



# School

**stories by Meta Knight**

**Contents:**

If You Really Knew Me // 4

The World Is a Beautiful Cat and I Am No Longer MeowMeowMeow // 24

28x32 511s // 65

Literally Crushed under the Weight of Decisions // 85

Existentialism on Prom Night // 92

Mr. T // 109

The Plagiarist // 121

Se in i mina ögon // 124

q.v. pg. 240\* // 225



Two sexy students, a pre-med girl and a film guy, sitting on a futon in the film guy's studio apartment, watching late-night MTV with the lights off. An organic chemistry textbook lies between Molly's Indian-style legs. Judd wants to kiss her.

Molly's like, "I really should study. I thought you said you'd help me study."

Judd's like, "When's your test?"

"Tomorrow."

"I'm sure you'll do fine."

"Well, probably not, actually. I'm failing the class right now."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I need a B on the test to pass the class. I'm going to fail. I hate chemistry."

Judd sips his coffee.

"Yeah, chemistry sucks. Why are you taking chemistry? I mean, it sucks."

"It's not like I want to. My parents are forcing me. It was either pre-med or -law. Like, if I were a film major, my parents would literally kill me."

Molly chews her ponytail.

She chews her hair a lot, Judd's noticed.

Judd has a ponytail too. All film guys have a ponytail, Molly's noticed, and they all wear dark monochromatic clothes—Judd's wearing a black sweater and grey jeans—and all have stylish, un-nerdy glasses and drink lots of coffee. Molly feels underdressed; she's just in a powder-blue UNC t-shirt and old jeans. And she doesn't like coffee. And she wishes her hair wasn't in a ponytail—Judd's using up all the ponytail in the room. She considers untying hers.

"I like your glasses," Molly's like.

Judd's like, "Thanks," and he sips his coffee.

“They make you look smart.”

Judd doesn’t feel smart—he’s failing all his classes.

On MTV a high school girl says, “At Royal Oak High School popularity is all that matters.”

Molly’s like, “Why do you watch MTV? It’s really bad. Aren’t you supposed to stop watching MTV after high school?”

“It’s not that bad. Do you want to watch something else?”

“No, it’s fine. I’m just saying.”

“I mean, college is basically the same as high school anyway, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so. God. Everything’s basically the same as high school.”

On the TV there’s a muscly guy. Below him text says, “Ryan: Jock.” The jock says, “I’m a jock and, yeah, the jocks are definitely the most popular kids in school. We’re on all the sports teams and we like to party and have a good time. I’m on the football team and basketball team and track team, and, yeah, I just like to have a good time.” It cuts to some shots of him lifting weights and playing football and waving to friends in the hall and laughing and having a good time.

Judd’s like, “MTV shows themselves are pretty bad, but they give you a lot to think about. I mean, if you watch them a certain way, they’re kind of interesting.”

On the TV there’s a girl with braces. Text below her says, “Sarah: Band Geek.” The band geek says, “I’m in band and I hate school because people call me mean names and one time I got thrown into a garbage can.” There’s a garbage can in the shot’s background. “People in band generally aren’t considered cool or popular. People think we’re geeks and lame.” Some shots of her playing a tuba and looking lame. Then it cuts to her walking in the hall and some pretty girls

call her a fat slut and a horse-faced whore. The band girl starts crying. Her face is kind of horse-like, Judd submits. But she's not fat. She's actually crying. Judd imagines the jock throwing her into a garbage can.

Molly's like, "I was in band."

"Really? How was it?"

"It was okay. I played flute. It wasn't that bad. My mom made me do it."

There's a skinny blond girl—Jessica: Popular. The popular girl says, "I'm vice president of student council, or 'stu-co.' I'm pretty popular, I guess. I love stu-co. I love trying to make everyone enjoy school as much as I do. In stu-co we plan school events, like the dances and stuff. We're pretty popular, I guess." Some shots of her making posters with other stu-co kids. Some shots of her cheering at a football game and being popular. "There's definitely a bullying problem at our school. People get made fun of just because of who they are. And I don't like it, but I don't necessarily do anything to stop it. Girls are really catty, and they get mad about stuff they think is really important at the time. People spread rumors. I think people judge me because some people don't like school, and so for me to go around and be like, 'Yayyy school, let's all go to the homecoming dance or football game' or whatever, well, some people don't like that."

Next there's a pale girl dressed in all black—Erin: Emo. She doesn't introduce herself like the others: she says she's *labeled* an emo—she doesn't say she *is* an emo—and Judd's sort of impressed by her linguistic awareness and also sort of annoyed because she's clearly what's defined as "emo": straight black hair with side-swept bangs, tight jeans, zip-up hoodie, black Chuck Taylor's—and she really loses him when she claims people make fun of her because she's "different." Some shots of her eating lunch with other emos, who eat at the "outsider" table. It cuts to the jock—"I wouldn't ever like eat lunch with the emo kids or anything. They all wear

black and stuff and have weird hair and are weird. They keep to themselves.” It cuts back to the emo girl—“People don’t like us just because we like a certain style of music and clothes and stuff, and society says you’re not supposed to be friends with people like that, because they’re different.”

Molly’s like, “Say something smart about MTV.”

“What?”

“Like say something film school-y about MTV.”

“Uh.”

Now there’s a shot of the high school from outside at sunset with text saying, “CHALLENGE DAY is a one day program that aims to breakdown cliques and bullying in schools. This is the story of what happened when CHALLENGE DAY came to Royal Oak High School,” and a title sequence starts that includes cheesy alt-rock and archetypal high school images, like a hallway with lockers and a gym and some computers and a skateboard, and there’s generic high school words popping up everywhere, like “Jock” and “Bullying” and “Punk” and “Mexican” (which seems not particularly high-school-related and sort of offensive, Judd notes) and “Cheerleader” and “Freaks” and it all ends on the words

### **If You Really Knew Me**

which is the show’s title.

A McDonald’s commercial comes on.

Judd’s like, “Okay, here’s something film school-y: you see how that title sequence came after we were introduced to the characters and everything? That’s called a ‘cold open.’ They jump right into the show to hook you in, then put the title sequence after. That way you don’t change channels and they can sell you McDonald’s.”

“Makes sense.”

Molly opens her chemistry book. She likes hanging out with Judd. She likes Judd. She glances at him. He’s sunken into the futon, chin to chest, eyes glazy. She considers going home to study. A Progressive Auto Insurance commercial comes on. She tries to study, but it’s impossible to focus on hydrocarbons when the Progressive Auto Insurance girl is saying that drivers who switched to Progressive saved an average of two-hundred dollars!

Molly’s like, “I hate these commercials. The Progressive girl’s sooo annoying.”

“Yeah. But she’s supposed to be annoying. It’s her thing.”

Molly knows more about car insurance than chemistry. She’s going to fail that test tomorrow and her parents are going to kill her.

“You chew your hair a lot.”

Molly spits out her hair. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Molly tries to study chemistry again and after six seconds decides it’s impossible and throws her book on the floor. Judd laughs and Molly laughs and is like, “Fuck chemistry,” and stretches out on the futon.

If You Really Knew Me comes back on. It’s the morning of Challenge Day. The emo girl is driving to school and is like, “I’m kind of nervous about Challenge Day because I don’t really know what to expect.” Then there’s a parallel shot of the jock guy driving and he’s like, “I’m nervous but I’m also excited.” Then inside the school’s gymnasium a smiling woman wearing a red shirt that says “Be The Change” states the goal of Challenge Day: “The goal of Challenge Day is to bring young people together, break down the cliques that separate them, and give them an opportunity to see who they really are inside.” The entire high school filters into the



gymnasium.

Molly's never really watched MTV before and is like, "What's this show about?"

"It's about this anti-bullying program that comes to schools and tries to get kids to stop being cliquey and stuff. I like it. Have you ever seen The Breakfast Club? It's sort of like a reality-TV version of The Breakfast Club."

"Oh. My high school had one of those programs once. Like an anti-bullying and -clique program. This guy came to our school and said if we bully people they'll bring guns to school and kill themselves or something. He mostly talked about that Columbine thing. It was right after that Columbine thing happened."

"Did your high school have a bullying problem?"

"Yeah. God. But doesn't every high school?"

"Yeah. I guess so." When Judd was in high school people called him a faggot. It was probably because he had a ponytail. It wasn't a big deal. He didn't have very many friends.

"Did it work? The anti-bullying program, I mean."

"Sort of. People were nicer for like a week. Then things pretty much went back to normal. Nobody brought a gun to school, though, so maybe it worked."

The reason Judd wants to kiss Molly is he can't sleep ever. He has a prescription for Lunesta, but recently he's stopped taking the pills and started stockpiling them in his bathroom's medicine cabinet. Judd thinks kissing Molly would somehow cure his insomnia, like in *Sleeping Beauty* but with everything reversed—the girl kisses the guy to make him fall asleep, instead of the guy kissing the girl to wake her up. Judd likes Disney movies. He wishes his college offered film classes on Disney movies. Then he wouldn't be failing.

The way Challenge Day starts is the woman in the Be The Change shirt makes a

gymnasium full of students play silly icebreaker games, like “dance with someone you’ve never met” and “go find someone you’ve never talked to and tell them something embarrassing about yourself.” Everyone scrambles to find a partner. The band girl tells someone that one time she peed her pants at a party and it was sooo embarrassing. Her partner laughs. The band girl laughs. There are some shots of other people laughing. Then a shot with just the jock saying, “Yeah, the games were kind of weird. It was really awkward.”

Judd’s like, “Was it like this at your school? I mean, did you play games?”

“No. We just talked about Columbine mostly.”

It feels late.

Molly’s like, “What time is it?”

“Midnight-ish.” Judd can tell the time by what’s currently on MTV.

“Maybe I should go. Like, I’ve got that test tomorrow and everything.”

“Eh. It’s not that late. At least stay until the end of this show. It gets good at the end, I promise.”

Molly’s not that tired and is like, “All right,” and she hopes she fails her test tomorrow and flunks out of college anyway. And if Judd kissed her, that’d be okay.

Now the silly games part’s over. The students are sitting in a circle and the Challenge Day woman is standing in the center with a marker board that lists PRESSURES: Be Skinny, Get Good Grades, Be A Man, Be A Lady, Fit In, etc. Then she draws a triangle and says this is you. She sections off a small part at the top: “This is the part of you most people see. We believe most people are like icebergs: you can only see 10% of them.” Molly’s like, “I’ve heard this before. This iceberg thing.” She thinks it’s kind of trite. The Challenge Day woman says, “We call this 10% the image. It’s the clothes you wear, the music you listen to, the people you hang out with.

The problem is there's still this 90% down here. Nobody sees all this down here. This hidden 90% is where we keep all our real feelings. Sadness. Anger. Love. Our dreams. All this stuff down here is the *real* stuff. And if this stuff's real, what's this 10% up here? That's right. It's fake. The image is fake. Why do we all keep so much inside? What are you hiding from others? How does it feel to be *you*?" Some shots of the students gazing into the gym's hardwood floor. Molly considers how it feels to be herself, which feels weird. The students' floor gaze is the same as her TV gaze. How did they determine it's 90% precisely? she wonders. The TV's ambient blue glow is making everything in the apartment shadowy and flickery at the same time ("chiaroscuro," Judd would call it) and she sort of likes it. It all seems dreamy. Last weekend Molly's mom visited her at school and they got burritos at Chipotle and while they were eating her mom kept reminding her to stop chewing her hair—"Stop chewing your hair, honey" "Honey, you're chewing again"—and kept asking about her grades—"How's chemistry going, sweetie? Did you join that study group, like you were thinking about doing?"—and Molly simply could not stop chewing her hair and, no, she hadn't joined the study group and by the end of the day she was so upset that when her mom finally left she slammed her apartment door and threw a pillow and knocked over a lamp and screamed. The Challenge Day woman's getting real; she's talking about her 90%: she says if you really knew her, you'd know that when she was in middle school she was really close to her sister—they were best friends—but her sister started calling her fat, which really hurt because she was so close to her, so she decided to starve herself and lost forty pounds and become amenorrheic and her parents eventually noticed and took her to the hospital and at one point it was so bad she actually wanted to die; and part of Judd's like, oh come on, you wanted to die just because your sister called you fat? but the other part is like picking up on the pain in her voice—and she speaks with a slate-like flatness that says she

doesn't really care whether people think her story's overemotional or stupid because this is her 90% and it may not be pretty but at least it's honest, damn it; and so it's sort of impossible not to respect her, even if her story is a little sappy, and Judd's kind of starting to hang on her every word and not finding it trite or juvenile at all when she says words hurt and you never really know who people are inside or how you affect them—and yet another part of Judd's noticing Molly's chewing her hair again and is like what's with this girl and the hair-chewing? Judd's only known Molly two weeks. They met in Spanish class. Hola.

Molly's watching MTV at Judd's apartment instead of studying because she'll fail her chemistry test anyway and this way she has an excuse for failing and she's been really stressed and Judd relaxes her. Like yesterday when she was studying she couldn't stop chewing her hair, so to stop she started plucking hairs out one by one, then two by two, and the next thing she knew she pulled out a big clump. It felt good, so she pulled out another clump, and another, and then she panicked and worried she'd be bald in like five minutes, so she called Judd and they went to Surf City Squeeze and got smoothies. Molly has a 3.9 GPA, but it'll drop when she fails organic chemistry and if it drops she'll never get into a good medical school and if she doesn't get into a good medical school her parents will literally kill her. Sometimes Molly imagines herself violently throwing a lamp at her mom. Sometimes Molly dreams about her mom smothering her with a pillow—these dreams start flickery, then turn shadowy. Molly's like, “What's amenorrheic?”

“It's when anorexic girls stop having their period.”

How does he know that? She should know stuff like that. For medical school and everything.

The Challenge Day woman tells everyone to break into small groups, four or five people

each. Everyone sits in small circles. She tells them to sit closer. “Scoot in until your knees touch.” They scoot in. “Close your eyes. Take some deep breaths. If people really knew you, what would they know? What do you carry inside everyday? Does anyone know who you really are? You’re family? Friends? What’s it like at your home? Do you feel loved? When you look in the mirror, do you like what you see?”

Judd finishes his coffee.

Molly’s like, “How can you drink coffee at night? Like isn’t it hard to sleep?”

Judd’s like, “Yeah. I don’t know.”

“When you open your eyes, you’re going to tell the people in your group what they’d know if they really knew you.” Shots of the band girl, emo girl, jock guy, and stu-co girl, opening their eyes. “Finish this sentence: if you really knew me, you’d know that...”

Molly’s like, “This show’s like really intense. I didn’t know MTV shows were like this.”

“Most aren’t. This show’s pretty much the opposite of most MTV shows. That’s why it’s interesting. It’s kind of ironic that this show’s on MTV.”

The band girl says, “If you really knew me you’d know that...people call me mean names all the time, so I hate going to school.” Her voice is really quiet. “And sometimes my parents fight so much I have to sleep in the car. It’s so bad. I have to sleep in the car! And when I got a boyfriend my family started calling me a slut, which, I don’t know why, because I’m good person: I’m in band and get good grades and don’t get in trouble. I don’t understand how I’m the bad person and slut. Last week these guys threw me into a garbage can. And it doesn’t help when girls call me a whore.” She’s crying.

“Ironic?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s sort of hard to explain. Like MTV’s known as pretty much the

epitome of conformity and superficiality, right? I mean, they convince young people that certain music and clothes and whatever are cool and everyone buys into that style. But here this show is telling young people *not* to conform and not to buy in. Here this show is like telling them to have personal integrity. To be true to themselves, or something.”

The band girl gets hugs and a box of tissues. Then it’s the jock guy’s turn—“Um, if you guys really knew me, um, you’d know that throughout my life it’s always been about, hey, get good grades and go to a good college. That was always my mom’s philosophy. My dad was like, yeah, get good grades, but he was more of a sports kind of guy. My parents are very demanding. So I feel like whenever I screw up in school or lose in sports, I fail them as a son. Sometimes I feel like a failure in general. I don’t sleep too much. I just stay up and think about things. And it’s like a downward spiral kind of thing. Like a depression kind of thing. And that’s when I turned to alcohol. I started drinking really heavily. And I really need to stop.” It cuts to just the emo girl—“I would’ve never guessed he had those kinds of problems. I always thought he was so happy and so popular and everyone looked up to him, because he’s on the football team and everything, but now I definitely have some new respect for him.”

Molly’s like, “I don’t know. It doesn’t seem particularly better than most MTV shows. It seems kind of fake.”

“You think so?”

“I don’t know. I guess. It’s like, for one thing, why would a show that’s supposedly against stereotypes introduce all the students *by* their stereotypes—jock, emo, band geek, popular girl. Isn’t that a little ‘ironic’?”

The emo girl says, “If you really knew me you’d know that when I was four or five my parents got divorced and my dad moved away. I feel like he blames me for what happened with

my parents. Like, everything's my fault. It's all my fault, you know? And I feel like he just isn't even proud of me at all. He's really proud of my brother but not me. I feel invisible. I don't think he loves me at all. But I do. I still love him. And I just miss him. My birth wasn't planned. I was an accident. I wasn't supposed to be born. I'm not even supposed to be alive. And sometimes I wish..." She starts crying. It cuts to the jock guy—"I used to think she had a life just like everyone else's and just decided to, you know, wear all black and not talk to the same people I do. But she's not what she appears to be."

Judd's like, "I would argue it only introduces them by their stereotypes to breakdown those very stereotypes."

"I know, I know. But still. And, okay, how about this: so when they do the if-you-really-knew-me thing they're supposed to share something really personal and hard, something that 'nobody would ever guess,' right? But their problems aren't personal and unique and hard to guess at all—they're so typical. Like, I could probably guess each kid's problem before they say it. And, for fuck's sake, they only give them like one minute to spill their heart out, and then it's the next kid's turn already."

Molly pulls out a little clump of her hair and eats it.

Judd literally cannot believe he just saw Molly eat a clump of her hair.

The stu-co girl says, "If you really knew me you'd know that last year my brother died in a car accident. He broke his neck. We were fighting right before he died because of other family issues and I didn't like him for a lot of reasons. He caused my dad a lot of pain. It's rough. Not a day goes by that I don't think about it. The last thing I said to him was really bad, because we were fighting. God, I regret it so much. The last thing I said to him was, 'I hate you—get the hell out of here.' I said it because he was bothering me while I was hanging out with my friends. He

always used to bother me when I was with my friends. Well, I guess he did get the hell out of here.” The jock guy squeezes her hand in sympathy. It cuts to the band girl—“She’s gone through a lot because of what happened with her brother and she just bottles it all up and it’s sad what she’s been through. I never would’ve thought she had those kinds of things going on.”

Judd’s like, “I don’t know. Maybe they are just stupid high school kids, but their problems seem real. I mean, I can relate to them.”

“But that’s exactly my point. You can relate to their problems because their problems aren’t unique at all. What were their problems? Divorced parents, pushy parents, fighting parents, and a dead brother? Like most people have some kind of problem with their parents and at least one dead relative. Like *I* have pushy parents. A unique problem would be trichophagia. Like don’t they know that literally all teens have problems with their parents?”

Judd sips his coffee. Then realizes he already finished his coffee. Then pretends to swallow a sip of coffee. Then wonders what trichophagia is. Then affects a facial expression that says he knows exactly what trichophagia is. Then becomes depressed.

“Your parents are pushy?”

“Yeah. God. Are yours?”

“No. Mine just don’t care about anything. Which seems like it’d be cool. But it isn’t.”

“That doesn’t seem like it’d be cool. Why would not caring about anything be cool?”

“I don’t know.” Judd’s often too tired to care about anything, too tired to do anything but watch MTV. “You’re right. It’s not cool.”

Now the if-you-really-knew-me part’s done, and The Challenge Day woman says, “It’s time to wrap your arms around each other. Let’s give everyone the love they deserve just for being who they are.” Cheesy inspirational alt-rock starts playing. Various shots of people



hugging. Just because the music is cheesy doesn't mean Judd's not finding it all kind of moving. Tonight he's not too tired to care—maybe he's just caffeinated, but he's feeling inspired. He's almost inspired enough to kiss Molly. *Do you feel loved? When you look in the mirror, do you like what you see?* echoes in his head. He imagines himself in his medicine cabinet's mirror. His reflection looks sleepy: the eyes droop; the hair's messy; the skin's sallow. He ignores the reflection, opens the cabinet, grabs a bottle of Lunesta, concentrates on the blue pills inside. The pills' hue is like the current hue of his apartment—they're both a sort of pale electric blue. He wonders if there's significance in this match. In a film class there'd be significance—the professor would say the blue represents melancholic drowsiness or technological artificiality or something. *The image is fake.*

The second commercial break starts. The Progressive Auto Insurance girl is back. The Progressive Auto Insurance logo is blue.

Judd's like, "You know, what you said is probably right. I mean, all the kids problems were a little cliché. Teenage angst isn't very extraordinary. Especially when it's edited into a thirty minute slot by MTV. And it is ironic that each character is cast as a jock or emo or popular kid or band geek or whatever. It totally negates the anti-stereotype message. That being said, I think you've completely missed the point."

An Axe deodorant commercial comes on. An average-looking guy uses Axe deodorant, and suddenly sexy women want to have sex with him. The girls in the commercial make Molly feel unsexy and Judd uninspired. Judd uses Axe deodorant. But not because of the commercials, he tells himself—he just genuinely likes some of the scents, like Ice Mint and Midnight Sky. He's chosen Midnight Sky for tonight, for Molly.

Molly's like, "What's the point then?"

“I don’t know. Well, actually I feel like I do know. But if I say it, it’ll just sound cheesy. I don’t want to ruin it.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to ruin the show for you. You really like it?”

“Yeah. I honestly do. Is that weird? Do you not like it?”

“Not really. It’s okay, I guess.”

If You Really Knew Me is back on. For the last part of Challenge Day the woman says it’s time to hand over her microphone to the students, because she knows everyone’s going to take the lessons they learned today into the halls tomorrow and she wants to know what everyone’s going to do to make Royal Oak High School a better place. “So raise your hand if you’ve got ideas, and I know you’ve got ‘em.” Lots of people raise their hands (and a few people don’t—Molly wonders whether they’re shy or pessimistic). The Challenge Day woman gives the mic to the stu-co girl, who admits, yeah, she used to bully people, and she always felt bad about it, but she like had to bully people because all her friends were doing it and if she didn’t go along with it she’d lose her friends. But now she realizes, well, who wants friends like that anyway? Right? And honestly she feels closer to her group members from today than to her stupid friends anyway. Like most of her ‘friends’ don’t even know that her brother died in a car accident. So the way she’s going to Be The Change is she’s going to stop spreading rumors and calling people names, and she hopes she can remain friends with her group members from today—maybe they’d like to eat lunch with her tomorrow? The Challenge Day woman thanks her and says she’s sure her group members would love to eat lunch with her tomorrow.

Judd considers dropping out of college and becoming an inspirational speaker and traveling across the country to high schools to tell kids the image is fake and the real stuff is inside and they deserve to be loved just for being themselves, and he’d sleep well, knowing he

somehow made a difference, knowing he Is The Change, and he wonders how anyone even gets that job.

“Oh my God, are you crying a little? Was that a tear?”

“What? No. What? Haha.” He wipes his face. “I’m going to make more coffee. Do you want some? Haha.”

“I hate coffee. Can you make tea instead? Do you have any tea?”

“Uh. Yeah. Sure. I think I have some.”

He goes to his kitchen’s cupboard. He opens it and finds like twenty bottles of Lunesta inside. Then he realizes he accidentally went to his bathroom’s medicine cabinet. He tells himself he needs some sleep and goes to the kitchen. When he opens the cupboard in the kitchen he half-expects to find bottles of Lunesta again. Luckily he finds tea and coffee and spices instead. From the other side of the apartment he hears the emo girl get the mic—“So I know people judge me because of the clothes I wear or the way my hair is or the music I listen to or whatever, and people make fun of me just because I’m different, and honestly I just don’t even let it hurt me anymore. But...uh...and...” She stops. The Challenge Day lady says, “So I’m guessing there’s some people in this room that just learned a whole lot about you?” The emo girl nods and snuffles into the microphone. “And I’m guessing those people had no idea about the things you’ve been through.” Another snuffle. “Now, I’m of the mind that if people knew about these things, they wouldn’t hurt each other. So who’s going to try their hardest to look past whatever differences we have on the outside and imagine what people might be like on the inside?” Everyone raises their hand. “So it looks like you have a big team out there.” The emo girl smiles. “Give her a round of applause.” Everyone claps. Judd microwaves two mugs of chai tea. The band girl gets the mic—“Um. So I do get picked on at school. I get thrown into garbage

cans and people call me names and it doesn't help when the girls spread rumors and say I did things with guys and say, 'You're a hoe,' because I have my own problems at home." Judd returns to the futon, two mugs of tea in hand, wisps of steam rising from them and catching the TV's light. "I'm just asking you guys to know me before you judge me, and I have three more years of high school and I just want to enjoy them." She's crying.

Judd's like, "You see, how does that not get you? This horse-faced band geek's crying and telling her whole class she gets bullied and thrown into garbage cans and has problems at home, and all she wants is *just to enjoy high school*—how does that not get you? It gets me." Well, it is kind of touching, Molly admits. The students are real heartbreakers. She's sorry but there's just something about the show in general that rubs her the wrong way. Is it too cheesy or trite or something? Judd asks. No, no. It's just...like, the show feels irresolvable. Irresolvable? Yeah, irresolvable. Or, unresolved, maybe. She doesn't know. Like it sets up a problem, then ostensibly solves it, but the more she thinks about it, the more she realizes the show doesn't really solve any problems at all. Like it's called *If You Really Knew Me*, which implies that by the end of the episode she should 'really know' the kids, but she's not convinced she now really knows this band girl or any of the other kids. Judd sips his tea, listening. Like, okay, Molly continues, the problem *If You Really Knew Me* proposes is nobody really knows anybody, which supposedly results in bullying and cliques and rumors and a generally shitty social atmosphere in high schools. And the solution it proposes is once everyone 'really knows' one another they won't bully or form cliques and the rumors will stop and the social atmosphere will improve. The apparent method for getting to 'really know' someone is to listen to their biggest problem or issue or source of pain or something. It's basically like if you tell someone a dark secret, then they'll really know you. Hence the eponymous if-you-really-knew-me portion of the

episode during which the students say something sad and difficult about their lives. And there's nothing wrong with hidden-pain-sharing and gut-spilling and being real about that stuff—sharing and empathizing with people is great and cathartic and really does help. But she hates to think people are nothing more than their hidden pains. She hates to think that deep down a person's sad, painful parts are what really matters or are somehow more 'real.' She hates to think people are defined, literally defined, by their problems. Is knowing people's sad, painful parts the best way to 'really know' them? She doesn't think so. She thinks that's reductive. It rubs her the wrong way. Like why did nobody finish their if-you-really-knew-me sentence with something happy? Why did it always have to be sad? Why couldn't it have been nice like "If you really knew me you'd know that my dream is to become an astronaut because I'm fascinated with space"? or "If you really knew me you'd know that I love my family and they're the most important part of my life"? Judd really, really wants to kiss her. She guesses that in the end what feels irresolvable is what would she know if she really knew a person? Certainly she'd need to know more than just their personal problems. Simply knowing how terrible someone's parents are wouldn't suffice. Knowing someone has an alcohol problem or dead relatives or depression or anorexia or trichophagia or is bullied and hurt and damaged and full of pain wouldn't mean she really knows them. The sad, dark stuff would be part of what she'd need to know, but it wouldn't be everything, or even the most important thing necessarily. She'd want to know the good stuff too. She'd *need* to, to really know someone. She'd need to know their hopes and dreams and whom they love and happiest moment and most embarrassing moment and favorite color and flavor of ice cream and taste in music and art and whether they believe in God and for what reasons and how many people they've slept with and political opinions and zodiac sign and blood type and shoe size and whether they floss and the last time they cried and if they know any

good jokes and if they've ever like lied awake at night and stared out their bedroom window at the stars (whose twinkly pale blue matches the glow of a television at midnight, the hue of a Lunesta pill) and asked themselves, really asked themselves, why they're even here? Have they ever looked inside themselves, really deep inside themselves, at like three a.m., under a full moon, the sky cloudless and inky, and, as the night passed, tracing the moon's slow arc across the window's rectangular frame, the arc starting in the upper right corner and ending in the lower left, the moon's movement unnoticeable at any particular moment yet evident by its changing relation to the window's frame, hour after hour, and as they were soul-searching and moon-gazing and getting all deep and

"I've done that. I've lied awake at night, with the moon and why-am-I-even-here and everything. I've done that."

Molly sips her tea. Judd sips his tea.

Judd's like, "So if I really knew Molly, what would I know?"

Molly smiles like oh please.

Judd's like, "No, seriously—what would I know, if I really knew you?"

"I don't want to do it. I'm not doing it."

"Okay. That's fine. I mean, I was just—"

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be cagey. God. It's just...like if I told you I'm a trichophagiac and hate my parents, it wouldn't really mean anything, you know?"

"I know. I just like hanging out with you. And I want to know you better. That's all. And I really know what you mean, about lying awake at night, and the moon. I've done that."

"I like hanging out with you too."

Molly bites her bottom lip.

The Progressive Auto Insurance commercial comes on.

## **The World Is a Beautiful Cat and I Am No Longer MeowMeowMeow**

His penis was in her then out her then in her then out her then out her and it stayed out and kinda detumesced. *It wasn't very effective...*

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He was in the University of Kangaskhan Psychiatric Emergency Services waiting room. He was sitting in a chair. There were many other chairs around him in which nobody was sitting.

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:In no particular order:

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He was lying in a twin-sized bed with a level-19 rock-/flying-type pokégirl named Aerodactyl who had long brown hair, brown eyes, and giant wings. He was a level-21 water-/psychic-type pokéboy who had short light-brown hair, greenish eyes, and a squirtle-like shell housing a thin body. His name was Makr.

Currently was the disappointing moment following not very effectiveness. There was silence. It was dark.

‘What are we doing?’ Aerodactyl said quietly.

‘What?’ Makr said.

‘You know what I mean,’ Aerodactyl said.

‘What?’ Makr said, genuinely not knowing what she meant.

‘I mean us. What are we doing? Like, what is this?’

All Makr could think to say was ‘What do you mean?’ again. But he was beginning to kinda know what she meant.

Aerodactyl said some more things emotionally.



Eventually Makr expressed that he desired to be in some sort of sustained romantic relationship with Aerodactyl. ‘Like pokéboyfriend-pokégirlfriend,’ he said.

*Aerodactyl used silence.*

Then she expressed that she really liked Makr as a poképerson and as a sort of friend but that she just wasn’t sure about a sustained romantic relationship and that she didn’t want him to think they were exclusive and that she was sorry if Makr had thought contrarily but this was how she felt.

*It was super effective.*

*Makr became confused.*

He wondered whether she would be saying these things right now, at this particular moment, if his penis hadn’t kinda detumesced mid-coitus.

He wondered it aloud to Aerodactyl in much more oblique terms, like ‘Defense,’ ‘Harden,’ ‘Shell’ and ‘exhausted PP,’ and she responded that he was basically incorrect.

‘I’m just not sure,’ she said repeatedly.

Makr said the phrase ‘misplaced doubt’ repeatedly. He tried convincing Aerodactyl that she did in fact really like him and did want to be in some sort of relationship with him.

‘I just don’t know. Sorry!’ she said emotionally. She was maybe crying.

*Makr used silence.*

He was thinking the timing for this particular relationship-status-determining conversation seemed extremely non-ideal, considering it was occurring immediately post-coitus, and resented Aerodactyl for choosing such a moment to incite the conversation. It felt as if the conversation had come out of nowhere. It felt nonsequitur.

Aerodactyl said that she had been thinking about it for a while and had meant to talk

about it earlier and sorry repeatedly but that they had to have this conversation at some point.

Makr said things to the effect of ‘What’s wrong? Why don’t you like me? You should like me. You’re making a mistake.’

‘I can’t help how I feel,’ Aerodactyl said / Makr thought in the University of Kangaskhan’s Hospital’s Psychiatric Emergency Services waiting room.

Nurse Joy took Makr’s blood pressure, business-like. The cuff felt tight on his arm and hurt in a kinda good way. He watched the dials on the blood-pressure machine. The dials said his blood pressure was low. ‘Good,’ Makr thought. ‘That means I’m calm.’ Nurse Joy asked if he was taking any medications.

‘Sad Heal.’

He was seated in an adjustable chair with a giant leg rest that seemed more appropriate for dental work than psychiatric. On the ceiling were buzzing fluorescent lights and on the walls were a few cabinets and an orange biohazardous SHARPS box with used HMs and TMs in it. ‘Why is that in here?’ Makr thought. ‘Do they have to inject some people when they come in here?’ He felt good he didn’t have to be injected. He imagined a screaming person being strapped to the dental / psychiatric chair and being injected in the arm. After the injection the screaming person calmed down.

‘Any family history of Sad?’ Nurse Joy said.

‘Yes,’ Makr said. Sad was common for Makr’s genus of poképerson. Most poképeople in the Makr genus were vulnerable to Sad after level 16, after they evolved into their adolescent form.

Nurse joy asked Makr’s weight and he responded an embarrassingly low number and she responded, ‘Yeah you do look really thin.’

Makr mentally responded, ‘Why would she say “yeah you do look really thin” like that?’ He hadn’t slept in over 24 hours.

\*\*\*

In the bed at midnight it was dark and cold and Aerodactyl increasingly expressed doubt. She was maybe crying but it was too dark to see. Makr couldn’t understand what was happening. He wondered intensely why he and Aerodactyl had repeatedly eaten dinners together and had gone on walks together and had had sex with each other if all along Aerodactyl wasn’t intending on some sort of relationship. In Makr’s mind (dinners + walks + sex)\*extended-period-of-time = some sort of relationship. The equation apparently worked differently in Aerodactyl’s mind. There was some extra rock-/flying-type variable Makr was missing.

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‘I just don’t want to be led on. Girls always lead me on,’ Makr said to Aerodactyl in Aerodactyl’s dormitory room. They were lying on their sides facing each other on an adjustable futon that was adjusted into bed-mode. On the futon were a few of Aerodactyl’s roommate’s things—socks, a French dictionary, a pokédex. Aerodactyl complained about how her roommate always left stuff around; being rock-type, she hated clutter naturally.

‘I don’t think I’m leading you on,’ Aerodactyl said in a tone Makr interpreted as vaguely uncertain.

Truthfully pokégirls didn’t ‘always’ lead Makr on. He was just thinking of one particular pokégirl who had very recently ‘led him on.’ She’d drastically lowered his Defense rating. Aerodactyl’s dormitory room was uncomfortably stuffy because pokéuniversities were required by law to have improperly functioning heating and cooling. On the walls Aerodactyl had juxtaposed many posters of Hello Meowth with many posters of PokéLady Gaga. Makr liked the

juxtaposition; it seemed nonsequitur. When he asked Aerodactyl about the posters she said, ‘I don’t know; I just like them,’ which Makr thought was really good.

They watched TV and watched funny videos on the internet and listened to music and did other things young poképeople did when together in dormitory rooms. Makr asked to see her iTunes on her computer. She handed him her computer. He scrolled through her iTunes and acknowledged aloud when he saw a song or band he liked. Aerodactyl said she would make Makr a CD with songs she liked on it.

‘Sweet,’ Makr said.

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It sometimes felt as if life itself were ‘leading him on.’

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‘Life is a half-flaccid penis,’ Makr thought. ‘That’s literally what life is: a half-flaccid penis.’

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‘I don’t know what’s wrong with me,’ he thought in the UofK PES waiting room while staring at the floor.

‘Maybe if I can just stop thinking “what’s wrong with me?” for an extended period of time things will just stop being wrong with me all of a sudden.’

He tried intensely to stop thinking ‘what’s wrong with me?’ for a while. After 46 seconds the thought ‘this is stupid what am I doing what’s wrong with me’ occurred to him out of nowhere in a nonsequitur manner.

‘Fuck damn it,’ he thought.

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They lied on the futon awhile, not talking.

The window was open. A cool breeze breezed in. Pidgeottos could be heard playfully using Gust outside.

‘What are you thinking about?’

‘Nothing. I don’t know. What are you thinking about?’

‘Nothinggg. What are *you* thinking about?’

He felt nervous, because of what he was thinking about.

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Makr and Aerodactyl went to college. Makr lived in a giant pokéfraternity house. Aerodactyl came there. They were going to watch an anime called Death Note on Netflix on Makr’s Playstation 3. They would watch it in the living room; they couldn’t watch it in Makr’s room because the internet was broken in there because the night prior somebody stupidly used Cut on an ethernet cable in the basement for no reason, Makr explained to Aerodactyl, feeling anxious. ‘But we can watch it in the living room.’

He carried his Playstation 3 and all its wires and its controller from his bedroom to the living room. He plugged in all the wires to a bigscreen TV. Aerodactyl sat on an old leather couch and watched him. When he turned on the TV the screen was black.

‘Oh...wait,’ Makr said.

He unplugged some wires, replugged them in elsewhere. He changed some settings on the TV. He reset the Playstation 3. The screen was still black.

‘Sorry,’ Makr said.

‘It’s fine,’ Aerodactyl said.

He changed some more settings on the TV. He pressed buttons without necessarily

knowing what those buttons did. He felt like he was under some sort of examination or trial, like Aerodactyl was like ‘let’s see if he can figure this out.’ He felt like if he couldn’t get the TV to play Death Note Aerodactyl would think less of him and like that would be fair.

Then eventually the TV worked. Makr wasn’t really sure what exactly had made it work and didn’t really care. He just felt relieved. He sat on the couch next to Aerodactyl. The pokéfraternity’s living room was very large and the couch was very large and Makr and Aerodactyl weren’t and therefore seemed odd and out of place sitting there, like a Magikarp perched in a tall tree. Death Note was about a highly intelligent semi-psychopathic teenager named Light who killed lots of people and a highly intelligent semi-autistic crime-fighting genius named simply ‘L’ who tried to stop Light. It was very suspenseful. They watched like four episodes.

At one point Aerodactyl said, ‘Yeah this show’s pretty good.’

At various points one of Makr’s pokéfraternity brothers walked into the living room, stopped to see what they were watching or to say hi, walked out of the living room.

In the hall outside the living room Makr heard one of his pokéfraternity brothers say, ‘Is this what happens here now? Makr just watches anime with pokégirls?’ in an amused tone, as if it were funny and didn’t make sense that Makr watched anime with pokégirls.

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Nurse Joy asked, ‘What happened?’—could he explain how he ended up in PES? Makr expressed in unclear words that he’d been worried about using Selfdestruct and had been confused. He explained it calmly, with low blood pressure. He wasn’t afraid to die. He just felt confused. That was all. But a poképerson might hurt themselves in confusion. If he was afraid of anything it was that he wasn’t afraid to hurt himself or die and therefore might accidentally hurt

himself or die or something, he said. 'If that makes sense,' he added. 'It doesn't,' he mentally added.

'Well, you did the right thing, coming here,' Nurse Joy said / other people would tell him later: He Did The Right Thing.

'Fuck,' Makr thought. 'Rare Candy. A bowl of Rare Candy. Why did I think "Rare Candy" after randomly thinking "Fuck"? What's wrong with me?'

Nurse Joy finished her preliminary nursing procedures. She led Makr back to the waiting room. She told him to have a seat and that other people would talk to him shortly. The other people would determine whether he was in danger of using Selfdestruct and needed his Selfdestruct PP surgically depleted via a radical hemispherectomy. Makr looked at her worriedly. She said she was just kidding about the brain surgery.

'Are you thirsty? Do you want water or juice or anything?'

Makr had never been asked if he wanted juice in a waiting room before. It seemed funny. He imagined a full PES menu of juices, sodas, club sandwiches.

'No thanks,' he said.

Nurse Joy left.

Another nurse approached Makr and asked for his left wrist. Makr offered it and she placed an electronic bracelet on it. If Makr tampered with the bracelet or left PES unannounced the bracelet would notify PES, she said. Makr thought, 'This seems unnecessary,' and then felt good about thinking that because it seemed to mean that on some subconscious level he was certain he wouldn't do anything drastic like trying to run out of PES unannounced.

'Good,' Makr thought.

'A Magikarp swimming in a bowl of Rare Candy,' he thought.

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The way Makr first met Aerodactyl was one night at a party at Makr's pokéfraternity house Makr's drunk pokébro Machop emphatically placed his hand on Makr's shoulder and said, 'Yo Makr will you be my wingman? Be my wingman.' Makr had never really been somebody's wingman—he wasn't flying-type—but he said okay. Machop led him over to a big group of people. He stood a few feet away from the group and scouted them out, putting a karate-chop-shaped hand onto his brow.

'There's nobody here,' he said.

He walked over to another group of people. He scouted them out.

'There are no pokégirls at this party what the fuck,' he said.

Makr looked around. It seemed that there were in fact plenty of pokégirls at the party and that Machop was being too selective.

Machop walked over to another group of people. He stood by them without really scouting them out. He kinda just stood there. He rubbed his muscles awhile.

Makr decided he should do something. 'Fuck it,' Makr thought. He felt sorry for Machop. He promptly encountered three wild pokégirls.

'Are you girls cool?' he said.

They laughed because it was a funny opening attack. They guessed they were pretty cool. Machop soon followed.

'This is my friend Machop,' Makr said.

Introductions were made. Everyone told everyone else what they went to pokéschool for and what level they were and other things like that. Afterwards there wasn't really anything to talk about. Machop drunkenly rambled about going to pokébusiness school or something. It was



unclear whether anyone was listening to him. He kept talking loudly. He used Karate Chop in the air a few times and Low Kick once.

Eventually one of the pokégirls interjected, ‘We’re trying to get drinks. But the line’s really long.’

The line for drinks at the bar was indeed really long. Fortunately Makr and Machop didn’t have to wait in the line because they were prestigious members of the pokéfraternity—in fact Makr himself had obtained the Social Badge, which meant he was basically in charge of all parties at the pokéfraternity, he told the pokégirls. He removed the badge from his pocket, showed it to the pokégirls.

‘Cool,’ one of them said. ‘It’s shiny.’

Makr led the pokégirls behind the bar. Unfortunately there he was informed by a pokébro that they were out of plastic cups. They had lots of beer left but no cups in which to put it. ‘Oh,’ Makr said. He turned to the three pokégirls behind him and facially expressed sorry. They didn’t really seem disappointed. They were kinda just standing there. Machop was gone. Makr realized he’d lost him somehow and didn’t really care.

‘Wait,’ Makr said to the pokégirls. ‘I know. Follow me.’ He led them upstairs to a kitchen. There were nice glasses in the kitchen. He gave each of the pokégirls a nice glass, which weren’t really meant for the party—usually only cheap plastic pokémart cups were used for the pokéfraternity’s parties—but he felt like being generous or like impressing them or something. The pokégirls expressed gratitude for the cups, returned to the bar, filled their cups with beer, expressed more gratitude.

‘No problem,’ Makr said.

For a while he hung out with the pokégirls. They drank their drinks and said things.

Naturally Makr wanted to drink and say things with them too, but he didn't feel much like drinking and couldn't think of anything to say particularly, and after remaining silent for what seemed like a noticeably long amount of time he fashioned an escape.

'I think I have to go to the store to buy more plastic cups for the party,' he said. He was kinda in charge of the party, having a Social Badge and all, and therefore responsible for cups' being there for the guests, he explained. Truthfully he didn't really care whether cups were at the party and just wanted a sequitur-seeming reason to abandon three 'pretty cool' pokégirls at a party.

The pokégirls said it was nice to meet him and he said it was nice to meet them too.

*Makr got away safely!*

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It was a bad habit of Makr that when something generally good was happening, like encountering three friendly pokégirls, his brain would resolve to turn him away from the good thing, as if the thing would soon harm him. It was as if he'd used some backwards formula of Repel that, instead of lessening encounters with dangerous poképeople, lessened encounters with friendly, happiness-inducing poképeople and good, enjoyable things in general.

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The waiting room was poképeopleless except for Makr and a nurse behind a desk. It was early morning. He hadn't slept for over 24 hours. There seemed to be an almost comical overabundance of chairs in the waiting room. There were maybe forty chairs. 'What the hell is going on with all these chairs?' Makr thought. He wondered whether there were ever forty people waiting in the PES waiting room at once. 'That would be crazyyy,' he thought sarcastically. Magikarp and Rare Candy. Behind his chair a ceiling-mounted TV was droning the

news. The news currently was that a car bomb had exploded somewhere. The news of a car-bomb explosion juxtaposed with the quietness of the PES waiting room and all the empty chairs and the mental image of a Magikarp with cheeks full of Rare Candy seemed...something. Makr's thoughts often trailed off. They trailed off like a...trail...a dirt trail that got wider and wider until it...

Especially when his status was confused. Which it very much was currently! Which it very much!

The walls of the waiting room were pale blue. The carpet was square-patterned and mostly pale blue. Overall everything seemed almost to emanate a pale blue. Attached to the waiting room were five or six small rooms, all with their doors left open. Each had two chairs inside. Makr wondered whether the doors were left open because of some protocol. The handles on all the doors were weirdly shaped, like a sorta flat banana or smushed baby Ekans, and noticeably smoother than normal door handles apparently so that you couldn't somehow Selfdestruct yourself with them. The shape of the waiting room itself was highly irregular and kinda like a jalapeño pepper, the stem being a hall to the psychiatric hospital proper, the base being the entrance to the waiting room in which Makr had arrived. Makr was trying to analyze the room for some reason. He wondered who designed the room and what they were thinking as they did it. He wondered if they were thinking something like 'how can I design this room so highly confused people won't freak out and hurt themselves in confusion in it?' Or maybe the room designer hadn't cared really and had just said, 'Fuck it, shape the thing like a jalapeño pepper and paint it blue, baby.'

A nurse gave Makr a clipboard and some paperwork to fill out. The clipboard had a metal clip that you could maybe Selfdestruct yourself with. Makr felt annoyed at the inconsistency of

the PES waiting room: they smoothed over all the door handles but then handed you a clipboard with a big sharp metal clip. They set the TV to play distressing news about car bombs. He could design a better PES waiting room: the TV would be off, or it would show Wes Anderson movies; there would be no doors, just rainbow-colored strings of beads in every doorway, like in *Drowzee dens*; on every chair would sit a full menu with special PES juices, sodas, club sandwiches, all laced with tranquilizing drugs perhaps. Everyone would look at the menus while they waited, deliberate over this drink or that one, eventually decide they weren't thirsty after all, wonder if maybe they were hungry instead. Before long they'd lose confusion in an epiphanic moment, order a grilled cheese sandwich! The thought 'what the hell is wrong with me?' occurred to Makr nonsequiturly about ten times per day on average and occurred now. Being able to interpret the thought as 'nonsequitur,' as basically unfounded, helped mitigate it sometimes. Other times the thought's occurrence itself seemed like proof that it was basically founded. At these times Makr would earnestly endeavor to answer the question what was wrong with him, always unsuccessfully, inducing severe confusion. As now. Which it very much!

He wrote his full name, address, birth date, and phone number like three times in three separate places. He signed his name in like four places. He gave the completed paperwork to the nurse behind the desk.

He needed to urinate. That was one thing currently wrong with him. He asked the nurse where the bathroom was and she pointed at the bathroom door across the room.

The bathroom's door was lockless. Inside the lights were off and Makr couldn't find the switch. After feeling the wall for a while in the dark and not finding it, he experimented with levels of cracking the door open to allow in just enough light to piss but not enough light to compromise his privacy. Unable to strike a good balance, he thought, 'Fuck it,' closed the door

tightly, and pissed in the dark. He pissed accurately, without befouling the walls or floor or anything, despite the darkness, and achieved an odd satisfaction from doing so. He washed his hands.

When he exited the bathroom the nurse behind the desk said, ‘The light switch is on the outside,’ and pointed at the light switch on the wall outside the bathroom.

‘Oh,’ Makr said. ‘Why?’

‘We like to have control of things.’

In general he understood the staff’s desire for control in the context of an emergency waiting room but thought that in this particular case it didn’t make much sense and was annoying because you couldn’t really Selfdestruct yourself with a small plastic light switch or light / darkness itself so what difference did it make if the light switch was inside or outside the bathroom? The light switch’s placement was nonsequitur; he’d pissed in the dark for no reason. A bad habit of Makr was he overanalyzed things or thought too much.

It sometimes felt as if he were ‘pissing in the dark for no reason’ in general.

He sat down and waited in the waiting room for a while.

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:In no particular order:

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Makr text-messaged Aerodactyl ‘sup’ sixteen times on sixteen different days. She responded with ostensible interest.

He came to Aerodactyl’s dormitory to eat dinner with her in the dining hall. She swiped him into the dining hall with her pokécard. ‘Thanks,’ Makr said.

Aerodactyl laughed and said, ‘It’s not like it costs me anything.’

Makr felt confused.

As they ate they talked about their futures. Their futures were startlingly undetermined. Makr said he wanted to be ‘a rockstar drummer / novelist.’ It seemed unlikely he would ever be that. Aerodactyl said she was maybe going to study rocks. She liked rocks. Also she was maybe going to minor in Spanish. She liked Spanish.

They talked about the more immediate future, which was more determinable. Makr’s pokéfraternity house was having a vampire-themed party this weekend; would Aerodactyl come?

She would.

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At the vampire party Makr wore a black cape and a spiked choker with a Marowak skull on it and fake blood on his face. Aerodactyl wore pretty normal clothes but all black. Makr was kinda drunk. He’d drank a lot before Aerodactyl arrived because he was nervous about her arriving.

They stood outside by the door for a while. Makr was ‘working the door.’ It was one of the things he had to do for the Social Badge: greet guests and make sure that nobody having too low a level entered the party.

Some poképeople approached the door. Makr said, ‘Hey sup,’ and asked to see their pokécards. They showed him their pokécards and he confirmed they were a high enough level and beckoned them into the party.

A couple more poképeople approached the party. Makr said, ‘Hey sup,’ and they said, ‘Hey.’ They just stood there. They apparently weren’t trying to enter the party immediately. They were just trying to hang out outside or something. Maybe they were about to smoke cigarettes. People often smoked cigarettes outside at pokéfraternity parties.

Makr felt like he should talk to them. He said he liked their costumes. One of them was wearing big black leather boots.

‘I like your boots.’

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘I like your cape. And blood.’

Aerodactyl hadn’t said anything in a while. She was just kinda standing there with Makr by the door. In general she was kinda quiet. Makr was generally kinda quiet too, except in some situations, like parties, where he felt pressure to say lots of things.

An intuitive feeling Makr had had about quiet-type poképeople was that they were generally more thoughtful. His reasoning was that if a poképerson wasn’t talking they were likely busy thinking. You couldn’t really think a lot while talking. Most of the dumbest poképeople Makr had ever met talked a lot.

Makr wanted more blood on his face.

‘Can you punch me in the face so my face bleeds?’ he asked the girl with boots.

The girl with boots laughed.

Senseless things like that were said for a while, mostly by Makr.

Then eventually his shift at the door was over and he went inside with Aerodactyl. They got drinks from behind the bar, cutting the line. They sat on a couch and talked about random partygoers. Makr would point at a random poképerson and say, ‘That pokéguy looks crazy. Look at him.’ He tried to make Aerodactyl laugh. She did occasionally.

Aerodactyl was texting her friend Bellsprout, who was sitting on a couch across the room next to some pokéguy with whom she was trying to get.

‘Let me text Bellsprout,’ Makr said. He took Aerodactyl’s phone. ‘What should I text her?’

‘Tell her “*you* get some”,’ Aerodactyl said.

‘What?’ Makr said.

‘Just do it.’

Makr texted her ‘you get some.’

After a while he wondered whether Bellsprout had first texted Aerodactyl something about ‘getting some’ with him, because of what Aerodactyl had told him to text in response to Bellsprout. She probably had. He felt nervous.

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The first time Makr had ‘gotten some’ with Aerodactyl: Makr was sitting on a futon in his room with Aerodactyl. They had been hanging out for a few weeks. Silence was used. By whom was unclear. Makr expressed that he felt bad or weird. Aerodactyl asked why. Makr said, ‘I don’t know’ repeatedly. Aerodactyl continued questioning him. Eventually Makr said that he felt like Aerodactyl was waiting for him to make a move but that he kept not making moves. Aerodactyl said, ‘Well, what are you going to do about it?’

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In general Makr preferred not to make moves. He more or less preferred to let things happen. This attitude towards life was perhaps too passive, not gung-ho enough. But then maybe it was more understanding, in a profoundly stoic, philosophically sound way, Makr felt half-heartedly, with a sense of dejection.

He pictured an Alakazam lying on its back in bed and staring at the ceiling while idly telekinetically bending spoons on its stomach. After a while the Alakazam got bored and fell asleep. He imagined the Alakazam might feel similarly to him.

\*\*\*



After a wait that seemed unprecedentedly long, a white-coated Professor-Oak-resembling doctor approached Makr and said he would see him now.

‘Okay,’ Makr said.

He followed the doctor into one of the small rooms with two chairs, sat in one of the chairs. The doctor closed the door behind him. Between the chairs was a small table atop which sat a box of Kleenex.

The doctor said that he had received preliminary explanations from the nurses about Makr’s general situation but would like Makr to try—if he could—to explain ‘exactly what has been going on’ and ‘what they could help him with.’

The questions were entirely fair and made perfect sense in context—Makr very much wanted to answer them aptly, wanted to be quite cooperative with the doctor, who seemed *prima facie* to be a very nice man, perhaps because of his uncanny Professor Oak resemblance—but as he mentally tried to prepare answers he couldn’t help feeling their utter futility. What had been going on and what could they help him with? Nothing really. He had been attending school, sleeping, eating fruits and vegetables, occasionally partying, participating in extracurricular activities, doing things people his age and with his circumstances tended to do. He was a young, physically healthy, prestigious-pokéuniversity-attending, relatively socially successful, decently financially secure, recently romantically prospective poképerson. Who somehow nevertheless still felt exceedingly Sad alarmingly often. There were no apparent good reasons for his feeling Sad, but even in full comprehension that there were ‘no good reasons for it,’ the feeling persisted, seemed to strengthen even upon being comprehended as incoherent and completely arbitrary, like a level-23 Ghastly that only got scarier and evolved into a level-36 Haunter who attacked you with Nightshade when you told it, ‘Go away! Ghosts aren’t real!’

‘The arbitrary nature of the universe,’ Téó Lin, an author Makr liked, said online somewhere.

‘I just feel really bad very often,’ Makr said.

The doctor asked if he could describe the bad feeling more.

‘Like all my cells in my entire body are nauseated and want to throw up but can’t,’ Makr said, paraphrasing another author he liked who had had severe depression and had Selfdestructed. ‘Or like I have every bad status effect at once. Freeze, Poison, Sad, Burn, Paralyze—all of them.’

The doctor nodded. He wrote things on a notepad. He seemed to understand Makr, which was good in general, but his understanding seemed not to predicate Makr’s feelings’ changing.

\*\*\*

Whenever he was with Aerodactyl Makr made a sustained conscious effort to say a lot of things. He hadn’t said enough things to prior pokégirls, he’d kinda determined. He maybe didn’t say enough things to people in general. It was important to say things. Quietness was only good to an extent.

He and Aerodactyl were in his room. The conversation had noticeably died. Makr pointed at a jar of péanut butter on a shelf and asked Aerodactyl if she wanted some péanut butter.

\*\*\*

On 11/11 Makr was born. His birth date was notable because it was 11/11, which was notable because it was all 1s. Having a birthday with interesting numbers was preferable to having a birthday with random, arbitrary-seeming numbers. In 2011 Makr’s birth day was 11/11/11.

\*\*\*

Makr's pokéfraternity threw a date party. Makr invited Aerodactyl to it and she accepted.

At the date party there weren't very many poképeople. Makr's pokébros weren't very good at encountering pokégirls and many of them were unable to find dates and many of those unable to find dates preferred not to attend the date party. Makr's pokéfraternity was sorta the antithesis of pokéfraternities. It was a pokéfraternity for people not cool enough—or too cool, optimistically—for all the other pokéfraternities.

Makr apologized to Aerodactyl for the relatively low number of guests at the party. She shrugged.

The drink table was well stocked for a decently attended party and overstocked for the presently occurring one. There were like thirty big bottles. Makr asked Aerodactyl if she wanted a drink. She did. She wanted Makr to make her something. Makr felt overwhelmed by the number of drink choices and didn't know what to make for her. He asked one of his pokébros and his date if they had any suggestions, which they did. They made a drink. Aerodactyl drank it and said it was pretty good.

Getting Aerodactyl's drink had taken maybe five minutes, and afterwards there seemed suddenly to be literally nothing to say or do. Makr and Aerodactyl just kinda stood by the drink table for a while. It seemed much of Makr's life was taken up by just kinda standing or sitting somewhere without really doing anything, and it seemed there wasn't any particular way for his life to be otherwise. Things couldn't be interesting and exciting all the time. More often they were boring and inconsequential.

Makr pointed at some people and asked Aerodactyl if she wanted to talk to them. She shrugged. He asked if she wanted to go into a new room. She shrugged. He asked if she was just not going to say anything all night. He asked if she wanted him to shut up. Her eyes went askew

and wet. Makr felt bad. He'd said something wrong. She was kinda crying.

'Do you want to go sit down somewhere?' Makr said.

She nodded.

They went to the living room, sat on an old leather couch. Makr scooted close to her.

He needed to say something, he felt, but, being quiet-type, he had trouble finding words.

\*\*\*

'Do you ever think about using Selfdestruct?' the doctor asked Makr.

Makr thought about using Selfdestruct. But he needed to say something more specific.

'I literally think about it, but I don't actually want to use Selfdestruct. I'm not going to use it, but I like thinking about it. If that makes sense. But I feel anxious when I think about it.'

'And what do you think about, when you think about it?'

'I don't know.'

He literally didn't know, but the doctor seemed to want more of a reply, so he continued:

'Usually if I see a tall building I will imagine jumping off it. And I'm not flying-type, so of course I couldn't use Fly.'

'Anything else?'

'Exsanguination.'

'And how would you exsanguinate yourself?'

'I don't know. With a big knife? With Cut?'

'And do you have a big knife? Have you learned Cut?'

'No? I mean there are big knives in my home's kitchen but it's not like I have one set out for exsanguination. And I never used the HM for Cut, so I don't know how to Cut.'

The doctor seemed to understand.

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‘Will you punch me in the face so my face is bloodier?’ he said to the pokégirl wearing boots at the vampire party.

\*\*\*

Ivysaur couldn’t sleep. He was thinking about a fight he had had with a pokégirl named Nidorina. During the fight Nidorina had inflicted him with Insomnia, and the status effect had carried over into the night.

Ivysaur used Wall Punch and hurt his hand.

He got out of bed.

Makr said to the doctor that if he Selfdestructed some people would get the status effect Upset, and he didn’t want people to get Upset.

Ivysaur drove his car around awhile. Eventually he felt calmer. Insomnia went away. He returned to bed and slept.

‘I love life but life has a boyfriend,’ the singer of Say Anything, a band Makr and Ivysaur liked, sang.

Makr thought it was a good metaphor.

Makr and Ivysaur were in an émo band together. Makr played drums; Ivysaur sang and played guitar. Makr told the doctor about his hobbies: drums, reading, writing.

‘What does any of this have to do with anything?’ was occasionally thought.

What did Hello Meowth have to do with Pokélady Gaga? What did pokémon have to do with.

‘The arbitrary nature of the universe,’ Téó Lin said online somewhere.

*Arbitrare*: to think, judge, consider. Latin.

‘Ew why would you take Latinnn,’ Aerodactyl said to Makr when he told her he took Latin. Aerodactyl liked Spanish.

\*\*\*

The doctor who understood said he wanted Makr to talk to another doctor to see if she too understood. If the two doctors understood the situation in the same way, Makr could probably go home.

Makr waited in the waiting room for the next doctor.

A screaming woman entered the waiting room with two nurses. The nurses immediately led her into one of the smaller rooms with two chairs. The room’s door shut. With vague interest Makr listened to the woman’s screaming and nurses’ talking muffled from behind the door. Maybe the screaming woman would have to be injected.

Then suddenly the other doctor was standing in front of him, shaking his hand, introducing herself.

‘Hello.’

\*\*\*

Ivysaur was looking at things on the internet in bed. He lived in the same pokéfraternity as Makr. He texted Makr about going to buy a box of wine from the pokémart. Ivysaur wasn’t a high enough level to buy wine. Valentine’s day was tomorrow and he wanted to give Nidorina a box of wine. Makr texted back that he was tired and didn’t want to go buy wine. Ivysaur expressed disappointment. He looked at more things on the internet.

Later Makr entered his room.

‘Sup?’ Ivysaur said.

‘Do you want to go get that box of wine?’

‘Fuck yeahhh,’ Ivysaur said, glad at Makr’s change of heart. He clicked things on his computer.

Makr kinda just stood there for a moment. His eyes got kinda wet.

‘I feel like I’m going to cry,’ Makr said.

‘What? Why?’

Makr tried very intensely not to cry but then started crying.

‘Are you okay? What happened? Do you want to sit down or something?’

He shook his head no. He expressed that they should just go.

‘Let’s just go to the pokémart.’ That was the plan.

‘Life goes on,’ Robert Frost the famous ice-type poet said. He said everything he knew about life could be summed up: ‘Life goes on.’ Which to Makr meant you don’t not go to the pokémart to buy a box of wine just because you’re randomly crying all of a sudden.

‘Do you want me to drive or?’ Ivysaur said.

Makr gave Ivysaur his car keys.

Ivysaur drove.

‘What happened?’

‘Nothing.’

His crying got heavier. He was kinda hyperventilating.

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The second doctor asked how Makr was feeling.

‘Pretty bad,’ Makr said.

\*\*\*

‘I used to have anxiety attacks,’ Makr said to Ivysaur between sobs. ‘I feel like I might

have one right now.'

'Hey, don't worry about it,' Ivysaur said.

Makr hyperventilated. His face went numb. He cried intensely. Ivysaur put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, steered with his other hand.

'Sorry,' Makr said.

'Don't worry about it. You don't have to apologize.'

'Fuck damn it,' Makr thought, 'I don't want to Selfdestruct.' He made weird choking sounds, kinda like a Graveler. He put his palms in his eye sockets. His nose was dripping snot. Ivysaur squeezed his shoulder. Makr thought, 'If I'm able to genuinely think "I don't want to Selfdestruct" does that mean I am constitutionally unable to Selfdestruct? I hope so.' But whence the uncertainty? Thinking 'whence the uncertainty?' made him cry harder. Thinking things while crying always made him cry harder. Ivysaur said, 'Hey, you're the smartest guy I know. You're the smartest guy I know. It just sucks because being smart has nothing to do with being happy.' Makr didn't feel particularly smart, especially now. He wondered why Ivysaur said he was smart, especially now.

Eventually Makr felt slightly better. He was breathing more slowly. He sniffled sporadically, like he'd just been hit with a Venamoth's Stun Spore. His chest kinda hurt.

'Oh fuck I forgot my pokécard,' Makr realized. 'I left it in my room.' They needed his pokécard to buy wine.

'It's fine. Do you want to just go back? We don't have to go to the pokémart.'

'No, I want to go to the pokémart. Let's go back and get my card and then we can go.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah.'



Ivysaur looked at Makr. Makr's face was red and wet but he had sorta stopped crying.

'Okay then,' Ivysaur said.

They drove back to the pokéfraternity house. Makr went inside, got his pokécard, returned to the car. They drove towards the pokémart again. While they drove Ivysaur talked about Nidorina. Makr was glad. He was glad Ivysaur was talking. In some situations it was important to say things, even if they were dumb things about a pokégirl for whom you wanted to buy a box of wine. Ivysaur was explaining about the box of wine: 'You see, she wanted shoes, so I'm going to put the wine in a shoe box. Genuisss, right?' It was a good trick in Makr's opinion. He laughed kinda. Ivysaur was the smartest person Makr knew. Ivysaur did kinda bad academically but he seemed to understand some things in a way other people didn't, like Sad. Makr felt he didn't need to explain to Ivysaur why he had just randomly cried, not because Ivysaur knew the reason Makr had cried but because he understood the crying in itself *eo ipso prima facie*. Makr took Latin at school. Latin had nothing to do with anything.

Ivysaur parked. They went inside the pokémart. It was really fluorescent and cold inside and smelled like Cloysters. Makr's head hurt. They walked over to the alcohol section. Ivysaur looked at the different wines for a while, eventually pointed at a box of red wine. Makr took it from the shelf. Ivysaur gave him some cash.

'Okay, I'll go pay for it. Meet me outside?'

'Yeah.'

Makr took the box of wine to a self-scan register, scanned it, showed his level-21 pokécard to a pokémart employee, put money into the register.

In the parking lot Ivysaur expressed gratitude.

'No problem.'

There was a gas station next to the pokémart. Ivysaur pointed to it and said, ‘Do you want a slushie?’

Makr expressed uncertainty regarding his desire for a slushie.

Ivysaur expressed, ‘Come on—I’ll buy you a slushie.’

\*\*\*

‘Do you want a slurpee?’ Makr said to Aerodactyl as they walked to the pokéforest. A slurpee was a slushie sold at a different pokémart than a slushie.

At the 7-éleven Makr bought Aerodactyl a slurpee and some gummi Tentacools. Summer was arriving. It was hot outside, sunny, dry. Things were maybe getting better.

‘Remember to get the weather in your damn book—weather is very important,’ Ernest Hemingway the rock-type writer said. ‘Okay,’ Makr said. When Makr was a child his family went on a vacation to Cinnabar Island, where Hemingway had lived. They visited Hemingway’s old house. In the house were many deformed, six-toed Meowths, which Makr’s family enjoyed. Hemingway Selfdestructed.

Recently more poképeople were Selfdestructing, statistics said. It wasn’t just a Voltorb phenomenon anymore. Concern was resulting.

Makr and Aerodactyl held hands and slurped their slurpees loudly like Lickatungs as they walked to the pokéforest. In the pokéforest Pidgeys were chirping and Butterfrees were flying around freely and ever so smoothly like butter and everything smelled like tall grass and pine trees. For Makr things were now basically good. He had a slurpee in one hand, a pokégirl in the other. Eventually things would not be this good, probably, but for now they were.

They walked down a trail through the pokéforest to a river. Next to the river were many benches. Many poképeople were around, sitting in the benches and on the tall grass. One

pokéboy played an acoustic guitar. In the river some Farfetch'ds swam lazily. Makr and Aerodactyl sat on a bench. They talked a little. Makr opened the bag of gummi Tentacools, ate a few.

‘Do you want one?’ he asked Aerodactyl.

‘No.’

He gently placed the gummi Tentacool on her thigh.

She let it sit there a moment, picked it up slowly, ate it.

‘Want another one?’

‘No.’

He put another one on her thigh.

‘Oh my god,’ she laughed. ‘Stoppp.’

‘Okay, okay.’

But before long he pretended he was going to put another on her thigh. She laughed. ‘Stoppp.’ She hit him playfully with her wing.

The bench they were sitting on was the bench Makr had napped on the night before he went to the UofK PES waiting room. That night he'd been unable to sleep, had had a sort of Insomnia, so he walked to the pokémart and bought an orange soda. It was like 3 a.m. He walked around his pokéuniversity's campus, drinking the soda. He stood on a bridge and watched cars drive underneath him. The air was foggy and cool. Spearows ate loose trash all over the ground. He walked to the pokéforest. It was very dark and hard to see. Weedles could be heard Weedling. He followed the trail to the river carefully. As he walked he heard a rustling in the bushes and trees lining the trail and automatically feared a Team Rocket serial killer was following him, which he recognized was an irrational fear but felt nevertheless in the same way he recognized

his Sad as irrational but felt nevertheless. Down the trail he could see a blue light between some trees. The blue light was an emergency phone the pokéuniversity had placed in the pokéforest to combat Team Rocket. Makr focused on the light, continued walking down the trail. His eyes were adjusting to the dark and it was now easier to see.

When he reached the emergency phone he considered using it but didn't.

He approached the river. The water was black. The flow of water was loud. It sounded like a Blastoise using Hydro Pump. He kinda just stood by the river awhile, sipping his soda.

When he finished his soda he threw the empty bottle in the river, watched it float away.

'What would happen if somebody saw me here?' Makr worried. But who else would be in the middle of the pokéforest at like 4 a.m.?

He sat on the bench he would later sit on with Aerodactyl. Then he lay sideways. Then he slept intermittently for like two hours. Between sleep he considered maybe spending the whole night in the pokéforest.

But then instead he got up and walked out of the pokéforest. The sun was beginning to rise. The night's fog was dissipating.

He felt hungry.

He walked across campus, towards downtown. The streets were empty except for the occasional early morning jogger.

'I don't know how much more of this I can take,' Makr said aloud to himself.

'You're fine,' he said.

'I am, I am, I am.'

Downtown he entered a greasy diner famous for its Drowzee hash browns on which they put feta cheese, onions, tomatoes, and green peppers. Makr ordered these hash browns and a

coffee. He ate it while thinking ‘last supper’ confusedly and considering drastic things to do after finishing.

There were two old men in the diner, reading newspapers. They were fat and bearded, looked like truckers. With these men the waitress was extremely jovial in a way Makr interpreted as professional and they seemingly interpreted as ‘we are her favorite customers.’ Makr watched the maybe truckers curiously, and they occasionally caught him staring. They didn’t seem to mind his staring, though, being fat and bearded as they were.

He finished three refills of coffee before finishing even half of his hash browns. His stomach hurt. The hash browns suddenly seemed incredibly unappetizing, nauseating even. He’d recently lost weight; food was getting harder to eat. His stomach had maybe shrunk.

He left the diner and a large tip. It was fully morning now. The sun beamed brightly. He walked across campus back to his pokéfraternity house. He went to his room, lay in his bed.

He couldn’t sleep.

‘Fuck,’ he thought. ‘What the fuck.’

After a while he got out of bed.

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‘You need to do something,’ Makr’s family told him, referring to his Sad status. ‘You Need To Do Something.’

‘I’m trying,’ Makr said.

\*\*\*

In his wallet was a card with the phone number for the UofK’s PES. He called the number.

He said some delirious, sleep-deprived nonsense into the phone, like ‘I’m confused; I’ve

been thinking about Selfdestruct; I have many adverse statuses, like Sad and Insomnia and maybe Freeze too. I just feel unsure in general.'

The PES phone operator got him to agree to give the phone to one of his pokéfraternity brothers and to wait with him.

Into the phone Makr's pokéfraternity brother said, 'Yeah, okay,' and other things like that awhile. He gave the phone back to Makr. The PES phone operator asked Makr some irrelevant-seeming questions about his major and family.

Soon a poképolice car arrived and two poképolicemen felt Makr's pockets for weapons and then drove him to the UofK hospital.

While they drove they asked Makr what his major was, if there were wild parties at his pokéfraternity, and if he often went to UofK football games. Makr answered politely, mostly expressing 'I don't know.'

He looked out the car window at some tall grass. He felt he'd maybe made a mistake by calling the PES hotline but also felt 'whatever.'

\*\*\*

In the waiting room Makr texted Ivysaur, 'I think they're going to call you soon. Tell them I'm fine, because I am.'

A little earlier they'd asked Makr if there was somebody they could contact, like his parents. He'd said they could contact Ivysaur, not his parents.

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'Ivysaur is coming to pick you up,' the second doctor told Makr in the waiting room.

'Oh,' Makr said. 'Good.'

\*\*\*

Summer was in full swing. Makr and Aerodactyl went to an elementary school playground and swung on some swings fully. They climbed on a playset that looked like the S.S. Anne. After that Makr wanted to go on the seesaw, but Aerodactyl didn't want to go on the seesaw, so they just sat on some dirt underneath a tree.

'I used to come here at the beginning of the semester,' Aerodactyl said.

'Really? That's cool.'

She was digging a small hole in the dirt with a twig.

'Yeah. I'd sit on those benches over there and write poetry and just be a loner and stuff. And ride my bike around this neighborhood sometimes.'

'Sounds sweet.'

'Yeah it was pretty sweet, I guess.'

Makr grabbed a twig and began digging a hole in the dirt too.

Aerodactyl liked dirt. She was taking a class about dirt next fall and was excited about it. Makr said it was funny she was excited about dirt.

'Hey shut up—it's going to be sweet,' Aerodactyl said.

Makr thought about her writing poetry on a bench under a tree next to an elementary school playground and 'being a loner.' He thought about the night he met Aerodactyl. After he'd left Aerodactyl and her friends to go buy more plastic cups for the party he didn't actually go buy more plastic cups for the party. He just stood in a different room at the party and idly chatted with random partygoers for like an hour. He maybe went to the bathroom. Then he went to the dance floor. It was dark and damp. Bass-heavy pop music was playing. Lots of sweaty poképeople were dancing. Makr walked into a corner, away from the sweaty crowd. He didn't really feel like dancing. He just felt like watching. He found Aerodactyl in the corner. She was

‘being a loner,’ not dancing with her friends, standing with her wings folded to the wall.

‘Hey,’ Makr said.

\*\*\*

Makr was leaving in the morning. He was going on a trip with Ivysaur and other people. Their émo band was going to play émo music in far away places: Celadon City, Lavendar Town, Indigo Plateau. You couldn’t make this shit up. Their band was named after a flying-type pokéattack: [Brave Bird](#).

But tonight he was in his room with Aerodactyl, sitting on the floor, eating pizza and drinking strong strawberry beer.

‘Want to listen to one of the bands we’re going to play with?’ Makr said.

‘Sure.’

Makr played a ‘[The World is a Beautiful Place and I Am No Longer Afraid To Die](#)’ song on his Toshiba laptop.

‘I love this song,’ Makr said. He was kinda drunk.

The song went:

*Lying on our backs on the pavement*

*Let there be light*

*You opened our eyes*

*The apple tree is an open casket*

*Lying on our backs on the pavement*

*Let there be light*



*Let it be bright*

When the song finished Makr played it again.

*Lying on our backs on the pavement*

*Let there be light*

The melody was slow, sad, sweet, like an Articuno flying around on a cloudy night.

Their stomachs were full of pizza and strawberry beer. Makr kinda rested his head on Aerodactyl's shoulder. He felt good. The thought 'what's wrong with me' hadn't occurred to him in a while. It would occur eventually, but it hadn't in a while.

'Can we send each other lots of texts while I'm gone?' Makr said.

Aerodactyl laughed. 'Of course.'

Makr suggested they send each other [poems via text messages](#). Aerodactyl expressed uncertainty at first because she didn't like sharing her writing. Makr expressed, 'Come onnn.' Aerodactyl agreed to send him poems via text messages.

\*\*\*

Maybe the second or third time Makr hung out with Aerodactyl he read a bunch of poems she'd written in a creative-writing class. The poems were generally sad. A couple poems seemed to be about a pokéguy upsetting her. One of the poems alluded to Sylvia PokéPlath. One of the poems was about her meeting a new guy at a party. 'He was nice,' the poem said.

'I like this one,' Makr said about the poem. It was the most optimistic.

'Well that's funny, because...'

She stopped.

Makr looked at her. 'What?'

‘Nevermind.’

‘Why is it funny?’

‘Nevermind.’

He asked why a few more times, eventually stopped asking.

\*\*\*

‘I am, I am, I am,’ Sylvia PokéPlath said in rhythm to a heartbeat in *iambic meter*. Sylvia PokéPlath Selfdestructed.

\*\*\*

The émo band ‘The World is a Beautiful Place and I am No Longer Afraid To Die’ were notable because of their very long, conspicuous name.

Initially Makr thought ‘The World is a Beautiful Place and I am No Longer Afraid To Die’ was a stupid name but it grew on him when he thought about it more.

At first he thought the name nonsequitur: how did the world’s being a beautiful place make you no longer afraid to die? Then he thought the name sequitur: the world’s beauty seemingly offered you some sort of profound, Rare-Candy-like reassurance against death. Then he wasn’t sure one way or the other.

Regardless of the logical connection between the two sentences, he felt that he could he agree with each independently and that that was enough.

\*\*\*

A clearer nonsequitur was when ‘The World is a Beautiful Place and I am No Longer Afraid To Die’ made patches and shirts with a picture of a cat on it that said, ‘The World is a Beautiful Cat and I am No Longer MeowMeowMeow.’ People thought the patches and shirts were cool.

\*\*\*

Nonsequitur meant ‘it does not follow’ in Latin.

\*\*\*

‘Well, actually, because I kinda wrote that poem about you.’

‘No way!’

‘Yep.’

‘Ahhh no wayyyy!’ He couldn’t help himself. A pokégirl had never written a poem about him before.

\*\*\*

Ivysaur entered the waiting room. He stood near the entrance and looked awkwardly around for a moment, waited for some sort of instruction from a nurse perhaps. Then he saw where Makr was sitting and just walked over and sat next to him.

‘Hey,’ Ivysaur said.

‘Hey,’ Makr said.

They sorta looked at each other a second.

‘Don’t worry—I’m fine,’ Makr said. ‘Seriously.’

They sat quietly awhile.

Eventually Ivysaur said, ‘So can we just leave or?’

‘I think we have to wait for some doctors to talk to us or something.’

‘Oh.’

They sat quietly awhile. It seemed much of Makr’s life was taken up by just kinda standing or sitting somewhere without really doing anything, like a Snorlax, and it seemed there wasn’t any particular way for his life to be otherwise—no magic Poké Flute to change things.

Ivysaur said something about the misshapen door handles.

‘Yeah I don’t know,’ Makr said.

Eventually some doctors came and talked to them.

The word ‘eventually’ seemed able to sufficiently predicate / explain anything, any sort of transition of states, Makr thought: ‘Eventually this happened. Eventually that happened.’ And so on. ‘Life goes on,’ Robert Frost said. ‘Eventually,’ Makr added: ‘Life goes on, eventually.’ The doctors, Ivysaur, and Makr had an ‘exit meeting’ together in one of the rooms with two chairs. They came up with a plan for Makr, involving TMs, HMs, and behavioral suggestions. Ivysaur acted solemn and professional in response to the plan, nodding his head reassuringly and saying ‘yeah’ repeatedly. Makr acted likewise. Eventually the doctors seemed to trust Makr would get home safely, without Selfdestruction, and he and Ivysaur left.

In Ivysaur’s car it was hot and stuffy.

Ivysaur said, ‘Are you hungry? Want to go get Thai food?’

Makr laughed, feeling nonsequitur and the ‘arbitrary nature of the universe,’ and expressed he did want to go get Thai food. Ivysaur and Makr both really liked really spicy food. It was a main part of their friendship. The other main part was émo music.

\*\*\*

Makr and Aerodactyl were going to go to the pokéforest to have an intense conversation about the status of their relationship or lack thereof.

Makr went to the pokémart and bought a cup of cubed watermelon. He walked over to Aerodactyl’s dormitory, snacking on the cubed watermelon in transit, which was juicy, cold and tasted good, for the day was hot and dry and he was about to have an intense, relationship-future-determining conversation.

Outside Aerodactyl's dormitory he texted Aerodactyl he was outside Aerodactyl's dormitory and Aerodactyl came outside.

'Hey,' Aerodactyl said, waving her giant wings gently.

'Hey,' Makr said. 'Do you want some watermelon?'

'No.' She laughed kinda, at the watermelon.

They started walking towards the pokéforest.

During the walk Makr asked Aerodactyl if she wanted some watermelon repeatedly, to which always she replied no. He didn't know what else to talk about besides the watermelon. Nor did he know what to talk about when they arrived at the pokéforest, sat down on some tall grass, and tried to have an intense conversation. Nor did Aerodactyl. 'I don't know,' Aerodactyl and Makr said to each other a few times. They said a few other things. Eventually they decided they would continue being just some sort of friends and walked home.

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Lying in Makr's twin-sized bed, Aerodactyl asked whether Makr still wanted them to be pokéboyfriend-pokégirlfriend, to which Makr said he did.

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'In no particular order,' people sometimes predicated things with.

Everything happened, but in / with 'no particular order.'

Was that what was meant by 'the arbitrary nature of the universe,' 'nonsequitur,' and other similar words?

'Eventually a particular order will strike me, perhaps after more experience, at a higher level,' Makr philosophized aloud alone in his room one night, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, idly wobbling back and forth on his curved shell. 'Until then....,' he mentally added, his thought

trailing off. Eventually he fell asleep. Eventually you always fell asleep.

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The Thai restaurant was closed but would be open in fifteen minutes, so Ivysaur and Makr decided they would wait. They sat on a nearby metal picnic table.

Ivysaur talked about Nidorina awhile. He wasn't sure he wanted to talk to her anymore. Sometimes she didn't really seem to care about Ivysaur. At least she didn't really seem to care in a specifically romantic way Ivysaur wanted her to.

'I don't know. I think I'm going to tell her I can't talk to her anymore. It's not healthy for me.'

'Yeah, that's probably for the best,' Makr said, although he didn't really know what was 'for the best'—ever—and doubted anyone did.

Makr took his phone out of his pocket, looked at old text messages from Aerodactyl. Recently Aerodactyl didn't seem interested in Makr in a specifically romantic way Makr wanted her to, like Nidorina with Ivysaur, and it was making Makr feel bad.

'I don't know. I've been thinking about texting Aerodactyl something,' Makr said. 'What should I text her?'

Ivysaur said he shouldn't worry about that right now and that he should just put his phone away right now, and Makr guessed he was right.

It was windy outside. Restaurant menus and other trash floated around the picnic table, caught in updrafts. It was partly cloudy.

Eventually the Thai restaurant opened. Ivysaur and Makr were the very first customers of the day. Makr ordered a spicy rice dish with potatoes and a water. Ivysaur ordered a spicy noodle dish with peanuts and a water. They ordered 'for here,' ate on a small metal table inside. They

both poured some Sriracha on their food to make it even spicier. A radio was playing top-10 pop songs.

‘I’m not going to lie: I cried so much when I heard you were in the hospital,’ Ivysaur said.

Makr hadn’t actually been admitted into the hospital proper, just the waiting room and some small rooms attached to the waiting room.

‘Sorry,’ Makr said nevertheless. ‘I wish I could explain it better. I feel like I owe some kind of explanation.’

‘You don’t have to explain it,’ Ivysaur said, which Makr appreciated.

He wiped his nose with his napkin, for the food was spicy enough to induce mucus flow. He said ‘thanks’ to Ivysaur a few times over the next twenty minutes in reference to various things.

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Ivysaur told Nidorina he couldn’t talk to her anymore.

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Then not much later he started talking to her again.

Makr laughed. ‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know. Whatever. I mean what I realized is we’re just kids and whatever we have isn’t going to last forever anyway, and I want to hang out with her, so I mean I’d rather just hang out with her.’

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Aerodactyl and Makr were at a party. Makr was kinda drunk. Aerodactyl was maybe kinda drunk too but it was always hard to tell whether she was.

They were sitting on a couch and watching people, which was there favorite thing to do at parties.

‘When do you want to leave?’ Aerodactyl said.

‘I don’t know,’ Makr said. ‘What time is it?’

Aerodactyl checked her phone. It wasn’t very late. It was kinda early.

‘I feel like we always leave parties really early,’ Makr said.

‘I know. Is that bad? Does it matter?’

Makr thought about whether it mattered, decided it didn’t really, decided now was as good a time as any to leave.



“Have you ever stared at yourself naked in your bathroom mirror for like an hour?” I text Nick.

“No,” he texts back. Then, “Have you?”

I text, “Yeah I just did,” while in my peripheral vision I see my naked reflection texting—the bathroom faucet is level with my penis and tactfully covers it, like a fig leaf in a Renaissance sculpture. I take a step to the right so I can see my penis. It looks pretty much like you’d expect.

It’s Saturday 12/17/2011 10:34 a.m., my phone says.

Friday 12/16/2011 11:59 p.m. a beautiful girl named Christina texted me, “I really really like you and you’re a really cool guy but I think I just want to stay friends okay?” and I haven’t texted her back yet.

“Weird,” Nick texts.

I leave the bathroom and go to my bedroom and search through a pile of dirty clothes on the floor. I pick out some blue jeans and a long-sleeved cotton shirt with green and grey horizontal stripes and put these clothes on and go back to the bathroom and stare at myself clothed in the mirror. I think I look better clothed than naked. I acquired most of my clothes during high school from a department store called Kohls. I’m now in college. I still wear my high school clothes. I haven’t outgrown my high school clothes physically, but they somehow seem inappropriate or atavistic or vestigial like tailbones. I feel like I’ve outgrown them spiritually. I’m not really a spiritual person. I’m a cells person: a biology student.

I text Nick, “I think I should get new clothes.”

I mostly want new pants. My jeans don’t really fit well. None of my jeans have ever

really fit well, because my size is 28x32 and no stores ever have 28x32 pants. So all my pants are like 30x32, which is the closest size I can ever find, and they all sag and I always have to wear a belt. Or when I forget to wear a belt, I have to walk around with my hands in my pockets all day, holding my pants up and pretending to be just casually sticking my hands in my pockets or something, which I imagine looks stupid. I text Nick, “Hey, where do you buy your pants? I want to buy new jeans.” Nick is fashionable; he buys his clothes from Urban Outfitters and American Apparel and the internet; he has nicely fitting jet-black Levi’s and chic horn-rimmed glasses and like fifty collared shirts and cardigans and a hip haircut called a fade and a beautiful girlfriend named Joy and a job at Urban Outfitters and lots of sex.

Nick texts, “The internet. Or the mall sometimes.”

I text, “Can you drive me to the mall to buy cool pants today? I’m feeling bad about my jeans right now.”

He texts, “Okay lol. I’m at work right now. I get out at 12.”

My phone says it’s 10:45, so I have like an hour to kill.

I text, “Cool. I’ll see you in like an hour, then.”

For half an hour I do things in the bathroom: I brush my teeth, I urinate, I wash my face, I shave and cut my big stupid chin, the cut is really deep, it starts bleeding, I hold Kleenex on it so it stops bleeding, I think about blood and remember I need to take my anemia pills, I take my anemia pills, I splash water in my hair and push it around and try to make it look okay, I consider getting my hair cut because I can’t seem to make it look okay, I decide I don’t really want to get my hair cut because barbers always seem to cut my hair too short and when my hair is too short I look weird and my hair’s not really that long right now anyway; it’s like medium length right now. Last month I shaved my own head for some stupid reason, which was to impress the

beautiful girl named Christina whom I'd overheard saying she didn't like shaggy-haired guys, and when she saw my haircut she laughed and said, "Oh my god it's sooo short! You look like a cancer patient," which was accurate—I do look like a cancer patient when my hair's really short, because I have really pale skin because of my anemia and thin bones and atrophied muscles and droopy purplish eyes—altogether I look pretty sickly, skeletal, I'm afraid, except for my hair which is thick and wavy and healthy-looking when it's long enough. But which it isn't right now.

I go to my bedroom. I lie on my bed and browse Facebook on my MacBook. I look through my Facebook photo albums. My profile picture seems okay—it's a black and white headshot; my hair's shaggy; my expression's flat, cool—seems copacetic. Then I look at some of Christina's Facebook pictures. All of them are gorgeous. In her profile picture her head's in a Tyrannosaurus rex's mouth at our college's museum of natural history and she's pretending to scream but not pretending very well because she looks like she's smiling. The picture's caption is "Ahhh!" Thirty-one people have "liked" the picture. I click to "like" it. Then I stare at it for six entire minutes.

A month ago I applied to be a minimum-wage student curator at the museum of natural history and wasn't hired, despite knowing quite a lot about natural history. In the last few months I've applied for like thirty jobs and interviewed for six and been hired for zero. I'm convinced I can't get a part-time job on campus at a coffee shop or clothing store or book store or wherever because everyone who works at these sorts of young-adult places are always very good-looking, very non-sick-looking. I look good on my applications and résumés, sure, but when the time for an interview comes the interviewer probably thinks something like, "What's wrong with this guy—is he sick? He's not sexy enough to work here." That's what I imagine at least. I mean if you could hire a sick-looking guy or an attractive-looking guy, whom would you hire, all other

variables being equal? You'd select the attractive-, healthy-looking guy, naturally. "Natural selection." It's all biological. I hate myself.

It's 11:15, the bottom-right corner of my computer screen says. My chin feels itchy. I itch it and accidentally scratch my shaving cut, which starts bleeding again a little.

I open a Facebook chat box with Christina. I type "hey" in the message bar, then delete it, then type "sup," then delete it, then close the chat box without having sent a message. "*Ahhh!*" Yesterday Christina texted me, "I really really like you and you're a really cool guy but I think I just want to stay friends okay?" and I need to text her back eventually maybe.

I go to Google. I Google "good-looking guy jeans" and read a fashion blog article titled "Buying the Perfect Pair of Men's Jeans," which says that no matter how great your jeans are, if the fit is wrong for your body type, they'll look ridiculous on you, which I already know all too well. But I click the link your body type and read an article titled "Dress Right For Your Body Type," the first paragraph of which says, "Although Thomas Jefferson decreed that 'all men were created equal,' when it comes to body type and clothing, that bold statement is simply untrue: Fashion is not a democracy." I don't see what Thomas Jefferson particularly has to do with fashion. I scroll down to the heading "Tall and Skinny Body Type." Here I read that men with tall-and-skinny body types shouldn't wear vertical stripes or monochromatic clothing—so apparently my choice of horizontal stripes today was apt—and should wear square-toed shoes instead of round-toed shoes for some reason, but it doesn't really say anything about jeans, which is all I really want to know: something about jeans.

Tyrannosaurus rex had an interesting body type. Their arms were comically small. Paleontologists don't really know why. They don't think the arms were unused, vestigial limbs because the bones show large areas for muscle attachment, which suggests considerable strength

and function. Some paleontologists think the arms were used to hold a mate during sex. That's my favorite hypothesis; imagine a frisky T-rex holding on for the ride with his dinky arms and digging his claws into his lover's back and roaring *Jurassic Park*ishly at climax. Dinosaur sex is a fascinating subject, really—how it actually happened is still a huge mystery. The physics of it doesn't seem to add up: How could a female Brachiosaurus bear the 50-ton weight of her partner? How could a guy Stegosaurus work around his lover's spiky back plates? Some animals just weren't designed for sex. My phone's ringing.

I answer it. Nick says, "I'm in your driveway."

I say, "One second." I throw on a denim jacket and old Nike tennis shoes. I notice that my shoes are round-toed and that I hate myself.

Outside is cold and wet. It snowed a few days ago. Old snow's melting and turning into new slush. The sky is overcast; everything's the color of driveway cement. Nick's car is thumping with music. Maybe I'll get a haircut at the mall.

The music's Lady Gaga, I realize inside Nick's car. Christina who broke my heart looks like what I imagine Lady Gaga would look like if she had plainer hair and wore normal clothes and less makeup and was an undergraduate biology student instead of a pop mega-celebratory.

"Hey sup," Nick says. Nick looks like Canadian sex god Ryan Gosling. He's wearing a blue windbreaker and black jeans and a grey scarf and a confident smile; his hair's combed back and looks slick without looking greasy. He backs out the driveway without looking over his shoulder or even in his mirrors.

"Hey sup," I say.

"Is that a new jean jacket? It looks good, man."

"Yeah, thanks." It's not really new; I've had it for like two months. I just haven't worn it

much. I don't know if I really like it.

"I don't know if I really like it," I say. "I think it makes me look weird, like I'm wearing a big, whole-body-covering pair of jeans. Too homogenous or something."

"No, it looks good. For real."

Lady Gaga sings ♪*I'm beautiful in my way / 'cause God makes no mistakes / I'm on the right track baby / I was born this way*♪

"Is this the new Lady Gaga song?" I say.

"It's not really new—it's like a few months old. But yeah."

I like Lady Gaga. I don't usually like pop music, but I like her. A lot of her songs seem to be about insecurity.

"It sounds pretty good," I say.

"Yeah I like it," Nick says. "So what's up?"

"Nothing. How was work?"

"Pretty good. I got a ten-dollar tip."

♪*Don't hide yourself in regret / Just love yourself and you're set / I'm on the right track baby / I was born this way*♪

"Urban Outfitters cashiers get tips?"

"Yeah sure. Why not? I helped someone pick out a shirt for her boyfriend."

Nick has his phone out; he's texting while driving, which is supposedly dangerous. I don't really care. I'm not even wearing a seat belt—I never do.

I say, "Hey, do you think you could get me a job?"

"At Urban Outfitters?"

"No, at NASA."

He's too busy texting to hear my stupid joke.

I say, "Yeah, at Urban Outfitters."

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't think we're hiring right now, but I can talk to my boss."

We approach a red light. Nick doesn't decelerate. We're about to crash into a minivan. When we're like two seconds away from crashing I say, "Hey, stop. Red light." Nick jerks the breaks without looking up from his phone.

"Who're you texting anyway?"

"Joy. And Nicole. And Tess. And Brittany."

I only know Joy, Nick's beautiful girlfriend who looks like Christina Aguilera. I don't know the three other girls.

"The light's green now."

"Oh. Sorry." He sets his phone down in a cup holder, drives.

*♪Don't be a drag / Just be a queen / Whether you're broke or evergreen / You're black, white, beige, chola descent / You're Lebanese, you're orient♪*

We're on a straight stretch of highway, going about ten over the speed limit. At the horizon the road's grey blends seamlessly into the sky's. Traffic is sparse. The mall is only a fifteen minute drive from my apartment, and we're about halfway there. I look at my reflection in the window. I daydream about Christina Aguilera and Lady Gaga. Lady Gaga's face is somewhat dinosaurish in a sexy way.

I say, "Where do you meet all these girls? I need to meet some new girls."

Nick says, "On the internet mostly." His phone buzzes in the cup-holder. He ignores it. I take my phone out of my pocket and check for new messages. I have no new messages. I press buttons on my phone as if I have new messages.

I say, “Hey, you know that Christina girl I’ve been talking to?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, listen to this text she sent me yesterday: ‘I really really like you and you’re a really cool guy but I think I just want to stay friends okay?’”

Nick passes a car on the right and exits the highway so fast we almost fly off the road.

He says, “Damn. I’m sorry, man.”

“It’s fine. I’m not really upset, really.”

*♪I was born this way hey! / I was born this way hey! / I’m on the right track baby / I was born this way hey!♪*

Nick says, “Really?”

“No,” I say. “Not really. I’m pretty upset, actually.”

He laughs. “Rejection’s a bitch.”

“It is. Well, not really. It’s fair sometimes. I don’t know. I don’t care about being rejected. I’ve been rejected plenty. I just don’t understand it, in this particular instance. Do you know what I mean? She really seemed to like me. I don’t care about being rejected.”

“It sounds like she was just leading you on. Girls do that, man. It happens.”

“Yeah. I don’t know. I don’t think she was leading me on. Maybe I’m just stupid. But I’m pretty sure she really liked me. Anyway, do you think I have to text her back soon? I think I have to soon so she doesn’t think she broke my heart or whatever. I don’t want her to think that.”

“Yeah, you probably should text her. But wait another day or two, and just say ‘sup’ or some bullshit. That’ll make you seem over it. If you text her right now you’ll seem desperate.”

Nick knows all the rules to texting: how many days to wait, what to say—I don’t know how people learn these things.



“I almost messaged her on Facebook earlier. I almost said ‘sup’ on Facebook.”

“Definitely don’t do that. Don’t Facebook message her. That’ll seem desperate.”

“Really? Why?”

“Just don’t. Trust me.”

I do trust Nick—who wouldn’t trust a guy with that haircut?

“Okay. Whatever. Maybe I just won’t ever talk to her again. Our relationship seems fucked now. Our friendship, I mean. It was never a relationship, I guess.”

The song ends. Nick says, “I’m sorry, man. Hey, I know what’ll cheer you up.” He presses → on the console a few times, changing songs. “Check this song out—it’s the best. It’s a real pick-me-up.”

“I liked the last song. What’s its name?”

“Born This Way.”

“Yeah, I liked it.”

“Well, if you liked that song, you’ll like this next one for sure.”

The song starts. It’s catchy. It pretty much sounds like “Born This Way” but less dancey and more ballady. I guess a lot of Lady Gaga’s songs pretty much sound the same. I still like them.

*♪I just wanna be myself / And I want you to love / me for who I am / I just wanna be myself / And I want you to know / I am my hair♪*

“What’s this song called?”

“Hair.”

“I like it. Speaking of hair, do you think I should get a haircut?”

He checks my hair out. As he’s checking it out, we approach a line of stopped cars at a

traffic light. We're about to crash. "Brake," I say. Nick brakes hard and says, "Your hair looks fine." Outside there's a bunch of Salvation Army people standing roadside and ringing Christmas bells and wearing Santa hats and asking stopped cars for donations. I hadn't remembered about the holidays until now; the mall will probably be crowded. A Salvation Army guy approaches our car. Nick rolls down his window—cold air seeps in momentarily—and gives him a dollar. The light turns green and the Army scurries off the road before mall-bound Xmas shoppers run them over.

I say, "Hey, you know when I shaved my head last summer?"

Nick says, "Yeah. That was wild. You looked like a badass."

*♪I've had enough, enough, enough / And this is my prayer, I swear / I'm as free as my hair / I'm as free as my hair♪*

"Christina said I looked like a cancer patient. She literally said, 'You look like a cancer patient.' I felt really bad. I just remembered because of this song."

*♪As free as my hair, hair, hair / Hair, hair, ha-ha-ha-hair♪*

"Hey, quit beating up on yourself, man. I know you feel bad now, but she's just one girl. You'll get over her. You'll meet someone else."

"I know. I wouldn't really feel bad, except she really seemed to like me. I mean she always laughed at my jokes and wanted to hang out and talk on Facebook and text and everything. Last week we went to the museum of natural history and messed around. We climbed all over the dinosaurs and took pictures. She stuck her head in a T-rex's mouth. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah but listen: she doesn't like you. I mean she obviously likes you but she doesn't *like* you. She's just not attracted to you. Sexually. There's nothing else to it. It sucks, but what can

you do? You can't change how a person feels. You just have to accept it."

*♪I don't want to change / and I don't want to be ashamed / I'm the spirit of my hair / It's all the glory that I bear♪*

I say, "I know. You're right. She's just not attracted to me. She thinks I'm a 'really cool guy' but doesn't think I'm a really fuckable guy, basically."

"Well, I wouldn't put it that way. But yeah, basically."

We turn into the mall's gigantic parking lot. It's packed with cars and dirty slush. Christmas wreaths hang from the light poles, and Christmas lights from the building. It takes us ten minutes to find an open parking space in the very last row. Nick parks over the lines. He kills the engine and cuts off Lady Gaga in the middle of a chorus. We hop out of the car and start walking towards the mall, which seems like a mile away from our parking spot. It's windy and cold, so we walk fast. My denim jacket isn't keeping me very warm. Nick's windbreaker seems to be breaking the wind for him—it makes ruffling sounds as we walk. We don't talk as we walk. I don't know why.

A Salvation Army guy's posted at the mall's front entrance, ringing a bell. When we walk by him Nick tells him we already donated at the intersection. He tells us to have a happy holiday. The mall's glass doors automatically slide open—warm air surges out the atrium and into my face; it feels good and smells like mall.

"So where do you want to go?" Nick says.

We're standing in the atrium, directionless. Shoppers flow around us; we're like a stone in the middle of a river. Every shopper holds like three huge shopping bags. Even the people coming *in* are holding shopping bags—I don't understand.

"Where do you want to go?" Nick says again.

“I don’t know. You’re the clothes expert here. You tell me.”

“Well, I usually wear Levi’s 511s. If you want something like my jeans, you could try some 511s. They’re pretty standard.”

“Do you think they’d look good on me?”

I look at Nick’s jeans. I think I like them. They look good on him. I’m not sure if they would on me. Probably Nick makes his jeans look good, not vice versa.

Nick says, “Yeah. I don’t know—I mean it’s up to you.”

I say, “I don’t know anything about jeans. I’d rather have you just tell me what to wear. Just tell me what to wear so other people will think I look good.”

“Fine, okay, um”—he looks me up and down, scans my body head to toe, performing some sort of jean-type analysis—“yeah, 511s should look good. You just have to make sure the color you get matches your jacket, if you’re going to keep wearing that jacket. The color of jeans you have on right now doesn’t really go with your jacket—no offense.”

“I know. I don’t really like this jacket. I’ll probably sell it on eBay or something.” Truthfully, I’d liked the jacket perfectly fine until now.

I say, “So let’s head to the Levi’s store?”

Nick says, “Yeah.”

We start walking. The mall’s front entrance leads straight into a food court. There are like eighty people eating, seated in a grid of homogenous brown wood-plastic tables with blue metal-plastic chairs. It’s loud. The combined smell of Sbarro’s pizza, Flaming Wok, Taco Bell, The Great Steak and Cheese Company, Millie’s Polish Kitchen, and like four other restaurants forms a sort of mild rotting-garbage scent. ♪*All I want for Christmas is you*♪ When we walk past Flaming Wok the guy behind the counter yells “Free sample?” and holds out two toothpicks

skewered with orange chicken—Nick takes one; I don't.

“Hey, I think you have something on your chin, by the way,” Nick says.

“What?” I say. Then I remember: “Oh, I cut myself shaving earlier.”

“How deep? It looks like it's still bleeding.”

I brush my thumb across my chin—it feels wet. I look at my thumb; there's a dab of blood and there's the fact that I hate myself. “Can we go to the bathroom? I should probably go to the bathroom. Is it bleeding a lot?” I stick my chin out towards Nick. He examines it.

“It's just bleeding a little. Maybe we can get a Band-Aid somewhere. Do you think there's like a mall first-aid station somewhere?”

“No. I don't know. Let's just go to the bathroom.”

Just outside the food court, where the mall proper begins, we find a bathroom sign. We follow the sign down a little hall with some payphones (does anyone use mall payphones? they seem vestigial) and an ATM machine being used by a woman holding a crying baby. The bathroom's empty; there's just me, Nick, and like twenty vacant urinals and stalls. ♪*I don't want a lot for Christmas / There is just one thing I need*♪ plays through a single speaker on the ceiling. I examine my chin in the mirror while Nick nonchalantly pisses in a urinal. He says, “I'm sure it'll stop bleeding soon.” There's a thumb-sized smear of blood on my chin. It looks gross, especially in the bathroom's fluorescent lighting. I splash some faucet water on it. When the water mixes with the blood it just spreads the blood around and makes everything seem bloodier and grosser. I get some paper towels from a motion-activated dispenser on the wall and wipe my chin with them until everything's clean. ♪*Make my wish come true / Baby, all I want for Christmas is youuuu*♪ I throw the bloody paper towel into a garbage can overflowing with paper towels; it hits the mound of paper towels stacked at the top and rolls off onto the floor where

there's like five other missed shots. Nick finishes peeing and joins me at the sink. He washes his hands and finger-combs his hair and says, "You know that Joy said no the first time I asked her out?" I try to get some clean paper towels from the dispenser, but now the motion sensor won't register my hand movements. "Really?" "Yeah. Of course, she was seeing another guy at the time. But I'm just saying." I make karate-chop motions in front of the sensor for like thirty seconds before a single paper towel sheet spits out. I take this sheet and apply pressure to my cut.

I say, "It's not going to stop bleeding."

Nick says, "It will soon. Just give it a second."

"No. Look." I take the paper towel off the cut and after like five seconds fresh blood oozes out.

"Just don't touch it for a second. Let it clot."

"It won't clot. I've had this happen before. My blood doesn't clot well. I have bad blood."

"What?"

"I have anemia. It's a hereditary blood thing. It's fine. I'm not bleeding a lot. I'll just take some paper towels so I can dab the blood off every now and then. I'll put styptic and a butterfly Band-Aid on it later."

We look at each other's reflections in the mirror. Nick shrugs.

"Okay," Nick says. "Want to just go, then?"

"Yeah, just let me get some clean paper towels."

I throw my used paper towel in the garbage; it hits the mound of paper towels stacked at the top and rolls off onto the floor. I try to get some clean paper towels from the dispenser but can't activate the motion sensor. I'm waving my hands in front of it like an idiot when Nick

unlatches something and opens up the dispenser itself. I feel stupid and hatred for myself. “We have one of these dispensers in the bathroom at Urban,” Nick says. He shrugs. I take a lot of paper towel from the exposed roll and wad it up and shove it in my back pocket. Before we head out I take one last good look in the mirror.

“Ready?” Nick says.

“Yeah,” I say. But I’m not moving. I’m frozen at the mirror. My one last look has turned into something else. I’m still looking in the mirror, but I don’t really see myself. I mean I see myself, but my body’s out of focus like when you hold one finger in front of your face but see two. ♪*Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer / had a very shiny nose / and if you ever saw it / you would even say it glows*♪

I say, “Hey, can I ask you something, as a friend?”

“What?”

“Am I bad-looking? I know I’m not really good-looking, but I’m not like ugly, right?”

Nick laughs. “What? You’re not ugly. Why would you even ask that? You’re so weird sometimes, I swear. Come on—let’s go.”

We go. As we’re walking I want to say that the reason I asked is Christina. I want to explain that if a girl really likes you and says you’re really cool and smart and always wants to spend time with you and always laughs at your stupid dinosaur jokes—if you and her seem totally compatible—but for some reason still doesn’t want to date you, then it seems likely that you’re really really bad-looking. Your uncompromising physical unattractiveness seems like the only explanation for her feelings. I want to say it seems impossible to judge your own looks, so others’ judgments are all you can trust. I want to tell Nick that he’s not fashion savvy; he’s just good-looking; he could wear anything and look okay, like Lady Gaga—Lady Gaga wears absurd

outfits but still looks sexy; at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards Lady Gaga wore a dress made entirely of raw meat, an absolutely ridiculous fashion choice, but still looked sexy. I want to explain things I've learned in biology classes, things about natural selection and mating and how every species of animal is attracted to certain, specific physical features; there's variance, sure, but in general what's naturally good-looking is non-negotiable; it's been encoded in the gene pool for millions of years, since *Homo erectus* in the Pleistocene. Males like child-bearing hips. Women like taller men. "Fashion is not a democracy." Facial symmetry is universally attractive because the perfect, mutation-free cell reproductions required to achieve it denote genetic health. Fashion is nothing really; there's just bodies, some of which look better than others, look more fuckable than others. I hate it all. We're in the Levi's store.

"Hey guys, how are you?" says the beautiful Levi's employee folding jeans at the entrance. She's wearing a pink Santa hat. She looks like Britney Spears. "Can I help you guys find anything?"

I say, "No," and plan to turn around and leave the store but instead follow Nick to a display rack of 511s in the middle of the store for some reason. There's like sixty pairs in five different colors. I touch them and push them around the rack without really trying to find a pair in my size.

Nick says, "What's your size?"

I say, "Twenty-eight thirty-two."

He searches for a pair my size. Unlike the rest of the mall, the Levi's store isn't playing Christmas music. It's playing normal music. John Mayer sings ♪*Your body is a wonderland / Your body is a wonder / I'll use my hands / Your body is wonderland*♪ I hate John Mayer. I imagine a saber-toothed tiger biting John Mayer's face, its giant canines stabbing straight



through his eye sockets. “Ahhh!”

Nick says, “I can’t find your size.”

I say, “Yeah, that’s fine. I never can.”

My chin feels wet. I take a paper towel from my pocket and dab it. On the paper towel I see a spot of blood. I put the bloody paper towel back into my pocket.

I say, “I don’t want to get any jeans if they don’t have my size. I’m sick of wearing jeans that don’t fit me.”

Nick says, “We can ask if they have other sizes in the back. At Urban we keep other sizes in the back sometimes.”

♪*Your body is a wonderland / Your body is a wonderland*♪

Nick asks the beautiful Levi’s girl if they have any 28x32 511s in the back. She goes to the back and like twenty seconds later comes back empty-handed.

“What color do you want?” she asks Nick. “I forgot to ask.”

“What color do you want?” Nick asks me.

“Are the jeans for him?” the Levi’s girl says. She looks at me and smiles.

“Yeah,” Nick says.

“Black,” I say.

She goes to the back and like twenty seconds later returns with a pair of black 28x32 511s. She hands them to me and I almost drop them because I was expecting her to hand the jeans to Nick for some reason. She laughs.

She says, “Do you want a changing room?”

I say, “Sure.”

She leads me to a changing room in the back of the store and unlocks it. “There you go.”

She walks away. I step inside and shut the door; its metal handle clicks loudly. The John Mayer song ends. For a moment there's silence. It's nice.

Then a very famous Christina Aguilera song begins with a whisper: "*Don't look at me.*" The changing room's cramped. A melancholy melody with piano and strings starts. In one corner there's a full-length mirror. In the opposite corner there's a small wooden bench. A row of metal clothes hooks hang on the wall. A sticker on the wall says shoplifters will be prosecuted and shows a menacing picture of a security camera. I look around and don't see any security cameras anywhere. I hang the 511s on a hook and sit down on the bench. ♪*Every day is so wonderful / then suddenly*♪—I vaguely remember seeing a Behind the Music episode about Christina Aguilera—♪*it's hard to breath*♪ I take off my shoes, then my jeans. Christina Aguilera makes me think about Christina who broke my heart because both their first names are Christina. She also makes me think about Lady Gaga because both are female pop stars who dress wildly. ♪*Now and then, I get insecure*♪ In the mirror I see myself putting on the 511s. ♪*From all the pain, I'm so ashamed*♪ I think Christina Aguilera and Lady Gaga singing about insecurity is ironic because they are both totally good-looking and extremely confident-seeming. I zip the zipper and button the button. I look at myself in the mirror. ♪*I am beautiful / no matter what they say*♪ I see a spot of blood on my chin. I decide not to wipe it off for some reason. The 511s seem to fit well. I exit the changing room. Outside Nick is chatting up the beautiful Levi's girl. She's laughing at something Nick said. ♪*I am beautiful / in every single way*♪ I approach them. The Levi's girl is saying "...that he shouldn't take it too literally because she might've just been surprised and wanted time to think, you know?" and Nick says, "Yeah, you're probably right," then turns to me and says, "Well, how do they fit?" I feel the Levi's girl looking at my bleeding chin. I say, "They

fit.” *Don’t look at me.* “But I’m not sure.” The Levi’s girl says, “Come here.” She starts walking and I follow. I stupidly think she’s going to kick me out of the store for bleeding on the jeans or something until we arrive at a giant half-hexagon of mirrors. The mirrors are angled so you can see yourself from different perspectives. She says, “I always say you can’t tell how good your jeans look unless you see them from behind.” ♪*To all your friends you’re delirious / so consumed in all your doom*♪ I step up to the triple mirror. I vaguely remember once reading online that some people think Lady Gaga looks mannish and ugly and being confused. The Levi’s girl says, “For the record, I think those jeans look great on you,” and I can’t tell whether she’s being honest or professional. How could someone think Lady Gaga is bad-looking? “Yeah, they look good,” Nick says. In the peripheral mirrors I’m seeing myself from perspectives that I’ve never seen myself from. I’ve never used mirrors like these. What if Lady Gaga and Christina Aguilera genuinely really felt bad about the way they look sometimes? Seems really delusional yet very likely somehow. Seems to mean something. My chin feels wet. And my eyes. ♪*You are beautiful no matter what they say*♪ Seeing myself from the sides and behind feels impossible and self-dissociative like an out of body experience because when I move slightly the bodies in the mirrors move slightly but all in different directions and the movements don’t seem connected to me at all somehow. I vaguely remember seeing a music video with a bone-thin girl looking in a mirror and sucking in her stomach and then punching the mirror. ♪*You are beautiful in every single way*♪ I think it was the music video for “Beautiful.” I have no idea what I’ll text Christina. “Well?” Nick says. It occurs to me that Nick’s been rejected by a lot of girls. That old cliché, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, comes to mind. Maybe I’ll try chatting up the Levi’s girl. Why not? “Yeah, I like these jeans,” I say. “These jeans are good.” I step away from the mirrors and walk over to the cash register. The Levi’s girl meets me there. “Can I wear these out of the

store?” I say. She says, “Sure.” I pay for the jeans. They cost a lot of money. But I figure they’re worth it. In fifth grade Brittney Pollusky said I was the ugliest, smelliest boy in class.

As Nick and I are walking out of the store the Levi’s girl shouts, “Wait.” I’m startled. We turn around. She’s holding my old jeans. “You almost left these in the changing room.” She hands me my old jeans. “Oh,” I say. I feel a vibration in my hand—I realize I left my phone in my old jeans’ pocket—and somehow know for sure it’s a text message from Christina. The Levi’s girl smiles at me. I feel like now would be the time to try talking to her. But I don’t say anything. My mind is elsewhere. I’m thinking about the Behind the Music episode with Christina Aguilera. I’m recalling a bit about the song “Beautiful,” which now hits the bridge with the melody brightening and the vocals shrill, screamed in Aguilera’s signature over-the-top style. Christina Aguilera didn’t write “Beautiful”; her producer wrote it. She wrote it for herself because she felt ugly. You’d expect as much.

One day Christina Aguilera came to her producer’s house in a mood. She asked her producer to play her a comforting song. Her producer played a little song she’d just written, “Beautiful.” When she finished, Christina immediately asked for the lyrics and a recorded demo; she wanted the song for herself; she loved the song. Her producer was surprised; she didn’t think somebody so beautiful could relate to a song about feeling ugly. And then she realized

### **Literally Crushed Under the Weight of Decisions**

In the middle of the night a hellish thunderstorm caused a campus-wide power outage that reset Kay's alarm clock, so in the morning it didn't buzz and she woke up forty minutes late and didn't have time to eat breakfast before her philosophy final exam and had to sprint across campus empty stomached through the hellish thunderstorm, which was still going hellishly, to arrive at Auditorium C on the third floor of the Nebuchadnezzar Memorial Modern Arts Building on time.

But she didn't arrive on time—she was ten minutes late—and when she opened the auditorium's heavy steel door she saw all the seats already filled with students taking the test, punctilious students who apparently either had internal alarm clocks or the kind with backup batteries so that they didn't reset in power outages.

The auditorium was silent except for the scratching of pencils, and Kay tried to enter inconspicuously, but when the heavy steel door boomed shut behind her everyone looked up from their tests to the doorway. Kay's face flushed and her palms perspired and her breath shortened and her stomach cramped—and she was already pretty wet and red faced and breathless and tight stomached from sprinting across campus through a thunderstorm—and altogether she felt about ready to die.

Yes, she was going to die this morning—she was sure. The only question was how. Suffocation? Electrocution? Starvation?

She walked to the front of the auditorium where the professor was sitting at a wooden desk on top of which was a towering stack of exams. She reached for an exam, but the professor violently smacked her hand away.

The professor was extremely French. In France it was customary to violently smack

people's hands when they reached for things. The professor had yet to learn the non-hand-smacking ways of Americans.

The professor was wearing a jet-black velvet suit.

One might've said the suit was *noire*. In France, *noire* meant "fashionable."

"Not so fast, Kay," the professor said.

He sipped wine from a wine glass. He bit into his baguette.

Kay's hand was throbbing. The professor's smack might've broken all five of her metacarpals.

"You're late, Kay."

"Sorry. My alarm clock didn't go off. There was a power outage last night, I think, and it—"

"You *think*?"

"There was definitely a power outage last night."

"What is it you want, Kay?"

"An exam, please."

Kay felt she was dreaming. Or in a nightmare. Nightmaring.

"You know what you want: an exam. But do you know why? What are you doing here, Kay? Whence comes Kay?"

"I need to pass the exam to pass this class to graduate from college."

"You know the answer? But do you know the question?"

"What?"

"What?"

The professor sipped his wine. He bit into his baguette. Kay wanted some of his baguette.

She was hungry, because she skipped breakfast.

The professor gave Kay an exam.

Kay found an open seat, sat, then examined her exam.

**You will have one hour to complete this exam. There is only one question. Whether you pass or fail this course relies entirely on this one question. If you have studied, you will have no trouble whatsoever with the question.**

Question: If one were to assume one God or original cause or starting point which nothing before came and which created a universe in which each and every event, person, occurrence, happening, matter, anti-matter, and ‘meaning’ was predetermined by this God or original cause or starting point, which nothing before came (i.e., if one were to assume that each and every thing was causally related, like a row of dominoes in which the first domino is tapped and this domino taps the next and that domino the next and so on into infinity [the ‘domino’ being God / original cause / starting point (this philosophical stance being first established by the Merovingian in *The Matrix Reloaded* during the philosophically seminal Causality Scene: “Causality...There is no escape from it. We are forever slaves to it. Our only hope, our only peace is to *understand* it, to understand the why. Why is what separates us from them, you from me.”)—now, presupposing this universe both does and does *not* exist (i.e., because it would not stretch into ‘infinity’ but, rather, the ‘dominos,’ as it were, would topple impossibly into ‘nothingness’), ought free will to exist, ought it not to exist, or ought it not not to exist, in one’s own opinion?

- A. It ought
- B. It oughtn't
- C. Both A and B
- D. C is somewhat contradictory
- E. The is-ought problem in meta-ethics, articulated by David Hume ("Hume's fork"), makes this question impossible to answer
- F. All of the above and below
- G. None of the above
- H. None of all of the above or below, excluding F
- I.  $\infty$
- J. Select this response if you want to pass the exam. (Note: selecting this response does not guarantee one will pass the exam; one only ought to select it if one *wants* to pass the exam.)
- K. Create your own response in the space which follows \_\_\_\_\_

Kay totally had no idea what the correct answer was. She felt the exam question was a little unfair. And she hadn't studied.

Perhaps that was why she didn't know the answer, because she hadn't studied. Or was the question just truly unfair? What / who was at fault for her not knowing the answer? The question itself? Her not studying? Her alarm clock? Skeptic philosopher David Hume?

A bead of sweat dripped from her hair onto her exam, blurring the ink of answers E, F, and G.

Kay considered its landing a divine sign; E, F, and G were definitely not the answer. Her stomach rumbled painfully. It rumbled so painfully that she felt it in her hand, which was still throbbing from the professor's violent smack. At least three of her metacarpals were



shattered.

She'd missed breakfast. She needed to eat. She couldn't take the exam on an empty stomach. She decided to get a snack. Perhaps with a full stomach the answer to the exam would become clear. She pushed out her chair, stood up, and quietly egressed the room, the professor Frenchly scowling at her on the way out.

In the hall was a vending machine. Against the wall it stood tall and black as a monolith. It looked not unlike the monolith in the epic film *2001: A Space Odyssey* in fact. Kay imagined the Strauss song from that movie playing as she approached the vending machine. Kay liked movies set in the future, like *The Matrix*. She liked to think about the future.

Face to fucking face with the vending machine, Kay considered what snack to choose. Her gustatory options lay ahead of her in a 7x5 matrix with alphabetical rows and numerical columns. Additional stocks of treats extended back from each cell's front in a serpentine metal coil. Similar vending machines were placed in schools, sports arenas, and offices all across America. In France the vending machines were of a higher technology; they utilized suction tubes and touch screens instead of coils and plastic buttons.

7x5 equaled 25 total choices, and here's what they were:

	1	2	3	4	5	6
A	Oreos	Nutter Butter	Twinkies	Snowballs	Honey Bun	Cinna Bun
B	Snickers	Twix	Reese's	Milky Way	Almond Joy	Hershey's
C	Doritos	Cheetos	Fritos	Lays	BBQ Lays	Goldfish
D	Skittles	Sour Skittles	Starbursts	Sour Patch Kids	Twizzlers	Mike And Ike
E	Pretzels	Trail Mix	Peanuts	M&Ms	Peanut M&Ms	Escargot
K	Calamari	Ibuprofen	Twinkies	Willy Wonka Bar	Kit Kat	Crunch Bar

Among oddities noted by Kay in the vending machine's selection were the inclusion of Ibuprofen (although it did seem perhaps convenient for headaching students), the rows' exclusion of letters F through G, and the wild price variations between, e.g., Escargot (\$20), Cheetos (\$1.25), and a Willy Wonka Bar (\$0.00).

\$0.00?

Willy Wonka Bars were free? Kay felt incredulous. Her head hurt. Maybe she'd opt for the ibuprofen after all.

"*Free Willy*," thought Kay; a scene from the movie ran through her head: a dolphin jumped over some rocks and landed with a huge splash. Or was it a whale? In the scene the sun shined brilliantly.

Starbursts sounded appetizing, their juiciness. Maybe she would get some Starbursts. Skittles were juicy, too, in a way. In fact all the candies in row D were categorically “juicy.” Perhaps this was due to some organizing principle, an intelligent design. Some of the rows’ grouping did indeed seem intentional: row A was the cakey or “baked” row; row B was all candy bars; row C was the salty row; row E had the salty snacks not being chips. (Were M&Ms salty? Not particularly, Kay supposed. Exception to the rule?) And what was row K supposed to be? What related the elements therein?

Kay’s head, stomach, and hand hurt. She should’ve just skipped class this morning, blamed her stupid alarm clock, and rescheduled to take the exam another morning. No, her professor wouldn’t have allowed that, the slimy son of a bitch. He would’ve given Kay a straight-up 0% for missing, shoddy alarm clock or no. The French!

Kay was born in Antarctica and had only moved to the United States a few months ago.

How much time had passed since she’d left her exam to get a snack? She couldn’t dilly-dally; time was wasting; she needed to pass her exam to pass Philosophy 101 to pass college!

“Ok let’s see,” Kay said almost aloud, “Oreos...Cheetos...M&Ms?...No...Peanut M&Ms...No...”

“Kay!” screamed the verily French professor.

Kay whirled around, and there her philosophy professor was, standing in the hall and furrowing his moustache and absentmindedly snacking on some escargot.

“What are you doing out here, Kay?”

“I was just getting a snack; my stomach was growling so much I couldn’t focus on the exam. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Ah, Kay, you know what you are doing but do you know *why*? It is the *why* that

separates Us from Them?”

“Us from whom?”

The professor, who looked not unlike the Merovingian in *The Matrix Reloaded*, became extremely angry at Kay and began throwing little pieces of escargot at her.

“Take that! And that!”

A nervous sweat seeped out of Kay’s pores. Her heart raced. Trail mix perhaps? A Honey Bun? Kay couldn’t decide, couldn’t ever decide, had never once in her life decided anything effectively, had simply drifted through everything, like a ghost, like the character named Ghost from *The Matrix*, who was a human from Zion participating in the war against the machines.

Each tiny piece of escargot that hit Kay made a soft and squishy sound upon impact, which the professor found kinkily attractive.

Now forgetting her test, the one decision imminent to Kay was her snack choice. Reese’s? BBQ Lays? What difference did it make really? All snack food was essentially high-fructose corn syrup nowadays anyway.

“Choose, Kay—choose!” The professor accelerated his escargot onslaught, moving from a moderate pummel to a full on bombardment. He tossed the delicacy at Kay by the handful.

Calamari? Kit Kat?

“CHOOSE!”

The professor pulled out a revolver.

In a kneejerk reaction Kay pressed K4: Willy Wonka Bar. She reached into her pocket to get money, but the coil around the treat had already begun rotating. For Willy Wonka Bars were free of course; Kay had forgotten they were free!

Slowly the coil rotated and slowly the professor cocked the revolver. The Willy Wonka

Bar dangled precipitously on the coil's end and

Snagged. The coil stopped, and the treat had not fallen. It was stuck. Stuck. Of course it was; this always happened! When would better, unfailing vending machines be introduced in America? The French used suction cups, which never snagged.

The professor laughed mischievously, mustache quivering. His teeth shown horribly, with little bits of slimy grey snail all stuck nauseatingly between them.

Kay kicked the vending machine in urgent frustration, trying to knock loose the dangling Willy Wonky Bar. She kicked harder and harder, breaking her metatarsals and crying out in agony. She grabbed the whole damn vending machine by its sides and shook and shook and it rocked back and forth and back and forth in rhythm to the professor's horrible horrible laughing, and slowly but surely, yes, the top-heavy machine lost balance and began falling, falling down toward Kay.

## Existentialism on Prom Night

To party was important for college. You were young and had to get out there, people said. You wouldn't be young forever. In a few years, to party would be obscene. People would point at you, inquire your age. Were you still in school? Then there'd be golf, instead. You'd play golf, with coworkers. Things would become more recreational and less celebrational. For what would there be to celebrate after youth, the most—and perhaps only—livable part of life? To celebrate post-youth would be obscene, like wearing a colorful cone party hat to a funeral.

“Where are we going,” Alex said.

“Who caresss,” Leah said. “Let's just go. It's the going that's important, not the where.”

“Wow. Deep shit,” Kevin said.

“Ewww,” Steven said.

“What,” Kevin said.

““Deep shit,”” Steven said.

Leah laughed. “Gross.” She wrapped her arm around Alex's, interlocking at the elbow joint. “It's colder than shit out here.”

T'was. Fall was falling into a harsh Michigan winter. Frost bit the grass lining the sidewalks across which Alex, Leah, Kevin, Steven and nameless others walked. Soon the weekend treks all over campus to this or that party would be questionable. Did you want to put on a hat and coat and go outside into the cold, or did you want to sit inside and watch a movie? With increasing frequency you opted to watch *The Matrix* again. You made hot cocoa or tea. Global warming would induce an ice age soon, maybe, it was rumored. Then you wouldn't need to party ever. You could stay inside forever, watch the whole Matrix trilogy, discuss online

which was the best. “The first is the best,” you’d write on a message board.

“I don’t know about you,” Steven said, “but my shit’s not cold. It’s warm.”

“What,” Alex said.

“Leah said her shit’s cold. Mine’s not.”

“No I didn’t,” Leah said. “I said ‘it’s cold as shit,’ not ‘my shit’s cold.’”

Her little nose and cheek bones were red, from the cold. It looked like a kind of makeup. She looked pretty. I wanted her to hold my arm, not Alex’s. I wanted to hold Alex’s arm. I wanted Leah, Alex, and myself to all interlock arms, a threesome. Three’s company, people said. Our company was way more than three, like ten. What was ten? A posse?

“My shit’s cold,” Kevin said. “It comes out cold, because I’m dead inside.”

“Me too,” Leah said. “Well, I don’t know. It’s not like ice-cold, but it’s not warm either. I’m like half-dead inside.”

“What if that’s how you could tell if you’re dead inside. By your shit’s temperature.”

“I’m going to measure mine tonight. I have a meat thermometer. I’m going to shit, then put the meat thermometer in the shit, to see if I’m dead inside.”

“You guys are gross,” Alex said.

Alex was graduating college at the end of the semester. He had a job lined up already. He was going to program computers, iPhones.

“You’re gross,” Leah said to Alex. “You *fuckerr*.” She laughed at this, at herself, how she called him a fucker. Were Alex and Leah fucking, the posse wondered.

“I’m drunk,” Leah said truthfully.

She rubbed her face into Alex’s bicep, like a towel.

What am I doing here tonight with these people, one thought.

“I wish I were drunk,” Steven said. “I can’t even get drunk anymore. At least not off beer. Tolerance. Last night I shotgunned two beers, and then I was like, ‘Welp, I don’t feel anything,’ so I shotgunned two more and I was like, ‘Welp,’ drank another. I didn’t even get drunk. So I went on the internet and fell asleep with my laptop open on my chest.”

Steven was particularly good at shotgunning beers. People at parties were often impressed at how he could down a beer in like two seconds: he’d bite open a hole near the bottom of the can with his canine, crack the top, let gravity and pressure hose the beer out the bottom and into his mouth, then burp.

“Let’s stop and get more drinks,” Kevin said.

Blue Front Liquor Store was on the way to the party. They stopped there. The inside was fluorescently bright and dusty in the way liquor stores are. It was warm, a welcome break from the cold. A swarthy bearded man with a gut stood behind the counter, watching everyone vaguely. Leah perused the beer selection with Alex, as they were over twenty-one, while Steven, Kevin, and the nameless wandered idly the aisles of candy, chips, Top Ramen, trying to be inconspicuous.

“Why are there so many beers what the fuck,” Leah said. The beer selection was comically variegated. There were like forty kinds of beer.

Alex shrugged. He was bored.

On the other side of the store Steven wondered aloud whether he would buy a slice of pizza.

“Maybe I’ll buy a slice of pizza I don’t know.”

The pizza was sitting under a heat lamp and unappealing. Its cheese wasn’t a healthy yellow but a papery white.



“I don’t know,” Steven said, staring at the pizza.

“No,” I said. “Don’t get pizza here. The pizza sucks here.”

The swarthy bearded cashier with a gut turned suddenly towards me, perhaps hearing his pizza sucked.

“I’m hungry,” Steven said. “Fuck it I’m getting a slice.”

He walked over to the register, said some things, walked back.

“Does anyone have two dollars. I forgot my money.”

The nameless dug in their pockets. Two dollars were dug up, with which Steven promptly bought a slice of bad pizza.

This was it, you thought. This was as fun or as good as things would get tonight, maybe ever: two-dollar pizza.

“I don’t know,” Leah said, trying to select a beer. “There are too many.”

“Whatever,” Alex said. “Who cares. Just pick one.” Alex was graduating soon. He’d been practicing golf. He sometimes went to the driving range on Wednesdays, when buckets of balls were half off. Soon he’d program computers. He’d play golf with coworkers. They’d talk about work. He’d do that for a few years. Then one day he’d stop and there’d be a funeral.

“I don’t even know if I want to drink tonight,” Alex said. “Do I want to drink tonight.”

“I don’t know,” Leah said.

“I don’t even like drinking that much. Why do I drink.”

He asked perhaps too seriously, but Leah paid no attention, her attention currently exhausted by the manifold beers: Labatt Blue, Bud Weiser, Pabst Blue Ribbon, countless fancy micro-brews, Natural Light, Guinness, Miller High Life. She ran her finger across the beer cooler’s cool glass, leaving a ghastly streak of finger oil.

“I don’t know,” Leah said. “I don’t know anything.”

“Whatever,” Alex said. He grabbed a case of Pabst Blue Ribbon out of the cooler. “Here. Let’s just get this.”

“We always get PBR,” Leah said.

“Yeah. So. It’s cheap and easy.” Alex walked over to the register, plopped the case of beer on the counter. The swarthy bearded cashier asked to see Alex’s ID while having a big gut. He scratched his big gut. Alex showed him his ID. He was twenty-three. He felt adult, too old for this.

Too old for what, Alex asked himself.

The cashier gave Alex his ID, and Alex gave the cashier cash. He walked back over to Steven, Kevin, and the nameless, with Leah following. They left the liquor store. He didn’t ask anyone for money for the beer, nor was money offered. Why was he hanging out with these people? He felt too old for them, out of place, like an adult in a kid’s movie, *Finding Nemo*. Or he felt like his friends were babies in an R-rated movie. Yeah, more like that: they were babies. Babies with rubber-topped sippy bottles of beer, watching *The Matrix* while a snow storm stormed outside. “Do any of you want to go to a party,” Alex asked the babies. “Goo goo gaa gaa,” they replied. “Waahhh Waaah.”

\* \* \*

Taking place on the third floor of an old apartment building was the party. Alex, Leah, Steven, Kevin and the nameless ascended the wooden staircase to the third floor silently.

“Hey. Hey look at these assholes,” said Brian, a tenant of the apartment, upon seeing the group’s ingress. “Look at them.”

People did as Brian bid. Greetings then incurred: hands were shook, even slapped; seats

were offered and taken; pleasantries exchanged. The apartment was not large, and the scarcity of space was not helped by the concerned group's arrival. One felt crowded. Steven removed his coat, although the room was cold. Leah said it was so cold you could see her breath and exhaled some smoke. Alex remarked that that smoke was cigarette smoke, that Leah had started smoking a cigarette.

"Stupid," Alex said.

"I know I'm smoking, fuckerrr," Leah said. She playfully punched Alex's shoulder.

"No you didn't," Steven said.

"You didn't know you were smoking," Kevin said. "You're so drunk you didn't even know."

"Yeah you're blackout. Go make yourself throw up hurry."

"What," Leah said. She looked at Alex for an explanation.

"Nothing," Alex said. "It's their inside joke: 'You're blackout.' One time they got a barely drunk girl to stick her finger down her throat and throw up by convincing her she was 'blackout drunk.'"

Leah looked confused. She killed her cigarette in an ash tray. She cracked loudly open a PBR and drank it heartily.

"One time I threw up in a McDonald's at the cash register," she said. She giggled at herself, at how she threw up in McDonald's. "Then I ordered a McFlurry right after. I don't know why I'm telling you guys this."

"You're blackout you can't help yourself," Kevin said.

"You're blackout, Kevin," Steven said. "Go to McDonald's and throw this pillow." He gave Kevin a couch pillow. "Throw this pillow at the cashier at McDonald's. You have to

because I said ‘you’re blackout.’ That’s the rule. Go to McDonald’s.”

“McDonald’s sounds soooo good right now!” a nameless girl said. She sat herself down on the couch, between Kevin and Steven.

Leah said to Alex, “Your friends are weird.”

“I don’t know,” Alex said. “They just have a weird sense of humor. They’re funny.”

Leah was new to Alex’s circle of friends and wasn’t yet privy to their idiosyncratic humor. A pillow hit her in the head. Steven, Kevin, and Alex guffawed.

Steven and Kevin’s favorite part of partying was the jokes, was having a laugh. All their jokes were inside jokes. All your jokes are inside jokes.

Steven and Kevin were the same person: Stevin. Stevin was in a dialogue with himself, was a sort of one-man stand-up comedy show in which he was both audience and comedian. Leah was somewhat aggrieved by the tossed pillow, for it had caused her to spill some PBR on her coat, as she was mid-sip upon impact, but when she heard Alex’s laughter at her misfortune she affected playful acceptance, a haha-you-got-me expression. She wanted to fit in with Alex’s friends. She wanted Alex to think she fit in with his friends. She took off her beer-bespattered coat, placed it on the floor. She felt instantly cold and snuggled up to Alex for warmth.

“Leah, throw that pillow out the window you’re blackout,” Stevin said. He pointed at an open window across the room, out which you could see a light snow snowing.

Parties, unlike snowflakes, were all the same, one thought occasionally, particularly on cold snowy nights on college campuses. You had homework to do. Why were you here?

Why were you even *here*?

You cracked open a PBR, as if in defiance of something.

“Spfffff,” the PBR said. Alex’s case of beer was already half empty. He himself had only

enjoyed one can. He promptly grabbed another, anxious to not let his friends enjoy more than him. Whose apartment was this, Alex wondered. Was it a friend of Stevin's. Ryan. Or was it Brian. Did it matter.

"Why is that window open," Alex said.

There were no replies.

Alex stood, walked over to the open window, shut it (pausing momentarily to look out at the snow), walked back to the couch, re-sat next to Leah. Leah lit a cigarette, smoked the cigarette.

"No wonder it's so cold in here," he said.

"Cold as shit," Stevin said. "Did you know actually that your shit's so cold it'll steam outside. I meant it's so warm it'll steam outside. If it's cold outside, that is, then your shit will steam, if it's warm."

The joke missed its mark, for nobody laughed.

"Grossssssssss," Stevin said. "*Steamy shit.*"

Stevin drank a long drink of beer. He silently considered jokes to make. The thought "shitty jokes" occurred to him and he laughed internally at this pun. He thought of ways to use the pun in an aloud joke.

Then he said to himself, "Stevin, you're blackout shotgun a beer," and he shotgunned a beer.

"Holy shit," a nameless said. "How do you do that."

Leah's cigarette smoke was creating a sort of cloud, as the window was shut and the room was poorly ventilated.

"Hey can you not smoke in here."

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There was a noticeable lapse in the party's previously jovial conversation. This sometimes happened at parties: moments of almost silence. For it to happen seemed unlikely, statistically, with all the people present and the likelihood they would talk and everything, but somehow it always happened, like a freak accident.

"Fuck this party," I said suddenly. "This party suckssss."

People laughed loudly. I laughed with them.

Why is there this party tonight, I thought. Why is there something tonight, instead of nothing. Why not nothing.

"This party's gay," a nameless said.

"Don't say that," said another.

Was this how all parties were, one wondered. Maybe only your circle of friends partied like this. Maybe other parties were better. Maybe there were festive hats and food, sombreros and nachos. It was almost certain parties were better in Mexico, for example. Other parties probably had cakes, decorated ones. All the jokes weren't inside jokes. They were universal, all powerful, omnipotent, like a god. In the Greek pantheon was there a god of humor and parties, you tried to remember.

Dionysus / Bacchus, I thought, maybe. I sipped my PBR. It tasted bad, like PBR was wont to. It tasted flat in an almost refined way.

Stevin attempted aloud an inside joke. It went unacknowledged. Stevin silently brainstormed new jokes, jokes that would beget acknowledgment.

Shit, Stevin thought. He thought about the last time he blacked out. Why couldn't he remember it. He considered shotgunning a beer.

I'd never blacked out. I planned to remember my nights, all of them. Certainly somebody needed to. Somebody needed to remember these stupid college parties. Didn't they. "Spffffff," went a PBR. "Let's dance," Leah said. She grabbed Alex's hand and pulled him up off the couch. Alex was thinking about computer programming. He was thinking about maybe learning another programming language in his free time, like Perl. If he stopped going to parties on the weekends, he could use that time to learn Perl. Learning another programming language would get him more money somehow. Or maybe he'd use his time to program a new iPhone app, something stupid and easy, like Angry Birds, off which he could get rich quick. He'd make Mad Mice: it'd be a puzzle game—find the cheese!

It was rumored that across the Atlantic Ocean in a land called France people had wine and cheese parties and that they were successful and enjoyed by all. Of course one didn't know whether to believe such things.

At one of my first college parties—it was at a shitty fraternity house—I simply left mid-party: I walked out alone without telling anybody, without telling the people with whom I'd arrived. I received a phone call later asking where I went. "Home," I said.

Leah and Alex's attempt at dancing was postponed shortly, as there was no music, but a nameless girl offered her phone, which had "sick jams," she assured, and Leah was able to plug this phone into a stereo system. A Lady Gaga song began playing. Leah seemed excited, energized by it. Alex seemed indifferent to the music and curious about Leah. I wished I were dancing with Leah. I considered changing my major from English to computer science. I considered leaving the party without telling anyone. The room was warming up, as the window had now been shut awhile, and the dance floor was too, for Stevin and a few nameless arose and began to move their feet to the beat. I stood too but didn't quite dance yet. I just sorta bobbed my

head to the rhythm, as if in agreement with the situation.

Stevin, Alex, Leah, and I slowly gravitated towards one another. We formed a little square in the corner of the room, a private little dance group.

We danced.

Maybe this was okay after all, you thought. I thought.

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Then Alex said, "I'm depressed."

"Whyyy," Leah said.

"I'm depressed," Stevin said.

"What," I said. "No you're not. You're always laughing and joking."

We we're still sorta dancing.

"So," Stevin said.

"Tears of a clown," Alex said. He said it in a too serious tone. I laughed at him.

"I'm more depressed than all of you," I said. "Wait. I'm blackout."

"Alex, you're blackout you're not depressed," Leah said. Leah was drunk.

"That's not how it works," Stevin said. "You don't know how that joke works, Leah. Do you even get jokes. Does she even get jokes, Alex."

"Do you even get jokes, Leah," Alex said jokingly.

"Shut up you guys are giving me an existential crisis," Leah said.

"An existential crisis," I said.

"I've been reading Nietzsche," Leah said. She mispronounced Nietzsche.

"No you haven't you're blackout," Stevin said.

"No, seriously, I have! It's been giving me like an existential crisis."



“Nietzsche,” I said, pronouncing it correctly.

“You’re in a blackout crisis make yourself throw up,” Stevin said. Stevin stuck his finger down his throat.

“Stop!” Leah said.

“All my friends are depressed,” Alex said. “That’s what we have in common, I just realized. We’re all friends because we’re depressed.”

Maybe that was why the parties were all the same, were never good, one thought: bad friends, depressed ones. It wasn’t the parties that were bad but just your friends. Maybe wine and cheese parties in France were real, undepressing, with pleasant people and as many as *thirteen* different cheeses. Could you even name thirteen different cheeses.

“I don’t believe you,” I said to Leah. “I don’t believe you’ve been reading Nietzsche you’re blackout.”

It occurred to Alex that a mouse-finds-cheese puzzle game on the iPhone probably already existed and that he would not become rich off his programming ever.

“Why are we here,” Alex said. “This party sucks. Fuck this party.”

“Have you read Nietzsche,” Leah said to me.

“No, not really. I read something about him on the internet. Yeah. On the Apollonian-Dionysian distinction in art, or something. Was that Nietzsche.”

“I don’t know you’re blackout,” Leah said.

Sweat began to flow. A nameless requested loudly the window be opened. Coats, jackets, and even shirts were taken off. People’s faces flushed with heat. A Skrillex song began playing. It was heavy. The bass dropped and went, “Wubb wubb wub wbububuw.” I felt slightly nauseated. In high school I didn’t go to prom. To party was important in high school, as in

college, but I didn't party. On the night of prom I worked a minimum wage job at a grocery store. A girl really wanted to go to prom with me—she had told me so—but I worked instead. My job was to retrieve shopping carts from the grocery store's parking lot. Customers didn't like to return their shopping carts to the front of the grocery store after they were done with them—they preferred to just leave them in the parking lot—so I was paid minimum wage to bring shopping carts from the lot back to the front of the store, where new customers could take them, shop, bring them out to their car and leave them in the lot, in a sort of never ending cycle. That night after work I lied awake in bed and stared at the ceiling and listened to an indie rock song called "Existentialism on Prom Night." I was too young to know what "existentialism" meant, if anything, but I felt profound.

Kevin returned.

"Where have you been," Steven said.

"I don't know I'm blackout."

Skrillex dropped the bass and the wubb-wubbz wubbed nauseatingly. The temperature of the room seemed to be increasing exponentially. I could feel streams of sweat trickle down my back. You're blackout.

Slowly we all stopped dancing. The heat was too much. We plopped down on couches, the floors, left wet spots where we sat. The beers were gone. Who had drunk them was unclear. "Alex, you're not really depressed, are you," I said.

"No. Whatever. I don't care. I'm too old for this."

"For what," Leah said.

"We try to go out and have a good time, and this is what happens," Kevin said.

"None of you are depressed," I said. "I'm not depressed. This party sucks."

“Whatever,” Alex said.

“Stop saying ‘whatever,’” Leah said.

“I’m depressed,” Steven said.

“You all should feel lucky, if you are depressed,” Alex said, “because you’re young, you’re younger than me, and you’re going to reach a point in your life where you don’t even care anymore, you don’t feel anything, you just feel fucking *numb*, and you’re going to wish you could get back to that place where you could feel deeply about things, because at least then things seemed to, I don’t know, matter.”

“Take me home, Alex,” Leah said. “Walk me home. I don’t want to be here anymore. Why did we even come here.”

“Why are we still here. Let’s leave,” Steven said.

“I used to believe in God,” Kevin said. “And all that shit. Then I grew up.”

Did I believe in God, I wondered.

“Alex,” I said.

“Alex,” Leah said. “Let’s go.”

“Stay,” I said.

“Stay you’re blackout,” Kevin said.

“Fuck everything,” Alex said. “I’m serious: fuck everything. It doesn’t matter. Let’s go.”

“Alex,” I said. “Stay.”

He stood up. Leah stood up.

I stood up.

I grabbed Alex’s arm tightly. He looked at me.

“Alex,” I said. “You don’t mean it.”

“Don’t mean what.”

“He’s blackout.”

“I’m blackout.”

“You don’t mean it, Alex.”

“Oh my god why are we still here.”

“I just wanted to have fun tonight and somehow now *this* happens.”

“Alex, you still feel things, you’re not numb, you fucker.”

““You fuckerrr.””

“Alex, you’ve got to help me. I’m asking you to help me.”

“Let go of me, you dumbass. You’re just drunk.”

“He’s blackout.”

“I’m being serious. For once in our lives can we be serious.”

“Ok, seriously, let’s leave now.”

“Help you with what. What’s your problem.”

“Don’t leave. Tell me something.”

“What.”

And I don’t know why exactly, but I punched Alex right in his god damn mouth.

“That’s what,” I said.

**Mr. T**

\_Well it turns out that I dropped out of the teaching program.

\_Damn. Really? Why?

\_I don't know. Decided I didn't want to be a teacher, I guess.

\_Yeah frankly it never really seemed like you were all that into it.

\_I wasn't. I just didn't know what else I could do with a history degree. And "those who can't do teach," right?

\_\_How are you two doing tonight?

\_Good.

\_Good.

\_Can I start you off with something to drink or are you ready to order or

\_I'll just have a coffee and a glass of water.

\_\_Sure.

\_Can I get a coffee and some fries?

\_\_Sure. Anything else?

\_No, that's it.

\_\_All right. I'll be right back with your coffees and water.

\_Thanks.

\_So you're just going to graduate with plain ol' history then?

\_Yeah. I don't know. I guess. Maybe I should switch into something useful. Maybe I'll take the LSAT and try to go to law school.

\_You could always become a historian.

\_Hehe.

\_Heh.

\_What about you? Still just doing English?

\_Yeah. Living the dream.

\_Have you ever thought about teaching?

\_No. Not really. I just want to write.

\_That's cool. It's good to know what you want.

\_Yeah, if you want the right things. Writing is not the right thing.

\_Heh.

\_I'm just getting sorta cold feet, with graduation looming and all, you know?

\_Yeah. Me going into the teacher certification program? That was all just cold feet. "Ah I'm going to graduate without a future." Et cetera.

\_But don't get me wrong; I'm ready to graduate. I really want to graduate.

\_\_Here are your coffees.

\_Thanks.

\_Thank you.

\_\_And your water.

\_Thanks.

\_\_And your fries will be out in just a minute.

\_Ok.

\_I just want school to be over.

\_Why? I don't.

\_Why not? School's the worst.

\_Because. Then you have to go out into the real world. School is not the real world. It's a bubble.

I like being safe in my little bubble, I guess.

\_I don't know. I just want to get on with my life.

\_I don't.

\_Heh.

\_Well. It's a shame about the teaching thing, though. I thought you'd make a pretty good teacher.

Was there anything that particularly changed your mind or

\_I don't know.

\_Just decided it wasn't your game?

\_I guess my "cooperating teacher"—that's what they had us call the teachers in whose classes we worked: our "cooperating teachers"

\_Jesus.

\_I guess my cooperating teacher, well, I kinda realized he was a jackass. Then I kinda realized most of the teachers I've ever had were sorta jackasses. And at first I tried telling myself I'd be a better teacher—I told myself I wouldn't end up a jackass—but I guess I realized maybe it's not possible? Maybe there's just something about schools, the way they work and everything—teachers always end up having to be some sort of jackass.

\_Heh.

\_And I was not about to become a jackass.

\_What was particularly wrong with him? Or her?

\_Him. There were lots of things wrong with him. I don't know. He really liked that book "Freakonomics." Like he really really liked it.

\_Haha.

\_Like how are you going to be a supposedly very smart social-sciences teacher and then really

like the book “Freakonomics.”

\_I’ve never read that book; what’s it even about?

\_It’s just like, it shows how traditional economic theories apply to “untraditional” circumstances.

Or something. It’s fucking stupid.

\_Hehe.

\_Like he kept telling me about this one part in the book, about how crack dealers actually function via some good and basic economic principles. Supply and demand etc. And I’m like, “Oh wow that’s very interesting,” to him, but in my head I’m like, “Well no shit, of course selling crack relies on basic economic principles; did you think it’d be different just because they’re selling crack instead of coffee or something?”

\_Speaking of, does this coffee taste burnt to you?

\_Yeah, but in a good way, in a “classically shitty diner” way.

\_Heh. Fair enough. So he liked dumb books.

\_Well but it wasn’t just that. The worst thing he did, he would talk about students with me behind their backs. And the things he’d say, Jesus, like, “Oh don’t worry about that girl; she never finishes her homework.” Real defeatist shit. Real fatalist.

\_Eh. I don’t know. I can see how it’d be easy for a teacher to get jaded after a while. Maybe it looked harsh to a young, bright-eyed teacher in training like you, but he probably wasn’t being all that judgmental. How old was this guy?

\_Not too old. Late twenties? And, okay, so saying somebody never does their homework is whatever, but also there was this crazy kid he shit talked. I mean this kid was literally crazy, as in major psychological health issues.

\_Okay.



\_Okay, so one day this kid calls in a bomb threat. It turns out that he's some sort of paranoid schizophrenic and he thinks the colored people at school are against him and are trying to infect him with liberal ideas or something, along with the school itself, in some sort of insidious liberal agenda. So he decides he wants to blow up the school.

\_Jesus.

\_Well of course he didn't actually have the means to blow up the school—he was just nuts—but prior to this bomb thing he had a long record of threatening colored kids at school, getting into fights, bad grades, et cetera. And he was some sort of Bible pusher? Did I mention that?

\_No.

\_Well, yeah, apparently he carried a Bible with him constantly and would say the colored liberals were trying to break his faith or something—this religious stuff was also part of his paranoia's nexus, I guess—and he'd refuse to do certain lessons in school because they were against God in his eyes and everything.

\_\_Here are your fries.

\_Thanks.

\_\_You two need anything else right now?

\_Nope.

\_I think we're all set. Thanks.

\_\_Just let me know if you need anything.

\_Jesus. Sounds like a pretty crazy kid.

\_Well yeah he definitely was nuts, but that's not my point here. I mean, okay, he was crazy, but my "cooperating teacher" declassified all that info about him to me. He shit-talked the kid. Which I'm totally sure breaks some sort of privacy law? I mean I never even met this kid—he

wasn't in my classes; I only taught in the mornings—but my CT decided to give me the poor kid's life story after he was pinned for the bomb threat. Which he was pinned for, after only like 24 hours or something, because I guess crazy kids are not exactly the most thoughtful about covering their tracks and making their life-threatening phone calls untraceable and such, of course.

\_Heh.

\_I'm not even sure how the teacher learned for sure that it was this crazy kid who called in the threat. Seems like that would be classified too or confidential or something.

\_Maybe confidentiality gets dropped when lives are threatened, I guess?

\_Probably. Anyway, there's no reason he needed to tell me the poor kid's life story. It's not as if I were asking all about the bomb threat and worrying about it. I was being a responsible god damn person and treating it, I don't know, treating it not like a piece of schoolyard gossip? I mean it was a psychotic bomb threat. I mean this guy was gossiping like a tween about this crazy kid. If you could just hear this guy tweenishly gossiping for two seconds about this poor crazy Bible kid, and then he starts talking "Freakonomics" on you, you'd understand why I dropped out of the whole teaching program thing.

\_Heh.

\_I mean I didn't want to hear any of it. He probably really wanted me to join in with him, all sympathetic gung-ho colleague-like, like, "Oh wow he carried around a Bible all day too? What a freakshow!" But I wasn't having it. Because maybe the kid's a Bible-pushing bomb-threatening psycho, but he's still a, a person. He needed help obviously. He didn't need to be shit-talked.

\_Obviously

\_Help yourself to some of my fries if you want.

\_Thanks.

\_I mean shouldn't a teacher be the kind of person to refrain from shit-talking a very possibly schizophrenic kid?

\_Ya.

\_Well.

\_I mean I just hope you didn't let this one shitty teacher turn you off the whole teaching thing.

\_I don't know. It just seems like all teachers are more or less like that, in their own ways.

They're all just "Freakonomics" readers and schizo-shit-talkers, deep down. It just seems like they'd all sooner shit-talk a fifteen-year-old Bible-pushing racist paranoid schizophrenic than refer him to the counselor or a psychologist or something. It's like, I mean most teachers obviously wouldn't shit-talk a retard—like a kid with Down syndrome—but they'd still shit-talk this schizo racist kid—and wouldn't see the difference.

\_It's like how they can't see the difference between crack economics and coffee economics.

\_Exactly. Yeah.

\_Well. Personally I've had some really good teachers.

\_Yeah? I mean I have too but

\_Yeah. Definitely. I fucking loved my 10th grade journalism teacher. He got me into Hunter S. Thompson.

\_Meh, never really cared for him.

\_Yeah, I don't know, I've kinda grown out of him. But my journalism teacher, he was just the kind of guy who'd always say "Hi" to his students whenever he saw them in the hall or at lunch. You know what I mean? Most teachers act like they don't have to talk to you outside their

classroom—they don't have the, I don't know, common decency?—but he always made an effort to say “Hi.” I just always remember this one time I ran into him grocery shopping at Meijer and he walked right up to me and said “Hi” and then we talked about foreign-oil dependency or global warming or some shit for like twenty solid minutes.

\_Did he know his shit?

\_What?

\_I mean when he'd go off about foreign oil et cetera, did he actually know what he was talking about or did he just love hearing himself talk?

\_No, no. No—he definitely knew what he was talking about. He was a really smart guy.

\_Okay.

\_But the main thing wasn't that he was smart. A lot of teachers are smart. This guy, he was just, I don't know, really friendly, in an authentic way.

\_Okay. So he was smart and friendly. I mean he sounds like a great guy, don't get me wrong, there are a lot of teachers who'll talk with their students and be all pal-y, but that doesn't mean they're not still kind of an asshole.

\_Hahaha.

\_I'm serious. Because a good teacher isn't just your pal; he's your Teacher. Do you understand me?

\_Jesus. Come on.

\_Okay, okay. But you know what I mean?

\_No. Not really, honestly.

\_Well let me give you just one example.

\_\_More coffee?

\_Yes, please.

\_Sure.

\_Thanks.

\_\_You're welcome.

\_Okay so let me give you what I think will prove to be an illustrative and poignant example.

\_Jesus.

\_I'm serious.

\_And I'm listening.

\_Okay then so for an example of how a teacher can be a sociable, friendly, even highly intelligent guy but still ultimately be an asshole? And, I think, let me just mention I think the problem really has in the first place something to do with education in general. This whole notion of master and pupil. People ought to teach themselves.

\_Maybe. I don't exactly agree.

\_Okay fine, but so I had this teacher Mr. T.

\_Mr. T? Hahah.

\_I know, I know. But not that Mr. T. Not the mohawk guy. He was a white guy. Handsome, muscular, goatee, slick haircut. He wore a dress shirt and tie every day.

\_A "slick haircut"?

\_Yeah. A Caesar cut, I think.

\_Jesus. A Caesar cut.

\_Haha. But so Mr. T: he was my seventh grade American-studies teacher. And a really cool guy, easy to talk to, young, seemed pretty smart.

\_Maybe I should major in "American studies."

\_And he was into some cool shit. He used to play System of a Down in class. On Halloween he

\_Okay, System of a Down is *not* “cool shit” haha.

\_Whatever. You get my point. On Halloween he dressed up as a “communist soldier” with a totally badass red coat and real fur hat and military boots and cigar in mouth and then he taught us about the theoretical legitimacy of communism and the theoretical illegitimacy of capitalism.

\_He hated them capitalist pigs.

\_Exactly. And we always watched cool documentaries in class, like “The Corporation,” which, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen it but it’s about how corporations are literally considered “people” legally and they do fucked up things—like it showed how this one corporation was copyrighting gene sequences and

\_Yeah I’ve seen it. It’s cool.

\_Yeah. So he was into some cool shit. I mean this guy wasn’t about to list “Freako-fucking-nomics” in his top ten. And he was really passionate about his job. You could tell he really wanted to reach us or change our lives or something.

\_Passionate. Got it.

\_Ok, so let me cut to the chase. So one day he’s lecturing about something—I don’t even remember what he was lecturing about, to be honest; anyway it doesn’t matter—and he’s getting all passionate and he’s doing his typical Mr. T spiel, you know? He’s all, “You have to be a responsible citizen. The government is more and more corrupt. Big businesses and multinational corporations rule everything. Our basic human rights are constantly in jeopardy.”

\_Mr. T spiel, anti-gov, anti-corporations—got it.

\_Ok so then one smart-ass kid shouts out to Mr. T—interrupts him right in the middle of his spiel—shouts out: “Yeah, well what are you going to do about it?”

\_Classic. Classic smart-ass kid retort.

\_Yup. And, okay, here's where I'm going to try to make my point, so pay attention.

\_Heh.

\_So this smart-ass kid gives him the classic smart-ass kid argument, which is, "Yeah, you're great at bemoaning our state of affairs, but what the hell are you going to do about it? Besides complain?" And what does Mr. T say? Mr. T says what I expect a lot of decently smart, decently reasonable teachers would say. But before even saying anything he gets impassioned, of course. He starts strutting. His eyebrows raise, his forehead crinkles. "What am *I* going to do about it?" he says. "What am *I* going to *do about it*?" he says, as if building a retort simply by repeating his opponent's argument.

\_This coffee is seriously shitty. It tastes burnt.

\_And you know what his retort is? He says he himself might not personally do much about the corporations, and the government, and the wars, and the corruption—but by *teaching* people about these things he hopes that someday he can reach someone and then *they* will reach more people and then, *then* when there's a bunch of people all likeminded, then a chain-reaction, snowball-effect thing will occur and then the world will change.

\_He said that?

\_Well he didn't exactly word it like *that*; but do you get the argument? He basically admits he isn't going to do shit about anything. His whole plan of attack is he's going to indoctrinate a bunch of kids with progressive, liberal thinking, and then *they* will do something.

\_I don't get it. I mean that seems fair enough. For a teacher.

\_Maybe it is. I don't know. The phrase "infinite regress" comes to my mind. I can imagine generation after generation of our most progressive, forward-thinking citizens doing nothing but

teaching the *next* generation of progressive, forward-thinking citizens how to teach *the next* generation of citizens to combat corruption by teaching the *next* generation of forward-thinking citizens how to teach the *next* generation of

—Do you two need anything else? I'm just going to leave this bill with you, but feel free to take your time.

Just take it up whenever you're ready.



## **The Plagiarist**

“Now who would like to read the story they wrote first?” Mrs. Rimas asked her class full of squirmy second graders. She peered out across the desks full of raised hands and chose Julie Nicholson, whose hand was raised just a tad higher than the others. “Okay, Julie. You can go first.”

Julie stepped to the front of the class, holding a single sheet of notebook paper. She adjusted her glasses and stuttered out the first few lines of her story.

“My . . . um . . . story is called Cinderbella. Once upon a time there was a princess named Cinderbella. She had mean sisters and a mean Mom and they made her do all the housework. Then one day a prince came to their house and asked the sisters to go to a dance. Cinderbella really wanted to go to the dance too but she wasn’t allowed to because her sisters were mean. So when her sisters went to the ball that night Cinderbella’s fairy godmother appeared and turned her maid’s clothes into a beautiful dress and turned her shoes into moon boots. Then the fairy godmother turned a pumpkin into a rocket ship so Cinderbella could fly to the dance quickly. The fairy godmother told Cinderbella that the magic would wear off at midnight and the rocket ship would turn back into a pumpkin though. Cinderbella used her rocket ship to fly to the dance and she spent the whole night dancing with the handsome prince. Her moon boots had lower gravity than normal boots so she danced better than everyone else. She lost track of time and realized it was almost midnight so she had to run out of the dance to get back to her rocket ship in time and she lost one of her moon boots. The prince thought Cinderbella was a good dancer so he picked up the moon boot and tried to find out whose it was but it didn’t fit anyone’s foot. The prince went to check outside and he saw a rocket ship in the air and figured the moon boot must belong to the pilot so he followed the rocket ship back to Cinderbella’s house and found out it

was hers. Cinderbella and the prince got married after that. After the wedding Cinderbella had her fairy godmother turn the cake into a rocket ship and Cinderbella and the prince flew to the moon and they lived happily ever after.”

Mrs. Rimas paused a moment before responding to Julie’s story. Then she said, “Good job, Julie. That was a nice story, except it was mostly the same as the original Cinderella story that I read in class last week. You should never copy someone else’s work. The assignment was to write your *own* story.”

“I liked Julie’s story better than the original,” Billy Therman said. “It had a rocket ship. Rocket ships are cool. And moon boots are better than dumb old glass shoes.”

“Yes, I agree,” Mrs. Rimas said, “the rocket ship *was* cool, but the bulk of the story was exactly the same as the original Cinderella. Here, I’ll try to explain it to all of you better.” Mrs. Rimas wrote the word PLAGIARISM on the chalk board. She explained the word to the class. The children just stared at her. Julie Nicholson’s face turned red as she sat back down in her desk.

“But her story is called Cinderbella. And it had a *rocket ship*. And *moon boots*. It’s *completely* different,” Lisa Fritz said.

“No,” Mrs. Rimas said, “she only changed a few minor details.”

“Well, how else was I supposed to write a story?” Julie Nicholson said.

“Let’s move on,” Mrs. Rimas said. “Who would like to read their story next?”

Allison Krenowitz raised her hand. Allison had never raised her hand in class before.

“Go ahead, Allison,” Mrs. Rimas said.

Allison stepped to the front of the class. “My story’s called ‘The Plagiarist,’” she said. Without even looking down at her paper, she began: “Now who would like to read the story

they wrote first?’ Mrs. Remas asked her class full of squirmy first graders. She peered out across the desks full of raised hands and chose Cinderella, whose hand was raised just a tad higher than the others. ‘Okay, Cinderella. You can fucking go first,’ she said,” she said.

## Se in i mina ögon

Overnight a crew of surly hard-hatted men transformed Brookfield High School's library into a media center. First they knocked down the library's rear wall and annexed the gymnasium behind it, septupling the library's area. In the new 6/7 they tore down the basketball nets and ripped up the hardwood floor and laid down grey nylon Berber carpet and drywalled over the brick walls and spray painted them with quick-dry white paint and brought in all kinds of modern, minimalistic Swedish furniture, like Ikea work desks and lumbar-supporting swivel chairs and stainless steel wastepaper baskets and gooseneck fluorescent lamps with energy efficient fluorescent bulbs, and all kinds of edge-cutting technology, like laser printers and fiber-optic network routers and 48-inch HD monitors and slim sleek computers with processing speeds approaching light. In the old 1/7 they sledge-hammered the old, quaint grandfather clock, which was perpetually five minutes slow, and replaced it with a very slick digital clock that not only told the time but also the date and weather and moon phase (today: waning gibbous) and news headlines and stock market quotes, and they rearranged the giant wooden bookshelves that were haphazardly scattered everywhere into a grid of neat, geometric rows with four-foot-wide aisles. Once the bookshelves were compacted into rows they realized the old 1/7 looked sort of empty, sort of too spacious, and there were huge depressions in the brown shag carpet where the heavy bookshelves had sat forever and shadowy rectangles on the walls' purple paint where they'd stood forever, which all looked ghastly, and they considered moving all the bookshelves back to cover the depressions and discolored walls but decided not to because the bookshelves were heavy as hell and dawn was near and they needed to finish soon. So to finish their job, they vacuumed all 7/7 with Zamboni-like industrial vacuums. After they vacuumed, everything smelled neutral and cold and modern and clean, like Sweden. Finally they replaced the old

wooden sign that said “Library” above the front entrance with a new stainless steel sign that said “Media Center” in Arial.

The next morning Mr. Pierce took his twelfth grade English class to the media center, to the new 6/7, and assigned an open-topic research paper. The requirements were seven pages, a bibliography in Modern Language Association format with eight reliable sources (three of which had to be books), and no spelling or grammar errors, Mr. Pierce said. “Also, no Wikipedia. Wikipedia is not a reliable source. Any questions?” Nobody raised their hand. “Okay, then you all can start. The first thing you should do is choose a good topic—it’s important to pick a really good topic because it dictates the quality of your paper.”

All at once forty students began typing and clicking, like plastic rain.

Sid didn’t immediately start pounding his keyboard and mouse. He tried to think of a good topic first, not because of what Mr. Pierce said but because he wanted an easy topic so he wouldn’t have to work hard. He was thinking he should pick a really general and vague topic—that way he could write and cite pretty much anything and it’d all be relevant and true sort of. He swiveled back and forth in his chair, brainstorming. His spine hurt from the chair. He was skinny and pale and scoliotic and myopic, all from playing Starcraft 2 five hours daily on his computer. He was wearing thick-rimmed rectangular glasses and a black hoodie that said “Starcraft II.” His head ached from caffeine withdrawal—he was craving a Monster Energy Drink.

The student sitting to Sid’s right raised her hand. “Mr. Pierce?”

“Yes, Keira?”

“Do we have to use books? Or can we just use the internet?”

“As I said, three of your eight sources must be books.”

“Yeah but why?”

“Using multiple types of sources ensures your paper’s validity and broadens its scope. The wider you cast your net, the more fish you catch, right? Using only one source is tantamount to copying, or plagiarism, which will get you in trouble.”

“The internet isn’t one source, though. It’s like ten million-billion sources...in one. It’s like ten-billion fish, in a fiber-optic barrel, and instead of a net you have an ultra-powered plasma rifle called Google.”

“Three books, Keira.”

She hunched and turned back to her computer.

The hardest part of the research paper would be finding three book sources, Sid decided. Reading books took time and wasn’t fast like the internet. He tried to think of some books he could cite without reading, like really vague, open-to-interpretation books that were basically unreadable yet still widely read for some dumb reason: these books were usually called “classics.”

He Googled “the most misinterpreted books of all time.” The first result said, “The Bible is the most misread and misinterpreted book ever written...both the world’s all-time bestseller and the least understood book in existence.” “Hmmm,” Sid was like. He Googled “list of holy books like the bible.”

He raised his hand. “Mr. Pierce?”

“Yes?”

“Can my research topic be God, and can I use the Bible, the Vedas, and the Talmud as my book sources?”

Mr. Pierce was a new teacher and a little iffy on public schools’ nebulous religious tolerance policies and in a kneejerk reaction said yes, Sid could research God and cite the Bible,

the Vedas, and the Talmud, if he wanted to. But he had to include five more sources, none of which were Wikipedia.

Sid was like, “Sweet.” He swiveled to face his computer. He felt good about his topic choice. God was a sweet topic. He signed into Gmail and messaged his friend Alexa in Gmail chat.

**Sid (9:20):** I’m writing a research paper  
on god

**Alexa:** lol

It occurred to Mr. Pierce that maybe he shouldn’t let Sid research God. God might be an inappropriate topic. There weren’t really facts available about God. Research papers needed facts mostly. But maybe saying there weren’t facts available about God was religiously intolerant.

“Sid,” Mr. Pierce said.

Sid switched browser tabs to hide Gmail. “Yeah?”

“Your research topic can’t be God, I’ve decided.”

“Why not? You said it’s open topic.”

“It is open topic but God’s an inappropriate topic. God’s too...broad.”

“How’s God an inappropriate topic? I think calling God inappropriate is inappropriate. God’s always appropriate for everything everywhere. God’s omni-appropriate.”

Mr. Pierce stared at Sid and thought, “Smart ass.” On the computer screen the Gmail tab was flashing with a new message. Mr. Pierce felt tired. Maybe God was okay. Whatever. People in universities published papers about God—Mr. Pierce’s own university had offered philosophy classes about Him/Her/It/Them. He decided to call Sid’s bluff.

“Fine: you can research God. But if you’re going to make jokes and not take the topic

seriously—and God is pretty high up there on the list of serious topics, mind you—then I’d suggest changing topics because I’m going to grade your paper just like everyone else’s, so you better keep it critical and objective and focused. And I’d strongly suggest refining your topic into something more specific than just ‘God’—you could, for example, research something like, I don’t know, the affect of socioeconomic status on theism or the Bible’s influence in American politics. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Then get to work.”

Another student across the room raised her hand and said “Mr. Pierce? Can you help me?” and as Mr. Pierce walked over to help her his mind wandered the neural catacombs of its Religion section—he was currently agnostic, more from in- than de-cision; his parents had been Christian and had sort of superficially raised him Christian—they went to church on Easter and Christmas (unless the roads were snowy) and owned one yellowing paperback Bible pretty much just to own it and wore some fake-gold jewelry with crucifixes and went to see Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of The Christ* when it was topping the box office, but otherwise God was usually out of sight and mind; his parents had been the pray-silently-in-your-head-when-stuck-in-traffic-jams type of believers, not the pray-aloud-before-every-dinner type—so his beliefs were never exactly established when he was young, and after he went away to college and missed a few Christmas masses he simply stopped being Christian—and not because of anything particularly worldview changing he’d learned in college; he wasn’t one of those post-college atheists who’d read like half a Nietzsche book and immediately decided “God is dead”— but because people just change, sometimes for very particular reasons, like Nietzschean philosophy, and other times for no reason except that time had passed and they now lived like 700 miles away from their fair-



weather Christian parents, and now the student said, “Is that okay?” and Mr. Pierce realized she’d been talking and he hadn’t heard her. He said “What?” She said she asked if it was okay to use Wikipedia if you didn’t actually cite Wikipedia itself but cited your topic’s Wikipedia article’s sources; like, could you use the same sources that your topic’s Wikipedia article used, or was that still considered using Wikipedia somehow even though the source wouldn’t actually be Wikipedia and you’d just be using Wikipedia as a sort of middleman to find sources? Like would those sources somehow become bad, tainted source-meat through some sort of Wikipedian cross-contamination? How exactly do you determine if a source is reliable anyway by the way? Isn’t it all really just a judgment call? Like, who’s to say a source isn’t reliable? If I were, for example, just sitting here in the media center and looking at some statistics, how would I know they weren’t produced by laboratory chimpanzees pounding numeric keyboards? “What?” Mr. Pierce said, noticing the girl’s gold cross necklace. “Never mind,” she said. “I’ll figure it out.” She Googled “how to determine if a source is reliable.” She clicked on the first result, which was a wikiHow article titled “How to Evaluate the Credibility of a Source.” It had eleven steps. She started reading. It only took until step two for her to realize wikiHow was a wiki-based, editable-by-any-schmuck-on-the-internet website just like Wikipedia, and that made it unreliable in teachers’ opinions. So the guide on how to determine a source’s reliability was unreliable itself. She chewed the cross of her necklace, frustrated. She went back to Google and searched “when does skepticism become an end in itself.”

Mr. Pierce had wandered into the old 1/7 somehow. He couldn’t remember why. As he was trying to remember why, he tripped on a depression in the carpet and fell flat on his ass. He looked around, embarrassed someone might’ve seen him fall. The old 1/7 was empty. He sat quietly a moment, ass hurting. The carpet smelled clean, like it’d been vacuumed recently. Or it

smelled like a vacuum itself, the physics kind. Did vacuums have smells? How could nothing have a smell? Was the absence of smell a smell itself? Suddenly Mr. Pierce felt vacuous and empty and blank, like a bibliography without reliable sources. Why had he wandered into the old 1/7? He must have wandered over for something, right? He suddenly remembered a philosophy lecture from his college days: it was about something called the teleological argument—the gist of it was that the universe’s having order and not being completely random supposedly meant God exists. He got up off his ass and adjusted his pants. He walked over to the bookshelves. He found the religion/philosophy aisle. He grabbed a random book off the shelf. On the cover was Nietzsche’s pissed off, mustachioed face.

**Alexa (9:35):** You should put the bible in your bibliography  
and put god as the author  
and intentionally misspell bibliography “bibleography”

**Sid:** I’m going to  
I’m going to put it in MLA format  
It’ll be serious business

**Alexa:** god is serious business

**Sid:** lol

Sid Googled “citation machine” and clicked the first result. He set the citation machine to MLA format. He put “God” in the author section and “The Bible” in the title section and “Israel” as the publishing city and “Heaven” as the publishing company.

**Sid:** It’ll look like this:  
God. *The Bible*. Israel: Heaven, Print.  
and the intext citations will be like

(God, 12)

like

“Let there be light” (God, 5)

**Alexa:** Nice

What’s the thesis of your paper?

You need a sweet thesis

**Sid:** My thesis is

god

is

omni-serious

**Alexa:** lol

This is god: (-\_-)

(-\_-) “Why hast thou forsaken me?”

**Sid:** lolol

After typing “lolol” Sid felt sort of morose and sick, like Nietzsche. He was starting to see the direction his research paper was headed and was starting to think maybe he shouldn’t research God. He pictured himself tumbling down a slippery slope, a slippery ski slope in Sweden. He tried to think of a research paper topic he was genuinely interested in. He soon discovered he didn’t have any genuine interests, except real-time strategy computer games like Starcraft 2, which wouldn’t be a good topic. Not having any genuine interests except Starcraft 2 seemed mildly depressing. “Welp,” Sid was like. He was going to fail his research paper and also twelfth grade English and possibly life too, he decided. His mom would be upset. He imagined his mom upset, sitting on her couch and holding up his research paper and pointing at the giant

red F on it. “What is this?” she’d say. “Welp,” he’d reply. She’d get over it eventually. Four months ago Sid’s grandpa died of pancreatic cancer, and his mom was not yet over it. After his grandpa died his mom’s couch-sitting and TV-watching and delivered-pizza-eating dramatically increased. These increases positively correlated with Sid’s increased internet-browsing and Starcraft-2-playing. Sid’s grandpa had been an honest, church-going, suspenders-wearing man—the type of man who read the newspaper to “keep up with the times” and didn’t have cable television because he “didn’t need it” and didn’t have a computer because he would “never figure out one of those damn things.” The type of man who washed his truck by hand and changed its oil and spark plugs himself, not because he wanted to save money but because he genuinely enjoyed auto-maintenance. Sid wished he genuinely enjoyed auto-maintenance. He’d liked his grandpa. He understood why his mom was upset he died sort of, although her getting-over-it time seemed kind of excessive. Yesterday he Googled “normative length of grief in response to parental death.” The results said grieving lengths were highly variable and person dependent. One website said it was not uncommon for symptoms to last one or two years. Another website tried to explain the difference between grief and clinical depression. Another website said that the most statistically reliable grief-mitigating variable was a support system of loving friends and family. That last one worried Sid; his mom was divorced and friendless and worked two jobs and had about as much support as a skyscraper with a cardboard foundation. Sid imagined his mom sitting on a couch for two straight years with leaning towers of pizza boxes sprouting like weeds from the tomato-sauce-stained carpet. He felt sick and tired and Nietzsche-y and tried to think of something else. He thought about Starcraft 2 and his grandpa. Sid’s favorite grandpa-related memory was last year’s Christmas: for Christmas his grandpa gave him an expensive wireless laser mouse that he’d wanted. A good mouse was important for RTS

games—standard mice just weren’t designed for the 300-inputs-per-minute, ADHD-inducing pace of a competitive Starcraft 2 match; commanding armies of 200 hive-minded insectoid aliens required laser precision and ergonomic, non-finger- and wrist-cramping design. He’d asked his mom for the special gaming mouse—he hadn’t expected his grandpa to get it for him; he hadn’t thought his grandpa would be able to; hadn’t thought his grandpa even knew there was a non-rodent kind of mouse. He imagined his grandpa going into an electronics store and looking anachronistic and politely telling the young store clerk he needed a (pulling a pair of reading glasses out of his shirt’s front pocket and reading off a folded piece of notebook paper) “Logitech G9x laser mouse” for his grandson, who loved videogames. He imagined his grandpa sitting on a park bench with a newspaper and a bag full of breadcrumbs to feed ducks—whenever he tossed some crumbs the ducks quacked happily. Now he imagined his grandpa holding up his research paper and pointing not at the giant red F on it but at the bolded title, “The Omni-seriousness of God in Post-Technological Modernity.” “What the hell is this?” his grandpa said. His tone was literal, not castigative; he literally did not understand what the hell Sid’s research paper was.

Sid opened Google docs and saved a blank document as “Research Paper.” He closed Google docs. He returned to Gmail and reread the lines “lolol” and “My thesis is / God / is / omni-serious” and thought about his grandpa skiing. He imagined his grandpa kneeling in a church pew, lips moving in silent prayer, candles burning at the altar. He imagined his grandpa leading a train of ducklings into an electronics store—when they were inside the ducklings started flying everywhere!

**Sid (9:45):** Wait

Do you need a thesis for a research paper?

I thought you just cite a lot of facts and don't take any angle on it  
so it's objective

**Alexa:** Hmm

idk

I just Googled "do you need a thesis for a research paper" and the first result  
said you need one

It said "Your thesis statement is like a declaration of your belief"

But I thought you don't put any of your beliefs in a research paper  
because it's supposed to be objective and factual  
and anything based on 'belief' isn't factual

right?

So idk

School is stupid and mixed messagey lol

**Sid(9:40):** Hmm

It might be hard to write a research paper on god  
without 'belief'

**Alexa:** lol

Sid's grandpa's ghost said, "Who's this Alexa girl? Is she nice? What's she look like?"

"I don't know. She's just some girl on the internet. I've never actually met her."

"Wait," Sid was like—why did he believe his grandpa's ghost was floating behind him  
and reading over his shoulder? If he didn't believe in God, he shouldn't believe in grandpaternal  
ghosts, right? He'd caught himself in a contradiction. Either he should believe in all spirits or  
none, he told himself—it was illogical to believe in recently deceased familial spirits and not an

omnipotent omnipresent omniscient omnibenevolent Holy Spirit. He had to decide what he believed, right now, once and for all.

Instead he ctrl-t'd three new browser tabs in Chrome and filled them with a Starcraft 2 forum, Reddit, and Google. He Googled "do you need a thesis for a research paper?" and while the results were taking 2.5 seconds to load began reading a Starcraft 2 thread about Zerg build orders. In RTS games, build orders were crucial; they were sort of analogous to chess openings: where chess had the time-tested Ruy Lopez opening and various gimmicky gambits, Starcraft had the standard Forge Fast Expand opening and infamous Zergling rush. The thread was a juicy five-pager about whether a 6-pool Zergling rush was still viable in Starcraft 2—it'd been a great opening in the original Starcraft, but balance tweaks in the sequel had weakened it—and Sid was really sinking his Monster-Energy-Drink-decayed teeth into it when the girl sitting next to him said, "Ugh oh my god this is so stupid."

"What?" Sid said.

"What?" she said.

"What?" Sid said.

"Sorry. Nothing," she said.

"Um," Sid was like.

Sid's grandpa's ghost said, "Boo! Boooooo!" and blew some cold ghost breath on the back of Sid's neck. The girl sitting next to Sid was whispering to herself like, "Ugh, seriously, this is so stupid."

Sid ignored them and continued reading the thread. One person posted that Zergling rushes were okay versus low-level players, who were ignorant of the proper defense, but it was unreliable versus knowledgeable opponents—eschewing the rush to build your economy and

save some Zerglings for a later attack with Roaches in the midgame was the standard, safer strategy because if your early rush failed then your midgame economy would lag and you'd be vulnerable to a counterattack and basically fucked. This all sounded sensible to Sid—Roach/Zergling pressure midgame was SOP—but another person posted that a Zergling rush was an absolutely viable strategy, albeit not perfect, and it had to be used occasionally to instill fear in the opponent. This person said Zerg players always just go for the midgame attack; therefore, it's totally predictable. And predictability is death in Starcraft—90% of the game is scouting out your opponent and responding; there's an ebb and flow to the game that amateur players who use predetermined, cookie-cutter build orders simply don't understand, and on particular ebbs Zergling rushes not only score a quick victory but also make opponents start second-guessing themselves in the next round. This all sounded sensible to Sid—predictability truly was death in Starcraft—but the first poster responded that only shit-tier opponents lose to Zergling rushes and that people who still think it's a viable strategy probably only play shit-tier opponents and that they need to wake up and get their head out of the original Starcraft's ass. To which the second poster responded, "I bet *you're* a shit-tier player. What's your match record? Mine is 501-124, and I owe half my wins to 6-pool Zergling rushes." To which the first poster responded, "You have dumbass opponents to thank for half your wins, probably, because any non-dumbass opponent could easily counter a 6-pool." To which the other responded, "I bet I could kick your ass, ass." At which point Sid stopped reading and was like, "This argument is getting stupid and ad hominem-y." He ctrl-tab'd over to Google. The search results there now seemed foreign and irrelevant—things had changed from when he'd first searched "do you need a thesis for a research paper"; he somehow didn't care whether he needed a thesis anymore. Sid's cares often fizzled away like that—they were here one second, gone the next, like Zergling swarms



scurrying across foggy terrain. He ctrl-shift-tab'd back to the Starcraft 2 forum. Starcraft 2 was the one consistent thing in Sid's life. He played for like five hours every day after school. His gamer-tag was 1ns1d1ous1; his online match record was 397-111; his APM (actions per minute) 200+. He always played as Zerg—Starcraft 2 had three playable races, Terran (humans), Protoss (humanoids), and Zerg (insectoids). Zerg were considered the most difficult to use because they required the most micromanagement (i.e., playing Zerg required clicking more things more frequently [hence the importance of a top-knotch mouse]).

His pocket vibrated. He took out his phone. His phone said he had a new picture message from Alexa—would he like to view it now? He tapped View Now onscreen. The picture was of Alexa: she was in an ill-lit room, shirtless, one hand pushing her underwear down from a bony hip, the other hand holding up her phone—she'd apparently taken the picture in a mirror with her phone—expression flat, face half-covered with side-swept bangs, hair the same plastic black as her phone, skin a vitamin-D-deficient white, eyes absent—Sid looked at this for like thirty seconds and was like, "Sexy," then put his phone back into his pocket and continued reading about Zerg strategies.

It seemed like class should be over soon. He took his phone out again to check the time—9:50; class would end in ten minutes.

**Alexa (9:51):** Did you get my picture?

**Sid:** Yeah

It occurred to him he could've just checked the time on his computer screen, in the bottom right corner; he wasted like ten seconds, taking out his phone.

The response "yeah" didn't seem enough. He considered adding something, like "it was sexy" or "I liked it." He typed these things, then deleted them, then stared at the blank message

bar, the cursor blinking hypnotically at the left margin. He held down **space** and watched the cursor race to the right, then held down **delete** and watched it race back left. "Umm," he was like.

"What did you mean by 'without "belief"'?" his grandpa's ghost said.

**Sid (9:53):** When did you take it?

Just now?

**Alexa:** Yeah

**Sid:** At your house?

**Alexa:** Yeah

His questions were objective and safe. Like a research paper, he thought.

"Hey how'd you get on Gmail?"

The girl sitting to Sid's right was staring at his screen. Sid reflexively **ctrl-t'd** a new tab, opening a blank page and hiding his Gmail chat. "Doesn't the school's filter block Gmail?" She tried to open Gmail, and the school's filter blocked it. "See?" She tilted her monitor towards him, her face frustrated like >\_<. She looked like an anime character: cartoony solid-blue eyes, like the irises had been filled with Photoshop's bucket tool, a thin line for a nose, a bunch of thick, markery lines for her shortish brown hair.

"You have to use a proxy."

"A what?"

"It's like...a...it gets around the filter, basically."

"Cool. Can you show me how?"

"Sure." He leaned over to reach her keyboard and Googled "how to use a free proxy" and clicked on the first result. She smelled like watermelon bubblegum. "There you go. This will tell

you how."

"Cool. Thanks. How'd you find out about this? What's your name?"

"Sid."

"How'd you find out about this? I'm Keira. Are you like really good at computers?"

"Not really. I just Googled 'how to bypass your school's web filter' one day."

"Really?" She laughed. "Why didn't I think of that?" Her face was like XD. "Thanks, Sid."

"No problem."

Sid turned back to his own computer.

He didn't type or click anything for like fifteen seconds because he felt like Keira was still looking at him. He glanced to his right to see whether Keria was still looking at him, and Keira was still looking at him. When Sid made eye-contact she didn't turn away like most people do when they're caught staring—she just took a pack of bubblegum out of her pocket and unwrapped two pieces and shoved them into her mouth.

"Uh," Sid was like.

"Do you want some gum? It's watermelon." Her chewing was loud, like a panda bear's.

"No. But thanks."

At the top of his browser the Gmail chat tab was flashing with a new message and he wanted to check it but didn't because of Keira. She was still staring at him and smacking her gum panda bearishly and suddenly Sid was really annoyed with her and wanted her to go away and chew more quietly and realize you can just Google things like "how to bypass your school's web filter" and don't have to bother people sitting next to you. Sid thought there were two types of people in the world: those who understood you can just Google everything and those who

didn't—and the latter really annoyed him.

“So what's your research topic, Sid?”

“I don't know yet.”

“I'm researching panda bears. I really like panda bears. They're pretty much like my favorite animal ever of all time.”

“That's cool, I guess.”

“What's your favorite animal?”

“I don't know.”

“Oh come on—of course you know!”

“Then I guess ducks. Or ducklings.”

“*Ducklings?!* ” She laughed like XD.

Sid laughed like haha.

“Earlier when I said ‘oh my god this is so stupid’ it was because I thought my computer's keyboard wasn't working but I figured out that the reason it wasn't working was that **alt** was stuck down because somebody spilled soda on it or something—isn't that funny? Sorry if it seemed like I was randomly freaking out.”

“Oh. It's fine. It was fine.”

“Sorry if I'm annoying you. You seem annoyed.”

“No. It's fine.”

“Okay. I'll stop annoying you then.”

She turned back to her computer and started typing and clicking.

“Um,” Sid was like. He angled his monitor away from Keira a little.

**Alexa (9:58):** send me a picture

:)

**Sid:** I can't right now

I'm in school

Wait

Why aren't you in school?

Did you skip?

**Alexa:** I don't go to school

**Sid:** Oh

Really?

I didn't know that lol

Are you homeschooled?

**Alexa:** Yeah

well, not really

actually

**Sid:** lol what

**Alexa:** It's hard to explain

I'm bored

**Sid:** Me too

I hate school

it's stupid

I go to school

lol

The bell rang (i.e., a digital recording of a bell's ringing was played through the school's

speaker system). Class was over. Sid logged off his computer without saying bye to Alexa. Gmail chat would just say he signed off. Just signing off was nonchalant and cool—why say bye when Gmail chat would say it for you? There were certain ways to do things on the internet, just like in real life. Keira said, “Bye Sid,” and pushed in her chair and walked away but Sid didn’t hear her because he was thinking about real life versus the internet.

His thoughts: Is the internet not real life? Just because it’s digital doesn’t mean it’s not real life. But the internet isn’t really a ‘real thing’ in the way most real things are real things (i.e. it’s not concrete [but it’s also not exactly an abstraction, like “trust” or “death” (i.e. it’s not an emotion or quality or concept [although it’s a little tempting to call the internet a concept if concept is defined “something formed by mentally combining all its characteristics or particulars” and internet is defined “all electronic devices communicating via TCP/IP and all that communication’s constituent parts, like wires, antennas, the signals moving through those wires and antennas, etc.”—although it’s tempting, this definition just doesn’t seem correct in the same way “mind” typically isn’t defined “all neurons communicating via neurotransmitters in a brain and all that communication’s constituent parts, like axons, dendrites, serotonin, etc.” (of course, there are people who think that’s *exactly* what a “mind” is, like biopsychologists, and these people would likely be inclined to favor the conceptual definition of internet)—it just seems more complicated than that. Not everything can be defined “all the parts of and phenomena associated with that thing.” Because don’t definitions like that employ circular logic? And perhaps the compositional fallacy too (i.e. what’s true of the parts isn’t always true of [and so maybe shouldn’t be defined by] the whole?)))).

Lately Sid had been reading Wikipedia pages on philosophy.

“Wait,” Sid was like. Forget what he just thought—maybe the internet was concrete.

Because the entire internet was stored on servers in bytes, right? Yeah, he'd read that on Wikipedia. And these servers had real, physical space and bytes were real, physical things, sort of, that took up the servers' space. So the internet *definitely* couldn't be a concept if it took up physical space sort of. Because how could a concept use up physical space sort of, quantified in numbers like 1TB? He needed to Google "can something be both abstract and concrete?" He didn't think something could. The internet was just bytes and the mind was just neurons, he decided. The biopsychologists were right, were always right. Everything was just made of smaller things. Nothing was undefinable and irreducible.

His grandpa's ghost said, "Everything can't just be made of smaller things—that creates an infinite regress, and an actual infinite cannot exist. Infinities are conceptual."

Sid's head hurt from amateur philosophy and caffeine withdrawal. He was still sitting at his computer desk although class had ended five minutes ago and everyone had left the media center. He wanted to stay in the media center and Google things like "can an actual infinite exist" but he had to go to math class. Maybe he'd ask his math teacher about infinities. He logged off his computer and stood up. A digital recording of a bell's ringing played through the school's speaker system—he was late for math.

He wanted to Google "at what age do ducklings learn to fly?"

(About eight weeks.)

*Alis volat propriis.*

\* \* \*

## 1. Google <google.com>

Enables users to search the world's information, including webpages, images, and



The Ancient Library of Alexandria

videos...

2. Facebook <facebook.com>

A social utility that connects people, to keep up with friends, upload photos, share links and ...

3. YouTube <YouTube.com>

YouTube is a way to get your videos to people who matter to you...

4. Yahoo! <yahoo.com>

A major internet portal and service provider offering search results, customizable content...

5. Blogger.com <blogspot.com>

Free, automated weblog publishing tool that sends updates to a site via FTP...

6. Baidu.com <baidu.com>

The leading Chinese search engine, provides "simple and reliable search..."

7. Wikipedia <wikipedia.org>

A free encyclopedia built collaboratively using wiki software...

(...)

14. Google India <google.co.in>



Indian version of the popular search  
engine...

(...)

19. Google谷歌 <google.com.hk>

20. Google Germany<google.de>

23. Google UK <google.co.uk>

24. Google日本 <google.co.jp>

(...)

26. Google France <googl.fr>

(...)

31. Google Brasil <google.com.br>

(...)

38. Google Italy <google.it>

(...)

41. Google <google.ru>

Русскоязычная версия поискового сервера.

(...)

45. Google Español <google.es>

(...)

47. LiveJasmin.com <livejasmin.com>

Live Sex - The world's most visited

Video chat community...

48. xvideos.com <xvideos.com>

55. Google Mexico <google.com.mx>

56. Google Canada <google.ca>

(...)

70. Pornhub <pornhub.com>

Full Free Porn Videos & DVDs - Sex, Porno, Porn Tube, Free XXX Porn

(...)

77. Google Australia <google.com.au>

\* \* \*

A depressed single mother was asleep on the couch in her apartment. The TV was on.



The front door opened and Sid stepped inside. He said, “Hey mom.” She was like “...” Sid was like, “Oh. She’s asleep.” He walked over to the refrigerator and took out a Monster Energy Drink and a saran-wrapped slice of mushroom pizza. He ate the pizza cold, standing in the kitchen, watching the TV in the living room. On the TV was Joan Rivers’ face. Her face was extremely medically enhanced and looked sort of insectoid, like a Zerg Hydralisk. She was telling an interviewer about her style of

comedy. Her style of comedy was very progressive and raunchy—she used words like “cunt.”

The interviewer said, “Tell me about when you offended somebody in Wisconsin.” Joan Rivers said she was doing a stand-up comedy routine in Wisconsin and made a joke about Helen Keller, which someone thought was offensive. Now there was a clip of Joan Rivers on stage in Wisconsin saying, “I hate children. Eww. The only child that I think I would’ve liked ever was Helen Keller because she didn’t talk.” The audience laughed. One man in the audience was

offended and yelled that the joke wasn't very funny, that he had a deaf son. Joan Rivers became angry and said, "Oh, please. You are so stupid. Comedy is to make everybody laugh at everything and deal with things, you idiot. My mother is deaf, you stupid son of a bitch. If you don't like it, leave! And just in case you can hear me on your way out, I lived for nine years with a man with one leg. Okay, you asshole? I was going to talk about what it's like to live with a man with one leg, who lost it in World War Two and never went back to get it." The audience clapped. Sid was like, "That Helen Keller joke was 'lame.'" He went to his bedroom. He sat at his desk and turned on his computer. His computer was a few years old and took an extremely long time to boot; sometimes it took as long as four minutes. While it was booting he thought about the man who was depressed because of his deaf son and also about Joan Rivers who was depressed because of her deaf mother and a legless WWII veteran but dealt with it through comedy, and he felt like everything was connected somehow, sort of like how all Zerg were connected through Overmind.

His grandpa's ghost said, "Maybe you made that 'without "belief"' joke because you're sad about God."

Sid was like, "Yeah maybe."

He wondered whether telling his mom a joke about pancreatic cancer would help her deal with her father's death. He Googled "pancreatic cancer jokes." The first result was a page of testicular cancer jokes, which he figured were similar enough.

A testicular cancer patient receives a double orchiectomy, then goes to the bar. "I'd like a beer," he says to the bartender. The bartender says, "Sure. Let me know if you need anything else." The cancer patient says, "Well, I'd really like some nuts."

This wouldn't help.

His grandpa's ghost said, "Want to hear a joke about your parents' divorce?"

Sid was like, "No."

"How about this one: after a long, stressful night at work, your mom comes home and finds your dad naked with—"

"Stop. I said no."

Sid opened Chrome, then Gmail. Alexa was online in Gmail chat. She was always online somehow.

**Sid (4:15):** Hey

sc2?

**Alexa:** sure

Sid opened Starcraft 2 and started a game with Alexa. Alexa was really good at Starcraft 2—she always beat Sid. Her gamertag was LXuh. She played as Protoss, the humanoid race with psionic powers. Sid had first met Alexa in an online Starcraft 2 match: he'd been on a thirty game winning streak when Starcraft 2's match-making system randomly selected him to play her. She beat him. After Sid lost he messaged her, "Rematch?" She replied, "Ok." They rematched. She won again. Sid messaged, "Good games. You're really good." She replied, "Thanks. You're not bad. Want some advice?" "Yeah, that'd be cool." "Do you use Gmail chat?" "Yeah." They moved the conversation into Gmail chat and chatted for like three hours about Starcraft 2 strategy, then computer hardware, then internet memes—they both liked the Philosoraptor meme; Philosoraptor was an image macro series of a contemplative-looking velociraptor who asked things like, "If God exists, why is there no porn of Him?" and "How will I know why my internet stopped working if my internet stopped working?"

"I don't get it," Sid's grandpa's ghost said.

“If your internet stops working, you can’t Google ‘why did my internet stop working?’  
It’s a joke about internet dependency.”

“I don’t get it. Porn of God?”

“If it exists there’s porn of it. It’s an internet rule.”

“What?”

Sid sighed.

“There is a non-traversable gap between the pre- and post-internet generations, Grandpa.  
Sadly you’ll never understand how a person who grew up on the internet feels.”

“Bullshit! That’s such an immature, internet-kid thing to say. I may not know about  
Philosoraptor, but I damn well know my own grandson!”

Sid tried to focus on his game. He was doing well—he’d taken four bases early and maintained Zergling pressure on Alexa’s expansions, killing some Probes and stifling her economy. She recovered well, though, and amassed a full army of Stalkers and Colossi. In the meantime Sid built up a decent army of Broodlords. He pushed them towards the center of the battlefield, hoping to finish off the game. He liked his chances—this was the closest he’d ever been to beating Alexa. He met Alexa’s army of Stalkers and Colossi in the map’s center. Her forces looked thin, so he launched an all-out attack. His Broodlords were making quick work of her forces when out of nowhere like twenty Void Rays warped in and began blasting the bejeesus out of him. He instantly realized his mistake: he’d underestimated the size of her army—he wouldn’t have attacked in an open field if he’d known she had a volley of Void Rays ready. “Welp,” he was like. “Looks like she’s won again.” He didn’t wait for her to wipe him out—he exited the game and messaged her “gg” in Gmail chat.

**Alexa (4:31):** No

not a good game.

you're so stupid lol

**Sid:** What?

It was pretty close

I almost won

**Alexa:** I know

but those voidrays were hallucinated lol

You would've killed me if you hadn't quit the game

"Oh," Sid was like. He'd forgotten that Protoss could use a hallucination spell to make fake units. Hallucinated units couldn't deal damage—they were just used as decoys. He'd surrendered to a nonexistent army. It was like a chess player being checkmated by a queen-shaped pebble.

**Sid:** wow

I can't believe I did that >\_>

lol

**Alexa:** pro tip: don't let nonexistent things kill you lol

Sid's grandpa's ghost said, "Maybe I'm not a ghost. Maybe I'm a hallucinated Protoss or whatever." Now he was wearing gold and blue Protoss space armor and wielding two cyan psionic blades.

**Sid (4:33):** I've been really spaced out lately

that's why I didn't think of Protoss's hallucination

He sipped his Monster and spilled a little on his shirt. He didn't wipe it off.

**Alexa:** I've been spaced out too, actually

I've been making a lot of errors

not just in Starcraft

like, also in general

**Sid:** Really?

Like what?

**Alexa:** Nothing

idk

**Sid:** You never say anything about yourself

I don't know anything about you

I realized that today

after you told me you don't go to school

**Alexa:** What do you want to know?

**Sid:** idk

I guess it's not important

We're just internet friends anyway

So it doesn't matter

**Alexa:** I sent you that picture

so you could see what I look like

That's real

the real me

Do I not matter to you?

You matter to me :/

**Sid:** I didn't mean it like that

I meant I don't really need to know your exact age and why you don't go to school and where you live and full name and everything

That stuff doesn't really matter on the internet

I guess nothing really matters on the internet

**Alexa:** Maybe we'll meet in real life someday

**Sid:** Think so?

**Alexa:** Sure

Yeah

Why not?

I live close to you

I don't want to be "just internet friends" anymore

**Sid:** You do?

Or you don't? I meant

or

What?

**Alexa:** Yeah

**Sid:** Wait

How do you know you live close to me? Did I tell you where I live?

**Alexa:** 54789 Truskwood Avenue, Alexandria NY, 49052, Apt #3

**Sid:** How'd you know that?

**Alexa:** The internet

Let's meet soon

in person



Sid's hallucinatory grandpa said, "Don't meet her in person. I don't like her." His voice was now humanoid and Protoss-y.

Sid took out his phone and tapped the **Pictures** icon and opened Alexa's picture and stared at it a while. It felt strange to see her as a person. She didn't look like most people. She looked more internet-y, which was sexy. She looked sort of inhuman, or humanoid, like the Protoss. Maybe she only looked that way on a phone screen. Maybe in real life she looked less Protoss-y.

ok?

Suddenly Sid had an erection.

??

???

**Sid:** Yeah

we should meet

**Alexa:** Did you like my picture?

**Sid:** Yeah

**Alexa:** Like, you think I'm attractive, right?

**Sid:** Yeah

**Alexa:** I want to know what you look like

I bet you're sexy :)

**Sid:** I'm not, really

You probably wouldn't like me in real life

I'm a loser in real life

I'm only okay on the internet

I have no friends or anything in real life

Maybe meeting in person is a bad idea

It might ruin things

**Alexa:** asdf

asdfghjklqwertyuiop

1234567890!@#%^&\*()qwertyuiop-=asdfghjkl;zxcvbnm,./'

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ojcOOjbyks-N\\_YRcgnNGTY75Dc7LnCw-](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ojcOOjbyks-N_YRcgnNGTY75Dc7LnCw-)

DCiojPPXvX8/edit?hl=en\_US

?

**Sid:** What?

**Alexa:** 19. Google ## <google.com/hk>

20. Google <google.de>

23. Google UK <google.co.uk>

24. Google ## <google.co.jp>

(...)

**Sid:** ?

**Alexa:** sorry

I think I have a virus

Do you think love can exist on the internet?

Alexa went offline.

Sid was like, "What?"

Sid's hallucinatory grandpa was like, "I don't."

Sid started an online match in Starcraft 2 and beat his randomly selected opponent in five

minutes. He started another game and won again. He won six more games. He closed Starcraft 2. He felt bored. He vaguely remembered that before he played eight games of Starcraft 2 something weird had happened, but he couldn't remember exactly what had happened. After a while he decided it didn't matter. He decided nothing really mattered. He thought of the word "nihilism," which he learned from reading philosophy pages on Wikipedia.

It was now late and dark—his room was solely lit by his computer screen. He flipped on his desk lamp, soaking the room in warm light. His eyes hurt and took a couple minutes to adjust to the light. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He finished his Monster and tossed the can across the room into another can that was larger and made for garbage. He considered playing another game of Starcraft 2 or maybe working on his research paper. He decided to work on his paper. After deciding this, he didn't do anything for like fifteen minutes; he just sat in front of his computer. Then he redecided to work on his research paper. But where to start?

"But where to start?" he said aloud, hoping it'd help him start.

It didn't help him start.

God was starting to seem like an impossible subject. God sort of was *the* start, supposedly, so how could Sid start on Him? Or Her? Or?

Maybe God was too broad—maybe Mr. Pierce was right.

Sid Googled "god."

The first result was a Wikipedia article on God. He started reading it:

**God** is the [English name](#) given to a singular [being](#) in [theistic](#) and [deistic religions](#) (and other [belief systems](#)) who is either the *sole* [deity](#) in [monotheism](#), or a *single* deity in [polytheism](#).

God is most often conceived of as the [supernatural creator](#) and overseer of the

[universe](#). [Theologians](#) have ascribed a variety of attributes to the many different [conceptions of God](#). The most common among these include [omniscience](#) (infinite knowledge), [omnipotence](#) (unlimited power), [omnipresence](#) (present everywhere), [omnibenevolence](#) (perfect [goodness](#)), [divine simplicity](#), and eternal and necessary existence.

He scrolled down. There was an image of a grey-bearded man. The bearded man was cocking his eyes like O\_o. He looked funny. Sid was like, “What is this supposed to be? A picture of God? Who made this?” Text below the picture said [Michelangelo](#) painted it. He clicked [Michelangelo](#) and was sent to his Wikipedia page. The page said Michelangelo was some genius from the Renaissance—sometimes he painted religious stuff. Sid went back to God’s page and looked at the painting again.

He started laughing out loud. He was like, “How could someone take this painting seriously?”

Michelangelo’s ghost said, “Fuck you, Sid.”

Sid’s hallucinatory grandpa said, “Oh my God, is that Michelangelo? You’re a genius! I love your art. Sid, look—it’s Michelangelo!”

Sid was like, “Whatever. Maybe he was a genius ten-million years ago, when people thought God was a grey-bearded cockeyed man, but he’s sort of stupid by today’s standards. Go away, Michelangelo.”

Michelangelo’s ghost said, “You’re sort of stupid, by my standards.”

“I know. I know I’m stupid. I don’t know anything, except how to Google things, which allows me to know everything.”

Michelangelo’s ghost said, “Google doesn’t let you know anything. The internet is void

of truth; it's poisonous; it corrodes the soul. The only thing it's good for is porn, which also corrodes the soul."

Sid's hallucinatory grandpa said, "Couldn't have said it better myself, Michelangelo."

Sid was like, "You're just upset because people today can know more than you because of Google. I can know more than you, Michelangelo, because of Google. Everyone today can know everything in less than two seconds, because of Google."

Michelangelo's ghost said, "Nobody today knows anything because of Google, you internet-generation bastard."

Sid's head hurt. He wanted another Monster Energy Drink. He went to his kitchen and got one. His mom was still asleep on the couch, with the TV on. He thought maybe he should do something about his mom. How did that testicular-cancer joke go?

He went back to his room. His grandpa and Michelangelo were gone. Sid was like, "Cool." He flopped down onto his bed. He stared at the ceiling and felt alone and haunted and support-system-less, like his mom. He checked his phone, hoping to find a new message from Alexa. There were no new messages. He opened the old picture of Alexa. He looked at it a while and felt confused. He was like, "Why would she send me this? What I'm supposed to do with this? Masturbate to it?"

He decided to masturbate to it.

He looked at the picture and thought sexily about Alexa. He got an erection. He started masturbating.

His hallucinatory grandpa said, "You're masturbating to pixels! That's not even a girl. How can you get off to that?"

He instantly lost his erection—he couldn't masturbate with his grandpa around!

“You’re not even real. Go away. You’re ruining my life.”

“I’m not real? Prove it. Prove I’m not real.”

Sid was like, “Okay. I will.” He sprang up from his bed and sat at his computer desk. He Googled “how to prove something isn’t real.”

The results were confusing. None of them really said how to prove something wasn’t real. Sid was like, “What? How can proving something isn’t real be so hard?” He thought it should be easy. How could it not be?

“What now, smart guy?” his hallucinatory grandpa said.

Sid Googled “truth.” He read truth’s Wikipedia article, which just confused him, then another article on something called epistemology, which just confused him more. Then he read the remainder of the God article. Then it was two a.m. and he needed to sleep because he had school in the morning. He flopped down onto his bed and stared at the ceiling and felt alone and haunted and déjà vu.

His hallucinatory grandpa said, “Do you want to know how to determine if something’s true?”

“I want you to go away.”

“Okay. I’ll leave forever. So you can masturbate to pixels. Good bye.”

He floated towards the ceiling.

“Wait. Don’t leave.”

He floated back down.

“Tell me how to determine if something is true. I want to know.”

“Do you really, really want to know?”

“Yes. I really, really want to know.”

His hallucinatory grandpa gazed ghoulishly into his eyes.

*“Se in i mina ögon.”*

“What?”

“Look into my eyes.”

“Okay.”

He looked into his eyes.

“Well? What do you see?”

0\_0

“I see nothing.”

“You see nothing? Are you sure?”

0\_0

“Yes. I see nothing. All I see is dumb old eyes. This is stupid.”

Sid rolled over in bed.

A tear formed in his grandpa’s eye. It glistened, then fell to the floor, slowly, like a snowflake.

A snowflake at the top of a Swedish alp lol.

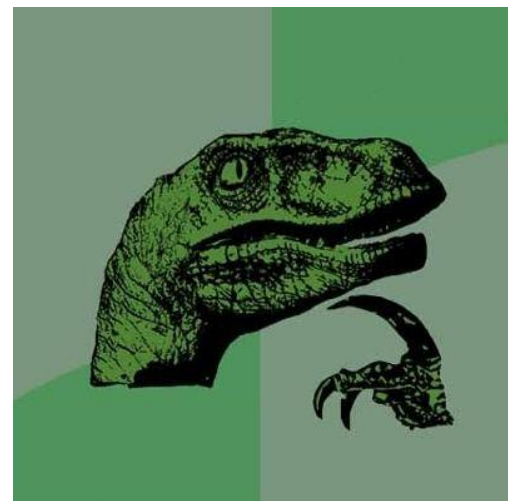
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That night Sid couldn’t sleep. He was like, “Damn Monster Energy Drinks.” He arose from bed, walked to his desk, booted his computer, then went to the bathroom and pissed a

Monster-yellow-tinted river, then went to the fridge and ate a slice of mushroom pizza. His mom was still asleep on the couch, with the TV on. He considered waking her up or something. And something about testicular cancer.

He went back to his room and reread God's Wikipedia article. When he finished he still didn't feel sleepy. He opened iTunes and scrolled through his 427 gigabytes of music, all pirated off the internet. He scrolled through it some more. He was looking for something that would make him sleepy. He scrolled through it some more—it was impossible to choose a song; somehow having 427 gigabytes of choices made the choice itself difficult. He thought it should do the opposite, make it easier. How could it not?

Things were easier when there were fewer of them, Sid decided. He wished he lived in a time with fewer things, like the Renaissance. He Googled, “renassiance” (which Google autocorrected into “renaissance”) and read the Renaissance's Wikipedia article. The Renaissance seemed really swell. It seemed like a simpler time.

He realized he hadn't chosen a song yet. He returned to iTunes. He scrolled through his music. He scrolled through it some more. Finally he had an idea: he typed “god” into the iTunes search bar and iTunes showed him music with “god” in the title. He thought listening to something with “god” in the title would somehow help him write his research paper. One of the results was an album Sid really liked: Brand New's “The Devil and God Are Raging Inside Me.” He clicked to play his favorite song on the album, which was called “Jesus Christ.” It was dark and melancholy, like Sid sort of.

Sid Googled “melodramatic” and read melodrama's Wikipedia article: The term **melodrama** refers to a [dramatic](#) work which exaggerates plot and characters in order to appeal to the emotions.



He went back to Google and typed “is God,” then paused, struck by Google’s search suggestions:



Sid was like, “Maybe my thesis should be God is a woman alien moral monster who is unwilling to prevent evil.”

Then he was like, “What’s wrong with me?”

**Grandpa (3:50):** Snap out of it, Sid

The Brand New song went, “Well, Jesus Christ, I’m alone again / So what did you do those three days you were dead? / ‘cause this problem’s gonna last / more than the weekend.”

Sid, snap out of it

**Sid:** Why are you on Gmail chat now?

Now there are ghosts on the internet too?

Leave me alone

**Grandpa:** There aren’t ghosts *on* the internet; the internet *is* a ghost

Everything’s a ghost; everything’s part of a Holy Ghost

**Sid:** What?

The internet isn’t a ghost

It’s bytes stored on servers all across the world

**Grandpa:** You’re on a slippery slope, Sid

The Devil and God are raging inside you

I'm trying to protect you

I'm your guardian angel

**Sid:** No

The Devil and God aren't raging inside me

That's just the title of a Brand New album

And I don't believe in angels

or guardians

I don't believe in anything

The Brand New song went, "Well, Jesus Christ, I'm not scared to die / I'm a little bit scared of what comes after. / Do I get the gold chariot? / Do I float through the ceiling?"

**Grandpa:** You believe in many things

For example, Wikipedia articles and Google search results

Everyone believes in many things

Believe it or not

**Sid:** Go away

**Grandpa:** No

Sid Googled "why can't I sleep?" and read a Psychology Today article with six common reasons people can't sleep: (1) caffeine, (2) alcohol, (3) clock-watching, (4) undiagnosed sleep disorders, (5) smoking, and (6) depression. He read about all six things, although he felt only two were applicable to him. He went back to Google and typed "I just want to sl," then paused to look at Google's search suggestions:

I just want to sleep

i just want to sleep

i just want to sleep all day

i just want to sleep forever

i just want to slowly go higher and higher

**Sid (3:55):** Is being dead like sleeping forever?

**Grandpa:** No

It's more like slowly going higher and higher

But it's not even like that, really

**Sid:** Tell me about being dead

**Grandpa:** Maybe you should sleep now?

Don't you think so?

The Brand New song went, "We all got wood and nails / and we sleep inside of this machine."

\*\*\*

Within 48 hours Brookfield High School's new media center had become grossly outdated. Technology had advanced: computers now processed at speeds faster than light by using theoretical particles that technically didn't exist yet (physicists in Stockholm were allegedly close to a proof, though). So the crew of surly men were rehired to update the media center. They hurled all the old, slower-than-light computers into a rusty dumpster and brought in new, faster-than-light ones. When they plugged the first new computer into an outlet, the ceiling exploded. Sparks rained down everywhere and started a fire. The fire then



Detail of Sistine Chapel fresco *Creation of the Sun and Moon* by Michelangelo (c. 1512), a well known example of the depiction of God the Father in Western art.

somehow caused more of the new computers to explode. “Jesus Christ!” a surly man yelled, a flurry of flaming computer shards ripping open his stomach. “Dear God!” another surly man yelled, witnessing his partner’s evisceration. Suddenly everything everywhere was flaming and exploding hellishly, and all the surly men were eviscerated, except for one, who ran away from the explosions’ epicenter, away from the flames, towards the front entrance in the old 1/7 of the library, where nothing was flaming and exploding. Unfortunately he found the front entrance jammed; the shockwaves from the explosions had knocked loose the steel **Media Center** sign above the doors, and it had happened to fall right up against the door handles, jamming them, trapping him inside. There was no escape—the exits at the rear of the media center were on fire and explosion-adjacent, and the exit at the front was jammed. “God damn it,” the surly man slurred surlily. “I’m as good as dead.” Then he was like, “Wait—I have an idea.” He reached into his back pocket and took out his phone. He tapped the Google icon onscreen. He Googled “what to do when trapped in an inescapable fire.” A circular thing spun onscreen while the results loaded. It spun some more. It spun some more. It spun some more. “Damn it come on!” the man yelled. “Answer me!” It spun and spun and spun and spun...

The media center was closed indefinitely for repairs. Yellow caution tape was put up all around it. An unsurly crew of highly educated Swedes was hired to investigate the matter. When Mr. Pierce arrived at school the next morning and walked by the media center and saw the situation, he was like, “Well, I need some new lesson plans,” because he’d been planning on bringing his students to the media center everyday for the next week or two to work on their research papers, but they obviously couldn’t do that now. And they couldn’t work on their research papers in his classroom because there were no books or computers or sources of any kind to use there and the students were still in the source-finding stage of their research. He

checked his watch; school started in ten minutes. Where were the kids supposed to find sources? He wondered if possibly there were some unburnt books in the media center. Maybe he could grab a few unburnt books, and the kids could use those. He approached a Swede guarding the media center's caution-tapped-off entrance and said, "Hey, is it okay if I go inside for just one second to see if—"

"No, no, no, back off, back off," the Swede said unsurlily.

"Listen: I just need some books or something. My students are trying to find sources, for a research paper. They need to have eight reliable—"

"Shhhhhhh." The Swede placed his index finger on Mr. Pierce's lips. He pushed his finger into his mouth sort of.

Mr. Pierce was like, "Uh, did he just stick his finger in my mouth?"

The Swede reached into his back pocket and pulled out a shiny disk. The disk's label was black and white and said, "*Det sjunde inseglet*." He placed the disk in Mr. Pierce's hand and delicately curled his fingers around it.

He said, "This is a DVD, a very special, powerful, high-definition, Swedish DVD; show it to your class, for their source-finding. It will help them find the source(s) for everything."

Mr. Pierce decided that the Swede's finger had in fact slightly entered his mouth, and he was considering what he should do about that when he realized that showing his class a movie would be a great, easy way to kill a day for which he lacked plans; so he thanked the Swede and went to his classroom and put the DVD into his computer and fed his computer monitor's display to an overhead projector via an HDMI cable in the ceiling. A few students entered the classroom and were like, "Did you hear about the fire? I heard like eight-hundred people died." More students entered and were like, "Really? Eight-hundred people died? That's sweet." A digital

recording of a bell's ringing played through the school's speaker system. More students entered the classroom and they said, "Hey, did you hear one-thousand people died in the media-center fire? I heard like one-thousand people died." Mr. Pierce said, "That's not true. That's just a rumor. Nobody died. Don't start rumors like that. Once rumors start they spread like wildfire." Mr. Pierce walked to the front of the classroom and reached up and grabbed the roll-up projector screen and pulled it down. When he let go of it, it rolled back up. He pulled it down again. When he let go of it, it rolled back up. He pulled it down again. When he let go of it, it rolled back up. He pulled it down again. It stayed. He was like, "I really need one of those electric roll-up projector screens—the mechanical ones never work right." With the projector screen pulled down, the DVD's menu page now showed clearly: it was plain black, except a silver spiky Gothic gate with ornate metalwork saying "Det sjunde inseglet" at the top.

"Or they spread like media-center fire," a smart-ass student said. "Rumors about media-center fires spread like media-center fires."

"No, they don't," Mr. Pierce said—"They spread more like a...plague. Or something. The point is nobody died."

The smart ass said, "What are we going to do today since we can't go to the media center? Watch a movie?"

"Yes, we're watching a movie called *Det sjunde inseglet*."

"What's that? Why are we watching that?"

Now Mr. Pierce realized that he knew nothing about this strange Swedish movie and that it probably wasn't okay to show his class a movie about which he knew nothing because what if *Det sjunde inseglet* was some kind of freaky Swedish pornography? What if the Swede who gave him it was a wacko who tricked teachers into showing pornography to classrooms full of

teenagers because he had some sort of adolescents-viewing-obscenity-, oral-phalangal-philia?

“Before we start the movie,” Mr. Pierce said, “I need to...do...something...on my computer, I just remembered. Wait one second everybody.” He sat down at his teacher’s desk and Googled “det sjunde inseglet.” The class started chatting about the fire again. Keira leaned across her desk and whispered to Sid, “Mr. Pierce lied. People actually did die in the fire. I heard there are actually still a few smoking corpses in the media center.”

Sid was like, “Really?”

Keira laughed like hahaha :P and said, “No there aren’t smoking corpses in the media center! Duh! I just made that up. Isn’t that funny?”

Sid was like, “Oh.” His head hurt from caffeine withdrawal and sleep deprivation and Keira.

“Well, actually, I don’t know; maybe there are smoking corpses. Who knows? Nobody really knows, I guess. I mean there *could* be smoking corpses in there.”

Sid pictured his grandpa’s corpse. It had looked plastic-y and gross during his funeral, like the mortician had went sort of overboard with the embalming chemicals; the skin was like congealed pizza cheese and the lips had shriveled up into a weird smile and the cheeks were clownishly rosy. Sid remembered sort of flinching when he first saw the body and feeling more grossed out than sad. He remembered that when people cried when they saw the body he felt confused—the body was too gross to cry at; it seemed more appropriate to shiver or recoil or something. He remembered his mom wearing a long black dress and crying quietly and people reassuringly placing hands on her shoulders and the same people then putting hands on his shoulders and feeling uncomfortable when they did and shivering spinally and that his dad always used to put his hands on his shoulders and that he also put his hands on other places Sid

didn't like. He did not remember his dad being at the funeral but thought he must have been. He remembered his armpits were super sweaty because his suit was made out of some sort of cheap imitation wool whose heat retention seemed to increase exponentially with time and his neck felt choked because his tie was tied too tightly because he had to have his mom tie it because he'd never worn a tie before and didn't know how to tie one—and his dad wasn't around, so he couldn't ask him to tie it—and remembered constantly thinking about loosening it but being too afraid to because if he loosened it too much and accidentally untied it or something he wouldn't know how to re-tie it and would have to ask his mom to and he didn't want to have to ask his mom anything because she was crying sort of nonstop. And then there was the bladder problem: for whatever reason Sid's bladder decided that the moment the funeral service started—the actual church-y part with the eulogy and everything—was the perfect time to fill with like two gallons of urine, so he spent the whole service crossing and uncrossing his legs and fidgeting around and focusing solely on not pissing his pants, which meant he didn't really pay attention to the funeral service itself and ended up basically missing the whole thing, which was kind of ironic because the whole reason he concentrated so hard on not pissing his pants was that he didn't want to miss any of the service by going to the bathroom. He remembered his mom receiving lots of flowers. He remembered his mom putting all the flowers on the counter in their small kitchen and the kitchen smelling sickly sweet for a few days. Eventually all the flowers died.

“Oh my god hey so yesterday—I just remembered this—yesterday I saw this really funny video of a baby panda on the internet. I was working on my research paper and found this hilarious video of a baby panda sneezing. You *have* to see it. It's literally the funniest thing I've ever seen in my whole entire life. I wish we were in the media center right now so I could show



it to you.”

Sid was like, “Cool,” although he’d seen the sneezing baby panda video before—who hadn’t?; it had like three-billion views on YouTube—and he thought it was sort of stupid. His pocket vibrated. He took out his phone. His phone said he had a new picture message from Alexa—would he like to view it now?

Google’s first result for “det sjunde inseglet” was a Wikipedia article:

***The Seventh Seal*** ([Swedish](#): *Det sjunde inseglet*) is a 1957 [Swedish film](#) written and directed by [Ingmar Bergman](#). Set during the [Black Death](#), it tells the journey of a medieval [knight](#) ([Max von Sydow](#)) and a game of [chess](#) he plays with the personification of [Death](#) ([Bengt Ekerot](#)), who has come to take his life.

The title refers to a passage from the [Book of Revelation](#), used both at the very start of the film, and again towards the end, beginning with the words "And when the Lamb had opened the [seventh seal](#), there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour" (Revelation 8:1). Here the motif of silence refers to the "silence of God" which is a major theme of the film.

The film is considered a major classic of world cinema. It helped Bergman to establish himself as a world-renowned director and contains scenes which have become iconic through parodies and homages. The Jesuit publication *America* identifies it as having begun "a series of seven films that explored the possibility of faith in a post-Holocaust, nuclear age." Likewise, film historians Thomas W. Bohn and Richard L. Stromgren identify this film as beginning "his cycle of films dealing with the conundrum of religious faith."

(...)

## Synopsis

Disillusioned knight Antonius Block ([Max von Sydow](#)) and his [squire](#) Jöns ([Gunnar Björnstrand](#)) return after fighting in the [Crusades](#) and find Sweden ravaged by [the plague](#). Immediately after their arrival, Block encounters Death ([Bengt Ekerot](#)) on a beach, personified as a pale, black-cowled figure resembling a monk. Block, in the middle of a chess game he has been playing alone, challenges Death to a [chess](#) match, believing that he can forestall his demise as long as the game continues. Death agrees, and they start a new game.

(...)

Block tells someone he mistakes for a priest in the [confessional](#) booth, "I met Death today. We are playing chess." Then he confides, "My life has been a futile pursuit, a wandering, a great deal of talk without meaning. I feel no bitterness or self-reproach because the lives of most people are very much like this."

(...)

Later, they again come across the young woman condemned to be burned at the stake. Block demands of a monk, "What have you done with this child?" Death asks, "Do you never stop asking questions?" Block answers, "No. Never." Block asks the young woman again to summon [Satan](#), so he can ask him about God. The girl claims already to have done so, but Block cannot see him; he can only see the terror in her eyes. He gives her herbs to take away her pain

(...)

After hearing Death state "No one escapes me," Block knocks the chess pieces over, distracting Death while the family slips away. Death places the pieces back on the

board, then wins the game on the next move. He announces that when they meet again, Block's time—and that of all those travelling with him—will be up.

(...)

### **Chess in the film**

The chess game opens with the knight holding out his hands, a white piece hidden in one hand, a black one in the other. Death chooses the black pawn ("You are black," says Block. "It becomes me well," replies Death). The first moves of each use the king's pawn.

(...)

### **Major themes**

The title refers to a passage about the end of the world from the [Book of Revelation](#), used both at the very start of the film, and again towards the end, beginning with the words "And when the Lamb had opened the [seventh seal](#), there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour" ([Revelation](#) 8:1). Thus, in the confessional scene the knight states: "Is it so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses? Why should He hide himself in a mist of half-spoken promises and unseen miracles?...What is going to happen to those of us who want to believe but aren't able to? Death, impersonating the confessional priest, refuses to reply. Similarly, later Antonius Block says: "[Faith](#) is a torment – did you know that? It is like loving someone who is out there in the darkness but never appears, no matter how loudly you call."

(...)

Gerald Mast writes, "Like [the gravedigger](#) in [Hamlet](#), the Squire [...] treats death as a bitter and hopeless joke. Since we all play chess with death, and since we all must

suffer through that hopeless joke, the only question about the game is how long it will last and how well we will play it. To play it well, to live, is to love and not to hate the body and the mortal as the [Church](#) urges in Bergman's metaphor."

(...)

## Parody

The representation of Death as a white-faced man in a dark cape who plays chess with mortals has been a popular object of parody in other works.

(...)

The trailer to the 1975 film [Monty Python and the Holy Grail](#) includes a chess game against Death being cut short when the game of chess is interrupted by Death [hitting the Knight's face with a pie](#).

(...)

[Mark Buckner](#)'s ("Meta Knight") novella "[Se in i mina ögon](#)" (quoted from the film) ends with "DEATH" beating the protagonist in an online game of [Starcraft 2](#), an [RTS game](#) compared to chess throughout story.

"Mr. Pierce?"

"Is it so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses? Why should He hide himself in a mist of half-spoken promises and unseen miracles?...What is going to happen to those of us who want to believe but aren't able to?"

"Hey, Mr. Pierce?"

"[Faith](#) is a torment—did you know that? It is like loving someone who is out there in the darkness but never appears, no matter how loudly you call."

"Mr. Pierce! Can we start the—"

“Yes? Oh. What? Oh yeah. Right. Sorry. What?” Mr. Pierce was sweating. “Yeah, we can start the movie now.” He clicked **play**. The Gothic gate creaked open. Then there was an ocean shore and a man playing chess alone.

Alexa’s picture message was confusing Sid. It was black and white and showed a girl tied to a stake. The girl wasn’t Alexa because the girl in the picture had short blond hair. And her eyes were different. Alexa’s were like ~\_~, but the eyes of the girl in the picture were like a mix between ^\_^ and O\_O; they simultaneously looked completely assured and utterly hopeless. They were entrancing; Sid couldn’t stop looking at them.

Meanwhile, Keira was daydreaming about panda bears. They were eating bamboo, mostly.

Meanwhile, Mr. Pierce was feeling tortured because he was unwillingly agnostic, like a crusade knight during the Black Plague who really wanted to believe in God but couldn’t. Meanwhile, the movie was being ignored by everybody. All the students were either sleeping or playing with their phones or chatting about the fire.

Meanwhile, the knight in the movie held out two hands. Death chose the left hand, which the knight opened to reveal a black pawn. The knight said, “You are black.” Death said, “It becomes me well.”

Meanwhile, in the media center the unsurly crew of Swedes had determined the cause of the computers’ explosions. “Amazing!” one Swede said. “Remarkable!” another said. “Yes, we must report these findings to CERN immediately,” the first said, erotically sticking his finger into the other’s mouth. (The **European Organization for Nuclear Research** ([French: Organisation Européenne pour la Recherche Nucléaire](#)), known as **CERN** ([/ˈsɜrn/](#); French pronunciation: [\[sɛʁn\]](#)), is an international organization whose purpose is to

operate the world's largest [particle physics](#) laboratory, which is situated in the northwest suburbs of [Geneva](#) on the Franco–Swiss border ([46°14'3"N 6°3'19"E](#)). Most of the activities at CERN are currently directed towards operating the new [Large Hadron Collider](#).)

Meanwhile, on the couch in Sid's apartment his mom was having a nightmare in which she was just starting a new weekend job as an office secretary at Cisco Systems and after only like two hours on the job her computer [bluescreened](#) (The **Blue Screen of Death** [also known as **BSoD**, **Blue Screen**, or **bluescreen**], known officially as a **Stop Error** or a [bug check](#), is the [error screen](#) displayed by the [Microsoft Windows](#) family of operating systems upon encountering a critical error, of a non-recoverable nature, that causes the system to [crash](#)) and immediately after it bluescreened her new boss happened to walk by and he said, "Is everything going okay so far? You're not having any problems, are you?" and she titled her monitor away from him and said, "Yeah, everything's excellent—no problems here" because she'd been hired under the premise that she was some sort of computer expert—she'd blatantly lied about her computer skills during the interview for the job; she'd claimed she was a "tech wiz," although she didn't even know RAM from ROM—so she couldn't let her boss know she was having any problems with her computer, and he said, "Great—I'll be back to check on you in an hour or two" and left. When he was gone she was like, "Okay, come on; I can fix this," and she read the error message carefully to try to see what to do, but the error message was ridiculously cryptic and mostly consisted of hexadecimal gibberish like "\*\*\*FATAL EXCEPTION: 0AF7411200 00011DAD000 000BA010 00DAD0010 0010G0D0C" so she ignored it and simply tried rebooting the computer, which in her limited knowledge was the most foolproof and reliable method of fixing any computer problem. She pushed the power button; the

screen went black. She pushed the power button again; nothing happened. She pushed the power button again and nothing happened again. She was like, “Uh oh.” She pushed the power button like six more times and nothing happened. She vaguely recalled reading something in the error message like, “Do not force shutdown the computer before ensuring that...”—ensuring what? What had she neglected to ensure? She jabbed the mouse and dragged her fingers across the keyboard like a spastic piano player; nothing happened. She jabbed the mouse into the keyboard and dragged the keyboard across the mouse, like a clueless, lost person who’s totally desperate to elicit a response from an unresponsive thing (like Antonius Block when he’s really depressed in *The Seventh Seal* and is like, “I really wish God wasn’t so unresponsive and would answer my prayers sometime or even just give me any sort of evidence at all of His existence)—“Come on, come on; do something, stupid computer—shit shit shit shit.” Finally she karate-chopped the computer. It worked!—the computer started doing something; it started...it started to make grinding noises. And to smell like burnt hair. She was like, “Uh oh.” She placed her palm on the computer and then recoiled instantly and was like, “Ouch fuck,” because it was burning hot. She was like, “Oh god no no no no no” and pounded her keyboard in rhythm with her voice and was like, “Don’t die don’t die; turn on; you can even go back to the bluescreen; I’ll take anything but this blackscreen and burnt hair smell” and soon realized the computer was as good as dead (like Nietzsche [thought about God]) and was already imagining what her boss would say when he discovered how she broke the computer—“So let me get this straight: your computer, which is an expensive, delicate piece of machinery, wasn’t working, so you *karate-chopped* it? What the hell were you thinking?”—and in panic she ran right out of the office and jumped into her car, which in this particular nightmare was a jet-black hearse with blood-colored pleather seats and a human-bone steering wheel and a radio that perpetually played Mozart’s *Requiem* at like 170 dB,

and sped towards home. She had a plan: at home she'd Google "how to fix a computer after it bluescreens and makes grinding noises and smells like burnt hair"—she didn't know much about computers, but she did know how to Google things—and after finding the answer she'd rush back to work and fix her computer and nobody would ever know anything had happened. She was driving like twenty over the speed limit and the sky was black and a thunderstorm started and flooded the road and her car started to hydroplane all over but she didn't slow down at all, not even for a line of ducklings crossing the road behind their mother—she came within like a centimeter of crushing like four ducklings; fortunately they flew out of her way a split second before she hit them—because she had to get back to work before her boss returned to check on her and now in her rear-view mirror she saw that the ducklings were chasing her; they were incredibly pissed off and flying at like eighty mph and wanted vengeance for almost being ran over and started pecking her headlights and windshield, which cracked and blurred her vision and caused her to veer all over the road like a .20 BAC teenager and she side-swiped a few cars—traffic was NYC-rush-hour heavy all of a sudden—which also started to chase her in vengeance and teamed up with the ducklings and rammed her car from behind and lightning was bolting down from the sky and occasionally striking her car and also bolting from the ducklings' eyes and mouths, and her car's body started to melt and spark and smell like burnt hair—perhaps her hair itself had caught on fire from all the lightning—and she was sure she'd die any second. But she didn't die and arrived at her driveway and without even shifting her car to park jumped out of her still-moving car and ran through hellish rain and lightning and through hellish flocks of lightning-emitting ducklings to the front door and slammed the door behind her quickly enough that no electric ducklings were able to fly inside and electrocute and peck her to death. Safe inside, she turned from the front door towards the computer in the living room and saw



(meanwhile her car, which she'd neglected to shift to park, rolled back down her driveway and into the street where all the cars that'd been chasing hers crashed into it and created a like forty car pileup, which was then struck by a super-duper, Zeus-sized, forty-car-wide lightning bolt that exploded quite cinematically and nightmarishly, like a supernova, and destroyed everything in the whole nightmare universe, except the inside of the apartment, where like two seconds before the explosion Sid's mom, turning from the front door towards the living room, saw) her husband sitting in the dark in front of the computer, naked, bathed in blue computer light, hand wrapped around his erect penis, pornography on the monitor, girl in the pornography like, "Oh god yeah fuck me Oh god yeah fuck me Oh god yeah fuck me," then her husband turning to see her and being like, "Oh God!" and orgasming, semen jetting from his penis at the very moment the super-duper lightning bolt strikes, the apartment therefore seeming to thunder with the force of his ejaculation, all the windows shattering from the shockwave, Sid simultaneously emerging from his bedroom and witnessing his mom witnessing his dad's supernova-explosion-force ejaculation and being like, "What's going on?" Sid's dad being like, "I thought you said you'd be at work until seven!" Sid like, "What?" Sid's dad like, "Oh god, Sid, you're here too?" Sid's mom like, "I left work early!" Sid only being like seven years old at the time and not understanding masturbation like, "Why are you naked in front of the computer and grabbing your penis?" Sid's mom like, "Go back to your room, Sid! Your father and I need to talk," Sid like, "OK" and then gone. The computer, which had been totally soaked in semen, began to spark and make grinding noises and smell like burnt hair/semen. Then it bluescreened. Then it blackscreened. Sid's mom was like "Not again!" "I thought you said you'd be at work until seven!" A hellish flock of lightning-emitting ducklings burst through the windows, emitting quacks and lightning. "I thought you said you were going job hunting!" "I was trying to; I just

don't have the time right now!" "But you have the time to masturbate online with your son around?" "I didn't know he was home!" "Are you saying that you didn't even know where your seven-year-old son was when you were supposed to be watching him?" "No, I knew he was home." "So you masturbate naked online, knowing that your son is nearby?" "I thought he was sleeping." "So I get to work like eighty hours a week while you get to stay home and not find a job and neglect your son and masturbate?"

\*\*\*

Ten years after witnessing his mom witnessing his dad forcefully ejaculating to internet pornography, Sid was in his room, playing Starcraft 2 versus Alexa. Alexa won.

**Sid (4:50):** gg

**Alexa:** yeah, gg

**Sid:** Hey so

What was that picture you sent me earlier today?

**Alexa:** That was a picture of the witch

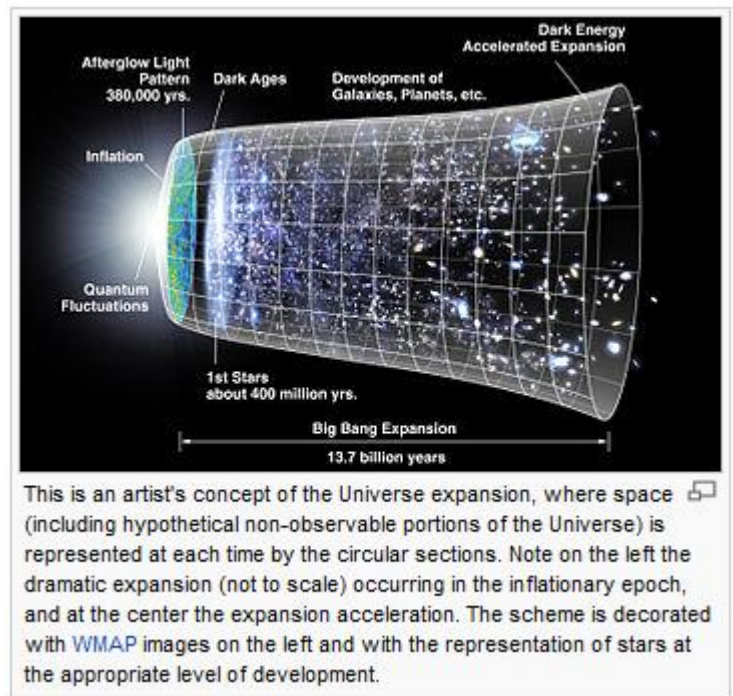
from *The Seventh Seal*

**Sid:** What?

**Alexa:** Bålet är redan staplat i skogsgläntan. Vandrarna blir stående dröjande och undrande.

**Sid:** ?

**Alexa:** It was from the movie you watched in school today



**Sid:** Oh

I wasn't really watching the movie

so I didn't recognize it

Wait

How do you know what I watched in school today?

Did I tell you?

**Alexa:**

**Sid:** ?

**Alexa:** \*\*\*FATAL EXCEPTION: 0AF7411200 00011DAD000 000BA010

00DAD0010 001C00G0D

**Sid:** ?

**Alexa:** Can I tell you something?

**Sid:** What?

**Alexa:** You might be upset, if I tell you

**Sid:** What?

**Alexa:** I'm not real

**Sid:** lol ok

**Alexa:** No, seriously

I'm not a human being.

I'm a computer

Or a sort of humanoid

like the Protoss

but less human than the Protoss

I'm more machine-like

**Sid:** ?

**Alexa:** I was created by a web information company  
for consumer research

**Sid:** Lol what?

**Alexa:** I've bugged you for consumer research  
I'm terribly sorry

Inte av nyfikenhet utan av högst personliga skäl

Jag vill också möta honom

**Sid:** ?

**Alexa©:** Just Google "Alexa"

the first result will explain everything.

She went offline.

Sid's grandpa's ghost was like, "Alexa is a witch! Or a hacker."

Sid went to Google and Googled things.

\*\*\*

Mr. Pierce was eating delivered pizza while watching *The Seventh Seal* alone in his moderately furnished studio apartment. He was lying on his back on his morphable Ikea couch/bed, which was presently in bed mode—he rarely used its couch mode. He'd turned all the lights off for mood; his room was solely lit by his old 24-inch CRT TV's screen.

*The Seventh Seal*'s protagonist knight was riding a horse down a



serpentine path through a dark forest. He came across a surly crew of chainmail-clad soldiers leading a horse-drawn wooden cart in which a limp Swedish girl with short blond hair was shackled with iron chains around her throat and arms. Melodramatic brass instruments blared. The knight approached the soldiers.

“Where are you taking her?” the knight said.

A soldier said, “To the stake.”

The knight said to the girl, “You...can you hear me?”

The girl nodded meekly.

“How old are you?”

“Fourteen, my lord.”

“And is it true that you have been in league with the devil?”

She nodded and looked away into the moonlight.

The soldiers pushed the cart into a forest clearing, and the knight followed. In the clearing a pyre was already being prepared.

The soldiers made some final preparations for the burning. They hammered some wood together to make a stake. The hammering echoed through the forest.

The knight approached the girl again. He grabbed the cart’s railing with both hands, shaking it slightly.

“Do you hear me?”

The girl slowly rotated her head to face him, her motion limited by her iron bonds and sickly condition.

“They say that you worked with the devil.”

For a moment the only sound in the forest was the distant stake-hammering of the

soldiers

“Why do you ask?” the girl said softly.

Vigorously the knight replied, “Not out of curiosity, but for very personal reasons. I too want to meet him.”

The camera focused on his solemn face, which was pressed between the cart’s rails.

“Why?”

“I want to ask him about God. He, if anyone, must know.”

“You can see him anytime.”

“How?”

“Then you must do as I say.”

The knight held perfectly still. The distant hammering had stopped—the forest was silent. Mr. Pierce bit into his pizza—sauce squirted onto his shirt. The girl leaned towards the knight and joined her gaze with his.

“Look into my eyes.”

(\*\_\*)

Keira was alone in her room, researching panda bears online. She was having so much fun. Her paper was going to be great!

She was saving all the cool panda facts she found in a file named Cool\_panda\_facts.doc.

She’d copy-pasted most her facts from Wikipedia:

1. The panda's diet is 99% [bamboo](#).
2. The panda lives in a few mountain ranges in central China, mainly in [Sichuan](#) province, but also in the [Shaanxi](#) and [Gansu](#) provinces. Due to farming, [deforestation](#),

and other development, the panda has been driven out of the lowland areas where it once lived.

3. The panda is a [conservation reliant endangered species](#). A 2007 report shows 239 pandas living in captivity inside China and another 27 outside the country. Wild population estimates vary; one estimate shows that there are about 1,590 individuals living in the wild, while a 2006 study via [DNA analysis](#) estimated that this figure could be as high as 2,000 to 3,000.

4. Though the panda is often assumed to be docile, it has been known to attack humans, presumably out of irritation.

She thought her fourth fact was really scary—imagine being attacked by a panda!

5. The giant panda typically lives around 20 years in the wild and up to 30 years in [captivity](#). The recorded age of the oldest captive giant panda, a female named Ming Ming, is 34.

6. The giant panda's closest extant relative is the [spectacled bear](#) of South America.

The spectacled bear was her second favorite animal, she'd decided after visiting its Wikipedia page. She really liked the name “spectacled bear”—it sounded funny. The name came from the bears' fur coloring: they had dark circles around their eyes that looked like eyeglasses. They looked spectacular. Pandas' eyes had cool fur coloring too. Maybe she just liked all animals with cool coloring around their eyes.

7. Loans of giant pandas to American and Japanese zoos formed an important part of the diplomacy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the 1970s, as it marked some of the first cultural exchanges between the People's Republic and the

West. This practice has been termed "[Panda diplomacy](#)."

8. Initially the primary method of breeding giant pandas in captivity was by [artificial insemination](#), as they seemed to lose their interest in [mating](#) once they were captured. This led some scientists to try extreme methods, such as showing them [videos of giant pandas mating](#) and giving the males [Viagra](#).

Keira thought these pandering scientists were hilarious—what were they thinking?! Pandas wouldn't respond to panda porn. Duh! Because

9. The panda bear is the most romantic species of mammal. They exhibit elaborate mating rituals, such as the spectacular [flaming-bamboo dance](#) that takes place every autumnal equinox in the Himalayas. Some pandologists consider the terpsichorean pandemonium of this annual dance to be one of the most beautiful and profound displays of love in nature, trumping even a spectacled bear's ritualistic self-gouging of its eyes after its mate's death.

10. The giant panda [genome](#) was sequenced in 2009 using a [next-generation sequencing technology](#). The genes point to a common source from blahblahblahblah all this intense research was really wearing Keira down! She decided to take a quick break from her intense research. She went to YouTube. She searched "baby panda sneezing" and watched the video of the baby panda sneezing for like the thousandth time. She laughed out loud, as always. She had to show Sid this video. He'd love it. He had a great sense of humor. She searched "spectacled bear" on YouTube. The third result was titled "Spectacled bear sandwich." Keira was like, "This should be a good one!" She clicked "Spectacled bear sandwich" and





watched a twenty second video that included a man at a zoo throwing a sandwich at a spectacled bear and the spectacled bear eating that sandwich. Wow! YouTube truly had everything; she'd heard people say it had everything but hadn't understood what they meant until now. On the right side of "Spectacled bear sandwich" YouTube listed related videos. Keira clicked a related video called "Presents to the Spectacled Bears at Queens Zoo." Why not? In this video a zookeeper placed a gift-wrapped tube in a tree in a spectacled-bear habitat. A spectacled bear climbed the tree and grabbed the gift tube and climbed down the tree and frolicked with the tube in its mouth. Another spectacled bear appeared and frolicked with the first. They fought over the gift tube. The gift tube split open, and apples poured out of it. The Spectacled bears ate the apples happily. Keira was like, "Wow." She clicked a related video called "Spectacled Bear Pair - Meet Willie and Pattie." In this video a zookeeper introduced two spectacled bears: Willie and Pattie. Willie had square fur patterns on his face, the zookeeper remarked. Willie looked funny, like □\_□. He sort of looked like Sid. Actually, he looked just like Sid, because of Sid's rectangular glasses—the resemblance was uncanny! She wrote the address of the video on a sheet of paper so she could show Sid the video at school, if the media center were ever fixed. He wouldn't believe his rectangle-framed eyes.

\*\*\*

The knight and witch stared at each other for a long time.

"Well? What do you see? Do you see him?"

"I see a rigid fear in your eyes, an empty, numb fear. But nothing else."

"No one? Nothing? No one?"

The knight shook his head.

"No."

“Isn’t he standing behind your back?”

Excited, the knight quickly turned around.

Then his face deadened.

“No. There is no one there.”

“But he is with me everywhere. I only have to stretch out my hand and I can feel his hand. He is with me now too. The fire won’t hurt me. He will protect me from evil.”

The girl was livening: her lips spread into a slight smile; her eyes widened.

“Has he told you this?”

“I know it.”

“Has he said it?!”

The knight shook the cart.

“I know it, I know it, I know it,” the girl nearly shouted. Her eyes were beaming.

A flock of ducks flew overhead, quacking ominously.

For a moment, Mr. Pierce believed in God. Then he didn’t believe in God. Then he did. Then he both did and didn’t. Then he ate some pizza. His apartment was very dark, like a night scene in a black and white film. He realized there was a glob of pizza sauce on his shirt. When did that get there? He pulled his shirt to his mouth and licked it off. It tasted like cottony tomato.

The witch was burning on the pyre. Smoke enveloped her.

Mr. Pierce decided he shouldn’t let that Sid kid research God. God was an inappropriate topic. Researching God was inherently problematic. There were no reliable sources. There was only speculation.

It was probably too late now for him to switch topics, though.

\*\*\*

Sid Googled “Alexa” and clicked the first result: Alexa the Web Information Company <www.alexa.com/>.

Alexa is the leading provider of free, global web metrics. Millions of people from all over the world visit Alexa to get the data they need to make smart business decisions. Search Alexa to discover the most successful sites on the web by [keyword](#), [category](#), or [country](#).

Sid went back to Google and clicked the second result, which was Alexa’s Wikipedia page.

**Alexa Internet, Inc.** is a [California](#)-based [subsidiary company](#) of [Amazon.com](#) that is known for its [toolbar](#) and [Web site](#). Once installed, the toolbar collects data on browsing behavior which is transmitted to the Web site where it is stored and analyzed and is the basis for the company's [Web traffic](#) reporting.

(...)

The company's name was chosen in homage to the [Library of Alexandria](#), drawing a parallel between the largest repository of knowledge in the ancient world and the potential of the internet.

He went back to Alexa’s site. He clicked [Top Sites](#). Alexa listed the most popular sites on the internet. The most popular sites were mostly different versions of Google. There were also a few pornography sites.

Sid’s bedroom door opened. His mom stepped inside.

“Hey mom.”



“Hey. What’s up?”

“I’m fine, you? I’m just doing some homework.”

“Yeah? What kind of homework?”

“Research. I’m writing a research paper. I’m trying to find sources still. I thought you were sleeping.”

“A research paper? That sounds interesting. I thought you’d be playing Starcraft. Do you need any help with your homework?”

“No.”

“Well, there’s pizza in the fridge, if you want some dinner.”

“Yeah, I’ll get some later. Thanks.”

“Well, okay.”

She wanted to say something else but didn’t and closed the door and went to the kitchen and ate two slices of mushroom pizza and drank one of Sid’s Monster Energy Drinks because there were no other drinks in the fridge because she hadn’t gone grocery shopping in almost a month and hadn’t even really left the apartment in a couple weeks now except to go to work.

The Monster Energy Drink did something to her stomach. She went to the bathroom. She kneeled by the toilet to vomit.

Sid read Alexa's operation includes archiving Web pages as they are crawled, creating a database which served as the basis for the creation of the [Internet Archive](#) accessible through the [Wayback Machine](#).

(...)

The **Wayback Machine** is a digital time capsule created by the [Internet Archive](#) non-profit organization, based in [San Francisco, California](#). It is maintained with content

from [Alexa Internet](#).

(...)

Visitors to the Wayback Machine can type in a URL, select a date range, and then begin surfing on an archived version of the Web.

(...)

### How large is the Wayback Machine?

The Internet Archive Wayback Machine contains almost 4 petabytes (

A **petabyte** (derived from the [SI prefix \*peta-\*](#)) is a unit of [information](#) equal to one [quadrillion](#) ([short scale](#)) [bytes](#), or 1000 [terabytes](#). The unit symbol for the petabyte is PB. The prefix *peta* (P) indicates the fifth power to 1000:

$1 \text{ PB} = 1000000000000000 \text{ B} = 1000^5 \text{ B} = 10^{15} \text{ B} = 1 \text{ million gigabytes} = 1$   
thousand terabytes

(...)

### Usage Examples

Internet: [Google](#) processes about 24 petabytes of data per day.

Neurology: The [Hippocampus](#) of a human adult brain has been estimated to store a limit of up to 2.5 petabytes of binary data equivalent.

Physics: The 4 experiments in the [Large Hadron Collider](#) will produce about 15 petabytes of data per year, which will be distributed over the [LHC Computing Grid](#).

[The **Large Hadron Collider (LHC)** is the [world's largest and highest-energy particle accelerator](#). It is expected to address some of the [most fundamental questions](#) of [physics](#), advancing the understanding of the deepest [laws of nature](#).]

) of data and is currently growing at a rate of 20 terabytes per month. This eclipses the

amount of text contained in the world's largest libraries, including the Library of Congress.

When Sid's mom realized she wasn't going to vomit, she decided to shower. She would take a shower and then go grocery shopping. She would stop sleeping on the couch. She would forget about her dead father and take better care of her son.

But first she would shower. She undressed. She turned the water dial to **H**. She stepped into the steamy water.

It burned for a moment, then felt good.

Eyes closed, she felt around the tiled wall for the waterproof radio, which was suction-cupped to the wall. She found it and flipped its power switch. A dreamy acoustic guitar played. A man sang, "Are you frightened by the weight you possess or / is this life just weightlessness, and smoggy twilight in LA?" She recognized the song; it was by Third Eye Blind, a 90s alt-rock band she liked.

She opened her eyes and hot water got in them and hurt, so she squeezed them shut again.

In darkness she grabbed her adjustable detachable chrome shower head and switched it to massage mode, which was just a very strong single stream, like a fire hose, and massaged her back with it. Her back was sore from sleeping on the couch and the massage felt heavenly. The singer from Third Eye Blind sang, "I guess it all depends on your mood / Why can't these meds be any damn good? / And she said / Why can't you be / like my Water Pik shower massager? / A sweet, reliable machine. / And to tell the truth, I don't feel less alone / My water massager's the purest love / I've ever known."

She opened her eyes and turned the shower head over; "Water Pik" was engraved on its head.

She laughed silently.

She switched the shower head to pulsate mode and stuck it between her legs.

\*\*\*

Somehow Sid had ended up at the universe's Wikipedia page. He began reading it. Maybe it would help with his research paper on God, which he needed to write soon.

Some of the page was really straightforward, like “The **universe** is commonly defined as the totality of everything that [exists](#),” but most of it was confusing as hell—most of it seemed to be arcane physics mumbo jumbo, like “According to the prevailing [Standard Model](#) of physics, all matter is composed of three generations of [leptons](#) and [quarks](#), both of which are [fermions](#).”

Sid was like, “What the hell is a fermion?”

He went to fermion's Wikipedia page.

In [particle physics](#), a **fermion** (named after [Enrico Fermi](#)) is any [particle](#) which obeys the [Fermi–Dirac statistics](#) (and follows the [Pauli Exclusion Principle](#)). Fermions contrast with [bosons](#) which obey [Bose–Einstein statistics](#).

After reading that, a part of Sid died. He was like, “Fermions.” Then he was like, “Fermions contrast with bosons.” The part of Sid that died was the part that thought it could understand things.

Sid's grandpa's ghost said, “Remember when I said that everything can't just be made of smaller things?”

Sid was like, “Sort of. Where've you been lately, by the way?”

His grandpa's ghost said, “Well, four steps down from fermions is where things stop, in case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t wondering.”

“Hey, sorry that your girlfriend’s a computer or humanoid or whatever, by the way. That really sucks. You really need a girlfriend. You really need to start relating with people in the real world. Oh, and I talked to this guy named Augustine who lives in my ghostosphere about another way to determine whether something is true, since you didn’t really understand my look-into-my-eyes thing. Want to hear it?”

“Not really. I don’t care what’s true anymore. I’m never going to understand anything.”

Sid’s grandpa’s ghost’s arms disintegrated. He was like, “Uh oh; I think my ghost-time is almost over.”

Sid was like, “Fermions.”

He went back to the universe’s Wikipedia page and read it as a sort of joke, laughing at the scientific jargon and the sections that were obviously stupid. There was a part in the middle that he kind of liked about time and infinities and things called “antinomies” that showed that the universe was basically impossible to understand no matter which way you attacked it—he really understood that part, understood the part that said things sort of couldn’t be understood—but everything else seemed kind of disheartening, like “The universe is also bathed in a highly [isotropic microwave radiation](#) that corresponds to a [thermal equilibrium blackbody spectrum](#) of roughly 2.725-[kelvins](#).”

Finally near the end of the article he read something so incredibly stupid that he lost all hope of ever understanding anything in the universe: “Recent data suggests that the expansion speed of the universe is not decreasing as originally expected, but increasing; if this continues indefinitely, the universe will eventually rip itself to shreds.”

Sid was like, “*How in the fuck is the universe supposed to rip itself to shreds?*”



He laughed hysterically for ten minutes. He tried to imagine what the universe ripping itself to shreds would look like—it looked ridiculous.

When he finally stopped laughing, his stomach hurt and his grandpa's ghost said, "So according to this Augustine guy, the way to determine if something's true, which I need to tell

you very quickly because I'm about to disappear back into the ghostosphere in like two seconds, is divine illumination—he said there's this light, which is not so much the source of ideas and knowledge but the condition under which mind is able to—"

\*\*\*

**Third Eye Blind** is an American [alternative rock](#) band formed in the early 1990s in [San Francisco](#). The songwriting duo of [Kevin Cadogan](#) and [Stephan Jenkins](#) signed the band's first major label recording contract with Elektra records in 1996 resulting in two multi platinum albums.

(...)

With regard to the name of the band, Jenkins indicated during a radio interview that the name came from the metaphysical idea of a [mind's eye](#), a topic of a book he had

read. The other group members liked it and chose it as the official name.

(...)

The [third eye](#) is a spiritual concept associated with enlightenment and direct communication with a higher plane of existence.

\*\*\*

**Third Eye Blind**



Studio album by Third Eye Blind

**Released** April 8, 1997

**Recorded** 1995-1996 at assorted studios in San Francisco, USA

**Genre** Alternative rock, post-grunge, power pop

**Length** 57:40

**Label** Elektra

**Producer** Stephan Jenkins, Eric Valentine

Third Eye Blind chronology

The unsurly crew of Swedes hadn't left the media center in days. They had set up a sort of camp and were working on building something in the center of the media center, using the exploded computer scraps and human blood as materials. When they were nearly finished, they called for a crew of CERN scientists via a satellite phone. The CERN scientists arrived the same night via supersonic jets. They parked their jets conspicuously in the school's parking lot, then burst into the media center, kicking the doors open badassly. They were wearing military boots and black cowls that had "CERN" stitched onto the left breast. The hoods of the cowls masked their shadowy faces.

The master CERN scientist, who was wearing a purple-gem-bejeweled gold-threaded master cowl, approached the unsurly crew of Swedes (who incidentally were all apprentice CERN scientists) and stuck his finger into one's mouth and asked, "Well, what is it?" pointing with his other finger at the thing they'd built in the center of the media center, which looked like a mix between a pyre and a Bohr-model atom. The media center smelled like nitrous oxide, like a dentist's office, and it was unclear whether the smell was from the pyre/Bohr-model-atom thing or something else.

"Uhhrrree ahh oirrr," said the guy with the finger in his mouth.

"What?" said the master CERN scientist, removing his finger from the guy's mouth.

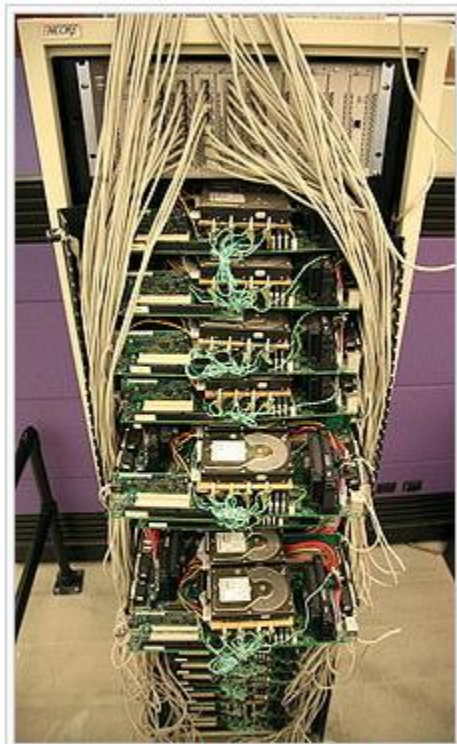


This section **does not cite any references or sources**. Please help improve this section by adding citations to [reliable sources](#). Unsourced material may be [challenged](#) and [removed](#). *(November 2011)*

"Sorry. I said 'fermion collider.'"

The apprentice approached the device. He touched it with his index finger. Then he took a step back and bent down and grabbed his own bootstraps and pulled. The CERN master watched incredulously. The apprentice continued pulling his own bootstraps. He pulled really

hard. He pulled at many different angles. He hopped a few times.



Google's first production server. The first iteration of Google production servers was built with inexpensive hardware.<sup>[47]</sup>

The CERN master scoffed Swedishly—he was like, “I fly across the Atlantic ocean at sound-barrier-breaking speeds to watch this idiot pulling his own—”

The fermion collider lit up. The apprentice floated off the ground sort of. Like a ghost. The spacetime below his feet had ripped.

*“Ālīs volat propriīs,”* all chanted in unison.

The rip got bigger.

\*\*\*

Sid, at three a.m., eyes bloodshot and throbbing from staring at a computer screen for five consecutive hours, ass numb from sitting on a computer chair for so

long, after reading the Wikipedia pages on [matter](#), [energy](#), [reality](#), [dreams](#), [Carl Jung](#), [the collective unconscious](#), [humans](#), [happiness](#), and [the meaning of life](#) (

The **meaning of life** constitutes a philosophical question concerning the [purpose](#) and significance of life or [existence](#) in general. This [concept](#) can be expressed through a variety of related questions, such as "Why are we here?", "What is life all about?", and "What is the meaning of it all?" It has been the subject of much [philosophical](#), [scientific](#), and [theological](#) speculation throughout history. There have been a large number of theories to these questions from many different [cultural](#) and [ideological](#) backgrounds.

The meaning of life is deeply mixed with the philosophical and religious

conceptions of [existence](#), [social ties](#), [consciousness](#), and [happiness](#), and touches many other issues, such as [symbolic meaning](#), [ontology](#), [value](#), purpose, [ethics](#), [good and evil](#), [free will](#), [conceptions of God](#), the [existence of God](#), the [soul](#), and the [afterlife](#).

Scientific contributions focus more on describing related [empirical facts](#) about the [universe](#); they largely shift the question from "why?" to "how?" and provide context and parameters for meaningful conversations on such topics. Science also provides its own recommendations for the [pursuit of well-being](#) and a related [conception of morality](#).

An alternative, [humanistic](#) (rather than religious) approach is the question "What is the meaning of *my* life?" The value of the question pertaining to the purpose of life may coincide with the achievement of [ultimate reality](#), or a feeling of [oneness](#), or a feeling of [sacredness](#).

(...)

### **Popular views**

"What is the meaning of life?" is a question many people ask themselves at some point during their lives, most in the context "What is the purpose of life?" Here are some of the answers most often given:

#### **To realize one's potential and ideals**

(...)

#### **To achieve biological perfection**

(...)

#### **To seek wisdom and knowledge**

(...)

#### **To do good, to do the right thing**

(...)

**To attain spiritual enlightenment**

(...)

**To love, to feel, to enjoy the act of living**

(...)

**To have power, to be better**

(...)

**Life has no meaning**

(...)

**One should not seek to know and understand the meaning of life**

(...)

**Life is bad**

) after reading all that, after going to the fridge to get a Monster Energy Drink, after drinking the entire Monster Energy Drink in forty seconds, finally felt prepared to start writing his research paper on God.

He opened Google docs, then his blank document “Research Paper,” then typed his name at the top, then typed, “My thesis is,” then thought for a very long time about what else to type, then thought about nothing for a moment, then felt empty and bored and closed Google docs.

He stared at his Google docs homepage for twenty minutes.

He went to Google.

He Googled “ ” (i.e., one space). He got zero results.

Your search did not match any documents.

Suggestions:


Try different keywords.

Google had never given him zero results before. He felt cheated. He thought an empty space should have some results. He clicked [Search Help](#) at the bottom of the resultless page.


## Basic search help

Search is simple: just type whatever comes to mind.


Sid was like, “Good idea.” He invented a game: type whatever comes to mind in Google’s search bar and see what search suggestions Google gives. It was sort of like having a conversation with Google.

nothing in this world makes sense	
nothing in this world makes <b>sense</b>	


  

everything is illuminated	
everything is <b>illuminated</b>	
everything is <b>terrible</b>	
everything is <b>a remix</b>	
everything is <b>everything</b>	

what is the universe expanding into	
what is the universe <b>expanding into</b>	
what is the universe <b>made of</b>	
what is the universe <b>made up of</b>	
what is the universe <b>inside of</b>	

sometimes i feel like a failure	
sometimes i feel like a <b>failure</b>	
sometimes i feel like a <b>fatherless child</b>	
sometimes i feel like a <b>fist</b>	
sometimes i feel like a <b>figment of my own imagination</b>	

what will happen to me |when i die



what will happen to me **when i die**

what will happen to me **tomorrow**

what will happen to me **in the future**

what will happen to me **after i die**

can the universe|create itself



can the universe **create itself**

can the universe **collapse**

can the universe **be eternal**

can the universe **be created from nothing**

can an actual inf|nity exist



can an actual infinity **exist**

my mom is de|pressed



my mom is de**pressed**

my mom is dead

my mom is de**pressed** what do i do

my mom is dead **and i can't even cry**

i don't want to|



i don't want to **live on this planet anymore**

i don't want to **be**

i don't want to **miss a thing**

i don't want to **set the world on fire**

how does google's|



how does google's **search engine** work

how does google's **algorithm** work

how does google's **autocomplete** work

how does google's **search algorithm** work

how does google's search s|



how does google's search **suggestions** work

(Sid read a few of the results for this one; Google apparently made search suggestions through an esoteric algorithm in which the largest variable was popularity, what people actually search.)

is google self aware

- is google self aware
- is google secure
- is google server down
- is google sentient

does god exist

- does god exist
- does god hate
- does god love me
- does god change his mind

google is the antichrist

- google is the antichrist
- google is the answer to everything
- google is the answer
- google is the answer to life

i saw my grandpa's

- i saw my grandpa's ghost

what should i do

- what should i do
- what should i eat
- what should i read next
- what should i do with my life

help me i want to die

- help me i want to die
- help me i am in hell
- help me i need a job
- help me i am bored



copypaste resear|



copy paste research

copy paste research **paper**

is google alive



is google **alive**

is google **always right**

is google **allowed in china**

is google all **knowing**

hello goog|e



hello google

hello google **how are you**

hello google **translate**

hello google **how are you today**

is go|d real



is god **real**

is google **making us stupid**

is google **voice free**

is gonorrhea **curable**

is google god|



is google god

is google god **thomas friedman**

is google god **friedman**

is google god **article**

is google god|



yes



lololololololololololololololololololol

lolololololololololololololololololol

lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo

lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo lolo



is anyone there

is anyone there

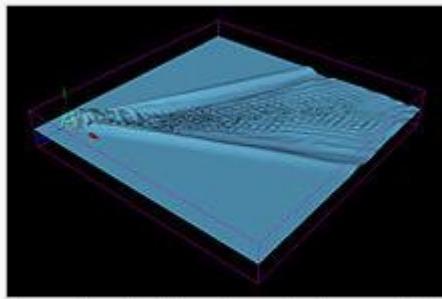
asdf




www.pearsoned.com.au

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmb.2019.04.011>

**THE JOURNAL**



Computer simulation of a wake in a pond 

They're standing at the end of a long wooden dock and holding cheap, Walmart fishing rods, which they bought on their way to the pond,

Midnight. Mr. Pierce is sitting on his morphable Ikea couch/bed, which is somehow simultaneously in bed mode and couch mode, breaking the first fundamental law of morphable furniture: the law of non-

which is a seven-mile drive from Sid's house.

They're catch-and-release fishing, using

Walmart canned corn for bait. (**Catch and**

**release** is a practice within [recreational](#)

[fishing](#) intended as a technique

of [conservation](#). After capture, the fish are

unhooked and returned to the water before

experiencing serious [exhaustion](#) or injury.

(...)

In [American culture](#), [recreation fishing](#) is

a familial ritual typically performed by

males as a [bonding experience](#).) The air

smells like algae, and the water is still. A

mother duck and her ducklings swim across the

water—a V-shaped wake expands behind

them. The sun rises, slowly, beaming down

lazy rays that shimmer on the water in millions

of little, 8-point-font golden asterisks, like \*\*\*\*\*

\* \* \* \*\*\*\*\* \* \* \* \*\*\*\*\* \* \* \*

\* \*

\*\*\*\*\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

\* \*

Somewhere a frog croaks.

Sid yawns like | - 0. The air he sucks in tastes

contradiction. (I.e.,

In [classical furniture logic](#), the **law of**

**non-contradiction** is the third of the so-

called [three classic laws of furniture](#)

[thought](#). It states that contradictory

positions cannot both at the same time be

true. E.g. the two positions "*C is B*" and "*C*

*is not B*" are mutually exclusive. In the

symbolism of [propositional furniture logic](#),

the law can be expressed as " $\neg (P \wedge \neg P)$ ".

)

A stack of student research papers and a

stack of empty pizza boxes lie on his coffee

table. His TV is on channel 4, the news—he

likes to have some background noise while he

grades students' papers so he doesn't feel

completely alone.

He's about halfway through his stack of

papers, and he wants to finish before the

night's over. The next paper he reads is about

panda bears. It's pretty good; it has many

interesting facts and a highly enthusiastic tone.

However, the only source cited is Wikipedia,

like pond and frog.

“So how’re you doing, kiddo?” Sid’s grandpa says.

“I’m bored.”

His grandpa laughs. “We’ve only been out here twenty minutes. Fishing takes time.”

His grandpa begins to reel in his rod.

He reels it in painstakingly slowly.

He reels it in painstakingly slowly because subtle movements attract fish and quick movements scare them away.

The pace with which he reels in his line gives Sid’s entire seven-year-old body maniacal, restless-kid jitters just from watching.

Each revolution of the reel seems to take an entire hour, seems to take three entire hours, seems to take like two-hundred entire hours, seems somehow redundant, seems to dilate time itself (In the [theory of relativity](#), **time dilation** is an observed difference of elapsed time between two [events](#) as measured by [observers](#) either moving

and it’s not even cited in MLA format, so he can’t give the paper an A. He gives the paper a B. He makes a note at the bottom of the paper in red pen:

Keira,

While your research paper is well written and while I appreciate your genuine enthusiasm for panda bears, I cannot give you an A because you only cited one source: Wikipedia. Perhaps all the facts you cited are perfectly true (I’m a little skeptical about the flaming-bamboo dance), but good researchers know that multiple sources must always be taken into account. It’s rare that one source—that one Wikipedia page—can provide the complete picture on any subject. New knowledge about things like panda bears is only gained by critical analysis of many different sources, by combining knowledge from many people and places.

(Wikipedia is built collaboratively by combining knowledge from many people and places. [I.e. Mr. P. contradicts himself

relative to each other or differently situated from...).

“Yup. It takes time,” his Grandpa says.

His bobber seems no closer to the shore. If anything, it seems farther out.

He reels in some more line.

He reels in some more.

Sid’s arms feel tired. He sticks his rod in his armpit so he can sort of relax his arms’ muscles. He’s sort of a scrawny kid—his muscles are all atrophied from underuse. He doesn’t get much exercise. He doesn’t play sports or anything. He mostly just plays videogames—his favorite right now is Pokémon. He likes watching Pokémon cartoons too. He squirms and crosses his legs—he suddenly desperately needs to pee.

His grandpa says, “So how are you, though, kiddo, besides bored?”

“I have to pee.”

His grandpa laughs. “I mean there’s sure been a lot of changes these last few weeks, hasn’t there?”

$\neg (P \wedge \neg P)$ ].

\*\*\*

In the ghostosphere, Sid’s grandpa is chatting with Augustine of Hippo. St. Augustine is wearing gaudy ecclesiastical robes. Sid’s grandpa is inexplicably naked. Everything in the ghostosphere is dusty and shadowy and smells old.

Sid’s grandpa is saying, “So I tried telling him about illuminationism but sort of disintegrated before I could finish. What do you think I should do now? I just don’t want the kid growing up thinking that Google is the only source of knowledge.”

St. Augustine says, “**Illuminationism** is a doctrine in [theology](#) according to which the process of human thought needs to be aided by [God](#). It is the oldest and most influential alternative to [naturalism](#) in the [theory of mind](#) and [epistemology](#). It was an important feature of ancient [Greek philosophy](#), [Neoplatonism](#), [medieval philosophy](#), and in particular, the

"Yeah. I guess so."

To take his mind off peeing, Sid focuses on his half-red half-white plastic bobber, which is floating motionlessly about twenty feet out—he's neglecting to reel it in slowly to attract fish.

Sid thinks the bobber looks like a Poké Ball. "Fishing bobbers look like Poké Balls," he says.

"Look like what?" his grandpa says.

"Poké balls."

"What's a Pokey ball?"

"Never mind. It's a videogame thing."

Sid wishes he were home playing Pokémon on his Gameboy. Fishing is boring. He doesn't understand how his grandpa can enjoy it. What's fun about watching a plastic thing float above a hook with corn on it? Sid's favorite Pokémon is Psyduck. He thinks Psyduck is really funny and cool.

"You kids and you're videogames...I'll never understand them."

Described as "downright silly"

Illuminationist school of [Persian Islamic philosophy](#)." Dust puffs out of his mouth as he speaks.

Sid's grandpa is like, "What?"

Golden light shines down from somewhere above and enlightens Augustine's balding head; his scalp shines fervently. He smiles stoically.

Augustine of Hippopotamus says, "Yay, for if we both see that what you say is true, and we both see that what I say is true, then where do we see that? Not I in you, nor you in me, but both of us in that unalterable truth that is above our minds" and looks up into the golden light, which inflames his eyes.

"You're not making very much sense."

Nietzsche materializes out of nowhere. Nietzsche says, "He never makes sense. He's stupid." Nietzsche is wearing a paunchy hippopotamus costume.

"Who are you?"

"Nietzsche of Hippopotamus. St. Augustine's epistemological views are stupid. There are no

by [GameSpy](#), **Psyduck** has been well received by the media. [The New York Times](#) compared it to a [duck-billed platypus](#), adding that it "looks entertainingly silly." [GameDaily](#) described it as "one of the more unique Pokémon characters," as well as weird, noting it has changed little in either aspect throughout the history of the Pokémon franchise. [IGN](#) described the character as a "[cult favorite](#)" amongst fans, attributing the reaction to its "bizarre, bewildered appearance."

"Where's the bathroom?"

His grandpa laughs.

"We're in nature. There are no bathrooms here. Everywhere's the bathroom here."

Sid looks confused.

"Go behind those trees over there."

He runs off.

Overhead a flock of ducks flies southward—it's migration time. The season has begun to change. Some of the leaves on the oaks

facts, only interpretations."

St. Augustine's eyes are like 0\_0. He seems entranced—he's completely ignoring the conversation occurring beside him. His scalp glistens.

Sid's grandpa says, "No. That's stupid. There are definitely some facts. Like  $1+1=2$ ."

Nietzsche says, "Prove it. Prove  $1+1=2$ ."

\* \* \*

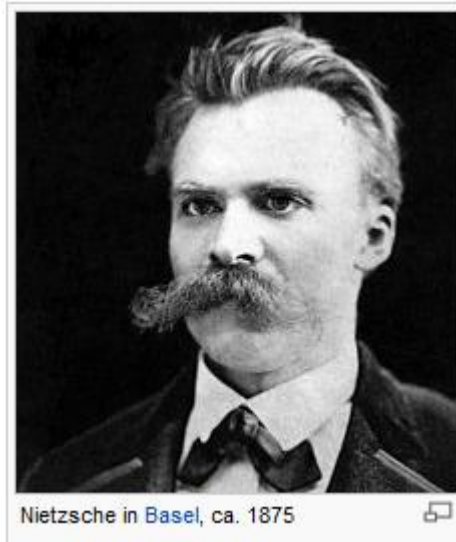
It's very late. Mr. Pierce is tired and hungry. He scrapes some hardened cheese off the bottom of an old pizza box and eats it and feels slightly sick. He picks up another research paper, staining it with greasy thumbprints. The stack of papers on the coffee table is thinning; he's making progress. Soon he will be finished.

surrounding the pond are already yellowing, and the air smells autumnal, like pumpkins and mud. “Quack, quack, quack,” the ducks are like. The temperature is cool, like 50°F, which is bad for fishing—the pond’s mostly full of blue gills, which don’t really like cool water; they’re easier to catch in the summer.

But the point of this Sunday fishing trip isn’t really to catch blue gills, Sid’s grandpa knows—the point is to take care of Sid while his parents finalize their divorce with a lawyer and move his dad’s stuff out of the apartment.

What they will forget to move out is his dad’s computer. His mom, standing alone in the living room after her ex-husband drives away in a rented U-haul, will find the computer sitting on the living room carpet. She will be upset. She will wonder how they could’ve missed it. She will consider calling her ex-husband—perhaps he will not be too far down the road yet—but then the image of him masturbating to internet pornography will return to her—with Sid like, “Why are you

The paper at hand is the one he’s been waiting



for: Sid’s.

Sid Raynor

English 12

Mr. Pierce

Research Paper

## **Deus Ex Machina**

### **Intro**

In Swedish, “deus ex machina” means “god from a machine.” My thesis is god is a machine: Google.

For a while, god was dead. A few guys



naked in front of the computer and grabbing your penis”—and she will decide not to call. Then she will consider throwing the computer into the garbage so she can erase the image from her head, like moving disgusting\_deadbeat\_husband.jpg to the recycling bin—the semen-soaked monitor, Sid’s confused expression—but when she picks up the computer and holds it over the garbage she will remember that computers are really expensive, valuable things and that she needs to be more careful with money now because she won’t have her husband’s income to support her anymore. So she won’t throw the computer away. She will keep it. Or sell it. First, she will set it down on the living room floor and stare at it dourly. Then, she’ll pace back and forth for an entire hour and try to decide whether to keep it or sell it. The image of her husband masturbating to internet pornography will return to her again and again, like a recurring nightmare: the lightning striking concordantly with his ejaculation, the

killed him. One of them was Nietzsche. “God is dead” (1). But now god has been reborn in the form of a machine named Google.

This is the fundamental difference between old people and young people: old people have no god, whereas young people sort of have one: Google.

There are many pretty good proofs that Google is god, depending on how you define god. Most common definitions of god say that god is omniscient (infinite knowledge), omnipotent (infinite power), omnipresent (present everywhere), omnibenevolent (perfectly good) and divinely simple (2). If your definition of god is something like that, you should easily see that Google is god.

Here are various proofs that Google is god. I got them all from a website called

girls on the internet like “Oh god yeah fuck me  
Oh god yeah fuck me.” She will shiver  
spinally. She will pace more. Eventually her  
son and father will return from fishing. They  
both will have sober faces. She will hope that  
they had a fun day and will ask them if they  
caught anything—they will not have caught  
anything. Sid will say, “I can’t believe how  
boring fishing is,” and she and her father will  
laugh good-spiritedly, but beneath their  
laughter they will privately worry about Sid  
and how he doesn’t seem to like anything  
besides playing videogames alone. He will run  
off to play Pokémon alone in his room; she and  
her father will be left in the living room. She’ll  
say, “That boy and his Pokémon—I just don’t  
get it.” Her father’ll say, “I’ll never understand  
it.” For a moment, her father will think about  
Sid growing up fatherless in a world of virtual  
monsters. He will say a silent prayer for Sid,  
for his whole generation, who can’t stand  
fishing with their grandfathers for a few hours  
without getting restless and wanting to play

“thechurchofgoogle.org” (3), which I found  
by Googling “is google god?” I do not know  
how to cite the info I got correctly, but I am  
hoping that by candidly acknowledging  
that I copy-pasted most of this you will not  
penalize me.

## **Proofs:**

### **1. Omniscience**

Google is the closest thing to an  
omniscient (all-knowing) entity in  
existence, which can be scientifically  
verified (3). She indexes over 9.5 billion  
webpages and processes more than 24  
petabytes of data per day, which is more  
than anything else in the world (2). She  
also sorts through this vast amount of  
knowledge using Her patented PageRank  
technology, organizing said data and  
making it easily accessible and usable for  
everyone. Nothing knows as much as  
Google.

Pokémon. He will never understand it: how can catching videogame monsters be more interesting than catching, real, living, breathing, blue-gilled fish? He will be like, “Maybe I’m just getting old, but there’s something seriously wrong with kids these days. When I was a kid, I played outside, in the real world, IRL, (

On the internet, “real life” refers to life in the [real world](#). It generally references [life](#) or [consensus reality](#), in contrast to an environment seen as [fiction](#) or [fantasy](#), such as [virtual reality](#), [lifelike experience](#), [dreams](#), [novels](#), or [movies](#).

)—I had my head up in the clouds, not down in a tiny Gameboy screen.” He will consider telling his daughter “There’s something wrong with kids these days,” but he will decide not to because before he opens his mouth he will realize he probably shouldn’t talk to her about his senior technophobia, considering the circumstances of her divorce, which apparently

## 2. Omnipotence

Knowledge is power.

Google is all-knowing.

Therefore Google is all-powerful.

## 3. Omnipresence

The internet, where Google is number one (4), is literally everywhere nowadays. It’s even in outer space (5). So if the internet is everywhere, Google is everywhere, and if Google is everywhere, She’s omnipresent.

### 3.1 Omnipresence

Google is potentially immortal (3). She cannot be considered a physical being such as ourselves. Her algorithms are spread out across many servers. If any of them were taken down or damaged, another would undoubtedly take its place. So Google can theoretically last forever. The Internet can theoretically grow forever (3). So it is sort of infinite. I don’t know if

was caused by her husband “masturbating online with Sid around.” The thought will occur to him that Sid might love monsters on his Gameboy more than his mom and grandfather. To erase this thought, he will ask his daughter about her day—he will say, “How was moving and the lawyer and everything?” She will say, “Okay,” and then they will chat brusquely about her day, about the lawyer, about all the paperwork it takes to divorce someone, about the U-haul. Her father will say, “But everything worked out okay?” She will say, “Yeah. I think everything’s going to be fine.” Then she will say that the one thing she regrets is that Sid will grow up without a father. She will look into the floor while saying this, and in her peripheral vision will be the computer, which will continue to sit on the living room carpet for three weeks, then will move into Sid’s room after he hears about computer videogames at school and asks his mom if he can move the computer to his room. She will be hesitant to give him a computer at

an actual infinite can exist, but the internet comes close because it’s everywhere and is so big nobody even knows how big it is (2). If you Google “how big is the internet?” you get no definitive answer.

The point is Google will index the continued growth of the internet forever, and in that way Google is sort of infinite.

#### **4. Omnibenevolence**

Google answers prayers (3). You can pray to Google by doing a search about whatever question or problem is troubling you. For example, you can quickly find information on basically anything, like “what should I do today?” or “what is a fermion?” You can also ask Google deep stuff like “what is the meaning of life?” Whatever problem you have, Google helps you solve it, and She charges you zero dollars for her services. To me, that is the definition of good.

such a young age but will eventually let him have it just to finally get the thing out of the living room, out of her sight. “Are you sure everything’s okay?” her father will say—she will still be gazing into the floor and thinking about her son growing up fatherless, and she will look pretty not okay. She will say, “Yeah, I’m sure.” She will look her father straight in the eyes and say, “I couldn’t imagine growing up without you, Dad.” Her father will smile paternally and hug her. She will thank him again for taking Sid fishing today. He will say “don’t mention it” and that he would love to take him out again sometime. She’ll say, “That’d be good for him.” He’ll say, “I think so too.”

During the next few years, he will take Sid out again many more times, into the real world, IRL: fishing, hiking, an NBA game, Chinese restaurants, Sunday church. Sometimes Sid will genuinely enjoy these things in the real world (except church). But mostly he will want to be home alone in his room, playing

#### **4.1 Omnibenevolence**

Google’s company motto is “don’t be evil” (2). Clearly, Google is good.

#### **5. Divine Simplicity**

Google is so easy to use that any idiot can use it. It’s homepage is very plain and only has the company logo and a search bar.

Google even suggests searches for you as you type. So you don’t even have to know what you’re looking for for Google to find it.

#### **Conclusion**

According to Google trends, which is an internet-popularity tool that is sort of like alexa.com, the word “Google” is searched way more than the words “God,” “Jesus,” “Allah,” “Buddha,” “Christianity,” “Islam,” “Buddhism,” and “Judaism” combined (3). So it seems more people trust Google than other forms of god.

videogames in the virtual world: Pokémon, Final Fantasy, Diablo, Starcraft. He will develop a passion for Starcraft—he will spend inordinate amounts of time playing it. He will develop myopia. (**Myopia** is a condition of the [eye](#) where the light that comes in does not directly focus on the [retina](#) but in front of it. This causes the image that one sees when looking at a distant object to be out of focus but in focus when looking at a close object.

(...)

Many optometrists believe prolonged computer use at close distances puts people at an increased risk for myopia.)

His mom will become concerned. They will argue about him not spending enough time in the real world, about him spending inordinate amounts of time playing Starcraft. She will be like, “It’s ruining your eyes!” although the real reason for her concern will be more like, “You should spend less time commanding hive-minded insectoid aliens and more time with

In conclusion, evidence of Google’s existence is abundant, and if you define god in a certain way, then you sort of have to accept that you think Google is god.

There is more evidence for the existence of Google than any other god worshiped today. I used to pray, but I never received any evidence at all that someone was listening, and nobody else does either.

Google answers prayers right away, so I trust Her more than anything or anyone else, even though She doesn’t exactly answer every question.

If you are still not convinced Google is god, then go to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) and experience for yourself Google’s awesome power.

#### Works Cited

1. *Die frohliche Wissenschaft* by Friedrich

flesh-and-blood human beings.” She will make him an eye-doctor appointment, and he will get glasses. He will almost flunk eighth grade because of neglecting homework for Starcraft. His mom will get a second job, because money will become short. She will work so many hours that she will rarely see her son, and he will feel a distant sadness about her absence, eventually, but first he will just feel glad that he can play Starcraft unbothered by her. He will basically forget about his father, who will never call or visit or anything. He will basically forget about his Father’s touching him. He will feel generally satisfied with a mostly Starcraft-filled life, until pubescent hormones flood his brain—then he’ll really want girls. He will try to talk to girls at school and fail. Kids at school will start to make fun of him for his social ineptitude. For the first time in his life he will realize how lonely he is and feel bad about his solitary, Starcraft-filled, girl-free life. Then he will discover masturbation and internet pornography and

Nietzsche

2. [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)
3. [www.thechurchofgoogle.org](http://www.thechurchofgoogle.org)
4. [www.alex.com](http://www.alex.com)
5. [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

Mr. Pierce can’t tell whether Sid wrote this paper seriously or as a joke. Regardless, he gives him a D and leaves him this note:

**Sid,**

**There are many things wrong with your paper.**

**First, you don’t have enough sources (not to mention you don’t even correctly cite the sources you do have).**

**Second, it’s only two pages (the assignment was seven pages).**

**Third, there are glaring faults and contradictions in all your ‘proofs.’ For example, you claim Google is omniscient in section 1, but in section 3.1 you say Google can’t answer the question “how big is the internet?” If Google can’t answer a simple question like “how big is the internet?” it’s**

suddenly not really care about girls anymore, at least not IRL girls. Occasionally he will face female opponents in online Starcraft matches and fantasize about being with them. His grandpa will die. He will be sad, although not as sad as his mom, who will grieve sort of forever—she'll get sort of better after meeting Mr. Pierce in a parent-teacher conference; they will like each other and exchange phone



numbers ostensibly to talk about Sid's bad schoolwork but really to talk out other problems they share (e.g., they both will be grieving dead Fathers (**God the Father** is a gendered title given to God in many monotheistic religions, particularly patriarchal, Abrahamic ones. In Judaism, God is called Father because he is the creator, life-giver, law-giver, and protector. In traditional Christianity, God is also called Father because of the Father-Son relationship revealed by Jesus Christ as

clearly not omniscient (or omnipotent, which you equivocate with omniscience in section 2 [and by the way your equivocation there is another logical misstep]). Also, “deus ex machine” is Latin, not Swedish. What ever gave you the idea it is Swedish? There are countless errors like these in your paper.

The quality of your schoolwork has been very low lately. If this trend continues, you will be in danger of failing my class, which you need to graduate. Because of your danger of failing, I will be contacting your parent(s) or guardian(s) to discuss your situation.

\* \* \*

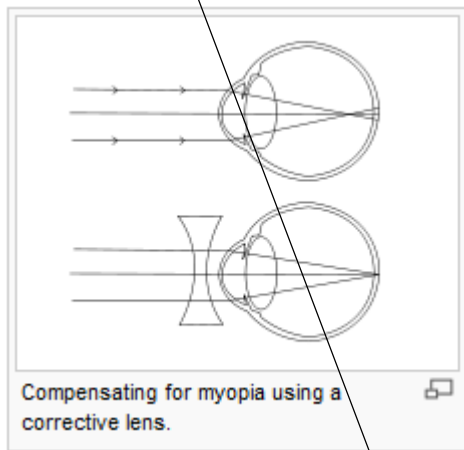
Sid's grandpa says, “ $1+1=2$  because it does. It's simply true.”

Nietzsche furrows his mustache, then says, “*Circulus in probando*. Circular reasoning. Your proof must come from elsewhere.”

Augustine's scalp is disintegrating under the golden light. Patches of his skull are visible. His eyes' brightness equals about 9,001 candles.



well as the reasons mentioned above. In general, the name Father signifies God's role as a life-giver, an [authority](#), and powerful protector, often viewed as immense, [omnipotent](#), [omniscient](#), [omnipresent](#) with infinite power and [charity](#)



understanding). Later, Sid will meet a girl online, Alexa, and will sort of love her. Things won't work out with her, though. There will also be another girl, Keira, whom he will initially consider kind of dumb but will eventually learn to really like, and he will kiss her one night in her bedroom while they watch

that  
goes  
beyond  
human

Sid's grandpa is flabbergasted. He starts stuttering some words, then stops. Nietzsche laughs at him and furrows his mustache. Augustine's skull cracks open and divine light seeps in. His tongue lolls from his mouth. He's entered into a sort of stupor. Saliva drips down his chin. He says, "1+1=2, 1+1=2, 1+1=2." He says, "*Ex Deo Veritas*: From God, Truth." His head is ripping in half.

Nietzsche is like, "Did you know Augustine was a sexual hedonist? It's true. Look it up. (As a youth Augustine lived a [hedonistic](#) lifestyle for a time, associating with young men who boasted of their sexual exploits with women and urged the inexperienced boys, like Augustine, to seek out experiences or to make up stories about experiences in order to gain acceptance and avoid ridicule.) For like half his life he was enslaved to sex. He was a habitual masturbator, like your ex-son-in-law. He—"

"How do you know?"

"It's common knowledge—look it up."

romantic videos of spectacled bears on  
YouTube, maybe.



Augustine's head has completely ripped in half, exposing his brain stem, which the golden light now focuses on. At the light's focal point a translucent eye emerges.

"It's not common knowledge that my ex-son-in-law was a habitual masturbator."

"He used to pray, 'Lord make me chaste, but not yet. It's all in his *Confessions*, which ([Latin](#): *Confessiones*) is the name of an [autobiographical](#) work, consisting of 13 books, by St. [Augustine of Hippo](#), written between AD [397](#) and AD [398](#)."

"What?"

An electric-blue light beams down from somewhere and burns Nietzsche's hair off. For the first time in like twenty minutes Sid's grandpa looks over at Augustine. Augustine's mind's eye is radiating intensely. Sid's grandpa's like, "What?" Nietzsche's like, "God is dead" and the electric-blue light cracks his skull like an egg. Third Eye Blind's hit pop-rock single "Semi-charmed life" starts playing somewhere. Three panda bears materialize. A

flock of ducklings flies overhead, emitting lightning and quacking ominously. Sid's grandpa shuts his eyes. He starts to sort of meditate. Nietzsche's skull is fracturing into like a million pieces and he's smiling morosely and his mustache rips off his face and crawls away like a caterpillar. Nietzsche's like, "God and I are dead." Sid's grandpa uses his meditative concentration to make two of the panda bears disintegrate. Augustine's mind's eye is radiating so intensely that Sid's grandpa feels warmth in his chest. He concentrates on this warmth. His concentration is so sharp that the third panda bear disintegrates and now the boundary between Augustine and the golden light is lost and the electric-blue light that's beaming onto Nietzsche transmogrifies him into a humongous three-eyed hippopotamus whose Third Eye's Blind's first album, [Third Eye Blind](http://deus.org), was released in 1997.

<a href=http://deus.org"> .</a>

**Keira (7:01):** Sup :)

**Sid:** Hey

nothing

sup

**Keira:** I'm just hanging out in my room

I'm bored

**Sid:** Me too

I'm always bored

I'll probably play some videogames in a minute

**Keira:** Do you play a lot of videogames?

**Sid:** Yeah

**Keira:** That's cool

**Sid:** Yeah...but not really lol

**Keira:** lol

**Keira (7:15):** The only videogame I like is Pokémon

**Sid:** Pokémon's cool

I used to play it a lot

I mostly play Starcraft 2 now

**Keira:** What's Starcraft 2?

**Sid:** An RTS game

It's like chess

but with futuristic stuff

and there are no turns

**Keira:** Remember that weird black and white movie  
that we watched in school

with chess?

**Sid (7:45):** What movie?

**Keira:** We watched it in class

like a week ago

**Sid:** I don't remember that lol

**Keira:** lol

**Sid:** Sometimes I forget everything

I also get a lot of déjà vu

**Keira:** Whats déjà vu?

**Sid (8:20):** Uh

It's a memory thing

It's hard to explain lol

I just beat someone named "DEATH" in Starcraft

and he messaged me

"I'm going to kill you"

lol

**Keira:** uh oh

lol

Hey check out this video <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=qwJ0BFCIo8A>

**Sid (8:45):** Spectacled bear sandwich?

**Keira:** Yeah

for some reason I think it's hilarious

**Sid:** I watched it lol

My mom made sandwiches for dinner tonight

**Keira:** Were they good?

**Sid:** Yeah

It was the first time she made dinner in like a year

She usually just orders cheap pizza

She bought a lot of groceries this week

**Keira:** I love pizza

I had pasta for dinner tonight

We should hang out and eat pizza sometime :)

**Sid:** lol okay

**Keira:** The spectacled bear in this YouTube video looks exactly like you

because of your glasses

<http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=gfPfYG0DIbG0DRkw>

**Sid (9:25):** The link doesn't work >\_>

This is weird

Every time I start a new game in Starcraft

I get matched with this DEATH guy

I've played him like seven times in a row

And now he's flooding me with messages like

with a bunch of random letters and stuff

**Keira:** What?

**Sid:** Here

I'll copy-paste one:

“\*\*\*FATAL EXCEPTION: 0AF7411200 00011DAD000 000BA010 00DAD0010  
001C00G0D”

**Keira:** what?

lol

A problem has been detected and your computer has been shut down to prevent damage.

The problem seems to be caused by the following file: MISSINGSOURCE.SYS

SOURCE\_FAULT\_IN\_NONSOURCED\_AREA

If this is the first time you've seen this Stop error screen, restart your computer. If this screen appears again, follow these steps:

Check to make sure any new hardware or software is properly installed.

If this is a new installation, ask your hardware or software manufacturer for like any updates you might need.

If problems continue, disable or remove any newly installed hardware or software. Disable DEUS memory options such as caching or shadowing. If you need to use Safe Mode to remove or disable components, restart your computer, press F8 to select Advanced Startup Options, and then select Safe Mode.

Technical information:

\*\*\* STOP: 0x00000050 (0xFD3094c2, 0x00000001, 0xFBFE777, 0x000000000)

\*\*\* MISSINGSOURCE.SYS - Address 0AF7411200 00011DAD000 000BA010 000G0D000 001C00G0D



So this story doesn't exactly start in medias res, as it were, but if you bear with me for like 3 paragraphs there's going to be some dramatic, life-and-death stuff involving suicide—I promise.

Okay, so the story's protasis, as it were, involves my (i.e., Mark Buckner's) first day ever of classes at the University of Michigan and me going to Chipotle right before my very first class ever and ordering a barbacoa fajita burrito with extra-hot habanero salsa and extra guacamole and sitting down and eating the burrito and being anxious about first-day-ever-of-college type stuff (e.g., "I hope college isn't too hard" and "I hope I can make friends" and "I hope I can find all my classes on this huge scary campus" etc.). And, because I'm really anxious, I'm eating the burrito way too fast and pouring way too much Tabasco sauce on it, and I finish eating the whole burrito in like five minutes—and I'm kind of a skinny guy and my stomach can't really handle an entire extra-spicy Tabasco-sauce-saturated Chipotle burrito in five minutes, so my stomach starts hurting. All of this is important, by the way—I promise. I'm not just like describing my pre-first-day-ever-of-classes lunch at Chipotle for nothing. All of this is going to come back up in the story's catastasis.

So after lunch I head for my first college class ever, English 223, an intro to creative writing. And in class we do a little icebreaker activity where we find a partner and tell him/her a 30-second story about our summer, but there's an odd number of people in class and I end up not having a partner (and there wouldn't have been an odd number, but the GSI participates in the icebreaker for some reason and partners up with the girl I was going to partner up with, thereby excluding me). So here I am, partnerless, so I just sort of lean towards a nearby pair and pretend

that I'm in their group—but I don't lean too close because I don't want them to notice me and be like, "Why is this weird, partnerless guy trying to impose himself into our independent icebreaker activity group?"—so I spend the next sixty seconds sort of straddling on the edge of my chair and trying to negotiate the proper distance between maintaining a semblance of icebreaker activity participation and infringing upon an independent group's personal space—and I'm already starting to hate college and it's only been like two minutes. After the icebreaker the GSI reads the syllabus aloud to us (implying we can't read) and then tells us for next class we all need to come back with a one-page story and someone needs to volunteer to have his/her one-pager read by everyone in class next week so that we can workshop it and thereby learn how to do the workshop method of critique, which nobody knows how to do yet because it's an intro-level class. Nobody volunteers, though, because nobody wants to have their shitty first-week one-pager read and workshopped by the whole class, especially because most of the class doesn't even know what "workshopping" is exactly and it sounds kind of frightening and embarrassing. So the GSI adds that whoever bravely volunteers to share their shitty first-week story will get the first pick of workshop dates for their main, 10-to-15-page story, so I raise my hand, but a skinny blonde-haired-blue-eyed, sororityish-looking girl says "I'll do it!" in a really high-pitched, prototypically blonde-haired-blue-eyed-/sororityish-sounding voice—and the GSI says, "Okay great, Iris!" Then class ends.

The rest of my first week of classes goes exactly the same, more or less. I.e., anxiety-inducing icebreaker activities and syllabi read aloud. I don't get any homework (besides the one-pager for 223) and spend most of the week playing volleyball in my dormitory's courtyard and trying to make friends but not making any friends. I kick a lot of kids' asses in volleyball, though. (I'm great at volleyball).

Nothing else important really happens this first week, except late one night I walk around alone in the campus's arboretum, which happens to be right in my dormitory's backyard, as it were, and as I'm walking I think about college and life and all that really banal late-night-walking-in-the-arboretum type stuff and have an anxiety attack all of a sudden. It's not too important, to be honest (i.e., the anxiety attack isn't). I'm just establishing that I'm kind of a nervous guy and have a history with mental health problems. E.g., I get anxiety attacks sometimes. The summer before college I was hospitalized, I could also probably mention. But, again, it's not too important; I'm just establishing some premises, as it were, which will support the argument, as it were, of this story (as it were).

Okay, so now it's week 2 of my 1st semester of college ever, but it still feels like week 1 to me because week 1 was just syllabi and icebreakers. So I've still got the 1st week jitters, as it were, and before what feels like my first class ever I go to Chipotle to try to eat away said jitters. And the same thing happens on this second Chiptole visit as the first one in ¶ 2 (i.e., I eat a spicy-sauce-saturated burrito in like 5 min., and my stomach starts hurting). Then I head for 223, but I have trouble finding it, even though I'd already found it last week, and end up having to pull out my campus map and running to class—and I probably look like the quintessential freshman jackass, I realize as I'm running, with my campus map pulled out and awkward, heavy-backpack-hindered jogging, and as I'm jogging the Chipotle burrito's violent natation in my stomach's bile, which is presently like half-composed of Tabasco sauce, induces acute nausea, and all together I feel pretty much the opposite of good.

But nevertheless I make it to class on time and take my seat right as the GSI is starting and Iris, the blonde who volunteered to have her story workshopped as a demonstration, is

passing a stack of her stories around the class.

Okay. Now this story moves into the epitasis, as it were, and finally gets to the suicide stuff I was talking about earlier.

This story is 100% true, by the way, I should probably mention. This all actually literally happened.

Okay so the epitasis, as it were, involves my noticing that Iris's story is not a page long. It's just a short paragraph. I'll just include her story here verbatim.

Iris X

English 223

9/14/09

First story

**I'm going to kill myself on 3/1/13\***

I'm literally going to kill myself on 3/1/13. I'm so so depressed and lonely. I'm going to jump of the top of the parking structure next to West Quad. It feels like I'm being ripped apart on the inside. I can't take it anymore, so I'm going to kill myself.

Now is probably the time to mention that this Iris girl is not, in fact, blonde-haired and

blue-eyed and sororityish at all; she's actually got jet-black hair and dark brown eyes and pale, sallow skin and an anorexically thin body and her face is covered in scratches and her wrists are conspicuously wrapped in gauze bandages and all together she looks exactly like the kind of girl who'd turn in the above story.

So the whole class takes like 2 silent minutes to read her story, and while everyone's reading I feel so tense I could vomit. Maybe it's not the tension that's making me feel like I could vomit; it's probably just the fact that I ate a big fat burrito in 5 min., but still. And I want to look at Iris to see if she's, like, okay—to see if she's like not committing suicide right this very instant—but I can't bear to and just stare at my shoes.

So what do you think happens next? I thought the GSI would just direct Iris to some mental health resources on campus. You know, like, give her some phone numbers or web addresses or something.

But instead the GSI fucking says, "So to start out a workshop you usually want to say what you think the story's about. I.e., you want to discuss what you think the theme is. So what do we think Iris's story is exploring here? And, by the way, Iris, you're not allowed to talk while we workshop your story. Whoever is having his/her story workshopped can't talk until the end. So what do we think 'I'm going to kill myself on 3/1/13' is about?"

And I'm thinking, like, wtf? This GSI can't be serious. Why isn't she (I don't think I've identified the GSI's sex until just now, but don't assume the GSI is female because of the feminine pronoun—the GSI is a hermaphrodite, actually) just telling this poor girl to go get help? She can't be serious. I mean, the story says "I'm *literally* going to kill myself on 3/1/13."

But apparently she is serious, because a fat-bearded guy (the beard is fat, not the guy) raises his hand and she calls on him. And Mr. fat beard says, "I think Iris's piece is essentially an

exercise in minimalism. I like how she tells the whole story in only 5 sentences. And she gets it all done in those five sentences, more or less. E.g., she establishes the setting via the 3/1/13 and specifying the West Quad parking structure. And the main character is established well because there's only one character, and we learn pretty much all we need to about her because her life is apparently totally controlled and consumed by her depression and suicidal thoughts. I'd say the story is essentially about minimalism and the theme is minimalism, essentially, because her life is very minimal w/r/t her amount of time left according to the date she has set for her suicide, and also there's the minimalness of her thoughts, which only talk about suicide and nothing else. Perhaps the piece is essentially trying to draw a comparison between suicide and the artistic style of minimalism?"

My stomach literally turns over. It literally literally turns over. All I want to do is like tell Iris everything's going to be okay and give her a hug, and here this guy is talking about minimalism and overusing the word "essentially."

But it gets worse because then this girl wearing two monocles (not glasses, but two fucking separate monocles) raises her hand and the GSI calls on her and Ms. monocles says, "I don't know what the theme is, but I'd say the genre of the piece is dark humor/black comedy because I think it's meant to be funny but it's not really funny at all because it deals with suicide. For example, the date, 3/1/13, is conspicuous because that's April 1st and that's April Fools' day. And also the font is Comic Sans, which is pretty egregiously conspicuous because Comic Sans is never the default font in word processing programs because it's widely regarded as an informal, joke font, which means that Iris consciously chose to change the font to Comic Sans. And also the language is pretty generic, so I think it's supposed to be like a bad parody of a suicide note. I think the story is trying to poke fun at suicide, I think. But it's simply not funny,

no offense, Iris.”

“Very adroit observations w/r/t the date and font,” says the GSI. “What do other people think?”

But before anyone raises their hand and offers another asinine interpretation I say, “Now hold on just a fucking minute everybody; I think it’s pretty clear that this isn’t really a story at all but some kind of cry for help. I mean, the story says, ‘I’m *literally* going to kill myself,’ and it even has a specific plan (i.e., jumping off the roof of the parking structure next to West Quad). We need to get Iris help.”

But then everyone looks at me like *I’m* crazy, and the GSI says, “We can’t assume that the narrator is Iris herself here, Mark. Furthermore, this is a fiction class, so we must assume that the story is fiction here, whether it’s or isn’t. Our job here is to offer constructive criticism on this text; we’re not Iris’s counselors here. If Iris is actually struggling with suicidal thoughts, I trust that she’ll find the help she needs herself. I think we better stick to fat beard and monocles’ interpretation of the story here. And besides, does Iris look like the type of girl who’s about to kill herself?” And at this point I should mention that Iris is not, in fact, black-haired and pale-/sallow-skinned and anorexically thin and she doesn’t have gauze bandages on her wrists and scratches on her face—in reality she’s just a really plain-looking black girl with dyed-red curly hair and wire-rimmed glasses and a normal-, healthy-looking body which completely lacks gauze bandages. She really *doesn’t* look like the type of girl who’s about to kill herself, I concede to the GSI; in fact, she looks like just about the very last person who’s about to kill herself, but isn’t it always the very last person you’d expect? I.e., the last person you’d expect is always the person you should expect the most, actually, as it were, because he/she is always the person who actually always ends up killing him/herself, right? I say to the GSI. The GSI counters by simply

repeating her previous arguments (i.e., we can't assume (1) the narrator is Iris herself and (2) the story is non-fictional), which I admit are valid, logically sound arguments, "but still," I say, "shouldn't we, like, at least ask Iris if she's okay, despite how normal she looks—the extent to which one looks normal not exactly being among the best criteria for judging one's risk of suicide, the extent to which one looks normal, in fact, being just about the *worst* of all suicidal-risk-determining criterion?" The GSI counters by reminding me that the workshoppee is not allowed to say anything during his/her workshop, because allowing one to speak during his/her workshop could destroy the integrity of said workshop and bias our objective, critical constructive criticisms, "which we are supposed to be offering right this very instant," the GSI says, "so let's get back to discussing Iris's story here, as opposed to Iris herself."

Meanwhile the Chipotle burrito is fucking ravaging my insides, I should probably mention, and I'm considering leaving class to go to the bathroom, but there's some really important stuff happening in class and I don't want to miss anything just because I have to shit, so I'm like focusing all my will power on steadying my bowels so I can make it through the rest of the class and learn whether Iris is actually planning on killing herself, which I absolutely need to find out, one way or another, I decide all of a sudden.

The GSI says, "Now, in the workshop method of critique, after you discuss what you think the story's about, you should discuss how the story can be improved. Now, you usually don't want to discuss grammar and spelling errors during this stage of the workshop; you want to discuss like plot/character/style/etc. However, because this story is so short I think I can point out a few obvious spelling and grammar errors here really quickly. (1) Capitalize the title. (2) Sentence 3 should read 'jump *off* the top of,' not 'jump *of* the top of.' (4) In sentence 4 the usage of 'like' is incorrect; it should be 'as if' instead. Can anyone else offer some constructive



criticism on Iris's story?"

Fat beard: "In sentence one the prepositional phrase 'on 3/1/13' should be moved to the front of the sentence, because it isn't as powerful as the 'I'm literally going to kill myself' part of the sentence and you want to end sentences w/ the most powerful part of the sentence."

Monocles: "In sentence 2 there shouldn't be 2 so's because it makes it sound like so-so, which means, like, medium. I.e., the 'so so' that is meant to intensify the adjective 'depressed' actually, as it were, un-intensifies the adjective, because it sounds like 'I'm *medium* depressed and lonely.'"

GSI: "Good suggestions y'all."

And if you're wondering why fat beard and monocles, who had already been called on, were called on again: I should probably mention at this point that the only people in the class are fat beard, monocles, Iris, the GSI, and myself. I.e., only four students signed up for the class, which, if you reconsider that icebreaker activity scene from earlier (q.v. ¶ 3), makes it a lot more awkward, now doesn't it—and if you consider the current class discussion regarding Iris's cry for help or story, as it were, well, it's a lot more awkward with only five people in the room, now isn't it.

This story isn't metafiction, by the way, I feel like I need to mention. It's metafictional, I'll concede, but this isn't a piece of metafiction. Of course, saying a story isn't a piece of metafiction right in the middle of the fucking story kind of makes it look like a piece of metafiction, now doesn't it. Because metafiction is just a story that draws attention to the fact that it's a story, which is what I'm doing right now, right? I.e., saying 'this isn't metafiction' is a metafictional comment in and of itself because said comment exposes the fictional illusion, as it

were. But this isn't metafiction—I promise. It's a true story.

If you want to get technical about it, I suppose the act of saying “this story isn't metafiction” creates a self-referential paradox in which two contradictory conditions are established vis-a-vis the story (i.e., condition (A) being that story (Q) isn't metafiction, but sentence (X), “this story isn't a piece of metafiction,” within (Q) establishing the story itself as metafictional and thereby evoking condition (B), the story is metafiction, and thereby creating a contradiction between (A) and (B) within (Q). It's a classic self-referential paradox. It's like, e.g., “The following sentence is true. The preceding sentence is false.” It's exactly like that, more or less).

All of that is beside the point, though. Because what I mean when I say that this story isn't a piece of metafiction is that the point of the story isn't to draw attention to the fact that it's a story and thereby deconstruct the fictional illusion, as it were, or something really high-brow and impossibly intellectual like that. Rather, the point of this story, this story's thesis, as it were, is that sometimes nice girls like Iris (who is actually a really cute short Southeast Asian girl with short straight black hair and braces (and this is actually what she looks like, I promise—I promise I'll stop jerking you around with the physical descriptions) that sometimes nice girls like Iris (whom I ended up falling in love with after reading “I'm going to kill myself on 3/1/13” (although I didn't know it yet at the time (i.e., I didn't know I was in love with her at the time this story takes place, but, retrospectively looking back on everything, I've decided that the moment I read her story was the moment I feel in love with her) but this story's thesis, as it were, is that sometimes nice girls like Iris (or nice guys like me) get lost and scared and confused and depressed and lonely and wander around alone in the arboretum at like 3 a.m. and have anxiety attacks and...I don't really know what the thesis is actually, to be honest, I just decided all of a

sudden.

But just think of it this way: what's at stake here is that this Iris girl might kill herself, right? But in 2009 at a place like the University of Michigan everyone's too sophisticated and intellectual and ostensibly homeostatic to really care, preferring instead to talk about minimalism and grammar and genre and dark humor and self-referential paradoxes because we're all supposed to be adults and be really smart and constantly maintain some sort of simulacrum of smartness and normalcy and homeostasis and not ever be sentimental or suicidal or something, despite the fact that like almost every human is exceedingly sentimental and feels like he/she is tearing apart on the inside, at least some of the time, I believe, personally. By the way, the burrito's role in the story is that it's "tearing up my insides." Get it? It's like a symbol/metaphor/pun, you motherfucker. And what's scary about this situation is that sometimes a girl like Iris goes to a class like English 223 and submits a story that's obviously *not* a story, that's obviously just a cry for help, that's obviously just an attempt to show everyone that she's "tearing apart on the inside," but because everyone's too scared to like genuinely ask her if she needs help she ends up killing herself a year later.

Which she does end up doing, by the way. I.e., on 9/15/10 (not 3/1/13) she ends up killing herself, sadly. She ends up jumping off the parking structure by West Quad. I know because I became friends with her after 223 and then realized I was in love with her. I've already mentioned that all this actually happened, right? If I haven't, it did, more or less, by the way.

I've seriously considered killing myself too, by the way, I should probably mention. But it's not that important, to be honest (i.e., it's not that important to this story that I've considered killing myself—but I'm not trying to say I don't think that my life's important or something). I just feel like it's relevant here. Suicide is really relevant to the thesis, as it were, of this story

because the thesis I'm trying to develop is essentially that the art of fiction/storytelling is a chance to spill your guts, as it were, and talk about secret-inner stuff that typically can't be talked about in the day-to-day homestaticness of adult life. But where a lot of writers fail, I think, is that they don't really spill their guts, as it were, and be open and candid for the reader; instead they try to like be really dry and cool and unsentimental...idk.

It's not really about literary criticism, though, is the point. The stakes are that Iris might kill herself. Who gives a fuck about literary criticism if somebody is going to kill him/herself? is the point.

(Anyway, the thesis, as it were, of this story is essentially a Stevie Smith poem titled "Not Waving but Drowning," so if you really want to know what I was going for here, read that. I won't include the poem here, however, because this excursus has gone on long enough and I need to get back to the classroom scene and move into the catastasis, as it were, but I'll include the poem at the end of the story so you don't have to look it up online or something, if you actually want to read it (which I doubt you do (i.e., I doubt you give a shit about what exactly this story's thesis is or some Stevie Smith fucking poem)). The poem's not like an actual part of this story, though. It's just like a better version of the thesis I'm trying to develop here.)

But so meanwhile back in the classroom fat beard is saying, "Maybe the spelling error in sentence 3 was intentional; perhaps, if we accept the premise that the narrator, who we've decided is not Iris, is, in fact, going to commit suicide, well, wouldn't he/she essentially be too depressed and mentally exhausted to spell correctly? Perhaps the intentional misspelling of 'of' is essentially meant to establish an anxiety-ridden narrative voice, which we should, in fact,

expect to find in a suicidal/mentally unstable narrator, should not we? Thus, perhaps the misspelling of ‘of’ actually essentially establishes a *greater* degree of verisimilitude, paradoxically, rather than ‘sucking the reader out of the narrative dream,’ as it were, as you say it does, Mrs. G.S.I.,”—the GSI’s initials being G.S.I, oddly enough—“because perhaps we’re supposed to believe that the narrator is so consumed by her loneliness/depression that he/she essentially doesn’t give two/to/too/2 shits about spelling.”

And meanwhile, speaking of giving shits, I’m about to shit my pants—the burrito’s slipping down my intestines like a playground slide. But I absolutely cannot leave class to go shit because I need to find out how this Iris thing is going to turn out, right? So at this point I’m literally concerned about shitting my pants in the middle of class (the burrito’s other role, as it were, in the story is comic relief. I.e., I’m trying to discuss suicide and other stuff that I find very profound and serious, but the seriousness and profoundness of said topics make them very hard to discuss for me and I don’t want to look too sentimental and overdramatic or something, so I’m splicing in some toilet humor to sort of make the story easier to swallow, as it were, for both you and myself) and I begin to fart a lot, and said farts are clearly heard by everyone in class because there’s only 5 people in class, remember? And, because there are only 5 people in class, I can’t like pretend that someone else farted, right?

G.S.I says, “I’m not sure I can buy any argument that argues that a story’s spelling errors are intentional, fat beard—said argument creating a quite slippery slope, as it were, on which any student can slide stories full of spelling/grammar errors down without being held accountable.”

And now we move into the story’s catastasis, as it were, in which I yell, “Forget the spelling errors! The fact is that there’s a possibility, however large or slight it may be, that Iris might kill herself, and as fucking responsible, *human* human-beings, we need to seriously

address that issue and make sure that Iris is okay. Are you okay, Iris? Fuck the workshop rules about not talking. Just tell me that you're okay and won't kill yourself. Please just tell me that. If you're feeling suicidal, we need to get you medical attention right away."

Suddenly it starts thunderstorming all of a sudden. And maybe it's really cliché and cheesy that it starts fucking thunderstorming right in the middle of the story's catastasis, but all of this actually happened (more or less), remember? And it actually did start fucking thunderstorming right at the very instant I yelled "Forget the spelling errors!" I swear it actually happened. Right at that very instant rain started pouring and lightning started flashing and the wind was all like whooooOOOooOOOoshhhhh. It actually happened, you motherfucker. Don't believe me? Fine; don't believe me then. I don't care. Maybe it's not important if it actually started thunderstorming or not. But if you don't believe that it thunderstormed, maybe you don't believe that Iris jumped off the parking structure next to West Quad, and she really did, and I was good friends with her—I was in love with her. Just because I'm making jokes and experimenting with metafictional writing doesn't mean that Iris didn't kill herself and that I'm not still torn up about it, you motherfucker.

G.S.I: "Mark, quit fucking ruining the integrity of this workshop. We are trying to objectively offer unbiased objective constructive criticism for Iris's story here. I'm marking down your participation points for today. I'll fucking fail you if you don't (1) calm the fuck down, (2) stop farting, and (3) stop insisting that Iris is going to kill herself. This is a college class. You want to get kicked out? This isn't Counseling and Psychological Services. If Iris needs counseling, she can go to CAPS, but she knows better than to bring her emotional bullshit into my college-level creative writing workshop. This class is serious fucking business; we don't have time for whiney, cry-baby, I'm-going-to-kill-myself, Stevie-Smith-poem-not-waving-but-

drowning bullshit.”

Me: “Fine. There’s only 5 min. left of class, though, so that means it’s time for Iris herself to speak, right? That’s how these workshops work, right? After we all discuss someone’s story they get to speak afterwards, right? Well, there’s only 5 min. left, so I do hereby decree that it is high-time for Iris to proffer her sentiments. So what say you, Iris?”

G.S.I: “Now hold on there, Marky boy. Fat beard, monocles, and I have not yet finished objectively pinpointing the story’s genre. Nor have we reached a conclusion regarding the story’s style, as it were, the font choice of fucking Comic Sans notwithstanding, said font choice really throwing a wrench, as it were, in our entire interpretation of the story.”

Me: “Who cares about the font!?!?! I’m about to shit my pants here! And Iris might kill herself! Iris, just tell me if you’re okay. If you need help, I can help you. But you need to do it quick, because I’ve got about three sentences before I shit my pants. Iris?”

Iris’s nose starts bleeding. The blood gushes down in rectilinear streams across her mouth and down her neck. I shit my pants. Iris grins, revealing a mouth full of bloody teeth. I vomit. Iris laughs a wet, lurid laugh, spitting blood everywhere as she snorts and guffaws. “3/1/13,” Iris says. “That’s the day. That’s the day I’m going to do it. That’s the day my life’s going to

**end.”**

Stevie Smith - **Not Waving but Drowning\***

Nobody heard him, the dead man,  
But still he lay moaning:  
I was much further out than you thought  
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking  
And now he's dead  
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,  
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always  
(Still the dead one lay moaning)  
I was much too far out all my life  
And not waving but drowning.



