

# Loosely Based

Storey Clayton



# Life is a Highway

Matt Norton, high school class of 2000, is tired of Kansas. His divorced parents barely know him, his distracted girlfriend barely cares, and he needs a change. College offers the promise of freedom from all he has known and grown to hate.

Antigone Edgewood, college dropout, is fleeing Chicago. Her abusive boyfriend has gone too far, and now she will go as far as she can to get away. An all-night diner offers the chance to sit down and contemplate her future.

Joe Ewing is investigating what he secretly suspects to be the biggest crime of his career.

*Loosely Based* is a story of interstates and intersections in modern American life.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Storey Clayton was born in Carson City, Nevada in 1980. He proceeded to visit 45 additional United States in the years that followed, giving him a variety of perspectives on its inhabitants. He has eagerly applied such perspective to writing and to debate, winning the North American Parliamentary Debate championship for Brandeis University in 2001.

Clayton graduated from Brandeis the following year with degrees in History and Philosophy. He now works in libraries and lives with his fiancée Emily and cat Pandora, in Berkeley, California.

*Loosely Based* is Clayton's first novel.



# Loosely Based

*a novel*

by Storey Clayton

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Manufactured in the United States of America

*For my parents,  
who taught me to read  
and gave me my voice.*

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# FIRST SEMESTER

## ONE

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**W**illiam Henry Harrison College is situated in the picturesque village of Fifeburg, Pennsylvania, population 7,600. About halfway between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, Fifeburg was founded by a zealous Revolutionary War vet, Albert Eaton, whose job during the war had been to play in a drum and fife corps. He had never fired a gun and all his friends had been Tories, but he was a loyal Revolutionary during the last month of the war. He had signed up twenty-two days before Yorktown, when it appeared imminent that the damn Yankees might win it after all.

Having properly hedged his bets and emerging successful for it, he took his family and a handful of friends (mostly Tory activists who feared for their lives) to the frontier of western Pennsylvania to start Fifeburg. He was the town's first mayor, and insisted on building five war memorials to the brave Revolutionaries who had died in the struggle for independence. One of them was a mock bell, made of wood, whose size rivaled the cracked version down the road in Philadelphia. This was carved with all the names of the Declaration of Independence signers, and sat beneath a delicate gazebo in the town square. Between paying for the construction of these various memorials and the hired men to defend against the threat of Indian attack, Fifeburg had little money to build an infrastructure, and languished even after Eaton's death.

Fifeburg played little role in America's early years until it

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gradually became a haven for abolitionists in the 1850's. The reputation the town had for gallant displays of liberty made it a natural choice for the headquarters of several abolitionist movements. Rallies were frequently held on the town square, where the great wooden bell made a fabulous prop. "And by the very names of liberty inscribed on this bell..." and so on. Frederick Douglass even came to speak there, and one man by the name of Ed Crabtree was so moved by Douglass' words that he joined the U.S. Army the next day.

His commander was a southern slave-owner named Mahorn who certainly dampened Crabtree's enthusiasm for joining the Army. Mahorn was a bitter, aging soul whose only joy came from ragging on young recruits and old colleagues. His favorite colleague to bash was William Henry Harrison, with whom he'd served during the Indian Wars. "Tip this, Tip that," he'd say. "Well fuck Old Tip, he only used this Army to get to Washington! And fuck Tyler too!"

It was only natural for Crabtree to assume that if *Mahorn* hated Harrison, he must have been a pretty good guy.

In 1861, a week before the declaration of hostilities between the states, Pvt. Edward Crabtree was inadvertently stabbed in the knee with a bayonet during a drill. He returned to Fifeburg unable to walk properly and without a job. It was a shame; he'd wanted a chance to shoot at old Sgt. Mahorn.

Alone, lame, and unskilled, Crabtree had few options available to him in the lowly climes of rural Pennsylvania. There was going to be a war, which would take at least a week, and then there would be even more competent young men returning home, just as he had. Often injured, perhaps, and unskilled. They would need training. They would need a college.

Crabtree had never been terribly well educated, but that didn't stop him from opening the doors of William Henry Harrison College in 1862, built on grants from several newly dissolved abolitionist groups that appeared to have little remaining purpose. They invested in the College on the condition that anyone who had been part of an abolitionist group prior to the war be admitted free of charge. They too were relatively unskilled. Former members of abolitionist groups everywhere enrolled forthwith.

The school flourished, as many young men attempting to quietly avoid the war took a new interest in higher education. The

standards remained lax and the teachers relaxed, and classes often became forums for discussion of American politics. “They put the ‘liberal’ in a liberal education,” wrote one critical columnist for the *Fifeburg Almanac*. The criticism, much like “Yankee Doodle Dandy” during the Revolution, became an unofficial motto for the College.

In fact, WHHC was so successful that Ed Crabtree, the College President, never bothered to look up the details on the life and presidency of its namesake. It wasn’t until just before his death of pneumonia in 1875 that a forlorn American History grad came to see him. “Oh Mr. Crabtree, what a terrible fate to befall you, just as your most honorable predecessor.”

Crabtree had coughed profusely before sputtering. “What predecessor? I founded the College!”

“Alas, in the name of our ninth President, who fell to this same disease after a solitary month in office.”

“Is that so?” Crabtree asked, and then died.

One-hundred and twenty-five years later, a blue Honda Civic drove into Fifeburg. It parked, without hesitation, in a lot next to the campus, whereon the old hospital had been. In fact, the parking space was neatly placed exactly where Edward Crabtree’s deathbed had lain. Dusk was settling over the town, and the lights in the parking lot were flickering on and off, sensitive to the failing and reappearing light.

“All right, get your things, let’s get this over with.”

“Huh?”

“I said to get your things. We don’t have much time. Take the heavy stuff first.”

“What are you *talking* about?”

“We’re here and we’re late. I’ve got to start heading back home. So you grab that big box and I’ll take your backpack. C’mon!” Miriam stepped out of the car and left Matt to let his head settle into the dashboard. He was fairly sure his dorm was on the other end of campus. A frequent visitor to the Harrison College website, Matt had memorized the small school’s geography. The parking lot was on the far west, while the Tyler dormitory fronted the eastern edge of campus.

Sighing, he exited the car, slammed the door, and confronted the box with his monitor in it. He was fairly reliant on his computer, and facing a year without television (his parents had refused to allow him to bring one; the first stand they had taken in



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unison in his recent memory) would make him all the more so. This box made him question his devotion to screens. He was convinced that it had been specifically engineered to be unwieldy, as though hundreds of scientists had gathered in a secret underground lab, carefully conducting psychological surveys of how to break people simply by making them carry a heavy burden. Eventually, after months of struggling, they must have perfected the shape, size, and weight of a computer monitor box! They had pride in their work, whose success was strewn across the twisted backs and shattered mentalities of long-time box-carriers.

“You sure we shouldn’t, y’know, get the *key* first or something?”

“Dorms,” his Mom spouted, quoting a brochure she’d been mailed, “will be open and unlocked during the duration of Orientation Week.” Anticipating the next protest, she added “And I have your room number right here. Tyler 401.” 401! Oh, the humanity! There were no elevators on campus. In fact, the entire ville of Fifeburg probably lacked the lifting devices.

“Well, I know, but--”

“Matt, *enough*. Let’s go!”

They went. Matt grabbed the carrying flaps on each end of the box (indeed, a concession the lab engineers begrudgingly must have made to the computer company’s public relations department) and lifted. Balancing the box on his knee, he tried to shift the weight but realized that he already *had* control of the only carrying flaps amidst the vast expanse of cardboard. His instincts had told him that there must be a more stable way of carrying this thing. His instincts, if he pressed them, probably wouldn’t recommend him breaking his spine either.

The trek across campus was slow going. Matt’s mother, a hurried woman in the first place, was practically sprinting ahead of him. Meanwhile, he was sweating profusely as he laboriously hauled the infernal box first across asphalt, then cement, and now the unfortunate brick path that cut through the campus’s lush lawns. The bricks were ill-kempt and uneven, threatening a perilous trip at any moment. At least the monitor would break his fall before breaking apart. “Maybe,” his mother ventured during one of his brief pauses, setting the monitor down, panting, and wiping the sweat from his dripping forehead, “you’ll *appreciate* having these things more now.” Going this far from home for college had definitely been a sound idea.

As they left the main path cutting through campus, forking onto an even less even brick path which led to Tyler, Matt began to perceive chanting in the background. He had begun to carry the box by holding its underside, since his hands were turning red-purple and felt raw enough to shed what little skin seemed to be left. While this method spared his aching hands, it made the box heavier and managed to render him blind. The latter of these facts became more frustrating as he distinctly verified the chanting.

He saw cardboard, and the logo indicating which end was supposed to be up. He couldn't read "THIS END UP" because it was upside-down. He heard "Harr-i-son, Harr-i-son, Harr-i-son!" with rising crescendo. He was immediately reminded of one of the few books that he had both read and remembered, *The Lord of the Flies*. Piggy was about to get slaughtered.

Slaughter would be a nice change of pace, Matt thought. He set the box down and was greeted by his mother's rolling eyes. He was relieved to see they weren't, for once, rolling at him. "Who *are* these people?" she asked, indicating the hitherto unseen throng of older college kids. They all wore insipid yellow T-shirts. In loud red letters across the front of each shirt "MAKE **EVERY MONTH COUNT!**" greeted Matt's eyes. He noticed the back of one, "HARISON ORIENTATION **2000**". Weren't there two R's in Harrison? There was no spelling in their endless chanting. ("Kill the pig!" Matt mused.)

A short, somewhat rounded girl ran up from the crowd to greet Miriam, and then Matt. "Hi!" she screamed. "Welcome to Harrison! My name is Lily!" She positively beamed at the two of them, Miriam giving her a mystified glance and Matt just tired and growing confused. "We're very very very happy to see you!" Miriam didn't doubt this. She saw a lot of suffering individuals under the age of 20, but had no idea what she would have prescribed for this malady. Matt had not been a hyperactive child, but this level of enthusiasm was still beyond any reasonable pale. "You need help with that?"

Matt quickly checked to see if the monitor box she was referring to was in fact taller than she was. Lily won the contest by at least an inch, he estimated. "I think, uh, I've got it?"

"Oh, I didn't mean *I* would help you!" she laughed, forcedly, making each "ha" distinct and deliberate. "Hey guys, it's another froshie! What's your name again?"

Matt was too ashamed, but Miriam told her "Matthew."

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“Hey guys! Let’s say hi to froshie Matthew!” It was a code. On an implied 3-count, the entire world seemed to erupt into song. Discordant, abrasive, and obscenely loud, but song nonetheless.

“Harrison is the place to be! Harrison is for you and me! Just ask us and you will see! Harrison is the place to be! Now we say hello to you, Froshie! Harr-i-son! Hey Matth-ew! Harr-i-son! Hey Matth-ew! Harr-i-son!”

Crimson-faced and sweating uncontrollably, Matt tried to pick up the box again. He wondered absently why it sounded like they were greeting Matthew Harrison, and what *would* they have done if his name hadn’t been two syllables? Much of the chanting dissipated, though a few die-hards persisted.

“Need some help, um, Matthew?” a tall strapping guy, who must have been a senior, asked him. Miriam, observing the scene, had to ask herself why her son didn’t look like *that*. Probably because Alex didn’t.

“I’m *fine*,” Matt insisted, and barreled up the steps into the Zachary Tyler Dormitory, whose name was obscured by a large red-on-yellow sign with the now familiar call to value *every month*. Miriam followed behind, smiling briefly at the guy.

“It’s been a long day.” Then, addressing the collective, “Thanks for the, well, y’know, welcome.”

Ah, four flights of stairs. Rome rose and fell on those stairs, centuries passing with small victories and crushing setbacks, and the impending atmosphere of being sacked. World history had never measured up to American for Matt.

Atop the final flight, like a specter of Attila the Hun, stood a kid who looked even dorkier than Matt perceived himself. Unlike Matt, he wore glasses, hanging precariously on a short nose and giving him the classic owlish appearance, offset only by his curious childish grin and a T-shirt which proudly rooted for the Harrison Bell-Ringers. Similar to Matt, he had short brown hair and the build of a couch potato. He backed off the top step as Miriam approached, slowly guiding Matt up to the final landing. Holding open the fire door so they could enter, the kid stepped aside and with surprising authority asked, “What room do you seek?”

Matt wanted to collapse on the floor, burrowing into the carpet and resting for a decade or two. Sweet oxygen. When he felt he had enough of a reserve to speak, “oh-one” emerged.

The kid’s goofy grin got that much goofier. “Well then you

must be Matthew!” He extended a hand, received the limp purple excuse for one that was offered back. “I’m David Benowski,” pausing to let this sink in, “your roommate.”

“I’m Matt,” he sighed back.

“So it would seem,” David returned, now with an edge of sly tacked on to the initial goofy.

Miriam looked expectantly at Matt. “What do you sayyy?” she inquired, in the way she had extracted “thank you”s from him when she was still married.

“Niketomeetyou,” he blurted, ashamed at his mother’s perception of him, but far too drained to resist.

“Charmed, I’m sure,” David winked and withdrew immediately to the nearest door, which was wide open. “Right this way, my loyal comrade!” This habit he had of looking twelve and speaking thirty was certainly disquieting.

Matt had seen televisions larger than Room 401. On his left was a bunkbed whose top bunk must have been about a foot below the ceiling. Straight ahead was the room’s lone window, about four feet by four feet square. Immediately he thought he was in prison, and began searching for the sink, toilet, and chained-to-the-wall bench. Finding none of these, he saw two sparse desks, some random shelving, and a closet that would make an uncomfortably small home for a family of moths. Miriam came in behind him, ducking instinctually though this was (barely) unnecessary. She was an inch shorter than her son, but always felt her advanced age should physically manifest itself somehow.

“A little grim,” she commented, “but hey, it’s college!”

“It’s not so bad,” David shrugged at them. “You’ll get used to it. I have, er, taken the *liberty*” the emphasis made it sound as though he were about to invoke the Constitution and other fundamental documents protecting his rights, “of claiming the bottom bunk. I’m rather, um, *warm* when I sleep and I don’t think I could handle the top bunk’s higher climes.” A pause, shifty at the lack of immediate response. “I hate to mention it, but I was here first.”

Mother and son looked at each other, the former accusing of the son’s tardiness, the latter beseeching for salvation from this pushy roommate. Silence was all that could settle the issue.

David coughed. “Right then, so I guess that’s *that*. Maybe, if it bothers you, we can switch at semester or something. Hm.” He looked around the walls, in Matt’s opinion as though he were

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hoping that they would move farther apart if he stared long enough, or could merely *find* the button that expanded the room. “Oh! Before I forget! Here.” He handed a small package to Matt, clearly the precise size of a compact disc case. “A little something of a greeting gift. Something close to my heart, and soon to yours too, I hope.” He pushed his sliding glasses back on his insubstantial nose and smiled awkwardly, on one side of his mouth, but not the other.

“Oh, uh, thanks. Sure.” Matt absently took the package and put it directly on the top bunk, which he exaggeratedly stretched to reach, even though the bunk wasn’t *that* far away. “I guess I should get my other stuff.” He said it with the luster of a man addressing his firing squad who, despite careful planning, had forgotten to bring bullets. “I guess you guys should get your bullets” would have sounded perhaps a smidgen more enthusiastic.

Miriam nodded and the two left before David could begin to offer help. It was clear that he would be more hindrance than assistance; Matt would probably have to help David take his backpack to classes. It wasn’t really that Matt was better built than David, far more of this came from a general sense of David’s physical motivations. Had he ever tried to carry anything? Matt could envision a cartoon feature in which David struggled to lift a feather, taking several heaves and eventually creating an ocean of sweat in which he would summarily drown.

Miriam knew that things would progress more quickly if Matt were in higher spirits. “He seemed like a very nice boy, dontchya think?”

The last episode he’d seen of the *Conan O’Brien* show came to mind and Matt took considerable restraint to avoid blurting “a very nice boy... for me to poop on!” Instead, he placated with “I’ve met worse, I’m sure.” He couldn’t think of any off-hand, but they had to be out there. At least he wasn’t a jock. Though he imagined that Harrison was not known for its jocks--the Bell-Ringers were in fact compelling arguments for a Division IV in collegiate athletics. If David had been a jock, though, at least the heaviest boxes remaining in the Civic would not be his responsibility.

They proceeded to the car in silence, both too occupied in different forthcoming futures to sustain a common-ground conversation.

It was long after nightfall by the time everything had been hauled from the small blue vehicle to the smaller dorm room that was to be Matt's new home. The boxes became progressively lighter as Matt became progressively more light-headed, entering depths of weariness he had never known. Every time they passed through the path leading up to Tyler, the flock of yellow-shirted Orientation helpers greeted Matt, assured each time that this was a new "froshie". Their zeal was not limited by the awareness most of them steadily acquired that this was actually someone they had seen before, perhaps multiple times. If anything, they became more ardent in their welcome, as though they secretly feared that Matt and his beleaguered mother kept returning because their prior greeting had been insufficient.

By the fifth and final trip, however, the throng had thinned to a paltry three people (it was getting awfully late), of whom Lily, the original greeter, was one. She was about to sound the alarm, but (finally) recognized Matt and simply said "Hi Matthew" instead. Matt was sorely tempted to dump his box of sheets and towels on the girl, 'neath which he was positive she'd be crushed and eternally silenced.

Instead, he said "Heyya" and kept on walking.

Upstairs, David was at his desk, which already held his laptop computer, fully operational. His left hand was where it had been the last three times Matt had visited 401, covering a rash of acne on his chin and left cheek. Matt hadn't noticed this, but Miriam, who took an interest in behaviors of this age group, had. "You know," she started. David didn't turn around. "David." He looked up as though shot. "You, uh, your acne problem is probably primarily due to your repeated placement of your hand on your face." She was trying to sound clinical, as she always did when delivering a diagnosis. "If you kept your hands off your face, it might go away."

David had gradually turned pink during the utterance of the unrequested prescription and now looked out the window, perhaps for a second opinion. He had developed the habit of covering his pimples in order to hide them from the world, which had the added side benefit of giving him a thoughtful and scholarly air. Where was Rodin when he needed him, anyway? And who *was* this woman to see through his hand?

"Uhhhh."

As he was deciding which box to unpack first, Matt's face

slowly broke out into a shit-eating grin. He always knew his mother was good for something. Cutting this guy down a couple notches might knock him off his high horse, bring him to a level where he could tell him what was up. Nothing like embarrassment for leveling the playing field.

“Just a suggestion.” Miriam considered the matter closed; she rarely got a response from her patients beyond a quick obligatory nod. Enforcement of her suggestions was the job of *parents*. She just gave them the tools to use at their own discretion. “Well, Matty, it’s late.”

“Yeah, there’s a Dorm Meeting in four minutes!” David had been searching for a response and a subject change equally. This worked nicely, he thought.

“Uh-huh,” Miriam again looked at this boy who was to share college with her son quizzically. She doubted that Matt would have the same hard time *she’d* had in school with the freshman roommate--she couldn’t imagine this David character bringing *anyone* home for the night. Ever. “So, I should probably get going.” She expected this to be difficult. She expected Matt to break down, to see tears in her son’s eyes, to be party to a five-minute embrace wherein he would try to prevent her leaving. She’d already prepared the line “I’ve spent one first night in college already” as a response to her expectation that he’d beg her not to leave.

“Okay. Bye Mom.” He looked up from the box he was opening, meeting her eyes and then returning to the box. “Have a safe trip back.”

“Do I get a *hug*?” Matt had hoped to avoid this in front of David, but his mother sounded slighted.

He went over, hugged Miriam, and she hit him with “I love you.”

He’d heard it before, but it was not a big thing in their family, especially after it became two families. His primary association with the phrase was a rough moment in April when he’d tried the line on Catie. He had not precisely appreciated her laughter which followed. Then he got a lecture about what that word meant, about her being 16 and him being 18, and he couldn’t remember saying it since. “Uh. You... too,” trickled from his mouth. He barely heard him say it himself, though he’d said it as loudly as he dared.

When the embraces separated, Miriam found herself tearful,

at least half of which had to be because of her son's lack of affection. She saw so much of Alex in him; she'd always tried to separate the two, but he'd grown to look just like him. After all, Alex had only been a year older than Matthew, a lonely sophomore, when Rose Panini had hauled him into her room. She blinked, felt a tear fall, and turned. "Have fun son don't forget to call I'll miss you." It was a running stream of words, receding in volume as she fled the room, taking the same approach she recommended for ripping off band-aids in one fell swoop. On "you" she was on the stairs, descending clamorously to keep herself from running back to hug her son forever. Why was that so *hard*? It wasn't until her hand hit the handle of the Honda Civic's door that she realized, *I am alone*. Sitting in the driver's seat, bawling, she saw her recent years as a Nicotine-patch-style step-down process, leaving Alex, but spending time with a smaller version of him, gradually less time as he grew older, and finally no time as of now. She had never smoked, but she was pretty sure she wanted a cigarette.

Back in 401, David was reassembling his pride while Matt was disassembling his boxes. Finally he decided to ask the question he would have liked to hear had someone else been there after his mother had just left him. "You okay?"

That was rich. "*Fine*," Matt insisted, and he was. Of the three partings he'd undergone in the past three days, only one had been taxing. He was still paying half his thoughts to that, even this minute. The thought that, with each passing moment, the Civic was receding from physical proximity was his only source of reassurance.

"All right, all right, just making sure." David's thoughts were still with his parents, who were together and had left him simultaneously. He had never been away from home longer than twenty-four hours. And while he did relish some time with people his age, to try to make friends and spread his ideas, the comfort of doting parents would be greatly missed. How could others deny this reality? "So, uh, about thirty seconds till Dorm Meeting. We're supposed to go together."

Matt rolled his eyes and turned to face his roommate. "Where do you find out all this shit?"

David was not accustomed to swearing. "Uhhhh. I was here earlier, you know. The R.A. down the hall told me. Resident Advisor, that is."



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So David *did* think he was stupid, Matt concluded. “I *know* what an R.A. is.” Standing, something occurred to him, along with the realization that he probably shouldn’t try standing on his sore legs for the next half-century. “Just because I’m from Kansas doesn’t mean I was born yesterday.”

“Oh, Kansas, huh? I’m from Pittsburgh. Hey, wait up! You don’t even know where the meeting is!”

But outside in the hall, there were scores of boys filing in the same general direction, all moving slowly and almost dazedly, bumping into each other and muttering hellos and small complaints. There was thunder coming from the stairs, as the crowd of teens proceeded down the stairs, hitting a landing, and down the stairs again. Though his mind was still occupied by one Catie Hanson, her smile, her laugh, her rude dismissal of his mother’s vehicle, the birthmark just above her right hip, he was beginning to realize he was not in Kansas anymore. After all, he *was* rooming with the Cowardly Lion.

Until that day, Matt had never seen the purpose of staircase railings. He clutched the railing all the way down, both for support and as a bulwark against the masses of stampeding youth. Crowds had not been a big part of his experience. The last similar setting had been, what, elementary school recess? Even then, the classes had been small and the playground unfilled.

On the ground floor of Tyler was a large common room, filled with ratty couches and a slanted ping-pong table all perched on stained wall-to-wall carpeting. The carpeting had once been gray, which still showed through in patches. At one of the narrow ends of the rectangular room was a white marker-board. Five yellow-shirts stood astride this board, watching the students fill in. In the crowd, Matt had successfully ditched David and ended up pressed against a window, standing, as more boys filed in behind him.

David walked in, scanned the crowd, found Matt (he was too squeezed to duck), and made a big show of “excuse me, pardon me” on his way over. Just as he reached Matt, the boys were asked to sit on the floor, and the presentation began. It was surprisingly dark outside, revealing through the windows that Harrison was still on the eastern edge of Fifeburg, as it had been almost 140 years prior. Bald florescent bulbs shined down on the boys.

“On behalf of Harrison Orientation 2000, I welcome you all to Harrison College!” The guy, who Matt was awfully sure had

been the one to offer help with the monitor box earlier that evening, paused, seemingly waiting for applause or cheers. Hearing none, he continued. "You will spend the best four years of your life here." Matt had been told this by every one of his high school teachers, many of his classmates, countless television sources, and himself. "As you do, we'd like to remind you to make *every month count!*" He was delivering the canned material like a State of the Union address, expecting partisan Senators to stand up and offer countless ovations. Matt found himself waiting for the latest report on the budget.

"My name is Bill Dean. I'm the R.A. on Tyler 4th, all the way upstairs. This is Mack, the R.A. on Tyler 3rd, Phil on Tyler 2nd, and Samrat on Tyler Ground." They all smiled and nodded, in turn. "We'll be having individual Hall Meetings directly after this," this brought the first audible response, as groans erupted from the crowd, "but I'd first like to introduce our Director of Campus Living, Mrs. Helga Feirstone, to say a few words to you about *the rules.*"

Mrs. Helga Feirstone looked positively bizarre in a yellow Orientation T-shirt. She had to be sixty, and probably had not worn a T-shirt, other than during past Freshman Orientations, since she had been fifteen. Maybe it was just the contrast between her and all of her twenty-year-old counterparts that made the yellow so odd.

"Good evening, gentlemen," she began. "And again, welcome to Harrison. We are a 138-year-old university" (just older than you!, Matt thought in Mrs. Feirstone's direction) "with a proud tradition. We are sure that you will do this university proud." A knowing pause. "But I fear that some among you are *not* here to do this school proud! Some are here, just having rid yourselves of parents, to do *whatever you like.* And while we are a *lib-er-al*" (she enunciated dramatically, almost disdainfully) "institution, do not let that go to your head! I suggest you familiarize yourself with the laws of the great state of Pennsylvania. Many of you are from elsewhere, and the laws of your home state shall not be upheld. The drinking age here is *twen-ty-one*" (more pained enunciation) "and shall be strictly enforced. Illicit substances, such as cocaine, heroin, and *mar-i-jua-na*, are utterly illegal. This too shall be strictly enforced. Are there any *questions?*"

A kid with shoulder-length black hair shot his hand into the

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air. He didn't wait to be recognized. "Yeah! What about sex?!" The predictable laughter ensued from the crowd.

Mrs. Feirstone adopted a cryptic smile. "You are not original, young sir. We get that question *ev-e-ry* year." A pause. "Sexual intercourse is legal in the state of Pennsylvania." Laughter here was interspersed with all the claps and cheers that Matt's R.A. had been expecting. Mrs. Feirstone bowed her head, as if she were about to lose her composure. "But be forewarned, you horny gentlemen, that you'd best use protection to guard your wild oats. Some of them may just get *sewn*, if you catch my drift. We don't think you'll like any *sur-pri-ses*, of the venereal kind, or the, shall we say, *cry-ing* kind. Harrison will not take responsibility for your mistakes, or accidents. Are there any *other* questions?"

Everyone's question had been answered, really, though this prompted another slew of painful recollections from Matt. He always was just that close to living in the moment, getting beyond his last night in Topeka, but the world would not let him forget his virginity, his rejection. His mother's Civic.

"Seeing none, I will dismiss you," people jumped up, "*but* remember!," people paused in seeming midair, "you are not only here to have fun, but also to *learrrrrn!*" And the boys dispersed, leaping over the din of Matt's R.A. again yelling about the individual Hall Meetings. David looked at Matt mischievously.

"We *are* here to learn, huh?"

Matt saw right through him. "Like *you're* ever gonna get any."

"And you are?" David fired back.

This hit a nerve. "Fuck off," he said and took off again.

He ran for his room, realizing as he went that this was not a refuge from the person he ran from. But he had nowhere else to go, and there was the exhaustion again, bowling him over and making him stop on a railing. He continued, running until he was ready to collapse in a heap on the top step, as he had hours earlier. He felt the rushing of water behind his eyes, and was flooded by the vision of Catie and his mother and the lovely white Suburban and Catie's lovely white skin, how the two were inextricably bound beyond his reach, how he saw his roommate in himself and a life of solitary hiding behind one's pimples.

He ran into his room, crying, not thinking to close, let alone lock, the door behind him. He tumbled into the bed before him, sobbing, crying for himself and his lost energy, his lost love

(could he call it that?), his lost hope, himself, lost.

I am being childish, he thought, and young and immature and stupid. *And* I don't care.

"Matthew?" the annoying superior voice sounded in the doorway. For the love of God!

"Matt," he insisted into the pillow.

"Huh?"

With effort, he turned his head to the wall, allowing his mouth to separate from the cloth below. "It's fucking *Matt*, all right? Not *Matty* or *Matthew* or *Matthias*. Just *Matt*." He returned to the pillow, where the tears had not stopped.

"Okay, let's start again then. *Matt*?"

"What?" his tongue felt cloth again.

"I--I'm sorry. I think we got off to a bad start back there. We have a year together, and I want it to be a beneficial one. Mutually beneficial. For both of us. Can, can, well, could you stop crying?"

Matt looked up, miserable, seeing the sodden world through layers of filmy water. "Who says I'm *crying*?" He knew he sounded like a four-year-old.

"Okay, okay. What's wrong? And don't tell me 'nothing' because this doesn't, well, look like nothing."

He sounded so damned parental. He was *his age*! "I miss *Catie*," he sobbed.

"That's not your mother's name, is it?"

He shot him a venomous glance, slowly heaving up the last of his snuffles. "My girlfri, well, shit, my ex-girlfriend."

"Junior?" David queried.

"Sophomore," Matt admitted sheepishly. He was trying to suppress the next wave of drops.

David nodded, as though seeing it all on a screen hidden within his broad-lensed glasses. Shortly, his attention returned to Matt. "Are you, uh, well, going to keep crying?"

"What the hell do you care?" Matt was defensive again at the description of this shameful act.

"Well, uh, you're on my bed. And, I think," he scratched the back of his neck carefully, "I think my sheets are getting soggy."

Matt pitifully attempted to wipe off David's pillow and sheets with a wet hand, then stood up. "Sorry," he muttered. "Y'know what, I'm really just," heave "just tired. It's not a big deal. It's n-n-n-nothing."

"Sure," David said, going to his pillow, and holding it up to

the light to inspect the damage. His parents *had* warned him about people not up to his standard of cleanliness. Or maturity, for that matter. But was this the start to the best four years of his life? Only one way to find out. "Speaking of your bed vs. my bed," he segued, "have you opened the package sitting on *your* bed?"

Matt let go a great whirling sigh, finally drying out, and attacked his tear-stained cheeks with his palms. Then, he aggressively grabbed for the wrapped CD case. "Should I?" he asked, contemplating it, stalling for composure.

"You may already have a copy," David pre-empted, "I'd almost be surprised if you didn't. But this is the *remastered* copy, special limited edition. For better sound quality. You do listen to music, don't you?"

This question could mean anything. He hoped it had nothing to do with his mother's classical music, though that was unlikely to be in need of "*remastering*". They were hardly uncovering Bach's basement tapes from cathedral wine cellars in Europe. He had a few soundtracks, himself, and a couple of random other CD's, mostly recently released, that he'd been given, but truly preferred seeing a new TV show to listening to an oft-heard disc. There was something about the repetition of collecting favorite music that eluded his understanding. He had to avoid the radio for much the same reason. "Sometimes," he said truthfully.

"Well, I listen to this CD all the time. It's my religion, my Bible, my alpha and omega, my, well, just open the thing already! This will change your life, if it hasn't already."

Skeptically, but thankful for something other than Catie to anticipate, Matt pulled the wrapping apart to reveal four men in rather shoddy animal suits. In rainbow lettering beneath them, **MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR** was proudly displayed. "O-kayyy," he slowly exhaled.

David set his pillow down and leapt off the bed, narrowly missing the bottom of the top bunk. "Okay?! Have you *heard* it?!"

"No," Matt admitted, trying to discern the starry yellow lettering at the top of the disc case. "Who is this?"

"The Beatles!" David screamed, at least uttering a name Matt had heard of before. Though his first thought, admittedly, was of Volkswagen *Beetles*. He had spent altogether too much time wondering exactly what size car *would* have sufficed for Catie.

"Right, I've heard of them," he said, trying to sound nonchalant, ahead of the game. That was always tough enough

with shaky post-crying voice.

David rolled his eyes. “You’re screwing around with me.”

“No, I really have heard of them. They do, uh, what’s it called. Well *you* know. What’s that song about needing help?”

“You mean *Help!*?” For a second, David had thought this kid had a wry sense of humor. Now he was merely convinced that Kansas was the missing second moon, orbiting Earth once every 10,000 years. “Where do you *come from*? Don’t you know *anything*? The Beatles are only the biggest band, let’s see, *ev-er!*”

“In *yo-ur* opinion.” Matt snuffled, wiped his nose.

David wrestled the disc from Matt’s inattentive hands and approached his laptop. “Well, then, let’s get *your* opinion, shall we?”

Tiredly, Matt nodded, and began his first ascent of many to the top bunk. Maybe he could just fall asleep. He was getting the idea that there’d be plenty of opportunities to hear this music, and he was none too eager to start *anything* right now. The mattress looked like it had been through Sherman’s visit to Atlanta, but he slid on top of it (flopping not permitted by the low ceiling), and settled in, hearing the sound of a bus coming from the laptop’s weak speakers just before slipping into unconsciousness.

## TWO

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**H**ours later and hundreds of miles west, Antigone Edgewood was storming down I-65 from Chicago, south towards Indianapolis. She drove an aging green Volvo station wagon with one broken brake-light and Illinois license plate “NTGONE”. It was 2:47 in the morning, or so the clock on her cell phone told her. She had a very important coin to flip in Indianapolis. She was not calm, but talking to herself helped.

“Alllll right. Okay. Here we are.” The cell phone rang. “There it goes again. Sorry, punkass, Antigone is not here to take your call. Antigone is not here to take your *fist*. Antigone is *never coming back*, so you can shove it! That’s *right* you’re hanging up the phone. You don’t have a cell phone. As long as you’re calling, you’re not chasing me. Yet.”

She was good at talking. She was not always positive that she was equally good at thinking. If she were, how did this happen? How had she stayed seven months, eighteen days, and twelve and a half hours with Rick Spiers? The drugs weren’t so bad, but whenever he went to the alcohol, there would always be trouble. But he had so much *potential*. She could save him, right? That’s what he had always told her. And she had been believing, at least until July. Something about the heat changed Rick. Or so it seemed.

“You’re not going to find me. You’re not going to see me again.” If she said it enough, it had to be true. She had a nasty habit of making things she said enough come true for other people. In addition to serving as a useful hobby, this made her a great professional telemarketer. She set sales records wherever she

went, and never had to worry about finding work. It was *avoiding* things that gave her trouble. And saying things to guys like Rick Spiers, just waiting for them to become true. “You’re not going to hit me” had debuted on July sixth, but she was still waiting for that one to sell.

She stopped addressing the phantom Rick, who she was very nearly sure was not on the road yet (he could always be stopping *periodically* to call from payphones, but no, that’s paranoia), and turned to herself. “Honey, you’ve got to get yourself cleaned up. You’ve got to get some food in that belly. You’ve got to take a nice long break from running. Maybe get a room. No, that would be pushing it. He’ll find you in a room, he can sense you. He’s intuitive. That’s why you fucking liked him, isn’t it? ‘How bad could he *be* if he *understands* so well?’ All right, hon, lay off. We’re getting away. We’re on the road. The road.”

As if to respond, two cars travelling north passed by, their headlights shining brightly, then fading behind her and leaving her to face the long straight interstate. “You are doing the right thing. Rick’s not gonna change. You can’t let other people do the changing, cuz they’re never gonna. Never until you change. Here I am, ma, look at me, I’m changing. I’m getting the fuck outta Dodge.”

Her breathing was gradually becoming normalized, but her foot was glued to the floor, where the gas pedal prompted her car to stay around 90 miles per hour. She was good with cops. She was good in any situation she could talk herself out of, that she felt she had control. Why did this never apply to guys like Rick? Where did they get all that power? Admittedly she was never trying to *save* cops, let alone long-distance phone service customers, but why did offering salvation mean weakness? Was *that* what Jesus was getting at?

“Oh Buddha,” she prayed, “let me find someone worth saving.” She couldn’t help but feel that this, in itself, implied something contradictory, but maybe the old man wouldn’t notice. After all, he liked paradoxes. Her life had always struck her as a koan, anyway, which had first drawn her to Buddhism. It was her devout experience that karma was a living daily reality that had led her towards Hinduism. And who didn’t like a walk in the woods, talking to the woods instead of herself? Wicca worked well with the parts of Christianity she liked. She would have loved John Lennon if he’d advocated *all* religions instead of none. As it



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was, she had to live for the day. Especially now.

“How random is a coin toss? Nothing’s random; I’m being silly again. Should I do two out of three? Does it work if I don’t have a quarter? I’m sure I can find a quarter. Maybe I should call Ashley and Betsy first. No, that’s crazy. They won’t be up, they’ll be mad, and they won’t think it’s urgent if I have to call. Shit. Twenty-five cents to destiny. Do I even have their phone numbers? I might have left them. That would be just perfect. Tomorrow Rick’s gonna go through my fucking phone book, number by number, and raise hell. Would Ashley or Betsy be more likely to tell? That’s silly too, they’re friends. They wouldn’t rat on me unless someone paid them enough. I can outbid whoever would pay.”

Ashley lived in St. Louis and Betsy lived in Philadelphia. St. Louis was closer, which was good in the short-term, but bad in the long-term. Philadelphia had the opposite characteristics, being farther. They were both good friends, though her best friend was an artist in Taos, New Mexico. She was not going to Taos. Taos did not need telemarketers, and she’d promised herself to never waitress again, even for a day. So it was her next-best friends, both from Amherst, where she’d been a drama major before dropping out after sophomore year. She’d stayed close in the ensuing six years, living on the cell phone and trying to explain herself and her unending changes. Ashley and Betsy didn’t understand, but they would always help. That was all she needed right now.

Indianapolis, where I-70 collided with I-65. West was St. Louis, east was Philly. In the center would be a much-needed stop at an all-night diner. And a meeting with destiny, in the form of George Washington or an eagle.

“Maybe I should let someone else flip the coin. I’ve never been much good with responsibility. I think if I flip it, it’ll land in my coffee and then I’ll take that to mean that I should go back to Chicago.” The very word brought shivers to her spine. Chicago had been the worst mistake yet, and not just because of Rick. Rick was intuitive, but he was too close to his hometown to pick up on the malignant undercurrent of America’s third largest city. There was a weighty hostility in the air that had always perturbed Antigone, and on the nights when Rick drank, she saw it (and often felt it) manifested in Rick himself. “I am not going back to Chicago. I should make a list of changes. Not writing in the car.

But number one is no more Chicago. God. Number two is no more tattoos.” She refused to let herself lift her own ratty T-shirt, which would reveal an inscription dedicating her stomach to Rick. This would certainly make it a challenge to find a better boyfriend. “Number three,” she sighed, facing the enormity of possible number threes. “Let’s stop telling people that I used to be called Emily. Emily was a kid. I may act like it, but I’m not a kid. Emily’s history.” Seven years ago, as her nineteenth birthday present to herself, she’d gone to the courthouse with all proper documents and changed her name to Antigone. “Legal civil disobedience,” she’d joked, accompanied by her best friend Rachel. “You should become Ophelia and then we could have a travelling troupe.” Rachel liked her name, though, and more importantly, had no interest in drowning herself. Which had made her wonder if Em wanted to die for her brother’s memory. Did Em *have* a brother?

“Number four,” she said, swerving to miss a rabbit running across the road, then quickly righting the car. “Not get killed. That’s not a change, but it’s sure as hell a good idea.” The lights of Indianapolis were just barely visible on the horizon. “Number five,” she sighed. “Get some coffee before I break number four.” She accelerated to 95, feeling the Volvo start to shake to mimic her own unsteady hands.

“No I don’t want to go to the Motor Speedway,” she yelled minutes later at the highway exit signs. “I want to go to breakfast.” After considerable searching, she rolled into a downtown parking lot under a fading sign that said **Albert’s All-Night Cafe**. “Albert was probably forty-two owners ago,” Antigone mused, “and curses this place every time he sees it for it still being open.” She scanned the locals through the window-walls which separated the Cafe interior from the August night. “That one’s going to ogle me. Baldy on the left there. Best to sit at the counter, close to the action. The help is always better than the customers at this hour anyway.” In this particular case, by “the customers” she meant, “the bald man who I’ve predicted will ogle me, and that infatuated couple in the corner who I’d rather not recognize right now”. The place was all but empty, and the cook and the waitress were chatting between the grill and the register.

She walked in, pressing both hands on the glass door, ducking at the sound of chimes spurred by her own movement. “Mornin’,” she muttered at the counter, taking the middle seat.

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“Coffee-black. You got egg sandwiches?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“You got bacon?”

“Yes ma’am.” The waitress’s eyes receded into her head, getting a good look at whatever is behind one’s eyes.

“You got sourdough?” The waitress shook her head. “Damn! I was on such a roll.” The waitress smiled faintly in the same way that she humored the 65-year-old grizzled drunks that would be dining there come sunup. “Alright, egg and bacon on wheat, if you please.”

“Here’s your black coffee, miss. Or ma’am?”

“Miss.” Always miss, she was getting pretty sure, at this rate. “I’m having the worst fucking day of my life, too, while we’re at it.”

“Anything we can do?” She said this and turned away, handing the ticket to the cook, who began by cracking eggs. He turned around and looked at Antigone, who was awfully pretty for half past three. Maybe *too* pretty, indeed, but she was dressed better than that.

Antigone looked right at the waitress, insisting on her eye-contact, a good way of talking to people. “You got a quarter?” She received a look from the waitress that made her say “No, I’m not bumming *change*, I’m making a decision.”

“What kind of decision, miss? Is it men?” She *had* said something about “worst fucking day,” so it had to be men, she was sure.

Before she could answer, the cook stepped in, “You know if you ask me,” he smiled, “coins are a bit too, well, *arbitrary*.” He checked to make sure she caught his drift--one never knew with the half-wits that rolled into this dump. Pretty and sharper than average, for this place, which was saying nothing. He turned back to the eggs. “I always was partial to rock-paper-scissors.”

She hadn’t thought of that. “Good call,” she said earnestly. “But I don’t really have a side I want to defend. And no opponent. And, wait a minute. Hang on. When you’re done, could you do me a favor?”

He’d been waiting to hear those words, even though he knew much better.

“Order up!” he called, wiping his hands on his apron and approaching the counter directly, leaving the waitress out of her normal role of taking the plate from grillside to counter. “Yes?”

“You too, please.” She nodded to the waitress. “Okay, best two outta three. I have to figure out which city is who.”

“You leavin’ town?” the cook blurted.

“Just got here and I’m not staying,” she admitted, but was not to be distracted. “All right now, you’re Philadelphia, and you’re St. Louis. Go for it.”

“You want us to decide where you’re *going*?” asked St. Louis the waitress.

Antigone guzzled coffee, bit half a sandwich half in one bite. Through the combined mouthful, “Sure. Why not?”

Philadelphia the cook shrugged. “Okay, le’s do it, then. Two outta three?” he confirmed. “We’ll go one, two, shoot, ’kay? Not one, two, *three*, shoot, but *one, two, shoot*. Ready?”

The waitress’s pupils again sought comfort in the nether regions of her head. “I haven’t done this since grade school.” Which must have been, Antigone quickly reasoned, during the sixties? Maybe the seventies. Her worn hands stretched out, fist on palm, to meet their much darker partners, younger and twice as large. Antigone could hardly watch, knowing that she had to keep her mind blank; any will-power of her own would taint the results. She figured the stubbornness of St. Louis was a roughly fair match for the enthusiasm of Philadelphia.

She closed one eye and wincingly witnessed a paper-rock, scissors-paper decision in favor of Philly. She was fairly sure that the waitress still perceived a one, two, *three*, shoot reality which left her with rock the first time around, but her heart hadn’t been in it to protest. “More coffee, Miss Philly?” she asked after it was over. Antigone nodded vigorously through her sandwich. “You ever *been* to Philadelphia?”

Antigone had to think on this, which she did by looking at the ceiling and bugging her eyes out. A boyfriend who’d been kinder than Rick had described this as her “fish looking out of water” look. This took a minute. “Uhhhh. No, I don’t s’pose I have,” she concluded. “Maybe I went through it once. But I haven’t been properly introduced.”

“You got friends there? Family?” The cook had returned to the grill, which he was diligently scraping with a spatula.

“Brotherly love!” They hadn’t heard from the bald guy on the left yet. He had heard from them. Three pairs of eyes wheeled.

“What?” Antigone asked, dreading initiating a conversation.

“City of brotherly love,” he slurred. “You’re talking about

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Philadelphia. That's its nickname."

"Well see if you can come up with the Pennsylvania state *bird*," Antigone muttered under her breath. Louder, "And do you love your brothers?" That should keep him guessing.

"Huh?"

"Do," she articulated slowly, as though he had misheard, not misunderstood. "you love your bro-thers?"

He scratched his head, possibly excavating for hair. "Lady," he finally slurred, "this is Indianapolis."

That seemed conclusive enough, a fitting curtain for her stay here at Albert's, but she definitely was a last cup away from drivability. *Philadelphia*? That was going to be a haul. She would have to crash between here and there, but let her put some miles on first. Rick would not go looking for her in Ohio, would he? Which was interrupted neatly by the cook, "You never told us what was wrong. Just said you was leaving."

"Oh. That's very astute." She winked at him. "I don't suppose it matters much. Just a tattoo I shouldn't have gotten, really." My story, she suddenly realized, is rather unoriginal. What killed her about her youth was that she'd lived it. She'd failed to elevate her youth to the level of behavior of those wise beyond their years. There was nothing new under the sun and, oh God, she even was beginning to *think* in cliches. It was bad enough that she behaved in them. The tattoo was Rick's idea, of course, but still. "I'm going to come back as a fruit fly," she said aloud. "Check please." The last of her coffee was lukewarm in her mouth, downright cold in her throat.

"You take care," the cook looked her in the eye as the waitress silently rang up the check. "Don't let anyone give you no trouble out there. Have a safe trip." He smiled.

"Thanks," she said, dropping a five on the counter. "If Philly works out, I'll come back and tip *you* some day." She laughed and fled, making sure to orchestrate a perfect exit. A heartbreaking finale. That made her night. A little confidence boost never hurt anyone. And where were her keys?

She turned around, seeing them in her mind before she witnessed them on the counter. Sighing, realizing that it really was becoming her worst fucking night, she re-entered. "How was Philadelphia?" asked the waitress snidely.

"Brotherly love!" bellowed the bald customer.

"Forget something?" the cook smiled playfully.

She grabbed her keys and ran out silently into the night. August's warmth enveloped her, and she could hear the gentle hum of whizzing cars on the freeway in the distance. "This is it. It's just me, future fruit fly, at your service. Onward we go. Siddhartha help me." She unlocked her car, got in, and prayed that it would start. On the lookout for anything that could possibly go wrong, she was warming to the idea that something had to go right. "But I have to make it go right. 'Be the change you want to see in the world,'" she quoted. This deserved another. "'Instant karma's gonna get you.'" She turned the ignition, revved the engine, reached for the radio dial, thought better of it, was overcome by curiosity, flipped it, realized it was set to a Chicago station, turned it to the nearest break in the static, and found only a commercial. "Maybe the *next* song will be 'Instant Karma'." The next song was "Under My Thumb", a Rick favorite. Touché.

She drove back to I-65 south, shortly thereafter exiting to I-70 east. "The change has come indeed," she intoned, switching the radio off.

"What I need," she reminded herself some time later, "is some good karma." She vaguely remembered a sign denoting arrival in Ohio, and about a thousand headlights since. Where did all these people come from at this time? Hers was supposed to be a solitary flight. "There's no sense in waiting for things to turn around without pushing them yourself. Let's get cranking. Time to push. I need to be on the lookout for some good karma making opportunities. You're not gonna make a fruit fly outta me. Yet."

A bug smashed into her windshield, splattering its remains in a concentrated area which, upon examination, was just out of the wipers' range. As the lights of cross-traffic vehicles passed by, they expanded in the translucent guts of the deceased insect. "It is ti-me," she sang softly to herself, tunelessly, "for some go-od karma. Let's go kar-ma, let's go kar-ma!" She scanned the horizon, a steady line of trees, highway, trees. Trees, highway, trees. Trees, truck, highway, trees. Trees, broken-down vehicle, highway, trees.

*Broken-down vehicle?*

"It's going the wrong way. Damn. This night just keeps getting worse. Maybe I can, well, shoot, when's the next exit? If it's a mile or two, I can, hell, if it's five miles, I'd better go back there. There's probably nobody in it or some murderer, but I can try. I don't have a choice right now. What's gonna go wrong, are

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things gonna get *worse*?” She chuckled at the elusive idea. “Maybe it’s Rick’s car. He flew to Columbus and is coming back for me.” A sign indicating Columbus’s distance flew by, followed shortly by an exit sign. “Let’s turn around and pray, shall we?” She did so, slowing her way up the off-ramp, across the overpass, back down onto the other side of the highway. “I-70 West,” she read the sign. “Maybe this takes me to St. Louis after all.”

She slowed to a moderated speed of 65 as she sought the broken-down vehicle she’d briefly spotted from the eastbound side. Seeing a dark splotch up ahead, she slowed, starting to drive into the shoulder, pulling up behind what appeared to be a very small car. She was fortunate to have seen it from the road. Guided, perhaps. “Well what have we here? You’d think these well-built economical Japanese cars never broke down. What was I thinking? They probably don’t. This person’s probably just tired. For Christ’s sake, Antigone, it’s almost dawn. It’s like stopping at a rest area so you don’t kill yourself with tired driving.” She paused, wondering why she hadn’t followed suit. “Or maybe it’s a trap. There’s a thousand ways this ends badly. Walk away.” She had pulled the parking brake and was stepping out of her car. “Walk a-way.” It didn’t *feel* wrong. It felt, sorta, neutral? She was next to dark roadside woods in the middle of a very unfamiliar state. “Antigone Edgewood. Walk out of this situation now.” She was running on fumes, and certainly not taking orders. She walked over to the car, hearing the soft crunch of shoulder gravel under her, and peered in, seeing nothing, half expecting something to jump out from the woods and consume her.

She ran back to her car, half fear, half the self-told excuse that she’d forgotten her flashlight. She got in the car, sat down, but didn’t close the door. The glove-box was hanging open. This was creepy. There was a flashlight in the middle of it, small, innocent, waiting.

Like her, in this car.

“Who am I kidding?” She saw “ICK” protruding from her half-bare belly. “I’m not innocent and I certainly should stop being scared.” She bravely, trying to laugh, stepped up, slammed the Volvo’s car door, turned on the weak little flashlight, marched up to the small car, and in a cavalier manner knocked on the driver’s side window. Seeing movement inside, towards the back, she jumped a mile high, almost landing in the road behind her. “That,” she said, regaining balance as a truck blew its horn at

her, “would have been very bad. Fitting,” she admitted, “but very bad still.”

Nothing brings a person to their senses like almost getting run over by a honking semi.

Before she could act with her newly-acquired bearings in order, the back door of the car opened, and a haggard older woman poked her head out. “What on Earth is going on?”

She was certainly awake, shaken up, but not articulate quite. “Well, I, uh, y’know, um, y’see, do you need--”

“Are you here to rape and kill me?” the older woman asked baldly, cutting her babble. Antigone stepped forward, now just a foot from the car. “Oh,” the woman blinked. “You’re female. Couldn’t quite see in the, do you have a cell phone?”

“Help,” Antigone managed. “Do you need help?”

“You just heard me ask for it, didn’t you? Thank you very much.”

“Right, well. I can offer you a cell phone, sure. Are you lost, though? Is there something, uh, I could do?”

The woman was not in the mood for nonsense. She stepped up out of the car, squarely, shorter than Antigone, and had clearly just been sleeping awkwardly in the back seat of her Honda Civic. “Cell. Phone. All the help I need. Thanks again.”

“Right.” Antigone trudged back to her car, feeling strangely little better for the good karma she must have been earning. Looking back at the license plate, trying to determine what state was low on compassion, she saw this woman was from Kansas. Figures. But then she realized, just after looking away, that “KANSAS” was at quite a down-sloping angle, towards the woods.

“Lady!” she called, not looking up, but not opening her car either.

“My *na-ame* is Miriam!”

“It’s not just the tire, is it?”

“What part of ‘cell phone’ don’t you understand? I’m tired, I’ve just spent the night in my car, and I want to call triple-A and get out of this god-forsaken state. Why do you offer me *help* if you just ask *questions*!?”

“Do you have a spare?” Antigone proved Miriam’s point.

“Would I be sleeping here, dealing with you, if I had a spare? I’m sorry. I’m just really tired and this has been a rough night and I would like to use a phone. That would be great. Thank you so



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much.” She was trying not to talk incessantly, incoherently, and was starting to be pretty sure that this woman was about to rob her. Any minute, she’d see the man come out of the passenger seat, ready to steal, and maybe rape and kill for good measure.

Antigone opened her door again, fumbled around for the phone on her seat, and found it one and a half seconds before it rang. “Shiiiiit!” she yelled, fearing that she’d answered it. “Oh crap. Uh, Miriam?!” Stepping out of the car again, to be heard. “Mir-i-am?! My cell phone’s, uh, broken.”

Oh God, here it came. This was the story. There was always a story. Whenever she read the paper about god-awful men in Kansas City or other urban areas, they always started the con with a story. It was really believable too, and everything sounded great until wham!, down came the tire-iron, or the knife, or out came the gun, and you always ended up stripped and bleeding in a cornfield somewhere. They hooked you with the story. Then came the kill. But she couldn’t drive away on a flat, and where would she run? She’d always thought people were so *stupid* to get into these situations...

“Oh yeah? Broken?” she called meekly. Hadn’t she heard it ringing just a second ago? Focus was sliding out from under her. Time to withdraw.

“Think, Antigone, think,” she muttered under her breath. “This is a golden platter-served opportunity. Not time to fuck up. You get demoted to ant for stunts like this. But what am I gonna do, have her talk to Rick?” Speaking of spare tires... no time for mental tangents, though. Spare tires! She’d have to be careful on the way to Philly, but this was the opportunity she’d begged for.

“Miriam?!” Looking at the Civic, she saw no Miriam. She walked up, knocked on the driver’s window. It wasn’t exactly cold; what was she doing back inside?

Can I afford to open it a crack?, Miriam wondered behind her locked car door. She yelled through the window instead. “What?!”

“You can have my spare!”

Still trying to hook, knowing that she’d lost credibility, trying to restore it with generosity. She shook her head. “I’d just like a phone if that’s okay.”

“I can’t use the phone. But you can *have* my spare tire! C’mon, I’ll help you put it on.” That would be necessary, if this were a sincere offer, because Miriam didn’t know how to change a tire herself. But she wasn’t biting.

“I’ll just wait for someone with a phone.”

The sun started to crack the horizon behind Antigone. “You don’t trust me, do you?” She was getting hoarse yelling through the window. “I’ll just leave the tire with you then. Shit.”

Muttering all the way back, “You try to do something nice for people and they just flip you off. Nothing but the finger, all day long.” More than anything, she was personally insulted that she hadn’t been able to talk her way into this person’s trust. Granted she had more impact with males, but generally she could get people to buy anything. Then again, they usually weren’t bidding just before dawn on I-70. This somehow seemed to be little consolation.

She opened the trunk, hauled out the spare, slammed it back down amidst a flutter of dust. Coughing, she rolled the tire along the shoulder gravel, towards its new home on the back right wheel of a blue Honda Civic. Leaning it against the side of the car, she slapped the Civic’s back windshield twice, waved at the car in general, and trudged finally back to the Volvo. She was ready to collapse. Just as she opened the door, for the last time, Miriam poked her head out of the car again, leaving her door open a crack.

“Uh, well, I didn’t get your name, but uh, you know what? I don’t know how to change a tire.” A nervous laugh, just sounding inane. “Really. Do you think you could, uh, do it? I’d appreciate it a lot.” She had no earthly idea whether to trust this bizarre blonde with the tire. Did people just forfeit their spare tires? This was more trap-like than ever, but the girl *was* about to drive off. Or was this just the perfect timing in her act? Sleep had not been restful on the roadside, and it was really time to either move on with life, or move on with the potential nightmare scene. As consciousness wobbled, Miriam distanced herself slightly from herself, and almost stopped taking an interest in what happened, as long as whatever it was happened *soon*.

Antigone, meanwhile, looked skyward with bugged eyes, the fish searching beyond water. “I better get to be a mammal of some kind for this. Or at least a reptile.” She shrugged, wandered over to the Civic again, this time just leaving her damn door open. “You got a tire iron?”

Flinching at the mention of her expected murder weapon, Miriam almost fell out of the Civic. Getting herself together, she went to the trunk. Then she turned. “You’re not going to kill me, are you?” She figured it couldn’t hurt to ask, maybe gauge a

reaction.

“I will if you don’t hurry,” Antigone sighed. “What kinda question is that? Do I look like I could kill you? Like I would want to?” She wrenched the tire iron from Miriam’s hand and went to work.

Seeking evidence, Miriam found only traces of a tattoo on the girl’s stomach. And her hair was awfully unkempt, but she was sure hers was about the same. Fair enough. “No. But you never know.”

That was certainly true, Antigone thought. Truest comment of the night. “Damn straight,” she had to concur.

It was becoming fully light by the time Antigone had finished changing the tire in the lingering uneasy silence. Her fingers felt weak and frail, and her whole soul seemed poised on the brink of implosion. The work gave her an outlet of mental energy, a depository for stress, but this drainage also took its toll. By the time she’d screwed the last nut, she could barely stand up. “Can I keep the old tire as a souvenir?”

“Uh, sure. Good night.” This seemed a bit hasty, and at the Civic door, Miriam turned again. “Thanks a whole lot for this. I’m sorry about, well, being snippy. Is there anything I can, I mean, do you want some compensation?” This would break the cardinal rule of good karma and so Antigone vehemently shook her head. “Well okay, if you’re sure.” Ducking into the car, and then popping back out, “I didn’t even get your name, did I?”

Antigone sighed. A really good test for new rule number three. It would be so easy to clunk out her old nondescript name in this situation, and be forgotten by morning. To end this dialogue with this silly ungrateful woman. To sleep, perchance to dream. “Antigone,” she called.

The girl was certifiable. Perhaps a certified mechanic, too, but certifiable. Time to go. Miriam slammed the door without another word, started the car, and tore out of the gravel. She parted with a honk, Antigone not knowing if it was a parting farewell or a warning to any semis that might be in her future lane.

This was the last thing Antigone would think about for a while. She closed the door she’d deliberately left open, opened the back door, pushed some of her ramshackly laid out clothes into a more comfortable pillow-sized heap, closed the door behind her, and collapsed. She didn’t even lock her Volvo before she fell asleep.

## THREE

---

**D**aylight streamed through the open window of Tyler 401, waking its inhabitants almost simultaneously. Neither Matt nor David had thought to pull down the shade before sleeping. Matt had been trying not to look like he was falling asleep and David had never lived in a room with natural light before. His own room at home was in the basement of his parents' house, and everything was nice and artificial.

The sun had just risen in the east, and was now commanding the two young men to rise to face it. Clearly, either Matt or David would have to take this outside. As it turned out, they both did.

"Morning, roomie," David called loudly enough to wake Matt, but he was already. "How'd ya sleep?"

Matt looked around. Where *was* he? What was this *voice*? Who left the window open? "Uhh. I dunno."

David bounced out of bed, becoming resigned to rising early. "You don't know how you slept?"

Matt's recognition was awakening, though he was not. This was college, right? "Uhh. Sure."

David gave up. "So, how'd you like the album?"

*What album?*

"You fell asleep while I was playing it, I think." David had walked to the right side of the room, opposite the beds, so he could look at his roommate while he spoke to him. An even more than expectedly blank look was plastered to this still prostrate kid. "The disc. You know. Magical Mystery Tour. The *Beatles*." Blankness abounded. "Do you remember last night?"

Matt closed his eyes. It was like having a hangover that

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talked. He remembered only strands of the previous night, most of which were manifesting themselves as he tried to move. *That* muscle had certainly been pulled, *this* one would rather not move for the next month. And when was the last time he'd *eaten*? "Did we eat last night?" Part of him was fairly sure he was addressing his central nervous system when actually talking to David.

David laughed uncomfortably. "I did, after the Tour ended. There was a bag of chips left over from the Hall Meeting. Which we missed."

Matt tried to suppress memories of Mrs. Helga Feirstone, and then her mention of sex, and then Catie, and then everything flooded back into the limelight of consciousness. Sobbing like a baby in front of, in front of, he looked across the room, David Benowski! "Christ," he couldn't help but utter.

"Huh?"

"Breakfast."

"Okay."

"Let's go." An odd thing to say, since he hadn't moved. He shook a foot. "You first."

"No."

No? A sigh. His mother had trained him well: do things like ripping off band-aids. "All right. Getting up." He rose all at once, was beaten back down by the ceiling. "Owwwww."

"You okay?"

"No."

"Still hungry?"

Cradling his head still, Matt jumped off the bed, nearly hitting his head again on the floor as he landed. Catching himself with his hands, he sprang back up and opened the door. "We are switching beds at semester," he informed David, "or I'm moving out."

They walked to breakfast in silence, purposefully, their shoes brushing the dew off the top of the grass and feeling the surging energy of not only a new day, but a new set of four years. Life had new perspective, and as Matt walked across his new campus, he felt the rush he'd been expecting after crossing the border into Missouri, or at the very least into Pennsylvania. Finally, he was on his way.

The dining hall, located in the student center, was closed. In fact, the student center was closed and would be for another twelve minutes. It was 6:48.

“So,” David wheedled, leaning against a glass door with “Tippecanoe Student Union Building” plastered on it. “you’ve still never heard the Tour?”

Matt shrugged, coming back from his cross-lawn high. “In my sleep.”

“That doesn’t count.”

“Guess not.”

“Well, tonight then.”

“I can’t wait.” A deep-fat fryer of sarcasm, with words held captive in metal mesh, then dumped into the vat to simmer and pop. This was becoming Matt’s style, especially when dealing with someone who certainly seemed less mature than college.

6:52.

“Do you think the food’ll be good?”

At least he wasn’t talking about the CD! “Nope.”

“Really? I hear they spend a lot of money on the dining facilities.”

“I think they spend a lot on *everything*.” Matt’s father had really impressed this idea upon him.

“Makes sense.” A pause, as if the conversation would take wing and fly on its own after enough encouragement. Finding himself wrong, David began again. “Did, did your high school have good food?”

“Nope.”

“Your mom?”

Matt looked down from his examination of the student center, generally called “T-SUB” by the locals. “She doesn’t cook.”

David blinked. “The microwave?”

“What about it?”

“Does it have good food?”

What kind of a question was that? “Nope.”

David concluded that Matt did not believe in good food. Or good music, apparently, but that may have just been a lack of exposure. Kids really did come to college without much experience! A seeming non sequitur, “Do you have a guideline for life?”

“What?”

6:57.

“A guideline, you know, a way of well, leading your life.”

Trying to drive larger vehicles in the future was about all

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Matt could think of on the spot. He hadn't been expecting this kind of serious question from David and had been caught briefly unaware. The normal defenses weren't quite up with such an inquiry. "Not... really. I dunno."

"You're not religious, I take it?"

"Nope."

"You believe in anything?"

This kid was either really aggressive or just stupid. "What do you mean by *that*?"

"You have faith in anything? You know, trust. Parents? Friends? Your girlfriend?"

Did wounds create the urge for people to distribute salt? If no one ever got hurt, the sea would probably be fresh water. "Trust," Matt repeated.

"Exactly." David smiled, thinking Matt was getting something.

"Oh look, it's time to go in!" Matt pulled on the door, but even though the clock visible through the glass said 7:01, the door remained locked.

David chuckled. "Maybe you believe in *time*." He thought. "You look like you trust it enough." He was thinking to say "too much", but would let Matt figure that out himself.

Matt was motioning to a janitor on the other side of the door. "Hmmm?"

"*Time*. You believe in time?"

Matt turned around when he was sure that the door was soon to be opened. "The past," he said authoritatively. "I believe in history."

"Now we're getting somewhere!" David had almost assuredly not meant to say that aloud. "History."

The door hit Matt in the back, almost sending him into David. The moment was lost and they both wandered into T-SUB, nodding their appreciation at the janitor. Matt remembered his hunger and David was dealing with this new aspect of Matt, much like discovering a fourth dimension and reexamining the contents of a previously three-dimensional world. Hadn't "they" theorized that time was the fourth dimension?

T-SUB's interior was uninspired, or maybe it was just the early morning light. There was a large portrait of William Henry Harrison himself on one wall near the stairs, which was behind a large plexiglass sheet so as not to be vandalized. This was only

moderately functional, as several etched names could be seen carved into the plexiglass at a certain angle or under certain light. The stairs went down into the basement of T-SUB, where the dining hall was, presumably so they could capture unwitting freshmen (did everyone use that insipid term “frosbies”?) there and whisk them into the next day’s meal before they’d met enough friends to notice their absence. At least such legends had been the lore at Topeka High School, and only made more sense given a basement cafeteria. Taped to one of the poles near the stairs was a large sign that said **FOOD** with an arrow pointing downwards.

“History,” David nodded as they passed the portrait of William Henry Harrison. “There’s a lot of history here. That’s probably why you came, huh?”

“I came here,” Matt maintained his acidic tone as he dropped off the final step, “to eat.” With that he walked off in the direction of the grill. “Maybe,” he told himself when out of earshot, “we’ll have Benowski Sandwiches for lunch.” His eyes were so focused on the grill he’d spotted as he walked through the empty cafeteria that he didn’t notice that it wasn’t actually empty. He almost plowed into someone who was just as intently focused on reaching a salad bar filled with, from the looks of it, tiny bite-size boxes of cereal.

“Uh, sorry,” said the guy as he brushed against Matt. “You might wanna watch where you’re going.”

Matt looked up and kept looking up. He was confronted with someone a foot taller and proportionally much wider than himself. “Right,” he delivered promptly. He’d been good at handling bullies since middle school. You agree with everything they say, wait till they turn around, and run like hell.

Were there bullies in college? How could there not be?

They were both standing there, perhaps rueful at their focus on their respective destinations. “What floor you on?”

“Tyler fourth.”

“Hey! Me too, man. I’m Oliver Joseph. I don’t remember seeing you at the hall meeting.”

David had caught up, and was suddenly *there* next to Matt. “We missed it.”

“Hey Joaquin! These are the guys that ditched the hall meeting!” His voice positively filled the cafeteria. Joaquin was nowhere to be found. “Bill missed you guys. I think you were the only two.” There was suspicion in his voice that unnerved Matt.



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“I was awfully tired,” Matt mentioned.

“Whatever. Hey, you mind if we sit with you guys? Gonna be hallmates and all.”

Matt had been hoping that there might not be an “us guys”, that he might get a moment away from the ubiquitous David Benowski. “Sure.”

“Great. Lemme get some cereal.”

When Matt found the table, which happened to be the only one occupied in the sea of tables and chairs that filled the basement, he noted that Oliver’s face was obscured by the wall of cereal he had amassed on (and around) his tray. An army of milk cartons was preparing a Viking-style assault on the cereal wall. Just visible beyond the milk army was a set of stacked arms with the top of a head centered squarely in their midst.

“Hey Joaquin. These are the guys that missed the hall meeting. Matt and Dave, I think.”

“Flgorp” was audible from Joaquin’s mouth, buried in his arms.

“Joaquin’s tired,” said a voice from behind the cereal boxes. “Some asshole woke us up this morning.”

“Woke *you* up this morning,” this correction was worth Joaquin raising his head to facilitate audibility. “*You*’re the asshole that woke *me* up this morning.”

“What happened?” David asked.

“Some asshole, as I said, next door, was causing a ruckus. I think he threw something at the wall. Hit it pretty hard. Woke me up.”

“It was the ceiling,” Joaquin chimed in. Suddenly Oliver’s hand was visible, dismantling the top of the wall, revealing his face. The sound of more cereal pouring could be heard, but was not yet within sight. “Because you woke up on top bunk, but I didn’t wake up till you *jumped* down.”

“So now you’re not so tired, gettin’ riled up, huh?” Joaquin replied to this accusation with renewed facial burial.

“You live in 403, don’t you?” David was about to give the game up, Matt despaired.

“Why you say that?” Oliver queried through a mouthful of cereal.

“Oh. I read the names on the door. Trying to learn everyone, y’know.”

“Since you missed the hall meeting.”

“Exactly.”

“Good idea. So which one’s Matt and Dave?”

“I’m David. That’s Matt.”

“Great. Are either of your mothers dead?”

Joaquin groaned again. “What?” asked Matt, speaking for the first time since sitting down and still mostly in awe of what looked like four columns against seven rows of cereal. The diversity of brands was admirable, but maybe they only stocked thirty at a time in the salad bar.

“Just checking. They aren’t, are they? ’Cause that’s my one rule. No busting on the dead.”

David ran a fork through his eggs. “Busting?”

Joaquin looked up. “Just lie. Trust me, say both parents are dead. And your children to come, just in case.”

“Mine aren’t dead, just divorced.” Matt took a swig of coffee. Nope, still couldn’t stomach the taste. “Can I have a milk, Oliver? Got enough?”

A protective hand blocked the path towards the milk army. “Well shit, man, everyone’s mom’s *divorced*. Get your own milk. Can’t you see I’m eating cereal?”

“Mine aren’t,” insisted David.

“No, I can’t *see* the cereal,” Matt backed his chair out from under the table. At least it wasn’t an attached bench like at Topeka High. Wood chairs, wood tables! This was why there was no tuition at a public high school. Or maybe it was just that there were trees in Pennsylvania from which to extract wood. Corn stalks made lousy furniture.

“A smartass. Nobody likes a smartass, Matt.”

“Mine aren’t divorced.”

“Do you want a cookie?”

“No,” said David, turning back to his eggs quietly. “I just wanted you to know.”

“*Your mom* wanted me to know!”

Joaquin groaned again, retreating from slumber once more. “It doesn’t even make sense. It’s such a stretch most of the time.”

“Your mom stretched most of the time!”

David spit out part of his egg laughing. Joaquin rolled his tired eyes. “Oh sure, laugh now. One out of twenty are actually good. But you’ll get tired of it real quick.”

“Your mom *didn’t* get tired of it real quick! In fact, she thought a lot more than one out of twenty were actually good!”

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Matt returned with three cartons of milk and confusion as to why his roommate was choking. A modicum of hope, granted, but mostly confusion. “Here” he set two milks next to the army. “Reinforcements. What’s wrong with *him*?”

“What did I tell you about smartasses?” But there was a grin through Oliver’s tough demeanor. “He thinks I’m funny.” David’s breathing was almost normalized, and he began panting a little. “You sound like your mom!”

David kept panting, and Matt looked over the cereal wall. “You played football in high school, didn’t you?”

Oliver gulped more cereal. “You kidding? I don’t run.”

“But I bet you hit.”

“No.” Oliver looked away, eating more cereal. “But I’m gonna lose some weight, if that’s where you’re going, smartass.”

Did this guy actually think that *he*, Matt, was one to crack jokes about others’ weight? Between the three of them that were awake, they could start a chapter of Jenny Craig! “Good for you.”

Oliver couldn’t tell if he was serious or not, but this Matt character didn’t seem to be serious much of the time. “Hey, I don’t see you eating cereal, smartass. You could drop a few pounds yourself.”

“No, I mean it, good for you.”

“Oh.”

There was silence, and another row of cereal boxes began to fall. “Say, Oliver? You ever hear *Magical Mystery Tour*?”

“Sure. Saw the movie too. Trippy shit.”

“Do you know the *real meaning* behind it?”

“Yeah. Do drugs. That’s it. That’s all the sixties were about.”

“No, I mean the *real* meaning. I mean, yeah, there’s drug stuff too, but the *really* good stuff. The *meaning*.” If he said that word enough, maybe it would *mean* more.

“Uh. Is there one?”

David beamed. “Is there? Is there ever! Let me tell you about *meaning*!”

“Your mom told me about meaning,” Oliver interjected, but his expression looked interested.

“The Tour,” David announced, “is a Metaphor for Life.”

“Yeah?”

“I dare say,” David was almost breathless, about to display the map with the most treasure-laden X on the planet. “*The Metaphor for Life*.”

"Hm," Oliver said through more cereal. He was really putting those flakes away.

"Each song," David continued, enraptured, "is a symbol, no, a guidebook for a phase of life. Eleven tracks, eleven life stages. Eleven ways of living. Perfectly timed, in perfect accordance with reality." It was fascinating to see this kid aglow.

"Your mom," muttered Oliver through his mouthfuls, "was perfectly timed." He said it softly, perhaps actually thinking about David's words. Matt was laughing to himself and wondering if Joaquin's haircut was more attractive than his own. Though Catie had always liked his hair, before that night...

David was hurt. "If you keep cracking those jokes," he said, "I'll keep the secrets of life to myself."

"Okay, kid, okay. Just razzing ya. Can't help it. Like your mom, I can't help it."

David nodded through a dubious look. "Right, so like I was saying, the key to life. Stage by stage." He had become disinterested in food. "You want to head back to Tyler and give it a listen?"

"Gimme a minute. Cereal calls." If it were a long-distance call, it would break his bank. Fortunately, there was very little distance indeed between him and the remaining boxes. "Gimme a preview."

"Magical Mystery Tour'," David said, "the first song, the first stage. The introduction. Just as we are introduced to life, the song introduces us with simple words and repetition. Roll up, roll up--"

"Do you *rehearse* this?" Matt had to know.

"No, I, I just *study* it. Roll up, roll up--"

"Drug reference!" shouted Oliver, and some milk splattered on David's cheek. "Rolling papers! Roll up a joint!"

David bent his head down as if mentioning marijuana were as illegal as distributing it. "Right, sure, that's one way of looking at it. You can say the whole album," he was snarling now, after remembering the cafeteria was devoid of listeners, "is just a bunch of high musicians getting high and singing about it." A pause. "Hell, you can say *life* is just people getting high and talking about it! But *that...* would miss the point."

"Your mom didn't miss the point."

David got up, picked up his tray, and stormed away from the table. Dropping it on the now stationary conveyor belt, he came

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back to collect his roommate as he would a backpack. “Coming Matt?”

“Um. In a while. You go on ahead.”

“You’re done eating.”

“I, uh, yeah.”

“So, what’re you gonna wait for?”

“Maybe I feel like it.”

“Okay.” And he was gone.

Joaquin looked up, as though startled. “Oliver go? Oh.”

“Just my crazy roommate.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Oliver chewed, “until I finish this meal.”

Making silent eye-contact, Joaquin and Matt stood up, Matt grabbed his tray, and they both left Oliver amongst the ruins of his breakfast.

When they were on the steps between the basement and the ground floor of T-SUB, judging themselves to be halfway between their roommates, Joaquin finally seemed passably awake. “I’m sorry. I’m really bad with names. What’s yours again? If I had to guess, I’d say it’s ‘Your Mom’.”

“Matt.”

They shook hands, awkwardly, on the steps. “Joaquin.”

“I remember.”

William Henry gazed from over Joaquin’s shoulder, looking ready to extend his own hand through the etchings of “98 RULZ”.

“Oh.”

“I hate my roommate.”

“Me too. I mean, my roommate. You understand.”

“Yeah. I’m not a huge fan of your roommate either.”

Joaquin laughed. “He’s a huge fan of your mom, apparently.”

“All our moms.”

“Right.”

“Where you from?”

“Taos, New Mexico. You?”

“Topeka, Kansas. Wow, New Mexico’s even farther west than Kansas!”

“Harrison tries to draw from all fifty, every year. That’s what the Orientation folks told me.”

They were at the doors exiting T-SUB again, and Matt could barely see David’s silhouette against the rising sunlight in the distance. He thought David was kicking at the grass, but it could

merely have been the way he walked normally. “Why’d you come here?”

“My roommate woke me up. He said someone next door--”

“No. Harrison.”

“Oh. My sister liked it.”

“Your sister?”

“Yeah. She’s a senior here.”

“Cool.”

“She thinks so.”

They paused, looking at the grass, Matt shading his eyes against the sun, making sure that David was well ahead of them, out of earshot. “She’s not an Orientation uh, person, is she?”

“No.”

“Is she up?”

Joaquin checked his watch, revealing 7:47. “I don’t think she’s flown in yet.”

“Oh.”

“Hey, I’m going to get some more sleep, dude. Maybe I can sleep through the Orientation activities.”

“Activities?”

“You didn’t know? Didn’t you read through the packet they sent home?”

Which home had they sent it to? “Uh, packet? No. I guess not.”

“Mandatory. But I don’t think we’re graded. Show us the campus, get people to meet people, you know. Bill told us all about it last night.”

“Bill.”

“Our R.A.. He’s a cool guy. A little uptight, but I guess they pay him to be.”

The sun seemed to be ascending awfully quickly. “Yeah.”

“Well, I’ll see you around, Matt. What room did you say you were in?”

“401. Next door. Get some sleep.”

Joaquin had been walking away slowly and now he jogged off, anticipating renewed rest with every step. Toni, his sister, had advised against every Orientation activity there was. She had helped him lobby their parents that he not even attend the Orientation days, but the elder Garcias had flatly refused. “Not everyone’s an art major, Antonia,” they had reminded her. “Some students actually study things and like to meet other people.” This

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information hadn't surprised Toni quite as much as they'd expected, but almost. Joaquin was already meeting people left and right, he realized, and the studying would come soon enough. For now, he was sure the inside of his eyelids would provide plenty of scintillating facts.

Up four flights of stairs, down two doors, a right turn, and he leapt into bed. The room was still dark and comforting, a little unfamiliar, awfully small, far too humid, but he was utterly exhausted. No rush for anything. Right now, it was still summer. Still warm, and there was time to rest...

Horns blasted through the walls, shoving him into consciousness. "*Roll up roll up for the Magical Mystery Tour, step right this way!*"

It was going to be a long morning.

## FOUR

---

They let her into the room. It was a stereotype incarnate. Dark walls, blinds on one side, closed. A square table in the center, metal. A lamp hanging down, lit. Two chairs, one nearer and empty. An armed guard in the back-right corner, by the window. A mirror on the left wall. A tape-recorder.

“Hello. Have a seat.” The man in the chair, fortyish, blunt, trying to be friendly but he’d forgotten how.

“Hi.”

“You don’t want to have a seat?”

She sat, almost dropping immediately from her position. The door closed behind her.

“You’ve refused counsel?”

“Not refused. I can’t afford it.”

“One may be provided for you, free of charge.”

“I don’t like lawyers.”

“You seem awfully young to have an opinion on lawyers.”

“My parents don’t like lawyers.”

“Where are your parents?”

“I don’t want them here.”

“Where are they?”

“At work.”

“Why don’t you want them here?”

“You’re going to ask me questions.”

“You don’t like your parents, do you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Do they know you’re here?”

“Kinda.”



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“All right then. Shall we begin?”

“I guess.”

The man reached for the tape-recorder. “I’m on your side. I’m Joe and this is Mitch, and we’re here to ask you a few questions today. As you know. I’m going to turn this on for everyone’s protection.” He did so. “State your name for the tape.”

“Catie.”

“Your full name.”

“Catie Hanson.”

“Your full official name. Your *legal* name.”

“Catherine Ramona Hanson.”

“All right, then Catherine,”

“*Catie*.”

“Katie.”

“Yeah?”

“Okay, Katie, state the date for the tape.”

“I don’t know what day it is. School’s out.”

“It’s December 22nd, Katie.”

“December 22nd.”

“The year, too.”

“December 22nd, 2000.”

“And who is present in the room?”

“You. And me. And that guy.”

“Mitch.”

“Yeah, with the gun. Mitch.”

“And who am I?”

“Joe?”

“Officer Joe Ewing, examiner.”

“Right.”

“Okay, Katie, how did you know Matthew Norton?”

“I dated him.”

“Was he your steady boyfriend?”

“I dunno how steady he was. Do you mean was he stable?”

“Was he your, uh, regular boyfriend?”

“He was my boyfriend for a while, yeah.”

“How long?”

“I dunno. Six months.”

“Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t ask earlier, do you want anything?  
Cup of coffee?”

“You got any smokes?”

“Are you of age?”

“You asked if I wanted anything. I’m not buying them from you.”

“Well, uh.”

“It’s legal for a two-year-old to smoke in Kansas. It’s not legal to *buy*. Are you selling?”

“I guess you don’t need a lawyer.”

“Excuse me?”

“Here.”

“Thank you.” She lit up. “Can I use the recorder as an ashtray?”

“I will take this opportunity to remind you that you’re in a police station, Katie! Not to mention on tape with an officer of the law.”

“I don’t have to be here.” She stood up.

“That’s true, that’s true, you don’t.” He looked at a notepad he’d brought from under the table as she slowly resumed her seat.

“Six months, you said?”

“Something like that.”

“Were you sleeping with him?”

“Excuse me?”

“Did you and Matthew Norton have sexual intercourse?”

“No.”

“I can give you immunity for being under age, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“No. We weren’t fucking.”

“Why not?”

“What kind of a question is that? Would my lawyer object to a question like that?”

“You’ve watched too many courtroom dramas, Katie.”

“I didn’t want to fuck him. Would you?”

“I don’t even know him. That’s why I’m asking you these questions, Katie. Was he ugly?”

“Ugly? No, that’s not it. He’s just not the kind you sleep with, that’s all.”

“Are you a virgin?”

“How is this relevant?”

“So you’re not.”

“No, I am!”

“So that’s why you didn’t sleep with Mr. Norton.”

“You make him sound like a spy.”

“Was he a spy?”

Storey Clayton

“Of course not. He was a dork.”

“A dork?”

“Yes, a dork. I was two years younger than him. He wanted me to sleep with him. He said he loved me.”

“Did he love you?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“You dated him for six months.”

“That doesn’t tell me a thing about love, now does it?”

“I’m asking the questions, if you don’t mind.”

She put her cigarette out on the table. “He wanted me to sleep with him as his going-away present.”

“Going away to...”

“College.”

“Ah. Did you?”

“I already *told* you I didn’t.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Are you deaf? I didn’t want him to be my first time. He just wasn’t *that* guy, you know?”

“Did you tell him that?”

“No.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I made up some excuse. I think it was being outdoors.”

“Outdoors?”

“Well, I, now I remember, I saw this cricket and it freaked me out. Did you know crickets are actual insects? They look freaking scary. Like cockroaches. I flipped out.”

“You were going to do it outdoors?”

“Not really. We were, you know, I don’t see how any of this is relevant.”

“That’s for me to see. You could have a lawyer here if you wanted.”

“That’s going to keep coming back up, isn’t it?”

“Quite possibly. Now then, you were outside?”

“I don’t remember. I flipped out, then we went in the car. I made something up about his car.”

“What was his car?”

“Well it wasn’t his car. It was his mom’s. A Honda Civic.”

“A Civic? Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It was his mom’s. Sometimes he’d drive his dad’s Suburban.”

“They’re divorced.”

“Yeah.”

“A Suburban? He drove that often?”

“Not really. Once in a while.”

“Maybe he just didn’t drive it much around you.”

“No, I think he drove it around me as much as he could.”

“Hm.”

“You got another cigarette?”

He slid a pack at her across the table, coming from the same mysterious location as the notepad.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah. You ever see him drive anything else?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno. An Oldsmobile?”

“A *what*?”

“An Oldsmobile.”

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“Okay, I guess that’s a ‘no’.”

“Good guess.”

“How’d you meet Matthew?”

“Soccer game.”

“Yours or his?”

“You don’t know much about this kid, do you?”

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s obvious is all. My soccer game.”

“He saw you there?”

“You could say that.”

“Was he stalking you?”

“You might call it that.”

“Would you call it that?”

“No. We have... fans.”

“Who want to sleep with you.”

“You’re really focused on sex, aren’t you?”

“People do things for sex. I see a lot of crimes for sex. I need to understand the motivations of people to know why they commit crimes.”

“Motivations, huh?”

“Yes, I’m trying to establish Mr. Norton’s motivations.”

“He liked soccer. He liked *me*.”

“Does he still like you?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“When did you last talk to him?”

Storey Clayton

“A few weeks ago.”

“In person?”

“No, on I.M.”

“‘I.M.’?”

“Instant Messenger.”

“I see.”

“It’s a computer program that lets you chat.”

“Oh! Chat! I see. Did you do that regularly?”

“Every now and then.”

“What did he say?”

“You want a transcript?”

“Interesting details.”

“There weren’t any. He’s fine, his friends are fine, his classes are fine.”

“Sounds like my children.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Everything’s just fine, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Or it was.”

“Were you proud of him?”

“Proud?”

“Yeah.”

“He was older, I guess, so that was something. I mean, a lot of boys like me. I don’t really need to, well, I dunno. I mean I like the kid, don’t get me wrong. *Proud* doesn’t really say what I’d say though.”

“What would you say?”

“Well. I wish he’d stayed with me in college.”

“Oh yeah?”

“That’d make me proud. To have a college boyfriend.”

“Is *that* why you didn’t sleep with him?”

“No! Jesus! What’s with all the sex?”

“Just motivations.”

“I’m starting to wonder about *your* motivations.”

“So why did he break up with you?”

“He didn’t. We were thinking about staying through in college, but he was going to Harrison.”

“Right, Harrison.”

“Well I can’t stay with someone long-distance!”

“You wanted him to go to, uh, what’s the local school?”

“Washburn. You’re from out of town?”

“I’m asking the questions, as you may recall. Washburn.”

“Or the state schools, those would have been fine. Something in Kansas. Exactly what I wanted was exactly what he didn’t want.”

“He wanted to get away?”

“You could say that.”

“Did he have, uh, enemies?”

“Lord no.”

“That was emphatic.”

“Yeah, it’s just absurd. Matt? Enemies? It’s like a soccer field having enemies. He just sat there and got walked on, y’know? He couldn’t have had enemies.”

“What about other boys who liked you?”

“I wouldn’t call that an enemy. And no one liked me *that* much. Except Matt. But he got me.”

“Any former friends?”

“Of mine?”

“Of Matt’s.”

“I’m not convinced Matt had friends. Except for my friends, y’know. We’d hang out, all of us, sometimes.”

“What did you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Describe hanging out with Matt and your friends.”

“We’d just do shit, y’know, like the movies or cards or something. Bowling once, I think. Nothing special.”

“Drinking?”

“I don’t know if Matt was exactly a drinker.”

“Really? He did other stuff?”

“Other stuff?”

“Like what you’re doing. Smoking.”

“Lord no. I smoke sometimes. Matt never smoked.”

“Did he know you smoked?”

“I didn’t then, really.”

“You sure Matt never smoked?”

“Positive.”

“Would you bet money on that?”

“Millions.”

“Interesting.”

“Is it?”

“Did Matt buy you lots of gifts?”

“Once or twice.”

“Lots?”

Storey Clayton

"I wouldn't call it lots. He was infatuated. He was a good guy. He got me flowers and a few little things."

"Little things?"

"Yeah, nothing big."

"Nothing... costly?"

"No, I don't think so. Matt's parents are kinda rich, but they mostly got him things. Not much cash. He always wanted to show me in, uh, other ways."

"Oh?"

"I don't think he valued gifts much. They never really got him excited, so he figured they wouldn't do much for me."

"You talked about this?"

"Once or twice."

"And he didn't get excited because he was so rich?"

"His parents were."

"How rich?"

"I don't know. Doctors."

"But Matt didn't have much cash?"

"Enough. Not tons."

"Not tons. Hm. What about his college friends? You said you talked to him recently."

"IMed him."

"Right. Chat. Uh, what were his friends like?"

"I never met them. I haven't seen Matt since August."

"Well what kind of crowd did he seem to be running in?"

"Dorks, mostly."

"Dorks?"

"Harrison's full of 'em. He hated his roommate. He was always playing this CD over and over and talking about how it was the key to life. Funny shit, really."

"Which CD?"

"I dunno. Some Beatles CD, I think."

"Beatles. A bit old, isn't it?"

"The roommate's a weird kid. You should be talking to him."

"I intend to."

"Good for you. Anything else?"

"You know, Katie, your contempt will not stand up in court."

"We're not in court, are we?"

"You could be soon."

"Well maybe I should get a lawyer."

"Katie, there is one more very important thing."

*Loosely Based*

“Shoot.”

“What was Matt’s involvement with drugs?”

“Drugs?”

“Illegal drugs.”

“You’re asking me what Matt’s involvement was with *drugs?*”

“That’s correct. Marijuana, narcotics, anything like that.”

“Are you sure we’re talking about the same Matt Norton here?”