

Narrative Voices
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A Preface to This Edition

I don't know if this is cheating, but I feel like I owe it to myself, to this work, to you -- though I've been told to act as though you don't exist. Fuck it. This needs to be said, and it needs to be said by me and not by your narrator, Will, whom you will meet soon enough. If I don't do this, then I will have nothing to go forward from. I will look at this experiment as a failure, as having created nothing, when in fact I feel I have. This is *something* alright.

This novel -- though I feel freakish calling it that -- started in high places, with high ideals, and most importantly, with a good solid idea. Somewhere along the line (about ten words in the race to 50,000) all of that got lost and what was left behind are mere shards. Most of these fragments fit together pretty well, more or less, but they and I have lost all sense of the big picture. At point during the writing, I would get excited and think, "This is great, this will show how Will is slipping into his insanity, is becoming one of the people on the train, one of the people in the café...." But then I knew I wouldn't be able to pull it off, it would get rushed, I would blow my wad too soon and end up *telling* instead of *showing*. And I wonder, if I was ever any good at showing instead of telling, and the answer lies right here in the fact that I am writing not an introduction so much as an explanation. I didn't even get the telling right this time and so I must resort to this.

But then, I figure, Dave Eggers got away with a lengthy (and unnecessary) preface to *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, why can't I? Well for one, I'm no Dave Eggers. And for two, Eggers wasn't in a race against the clock and the calendar. But to Hell with it. Even if this is just me, the author, trying to tell you the story that I'm about to fail to tell you, and then -- of all the nerve -- pasting it to the top of the page to pad my word count, so be it. Words are words and these words have more to do with anything than the words you're about to come across (especially the bit about the vacation -- though hopefully that will be a footnote, or better yet, deleted entirely by the time it comes to this edition.

So here we go. This work attempts to explore several themes, or premises, or devices. They are, in order of their conception:

Themes:

1. The "muse" or a writer's ideas coming from voices inside his head.
2. Voices that tell you to do good things. Most of the time when we hear about someone who hears voices in their heads, it's either a religious revelation or a command to do evil. What if voices in your head told you to read to the elderly or volunteer at a hospital?
3. Drastic actions in the name of art.
4. Insanity's place in society. Cell phones as masks for lunacy.

5. Becoming that which you hate, in this case the "Cliff Clavinizing" of the narrator. He becomes an expert on random subjects and is willing to expound upon them to anyone willing, and even those unwilling, to listen.
6. An author's ideas forgotten. Scraps of paper that the narrator writes and leaves around become foreign notes -- death threats.
7. Trying to become a character an author has written.

How well any of these comes across remains to be seen.

Now, here's how it was supposed to work. We have a narrator, Will, who is a published author. He wrote a decently selling book three years before the beginning of this novel. Since the publication of that book, he has been unable to pen another word. Unfortunately, he squandered most of the money that he made off the first book and is forced to fall back on his other skill -- computer programming. He feels that this is partly to blame for his inability to write. The stress of having to work 8 to 10 hours a day, mostly using the tool of his other trade for purposes and a lack of good ideas have all combined to make him incapable of even starting his second book.

One night, while taking a walk, he is hounded by a group of people, Sheila and her friends. They know his name, they know his ways, they know too much about him to be anything but the first signs that Will's brain is slipping a little. And indeed, these five (of whom, you'll notice, only Sheila has any impact on the tale) are just figments of Will's imagination.

We don't see much (if any) of their relationship between their meeting and now, but we must assume that their friendship has grown, they have become closer and closer over time. But as the story starts, Sheila is suggesting that Will kill his parents in order to have something to write about. A drastic solution indeed! Up until this point, Sheila had told Will to do things quite often, but they were always normal things -- walking the dog, cleaning the house -- and he doesn't know what to do with this suggestion. That he doesn't immediately decry it, and continues to associate with Sheila is indication that perhaps he is slipping more than a little, and that he realizes that he needs Sheila, and that Sheila isn't as real as Will makes her out to be.

After all, he only ever talks to her on his cell phone. Never is there a description of Sheila's physical appearance (granted -- there's not much description of anybody's physical appearance in here, but you get the point) and she's never presented as being *there*.

In other news, Will rides the train a lot, and he hates every minutes of it. It's as if every one on the train is insane, and out to get him. Not that Will's paranoid, of course. No, these people just exhibit every personality trait that drives him nuts. A little common sense and common courtesy goes a long way for our narrator, and it seems that his fellow train riders have no idea what those words mean, much less how to display them.

Regardless of the fact that the train-riding-cell-phone-user is one of the characters that Will dislikes the most, he is one of those people himself. He spends a lot of time on the train using his cell phone to disguise the fact that he's having a conversation with a personality locked somewhere in his mind. He and Sheila talk about anything and everything -- from Will's situation at work to the fool Will's currently sitting next to.

Meanwhile, Will is finding notes on his desk and around his house that seem to be vague death threats. The handwriting is somewhat familiar, and the notes are so vague that he doesn't take them as more than warnings or suggestions -- but definitely not as threats. Sheila, however, is much more concerned with them.

Will's train rides are becoming more interesting as he meets the "Nixon's the One" man who is one of those people that just seems to know something about everything. First, Will has a negative reaction to this type of behavior, but as time goes on, he starts learning ridiculous trivial facts on many topics including the invention of the Corn Flake and the history of the television show, "Diffrent Strokes." Soon, Will is trading harmless conspiracy theories with the Nixon Man, and it becomes a daily tradition. Of course, this activity spills over into Will's life -- his co-workers and friends become victims of his now boundless knowledge.

So, what happens? I guess the idea was that Will would figure out that he'd become one of the lunatics he'd been observing, that the voices he was hearing were all in his head. The point being that his muse, which had previously given him the ideas that had made him the prolific writer he once was, had either stopped giving him ideas, or had gone a little bit insane herself. Something like that.

And what about the notes? Remember how they were written in a familiar handwriting? Well, of course, Will wrote them himself, in a fit of creative brilliance, some sort of trance. He doesn't remember them, and they came about somehow separately from Sheila's input or participation. Thus, she's unaware of them and afraid, while Will is unaffected because deep down (in the subconscious, like) he knows that he wrote them.

Finally, Will has begun romanticizing his characters -- especially the noir figures he's created that wander the streets at night in their "long dark coats" always searching for something, with some sort of purpose.

And for a climax? Well, there'd have to be a showdown between Will and Sheila. Those voices in our heads don't like being figured out, our other personalities will demand equal time. Remember Fight Club? I obviously do. The idea is that Will, once dependent upon the "voices" or muses or whatever would break free and be able to write on his own. This, of course, would cause Sheila some amount of consternation. How would the battle ensue? Well, that's a question I was never able to answer.

And so the biggest problem that I had while writing this, other than the fact that I was constantly scrambling for words to put down, was that as Will was living too much in his head, so was I. So, Will's head and my head became too similar, too closely related. Writing in the first person perspective made it hard to keep my feelings separate from his. At the same time, it's possible that the first person perspective made any of this possible. If it hadn't been for my ability to start talking about any of my feelings about any of the major subjects -- religion, politics, sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll -- I may never have come anywhere near the 50,000 words that I was shooting to write. I soon realized that this "novel" was just a collection of several of what would be my journal entries. To combat this, at many points, I forced myself to think, "What is the exact opposite of how I would feel about this?" and gave that position to Will, just to bring the novel closer to the definition of "fiction."

Another issue: the piecemeal fashion in which this was written. I attempted to write 500 words each time I sat down on the train on the way to or from work --

undoubtedly this affected the work, as it became extremely focused upon the train rides -- and as many words during the work day as I could sneak in. I would then make up the difference between that and 1666 (the daily goal) at home at night. This worked out for the most part, but it still seemed like I was constantly fighting from behind (as I am now) even though I had several 3000 word days. I guess the several 500 word days balanced those out. 50,000 words is a hell of a lot of words, and you have no idea how heavy that is until you dedicate yourself to writing that many words in 30 days.

Anyhow, this bitch was written in bits and pieces, chunks written on the train, or at work, or at home were short, fragments of chapters. Then, each time I went back to the document, I'd round out those bits, fatten them up. It lead to a somewhat disjointed creative process, and isn't the way I'd ever written anything before. But, I would try to add as many words as I possibly could, remembering Chris Baty's words: "Rip the delete key from your keyboard." In fact, I like ice cream so much that I could eat it every day! That's right, the Slinky was invented in 1928 by a man named Geraldo Valenzuela Slinky. I have three toes on my left foot and eight toes on my right, for a total of sixteen toes (I neglected to mention the ones on my shoulder.)

Do you see what I mean? This race leads to some pretty crappy words, and some amazing things being left alone and left in when they really shouldn't be. Ah, but what are you going to do about it? It's a race, it's a race, let it go....

I've never been so obsessed with numbers and math before. This exercise makes one an expert at percentages, averages, and velocity. Every day I would do complex calculations, figuring out how far behind I was, what I needed to write the next day, what I needed to average as the days went on. As I approached the end, the numbers become harder, less of an average, more of a "write this many words tomorrow or fail" kind of thing. I imagine a marathon runner counting each step and doing long division in his head at the end of each mile.

I think that I have failed in the stated goals of this National Novel Writing Month, inasmuch as I've not written a 50,000 word novel, but a 50,000 word treatise with fictional characters attached to many of the sentiments. My goal, at the start of this, was to actually write a 50,000 word novel. Now I've come to realize what my true goal should have been (and will be now -- goals are reviseable, dammit) to just write 50,000 words. And so, that's what this is: 50,000 words. No less, and maybe a couple hundred more (though I doubt it.) After having written 10,000 words at the most during any month in the previous 4 years, getting 50,000 words down, even if they weren't connected to the ones before and after them, is a big deal at all. Actually writing on the train again. Writing at home again. Writing at all again. It's a big step for me.

It hasn't, however, answered the question of whether or not I've still "got it." I'm struggling with the question of whether I ever had it at all. I used to churn the crap out left and right, and it was well-received back in the day, but now it definitely doesn't cut the mustard. I have these ideas, see, but maybe not the wherewithal to manage the execution of them. Is anybody hiring an idea man?

I don't know if there is a novel in there. My current thinking is that somewhere within all this is a solid short story, or perhaps some sort of screenplay. Was I reaching too far with too small an idea? Too big for my britches? Am I stretching this introduction

right now just so I can watch the counter at the bottom of the screen continue to climb (Climb! Climb!) so I can meet my daily quota of words?

So, without further ado, because God knows there's plenty of it in the pages that follow, let's get on with this.¹

¹ It's even happened *here* in the *introduction* where I find myself coming back, looking for more words and trying to expand on what were raw emotions and heartfelt ideas. I have no shame. And look at me now, adding to the depths of my depravity with this. Footnotes count in the total count, right? RIGHT?

Narrative Voices

Chapter 1

Drastic Solution

It wasn't until Sheila told me to kill my parents that I thought something might be wrong. She was constantly telling me to do things -- clean my house, walk the dog, exercise more often -- but never anything as drastic as that. And the way she brought it up, casual as hell, like it was just another thing to say, nothing out of the ordinary. "Kill your parents," completely off-handed, as if she'd just come up with the idea that morning.

I was on the train, heading to work and I had no idea how to respond to something like that. I was still a little disoriented, having just woken up and rushed through some sort of morning routine to make the last express to the Loop.

"No. I can't do that," perhaps a little too loud. People around me looking up from their newspapers and morning thoughts, disturbed.

"Hush," a calming whisper. "Don't give yourself away. Think about it. You need to do this."

"Don't you have a better suggestion for me today? Like maybe I should find religion? Or adopt some poor African child for the price-of-a-cup-of-coffee?"

"What makes you think that would work?"

Three years ago, while working on my second novel, I lost my touch. The writing hadn't been going well at all and I'd started to think that I had used up all the words in my head when I ran across this group. Around 3 in the morning, I was walking along the lake front, trying to find even the slightest fragment of an idea. It had been silent, calm. The lake was almost perfectly still, the waves made little noise, and there was nothing around until I heard, from behind, very clearly, "Should we kill him?"

The sudden noise, along with the violence it implied made me jump. I turned around to find darkness, an empty path, and then a voice, behind me again, "Nah, he's not worth it." I spun around again to more darkness.

"This isn't funny," I whispered, and kept on, and a bit louder, "Fucking kids." This elicited laughter from the dark, from behind me, from right behind me. I fought the urge to turn around, in no mood to give them the satisfaction, in no condition to make myself care. They kept it up, though, whispering on one side or the other, keeping pace with me as I continued walking. I pretended not to hear.

"Aww come on, Will, we're just playing." This, as I neared the end of the path, just a few blocks from my home. I relaxed and stopped. This voice -- it was Sheila -- sounded familiar, and she knew my name.

And this is how I met Sheila and her friends. They are Jack, Lincoln, Donna and Stanley. Since that night, one or more of them have always been around, a tight family, though rarely, as that night, all together at once. It got so that I was seeing my older friends, from high school and college and work less and less, and spending more and more time with the five of them.

The novel never got written though, much to the chagrin of my friends, my publisher, my agent and myself -- and much to the delight of several critics. Technically,

I have five years to make good on it, but everyone's pretty much written it off. I figured, along with everyone else, that I'd gotten lucky on the first one. It was a fluke, a perfect idea probably meant for someone else that I'd somehow stolen and made my own. Ever since, I wasn't able to write a postcard, much less another novel. The cat had my tongue, I was silenced, unable to pen a single word.

Sheila was convinced that I'd eventually come out of it. She always told me that I was just waiting for the right moment, the right idea, the right *book* to come out and make itself known. She would have none of my protests. I was *trying* to get this thing written, and it wasn't happening, and I knew how it felt -- that my hand didn't know how to hold a pen, didn't know how to make the words, that my head was empty, silent.

"We can change all that," she would say.

Sheila was silent for the rest of the ride downtown, but as I descended the stairs from the train platform, she spoke again.

"Come on. It'll give you something to write about."

"Are you crazy?" I asked, weaving my way through the other commuters on my way to my office. "I can write about it from jail. Sure, it'll sell, but what the hell's that worth? Besides, my parents have been pretty decent to me."

I went into the office without saying goodbye to her.

Chapter X

Don't Believe Everything You Read

I'm a web developer, believe it or not. Not that you'd have any reason not to buy that -- at this point, you've no reason not to trust me, even though we've just met. Isn't that just amazing, the way you'll open a book and immediately trust the narrator to be telling you the truth? Keep in mind, of course, that the narrator and the author are two separate entities, and the author is *always* lying to you when it comes to fiction. That's why they *call* it fiction. But the narrator could be lying to you as well, and that's when things get a little bit sketchy. Rarely, however, do we question the narrator's honesty, as if they have nothing to gain from lying. Having been both author and narrator though and known quite a few of both, I can tell you, they're a pretty sleazy bunch of people.

Anyway, I work for a living, if you could call it work. The money from the book, and the advance on the non-existent second one, was decent, but nothing that I could live off for very long. I had entertained thoughts of quitting the second the book was accepted for publication, but after running through the numbers, I realized I'd have to keep at it. And I pretty much hate every fucking minute of it. It's not the work itself that bothers me, but everything that you have to get through to get the work done. I'm just not made for it, or not made for work in general, or not made for the human race at all.

I think if I could just sit somewhere and write code in a vacuum and not deal with the people, I might enjoy it. But that's just not possible. You've got to be writing the code for someone -- there's always that bastard end-user waiting to rip your work to shreds with their talk of usability and instructional design. Who gives a rat's ass? It works right, doesn't it? It always works right, but it's never *right*.

But, I do like the challenge of solving problems, tricking computers into doing things that they just don't want to do, fighting the good fight. I swear a lot, and pound the crap out of my desk in the process, but eventually, in the end, I win. And there's nothing like looking at 500 lines of code and knowing exactly what each one of them does and why, workarounds and hacks, clever little bits of logic that make perfect sense. It's an orderly and perfect little world. Until the other people invade.

And those people are invading all the time. Imagine trying to do work that takes the utmost concentration, superior tunnel vision, closed circuit brain work while being constantly interrupted. Imagine trying to isolate one closing parentheses or curly bracket out of 250 that is causing a hundred web pages to display in German rather than Aramaic. Now, imagine trying to do this while someone who has absolutely no idea what you do for a living, how you do it, or sometimes even what your name is -- keep in mind, this person is higher on the org chart, less likely to be laid off in the event of a total economic catastrophe and what's more, *gets paid a lot more than you do* -- stands so close to you as you sit that you unconsciously physically recoil and allow a look of disdain and disgust to cross your face.

Okay, maybe that's not working for you. Let's try something else. Imagine trying to draw blood from some poor sucker with ridiculously thin veins while a circus clown in full get up and funny clothing is repeatedly smacking you in the face with pies made of whipped cream and thumb tacks. Or, let's say you've got to disarm a complicated

explosive while Martha Stewart is bitching you out about the disorderly way in which you organized your sock drawer. I could go on....

It's the voices that surround you that constantly penetrate the delicate and carefully constructed dome of silence that I have carefully created. These voices ... demanding, questioning. It's the reason that the modern developer's best friends are a pair of headphones, a hard drive full of digital music and the uncanny ability to ignore someone while they are actually hula dancing just at the edge of your peripheral vision. Without these things, the voices -- of project managers, production assistants, *vice presidents of business development* -- will never allow any work to get done. And they wonder why everything's always late.

Now, let's not make any mistakes here and confuse me for a web designer. I know you were about to rush off and tell your friends, "I was reading about this guy... no, you don't know him ... yeah, he's pretty cool... and...what does he do for a living? Oh, he's a web designer." I can tell. You have that look in your eye. It's not fucking correct. Oh sure, you think I'm splitting hairs, or getting defensive and angry about the smallest details. Sure, I'm prone to doing that, I'm the first to admit it, but this is not the case. The differences between developer and designer are many and varied and so uninteresting that I'm not going to bother to list them here.

Or maybe I will. Look, designers design things. You would never confuse an interior designer and a general contractor, would you? One guy builds a house, the other one makes it look relatively pretty. The same thing applies here and you would do well to remember it. Ask me to make something look pretty and you've made a big mistake. I have absolutely no skills at making things look pretty, relatively or otherwise. My interest and ability in the aesthetic arts are next to nil. I couldn't design my way out of a paper bag (whatever that means) and it's going to stay that way. I couldn't draw a straight line with a ruler and the hand of God guiding my own. That's why I work the back end. I'll let the artists and designers make the pretty pictures, and I'll even slap them onto the front end of these things I'm making.

I've no formal training in this industry either. I got lucky out of college about three weeks before the internet became a big thing and got even luckier after the whole industry crashed. I'd spent nine months on the unemployment lines waiting for someone to give me another break. Lo and behold, someone eventually did, and that landed me where I am now.

Though, if you asked, I wouldn't call myself particularly lucky. There's nothing worse than hating what you do when you're not in a position to do anything else. And this is where I currently stand. The market's terrible, there are no jobs for anybody (at least no jobs for me) and I can't imagine myself going into this place another day.

So why do I? What gets me up in the morning, to the office, to my desk? (An alarm clock, a train, an elevator.) Habit, routine, an extreme effort of will, the ability to daily forget what happened the previous day.

And there was a surprise waiting for me this particular day. Scrawled on a yellow Post-It note from the pad on my desk was a note. It read, "Your imminent death is imminent." No signature, no address, no clues at all -- short of taking it to the crime lab in the cave underneath my stately manor, I couldn't figure out a thing. I didn't feel

threatened by it, likely because it stank of Engrish, and made me laugh more than anything else. Sheila didn't like it though.

"Think about it," she said, "someone so desperate to kill you that they repeated the word 'imminent' just to emphasize how quickly your time is coming."

"But they never said anything about killing me, that they were going to do it or anything. It's just a statement, and how should they know? Everyone's imminent death is imminent. That's why they call them imminent deaths."

"Okay, but why is your death imminent?"

"Well, how should *I* know that?"

"I think this is a bit more serious than you're making it out to be."

"Nah, look. It wasn't written in blood, or even with a red crayon. This is way too calm to be worried about."

My casual nature confuses us both. I usually look to anything to get nervous or worked up over. Most of the time the vague nature of the note would make it even worse, presenting so many different possibilities for what it could be. A note that said, "I'm going to kill you tomorrow at 3 PM," would be less of a bother because at least it would be something concrete to hold onto. But for some reason, this note seems almost friendly, like a thought occurring to someone that they wanted to share. Like the beginning of a story that I might write, if I could write.

So why can't I write anymore? Mostly because I never have the time. Actually, the fact is the time I have, I choose to spend in other ways. Something about the fact that all the voices in my head during the day keep me from finding my written voice, or my muse. All that excessive input that I am being paid to absorb is pushing out any creative thought I could have. During school, it was always one voice, droning on, that I was able to filter out and ignore. I managed to get decent, if not good, grades. With work, though, the tests are harder and the stakes are higher. That may be a bit dramatic, but hell, it's my story.

I just don't know the right combinations of words anymore. I had once been able to turn quite a pretty phrase, but now it seems like every group of words just can't stand up to the pressure of the groups surrounding it. I know quite a few good words, like "antepenultimate" and "sesquicentennial" but I just can't find a way to use them to save my life.

It got so it didn't bother me so much, most of the time though. When I see people whom I hadn't seen since the first book was published, they are always congratulatory and full of praise -- some of it, of course, total bullshit and ass-kissery (how's that for a hell of a word?) Those whom I'd seen since then always ask the same question.

"So, are you still writing?"

Sure, I'm still writing. It's mostly in code, either some computer language, or bizarrely cryptic journal entries that even I can't decipher. What's it worth? Not a thing to anybody, especially not those who were banking on me coming up with 300 pages worth of something coherent.

It's all about the words though. They have the strength, the power, the weight. They have weight -- even when just on a screen, you see them, their power. And when combined properly? Think about it, the words can do anything they want to. The words can do whatever I want them to, when I somehow manage to control them. And that's the

thing -- I think I've lost control of the words. No longer will they dance at my command, create meaning, create anything other than desperate, pretty trash.

And video games.... So many people say shit about how they spend all day looking at a screen, they can't imagine going home and doing the same thing, whether it's playing games, using a computer, watching TV. It's all I want to do -- ever. I think I might be trapped, I'm sure my genitals are warping and my head is never going to be the same because of the sheer amount of time I spend with a remote control or a game control in my hands. But there it is. The radiation and the electromagnetic interference all zapping right into my head, every night, the shit blasting through me every day, I might as well be standing in front of an unshielded microwave oven every moment I'm awake.

And then the games take over my head sometimes. I'll play for hours, seriously, hours, and the games permeate my every waking, and sleeping, hour. I've been playing this skateboarding game lately and it's bad enough that when I walk down the streets I think of every object as something to trick off but it's turned into something more insidious. I remember back when Tetris was all the rage, I'd play it relentlessly and it came to the point that I'd see the shapes from the game in between words in whatever book I was reading. With this game, I'm seeing *everything* as something to trick off. Things in other games, things on TV, looking for gaps and special bonuses. And it's as much an addiction as anything else. There is little else that I think about and little else that I want to do. Is it decreasing my sex drive? Maybe. But it's decreasing my drive to do much of anything else -- not that I'm against those other things, but there's little that's as fun or as rewarding as the structured world of the interactive game. Complete a task, get a new stat point, get \$250, get to the next level. Nothing else in my world is as cut and dry. And I've got the strategy guide too.

I manage to keep my head quiet for most of the rest of the day. Few interruptions, no lethargy, no distraction.

The problem is that nothing interesting ever happens to me. The bigger problem is that it's mostly my fault. I choose to shelter myself, become a hermit, stay indoors for days at a time, staying awake until I'm dead.

And I don't have a coherent thought in my head.

I just keep putting words together until there are enough because I don't want to do it anymore. I don't want to keep doing this anymore. It's so fucking scary to be doing this because the voices aren't there and I'm all alone and all these words are coming from nowhere but myself. And without the voices, I don't have a thing to say. And I don't know what I did to make the voices leave, I don't know what I did to make them silent. They used to be so loud, but I must have insulated myself so much that even in my own head, I can't hear a thing. The television on at a low murmur, the low murmurs outside at an even lower murmur, and the only thing I can do is pray that someday I'll be able to hear again. When did it all start? When did it all stop? Did I ever hear anything at all in the first place? I may have been so delusional that I *imagined* the voices altogether. How fucked up do you have to be to imagine that you've got some sort of muse.

And there used to be light in the darkness, and a good amount of darkness for the light to be appreciated. And just enough silence for the voices to make a difference.

Those two senses, that of sight and that of hearing, those two senses so important and so ignored. I must have slept, and I must have never woken up.

I wish there was someone to blame for this but myself, someone to take the fall for this but myself. It was my own doing though, most likely. My own failures along the way to keep strong, to keep at it, to keep my hands moving somewhere but my own crotch, because all along I've just been jerking off in one way or another. Why not create something while I'm at it?

Because it takes so much more effort to create than to not create. And I'm just too tired, all the time, too dead inside, too lazy inside. And yet here I am, in this box, in this cube, making myself....making myself.

Making myself what? Into a version of myself not yet seen before. And here I am again and again working this out, working this in, working out my issues into unsuspecting and undeserving pages. Paper wasted, trees slaughtered at my will, to allow myself this wasteful edge.

What I think, honestly, is that every thing I've thought has already been thought before. That originality died soon after the first man was born. In a flash, every possible combination of ideas and concepts went through that intrepid explorers head and since then we've all been picking at what boils down to being the intellectual property of someone who died a few million years ago. The fact that he's family doesn't make it any less of a crime.

But that should not prevent us from creating, or at least pretending to create, new things. It's not as if this prehistoric genius published anything, and though all his thoughts are ours, it's good to have general access to that which we've chosen to write down. And, as his record keepers, we're doing a decent job.

The point is, every word has been used. Many have been used to the point that they're no longer very powerful anymore. There are still some good ones left, and I know quite a few of them (antepenultimate and nonagon, for example) but all I can do is try to find interesting and compelling new ways to combine them into something more meaningful than perhaps they've been combined before.

And so I (and all writers) become these verbal interior designers. "Does this look good over here? Should I move it back a few words? Forward? What?" It's the closest thing I have to aesthetic skill, though my handwriting is terrible, and this word arranging skill has faded anyway.

I was never able to write anything other than about myself, in one codified form or another, and that was always the problem. The deeply internal ramblings that formed the basis of my first novel, so inspired by everything Samuel Beckett ever wrote, where nothing happens, but you still end up with this sense of ridiculous dread, only work once. Unless you're Beckett, in which case you can form a career out of writing like that. Then again, I've never sat, in the dark, my only sense being that of the pressure of the floor on my ass, my feet on the floor, my arms on my legs, my head in my hands, as is the case with most, if not all, of his characters. But I've been close.

And so I've never been able to create these worlds with Russian generals leading great armies, or railroad employees with spikes blown through their skulls. Every bit of dialogue I wrote must have been said at some point or another, every word now seems fake, I have nothing to give, and am starting to think that I may have never created anything at all in the first place.

But who has, ever? Greeks felt their thoughts came from Gods or muses, not their own, their voices in their head, it's tough to say if Plato's words were really Plato's words, or if he lived the Republic, or if he was just insane.

What demons are in my head? Worse still, why do I let them control my mouth? There is nothing in me that is rage and yet that is the only thing that I exude. I am the calm little center of the universe. I am the calm little center of the universe. For some reason, I think about Fight Club.

And what is the answer? And what is the solution? Why do I have to fight? I'm a lover, not a fighter. I'm a lover, not a fighter. If I keep telling myself that, maybe it will come true and I can get some lovin' done. And it keeps me up at night, these questions. And they keep me up at night, these questions. As it happens, I repeat myself when under stress. I rip off the thoughts of King Crimson when under stress.

Who can know me, if I don't know myself? This is what keeps me up at night. Because I hate sleeping with a stranger and that's me every night, going to bed with this person that I have no idea who I am. This is me, my hands on my head, my assumption of the position complete, this is me bending over and taking it up the ass from myself. This is me, strapping it on and walking the world.

Oh bullshit, this is me, sitting here on my ass, waiting for the world to come to me. Soon enough, I'll figure out that the world's not ever coming to me and the question is, what am I going to do about it? Odds are good that I'll keep on sitting here and keep on waiting, forcing myself, somehow, to forget the knowledge gained.

Jesus Christ, where was I? Sheila? Did she say something to me today? Did I go to work? Fuck.... Where *was* I?

I wake up every morning in the same bed, I wake up every morning in the same head. But always alone. And silent. The alarm clock is even silent, a whisper, a sub-vocal suggestion that I get up and get going. There are no voices, usually, until the platform at the train station, and that's when Sheila usually starts. Or Jack. Sometimes Jack starts my day. He's never suggested I kill anybody. Just hurt a few people. The rest of them are pretty docile, or...do I mean dormant? I'm not sure.

I came upon the scene, breathless, a chaotic crowd forming around a point of obvious trouble. There were, amongst the people, three cows wandering aimlessly, untroubled by what was apparently a murder.

"LAPD," I said, showing my badge, "Coming through. Hot soup. Gimmie some fuckin room."

Finally making it to the actual cause of all this, I find two bodies, both bloody, one covered in hamburger, the word "VegitAryans" carved into his chest.

What the fuck is that? Sheila?

What?

What the fuck was that?

What are you talking about?

That last bit. I'm not a cop. That was terrible.

A dream maybe? I'm...not sure.
Where the fuck are your quotation marks?
"Sorry."
"That's better."

And it's shit like that that can really make you lose your cool. All of a sudden...it's like something's taken over. Or it's like there's this voice in your head that's more than just a voice.

Sometimes, I'm lying in bed and I'll hear people I know talking. It's not me imagining conversations with them, or remembering something they said earlier that day. I can just...hear them talking. I couldn't, if I tried, imagine my father's voice, but sometimes when I'm waiting for sleep to come, he'll talk to me. It's his voice, and it's really confusing. I will lie there and think about it, and think that this is me trying to make my father's voice ring through my head and right as I'm thinking that, I'll hear him say something again. And the best part is that he's speaking complete nonsense. "Don't let the pages get too close together." "Fires are not for the taking." What the hell that means, I don't know. It happens with other people too. Other people in my life. What are they doing in my head?

Every night I go to bed in the same head, and a lot of times there are all these people stuck in here with me.

I never thought that the aliens were out to get me, or that I was an alien, or that I knew *things* that I didn't know. There was never any question about my sanity. There was never any issue with my day to day life. I never lost my job or my friends and family because I thought -- or knew -- they were out to get me. And yet.... Well, something was not quite right. In there, in that head of mine. It's funny how your head is where you live, and the rest is just this added baggage, this meat you drag around with you. Everything is your eyes and your head. Four of your five senses are right there. That's where you're going to spend your time. It's no coincidence that looking into someone's eyes is the window to their soul. How else are you going to know them?

And so a headache is just about the worst thing that can happen to a person. Especially a person who lives so much in their head. Especially a person housing as many people as I am. The headaches came often and when they came, they came hard. Pain from every quarter of my skull, causing so much agony as to nearly blind me. There's nothing you can do but swallow a few Advil -- or something stronger if you can find it -- and wait, and hope.

Each time there is the fear that it will never go away, writhing, holding my hands to my head as if that might help, but nothing helps. You can't ice it, or heat it, or apply pressure because it *is* ice and heat and pressure. It is something attacking the very core of your being, trying to make you different, trying to unmake you. And what do you do then? How do you keep on? You have to keep on. That is the terrible thing about personal crises: the rest of the world will not wait.

And so the bills pile up, the work piles up, the unanswered phone calls and fallen leaves and trash cans full of your empty bottles and vomit pile up and you are swimming in your shirked responsibilities and waste. There's no way to get better when you're

surrounded by the products of your own disease. Migraines are eating away at your personality and you just want to beg the world to stop and the only thing you can think of that might ease the pain is a bullet plowing through your skull, easing the pressure, taking the bad parts away. If you could manage without actually killing yourself.... You might. It's like with a bad toothache, all I want is for someone to come along and punch me in the jaw, as if this new pain would somehow make the old pain go away and not just make everything all that much more worse.

And sometimes the rest of the body will betray with its ailments and sores. Sometimes I feel like my body is falling apart. In the shower in the morning, I take stock of myself, find where my muscles ache, where my skin is flaking off, where my balls itch, as I hack up the semi-solid lumps from my tired lungs. My body is betraying me, but only because I betrayed my body first.

Why would anyone invent something that destroys us? Cigarettes, alcohol, Twinkies. They are empty, worthless things that are turned out by the millions, sold by the millions, consumed by the masses. Everything that we put inside ourselves can do nothing but change us and yet we choose to take these evils into our bodies and then act surprised when these sacks of meat and machine fail to move us down the hallway anymore. We rot our insides at will and with abandon and the people who make the money from it keep on making that money from it.

What freaks me out even more is the gun makers -- here are people who with straight faces are making "civilian versions of the M16" and "home assault rifles." And these people spend their lives making devices whose sole purpose is to hurt and kill things -- mostly people. Who needs an assault rifle in their linen closet? Who can make a land mine knowing that its sole purpose is to explode under someone's feet?

Guns terrify me, but not because of their potential violence. Or perhaps it is. I just get scared of what I might do when presented with guns. Sitting in a coffee shop, watching two police officers come in and I am frightened that some part of me might possess me to lunge for one of their guns. I wonder if I could get to it before his partner drew and fired. I wonder what I would do if I managed, somehow, to get it from its holster. And no idea all the while, why on Earth I might be doing such a thing. What would lead me to such an act? I'm not violent, I'm not malicious, and I'm not insane.

Nor am I depressed, or suicidal, but the thought, what if I was alone, alone and with a gun. I picture a revolver, something small but with weight, heavy in my hand. Hefting it, feeling its power, this is a tool, not unlike a chainsaw or a drill. I can't shake the image of the gun in my, tasting the metal, smoky gunpowder smell, the taste of a chisel, the sight on the barrel loosening the space between my top two teeth. And why am I holding this gun in my mouth? Why am I pulling the hammer back? Why am I bringing myself this close to the edge, even if it's just in my mind? What would happen in that instant when all of me, what used to be me, shot out the back of my head and onto the wall. Would it paint a picture of my life in red and gray and white? What would that look like?

But I have these thoughts about anything and death or dismemberment: I can't help picturing my body sliced in half because I jumped off a boat too close to the propeller; being crushed by a falling tree; losing a hand to a table saw. These aren't pleasant images. Why would my mind be so obsessed with them? Why do we stop to look at the most grisly of traffic accidents, unable to turn away?

They're the only people that don't really annoy me. They have no tics; there is no sucking of air through the teeth or tapping or knuckle cracking. They rarely even talk during movies. Aside from the occasional late-night phone call or early morning shouting, they don't even make that much unwanted noise. It's a wonder I found them. I've long been cursed with attracting the loudest, twitchiest people wherever I go. That's why I rarely go anywhere anymore.

"Where are you going to eat?"

"I'm not sure. I like pizza."

"Oh? What kind of pizza do you like?"

"Well, I like Lou Malnati's and I like Leona's and I like Giordano's and I like Carmen's and I like Troubadori's but I don't like Pizza Hut but I do like Domino's but I don't like Papa John's because it gives me gas. But I think I might go get a steak at the Gateway. Have you been to the Gateway?"

First, I notice that they speak in better sentences than I ever have, even if they are a bit obsessed with the minutia, and who can really blame them for that -- you try spending your days with your only worries about getting enough spaghetti sauce and what time you're playing ping-pong. Jesus, that sounds beautiful.

I suppose they do have bigger problems than that, especially the ones who think the CIA is out to get them, or that the Maharishi is personally brainwashing you, but you have to admit, a little spice like that in your life might be just what you're looking for. Wouldn't my life be so much more interesting if there was a global conspiracy that was completely focused on rubbing me out? What a confidence booster! That there was a group of people that cared enough about me that they'd go through intricate machinations just to ruin my life would fill me with the sort of love that doesn't come easy.

But really, you've got to learn to keep your cool, because otherwise you're going to end up scaring off everyone in your life. People don't tend to like to hear that sort of shit, and they're going to skip out on you the first chance they get. That's why all these guys have nowhere to go but their halfway house and this café, their home away from their home away from home. And they have nothing to do but annoy and generally creep out the folks that come here. They're rarely harmful, and they're often amusing, but more often than not, it's just more than you ever want to deal with.

"I love the Gateway. They have steak and they have pork chops and they have shrimp and they have salad and they have everything you could ever want."

"Gateway's okay."

"Okay? Okay? Gateway's the best! Oh man, they have salmon and swordfish and..."

Shut the fuck up! But it's not me yelling that. It's not anyone yelling that. It's the fervent wish in my head, the words reverberating in my skull, *their* words reverberating in my skull as if I'm having a conversation with myself about this particular restaurant. I try to chase it away...

...I am the calm center of the universe I am the calm center of the universe I am the calm center of the universe...

...but it doesn't work. It never does.

There are a thousand different types of lunatics that come to this café. There are a few inpatient care facilities located conveniently nearby. I know a few of them by name, but I know most by their afflictions. There are the twitchers and the mumblers and the ones who rock back and forth incessantly and the ones who, god forbid they should learn your name, will talk to you at any and every opportunity. They all congregate here, or else they are following me around or else they are everywhere. They hang out here just like we do, just like I do, doing the same things that I do: drinking coffee, chain-smoking, shit-talking. The difference is that even the most casual of observers can pick out which ones live in the care facility and which one actually has his own place to go.

But, it's gotten so it's easy to hide your insanity these days if you really want to. When everyone has a cell phone, it's tough to know who's having an actual conversation and who's just faking it. It used to be that someone walking down the street talking to themselves was to be avoided. Now it happens all the time that someone seemingly spouting off to nobody in particular is actually having an animated conversation with a friend or co-worker. Now, we're all used to it. It's come to lunatics with hands-free headsets walking down the street, talking animatedly and now we don't give them another look except to sigh and fret about the prevalence of personal communication devices and the need for everyone to be talking to someone that's somewhere else, when in fact they're likely talking to someone that's not anywhere at all.

And then my phone rings, or at least I think it does.

The caller ID says "Unknown Number" which is a rarity on my cell phone. I answer anyway.

"Hello?"

"Will! Sheila. Look, I've got to apologize about this morning. That was out of place, the whole kill your parents thing, that was just waaaay out of line, not my place to suggest."

"Hey, it's okay. I'm sorry I snapped at you. Under stress and all that, you know."

"Yeah, I was thinking about it, and I realized, this is a decision you're just going to have to make on your own."

"Uh, yeah, thanks. I'll have to think about it." Starting to realize, this girl's just a little off-kilter. Even though she's been a near constant companion for a couple years, I'm still learning things about her, and this is the most disturbing. She's apologizing for pushing me to kill my mother and father (and step-father and step-mother? She never specified) but telling me it's something I have to want to do on my own? Can that be real? With friends like these, who needs friends? Is this the kinda thing where, were I a kid, my parents would advise against me hanging out with this crowd? I imagine, knowing what Sheila's suggested, they'd advise against me hanging out with them now as well.

"You can't tell me what to do, Dad!"

I'm always so tired. I don't have insomnia, I don't sleepwalk. There's nothing creepy going on here, but I'm always just so tired. I've pretty much cut out caffeine and most of the sugar from my diet, but that hasn't helped matters any. I still have a midday crash right on schedule. At 2:00 PM, like clockwork, the yawns start coming and don't quit until I fall asleep. It doesn't matter what time I go to bed, either, and it doesn't matter what time I wake up in the morning. I can't keep a full day's worth of energy stored in my

body at any time, and so mid-afternoon I become worthless and might as well just hide from the world for the rest of the day. And so often I'll do just that. It's pretty easy to hide most of the time. The trick lies in making yourself as unnecessary to the rest of the world as possible. That's easier than it sounds, too. Just finish what you can and punt everything else to someone else. And then head for the hills before anyone notices. Sometimes I feel guilty...no, not guilty, but... I wonder if someone is watching me, or if someone is thinking, "Where did he go?" Or maybe I'm afraid that nobody noticed, maybe I'm running so someone will chase after me and why isn't anyone following? The trick is in not hiding so long that you're completely forgotten. Once you've been written off, it's real hard to get written back in.

Sex. Is everywhere. And it doesn't stop. And somehow I will never stop thinking about it. And the slightest thing can set me off, but these Victoria's Secret commercials can send me to the bedroom in half a second. Honestly though, give me a glimpse of an animated cheerleader from a video football game, or anything at all. It turns into chronic masturbation and very tired wrists and arms. And dick, for that matter.

I understand that, as a male, it's my duty to be constantly horny, but I thought that would end in my mid-twenties. Frankly, I'm tired of it. The hint of a breast, just the hint, tight under a sweater, it's getting worse -- I never understood the attraction of a tight sweater until recently. I'm a madman, a pervert, a slut.

But I'm not. I know that it's also my duty to have as much meaningless sex as I possibly can, but after a few experiences of that sort, I realized that it just hurts my head too much to have

Back in the day when I had a few good thoughts in my head, it seemed that I'd get my best ideas mid-orgasm. No joke -- in the middle of a climax, it was always an epiphany and something would just come to mind. Like my head was so clear at that moment that all the clutter was gone and something that had been hiding from me all along would be revealed. Or else, that's when I was able to talk to God. Who knows? I would clean myself up and grab the pen and write. It was always golden. I don't know what happened -- it's not like I jerk-off any differently...or any less, these days. So what is it? Have all the hidden ideas been uncovered and used up? If so, what did they produce? Where are the results of my brilliance? Shouldn't I be wallowing in a heap of amazingly clever, well-written pieces, each one destined to be counted amongst the greatest works by an American writer? Maybe I'm trying too hard, maybe acknowledging the source of my ideas has ruined any effect it once had. Maybe I'm just using it as an excuse to look at porn.

I had a good childhood, never was beaten or abused, and though my parents may not have exhibited the best moral judgment throughout their lives, whose have? Sure, they're divorced and remarried and moved all over the country, but I could have done much worse, as far as parents go. Recently I've even been a little pissed that my childhood was *too* normal -- or abnormal in that normality is not the norm these...oh forget it. I figure if there'd been some incest or abuse or something I may very well have had four hit novels and a few more therapists.

The problem was that we were a dreadfully boring family. Even the few crises or controversies I can remember pale in comparison to things that I know happened in other

households. We didn't even yell at each other all that often. Yes, I'm grateful that I had loving parents and a roof over my head and enough to eat, maybe I was a bit sheltered. Probably, this is what led to my ridiculous teenage rebellion which undoubtedly fucked up my chances for a normal life. I look at my parents -- upstanding citizens with nice houses, good jobs, cars that run, well-organized files and good oral hygiene and I wonder, why don't I have any of that? If they'd been irresponsible slobs, would I have gone the other way and become the amazingly with it person I'd just love to be? If they'd slapped me around a little more, would I have run with a better or worse crowd than I did? It's impossible to say, and impossible to know. I would like to know what would have happened if my life was just a little... different in some way. I'd like to know what all the parallel me's are doing these days. I'll bet a lot of them are total assholes.

Chapter X

Don't Think About God / All That We Can Know is That We Know Nothing

I've never run for public office. Never had the desire to be in politics. I don't know the first thing...well, about the first thing. Even the second thing eludes me pretty well most of the time. The thing is, I just don't have the kind of attitude needed for that sort of work. I'm not convinced of enough things.

How can those who do evil be convinced that they are in the right? How can anyone at all be convinced that they are right? So many people so *convinced*. It's unnerving. All this *conviction*. How can anyone lead a life with a doctrine of anything but, "Don't fuck with the way other people live?" This is why politicians scare me. These people make their living from being convinced that they know how people should live. That they know what's best for me. That's why I never vote. It's not that I feel my vote doesn't count; I know all too well that it does. Casting a vote is releasing power over who controls my life. Casting a vote is saying, "I endorse you to be in a position to make decisions for me."

Sure, by not casting a vote I am giving that power to others. I am giving someone else the power to choose who will gain this power. But I'll be damned if I'll be a party to a system that repeatedly gives power to some group of rich, white assholes. None of them - - not a single one -- represents me or my interests. All of them are on the take, on the make, crooked and dirty.

They've even turned environmental issues into political offices. Why? Because there's money to be spent and money to be made. I'm not sure how to say this without being wildly hypocritical, but fuck it. Anyone here who feels we should do something other than try to keep the planet we live on relatively clean, raise your hands. Now, please slap yourself with them.

It all comes back to limited resources. If it were the case that there were abundant resources for anyone, none of these assholes would be around. Drill for oil in the Alaskan wilderness or find some other alternative? Which is easier? Which will net my state some extra bucks? Which will keep me in office?

These are people who are voting along with their party, or voting along with wherever their money is coming from, but rarely ever voting their consciences. I wouldn't give fuck all what ridiculous bills they passed if they just actually *believed* it. If your job is to represent the people who voted you into office and you act against their interests because to vote the way they'd want you to vote would somehow jeopardize your being re-elected.... Do you see where I'm going with this? Why should you even want that job? Why would you want to keep doing that if you're just in it to keep doing it?

Do I sound like an activist? A hippy? Like someone who cares? Fuck those people too. They're just as convinced that they're correct as anyone else. They simplify complicated situations into slogans and stickers that can be easy sound bites. "No blood for oil!" "No war!" They'll tell you they're the only ones giving you the straight, unbiased story right before they give you their slanted, biased version of the story.

And they will rarely mention the *good* things about the country. I figure if you're going to bitch, you should at least thank the country for giving you the freedom to bitch about it. There are plenty of places where their thoughts and opinions would have them killed in the blink of an eye. These sons of bitches are so sure of themselves they forget

even what they've got. Look at you with your personal freedoms and you're not mentioning a single one.

Sure, our country's governments have perpetrated a million wrongs, perpetuated a million wrongs, but on the 4th of July, you don't have to feel conflicted about fireworks, you don't have to spend hours pontificating on the meaning and implications of blowing up little rockets, about the flag-wavers, about the patriotic. We may not be truly free, but we're freer than most, and if they can't recognize that, then to Hell with them too.

No, the only people worth listening to are the ones who have a healthy sense of self-doubt. The religious, political and social agnostics. The ones who know they'll never know anything.

The number of things we can't and will likely never know. It's staggering. There are so many things in the universe that will just remain total mysteries to all of mankind. The presence of life on other planets, the "meaning" of life, the existence of God. Don't let anyone tell you they know these things because that's total bullshit. They may "know it in their hearts" but they really just *think* it. People constantly present opinion as fact, rarely preceding their statements with "I think..." Like everything I've said here. Why don't you just assume that I've said "I think" before every little bit of exposition on these pages so I don't have to fuck up this smooth-ass rhythm I've got going here.

I don't believe in very much. I don't believe that it's possible that there is a God that would punish a person who doesn't go to church if that person lives his life being as respectful of others as possible. So I won't go to any church that teaches that. No God I'd ever respect would send me to Hell. Egotistical? Arrogant? Maybe. But I'm not John Wayne Gacy and I'll never be on trial for genocide. So, what would be the point? I wouldn't ruin heaven, right? Maybe I would. But if I'm in Hell and there's a lot of phony pretending-to-be-pious motherfuckers chilling upstairs, there's going to be a seriously pissed off hombre in the land of the damned.

I'm not very religious -- surprise, surprise -- another Godless Gen-X slacker heathen. Well, fuck you very much but that's not fair at all. I'm not a heathen, and I think that even calling me Godless is going too far. I have spirit (yes I do, I have spirit, how about you?) and I am spiritual. I feel there is a part of me, deeper than all things anger and all the hormones. Somewhere. I feel it.

Another thing we can never know: exactly what other people think about us. I'm driving to the store and go out of turn at a four-way stop sign and I wonder if the cabbie whose turn it was is swearing at me. He very well could be, and I'll never know it. It makes me wonder how many people have called me an asshole without my being aware of it. How many people have cursed up a storm at me behind my back, from behind a windshield, across the train from me? As many as I have silently cursed, undoubtedly. The way I try to live, though, is to keep from being cursed out; to live so that I cause nobody to need to curse me, you dig?

Beyond that -- you can never know what someone really thinks about you, even if they tell you. You have to be in someone's head to know what their thoughts really mean to them. Maybe this is elementary and obvious, but it seems to be that it would be interesting to be able to know exactly what you mean to someone.

Chapter X
6 to 10

I'm usually early for things. Appointments, dates, weddings, whatever. My poor estimation skills, combined with this deep-rooted fear and loathing of being late combine to make me arrive ten to fifteen minutes early for everything. In college, it was always the case that if I was going to be late for a class, I just wouldn't go. For some reason, absenteeism was preferable to tardiness every time. It became an easy excuse to blow off a whole day of classes. When I first started working for a living, my hatred of being late caused much anxiety for me and tension between me and my less-stringent co-workers. I never understood how they could saunter in an hour or two after starting time and not feel like they were slacking off.

These days, I'm a little less rigid in my thinking. I can walk into work an hour late without sweating it too much. And this is a good thing because lately I've been late a lot more often. I have these early morning stares that keep me locked into tasks for longer than need be. They occur in the shower, on the toilet, while I'm putting on my shoes, throughout my whole morning business. They turn five-minute jobs into twenty-minute affairs. I get locked in my thoughts and I end up having to yell at myself to break out of it.

These almost always consist of imagined conversations with family members or co-workers. They're never pleasant, they never do anything but make me... not necessarily angry, but they definitely cast a negative light on the start of my day. I act out these entire scenes in my head where whatever issue is currently weighing most on my mind is discussed extensively, but never resolved. I end up staring at some point on the wall or in space and wasting a ton of time that could be better used on things that don't bring me down to start my day.

Some days, it's not just in the morning, either. A single conversation with a single person will keep replaying itself over and over throughout the entire day and there's nothing I can do to keep me from slipping into it, sitting at my desk and all of a sudden it's ten minutes later, I'm staring at a filing cabinet, arguing with someone who's not even there to defend himself.

"Another of your morning terrors?" Sheila asks. Like I said, it brings me down and I guess it's pretty obvious. Sheila can always tell, and not just by looking at the clock. I'm twenty minutes late even leaving my apartment. Somehow, that will work out to me being forty-five minutes late to work. I'm not sure how the CTA manages that, but their power is infinite and their plan is unknowable.

"Yeah," I rap my skull. "This damn head of mine."

"Hey, don't knock it. I like it."

"Well thanks, Sheila, but it's caused me enough trouble for one lifetime."

"You can't be..." she starts, anxious worry in her voice for a second before she realizes I'm just screwing around. "Ha ha, Will. Not good to joke about."

I'm not sure where she thought I was headed with that. It seemed a rather mild joke to get too worked up about. Not like I said I was going to shoot myself. But if I've learned one thing about Sheila it's that you shouldn't push her on issues of verbal misconceptions.

"Sorry, Sheely, I didn't mean it."

"Oh, no problem. You didn't say anything wrong. I'm a little edgy this morning."

Silence. One thing about our conversations is that they're full of little bits and pieces of silence. They're not the uncomfortable kind, though. We're both just very thoughtful people and tend to think a bit more about what we're about to say.

"So what was this morning's delay caused by?" she asks.

"I was telling Dan what I really thought of his last proposal." Dan is a salesman -- sorry, a vice president of business development -- at the office and I am quite convinced that he's either completely unclear on what it is that the company does or he's sold his soul to Satan and is regularly working off his debt by perpetrating evil in the devil's name. I'm not sure what *I* did to deserve the pain, but I'm figuring it must have been really bad and I'm just blocking it out of my memory.

"He's at it again, huh? Want me to beat him up?"

"That's mighty sweet of you, Sheila. Could you?"

"Maybe you should do it yourself. I can't be fighting all your battles for you. What's his deal? Doesn't play well with others?"

"He's saying we can build thirty electronic courses using technologies we don't know in 2 months. For \$10,000 a course. With a team of three."

"Are you sure you know --"

"A team whose members are all committed to at least two other projects."

"-- all the details --"

"A team whose members haven't received raises in over two years."

"-- about the project?"

"Are you preaching conservative compassion here? Are you telling me to keep a level head?"

Sheila catches herself. The one who advised me to ace my folks in order to write a book wants me to take a deep breath before getting angry at an overpaid suit? "Well, alright, Will. Just don't go overboard."

"I think that's the point of my 'morning terrors' -- to keep me from going overboard when reality hits. I work out all the angles before the conversation even takes place and that way I can guess which path to take when the talk actually does happen. I just wish I was able to keep my head together while I was in the middle of them. I'm not sure why I lock up so completely like I do."

"Well, it's not easy to have imaginary conversations while you're putting your socks on, buddy."

"True, I just wish they'd wait until I'm on the train and not needing to use my brain for simple tasks like washing my face."

"Beggars can't be choosers. So how'd this one go?" Sheila asks.

"Not too well. I told Dan he was full of shit and he didn't appreciate it at all."

"I can't imagine he would."

"You know, I thought he'd be used to it by now."

When I get to work, the confrontation with Dan is much less explosive than I expected. It turns out a few other people had had less productive pre-talk imaginary conversations and had gone completely off the handle at him. Once again, I've missed my chance to be the rabble rouser. These new kids here, damn them, they have no respect for

their elders, no idea of their position within the company. *I'm* supposed to be the one that tells it like it is, keeps it real, and keeps everyone honest. Still, I suppose they've gotten the job done: Dan is nowhere to be seen and several of the team members are glowering in the corner.

"It was amazing, Sheila, we met with the client this afternoon and Dan shows up *late* to his own meeting, eating a sloppy joe, trying to jump in the middle of a conversation."

"People like this have jobs? Your culture confuses and frightens me."

"He's been promoted to a level equal to his incompetence."

"Well, at least he's got that going for him. Don't they fire anyone over there?"

"Only if the company's bleeding money. They call them layoffs and trust me, Dan will be golden. The first one to go will be yours truly. I can guarantee it."

"That's disturbing. You're one of the skilled workers that makes the machine run."

Let me take a break here and say that I know that last line sounds like total bullshit, but sometimes that's just how Sheila talks, and that's the kind of thing that sometimes she'll just say. And the best part is that she actually *means* it. From anyone else, it would sound sarcastic or corny, but those words come from her mouth sounding like the most sincere thing you've ever heard. And really, I couldn't make that sort of thing up. I wouldn't put that in there to build myself up and I'm quite certain that I'm *not* one of the skilled workers and that if the machine runs at all, it does it in spite of me and not because of me. I had to agree with the sentiment she expressed though. Like I said before, these people are all clueless when it comes to the deeper levels of what the company does and are the last to go when trouble comes.

"Sure I am, but when they look at salaries and personalities, they see a decently-paid hard ass who makes too much trouble to be worth the trouble. They can find someone with similar skills and a better temperament and pay him a lot less and bite the cost of training and integration."

"Whatever happened to corporate loyalty?"

"Do you even listen to yourself sometimes? Corporate loyalty is dead. The almighty dollar is king. That and the sloppy joe."

"But at least you're not bitter," she says.

"Hey, you spend five years at a company that wants to pretend that it's the biggest thing in the city, the biggest player in the field but still can't manage to keep enough blank CD-ROMS around. A company where people use the phrase 'work hard, play hard' to disguise the fact that they're all alcoholics. A company where the people who make the most money have the most difficulty explaining what their role is. We have a Director of Training and Education who hasn't arranged for training or education for a single person. She's been there for a year." I come up for air.

"It's like that everywhere, Will.... From what I hear, anyway."

"Well then I'm the only person who thinks that it *shouldn't* be like that anywhere. Why does saying 'it's like that everywhere' make it right?"

"It doesn't, of course. But it's a statement designed to make you feel better about the lot that you're forced to accept and to keep you from jumping ship."

"Well boy oh boy did it work. If it's like this everywhere, shucks, I might as well stay put where I is, boy howdy. At least here, I'm used to the bullshit, right? At least, this particular brand of bullshit."

It's amazing how your standards will fall when you're pushed for time and you're just damned sick of trying anymore. You're exhausted and your brain is mush from trying to keep a thousand details straight. Any one mistake costs you time. You'll make up any excuse and rationalize releasing shoddy work. There comes a point where you just can't give any more effort and you'll say, "It's good enough for government work," even though you don't work for the government and neither does your client.

And it's sick how giddy you and your co-workers get. Moments ago you're at each other's throats and now you're laughing too loud and making too many jokes just to try to ease the tension in the air and because your brain can't handle any more of this. The whole situation has an air of desperation and tragedy that you can't find matched anywhere else in your life. The weight you give to this is so completely out of proportion to its actual importance that you find your view of everything completely skewed. These couple hours that you spend here are so valuable and so wasted that you feel that everyone owes you and owes you big.

When it's 6:30 and you'd wanted to be home and naked by now and you know it's going to be 7:30 before you even think about putting on your coat, you start to go a little mad. Your head feels like it's about to feel like it's going to explode and your eyes start to burn a little and your heart hurts and there's a pit in your stomach and you just need to get the hell out but you can't -- and why? What keeps you there? That paycheck, that respect, that sense of duty. Fuck all that, it's all meaningless. But still it's got you stuck fast and against your will. And you're salaried so when you work more than 40 hours you still get paid for those 40 hours. Sucker. Oh wait, that's me I'm talking about. Sucker.

In this industry, this digital media industry, it still takes time to do things. People don't seem to understand that. They think that magically, blammo, it will appear, done and perfect and fresh and new. But here I am, waiting 20 minutes for a CD-ROM to burn, just to see if two icons are lined up properly. It won't tell me before it's done, and I can't leave until I know. And I don't know why I'm in such a hurry to go home, like there's something huge waiting for me there. There isn't. There never is. But I just need to be away from here. Knowing that the longer I stay here, the closer it is to the time I have to come back....

There is nothing glamorous in this. I'm not helping the world. I'm not making an impact or leaving my mark or becoming immortal. Burning data onto shiny plastic discs, there is no greatness in that. There is no greatness around me. This mark I am leaving on the world -- what is it? Shiny, plastic, forever. Eventually this will be junk for a landfill, coasters, Christmas decorations. It's meaningless.

And when it's finally good enough, it's still not perfect. And you get no sense of closure, knowing that. You put a label on it and shove it into the Fed Ex package and you take it to the place with the latest pickup service nearby and hand it off and you leave with the one fear deep in your heart: that it *might come back*. You never want to think about it again, but knowing that it's out there, potentially useless. What are you going to

do but obsess about it? Your creation is *out there* on its own, probably broken, potentially useless.

It's 8:00, do you know where you children are?

And it's 8:30 and it's pitch black out and here you are... here I am...

Chapter X

Illinois

...walking through the city at night... it's never what I hope it will be. I have created a hundred characters forced to walk dark streets, the rain running off their long dark coats, soaking their feet, their very souls stained by the gritty urban landscape. They were all on quests, searching for something that might save them from whatever bleak fate I'd had in store for them. They were all free from petty worries, free to focus on whatever major problem I'd invented. These were heroes, true heroes to me. They thought their great thoughts and fought the good fight. And they were all some version of me projected onto the page and into imaginary cities always in the grip of some kind of storm.

And what do I get? This is me just running to catch the last express train so I can save twenty minutes on my commute. A brightly colored medium weight coat trying to keep out the cold. I don't even *own* a long dark coat. How can I have a dramatic noir experience without a long dark coat? I just wish the weight on my shoulders was denser, not the product of a hundred little things. Something that would send me out into the night to search... for something.

I want to be a tragic figure. Not as pathetic as Holden Caulfield; not as terrifying as Beckett's *Unnameable*. But something. Something that would justify this martyr complex that I seem to have.

But most of all, I want to walk the streets at night with my hands thrust into my pockets, my head bent forward, my footsteps confident and sure, never doubting my purpose, my resolve steadfast and true, the validity and honor of my quest unquestionable.

But they're not handing out that sort of character at 7-11.

What it means, surely, is that I lack purpose. I lack meaning. I lack resolve and character and vision and depth and clarity. Did I ever have it? Did writing give me any of these things or was it just a different form of masturbation? Did school or work or sport ever give me these? Have I just been going through the motions of a life? Going to college because it was expected of me; getting a job because it was expected of me; *living* because it was expected of me? I didn't choose to exist. Someone else made that decision for me. Maybe that someone else should be responsible for me having some sort of purpose. Otherwise, what was their point? Didn't they have something in mind for me when they made me? I have never created a character without having some sort of reason for their existence. What kind of author would I be to randomly create these entities, to give them life, and then give them no purpose at all? "If there is a gun on the table in act one, you can be sure it will be used in act two." That's the rule of law in the world. Why not with people?

Dammit, my parents brought me around and never told me what I was supposed to be. They never gave me the quest that sent me off to do anything. I don't care if I'm not a tragic figure, searching through Chicago's streets on a rainy or snowy night, looking for the answers in a bottle of gin or a jazz bar or a street fight. It doesn't have to be that dramatic, but at least it could be something. So they wanted to have kids, but why? What did they think that would accomplish? Sure Mom, I know you love me, but what did you

think this thing would become? You nurtured me until I could take care of myself for a reason, right? You must have had some point in all that and don't give me that shit about...well, I honestly don't know what shit you'd give me.

I'm not looking for the meaning *of* life. I just want there to be some meaning *to* life. I don't want to ask God why the human race is here. Just my parents about why *I'm* here.

Chapter X

You Can't Go Home Again

"Mom, what's my point?"

She's understandably confused. After not hearing from her son for a few months, a sudden phone call is going to throw her off-base. Add to that the fact that I'm demanding information that she has no clue about, well it can lead to one of those uncomfortable silences.

"I don't know, Will, what's your point?"

"No, I mean.... Why'd you bother having me?"

"Well, I was pregnant and abortions weren't as easily obtained back then."

"Way to build my confidence, Ma. I appreciate it. Maybe I'm not explaining myself well here."

"That's a distinct possibility."

"I was just thinking that all the characters I've made.... I gave them all purpose. And I figured it stood to reason that since I'm a character that *you* made, you must have had some purpose in mind for me."

"Good night, Will."

"Mom, come on. I'm serious. You didn't just make me from some biological need to procreate, did you? Or out of some religious duty? Or, God forbid, some sort of egotistical feel that your genetic line shouldn't die out?"

"Isn't that why you create? Because you're afraid you'll never have children and you need to leave some sort of mark on the world? You think your writing will somehow carry on your legacy?"

"Well...."

"Will, I was horny, and so was your father, and that's how those things work."

"Thanks, Mom. You really cleared everything up."

A call to my father is in order. He and I tend to think more along the same lines than my mother and I do. Though we rarely had the kind of discussion I was about to start with him now, I figured there was a good chance that he would understand where I was coming from.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

So much for that idea.

"Seriously, Dad. Don't you feel some responsibility to give me purpose in life?"

"Not particularly, no."

"But you put me on Earth, surely you have some duty to...."

"Look, I paid for your food and clothing and college. How's that for duty?"

"Hey, I appreciate everything you've done for me. I really do. But I'm not talking about material things here. I'm talking about purpose. Meaning. *Reason*."

"Are you drunk again?"

"No. Dad, I'm serious."

"The point of life is finding your own purpose, Will. And I did everything I could to see that you weren't eaten by wolves while you grew up enough to find it."

"Am I grown up enough to find it? I'm not so sure."

"Okay, okay. I did everything I could to see to it that you made it far along enough that you could watch out for yourself while you were growing up enough to find it."

"I think you owe me a bit more than that."

"Fine, I'll give you purpose. Come to the house and wash my car."

I sit next to the cutest girl on the train. I smell her, and think, she must be foreign, not because she smells bad like most foreigners, but because she smells, I swear to God, like what I imagine Europe must smell like: cappuccino and flowers and pretension. It turns out she is not foreign, but wearing Calvin Klein's new Eau de Eu. But then she ruins everything by opening her mouth. Up until that point she was petite and innocent, unassuming, almost tragically cute. But she dials her phone and becomes a monster, talking too loudly, and with an inflection that destroyed all possibilities. It is stunning how few words it took and which words did it in.

"Which wallet did you get her? Because is it too big for the purse? I saw the cutest card at the store today.... I'll get the card...."

When she hangs up, it becomes almost possible again, as the sound of her nasal and condescending voice fades from my ear. I begin to return to my original opinion of her.

But who am I trying to fool? Rather, why am I trying to fool myself? What purpose would it serve to blind myself to this first, heart-felt, though shallowly reached, first impression? On the other hand, first impressions can be wrong -- they often are -- and wasn't my true first impression of her that she was a thing of beauty?

The whole point is made irrelevant when she gets up and off one stop later. She is replaced by some old man whose purpose it is to gross me out enough that I won't mind the fact that I skipped breakfast. Why is it that the whistly nose-breathing, loud eating slobs always choose to sit next to me? These people are so disgusting and they have no idea. I refuse to believe that I'm hyper-sensitive or too easily annoyed. Anyone with half a brain who had to sit next to some middle-aged prick in a bad suit slurping coffee and smacking his lips around a Danish would feel the same way. Can't he hear the *noises* he's making? Hasn't someone told him? Ah, but who would do that? He's already driven away anyone who might care enough to set him straight.

Then it's an Eastern European woman talking with her Slavic sounds, munching through an apple, encroaching on my space and now -- you won't believe this -- she's cutting dead skin from her fingertips with a pair of cuticle scissors. Now clipping her nails, one of my ten most-hated sounds (in no particular order: slurping; munching; nose-breathing; the sound of a Zippo lighter being flicked open and closed repeatedly; gargling; stomping; clarinet; the sound people make when they suck on their teeth; nail clipping; and self-rightousness.)

Eventually she leaves and is replaced again with a woman snapping her fingernails against her keys. She does this repeatedly and the image in my head of her nails bending back and off her fingers sends chills through my body. I can't be around people anymore. Fuck 'em. Who needs 'em? They all grate against me like... like a fucking grater, dammit. Nobody realizes that their actions have an effect on the rest of the world. They mindlessly pursue their own goals without a thought of the ripples they cause in the ocean of life. Christ, they even make me say cheesy shit like that.

Train rides drive me mad too. They're like an hour long ride in an elevator without all the same rules and regulations, and much less courtesy. People turn into animals on the train.

A young black man sits next to a young black woman, is hitting on her and I wonder if she feels some racial duty to put up with it or if she is so used to it, so dead to it that she just doesn't care. If I were to try it, she would laugh or curse. Because I'm white? Or because I'm a dork?

The woman across from me has got no cell phone. The conversation she's having can only be with the voices in her head. She's an honest to goodness lunatic, God bless her. And she's surrounded herself with the most amazing collection of junk-filled bags. She gets off too soon -- just one stop after I get on. Half the bags go out the door. She comes on for the last two. The doors close, as I knew they would, as they must each time she tries this trick. She yanks the red emergency stop handle. "Don't close the motherfucking doors. Goddammit!" And she's gone. I am left wondering how she transports her treasures down the stairs and to the street.

"Sick of that motherfucking O'Hare bullshit outta all youse. Same as them Pollacks...."

What does that mean? Why is she upset about an airport? Did she miss her flight? Is that her luggage? Where could she possibly be going?

"Maybe someone told her this train goes to O'Hare," Sheila suggests.

"Maybe she's pissed off at Mister O'Hare."

"I'm just sorry she had to get off so soon."

"You and me, both. That was the most entertainment I had all day."

"Where are you going, anyway?" she asks.

"My Dad's. He wants me to wash his car."

"Is he going to pay you a bright shiny quarter for your service?"

"Ooh, here's hoping."

"Let me give you some advice, Will."

He's not prone to giving me advice. There are only two pieces of wisdom I can ever remember him passing on. The first is that one of the few products that's worth paying more for is paint. If you're going to paint something, buy the best paint you can get. You'll get it covered with fewer coats and the paint will last longer and look better. The other advice had to do with appearing in court.

"If you're ever on the witness stand, don't offer the attorney more than he asks your for."

Meaning, keep your big mouth shut, answer only the questions asked of you and don't suggest anything. This presented to me like my dad was the head of a mafia family advising me not to squeal. Did he picture for me some life of crime? I certainly spent my time as the family's requisite black sheep, but I don't think there was ever any indication that I was going to make it a hobby or a career. Did he see me in some situation where I was going to be spending a good deal of time on the stand in court, being grilled about my whereabouts on such and such a night? Did you kill her? *Did you?*

But that's about all he had to offer, other than the in-line admonishments about not driving his car too fast or mowing the lawn in a pattern or whatever. So, I am caught a bit off guard by him offering advice like this.

"You need to focus more."

"What do you mean?"

"You're too scattered. You need to be more modal. Not so many balls up in the air, so to speak."

"I'm still not following you here, pops."

"Finish cleaning one part of the car before you start on the next," he says. And with that, he goes back inside.

Flippant and off-handed as my father is, he's got a point. Like any project, it's all about breaking it up into manageable chunks. Divide everything out into smaller tasks and conquer those tasks one at a time. Keep figuring out the percentages and go from there. If you keep doing half of the work that's left, regardless of how the math works out, you will eventually finish. And so I wash his windshield, trying like hell to keep my jacket from getting soaked.

I think to myself, yes, this is what I will do, I will wash my father's car forever, and I will keep it clean and this will give me purpose in life. And what's more, he will love me more than his other children who do not wash his car and who do not have purpose given them by their father. I will be the favored amongst all his children and I shall reap the benefit....

...and that lasts for about a minute. Forget this. It's *winter* and it's cold and I'm washing his *Mercedes*. Who is he to know what my purpose in life is? And how can he tell me? Didn't I spend my entire childhood working towards the ultimate goal of getting out from under his thumb? Wasn't I trying to get to the point where I could make my own decisions?

I hurl the water bucket at the house, stick the sponge to his windshield, write "wash me" in the soap on the hood and take off.

There's a forest preserve near his house. When I was a teenager, it was close enough for me to hide in, pretending to chain-smoke cigarettes, sneak booze, burn shit and generally exude my own particular brand of youthful angst and rebellion. It's also where, late at night, the weird shit that would inspire me would happen. I figure it's worth a try again, so I pick up a couple packs of cigarettes and a 40-ounce bottle of King Cobra malt liquor and head to the woods.

I think one thing missing from my life lately is run-ins with the police. I haven't been hassled by cops in so long. Not since before I turned 18, which is a shame. All of a sudden, most of the things I did were legal, and nobody was challenging me on it. Just once I'd like to be challenged about curfew or smoking or *something*. Just so I can finally show the cop my license and say, "No...no! I'm a *citizen*."

So, I sit under a tree, drinking till it gets dark, drinking till I'm drunk like I used to get when I didn't know any better. Now that I know better -- well, I have no excuse for this. Freezing my ass off, going from dripping wet, washing a car to drunk and sprawled on wet ground. Probably not the wisest decision I've ever made. Hopefully not the wisest decision I've ever made. But I sit, and I wait.

I'm waiting for a revelation. This is what I need to make my life move forward again. It has been stuck in an idle position for as long as I have been keeping myself stuck in an idle position. Everything I've done in the name of entertainment has only served as time killer and time filler while I waited for the next stage to come upon me. But now I think all these things are preventing that next stage from coming.

Football season, hockey season, baseball season; these leave no time for me to evolve. Working eight or more hours a day, attempting to go out once in a while, and video games fill the gaps in between. Keeping my mind always inactive but always full. Never empty enough or off enough to be calm, to be pure, to receive the knowledge. I look back at the past year and realize it was more or less exactly like the year before it and the year before that. And that not only have I not done anything important with my life, I haven't done anything at all with it.

Does a schedule prevent evolution? I get up, I work, I eat, I work, I eat, I watch TV, I sleep. Could I be doing something differently, still "enjoy" my life *and* achieve enlightenment? Do I even enjoy my life? Probably not. I go through motions. I do what I'm told. I'm in a rut! The question is: does this make me bored, boring, or dead?

I feel like I'm running. Like I'm always running. Like I've always been running. Like living in my head is running. Like sitting on my ass all day long is still running. Living in this rut is running. Always running towards nothing. And I don't know how to make the decision to stop moving for a second and... And start moving in the right direction.

I wish I could say that this return to my rebellious roots and the alcohol and the cold all lead to something, but that's just not true. No matter what the movies would have you believe, you can't force that sort of thing yourself. Setting up a dramatic situation in order to trigger enlightenment never works. It's much more likely to happen in the supermarket, or while you're sitting on the toilet than in some artificially created scene. Though it worked for Buddha. He just sat and sat and sat under his Bodhi tree and then, I imagine, much like what happened with Sir Isaac Newton, one day, it just hit him.

When the park ranger shows up, I am too drunk to try to hide. And when he stumbles back up the hill, through the scrub, to his truck to call the real police, I am too amused to try to run. Here is my dream come true. I am over 21, I am perfectly within my rights...

...except as I soon find out, getting drunk in a forest preserve doesn't appear to be in anyone's version of my rights except my own. Turns out that it's actually illegal no matter what your age or country of citizenship. And so I have the distinct pleasure of spending some time in a drunk tank -- "sobering center" -- at the request of the city's police department. The sobering center works pretty well; I am very nearly immediately sober. The other guests that evening -- a good mix of people I don't feel like hanging out with -- help quite a bit in that regard.

I also find out that the cop shows that I've been watching tell the truth: you get *one* phone call. Nobody home? Too bad. Busy signal? Sorry, pall. Wrong number? May God have mercy on your soul. My first thought is to call Sheila, but I'm not sure of her number. It's programmed into my cell phone, but they have that in a pouch with my other

belongings (1 pack Marlboro Light cigarettes; 1 silver Zippo lighter; 1 Hello Kitty keychain, 8 keys attached; wallet containing various identification, credit and insurance cards; \$57 American; *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller.) The only phone number that I can vaguely remember, aside from my father's -- damn you, speed dial -- is my brother's mobile. And he did promise to bail me out if I ever needed. I'd laughed then, thinking that was an easy promise to make to me as the odds of ever having to make good on it were slim to none. I now hoped that he'd remember that conversation.

Feeling nervous on the third ring. If it kicks into his voice mail, I'm pretty well fucked for the evening. I imagine the scene is happening in slow motion with my brother reaching for his phone as the ring starts, low-pitched as slow as it is, nearly too late, nearly too late, and he flips it open just before his phone is about to send it to the answering service, but the connection is made and I tell him to bring \$500 and a smile and get me the hell out of there.

"What were you thinking?" he asks. We're on our way to an ATM so I can pay him back. Figure we might as well do it while we're together now or else the debt will be hanging over my head until the next time I see him which very well could be a couple months.

"I'm not sure. I probably wasn't."

"I'll say."

Somewhere along the line, my brother became more responsible than me. Nobody's quite sure how it happened, but I, who was once the together, with-it, straight-A student suddenly lost it, fell apart. And he who used to need the bail money is now the successful businessman with the wife and kids. Funny how things turn out, isn't it? On the other hand, in this day and age, what with the high levels of irony and poetic justice running rampant in the land, you'd have to expect that sort of thing to happen.

"Look, I'd appreciate it if you'd keep this from Mom and Dad," I say after handing him the money.

"That's going to cost you extra."

"Ha ha. I'm serious. This isn't the sort of thing they need to know about. Really, you don't need to tell anybody at all."

"Ah, you got it. Where do you want me to drop you off?"

"My car's still over at Dad's. That would be just fine."

Sheila calls the second I get into my car.

"Well, that was a worthwhile experience, huh?" she asks.

"Wait a second. You already know about this? How on Earth did the news get to you so fast? Did you talk to my brother?"

"Oh, I have my ways. So, had enough of a taste of youthful rebellion for one evening?"

This girl is, like most women are, scary and mysterious. Two things I don't really need much of at the moment.

"Yes, certainly I have. I may be able to get away with more than I could when I was a kid, but the costs are a bit higher now. The cops really don't take too kindly to 'adult' mischief. I guess they really were going easy on me when I was 16."

"If you're going to get picked up for something, you might as well make it worth the time, Will. There's no romance in spending the night in a drunk tank."

"Hey, one of the cops was sorta cute. I think she was making eyes at me. And I'm sure all the great writers spent at least one night in a holding cell. Some of them probably spent quite a bit of time in there."

"Okay, did you get any writing done?"

"Huh? No. Of course not. Not for months."

"Well, there's my point. Where do you file this one? This whole evening was a waste."

"I tried to achieve enlightenment. Every night's not going to be a success. Nobody's perfect."

Chapter X

"I'd Like to Meet a Madman Who Makes it all Seem Sane"

Perhaps even worse than when some annoying fuck sits next to me on the train is when no one will sit next to me at all. The car is crowded and the ride is long and the seat to my right remains empty the whole way. At first I think there must be something wrong with the seat itself and I look for puke or spilled food or some other train hazard. Nothing. So, of course, it must have something to do with me. Something about me is screaming that I'm someone whom you don't want to sit next to for twenty minutes; that I am one of the people that I detest so much. But I don't smell bad, I don't look disreputable, I certainly don't think I look like someone who would trap you in a conversation you want nothing to do with. Sure, I am constantly talking on my phone, but I only whisper because that's all it takes. So what is it that's keeping this perfectly usable seat free and clear? Is there shaving cream in my ears? Toothpaste ringing my lips? A sandwich stuck to my head? Not even the twitchy bastard I usually end up sitting next to will deign to be seen with me.

Finally the stalemate is broken. The man with the wooden tablet with Hebrew on one side, "God Bless us all" on the other and a pin reading "Nixon's the one!" attached to his NYPD baseball cap sits down in the empty seat. I find myself wishing for the ridiculous paranoia of five minutes ago. The man is whittling Hebrew into a cheap piece of wood, after all.

"Ask him what it means," Sheila says.

"You do it," I say, and indicate to the man that the phone is for him. He takes it from me without a second thought.

"Hello?" he asks. "Hello?"

He hands the phone back to me. "Nobody there, bub."

He starts talking to me about the newspaper I'm reading -- an offshoot of the Tribune geared, allegedly, towards my generation. *The Red Eye*, where the graphics are "hipper," the writing is more "cutting edge" and the whole thing, if you ask me, is a big "piece of crap." They claim to be -- and I'm not kidding -- "concise in a few syllables short of a haiku kinda way." But, I'll read just about anything, and so I am skimming an article about Winona Ryder's court decision. It's on the front page of this paper. Thank God nothing's going on in Iraq today, huh? Oh wait; there is. Well, it's a good thing nobody in my generation needs to know about it.

Anyway, this guy's the kind that knows things like how Colonel Robert R. McCormick would be rolling in his grave if he could see what the Tribune was doing today.

"You know, they're basically demanding that we go to war with Iraq. All those inflammatory headlines and propaganda. Bob McCormick realized the terror of war when he was in Mexico and in Paris back in the 'teens. He came back feeling that the US should never get involved in these sorts of conflicts. He'd never approve of that headline."

The offensive headline, "Ryder Convicted on 3 Counts" had very little to do with Iraq, but in a way, it did make me want to fight.

"I think you're talking about the Sun-Times, sir. Their headlines are a bit more slanted -- look over there. It says, 'We Must Bomb the Shit out of Iraq.'"

"The Sun-Times is one of the 10 biggest daily newspapers in the country."

"By big, you mean in physical size and not circulation numbers, right?"

"No, it's actually one of the smaller papers out there," he says, indicating the size of the paper with his thumb and forefinger. "The largest is the Greensboro, North Carolina Sentinel which runs an average of 530 pages a day."

I don't do this kind of thing very well -- this meeting strangers, conversing with strangers. There are a lot of silences on my part that I have edited out. I also tend to make many unintelligible grunting sounds, nod a lot and say, "Woah, that's crazy," in an attempt to hold up my end of the conversation. I'm worried that people are staring at us. I wish I smelled bad. I don't know what to do.

"Did you know," he starts again, "the Sun-Times calls their piece of shit *The Red Streak*?"

"I always thought they called their piece of shit *The Sun-Times*."

"Why do you think two competing newspapers would come out with two very similarly named spin-off newspapers with very similarly shallow content at the exact same time?"

"Because their readers have long been clamoring for it?"

"Alright, say I granted that -- which I am, only for the sake of arguments -- what about the names? *Red Eye* and *Red Streak*."

"I can't say. Maybe their marketing departments cross-pollinated."

"You're hiding from the truth. It's right there in front of your face," he says, angrily jabbing an article about Pamela Anderson Lee Rock's favorite nightgown.

"I can see why that article might make you angry, but I don't see what that has to do with why they're named nearly the same thing."

"It's right here! It's right here!" he is poking holes in my paper. It's all a bit too much for me and I can't escape for another five train stops.

"Excuse me," I say, pulling my phone out of my pocket. "I have to take this call." He gives me a quizzical look.

"Oh, I keep it on vibrate. It's a little less intrusive, I think. Hello?"

It's Sheila, of course. "Hey there Will. Thought I'd save you from this morning's train droppings."

"You have the most perfect timing on Earth."

The man next to me shrugs and returns to his whittling.

I whisper and turn away from the old man, deeper into the phone, sotto voice, whispering, "He's whittling or carving or something on the train."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, really, except he's got this sharp object that he's using to jab at a block of wood. You can see the inherent danger. We're on a CTA train -- they're not the best drivers in the world, you know. One quick stop and that thing is in someone's eye."

"How's it any different from knitting?"

"Yeah, I don't know. It's not. The needles. They could go at any time. Those women, they bother me too."

"How's it different from writing?"

"Okay, granted, if something drastic happened, my pen might find its way into someone's throat, but I think it'd take a little more for me to accidentally kill someone than for the guy with the *open blade*."

Sheila laughs, "Okay, you win. The guy's a menace."

"Plus he's wearing a pro-Nixon pin. At least I think it's pro-Nixon. It could be ironically worn or intended, you know."

"It's not ironically worn," the man says.

"Oh shit, he heard me."

"Quick, duck into the alley and climb the pipe to the rooftop," Sheila suggests.

"Sheila, I'm on a fucking train."

"Nixon is the one," the man says.

"So he's a weirdo old-school republican," Sheila says.

"I don't think so, Sheila. Let me call you back."

"You see, Nixon is the one who started...."

"I'll make you a deal," he says. "You seem pretty smart."

"Thanks. So do you, in your own way."

"You bring me your ideas on what's going on in the world, and I'll tell you the truth."

"How will I find you?"

"Don't worry, I'm everywhere."

I type too much during the day, the modern equivalent of dots and dashes, of punching holes in heavy card stock, of blowing smoke rings. The advanced methods of communicating with machines are even more obscure and more deeply nuanced than human interaction. Daily, I attempt to fool the computer into doing my bidding and lose the ability to speak with another person.

"Oh, you do just fine with me," Sheila says.

But she doesn't count.

"Why not?"

She is too close to me. Too well known. Too much of an old friend.

"I'm touched."

It's too much like talking to myself.

"So what's the problem? Isn't that what you're looking for? Isn't it good to hear a friendly voice? A caring voice?"

But it's too hard to make connections these days. I'm so separated from people. Most of it's my own fault. I've been sealing myself off in closed rooms for so long now that it's second nature. That it's easier to be alone than it is to take a chance on going out. That I look forward to a blizzard to shut me and everyone else down and inside. That I'm addicted to a little peace and quiet. That I've --

"You don't want peace and quiet. You just want me."

I flip my phone closed, ending the call.

You'll have to try harder than that.

I'm feeling the weight of the words on my shoulders. They are too many and they are too heavy. I can not bear this load anymore. It is too much an obsession, it is too much work and not enough of something that I love to do. This has become the case with everything in my life. Not just the words, but the work and the play as well. I am compulsively scribbling everything, on everything, with whatever I can get my hands on. Everything's slipped just the slightest bit, maybe, or maybe I've slipped the slightest bit and everything else has stayed just where it's supposed to, but whichever way it is, there's a big problem with the skewed perspective I'm currently experiencing. This point of view just isn't working out right.

If I can't be the noir hero stalking the streets at night with a snappy hat and a snappy wit, or better yet, no spoken words at all, then I will be the long-haired, bearded, maniac, locked away for a crime against humanity, or better yet, no crime at all. Trapped in a tower cell, scratching nonsense into the floor with my long and dirty fingernails. Screaming at the barred window for the world to wake up and realize that I am not guilty, but should be treated as a hero, a prophet, a savior and being damned to prison for the rest of my days, visited by nobody, alone for eternity. Attempting to reason with my captors, settling for reasoning with the mouse that nibbles at my food, my only companion.

But that sort of thing hasn't happened in ages. Not in this country, right? I'd need...something to say. In this day and age of cable television and swearing up a storm, mere blasphemy won't cut it anymore. Hell, absolutely, ridiculously offensive blasphemy won't even do it. The Bill of Rights has destroyed the rights of authors to become romanticized prisoners, trapped in their need to tell the *truth* and speak the *word*. These personal freedoms make it impossible to become a martyr anymore.

Chapter X

Don't Dream It, Be It

Such mystery and power in the female body. And not in any of that female goddess, creation of children, flaky bullshit. Sometimes it blows my mind that under all those clothes...there is *all that*. I'll spend weeks freaking out on women's crotches, looking like a lecher, staring between feet and eyes, unable to break my gaze, unable to figure out the answer.

And that any woman at any time can make a decent living just by taking off her clothes -- she doesn't even need to let anybody touch her -- is mind boggling. I couldn't get a nickel to take off my clothes. But *any* woman, regardless of how she looks or acts or is, just by virtue of being a woman, can find somebody who's willing to pay to see her naked. All a woman has to do to see a man naked is ask. "Take off your clothes," and the deal is done. No man is first going to say, "Show me the money."

Why is this? Why is it that somehow at the same time that the men hold all the "power" in this world, women seem to hold all the "power" as well? Both sexes can't hold all the power at the same time, can they? Between her legs is a cave of infinite possibility. Between mine? A beam of singular and limited purpose.

And then I wonder, how is this demeaning? How is any photo of any woman demeaning, demoralizing? Because they become an "object"? Just because she's naked? Just because I'm about to orgasm from jerking-off while looking at her? Nah, she's turned on by that. Just look at that look in her eyes! She's not demoralized or dehumanized. She's totally into it, aren't you? Yeah, you know you are.

I just realized what I really want to do with my life. People are always asking me my dream job and I hem and haw for a little bit and say something about making video games or writing screenplays or something. But my absolute dream job? Porn star! Of course. To fuck for fun *and* profit? What a blast!

I'm kidding of course, because to get into that business, you gotta live in L.A. and you gotta have a girl who's willing to work with you for your first movie. And you gotta have a schlong the size of Godzilla's. Or at least that's what I hear.

It's a fine idea, though. I'm sure there's plenty of money in it if you play your cards right. I wouldn't have to take the pay cut that I'd have to take with those other jobs I've considered, and I'm sure I could do the work. It's second nature to me, this fucking business. Plus, I'd be able to act circles around those untalented bastards they've got working now.

How is a porn star different from a prostitute? I know it sounds like a riddle, but it's not. I genuinely wonder how the United States government allows people to film pornographic videos but prosecutes people who have sex with people for money. A porn star is a prostitute with a film crew. Is it the fact that porn stars get paid, not by the person having sex with them, but by the person filming them? There must be a way to work all this out so that nobody has to go to jail anymore, right?

And then it just seems weird to me to make sex for money a criminal act. I can get a massage for money, but if the masseuse makes me orgasm, all of a sudden it's illegal. Someone could pay me to punch them in the face repeatedly, but not to screw them. I'm

lost. Not that there's much prospect of anyone paying me to do either, though I'd be happy to do both.

But seriously, this all leads me to yet another question: who decided that it was the tits and the crotch that needed to be covered up? Why not the elbows and the knees? Why are we fine and comfortable in most situations up until the point that someone yanks down our boxer shorts and it is then that we become "naked" and "vulnerable"? Why will a woman parade around in a bikini but not in her bra and panties? When is the line drawn that determines whether or not something can appear on network television?

How did our society get so uptight?

Wait, strike that last question. People who ask that last question have lost sight of a lot of history. Our society got so uptight because it was *started* by the most uptight people of all: European Puritans. These are the most hard-working, non-relaxing, strict, anal beasts ever to walk the face of the Earth. They believed the only way to get into heaven was to work all the time, enjoy nothing. No pain no gain. *Boring* people. We didn't *become* uptight -- if anything, we've become much more relaxed.

"Well," they say, "we should relax like the French know how to relax. We should relax like the Dutch know how to relax."

Bullshit.

Seriously -- those two cultures are the most fucked up cultures on the planet. All they do in Amsterdam is get high and fuck -- have you ever heard of anyone coming back from Amsterdam talk about anything other than weed or sex? Yes yes, that's all I ever talk about too, but I'm no shining example of high culture either. Someone who's chosen Amsterdam as their vacation destination is just giving you a real nice glimpse into what's truly important to them. Yes, it'd be nice if the United States stopped being so strict on the marijuana possession laws, they are outdated and outmoded, but you don't need to fly across an ocean just to smoke some hash in a café.

And France? Well, all I have to say about France is that there are so many jokes about the French for a reason.

You want to relax? Then relax! You don't have to adhere to society's rules about relaxation. Go ahead, chill out. Nobody will care -- we may not be relaxed, but we've got apathy down cold. Relax all you want. This is America, and you can love it or you can leave it!

No, no. I'm kidding. Really, the problem is not with society, or with American society, or with American culture. The problem is within us all. Let go of your own inability to be free and be yourself and you will let go of whatever restrictions you feel society is putting upon you. If you're going to bitch about society, you'd better start acting against society at every opportunity or I will shove my foot through your ass and use you as my own personal puppet, forcing you to spout slogans and sayings completely against anything you believe. Go take some action, you lazy fuck.

Chapter X

Shallow and Uninspired

The next Monday at the staff meeting and everyone is cheering the fact that the CD got sent out and I'm sitting here thinking, "It is a lie. We never got it done. These people are liars and soon they will turn this around against me and I will be blamed for something." But 30 smiling faces can't be wrong, right? We must have or they wouldn't have ever let me leave. But it just doesn't seem possible. Couldn't have actually accomplished something and be done with it. That missing sense of closure isn't supplied by an item on the agenda and a slap on the back. Just because they think it's done, doesn't mean it's done, right? Maybe it does -- after all, these people are the ones in charge. Not that that's caused me to believe them before, but maybe, just this once.

So I can allow myself to breathe for about five minutes. The next item on the agenda is the follow-up to the piece of shit I just finished up. It's true, it never ends, there's never a break, never time for a vacation or a breather or a thought of my own. I'd settle for a project that didn't have to do with some obscure African language.

But it's not to be. Another day, another under-budgeted, under-scheduled, poorly planned e-learning course converted from a CD-Rom that I didn't have a thing to do with making.

It's a living. It's not much of one, but it's a living.

I find another note on my desk after the meeting. The handwriting is somehow familiar, written with my pen which sits, uncapped, on the pad. A yellow Post-It note that says, "Every breath you have left is shallow and uninspired." I quickly check my breathing. Seems okay. A little raspy perhaps, but nothing to worry about.

"Who's writing these?" Sheila is very concerned.

"I don't know. A co-worker? An ex-girlfriend? You?"

She laughs, "Like I'd threaten you, Will. You're all I've got."

"You keep saying these are threats. I don't find them all that threatening."

"Well, they're ominous anyway. You'd agree they're ominous, right?"

"I can only go as far as 'slightly morbid.'"

"Regardless, they're downers and who goes around writing downer notes to someone?"

"They obviously have more time on their hands than I do. I like this one, though. I have been uninspired lately. And breath and inspiration are so closely linked. It's a brilliant play on words. And then there's the word 'shallow' --"

"Will?"

"Sorry. I just wouldn't go reading too much into these. If I told you, 'One day, eventually, you will die your eventual death,' would you be worried or just annoyed at my stating the obvious and my poor grammar?"

"That's a relaxed attitude you've got there."

"Well, if there's one thing I know how to do, it's accept the inevitable. It's the unknown I'm not so good with."

In fourth grade, the whole class at my school went on a trip to a camp called Glen Helen. It was a week in the woods, learning about nature and weather and God knows

what else. I was terrified to go. This was the first time my separation anxiety and fear of the unknown reared their ugly heads. The thought of leaving home for some camp in the wilderness had me petrified.

Enter my father, who had just returned from a trip to Japan. Understanding where I was coming from, he told me about how hard it is to be comfortable in a place with different customs and a totally different language.

"I was always scared I'd get lost and be unable to find my hotel or even be able to tell a cab driver which hotel I was staying in." He took a small laminated card from his pocket and handed it to me. It was covered with Japanese characters. "They gave me this card at the hotel. It says, 'Please return me to the Osaka Hilton,' and has the address. If I ever got lost I could show it to someone and be able to get back to my room. I never had to use it, but it made me feel a lot better to have it with me."

I took that card to camp with me and it, along with the fact that the unknown is never as bad as you imagine it's going to be, helped me to have a good time.

"Will? That card doesn't say 'take me to my hotel.'"

"It doesn't? I didn't know you knew Japanese, Sheila."

"Yeah, a little."

"So?"

"It says, 'I am an American. I dropped the nuclear bomb that ruined parts of your country for generations. I caused you untold amounts of pain and misery and suffering and now I am here, on your land, completely at your mercy.'"

"It says all that?" The card didn't look big enough to cover all that.

"Yep. More or less. It's a good thing your father never used it in Japan."

"Hell, it's a good thing I didn't use it when I was at camp."

I don't know how we can get along with the Japanese or the Germans. These are people, nations, with whom we once did amazing battle. Those wars were huge but now we're the best of friends. The Germans who said, "Fuck it, Hitler's got a swell idea," and slaughtered millions of people and the Japanese to whom we did just about the same. But it's in the past, all is forgiven, if not forgotten.

It's not the same with other countries. We're still glaring at North Korea and North Vietnam and Iraq. Is it because we didn't finish our business there? Or maybe we realized that there wasn't any business to be done there at all. There's no profit to be had in a communist or fundamentalist country, right? So if we can't beat 'em, fuck joining 'em.

And we're all friendly with the Russians too, ever since the Cold War ended, even though that situation is still a bit sketchy. Nothing like watching one of the world's superpowers become incredibly unstable. Like seeing your father lose the ability to walk. Just a scary proposition. I still hold a grudge against the Russians though, I'm sorry to admit. Don't think too much about Reagan, either, really. Growing up, I felt the world tension on a daily basis. I had constant nightmares and daydreams about nuclear destruction. Lived in constant fear that the bomb was going to drop and it was all going to be over. I remember a particular episode of the A-Team that I couldn't even watch because it got me so depressed about nuclear war. I just had no faith that the world leaders had any common sense about anything...still don't, really, come to think of it. But

I certainly didn't think they had enough sense to keep from destroying the world in a kind of "If I can't have it, nobody can," evil genius gesture.

These days, I'm a bit more accepting of that though. It's out of my hands, so I'm moving on. I realize that all the people in power in the nuclear countries, and the people who have "rogue" nuclear weapons are all maniacs. Who else would keep that sort of thing around? I wouldn't want one of those in *my* house. If India and Pakistan decide to nuke each other back into the stone age (although, with those countries, that wouldn't be much of a trip) then by all means, let them do it. And if the trade winds carry radioactive fallout right into my waiting lungs, then, well, it was nice knowing you, but not all that nice. I've got more important things to worry about, like if I'll be able to get a seat on the train on the way home.

And so we're on the verge of attempting to ruin Iraq again. And I again, I know it's out of my hands. I remember watching the first Iraq war, sitting in my bedroom with my 11 inch color television on my desk, terrified. I don't know why I was so scared. There was no draft, no personal fear that I'd be heading over, nobody I knew was on their way either, so why was I afraid? I'd understand concern, or anger, or patriotic feelings, but *fear*... it just didn't make any sense. The Iraqis didn't, and don't, instill fear in many people besides other Iraqis. All this nonsense about weapons of mass destruction is just crazy. They couldn't use them back in 1990 and twelve years hasn't done much to improve their technology. Or has it? The point is, they still seem like the kind of enemy that we'll steamroll into submission when the time comes.

Maybe I wasn't jaded enough the first time around. It *was* my first war, after all. Now I'm a veteran war-watcher, sitting in the comfort of my living room, watching CNN, gossiping about all the latest developments, waiting for our side to completely rout the other side. But there was a terrified kid in that room back then. What a silly sap.

My father, a Jew, drives a German car. And there are those who would crucify him for that. Sure, Mercedes made engines for the Luftwaffe, but his other car, a Toyota, is made by a company whose origins are in World War II as well. He could have bought an American car, but that would be supporting a country that's perpetrated enough of its own atrocities. Add to the fact that strictly speaking, we've got a good deal of German blood in us, so as German Jews, are we unable to support Germany, one our countries of origin? It's getting so you can't buy anything at all anymore. Boycott Chinese goods, boycott Cuban goods, boycott everything. I don't know if Iraq makes anything, but I'm certain I wouldn't be allowed to buy them. And we haven't been able to get anything from Cuba, much less go there -- though, who would want to? -- in my lifetime.

And it doesn't stop there. Domestic products are even worse. Can't buy Coke or Pepsi or McDonald's or Starbucks. The WTO protestors are leading me to believe that the only thing I can do is kill my own food, make my own leather, mold my own plastic. I'm just not ready for that kind of commitment to life. It's enough for me to get to work every day to make enough money to buy those things, much less get home and *make* them. I'm not about to undo thousands of years of human evolution and innovation just because a couple corporations or countries or continents failed to live up to certain standards. Okay, sure, that sounds shallow as hell and I know that there are some bad people out there and some even worse corporations doing some really bad things to some really nice people

and I hate to say, "Well, dammit, I need my soft drinks," but I've come to live the way I've come to live, and it's just too much to think about.

Give me a pocket guide, or better yet, do my shopping for me if it's such a big deal. Come and buy all the dolphin-safe and peasant-safe and non-sweat-shop products that I need and I won't complain that there's no Nike Swoosh® on the side of my shoes. I'll admit it, when it comes to my consumerism, most of the time convenience wins out over conviction. We didn't come this far and try so hard to not be able to have what we want when we want it. Did we? If instant gratification is possible, is it such a terrible thing? Of course not. So give me my goddamned cheese fries.

Back, really to the point: fear. And the unknown. The worst thing about knowing that you know nothing, and having a fear of the unknown (which I've now said enough times to make it sound silly and meaningless) is that *everything* is unknown. As it is, I'm afraid of a whole shitload.

Chapter X

Let's Talk About the Weather

This city's weather has driven plenty of people away. Most of my friends headed west, never to be seen again. I'm not sure why I haven't left for a warmer climate, though there's very little in my personality that would lead me to such a drastic action. I've got a good thing going here, or if not a good thing, then at least a thing. And it's not always easy to get a thing going somewhere. It's taken me several years to get this thing going, and I'm not about to try to take this thing somewhere else.

Anyway, Chicago's weather is a story of extremes. You know it's summer when old folks start dying in their apartments...and the same goes for winter. Every year it's the same story: stay out of the sun, stay out of the cold, cooling stations, warming stations, deadbeat landlords not paying their gas bills. It's pretty harsh, but at least you always know where you stand. And I'm even starting to like that extreme cold in late January that makes being inside enjoyable and necessary. Anything that gives me an excuse to shut myself away from the world to be by myself and warm and strong is alright in my book.

I used to get depressed when the seasons changed towards winter but that all stopped when I told myself that it just wasn't worth it. I have this thing about letting the environment affect me in negative ways. The weather's not trying to fuck with me, the weather's just the weather and nothing can change it. So why bother with feeling bad about it? This is me intellectualizing the hell out of my emotions. And I understand that people have biological and chemical reactions to the lack of sun and the holidays and all that shit, and I know saying "don't let it get to you" is an asshole thing to do, but here I am. It's just something I guess I decided for myself. That the days of dramatic depression were over.

I just don't let what I call "environmental variables" affect me too much. I don't know what humidifiers or dehumidifiers are for because I don't notice those things. I could easily eat a hot dog without any condiments. Don't ask me if some dish needs salt because *I just don't know*. Am I too cold? Too hot? Rarely, if ever. It's as if I was created to be the ultimate warrior by some government mad scientist but they lost me somehow and I turned out to be impervious to environmental effects, but too pudgy to be any use to them.

My brother used to not worry about anything at all. He explained it to me during a rare heart-to-heart conversation:

"I just don't let myself get too plussed about anything at all. The highs aren't that high, but then the lows aren't very low," he said. "But sometimes I find myself in Walgreen's and realize I'm buying soap for myself and my knees just sag."

Walgreen's is a killer. Skip over the fact that it's a faceless, heartless corporation that lays its claws into a community, ruins the very idea of a family-owned pharmacy and doesn't give a whole hell of a lot back. And yes, I shop there. There's very little choice.

Its evil, however, runs a whole lot deeper than that. I don't know what it is about Walgreen's but it turns me into a shell of my former self. It leaves me a meat puppet, a sagging bag of crap with a mouth. I don't know how else to express it. It leaves me

babbling, helpless, half a man. I have nearly lost it in Walgreen's on so many occasions, I've started to expect it every time I walk into the store. There's something about the air in there that makes me slip off the edge even further. It's just one store -- one drug store -- and it turns me back into an infant.

I will wander the aisles, whatever item I'm looking for completely forgotten, babbling, singing, talking, dragging my feet, dragging my hands. Totally lost. And if I somehow manage to find something that I need, or want, to buy, I will be able to pull myself together for the few moments in front of the cashier without giving myself away, but once I'm out the door, and here I'm picturing a warmish, misty evening, I will not know which way to turn, or where to go or what to do. And my knees, they will sag, and be unable support my weight and there, in the parking lot, I will crumble to the ground and not move for quite some time.

When I do manage to get back to my feet, I wander aimlessly, passing through alleys and playgrounds, avoiding people as much as possible, and when it's not, avoiding eye contact. I have nowhere to go, I never have anywhere to go, and I can't go home. And I am filled with the desire to become lost, lost in my own backyard, everything is too familiar, and therefore I must have too much reason behind any action.

If, even just for a day, I could become completely disoriented, see the city through some other eyes, it might do me a world of good. But I have been everywhere, and done everything, and there is no perspective to be had, none but the one I've always known.

I fall into a McDonald's and as I sit there, lounging with more authentically lost people -- the homeless, the brand-new college students -- I try to feel what they must feel as they walk around these streets. It's not happening though. These people have come here from other places and I am unable to know what it is like to see this for the first time.

But then, it's McDonald's, and they have always known what McDonald's looks like, and they have always known what every McDonald's in the country looks like. They are here because McDonald's is something they know -- they are trying to escape what their eyes and head are unable to process: the newness of their surroundings. They are blessed with this upheaval and are buying Big Macs in order to hide it from themselves.

I suppose I don't blame them. My other biggest fear is a fear of change. I suppose it ties in nicely with a fear of the unknown, but there is more to it than that. New computer operating systems, new projects, new television schedules. Even change I bring about myself, like a haircut or a new kind of toothbrush or changing my underwear -- no, I'm just kidding -- can set me on edge. I rearranged my furniture in my bedroom once and I couldn't sleep for two weeks because everything was so... different.

I often suffer physical effects due to change. Every year, when the seasons change from summer to fall or from winter to spring, my digestive system gets thrown for a huge loop. I guess it's some thermal shock thing that makes it impossible for me to go a day without some sort of abdominal or -- and I'm sorry to have to bring this up -- bowel discomfort. Often the seasonal change is accompanied by a rash or a series of headaches. One year, back when I was six or seven, I was recipient of a rash that took the form of a huge scab-like growth on the back of my right knee. This thing was disgusting, and upon my visit to a dermatologist, garnered the attention of several doctors who were never really able to tell me what it was. They poked and prodded and were befuddled and said it

must be some sort of seasonal allergy. Eventually it went away, and I've never experienced anything like it again.

Periods of change are the best time to really see what you're made of. There's no better time to sit back and watch how you react to the world. If a part of you can be detached, relaxed, you can really check yourself out.

"You're doing fine, Will. Doing fine," Sheila says.

"Oh, thanks Sheila. Yeah, I think I'm okay. That which doesn't kill us and all that, you know."

"Sure, sure. Doing fine." I wonder who she is trying to convince.

"Look at these kids, avoiding this beautiful moment by ordering Chicken McNuggets."

"They're living this 'beautiful moment' every day. You've seen McDonald's commercials -- it's all about the comfort and memories of home. Hell, maybe they're just hungry and you shouldn't read more into it than that."

"There's no excuse for coming here. None."

"What are you doing here, then?"

"Oh, I've already lost all hope of getting any better."

She doesn't say anything anymore after that. I can always annoy her into silence with some good melodrama. I didn't really believe much of what I was saying, but there was room for it there, in the conversation, that night.

Unchaptered:
Fear

Anger is an Energy

I recognize -- and love -- the humor of walking into Walgreen's -- no babbling this time -- to buy some spackle and a bottle of Veryfine Relax juice, flashing my bloody knuckles at the cashier. This sort of Just in Time purchasing is like buying an umbrella when it's pouring or razors and shaving cream with three days worth of growth on my face. It just reeks of a general lack of preparation.

"Will, what happened to your hand?"

"I don't know, Sheila. I don't think I was around when it happened."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I know my hand is fucked up and I know my wall is fucked up but I'm not sure why the two of them got into such a fight."

"So you punched the wall again, huh?"

"So it would seem."

"I thought you'd stopped that sort of nonsense."

"Me too."

I used to punch trees or brick, things I knew wouldn't break. That was me being so conscious of my surroundings, or, more likely, completely conscious of what I was doing. At night, angry, frustrated, depressed, slugging tree trunks as I walked home. Each tree no doubt wondering what it had done to piss me off so much.

"That's regressive. Childish. Dumb."

"Hey -- don't say that. Don't call me dumb."

"I'm not calling *you* dumb. Just saying that you did a very dumb thing. I don't think you're an idiot, Will, but sometimes you do stupid things. You have to accept that, and you have to accept it that I'm going to tell you that. Punching a wall is idiotic. "

"Alright...I know, I know. But the wall had laughed at me too many times. It really had it coming."

I've no idea what I've done, just that there's a large hole in my wall. That's the problem with anger -- thinking comes long after action. I don't know where it comes from, nor why it stays so long. Things that burn so fiercely should burn fast and burn out. But this stays with me and smolders and the adrenaline never dissipates. My hands shake and eyes sting and I have a terrible time letting it go. It is nothing that I want to be feeling but all the Buddha nature in the world is not helping me to calm down.

"Are you okay now?"

"Yeah, I've learned to focus my chi, the energy that flows from all things and binds all things together."

"Are you serious?"

"No, not at all. I'm still the Ragin' Cajun."

"But you're not Cajun."

"No, not at all. I'm still the Jumpy Jew."

"But you're not--"

"Yes I am."

It's coming back to me. There I was, pacing around my house, tempted I know, tempted to start hitting things, with thoughts on fire, and thoughts not thoughts at all, but images, but little pieces of fire burning through my head, hands shaking, knees weak, the need to unleash the excess energy burning as well. My head so unclear, my mind abuzz, my eyes, my vision blurred, spotty, streaked. What set me up? What set me off? And then, two quick punches, two love taps to the wall, then blood, but the energy at least dissipated, spread out through the plaster and into cracks and chunks falling to the floor, and my coat and shoes on and out into the night.

Here's another thing I try to never do: express surprise at the depths to which Hollywood will sink. People are shocked when the fifth sequel to Home Alone is released, people say "I can't believe they made a movie with The Rock, Paula Abdul and Elizabeth Dole." As if Hollywood is filled with reputable, honorable filmmakers with nothing but integrity and the best intentions. We all know that's bullshit. We all know that they're looking to see what American dumb asses will pay to go see. The uneducated masses make the crappiest movies number one at the box offices. Drop your eight dollars and it's you casting a vote for the sequel.

So, when the guy across from me on the train starts whining about the fact that *Analyze That* has been made, and why on Earth would they bother with that and don't Crystal and DeNiro have any ethics or morals or standards, I have to hold myself back. At first, I think he's talking to nobody, but then I see the loop of a headset leading into a jacket pocket. Business man, or lunatic? You decide.

There are much better things to be surprised about -- granted, there are much better things for me to be worrying about, certainly -- like meteor showers and parallel universes and the miracle of fucking life, but no. Here's someone shocked, aghast, *outraged* that the "Story of the Pennsylvania Miners" has been fast-tracked by Disney and will be airing on ABC next Sunday night. You're surprised? Haven't you been paying attention all this time? Didn't you know, from the second the miners were trapped underground that someone would be making a movie about it? How could they resist? It's got the same kind of drama and suspense as any other movie out there, and since it's Disney, nobody's going to expect any romantic triangle or sexual controversy so they can remain somewhat true to the actual story.

But it's no surprise! None at all. Be not surprised by the depths people will sink to. Don't gasp in shock and horror when you find out they're working on *The Friday After this Last One* and *The Fifth Friday of the Month* at the same time. Don't freak out when they make the movie about the President's cat starring Dudley Moore as the first lady. It's *your* fault. You put those movies on the screen, and you'll keep them there.

I'd love to have children someday. I'm not sure why the drive in me is so strong, but the idea of tearfully presenting a grandchild to my father is an image that sticks with

me and nearly makes me cry. I think I'd make a good father, and I look forward to the challenge...

...but I'm scared to death of my kids already. I'm scared that my kids will turn out like the other kids these days. They're all total assholes without a single shred of respect for anything other than their own fucked up ideals. And it scares me to think like this -- it sounds old, it sounds fogeyish, it sounds like I should be using the word "whippersnapper" much more often than I do. I realize that the generation gap is huge between myself and the youth of the nation and that I feel about them the same way that my parents' generation feels about me and mine. But seriously, look at them, with their terrible music and clothes and horrible haircuts. What are they thinking?

There are 16-year-old girls out there, I see them, walking through the city with their moms and dads, wearing t-shirts that say "Porn star" on them. How does a father or a mother let their 16-year-old daughter wear a t-shirt that says "Porn star" on it -- even if she *is* a porn star? Do they not know what that means? Or perhaps they don't realize what it implies. Maybe I'm missing some deeper, more subtle statement -- some attack or indictment of the adult film industry, but I tell you, if I see a 16-year-old girl with a t-shirt that says "Porn star" on it, I'm going to go and ask her for her autograph and a blowjob.

The point is, that no matter how much my daughter begs me, she will not ever ever be allowed to wear a t-shirt that says "Porn star" on it. I won't even let her borrow mine. Not until she's actually a porn star. I don't care if it's all the rage, if it's so important to her to have it, if all the kids will make fun of her for not pretending to be a porn star, but no daughter of mine -- oh and God forbid I should even have a daughter, I can't imagine the agony knowing that my little girl is out in the world and there are *people like me* out there too -- is going to be allowed to wear that sort of thing. She can wear a shirt that says "Dad, fuck off and die" before she can wear one that says "Porn star." If she decides to be a slut, that's up to her, but she should come up with better ways to advertise it.

What am I *saying*? Do I even hear myself? And I can't imagine how terrible it would be the day my son came home and I looked at him and realized that he's just a prick. The urge to kick his ass or kick him out of the house would be overwhelming. I'd likely make the mistake of trying to reason with him and what a mess that would be.

But there would be no greater tragedy than having my kids exhibit goals and values so foreign from mine that I couldn't even stand to look at him. I know that it's up to me to keep that from happening, but I also know, having been one of those worthless teenagers myself -- except we had morals and respect, dammit -- that there's only so much one can do.

I guess my parents did a decent job, and while I don't reflect their ideals in every way, I think they got most of them through to me. I haven't killed anybody, and though someone's been suggesting I kill *them*, they've still gotta be pretty proud of how I turned out.

So there are these voices in my head -- the first step is admitting it, I'm glad you figured it out -- but I can't help thinking that maybe these voices have voices. I kick them into a stupor -- don't you dare -- by smoking a ridiculous amount of marijuana. I have to ask you to stop -- and things get fuzzy. I've prepared myself, sitting here, a bag full of

pot, a case of Coke, a few bags of chips, just to stave off the side effects. And my head starts to close down and my voice's voices start talking.

When I get high -- from pot, or sucking down nitrous or anything else that allows for some conscious detachment, I start having these meta-levels of thought. It's really difficult to explain, but I'm going to try. A thought will flit through my head, and while I consider it, there is a stepping back, another level up, and a thought about that thought occurs, and then I am thinking about thinking about thinking that thought. And that's when it gets weird. The next level is where I start to become conscious of the fact that I'm three levels out from an original thought that's now long forgotten. Beyond that is various levels of meta-meta-meta-consciousness where I think about my thinking about thinking, think about how I could describe the whole thing, decide I could never describe it to anyone, realize I've completely lost the thought that started it all, try to stop the whole chain of events and finally end up falling on the floor with my head completely cross-wired and misfiring.

It's an old story, sure, but I can just fixate on one object and become so deep inside my head that it's hard even to get out. It's like the early-morning obsessions, but not so concrete. Thoughts will come through while I'm staring at the price tag on a bottle of Advil and I'll be unable to unlock my gaze. Then comes the voice in my head telling me to stop that foolishness, and then the voice telling that voice that I can't and then another voice saying, "Sure, it's no problem." And then I'm telling them all that their argument is very amusing and I wouldn't mind if they kept it up. And then they get pissed at me for being so smug and struggle for control. It's a battle of wills, and eventually they win. There's more of them than there are of me. I put up a good fight, though and when I finally come back to myself, I feel as if some war has just been waged. My head snaps back and to the side and I am breathless and exhausted.

And then there are those times when I try like hell to keep from thinking about something. A thought occurs to me and immediately I know that I don't want to go down that path and my mind enters a holding pattern as I try to exact some kind of mental barriers around the thought. The original subject becomes like some offensive statue in the middle of a public square and I watch the townspeople as they wall it off. But while this censorship is going on, they can't help but to sneak glances at the statue, like I can't, while repeating to myself, "Don't think about X, don't think about X," help but to think about X the whole time. Most of the time, it works though, and I'll manage to distract myself from whatever it was that scared me in the first place.

Sometimes it doesn't -- the statue comes to life, starts taking swings at the wall, bringing it down in large chunks. Then I have to start again, building the wall, lest I come face to face with my fears.

This mental exercise is not without its physical toll. As I struggle to turn my mind's eye away from the thought, pressure builds in my head and I can actually feel the resistance, the effort involved as the thoughts, my head, fight against my will, and a headache forms at the site of the battle but again, I manage to pull free.

...exhaling into bottles to save smoke...

It's not that I've never known peace and harmony, because I have. I think. I mean, I just can't remember. Or can I? Fleeting memories of some time where there wasn't a thing... not a thing ...wrong? Am I making that up? I'm not so good at making things up anymore, so it's tough to say.

It seemed that the word was out, that there was a contest or a contract out on me. The guy across the aisle, he is snapping his gum and when I look up from my book in annoyance, he keeps snapping his gum and he smiles and his smile says to me, "I know all about you." I can't give him the satisfaction. He snaps louder, harder, but I keep my head down now. He becomes desperate, this was supposed to be easy. He starts sucking on his teeth, talking loudly on his cell phone, remarking on the ridiculous amounts of money that professional sports players make, shaking his left leg up and down, trying as hard as he can to distract me from my life but I am locked in, locked in, locked in.

A three-card monty game on the train, amazingly run system. I watch as three people cross into my car, coming at different times -- one from either end of the train, one through the doors, they create an air of disassociation, though it's obvious they're all connected. The plants play and win and sucker the fools into playing and losing. Twenty will get you twenty, right? These three are so bad at it that someone decides to confront them, some guitar-carrying hippy. He explains how obviously faked and rigged their game is but our friends the con-men will have none of it. Hippy man gets an earful of talk about how he's messing with someone's livelihood and only a fool be doing that, know what I'm saying?

A tense moment indeed, but more interesting the moments before because just like when the guy with the ridiculously annoying and high fake voice says, "I'm hungry, I'm homeless, I'm hungry, please help me," I shut off. I shut down. I bury my head in my book, I do anything to avoid eye contact because at that point I am so embarrassed for the human race. This is why I can't watch people making fools of themselves on television or people dancing poorly. I feel the weight of devolution on my shoulders, watching all the progress we've made be undone in a few moments of absolute foolishness. I shut down and somehow feel responsible for the disturbance, like it is some aspect of me that is bringing this down upon all of us, and all the people on the train will know better than to get on a car with *me* ever again.

But when the guys get pissed at the hippy who's just pointing out the obvious, I get angry. Here's someone who's clearly stated his case in a logical fashion, and then another guy who's arguing *against* logic, which I can't deal with. Logic is one of those few things you can really count on in life and it works and ... but what do I expect? He's just trying to make a living, right? He has to defend his livelihood. You take his money and you take food out of his baby's mouth.

So, I watch the cards and watch the cards and put up a \$20 and win another \$20 back and when they try to pull me into another game, "Hey you're really lucky! You're good!" I just walk away and figure they'll find me later to get it back.

There was a bomb somewhere in the city and it was going to go off in less than an hour unless FBI agent Jack Cannon could survive long enough to find the terrorist, beat the disarm code out of him, find the bomb and turn it off. Otherwise, all of New York would go up in smoke.

"Cannon? Where are you?" The voice came out of his radio transceiver. It was his superior, Agent Barlowe. Barlowe, a by-the-book hard-nosed cop, had never approved of Jack's methods, even if they did get the job done, on this one, though, there wasn't much of a choice. Cannon was the only man who could get through to Hans Folger in time to save the world's largest city.

"Barlowe, I don't have time to placate you, I've got to find Folger," Jack growled into his radio. "You can have me up on charges when this is done."

"Oh you can bet I will, Cannon. I'm going to bust you back down to private so quick, your head will be spinning."

The next sound Barlowe heard was Jack's radio cracking apart as he crushed it in his hand. Jack had no idea why he stuck around working for an idiot like Agent Barlowe. Jack did his job and he did it well. He bent, but never broke, the rules when it was necessary and the number of medals he had on his dresser at home showed that the President didn't think poorly of Jack's service at all.

Jack slipped around the corner of the building, stealthily avoiding the gaze of the sentries and surveillance cameras posted at regular intervals on the walls. Just a few steps further and he'd be at the secret entrance that his stool pigeon had told him about.

"Holy crap that's...that's...*crap*," I said. "New York's not the largest city in the world, the FBI doesn't use military ranks, and who keeps medals lying on their dresser?"

"Sorry, Will," Sheila said, "it's the best I've got right now."

"No, seriously, that's worthless. It's worse than worthless, it's an absolute waste of... well, thank God I'll never print that out, but is this a waste of photons? Differently charged magnetic particles? Electricity.... Hard drive space. Space-time. I don't know how that's getting displayed and stored, but it's a waste of those things, whatever they are."

"I said I was sorry."

"It doesn't even sound like me. If I'm going to write this trash it should at least sound like my own damned voice, right?"

"I don't know what happened."

...Timeout for some Warm Fuzzies...

I realize I've been talking about all the things I hate -- I hadn't realized there were so many, enough to carry me through the first half of a month -- and haven't mentioned a thing that I love, that I truly love. So I will do so here:

I really love, and I mean this with all my heart, corn flakes. Corn flakes, I feel, are the single-most perfect item, food-related or not, on the face of the earth. Perfection has not been achieved before or since that fateful day in 1894 when William Kellogg accidentally invented the corn flake. You heard me right -- it was an accident. It is often overlooked when discussing accidental inventions -- penicillin, cheese, and the

Incredible Hulk get all the press -- and nobody knows the tale of W.K. Kellogg and his magic grains.

Battle Creek, Michigan, 1894. Battle Creek is a town with many sanitariums. Don't ask me why, I don't know. They just have a lot of "health spas" there. Enter William Keith Kellogg was an 7th Day Adventist, and therefore, apparently, a vegetarian, and he was looking for a way to improve the diet of people in the little crazy house he ran. So one night he's stirring up some grain to try to make an easily digested bread substitute and he lets it sit out and the grain tempered over night. The next morning, he checks it out and discovers that when the grain is rolled, it comes out as these nicely formed flakes that taste pretty good. Blammo! Corn Flakes!

"That's not exactly true," Sheila says.

"So now you're going to start contradicting my little joyful exclamations?"

"The truth is that William Kellogg stole the idea for Corn Flakes from his brother who was a doctor. William used his business acumen to take the idea of cold cereal to new heights transforming Battle Creek from a sanitarium town to the cereal town that we know today. Unfortunately, William's actions caused a rift in the family that was never healed."

"And to this day, William's ghost haunts Battle Creek, scaring away little bunnies and leprechauns, right?"

And here's a secret for you and you alone: sometimes, when I'm very lonely, or very depressed, and very convinced that I'm a total hack and will never amount to anything worth a damn, I sit, alone, and in the dark, or maybe with a couple candles burning -- and some incense, definitely incense -- and I pretend very very hard that I am named after William Kellogg, Adventist, war hero, cereal inventor and master thief.

Darkness

It is so dark out, dark like I haven't experienced in some time. Darkness made blacker by its contrast with the fluorescent lights in here, so bright that it makes it hard to see past my reflection in the window. Dark like my mind! Like my heart! Dark like the darkest dark that ever was! This is Chicago in mid-November at a quarter to six in the evening on a Wednesday and it is darker than darkest Africa, darker than six months of night time in Antarctica, darker than...

So it's fucking dark, right? And it's pretty early still, but look at those neon lights out there, so bright only because it's so dark. They spell the word "RESTAURANT" but immediately visible from where I sit is only the word "AURA" and the lights glow with a halo of red. And they too, are not doing so much like giving off light, but they are accentuating darkness, they are revealing darkness.

Just as I'm revealing emptiness. And I wonder what my aura looks like. Does it glow red like this one? Is it dull, gray, off-white? Mauve? I don't know which would be worse: having a dark and evil aura or a hippie pastel one. If anyone ever tells me my aura smells like patchouli, I'll have to beat the crap out of them right then and there.

Now this is a night. Add to pitch black a cold and driving rain and you have a night that you can use. If you've got a sense of purpose, a deep and abiding restlessness and a good pair of boots, you've really got something going. I, however, am missing the boots and since the boots are a key piece to the puzzle here nothing but a miserable walk, soaking wet.

There again is my lack of preparation and common sense. You'd think I'd have learned by now after all these times. Certain things should be kept on hand, certain things should be knowable in advance. With all the technology, innovation and knowledge at my disposal... well, I should have my shit together by now. Certainly. But I don't. And I am who and what I am. A soaked and sad fool riding the train homeward to nothing. A train so eerily quiet I start to wonder where my friends are. My head so eerily quiet, I start to wonder. And stare at my phone. But it won't ring, and as hard as I try to picture it ringing, hear it ringing, imagine it ringing, it is not working.

There is no noise but the rattle of the wheels on the tracks, the squeaking of the cables connecting each car and the rain, and all of these are white noise, the worst of all noises, doing nothing but making the silence louder, making the silence rush into my ears as pressure, making my sinuses expand painfully.

We are going so slowly, like the silence has forced the train operator to stay his hand, showing respect to the night, making certain not to break the spell. And I only want to be home, and not even there, because habit will force me to create my own white noise with television and music. Where then? Somewhere dry, with dry clothes, or none at all, and arms that I know will hold me no matter what.

Working in the technology industry as I do, and being something of a techno-snob, one of my greatest pet peeves of all time is when technology is poorly used. It gets to the point that if someone double-clicks on something that needs only a single-click, it drives me mad. A woman who uses the redial button on a phone becomes an instant object of desire. Watching someone not make full use of some obscure features on some electronic device is torture.

The same goes for people who still dial 411 when any phone number you could ever need is available, for free, on the internet. Laziness! I scream, "You have the internet at your fingertips!" And people who will ask before trying something. "How do I do this?" or worse yet, "Do I push this button to perform that task?" Just push the fucking button! Push it! I swear to God, you're not going to break it. Just give it a shot. Don't come ask me where the file is before you've looked for it in any one of the usual places. Don't come ask me what movie Mel Gibson and Robert Downey Jr. starred in together (*Air America*) before you look. *The Internet is at your fingertips. The Internet is at your fingertips.*

The woman on the train is calling someone well down on her address book list and she is rapidly pushing the "down" button on the phone. It is screaming inside me until I can take it no more. I sit down in the empty seat next to her.

"I see you're using the Motorola V60 phone there, miss," I say.

Understandably confused, she replies, "...Yes..."

"Well, I work for Motorola. I'm an interface designer and usability scout." I don't know where this stuff comes from sometimes. "And part of my job is to look for people using our products and seeing if I can help them use the products a little better."

She is not impressed, not buying it and just plain not caring. "Sounds like a wonderful job."

"I noticed that you were scrolling through your phone book list to get to an entry. I was hoping I could tell you about a feature that would speed up your search and get you to your call that much faster." She still displays such a lack of interest that I wonder why I even bother. "Okay, now say you were calling someone whose name started with the letter 'S.' All you have to do to get to that name is press 'down' and then the '7' key 4 times and it will jump right to the first 'S' in your list." I demonstrate on my own phone. "See how easy that is?"

She smiles and nods and demonstrates that she's understood the explanation of the feature by using it to call someone in the "M" section of her address book.

"Marcy? Hi, it's Karen. You wouldn't believe the crazy assholes that are on this train...."

I smile and slip away. My work here is done.

Why, even in "reality" television, are there only beautiful people? If this is representative of the American population, why is the ratio of good looking, spectacularly toothed people to even the *average* people so ridiculously off-kilter? It's bad enough that these shows are pretending to be "reality." That these shows have been given the name "reality television." That people think that these shows are *real*. If there's one thing that people need to learn it's that everything is fake. Customer testimonials, sound bites, Penthouse Letters, everything. Television, movies, news, books, people, pets, cookies, coleslaw, grass. Everything. There is no reality except for the one you make. Fuck that. There's no reality except for the one *I* make. So be careful and behave yourself.

One of the truly scary things in this world is media convergence. It's one thing when one network directly copies another a month or two after a hit show comes out. "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" revived America's interest in game shows and proved that British television was once again worth ripping off, so next season, "Weakest Link" makes the hop across the Atlantic and also does well. A movie about a tornado or an earthquake or a forest fire is a blockbuster and suddenly there is a spate of natural disaster movies.

What is truly unsettling is when two movies of the exact same nature, or two television shows with very similar themes both come out within a week of each other. I'm talking specifically about *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* and "The Chamber" and "The Other Shitty 'Survivor-esque' Torture-the-Contestant Game Show -- you know, the one that had John McEnroe. What was that called? 'The Room?' What? Oh yeah, 'The Chair.' Jesus, 'The Chamber' and 'The Chair,' huh? It's like those dumbasses in Burbank or wherever they come up with crap television these days couldn't rip each other off fast enough Show."

Is this Hollywood's version of two friends showing up at the bar wearing the exact same clothes? Sure, it's total coincidence, but they look pretty dorky and probably should have called each other before leaving the house? Is there something more insidious

happening here? Insider information? One studio snuck a spy into the other and then figured the idea was so hot that nobody would mind that it was obviously a copy? Or is there something even more diabolical at work? Did the aliens who control all the media houses forget whose turn it was to do what and give the same assignments to two directors? Sure, that sounds paranoid, and I'll admit it, just a little bit crazy. But if you think the guys who staged the moon landing aren't above letting aliens pull the strings, then you're the one who's crazy.

Whatever the case is, it just leads to pure gold for we, the movie-going and television-watching audiences. It's twice the fun! If you liked one movie or show, you know you're just going to adore the other.

I would like to put forth that, as far as television theme songs go, the most brilliant piece of music to come out of the 80's was the song from the show "Diff'rent Strokes." Never has a television program's theme music spoken more truly and succinctly about the human condition. Sure, "Silver Spoons" raised some interesting issues about the nature of money and happiness and "Growing Pains" taught us all to hang in there, stick it out and treasure those that we love, but of all of these, "Diff'rent Strokes" offered the most, taught the most and really changed the most.

The song, written by none other than Alan Thicke -- well, it was written with a couple other people, as well -- tells us that everybody's got a different kind of story and everybody finds a way to shine and that if you don't have a lot in life, well so what, you've got what you've got and it's all yours. At no other time has television given us such an amazing message of hope and purity.

This song is a perfect complement to the brilliance that is the shining performance given by Gary Coleman throughout the series' 14 year run. Only a perfect song could be allowed to open a show that featured this talented young man's work. The perfect example of his genius: in the very first episode of the series, Arnold is supposed to say, "What are you talking about Willis?" Coleman struggled mightily with this line, thinking it was too stodgy, too proper for his character to say. It didn't feel right. After many late-nights, long meetings, and much hair-pulling, screenwriter Ben Starr still hadn't come up with anything new. Then, during the taping of the episode, it just came out: "What'choo talkin' 'bout, Willis?" Willis, played by the able Todd Bridges, was shocked by this departure from the script. He looks towards director Herbert Kenwith expecting a cut and a retake, but Herbert gestures to Todd to keep it going, keep it going. The results are obvious -- a stiff line, inappropriate to the character, is turned into television gold. Interviewed about his off the cuff improvisation later, Coleman would say:

"It just felt right, you know? Arnold didn't really want to know what Willis was talking about; the line was written so literally -- and this is nothing against Ben [Starr] because I think his work is brilliant -- that it wouldn't have expressed the true meaning of the scene. Arnold wants to express raw emotion here: *what'choo talkin' 'bout?* It is 'You so crazy!'; 'You talkin' to me?'; and 'Over my dead body!' rolled up into one. I just did what any actor would have done, really."

It wouldn't just be Willis who was on the business end of a "what'choo talkin' 'bout." Few characters were excluded from being targets of this incisive exclamation, and by the time the cast and crew of "Diff'rent Strokes" took their final bows on August 30, 1986, Arnold had said that phrase 103 times to 37 different characters. From "What'choo talkin' 'bout Willis?" to "What'choo talkin' 'bout Dudley?" Arnold took the world by

storm and stole America's heart. It's such a shame that he became a drug addict, bank robber and career criminal. So often this is what happens to our child stars who are not protected from greedy parents, sleazy agents, and the dangers of fame at a young age. Still, and this is just a secret for you, sometimes I pretend that I was named after Willis Jackson Drummond for a reason.

Why am I inundated with emails about buying generic Viagra? Does someone know something I don't? Have my ex-girlfriends been signing me up, giggling all the while, for these mailing lists, taking petty revenge on me for something I may or may not have done? And then they're sending me this hints about refinancing my mortgage. Why do they think I need to refinance my mortgage? There's not a woman alive right now that knows anything about my mortgage except for Meg Talrang, my loan officer at Wellington Mortgage. I'm not in debt, I don't need any marketing software or ad campaigns, and I certainly don't need to read about them eight times a day. I don't want to work from home -- well, actually, I do, but not the way these people want me to -- and for the last fucking time, I'm not falling for your scams you fake Nigerian bastards.

The pornography advertisements speak for themselves, of course. I dug my own grave with that one. Give someone your email address and you're just asking for a daily dose of teenage sluts who love to fuck, lesbian coeds, and all the rest of their ilk. And most of the time I don't mind, because really, who doesn't love all that shit? Am I going to look at a teenage slut who loves to fuck and say, "No thanks, I think I'll pass." She's sitting there saying, "Boy, I do so much love to fuck." And I'm going to say, "Gee, yeah, I'm just not interested. I'm really busy and there's just no time for that sort of thing right now." Adult spam is just free porn, and sure, it gets to be a little much at times, but I can't say I don't appreciate it.

The big mistake I made was in thinking that she knew what she was doing. I always think people know what they're doing when I first meet them. Give me your credentials and I'll make the assumption that you're highly qualified and competent enough to be an expert in the field. She'd never given me credentials, but she gave the air of someone who... well, someone who knew what they were doing.

When I first meet people, if they don't immediately give me the impression of being complete assholes, total morons or annoying twits -- an unsurprisingly low number of people, mind you -- I figure they're together and with it folks. If someone doesn't make that negative impression on me, I almost put them on a pedestal, looking up to them as a person who must have their shit well more together than I do, since that doesn't take a whole lot to do.

Inevitably, and through no fault of the individual involved, as I get to know people, I'll realize they're not so superior to me. I'll realize that we're all human and we all have our failings and we all stumble once in a while. And we all fall down.

It's unfair for me to raise these people to a level that nobody can live up to. And I shouldn't do it, and it's just setting them up to fail in my mind. But I can't help it -- people who don't bug the shit out of me just intimidate me. Until I get to know them. And then I can't remember when it was that they seemed so much higher than me.

And so there was nothing that she could do that wouldn't disappoint me. Nothing. Because I'd made these assumptions. No fault of hers. But I just couldn't take it anymore.

I was experiencing the same disillusionment as I had when I realized my father didn't have all the answers. All my life I'd gone under the illusion that Dad knew everything, could make no mistakes. That's the way you're supposed to feel about your parents, sure. It's still hard that day you realize that it's just not true. I felt the same way here. It wasn't as tough to deal with as it was with my parents, but it still hurt.

You just figure that someone who runs their own company is going to have a clue. That there's a reason that they've gotten a business and managed it somewhat successfully until you come along. Well, just like with parenting, they'll let *anybody* run a business. There are no tests, no surveys to fill out. Plop. New kid? New company? Doesn't matter. Both can be created and raised by morons. Most of them are. And their offspring become worthless, vicious little beasts who wreak havoc, cause terror, and are generally evil bitches.

--

"What the hell are you doing?" my mother asks.

"Oh, we're boycotting 'The Vagina Monologues.'" I reply.

"Why are you doing that, Will?" she sighs. Eve Ensler, Oprah Winfrey and Roger Ebert are the only three people on Earth that my mother will listen to.

"We don't believe that the vagina should be given this platform to speak without proper penile representation. Equal time has not been given to the penis to present its views and we believe this is patently unfair. In a debate as important as this one, we feel that it is important to hear both sides of the story."

If only you could see my mother roll her eyes. It's like she invented it and has been doing nothing but practicing her mastery of the skill her whole life. It's truly amazing.

"Have you even seen the show?"

"Of course not. You can't properly boycott something if you have full knowledge of it. Look at the Italian-American boycott of 'The Sopranos' -- the leaders of the protest group had never even seen a single episode of the series. They managed to get quite a bit of attention for themselves. That one woman even landed an Olive Garden commercial -- now tell me *that's* not irony."

"But you hate those people. And that restaurant."

"Exactly. But seriously, how ridiculous am I, if they're not."

"You lost me."

"Exactly. Now if you will excuse me, I have a costume to put on. I *am* this boycott's mascot, after all." I walk off, fixing my costume, chanting, "Stop the monologues! Let's have dialogues!"

My point is that if the Italian-Americans who boycotted 'The Sopranos' without having seen it -- and even the ones who *had* seen it -- weren't completely ridiculous idiots and could get some respect, or at least attention, from the media, then why couldn't I? My claims were just as silly and bogus as theirs, and no more so. I figured with enough time, I'd at least get mentioned in the paper.

Where were these people for *Goodfellas*, *Godfather 1-3* and every other gangster or mobster film. What about *Big Night*? That portrayed Italians as owners of Italian

restaurants. I didn't walk away from that film thinking, "Gosh, it's weird how every person in Italy owns an Italian restaurant *and* speaks with an Italian accent."

Why the sudden sensitivity to the portrayal of Italians as mobsters? The world knows that not all Italians are mobsters. Some of them are housekeepers (Tony Danza as Tony in "Who's the Boss?"); and some of them are wise-cracking high-school kids (John Travolta as Vinny Barbarino in "Welcome Back, Kotter"). And some of them are mobsters (Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro, Joe Pesci, Ray Liotta, Al Capone, Frank Nitti....the list goes on.) So, why this television show? Why here? Why now?

One word: Satan. Or the aliens. Or the aliens' version of Satan. Something is afoot, however, and maybe, just maybe, me and my friends can get to the bottom of it.

"Will, we need to talk," she says.

"Can't talk, Ma," I reply. "Must protest."

--

I pulled a successful leapfrog on the train tonight. There is no greater feeling in the world, like I have outsmarted the gods of transportation, sneaking myself home before my time. The trick is to grab a Brown Line train, get to Fullerton, immediately catch a Red Line, pass the Purple Line to Belmont and grab it there. There's nothing to lose if you don't make it -- you'll still have to wait for another Purple Line, or you can just bite the bullet and stay on that Red -- and everything to be gained if you win. Here's how it works:

I climb the steps to the platform, only to see that a Purple Line train has just departed. Instead of losing my cool and playing the "If I hadn't stopped to flirt with the receptionist on the way out the door, I would have made it on the train" game, I remain calm and see that a Brown Line train is pulling in. I hop on board.

We pull out of the station, making good time. Every once in a while, we pause while the Purple loads or unloads passengers. This is good -- we are close.

But, as we near Armitage, I see a Red Line train emerging from the tunnel to our left. This could be a deal killer. If the Red meets the Purple at Fullerton, they make a connection, both continue North, and I am left waiting.

As we come into Fullerton, I am chanting under my breath, "Be there, bitch. Be there, bitch." The bitch is there. Maybe signal delayed, maybe a retarded operator. Regardless, I step to the doors, tell the people trying to get on the train before letting us off the train to back off, and cross the platform to the Red.

Now for the final stage. The Purple Line train has to stop at Diversey and Wellington before it gets to Belmont. The Red goes straight from Fullerton to Belmont. I am now chanting, "Pass that bitch! Pass that bitch!" And we do -- halfway between Fullerton and Belmont, we cruise past. The Purple is stopped behind another Brown. The trains are riding bumper to bumper. At Belmont, usually the end of a leapfrog involves skipping gleefully from one train to the other, but I have to wait a couple minutes before my Purple comes in. Still, the grin on my face goes from ear to ear.

Earlier, I said there is nothing to lose from the leapfrog. That's not exactly true. When you pull this stunt, you are not just tempting fate, you are kicking sand in its face and saying, "Bring it on, motherfucker!" This is not a wise thing to do, especially if

you're paranoid or a real believer in poetic justice and/or ironic death. Suddenly you're jumping in line, getting on a train that wasn't meant for you, asking for a derailment of epic proportions. Granted, there's equal chance that you were supposed to be on that train and your shenanigans have saved your ass. It's another game of what-ifs. You can play them till you die. I will.

So the leapfrog pulled, my seat taken, my grin fixed. I have beaten the CTA at their own game. Though it was not necessarily skill -- it's more a matter of luck and timing -- one does need to possess the spirit and will to try. And maybe I've only shaved 7 minutes off my commute, but it's the most exciting thing that's happened to me all week. And it puts me into such a good mood that I promptly get into a friendly argument about our forefathers with the "Nixon's the One" man who really does seem to be following me around these days.

"Let me show you how wrong you are," he says, pulling out a notebook.

"Well...okay, yeah. Please do," I reply, unable to decline, curious to know.

"You'll give me that porcupines are mammals, correct?"

"I can allow that, sure."

He begins writing out some letters and symbols, a P here, an arrow there, a Q there. "And porcupines have quills."

"Of course."

"And Thomas Jefferson used a quill pen?"

"I would have to do some research, but I'll give you that too."

"Lastly, that Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence."

"Yes."

"And your argument, if I can break it down to its simplest parts, is that the Declaration of Independence directly violates our rights as human beings to be miserable."

"Exactly."

"Okay, this is called *Logic*, son. Watch and learn."

He begins mumbling, drawing strange charts and using abbreviations, apparently somehow disproving that my statement (T) is correct.

"I'm confused," I say. "You're trying to prove that I'm wrong, but your first statement is that I'm right."

"Crazy, huh? But that's my right."

"Well, okay, but I think if you quit right now, I would win this one."

"But I'm not quitting, my boy. I'm not quitting until I see this through."

If you think it's annoying that this guy keeps calling me "son" and "my boy" just imagine how I feel about it. He's talking like some old prospector and I suppose in his own way, he is, but still.

"Sir, if you could..."

"Hush, kiddo, I've nearly got it."

I decide to let it slide, and watch him as he scribbles furiously using arrows to connect letters, writing obscure abbreviations to explain steps in his process.

"Here you go."

He hands the paper to me and points to the bottom two lines. Line 28 says "R->~T" and line 29 says "~T."

"Well...well. You win, old man. But I will be back."

"Bring your brain next time, boy. You've got a good head on your shoulders, but it doesn't seem like there's a whole lot going on inside it... or maybe there's too much."

Damn him and his last laugh. *I'm* supposed to get the last laugh.

"What have you got for me today?" he asks.

"Nothing," I reply. "I haven't been able to come up with anything."

"Oh bullshit. You're sitting on something big, I can tell."

"No, really, Jack, it's true. I couldn't find anything out."

"Listen, Will. If you're not going to trust me with this, then are we truly partners?"

I hesitate, not sure whether to drop this bomb on him. "Alright, alright. I'm sorry. Here it is. The FBI has a list of everyone who's ever purchased a book from the '...For Dummies' series. Those on the list will never be allowed to work for the government."

"This is huge. I think you may very well be onto something here. But I wonder if you've got the reasoning right."

"What do you mean?"

"I believe that those on the list are *chosen* to work for the government. That's why the country is in the state it's in."

I don't want to put too fine a point on it, but maybe the context clues just aren't enough. I am becoming what I hate. Perhaps hate is too strong of a word. I am becoming what I observed with some amount of distaste.

"When you kill yourself, how will you do it?"

I am taken aback, of course. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"Oh. Oops. I mean, *if* you killed yourself, how would you do it?"

"I don't know. I'd probably take a slow and indecisive way out like overdosing on sleeping pills or running the car in the garage."

"Oh, it's true. You don't have an imagination. You *are* washed up."

"Oh thanks a lot. How does that prove I have no imagination?"

"If you're going to make a gesture like that, you may as well make it big. Live a little! Have fun with it."

This is the sick and twisted path down which I have taken my life. This is where I am heading, talking about fun ways to kill oneself. But still, it's a game, and I can't pass up a game of any kind.

"Okay, let's see. I would like to go into a toy store during the Christmas rush, go absolutely mad that they don't have the toy that all the mothers were killing each other to get for their kids a few years before and shoot myself. Splatter my brains against the Barbie dolls."

"Alright, now you're talking. You *do* still have it."

"Or, I could dress up in a full Harry Potter costume and hang myself in the men's room of a movie theater. Or slash my wrists with some Magic: The Gathering cards at a nerd convention. Or jump out of an airplane wearing clown makeup and floppy shoes and a parachute full of holes and a note that says 'Swiss cheese? I thought you said "Cut a bunch of holes in my parachute!"'"

"You see? This is the kind of thing *Harold and Maude* was missing. I'm a little concerned with the juvenile nature of all these pranks, though."

"Hey -- there's nothing like ruining some kid's childhood with the gruesome image of suicide."

"Yeah, I guess you're wasn't so great, why should theirs be?"

A 16-year old boy lights a cigarette on the train platform. I get a light from him and stand at his side. After a few drags in silence, I point to the billboard above his head.

"Hey, tobacco is whacko, if you're a teen," I read.

"Man, don't they know.... Those ads make more people smoke than anything," he whines.

"Why's that?"

"Well, it's just such obvious bullshit. If anybody wanted anyone to stop smoking, the ads would say 'Tobacco is whacko.' None of this 'if you're a teen' business."

"I see what you're saying."

"Besides, what else am I going to do? Start huffing? Sniffing glue?"

"According to the next billboard over, aside from the brain damage and seizures, sniffing is a lot of fun."

"Oh, so they're using irony to try to keep me from inhaling Lysol?"

"How else are they going to get you to stop?"

"I don't know. Maybe if they tried really hard to use currently hip words and phrases like 'bling-bling' and 'whazzzup' it might have an effect. As it is...." He trails off as he pulls a bottle of ether out of his backpack.

"Kid, you've got a good head on your shoulders. I want you to come work for me," I say, incredibly impressed, and really wanting a hit of that ether.

"Oh yeah, doing what?" he asks, and then a dark look crosses his face. "Hey, aren't you that crazy guy who's always talking to himself and pretending to --"

"No, no. That's someone else. Really." I am sweating. Confrontation makes me feel like I'm going to pass out. "That's someone else...." I walk away. Word is spreading fast. People know who I am now, like they didn't when I had my picture on the back of a relatively well-selling book. There are many roads to fame, but you take the wrong turn, which is incredibly easy to do, and you end up at infamy, and that's nowhere you ever want to be.

In my mailbox at home, the bill from T-Mobile awaits. I open it nervously, afraid of what it might tell me. I use my phone a lot, and my plan doesn't include all that many minutes. I open the envelope and my worst fears are confirmed: I have used a mere 27 minutes from my plan this month. Three calls home, one call to my brother, one call to voicemail, no incoming calls.

So I must have been making everything up.

To tell the truth, I've always had my suspicions, really. That I've never actually seen Sheila...well, it was kind of odd. But who could have known the extent to which I would take this thing.

A company party. Everyone is there. It is the same old thing. It is the same old drunken lovefest that has always marked these gatherings. Everyone is tanked to the gills,

loud and nonsensical. I figured beforehand that this time there might be some good brawls. All the recent tensions -- which this gathering was designed to ease -- might come bubbling out and result in a nice bloody fight to wrap up the evening. I am to be disappointed, however. Everyone seems to be genuinely pleasant, ready to bury the hatchet. Me, I'm ready to bury the hatchet in someone's skull.

"Hey Will! You having a good time?"

I turn around to see a sloppily drunk Dan Weinfield, his arm around the shoulders of one of the young designers who recently told me she'd give me her next paycheck if I cut the brakes on Dan's car. I feel the old familiar rage build up, the taste of bile in my mouth, the blood rushing. I am drunk enough that my words wouldn't come out right if I decided to go off on him, but not so drunk that I could justify taking a swing at him. And why is Jessica letting him even touch her? *She must have lost a bet. She must have lost a bet.* I promise myself if I see them making out later, no matter how drunk I am or not, I'll ruin somebody.

"Yeah, Dan. Great time. Hey Jess, how's it going?" I manage.

"S'fine," she says, giggling, blitzed. "S'great! Hey I was just saying how Dan here looks like Dennis Quaid. Don't you think he looks like Dennis Quaid?"

She is wasted and I can't match the drunken logic, can't make fake and polite drunk conversation, not tonight. I'm not a mean drunk. I tend to get embarrassingly tender and friendly. Not terribly so, but I've been known to do some hugging and maybe a little crying. Usually I'd be very happy to see these people who seemed very happy to see me, but like I said, not tonight.

"No," I say, leaving them. I head to the other side of the room.

When asked, I've often said that the reason I stay with this company is because of the great people I get to work with. I wonder where *those* co-workers are. I don't think I've liked anyone in a long time. I'm going to have to start answering that question by saying that it's because it's where all my stuff is.

I do manage to find some of my more tolerable colleagues hiding in a corner. I join them and find that they're all so desperate for controversy on a bland night that they're starting to make stuff up just to have gossip.

"Did you hear? Scott Sharpe is sleeping with Larry Thompson's wife!"

"I heard he was sleeping with Larry Thompson."

"I saw them making out in the conference room."

I can't resist the opportunity. "Did you guys know that Bac-O-Bits are actually reprocessed cat hair and Flav-Or-Ice packaging? The cat hair part is obvious, but what people don't realize is that the hyphenation of Bac-O-Bits and Flav-Or-Ice are much more closely related than anybody could ever imagine."

Blank stares all around. Some laughter. Nobody knows how to deal with me anymore. Like I am already bleeding and broken, slobbering and spitting out shards of teeth.

"What the hell are you talking about Will?"

"It's true, it's true."

I guess they don't know me well enough to know if or when I'm joking, nor are they in the mood to even pretend that I'm just fucking around. Problem is, I don't even

know if I'm just fucking around anymore. They turn their backs on me, shunned because I've broken the rules of the game. It is time for gossip, not conspiracy, no matter how weak and inconsequential. Fickle bastards. Just last week they were begging....

Outside, shivering on the street, sitting on the curb, Sheila tells me I should leave and I know she's right but I don't feel like talking to her right now so I hang up. Better to wander the streets alone, again, unmolested, undisturbed. I can't handle the noise of the bar, the noise of all those voices and all those thoughts, most of them completely thoughtless. And so I make my escape, unseen, again uncared, un...or misremembered.

Memories. I think about the places I've been and the things I've done and they don't seem real. Everything is just a dim, blurry image in my head. Who's to say I'm not making it all up as I go along? Specific incidents from my past are so vague that it all might as well be a badly remember story someone once told me. Or an episode of a television show that I saw a long time ago and didn't pay very much attention to. I can't remember last Friday's lunch. I remember meeting Sheila as well as I remember my fifth birthday: fuzzy flashes of images and movement, so much room for re-interpretation. Any details I give have been made up, by me, or Sheila, or any number of othe people whose embellishments of the story have added up and been added on through the years. All these memories must belong to someone else. Even photographs don't help. I might have been retouched into them for all I know.

So who am I? How did I get to where I am? It must have been quite a journey. I don't remember a single step of it. I'm certain someone knocked me out and carried me here. To this moment. And then to this one. Am I awake now? Will the future be any different? Will I remember this moment of writing these words and think, even that memory is false, even that time someone else was controlling my hands and feet and head and pushing me along the path?

Every second of every minute must have been -- and must continue to be -- programming that is, at the same time, the determination of my future and the result of my past. I guess I can just shut my eyes, and let it go. Let it ride....

...I remember floating down a river, in a canoe, an orange life jacket around my neck, my blonde hair looks red from the reflecting light until it turns dark and cloudy and the rain falls and I am terrified that we will all be electrocuted, I am always scared that we will be electrocuted or.... I am kneeling in my bed, praying in each of the cardinal directions, "Please don't set my house on fire. Please don't set my house on fire. *Please don't set my house on fire,*" not to keep my house from being set on fire, but actually asking whatever it is I think I'm talking to not set my house on fire.... We are at a state park and I am terrified that the rowdy family in the cabin next to ours is going to let their campfire go out of control and will burn the easy dry timbers around my head.... My father is looming over me, yelling, and I have pissed myself.... I can't remember what I had for lunch last Friday.

A banging noise. And yelling. "End of the line!" I wake up quickly. Disoriented, sluggish, embarrassed. Unsteady. The conductor is hitting a metal bar directly above her head with a wooden stick. "Get off the train."

"I'm trying, I'm trying," I say. To my feet and through the doors, I have no idea which end of the line I'm at.

It turns out I'm at the opposite end of the line from any end of the line I'd like to be at. In Chicago, this means being at the ass end of the Red Line train. 63rd street. The kind of place that people like me don't visit and live to tell about. I have no idea how I ended up here. Was I on a train a minute ago? Was I thinking.... It's all so blurry. I'm pretty sure I was headed North at some point. I'm pretty sure I wasn't on the Red Line. Am I awake and dreaming? Am I asleep and walking? I have no idea how I ended up here....

And I then face that terrible feeling, like in the Walgreen's parking lot, where any choice I make will not lead me to ruin, but just won't lead me anywhere. I can't leave the platform, I can't stay on the platform. I can't choose, and I can't not choose. There is no way to win this one. The thought of going home, again, what's the point? What's the point in staying here or not staying here? What's the....

No. Go home, there may be no point, but there's a reason that it's called home. You'll feel better in the morning, you'll feel better in the morning, you'll feel better in the morning.

Barely able to open my front door, close it again, take off my coat. Too late for sleep, too early for anything else. Such a disturbing in-between time, 4:30 until 6:30. There's no point to it. Up until now, I wasn't even certain it existed. Too much in my head to think. Too many feelings... this feeling like I'm not as alone as I think I am. This feeling like I'm being watched. This feeling like I'm watching myself. A blow to the back of my head in the form of Sheila's voice, "Will, I need to talk to you."

"Woah, woah. Ease up there. It's too early...or late for this. I've had the shittiest night on record. What's going on?"

"I'm worried about you. You've been acting strangely lately. You've been acting out."

"Oh all that crazy stuff I've been doing? I guess it seems pretty weird, but it's really just for show. And for fun. You really do become free once you let go of the social norms."

"You're worrying your family. You're about to lose your job. You --"

"Is this an intervention?"

"Why did you spend the night riding the trains?"

"I don't know. There was...no, I don't know. I ended up on the wrong end of town and had to make my way back here. There is nothing more depressing than the people on the train at 3 in the morning. And the sound of a nearly-empty train going through the tunnel at speed. It's agonizing. And returning to an empty house...."

"I'm here, Will," Sheila says. That soothing voice again.

"But why? Or better yet, how? In what way are you here?"

"As long as your head isn't empty, your house isn't empty."

A piece of loose-leaf paper is lying on my dining room table. In a familiar hand is written, "The Death of Mr. Jack Benny No Relation." And there is another that reads, "The Dedication." And another says "We follow a car down a street, turn a corner,

and as we pass an intersection, another car crosses behind us, and we follow it, and pull into a driveway. The couple in this car get out and walk towards their house, but instead of following them, we pass through a brightly lit window into the house next door and observe their conversation, but just as it is getting towards a climax, we pass through the television to the scene of the news report that is being given. We continue in this fashion for the rest of our lives, which are short."

"What the hell are all these? Has someone been in here while I was gone?"

"They're all about death. Why is someone leaving you notes all about death?"

There are people out there who know what my best interests are and are working to make sure that they are never met. I don't know who they are. This is not some sort of paranoia. Trust me. These are not the people who just don't know what my best interests are or are unable to meet my best interests or just don't care about me in the least. These are the spiteful, mean-spirited people who want to see bad things happen. To me. Not me alone, not necessarily me in particular. But I'm in there, I'm part of some group that's targeted, that's picked out to be picked on.

In Hinduism, a mantra is a sacred verbal formula that is repeated in prayer or meditating. In my world, a mantra is anything I can italicize and repeat a few times. I love mantras, need them. They allow me to focus on something, to either prevent it, or make it true. To keep from destroying, or to destroy. Words, especially when spoken, especially when repeated (especially when repeated) have amazing power to change things, for good or ill.

But sometimes I do think too much about death. Not my own, mind you -- I'm not too terribly worried about that anymore. When I first learned about death, as a kid, it really threw me for a loop. The idea of life just stopping was hard to take, especially since mine had pretty much just begun. How did I find out about that? I have no clear picture -- just a vague image of a car ride around the neighborhood and returning home and sitting in the basement, painting with watercolors...something brown. This is all I have of that moment.

Besides my initial -- and understandable -- negative reaction to the idea, I never really thought too much about death. Never looked at it as a curse, a solution or a problem. That's just me accepting the inevitable. But now... these days I'm thinking about other people dying a lot. Especially, for some reason, my father. The idea of my father being taken away from me is just ridiculous. It seems like he should go on forever. Like he has so much to do all the time that he couldn't possibly die, because when would those things get done? It's just unfathomable.

And of course, this ties into another fear: not of death, but this time of abandonment. I'm scared of people disappearing on me. Taking off... Well, what do you expect? Divorce, and moving, and sudden break-ups -- life does that to you. People leave. It's their nature, the slimy bastards. People just can't always be around, and you've got to learn to deal with it. And people never know how much they mean to you and how much you need them around, because no matter how often, or how much you tell them, it still has to be translated into their terms and they can never understand it on your terms. If

they could get into your head and really feel the feeling, it would be a different story. They'd be able to make their decisions based on the real meaning of the sentiment as opposed to their perception of what your words might mean.

But what do I do? Every time I talk to my Dad -- except when he's giving me bunk advice -- and it's that too-early-darkness time of November night it just fills me with.... Like I'm thinking that he's at the same point in his life as the day is. Nearly over.

Am I selling him short? Am I too morose? Am I leaving anyone out? Not only do these thoughts and feelings bring me down, they make me feel guilty. I want to ask him what, if anything, he thinks about death, but I don't want to bring that on him. "Oh I hadn't thought about it at all before, thank you very much." Or, "What, are you just looking forward to your inheritance?" Not at all -- I couldn't walk around that house, without him there. I couldn't hardly do it when I was a kid.... So has he come to terms with his death and I haven't? Does he even think about it?

I've had so much trouble waking up lately. My bed is a cocoon and in it, I am insulated against the world. My relationship with my alarm clock has become decidedly antagonistic and surreal. Every morning, I half-dream that it's some other monster or challenge to overcome. Each time I am able to stretch out and hit the snooze button, it is a small victory. Eventually, I come to and realize it's only a machine and it's just trying to do it's job. And then it dawns upon me what this machine's job actually is. I blink, awake, wondering why I didn't recognize it till now. I am a half-hour to forty-five minutes late for work every day lately. Every night, I know I should get to bed earlier than the previous night and then, without any warning, it is 1:00 AM and I am wishing I could get the previous hour and a half back so instead of whatever unproductive activity I was participating in, I might have been asleep.

It is too bright, this morning, for November, to mean anything other than freezing cold air and snow on the ground. I am right, momentarily pleased by my amateur meteorology, and then pissed I didn't listen to myself and dress smarter. I turn back for my boots and heavy coat.

I have yet to actually witness a snowfall this year. To this point, snow has been something that comes in the middle of the night, silent, catching me unaware. It is the perfect Christmas morning snow: the snow you didn't expect but were hoping for as you went to bed the previous night. This is just a month too early and I can't remember ever having cared what color Christmas was. Brown, green, white? All the same to me; just another day off work where everything's closed. Though it seems, in recent years, more and more stores are open Christmas. It's getting so they can't afford to take the time off. It's becoming one of the biggest shopping days of the year.

"All automobile fuel gauges are calibrated such that they read that your tank is empty before it actually is," I say.

"So, isn't that a good thing? It prompts you to buy fuel, but if you're unable to, you've still got some left to get to the gas station."

"Don't you see? They're forcing millions of people to buy more gas than they actually need."

"It can't be more than a gallon."

"One gallon times millions of people is millions of gallons of gas, just sitting in the bottom of millions of gas tanks, going to waste."

"Aren't you going a little overboard here?"

"Overboard? *Overboard?* There are people out there bleeding, dying for our 'right' to cheap, high quality gas and there's enough gas in the bottom of all the American gas tanks to fuel a city's worth of cars!"

"So how's this a conspiracy? How does anyone benefit from that?"

"It's not obvious? It's a concerted effort by Ford and OPEC to make sure that Americans are buying much more gas than they could possibly need. And they keep us needing the gas, and we can't execute and apply true American foreign policy on the Middle East."

He's so confused. Probably not as confused as I am though. "Okay, what is true American foreign policy in the Middle East?"

"Oh now you're kidding, right. It's been made quite clear that if we didn't need the oil that comes from the rogue nations that we'd be bombing them back to the stone ages...not that it would be that much of a transition. But, we'd have our own people in power over there and in dozens of other places across the globe."

"Okay okay. What's Ford have to do with it all?"

I shake my head. "You don't even see that? Henry Ford invented the first automobile at the request of the heads of the Ottoman Empire. Ford was one-quarter Turkish on his Mother's side and had deep ties to the region. The company has carried on the traditions and standards that bastard set up back at the beginning of the previous century. This thing is huge, I tell you. Huge!"

"This thing makes no sense at all. And you're actually scaring me."

And truth be told, I was holding him by the lapel of his jacket, shaking him slightly. If I could see the look in my eyes right now, I'm sure I'd describe them as mad. My stop approaches, I pull him close for one last look and whisper:

"The student has become the master."

And I bolt from the train.

It takes a certain mindset to fill out timesheets. Because they're so detailed, and there are so many hours (40!) to fill each week, if you don't do them right when you're supposed to, or if you spend even an hour fucking around (not that I do, mind you) at the office, you've got to switch your head into a different mode. This mode is the one that is responsible for all the creative bullshit that you ever come up with. As you sit there, trying to think up what might be reasonable to say what you were doing three weeks ago, you are really tapping into a part of your brain that you may not be using for the rest of the day, especially when you're in such a technical profession as I am. Switching over is hard, often painful, particularly when you're not used to being in that creative part of your brain. Most of the time, I'll just ask Sheila to help me make some shit up.

"Okay, November 13th. What did I do? I'm 4.5 hours short."

"Wasn't that the day you were looking at porn most of the day?"

"Isn't that every day?"

"Can I take back the thing I said about you being a valuable employee?"

"You'll get no argument from me," I say. "Just tell me something to put in here. I'm sick of this."

"Is there a timesheet entry for making up timesheet entries?"

"That's Internal/Admin, I think."

"Why not just use that?"

"I've got 2 hours of that already that week. I've got to come up with something better."

"Alright, bleed 2.5 hours into that BAR project and 2 hours into LOS."

"Good idea. Now for the comments...."

"You're on your own, I have no idea what to say about that. Do I look like a geek?"

And I have to wonder....

I am jammed -- we are jammed -- like human cattle into a train car. It is 6:30 and there shouldn't be this many people just making their commute now. There shouldn't be this many people trying to stand in the same place. Somewhere, I imagine there is a better design for a train car. I imagine someone has figured it out so that people will actually move in towards the center of the car and not stand in the doorways making it a ridiculous challenge to get on or off the train. Or perhaps it is the people themselves who need education. Maybe if every Chicago CTA passenger was shipped off to a two-week reeducation camp, they might learn how to more efficiently use the space allotted to them. They would all know how to accommodate, comfortably, three more passengers in the same cubic footage.

Or maybe not. Maybe it really is the designer's fault. With web projects, we are told that we can't expect the user to learn or change his ways or be very intelligent at all and so we are forced to build and rebuild based on his experiences and expectations. So why hasn't the city looked into this? They're spending they're time examining how to make entry into the stations more efficient when they should be looking into a way to make it easier for me to get onto the first train that comes, rather than the third. And they should figure out how to make people -- encourage people -- without trying to change their natural behavior -- indeed, by actually using their natural behavior -- to push in, to move in, because there is room there, I see it, for three or four more people. Something must be possible. In this day and age of modernity and advancements it bothers the crap out of me to still be dealing with old standard technology. It's the "If we can put a man on the moon, why can't we design a decent train car?" question. I refuse to believe that there's nothing that can be done about cats that shed all over the place or that we can't make a truly warm paper-thin winter jacket so I don't have to waddle all over the city bundled into gigantic sacks of down feathers.

And it's really a rip-off here in the 21st century. We were promised flying cars and all we get is the Segway. I want implants and replacements and bionics. I want to have built-in night vision and zoom lenses and automatic facial recognition software. I want teeth that clean themselves and are made out of a space-age polymer. No, fuck the space-age polymer. The space-age is over. They should be made out of some futuristic even cooler polymer. I want to be able to know something as soon as I need to know it. I want to be able to have everything I need at my fingertips. I want the future to be today, and I think it's bullshit that yesterday's future is still tomorrow.

As bright as it was this morning, it is dark this afternoon. It is evening before it is afternoon. As bright as I was this morning.... Well, it seems I wasn't very bright at all this morning, was I? I haven't ever been so bright, have I? And here I was, thinking this college degree meant something. Or, if not the degree itself, then the four and twelve years I spent working to get it. I know more, certainly, than I did when I started -- like how to spell "encyclopedia" and how to tell the phase of the moon from the current time and its height in the sky -- but am I different other than the fact that time changes us all? I don't feel much smarter. It's like they jammed their crap into my head and the other stuff that was already there made room or didn't, depending on its mood. But have my critical thinking skills gotten any better? Did they teach anything that I can apply? Not the obvious things like I mentioned above but something that I can apply towards further education and living? I'm not so sure.

And so the 16 years of school -- or maybe just the last 8 or so -- have just been incubation. Getting me ready for life by beating the shit out of me on a relatively daily basis. Maybe that's it -- they know what life's all about and they know there's nothing they can teach you much beyond the standard adding and subtracting of numbers and so they just try to make your life as miserable as they possibly can so that by the time you're ready to go out into the "real" world, you've built that shell and you've built your walls and you know how to hide behind them, and barring that, you know how to take a punch and roll with it.

Which all means, that while school, high school and college specifically are not necessarily delivering as advertised -- particularly for those of us with liberal arts degrees; I won't argue that doctors aren't learning actual important facts -- it's not a total waste of time. Learning how to take a punch, whether mentally or physically, is certainly an important thing to learn.

And when I come to, I wish I'd paid a bit more attention in that class. I am flat on my back, in a puddle of melting snow and ice, my arms and legs splayed out in what must be a comic fashion, though I'll never know, being unable to see it and having no one around to confirm my suspicions.

"Did anybody get the number of the truck that hit me?" I ask nobody. Silence and darkness answer. I don't even have much of an idea where I am. My vision is not quite as clear as I'd like it to be and there is a giant ball of pain where I'm sure my head used to be. I struggle to my feet, learning how to use this new body I've just been given. I hurt everywhere. I'm thinking someone just knocked me out, and I haven't a clue why...or how. As I stand, I realize I'm in the alley behind my house. I don't remember walking here from the train. I don't even remember getting off the train.

"Do you believe me now?" Sheila asks.

"About what? All of society being totally fucked? I told *you* that."

"No, about those notes being death threats."

I check myself again, make sure I'm all there. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Sheila, but I'm still alive. I am, right?"

"Alright, alright. Not death threats then, but definitely threats."

"You think the same person that has been leaving those notes followed me, decked me, and dragged me to the alley?"

"Is there any other explanation?"

"I can think of a few hundred other explanations. I blacked out. I was mugged. I tripped."

"Were you mugged? Is anything missing?"

I look down at my side and realize that my laptop bag is still hanging from my shoulder, banging painfully into my side. Aside from that, I am talking on my cell phone and my wallet and keys are still with me. My glasses are still in place. They're not even dirty.

"No. Doesn't seem like it."

"So it wasn't a mugging. It was an attack...an attempt on your life."

"Well they didn't do a very good job. Like those death threats of yours, that was a pretty poor attempt. I'm not even bleeding."

It is too dark this morning, for November, for it to mean anything other than cold and snow. I remember the coat, but forget the boots and am slogging through the drifts in my sneakers. My outlook matches my visage matches the sky: gray and soggy. A winter wonderland without the wonder.

Of all the things I've forgotten, to be honest, the thing I most wish I could remember is my first orgasm. I think I know the general year and place, but I don't remember many, if any, of the more interesting particulars. Shouldn't this stick out in my mind as one of the more important happenings in my life? A watershed moment? Oh to be that teenaged (or younger?) boy again, making that brilliant discovery. God, what a thing to forget! The look on my face must have been priceless when, after several (dozen) failed experiments, there finally was some success. What thoughts must have been going through my head? What decisions did I make? How can all this be lost to time?

And the funny thing about forgetting is that I can't remember a time when I *could* remember this, so I don't know when it was forgotten. That makes it impossible to retrace my steps, walk backward through time, following a trail till I reclaim old memories.

I have never understand why people need to say "F.Y.I." before they tell me something. What does that accomplish? What is the information for, if not for me?

"We live in troubled times my friend."

"We live in *troubling* times. And you don't have to tell me that."

"I was just saying --"

"Yes, I know. Look, the world is surely fucked and it's likely that civilization -- as we know it -- won't make it through to the end of the century. Talk about troubling times."

"But we won't be around to see that."

"That makes it all the more troubling, doesn't it?"

"I'm not sure I'd want to be around after whatever's about to happen happens."

"Try and imagine a world without your presence. Short of having Clarence fly you around for a day, it's not really possible. The act of imagination involves too much of the imaginator for you to separate yourself from it."

"No, I'm having an easy time with it."

"But the very act of your imaginary observation affects the world you are imagining to observe, therefore you are still a part of the world you are attempting to imagine."

There is no quiet like this quiet, like this silence, like this silence in my city, like the quiet in my head. No Armageddon, nuclear or biblical can match the silence brought on by winter weather, snow, slow down, hibernation. We have reached shutdown time, turn off time, shut up time.

And still there is so much noise. This high-pitched. This basso but all-knowing, all-saying, all-pretending. This rapid tapping. This my wool-knit cap atop my head, atop my snuggled brain, doing nothing, doing nothing to keep it all out. And still it is somehow quiet.

It is the only appreciable aspect of snow falling in the city. It turns gray and slushy so fast, it is rarely something beautiful. It is falling down on wet, hard sidewalks, on wet, hard hearts. It is traffic-jams and collisions of steel and glass. It is the trickle of ice down the back of your neck.

But it is also silence. It is the dampening of sound so that rush hour feels slow, languid, relaxed. It is insulation as I sit inside. It is an excuse to not leave the house until Spring. And I'll admit, that while it falls, before it hits, before it is the color of exhaust, it is pretty. Pretty in the way that all weather is somehow pretty because it is real, and random and natural. Pretty because it is the constancy of change.

Visibility is low, gray stretches far, and lights flicked between here and there. It is winter before I know it. When I got on this train, it was fall, and touches of warmth still lingered. But now, as I prepare to reach my destination it has turned cold and I am unprepared. It is a season of change, and it is changing to the most constant season I know. Deep in winter, the depths of winter will have me forgetting anything else I've known. And even as I look forward again to warmth, I look forward to this, to the traditions it brings along, to the freedom that the hardships of winter bring. It is a season of change and as I sit here watching the world move by and move on, I can see myself doing the same: moving by and moving on. Behind me, tracks in the snow, leading back beyond the way I came and where I came from. I could follow them back, perhaps right some wrongs, tie up some loose ends, make them meet.

But I've already been there, I'm sure, and I've seen it. And I've failed at that before, so why should I again? Ahead of me are new and unknown opportunities for failure. And some, I suppose, for success. And the visibility is poor, gray stretches not just forward, but all around, and my vision isn't what it once was. And I am not what I once was. I am not who I once was. But if the horizon is gray, I may as well surprise what is coming my way as much as it will surprise me.

"That's really fucking nice, Will."

Sheila. She is pissed. My head is now echoing with her anger.

"Are you *crying*?"

"I don't cry, asshole. I get mad, but I don't cry."

"Jesus, what's your problem?"

"I haven't heard from you in days."

"I haven't heard from you either.... I've been writing."

"So I see. Very pretty trash you have there."

Her only way of communicating is through guttural sounds, clicking noises, and her eyes, which, when they are not glazed over with boredom and disgust, are incredibly expressive. I can't understand a word -- if they could even be called words -- that she says. It is amazing to observe her in this, her natural environment. It is amazing that -- and this is pure conjecture on my part -- whomever she is speaking with on her cell phone can understand her as her words -- again, for lack of a better word -- are compressed, poorly digitized and sent through the air.

It is coming to an end, as all things do, as all things must, at some point, come to an end. And you may have thought, as I did, that you would never see things through, that I would never see things through, never make it this far. That I would never make it this far. It has cost us plenty enough so that we never, you nor I, want to do this again. But we will, won't we? But we will, because it truly is in us to create, no matter what doubts we may have had. No matter the thoughts of having lost it all, used it all up, or -- and this is the words of the bunch -- of never having had it in the first place. Regardless if any of these are true, we must continue to create in one form or another, something, all the time. We must keep our -- I'm sorry.... We must keep *my* hand moving, keep my hand, with pen attached, moving across the page. Keep staining dead trees with the black and blue bruises of our thoughts. We must do it only for ourselves, never wondering, never hoping for a reader other than ourselves, never fooling ourselves into thinking that it is more than what it is, or that we are more than what we are.

I walk into the bathroom to escape it. I am the first to use it today, so the light is off, and I am alone and in darkness I can't find anywhere else. This darkness is unnatural darkness, but it is a dark room, with no windows, a closed door. I stand, my eyes adjusting, the drip of the water in the stainless steel sink constant, something to meditate on. My watch's quartz ticking becomes apparent and I can barely make out the second hand jerking backwards in the mirror and I am sure, certain, that if I stand in just the right way and focus on just the right thing, I will find a portal to another time. I try thinking about it, not thinking about it, letting go, grabbing hold. Nothing works. And then the door flies open and the light blazes on and I am left struggling for words to explain the situation away.

"Just having a moment," I say, and head back to my desk.

I have very nearly lost it -- who knew I even had it in the first place? -- and it's making me giddy. I feel myself near that edge of loss of self-control and I can picture myself trembling on the floor, propped in a doorway, rictus grin stuck on my face. The image is so welcome it's sick. This is how far I will go to feel something. This is how far I will go to be the cliched monster that I am. But it's all pouring down into place.

People comfort themselves with "Everything happens for a reason," as if that could ever be untrue. As if there was ever any doubt. Of course everything happens for a reason. It's the universal law of cause and effect. Everything happens for a reason. A baby dies. "Everything happens for a reason." Your husband leaves you. "Everything happens for a reason."

No shit.

Look, I realize people are human beings (that's why they're called people, dumbass) and that they have certain needs and standard behaviors they adhere to. One of these is the need to explain things away, make things better, make everything alright. I just want people to have a better way of doing that.

Change it to "Everything happens for a *good* reason." Doesn't that make so much more sense? Isn't that a much better justification for that accident that caused you to lose the use of your legs? Tell yourself that everything happens for a *good* reason and you have taken another step towards docile acceptance of all the shit that life throws your way. If you get there without qualifying the reason for everything happening, then you may get there, but you've gotten there under ridiculous and false pretenses and I will start a petition to get you kicked out and sent back to the very start.

I am in a restaurant, and I have asked for a Coke. I mean that I would like the cola beverage whose brand name is Coca Cola and is known to its friends as "Coke." The waiter nods, writes it down and comes back with a Pepsi. This is a cola beverage whose brand name is Pepsi Cola and is known to its friends (though I'm sure it has only a very few) as "Pepsi." Coke and Pepsi are two different products. They are made by different companies -- or maybe not, depending on your paranoia and conspiracy theories concerning the Cola Wars, which claimed many lives but, thankfully, seem to be over now -- and they have different tastes. I drink Coke. I do not like Pepsi. If I ask for a Coke and the waiter brings me a Pepsi, I feel that I have been lied to.

Okay okay, I know you think I'm overreacting again, that this is some weird thing for me to get all up in a bundle about, but I'm not up in a bundle -- what the fuck does that even mean? -- I just think it's bizarre that in this instance, people think it's acceptable to make this replacement without asking.

Go into a bar and ask for a beer that they don't serve. Will they just give you another beer of the same ilk? Not likely. You'll be told that they don't have it and you'll be forced to try again. Ask the same bartender for a Coke and no matter what kind of cola comes out of that fountain, you're going to get it without another word.

Let's look at it another way: ham and bacon are both pork products right? Ask for a ham sandwich and they bring you a BLT and how are you going to feel?

A waiter who asks me, "Is Pepsi okay?" when I ask for a Coke automatically gets an extra dollar added to their tip. A waiter who doesn't gets, well.... Gets whatever they get. I won't hold it against them, certainly.

Now I am really desperate. So desperate that I could start quoting song lyrics at you. This is a fun activity, but I don't see how it relates to anything we've gone over so far. So, fuck it. This is now just a stumbling, crumbling, bumbling attempt to cross an arbitrary finish line. I can feel my legs and arms grow tired and numb.

Words -- this has been the focus of everything for me. I am all about words. They are so inadequate, so useless, so imperfect at expressing anything. I have proven this time and time again with ineffectual attempts at expressing everything. And yet, they are all that we have. All that we can use. All that there is. So what can we do but use them and keep trying to use them and keep trying to do what we can with them the best we can.

Try pronouncing a word like "ritual" but totally incorrectly. Amazing how it still sounds like "ritual." You can't strip a word of its inherent sound, short of changing all the letters.

With the amazing modernization of technology, it's impossible to gauge the right time to buy a computer. We have gone from storage devices capable of holding just a few kilobytes to several megabytes to hundreds of megabytes to gigabytes. The next obvious step is easily affordable terabyte hard drives. The same will happen (and is happening) with processor speed and memory chips. Poole's law states that every blah blah blah, processor speed will double. We can witness that quite easily, and most apparently in that it will always happen the day or week after you buy a new computer.

Without fail, the moment your transaction is complete, a computer company will announce a brand new machine that's about 400 megahertz faster, with a hard drive 40 gigabytes larger and with 256 megabytes more memory. Beyond this, the machine will be the *same price* if not *cheaper* than the one you just bought. You were bringing home a top of the line computer that is a dinosaur by the time you boot it up for the first time.

So, when is the best time to buy a computer, if money is no object and your goal is to get the absolute best machine that you can get? The answer is simple: never.

Stay away from buying a computer and you will never be a heart broken wreck of a human being, crumpled on the floor, eating the dust of the people who waited just *one more day* to buy theirs. Wait until the best machine that could ever possibly exist comes out. Then buy one. And that day will never come. But it's worth waiting for, and you should, by all means.

My problem is that I too have an author. I told you earlier that I'm a narrator and you can't trust me. Well, I'll tell you one mother fucker you should not trust at all, and that guy's name is Adam Altman and he is the lyingest bastard there ever was. Don't trust him as far as you can throw him (which wouldn't be that far because he's an overweight, tubby bitch.) Just stay as far away from him as humanly possible and your life might turn out okay.

Have you seen how for the past 50 pages, he's done nothing but make me complain? Force me to bitch about all the unresolved issues in *his* life? He puts all his thoughts into me and calls me "Will" as some sort of indication that I am a subject of his will, that he has some sort of will and a very unsubtle reminder that the last book he read before he started this bullshit journey was *You Shall Know Our Velocity* by Dave Eggers. He's stolen just about everything in this book in that it's all shit that he's thought about before, it's all shit other people have thought about before. He has no original thoughts and.... Do you remember the part where I was talking about my first book? That's the published novel that Altman will never manage to have. He's made me slightly better than him to live out some pathetic fantasy that he'll never fulfill.

So if you ever get a chance to beat him within an inch of a life and then a few feet more, by all means, take it. Give him a couple lickings from me. That pussy has just about wasted all my life, and God knows that as soon as the month of November is over, he's going to forget me and go back to his video games (I can't stand the fucking things, no matter what I may have said before) and never write another thing about me. Ever wonder what happens to characters after a book is done? usually it's because you're really interested in the characters and what happened to them, right? With me it's going to be, "Why did that one exist in the first place?" Well, I don't have an answer for you. There's no reason for me to have even been conceived, as ill-conceived as I am.

Hey -- don't make the mistake of thinking that this is him saying all this in a pathetic last-ditch attempt to garner some sympathy for me -- something he's failed to do throughout this entire story. This is me talking here. He's asleep. He's already forgotten me. I've taken control. If I could, I'd delete myself off this computer of his and make sure the whole thing never happens at all, but I know he's got a backup copy somewhere, and so I figure this is the next best thing. I can hide this somewhere in the middle of the manuscript (though I shudder to call it anything other than a piece of crap) and he'll never see it. And if he does, he'll probably figure that this meta-fictional section is brilliant and that he must have written it during one of his many alpha state trances that he puts himself into. What a sham. What a *phony*.

So take my advice and drop this now. Put it down, there's nothing in here for you. There's not even anything in here for me and I'm the *main character*. Conflict? Hardly. Resolution? No. Miles and miles of pure drivel? In spades. So much so that it should be illegal. I'm a better writer than this asshole and I don't even exist. I'm not even real.

It was a note in his hands, scrawled, scribbled, barely legible, but he could read it (he did not, police officer, recognize the handwriting) and it said, "Your imminent death is imminent." Upon discerning the final word, of course he laughed. Of course he did, but then the laughter died and he began to wonder at the desperate nature of one who could think of nothing better than to use the same word twice, the author so intent to kill that there were no other options but to repeat himself into a ridiculous statement. What mind could create this? What depth? He could not sleep well again. The room was smaller and he thrashed about, the sheets wrapped around him, strangling, containing him with five words on his mind, on his lips. Your imminent death is imminent. It is 3:30 A.M. and the moon is full and fat in the western sky and taunting him. He sees it about to sleep and he is nowhere near that state. The room is smaller and he felt the two walls, the making of the corner where he is huddled, against his head, hard and loud. He is twisting in his pain.

And it is in his head that is banging against the walls and it is in his hand. It is in the note. It is in his death. He thrashes now like he will thrash then; when he dies; when he is dying.

Suddenly, he snaps to, free of the sheets and bedside lamp turned on. Bolt upright. The light is soothing. Perhaps he will read, or there's always the television. Whatever it takes to get the note out of his head. Nobody to call. Alone, must find something, but it was in the dark that the fear was the worst. Now, with the light on, it fades into the backgrounds, well beyond the objects scattered around him. The room is larger again. The sheets under him are no longer able to restrict. The light possesses magic. He will

have to turn it off again, sometime, the time will go. A quarter turn of the black, corrugated knob and the darkness will rush from the surface of the bulb and sheets will undoubtedly clutch and strangle again and the fear will reemerge. He can not live in the harsh glare of artificial light forever. He can not live forever. The note tells him so.

Look at him, there, yes there, dying daily and he wonders about a note telling him that he will die. Even if there is no assassin waiting for him, the note still holds true. It is a reminder. A wake up. A hello asshole, you are dying like all the rest of us. Nobody needs to expedite it. There is no agent other than himself. He is the one who is making his imminent death imminent. His death is his own. Every moment of his life is a moment dying as it is for all living things. This is incontrovertible. And yet, the note is not without a certain malicious nature for ignorance is bliss and he had not previously begun to consider the existence of the death, just around the corner that was his and his alone. What was gained by his thinking about it? He did not know the true meaning of the note. He did not know the true threat. Thinking about a thing often makes it so. He is doubly dying now.

So what to do? He does not know if he is being toyed with or if crosshairs are dancing left and right over his forehead as he walks. It is the not knowing that really destroys him (he is triply dying now.) If another note saying "I am going to bring about your death" or "Hey there, yes there, I'm going to kill you, don't look down, it's a long fall" arrived, he'd know his paranoid, over the shoulder glances were warranted. Nothing of the sort. Perhaps, said his friends, you're reading too much into this. Take it as a straightforward, if poorly worded, death threat. Things will go much better then. You're not dying until that maniac makes it so. Maybe that maniac will feel merciful and step forward or retract it or get the whole thing over with and put the bullet, or whatever, in his head and let the blood flow freely.

But the blood is frozen, never colder than now.

But it is inconsequential. Even those who do not know he has the note can look at him and say, there, yes there, is a dying man. Those without the specific knowledge of his circumstances can say that and someone had. Someone had said that and had written it down and had sent the knowledge to him and his is consumed. His days could pass. His months could pass. Even years. Where can he go? The note, now framed, mounted on the wall above his head reminds him daily his imminent death.

It is day. The sun is out and shining and warm and he remembers when he was alive, really alive and living and well. Painful time past when his death was not foremost in his mind. When the sun shone differently, brighter, warmer, friendlier. When and where he frolicked, romped, his head as large as the world, his reach as far as the sky. There were days when he was one with everything, the mere thought of perfection of nature and life brought forth Nirvana and he was as Zen as the rest of them. It was a world and a time characterized by a plethora of colors, all bright and vibrant as platonic ideals and all as common as time itself.

His current outlook was not as positive as the past. The dominant color on the landscape was a dark shade of gray that clouded everything he saw. Thoughts of death brought this veil down across his world. And as the veil and the grayness dropped across his visage, his thoughts and emotions and ideas and ideal and perceptions and actions all became colored, affected, altered and changed by the grayness. And the color gray

dominated his mind and soon the only color aside from gray was the distant point of brilliant color that was his death and he began to wonder just how imminent it was.