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In a Relative Way

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IN A RELATIVE WAY

By

Gabriel Waskiewicz

Thesis

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This thesis by Gabriel Waskiewicz is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

IN A RELATIVE WAY

By

Gabriel Waskiewicz

In this series of interrelated personal essays, I explore how relationships with certain family members and friends have helped form my life. Through the lives of those profiled here, I believe readers will get a better glimpse into the troubles I've been through in my own life. The many parallels I have with the lives of these family members and friends show that they have endured comparable situations or have even been through many of the same problems that I've had to withstand. By first seeing how these important individuals shaped my life, readers will get a better understanding of the personal pitfalls that are described later on.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Marlene, for all of the guidance and love you've shown me over the years. If it wasn't for your faith in my ability to persevere, I never would have gotten through all the difficult times in my life. Thank you so much for always believing in me.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed in the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....1
Chapter One: The First Quarter-A Preface.....12
Chapter Two: Bottom16
Chapter Three: Sunday Morning Coming Down.....22
Chapter Three: Sanctuary.....40
Chapter Four: The Farm.....57
Chapter Five: Dirty Davis.....77
Chapter Six: Instant Zen.....97
Chapter Seven: The Trip.....116
Chapter Eight: Reentry.....149
Chapter Nine: CaSINo.....161
Chapter Ten: March Madness.....179
Chapter Eleven: Wishless.....193
Chapter Twelve: Death of a Wage Slave.....209
Chapter Thirteen: Krazy Karl.....218
Chapter Fourteen: Hope: Spring's Eternal Gift.....231
Work cited.....237

INTRODUCTION

In this series of interrelated personal essays, I explore how relationships with certain family members and friends have helped form my life. Through the lives of those profiled, I hope to give readers a glimpse into the troubles I've been through in my own life. The many parallels between my life and the lives of these family members and friends show that they have experienced similar situations or have been through some of the same problems that I've had to endure. By first understanding how these important individuals shaped my life, readers will get a better understanding of the personal pitfalls described later on.

In the essay entitled "Sunday Morning Coming Down" I focus on my father, a disabled Vietnam veteran who struggles with alcoholism and mental illness, which makes him difficult to understand and accept. From my first memories of meeting him in prison, I describe what it was like trying to cope with these diseases in a parent and how it took me many years before I could accept him. These struggles continued even after his sudden death when I was only twenty-one.

In other essays, the positive roles that my grandmother and her brother, my great uncle Kaarlo, played in my life are illustrated. Their strict Lutheran beliefs assisted in grounding me even when I was at my worst. When I needed her presence the most I was able to return to the apartment in which she helped raise me. She was no longer living, but even this unexpected reunion with her old dwelling allowed me to reassemble my shattered existence.

Other essays revolve around friends who have made many of the same poor choices that I have made, only sometimes these choices have had more severe or tragic outcomes for my friends. In "Dirty Davis", I discuss how one of my best friends from college struggled with drunk drivings and the death of his parents. "Krazy Karl" describes a former co-worker who now lives like a travelling bum.

Throughout this collection, the writing often focuses on topics revolving around substance abuse, mental illness, and sexual identity. The difficulties in my life play key roles in many of the essays. They illustrate the ways in which I have dealt with these issues, as well as showing how they have consumed other people in my life. In the end, it all shows that I am only the person that I am today because of having lived through all of this.

*

Early in life, I had always been more inclined to read works of fiction, starting with the Hardy Boys mystery series as a child. I moved on to Stephen King novels as a teen before finally starting to consume many of the "classic" works my father had always recommended, like those of John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemmingway. Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and Hemmingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* remain two of the most important works I've ever read. After finding in them a deeper truth that spoke to the human condition, I turned my attention to more contemporary authors. Originally, I gravitated towards the work of Kurt Vonnegut and Salman Rushdie, both of whom used elaborate settings and unique characters to create a means for observing some of the same issues facing mankind that were found in the works of Hemmingway and Steinbeck.

From there, I moved on to the poetry and prose of The Beats, and, like I had before with other authors who appealed to me, I started reading everything Jack Kerouac had written. His spontaneous style and preference for writing from personal experience coincided with my mindset at the time. It wasn't until then that I realized how many

of the authors I admired were actually writing their works based on material from their own lives.

Authors such as Hunter S. Thompson and Ken Kesey soon followed. Part of these authors charm was their willingness to write about things like drug use in such a candid manner. I respected their honesty, even if Thompson was prone to embellishment and self-mythologizing. Kesey's fictionalized accounts of his days serving as a counterculture icon in *Demon Box* and *Kesey's Garage Sale* provided useful context to Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, a work that I've always held in the highest regard. Wolfe's narrative style in this work wasn't one I could emulate, but I was able to appreciate the fact that the style he uses is meant to recreate the sensations of the drug use he is describing. When trying to reconstruct my own failing mental condition in "The Trip", I chose to use a similar narrative style to illustrate the feelings of paranoia and confusion I was experiencing at the time.

It was during this time that I was reading the works of Kerouac, Kesey, Thompson, and Wolfe that I first set my sights on trying to express myself through writing. I had recently went through something that I felt could only properly be reflected upon in print.

After being hospitalized for drug-induced psychosis, I tried to explain what had happened to my mother, but I wasn't able to appropriately convey the events that led up to my mental collapse verbally. Hoping to better deliver the message that it wasn't just the drugs that caused my problems, I turned to writing. Trying to explain all of this to my mother was my original inspiration for wanting to write the material contained in this thesis. It would take many years and failed attempts before I could get the thoughts down the way I wanted them.

In the early drafts, I chose to fictionalize parts of what had occurred, thinking this would make the writing easier and more accessible. Instead, it made my writing cumbersome and ineffective. I'm glad that none of the pieces I wrote during undergraduate workshops about this time in my life still exist today.

It wasn't until I returned to the Upper Peninsula during a second period of mental illness influenced by drug use that I started exploring the possibility of writing about these events in a more straightforward, non-fiction form. I'd finally realized that for my work to have the proper effect it needed to have, I was going to have to expose myself. I no longer wanted to hide behind the veil

of fiction, only I didn't yet know the type of structure and form my writing should take.

My first real exposure to the essay as a literary form was during a course on E.B. White and Annie Dillard while working on my undergraduate degree at Central Michigan University. I knew even then that my writing style fit White's more accessible narrative style. Dillard was awe-inspiring in her own way, but I knew I could never match her keen eye for description or elaborate, poetic prose. White's essays, on the other hand, had a subtle simplicity that I could relate to. In *One Man's Meat*, White gives readers observations on the daily life he led on a farm in Maine. Little things, like the death of a pig or failing to raise turkeys, are contrasted with allusions to the escalating conflict in World War II. Everything serves as an opportunity to give readers a lesson in honesty and humility. It would still be years before I attempted to apply these principles to my own writing.

The next seminal piece of non-fiction that I read was *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote. His ability to incorporate so many elements of fiction into a work of non-fiction was eye-opening. Until then, I hadn't realized how much the structure of non-fiction could be manipulated. Only later

would I learn how much Capote also manipulated some of the facts involved in this story in an effort to make the killers look more sympathetic. This always bothered me and made me wonder to what extent taking liberties in non-fiction was acceptable. I vowed then to represent everyone and everything in my work as accurately as possible.

It wasn't until years later that I found a form that suited the story I had to tell. It came in another book centered on a set of murders and the eventual execution of the killer. In *The Executioner's Song*, Norman Mailer uses a simple, concise prose style that relies on the facts of the story to hold the reader's attention. I believe part of the reason Mailer wrote the book in this manner was to have the form match the subject matter. The individuals he is describing are not complex characters doing a wide array of things. It is a story about a life-long criminal who gets out on parole only to commit even more heinous crimes than he had been in prison for in the first place.

Written in short sections that adequately describe one scene before moving on to the next, this epic work would serve as a model in both form and content. Mailer wasn't writing about his own experiences, like many of the other authors I hope to emulate, but he was writing in a frank,

upfront manner that didn't shy away from difficult material or topics. Because my story spanned so many years, I knew I would have to summarize portions of what I wanted to write about to condense it down and not end up with a thousand-plus page manuscript like Mailer's, but when reading *Executioner's Song*, I knew I had finally found a style that would work for me.

This writing style is used during a vast majority of this thesis. My own life does not reflect that of Gary Gilmore, the man awaiting execution in Mailer's book, but there are elements of his story present throughout. In addition to meeting my own father in prison, I also discuss a friend who shot his wife in the essay called "Wishless." With all of the trouble I've been through, most of which is recounted here, I feel lucky that my life didn't turn out like some of these individuals.

One essay that doesn't follow the style of *Executioner's Song* is "Instant Zen." Here, I balance the writing others have done about psychedelics with my own personal experiences with these drugs. By illustrating what authors like Aldous Huxley, Tom Wolfe, and Dr. Sidney Cohen had to say about the effects of these drugs, I am able to give readers a better understanding of how my

experiences—both good and bad—fit into the overall spectrum of the psychedelic experience. By serving as more of an informative piece, this chapter bridges the gap between my earlier life growing up in the U.P (included in the initial chapters that focus on my dad, grandma, and great uncle) and all the problems that occur in my life later while at college. When I later write about my two hospitalizations resulting from “bad” trips in the essays “The Trip” and “March Madness”, readers have already been given some insight into how this type of problem could occur because of the information given in “Instant Zen.”

In addition to the works of the many authors already mentioned, music has also been a major influence in my life. I’ve never been a musician, but the lyrics to songs have always been something that I’ve held close. Where some people would be inclined to quote the Bible, others poetry or lines from movies, it has always been the lyrics to rock music that come to my mind first. Maybe I should have spent more time studying the Bible or reading classic works of literature than listening to music with my friends. Still, I feel that gift of music to pass down meaning from one soul to the next is on par with any of these other forms of art. That is one of the reasons that

I found it so important to include it here in the writing of this thesis.

In the chapter about my dad, I recall a portion of a letter he wrote me before he died in which he wrote out the lyrics to a Johnny Cash song, explaining that the words of the song better describe his life than his own words can. I've often felt the same way about music—that it could better define me than my own words—and decided to use the lyrics from a song to open each of the essays in this thesis. In doing so, I hoped to form a record of sorts, one that could serve as the soundtrack to this time of my life.

Not only do the song lyrics help tie the entire piece together, many of them have an influence on the essays themselves. In "The Trip", the lyrics to Nirvana's "All Apologies" play a pivotal role in how the text is understood by giving readers an idea of the context of the time period being discussed. Kurt Cobain's music influenced almost everyone in my generation in some way. For many, he was the voice of our generation, and the words he wrote carried great importance for us. Understanding this influence is vital to understanding that essay.

In all, the works contained in this collection are a glimpse into the people, places, literature, and music that helped influence me during some very strange times in my life. For better or worse, all of these things have shaped the man I am today.

The First Quarter-A Preface

*I was looking back on my life
And all the things I've done to me
I'm still looking for the answers
I'm still searching for the key
The wreckage of my past
keeps haunting me
It just won't leave me alone
I still find it all a mystery
Could it be a dream?
The Road to Nowhere leads to me*

Ozzy Osbourne
-Road to Nowhere

Sometime in the late 1990s, when I was still in my early twenties, I told my mother that I would write her a book to explain my hospitalization for drug-induced psychosis that had occurred during the previous year. We were having drinks at the American Legion in my hometown on one of my visits home from college. At the time, I didn't have the words to express everything that had happened on that first trip out past the precipice of rationality and reason. As I peered into her pleading, tear-filled eyes all I could say to her was, "It wasn't just the drugs, Mom. You can't just blame it all on the drugs."

Part of this was my own refusal to believe that the psychoactive drugs I was still using were doing me more harm than good. Still, the statement remained true—a lot

of other factors besides just drugs had led to my mental collapse. Now, over a decade and a half later, I wonder if I have finally captured the phrases needed to clarify those moments of arduous self-discovery. And the years of questioning and self-doubt that followed.

In the months—and then years—that followed this conversation with my mom, I talked and thought quite a bit about this book that needed to be written. Yet, other than a few feeble attempts at fictionalizing my experiences, I rarely put the ideas down in print. Instead, I allowed everyday distractions to slowly erode away the time that many of us believe will be there later to get things done. Like most things in my life, I pushed back writing the material contained in these pages until I could wait no longer, always hoping for a time when the words would finally flow with ease. Then one day, the realization came that forty was pushing ever closer. All those things—the book for mom, a wife, kids, some outward signs of success—may not get done if I didn't start working on them soon.

When I first envisioned myself as a writer—after I felt like I had finally survived something worth writing about—I thought the title of that book for my mom should be *The*

First Quarter. This title had two meanings. The original idea was to write about my first 25 years, my first quarter century of being alive. But I also thought that I should start the book with a chapter about my first quarter ounce of pot, my true initiation into the world of drug use.

This was after I'd discovered Kerouac and his quasi-mythical muse Neal Cassady, whose only published work is a posthumous autobiographical collection entitled *The First Third*. I thought my book could serve as a tribute of sorts to this work in which Cassady describes his years growing up in skid row Denver with his alcoholic father.

This book contrasted the depictions of Cassady I'd seen described in the works of Jack Kerouac, Tom Wolfe, and Ken Kesey, who built him up as an icon of American male freedom, a bridge of mercury spanning two generations of hip culture in this country. Cassady embodied the independence of those generations with his life-affirming, full throttle approach to existence. As Dean Moriarty in *On the Road* and later as the fastest man alive in Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Cassady became an image to uphold, if not emulate. Instead of just talking about wanting to travel the country and experience everything in the moment—like I so often dreamed of doing in those years—

this fast-talking, sledge-hammer-tossing conman lived it. He also died four days before his 42nd birthday.

Now, having recently turned 38, those first 25 years seem like a lifetime ago. So much has happened since then that I sometimes wonder if I'm even the same person anymore. Will I be the same person when I finish writing this? Will whoever reads all these things still see me as the same person when they finish it? Still, there remains a desire to explain to my mom what happened to me back then, and how it shaped the person I am today. Only now, the idea of starting a book titled *The First Quarter* in which the first chapter describes my first quarter of marijuana seems absurd not inventive. And the words that didn't come easily then, still don't come easily now.

Bottom

*I've seen them drag you screaming
down the hallways of your brain*

Kris Kristofferson
-Chase the Feeling

Shackled to the jailhouse floor, arms handcuffed behind my back, I had become more beast than man—if not in my own mind, at least in those of the guards. My scraggly, shoulder-length hair and the endless oceans of my pupils were all the confirmation they needed. Only a tattered pair of faded-blue “No Fear” gym shorts, one of the few remaining vestiges to my high school years, hid my nakedness. The howls of pain and a steady stream of seemingly incoherent babble only confirmed their assessment: the madman caged alone in the drunk tank was brought in HIGH ON DRUGS and we should to stay as far away from his unpredictable ass as possible.

How long had I been left in this contorted position, my nerves left raw? The concept of time had no bearing on that night. Moments stretched on for lifetimes, hours passed in the turn of a deadbolt. Both my hands and feet were numb with lack of blood flow. Thoughts swirled through my mushroom-induced perception. I fluctuated

between feelings of grandiose self-worth and a deep, knowing paranoia that I would never leave that cell alive.

Every so often (minutes? eternities?), someone in a uniform appeared at the door of the cell. After warily eyeing me for signs of hostility, they crept towards me.

"Now I'm only going to remove these cuffs if you promise not to get violent again, alright?" said the older, haggard looking fellow they had sent in this time. I readily agree, only half-remembering the violence of which he spoke. Most of the last several hours were all part of blur, with certain sequences making everlasting impressions, while others hardly registered. The next few days—and then weeks, months—would have a similar imprint on my brain as I struggled to maintain, and then regain, my hold on reality.

I sensed compassion in this aging guard as he attempted to alleviate my discomfort. Later, when my mind began to come more unhinged, I would believe the body of this man contained the soul of my deceased father. At that moment, though, he remained the first kind face I'd seen since the flashing lights from three squad cars engulfed my apartment complex earlier in the night.

Still, when the guard lifted my arms to remove the cuffs a new bolt of pain surged through me, releasing a

fresh onslaught of curses and threats. "Well, fine then. Have it your way." He shook his head while hurrying back out of the cell.

This night precipitated my leaving Mt. Pleasant, a small college town where I stayed about three years longer than I should have. The evening began as a gathering of a few friends: a small bag of mushrooms, a large jug of whiskey, and the usual allotment of good grass. At some point, the scales tipped—as they always must, if not now then somewhere further down the trail of self-destruction—and fun turned into failure. Fortunately, no one was hurt, the damage limited to a couple of broken doors and a smashed glass table top.

With over a decade of perspective, I now realize that this night provided the tug required for me to come out of the deeply-defined ruts in which I'd gotten myself stuck. It also proved to be a harbinger of tragedy yet to come and a reminder of how sometimes the past seeps into the present.

In the morning, after long hours of hellish, drug-induced introspection, my mind really started to go. At some point the handcuffs had been removed from my wrists, but I

remained bound to jail floor by shackles running through the drainage cover. I'd toppled over multiple times while trying to stand up—my numb legs and feet unable to support me. This left one ankle severely sprained, an injury that would take almost as long to heal as the psychological damage I caused myself.

Throughout the night, my thoughts and beliefs had become increasingly untethered. All I could think about was how to get out of that cell before the bastards killed me. I knew they needed me dead because I was meant to save the world.

The Biblical story of Paul and Silas in prison came to me. Certain that I'd been left in there to die, I prayed to God to free me from their chains.

The whiskey and drugs flowing through me kept the guards in a state of fear and agitation. Every time they sent someone in to remove the handcuffs holding my arms behind my back, I thought it was an incarnation from my past. I wept as the middle-aged turnkey reentered the cell, knowing he was the embodiment of my father. Later, when an older female guard came to try removing the handcuffs, I hung my head in shame at the sight of grandmother. Their faces weren't the same, but I remained

certain that these individuals contained the spirits of my dead relatives.

In this altered reality, no one was who they seemed to be. The young man weeping on the bench outside my cell was an old roommate; the two state troopers, friends disguised to help pull off an elaborate prank.

When they served me my breakfast tray in the morning, I tried snorting the packet of salt, convinced someone was smuggling drugs into my cell. When that didn't work I started pulling out chunks of my hair and eating it with the hope that the THC contained within would keep me high. Eventually, they took me to the hospital to give me a shot of something to bring me down.

A psych evaluation and a series of hospitalizations followed. The doctors' diagnosis: drug-induced psychosis. I bounced between psych wards and friends' homes, struggling to maintain any semblance of proper social behavior. Extremely manic, it was as if my brain refused to stop running on the overdrive produced by that night in jail. Sleep became nearly impossible. I'd doze off for brief periods, only to wake with a start and a fresh surge of energy.

Friends and family feared for my safety, but the hospitals were leery of admitting a patient without insurance. They thought I was a drug seeker; they didn't understand this wasn't how I normally behaved. I was 27-years-old, and I had finally made it to the bottom.

Sunday Morning Coming Down

*'Cause there's something in a Sunday
that makes a body feel alone*

Johnny Cash
-Sunday Morning Coming Down

On a cloudy day in late August in 1997, just before the start of my fourth year of college, I sat alone doing my daily afternoon bong tokes when someone knocked on my door.

"Come on," I bellowed. This was my customary greeting. Looking back, it probably sounded more like "Hold on," but at the time I was too burnt out to realize this or just about anything else. Most of my friends usually just walked in after a quick knock, so I was a bit tentative while I maneuvered through my hazy apartment towards the front door. Still, I didn't bother to hide my bong or the Tupperware container filled with crystal-coated buds.

"I said 'come in'," I muttered, swinging the door open. On the other side, wearing matching looks of gloom, stood two Michigan State Police troopers.

My initial paranoia turned to outright fear when the older of the two officers asked, "May I speak with Gabriel Waskiewicz?"

What had I done? Well, actually, what hadn't I done lately to warrant a visit from the cops? The last couple years of my life had consisted of a long series of drug-induced adventures. But what did they know about? Should I lie? Tell them "Umm...he's not home right now" and hope for the best?

After glancing over my shoulder at the swirls of pot smoke glimmering in the patch of daylight the open door allowed into my otherwise dreary abode, I felt less than reassured. The marching hammers on the Pink Floyd "The Wall" poster hanging behind my TV set felt ominous. They're here to haul me away, I thought while finally whimpering, "Yeah, that's me." I've always been too dumb to lie.

"You're the son of Michael Joseph Waskiewicz?"

"Yes sir."

"I'm sorry to have to inform you," the officer said while struggling to maintain eye contact, "but your father was found dead this morning."

A few more questions passed between us—how did it happen, where was he found, is there anything else we can do for you—but the rest of that day has faded into the fog of my living room. At some point I called my only sibling,

my sister Katherine. I must have called my mom too. I'm sure I did more bong tokes. I know I didn't cry.

I first remember seeing my father when I was around four or five. Faded Polaroid pictures illustrate previous encounters, but I have no recollection of the awkward moments they capture of Katherine and me sitting on our father's lap. In each photo, he tries to maintain a smile. His large frame doesn't yet carry the customary heaviness I will associate with him later in life. Despite the circumstances and the looks of terror on his children's faces, my father's bright blue eyes gleam in stark contrast to his white t-shirt and the cement walls in the background.

Those moments of uncomfortable hugs and forced kisses remain in the backdrop of that day. They remain as hazy as those old photographs, the memory like an echo of something said in a dream. Do I remember trying to squirm out of this stranger's grasp as he desperately attempted to have his affection reciprocated, or is this just my projection after years of seeing those pictures?

The seemingly insignificant things linger instead: my first experience with Chicken McNuggets on the way there,

watching the film version of Popeye later in the trip, and my repeated attempts to get my stepdad to come inside.

"But why don't you wanna come in with us, Jim?" I pestered my stepdad in the waiting area, failing to fully comprehend the situation. My mother had recently remarried, and with a male figure finally in my life, I wanted him to accompany me everywhere.

"I just really don't like these kinds of places," he said, gently trying to appease me. "It'll be OK. You go on in with your mom and sis, and I'll be right here waiting when you get back."

"But why don't you like it here?"

"I just don't like being frisked," he finally grumbled, his glasses slipping down his nose.

Still not completely convinced, I continued pleading with him as a short, squat female guard patted me down and ushered me through a metal detector. I followed her, mesmerized by the huge ring of keys hanging at her side. They jangled like my mom's wind chimes as she led us through a series of locked doors and ushered us into the visitation area of the Marquette Maximum Security Prison.

One rainy summer afternoon a couple of years later, I discovered several handwritten pages tucked away in a dusty

Bible on my mom's bookshelf. As I half-skimmed the writing, wishing I could be outside playing instead, I began to realize what these words contained. I became mesmerized, not wanting to read them—to know what my dad had done to my mom—but no longer able to stop.

This letter, my mother's account of the night my father almost killed her, had been written as a form of therapy. Before finding it, I knew little about my father's imprisonment, only that he had somehow hurt my mom.

The letter vividly described how, in the midst of a Vietnam flashback, he repeatedly choked her to the point of passing out. While I cried in my crib at nine months old, my father was out of his mind and trying to strangle my mom. Upon regaining consciousness, she tried pleading with him to let her check on the baby, to which he responded, "I'll take care of him when I'm finished with you." Eventually, my mom managed to escape outside long enough to alert the neighbors to call the police, before being dragged back inside.

I placed the letter back in the Bible as raindrops trickled down our living room window. I never talked about the letter—or what it contained—with anyone.

Only years later did my mom explain to me more about what happened that night. My father had once again started to slowly lose his grip on reality. He'd been attending Alcoholics Anonymous and claimed that they had told him to stop taking the medications prescribed to him for the treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder because he was using them as a substitute for alcohol. He became increasingly angry and paranoid. He thought the meter reader for the electric company came to the house because my mother was having an affair with him. He accused her of trying to poison his food. Everything became her fault.

Unable to cope without his medication, my father eventually lost control completely. Earlier that day, his best friend since childhood, Mark, had come to the house with the hopes of getting my mom to go stay with his wife and him for a while. Being a Vietnam vet too, Mark understood some of what my father was experiencing. My mom told Mark that she'd married my father for better or for worse.

Sentenced to serve three to ten years for intent to do great bodily harm, my father would be sent to Jackson State Prison. His mother would always lament the fact that he'd been locked up with "all the murderers and rapists." My mom filed for divorce and brought my sister and me back

home to live in the small northern Michigan town where she had grown up.

At nineteen, my father had volunteered for the Army, assuming he would be drafted and sent to Vietnam anyway. He always kept his experiences there private, telling me only that they weren't women and baby killers, and to believe parts of *Full Metal Jacket* and *The Deer Hunter* more than *Apocalypse Now*.

From what I've been told, on his twenty-first birthday, which fell on or near Mother's Day, he watched his whole platoon die around him. Somehow he survived untouched. At least physically.

He suffered a complete nervous breakdown. After a MEDEVAC flew him out of the jungle, my father was sent back to the States, first to a Veteran's Hospital in San Diego and then for another lengthy stay in Battle Creek at a VA hospital in his home state of Michigan. His mother would make the four-hour round trip drive almost every day to visit him. These would be the first in a series of VA hospitalizations that would plague him for the rest of his life.

While I was growing up, he often asked me, "Is it better to live a coward or die a hero?" I would not be

here had he died a hero. Maybe he would not have suffered for the remainder of his life if he had not thought of himself as a coward.

Upon his release from prison, my father made an effort to make up for the years he had missed. My first memory of seeing him outside of the penitentiary was in a café called the Nite Owl in my hometown. As we sat in a booth eating breakfast with my maternal grandmother, I couldn't help but gawk at this loud, socially awkward creature sitting across from me.

He would holler for the waitress to bring him more coffee between bites of eggs containing more pepper than I'd ever seen anyone consume. His booming voice carried throughout the restaurant, drawing looks from other customers. I couldn't hear their whispers, but I knew they were talking about us. Looking back, the small town rumors about who he was and where he'd been probably had as much to do with the odd looks he received as his eccentric behavior, but a child of eight fails to draw such conclusions.

As we ate, he asked me questions about what I wanted to be when I grew up and what they were teaching me in school. I did my best to answer him, but could only mumble

out a few half-hearted responses, scooting ever closer to my grandma.

When he got up to use the bathroom, I asked my grandma, "Is this really my real dad?" He had just bought me every G.I. Joe guy I wanted at the Ben Franklin next door, but I was having trouble accepting that the man everyone seemed to be staring at could be responsible for me in any way. He seemed so foreign to the world I was accustomed to. All my grandmother could do was sigh and gently nod her head.

I would continue to be embarrassed by my father throughout my adolescence. In fact, for the remainder of his life I felt varying degrees of discomfort when dealing with him in public.

His drinking caused some of this embarrassment. Preferring brandy and Blatz over prescription medication, he'd tell me that "every town needs a drunk." Having never experienced any form of alcoholism before then, trying to understand and cope with this from my father proved difficult.

Being on one hundred percent disability from the military, he didn't epitomize your typical "town drunk," waking up in gutters and begging for change. He had enough

money to support himself, but maintained the life of a daily alcoholic, spending many lonely hours deep inside a bottle. Accepting him for who he was would take me many years.

As these years went by, my father spent less time in the city of Saginaw where he grew up and more time in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, just to be close to my sister and me. This started while he was still behind bars, with a request to be transferred to a prison in the U.P. Afterwards, he began visiting regularly, stays that started with just a few days or a week and then steadily increased.

During these early visits, he would take my sister and me out to dinner, or we would spend time in his motel room watching cartoons or whatever old films were on TV. Sitting on an unmade motel bed through a brutally long viewing of Dr. Zhivago—one he forced us watch despite our protests because it was his mother's favorite movie—left a lasting imprint. The movie made little sense to my adolescent mind. Still, my father insisted we watch it until the end, the part that always made his mother cry.

Other times, he would take us to the local V.F.W. to show us off. The other veterans seemed surprised that this shy little boy and pig-tailed girl belonged to this loud-mouthed guy everyone recognized but no one really knew.

How had the fruit rolled so far away from this crabapple tree?

Walking up the steps towards the bar of the place always felt like crossing over into forbidden territory. My grandma would most definitely not approve of these surroundings. The World War II vets sitting at the bar smoking Lucky Strikes and nursing Old Milwaukee were not the type of men I encountered on a typical summer afternoon. Their somber looks and deep sighs spoke of a world I had no experience with, and hopefully never would. Going to church luncheons and visiting my grandmother's brothers on the family farm were the types of activities I was more accustomed to. Still, as my sister and I shot pool balls around the table and sipped root beer out of mugs, my father sat at the bar and just smiled at us, content.

Eventually, my mom, who always wanted her children to know their father, allowed him to visit us at our home in the country as well. On one such visit, as I played outside with my father and a foster child who lived with my family, a helicopter approached. Whatever game we had been playing ceased to have meaning as my father crouched down in the tall weeds, imploring us to do the same. As I tried to explain that the other boy's name was Ronnie, not

Charlie, my father became increasingly frantic. Once the hiss of the propeller faded into the distance, he slowly started to regain his composure. Ronnie and I couldn't understand why he didn't want to play outside anymore.

In addition to his short stays in the U.P., we occasionally made trips to the Lower Peninsula to visit him. Images of being stuck in traffic on the Mackinaw Bridge on a holiday weekend while my father and paternal grandmother chain-smoked and argued are offset with a shopping spree at Toys "R" Us.

Later, after I had just entered high school, we would be downstate visiting when my father had a heart attack. He signed himself out of the hospital the following day, mad because no one would bring him cigarettes. Pictures taken at my aunt's house that evening show him looking extremely pale, almost ghostly, but staring adoringly at Katherine and me.

His short stays in the U.P. eventually led to him renting a cabin on Lake Superior for a summer. Then he rented an apartment for a year about an hour away, just on the other side of the Wisconsin border. By then, my sister had her driver's license and we could drive there to see him. Finally, for a majority of my last couple years of high

school, he lived in, or around, my hometown. During this ever-increasing time spent with him, I learned more about the person he was, and who he could have been.

When I lived nearby and became old enough to drive, I'd usually stop in to visit a couple times a week. He would cook me a steak and ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up. We would watch a baseball game, and he'd tell me he would have enjoyed watching me play little league more than these over-priced bums on TV.

One night, just as I was getting ready to leave—to go drink some beers with friends, most likely—the John Malkovich version of *Of Mice and Men* came on TV. When I explained to him that I'd read *The Grapes of Wrath* in school instead (and by read, I mean mostly slept through the movie), he refused to let me leave. Usually when I wanted to go, he tried to get me to stay a little longer, but that night he all but forced me stay. The memory of watching the tale of George and Lenny play out that night with my father far outweighs whatever drunken adventures I would have gotten into with my buddies.

In the same one bedroom home where he first introduced me to the power of Steinbeck, we also pondered the fate of the world together as we watched O.J. fleeing in the white Bronco. This was the day after my eighteenth birthday.

Another time, I sat in awe as he answered nearly every question in an episode of Jeopardy correctly through a mouthful of spaghetti, chunks of noodles flying at Alex Trabek's face on the TV screen. We even got a chance to drink a few beers together some nights the summer after my senior year, and he would give me advice like, "Never trust a man who won't have a drink with you." I didn't realize then that I was a lot more like him than I would ever care to admit.

I began to understand that despite all his imperfections, he cared more about Katherine and me than about anything. Around my friends, though, I still felt mortified at what he might say or do. I never got to the point where I felt completely comfortable with him around other people. When it was just the two of us, I could accept him for who he was, but around others I still felt somewhat ashamed that he was my father. Still, during these years I finally started to consider him more than just a father. He was my dad. Anyone can be a father, it takes affection and love to be dad. This relationship never got the chance to blossom, however. He would die before I could ever come to fully appreciate him.

*

Most of his visits or stays in the U.P. concluded with a trip to the VA hospital in Tomah, Wisconsin. The summer stay by Lake Superior ended with the owner having to clean vomit-filled pans out of the cabin; a call to police from neighbors about erratic behavior finished his time at the one-bedroom house. Ever since Vietnam, he had suffered from bouts of mental illness. Diagnosed as exhibiting symptoms of both schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder, he functioned normally for long stretches of time, only to inevitably lose touch once again.

While in the hospital, he would call regularly, feeding quarters into a pay phone just to hear his kids' voices. Long letters would arrive in the mail nearly every other day. They were often hard to read because his already scribbled handwriting became nearly illegible from over-medication.

I still have one of the last letters he sent me. In it, he candidly describes how he blames himself more than circumstance for the events of his life. Also included are regrets about not being around when I was little, the usual demand that I never join the military, a recommendation to read Hemingway and Steinbeck because "they knew the score,"

and most of the lyrics to Johnny Cash's "Sunday Morning
Coming Down." In the song, Cash begins,

Well I woke up Sunday morning
with no way to hold my head that didn't hurt
and the beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad
so I had one more for dessert

Then I fumbled in my closet through my clothes
and found my cleanest dirty shirt
Then I washed my face and combed my hair
Stumbled down the stairs to meet the day

My dad acknowledged that the words were not his own, but
felt that they probably best described his life. The
chorus ends with the line, "And it took me back to
something that I'd lost somewhere, somehow along the way."

The last time I saw my dad alive was at my cousin Rachel's
wedding. I thought he looked good, thinner than I'd seen
him in years. He looked so happy as he danced with my
sister, slowly swaying to the music. After dinner and a
couple of beers, he left early, having said goodbye to
everyone.

Only two weeks later, a maid found him in bed at a
Super 8 near Saginaw. He had died from gastrointestinal
hemorrhaging, a common problem among alcoholics. The

warning signs of internal bleeding ignored, he basically bled to death internally. My dad was 49.

The tears that didn't come the day I found out he died also didn't come at his funeral. Instead, I remained stoic as Mark, his childhood friend, looked into the casket and said, "Mike's finally come home from Vietnam." Like many men from his generation, my father could never put the horrors of war behind him. What happened to him there would dictate the rest of his life.

When he died, I don't think I knew how to feel about my father yet. I feared being like him for so long that I wasn't prepared to properly let him go. Now, a decade and half later, I've accepted him for who he was: a kind, compassionate man, flawed like everyone else, some of which was his own doing and some of which was not. In the years since his death, I've had my own struggles with drugs and alcohol, battled bouts of mental illness, and through it all I have learned that being like your father isn't always the worst thing in the world.

A year after his death I went to his grave with a six pack of Heineken and started the path towards acceptance. As I sat and shared those beers with my dad, I told him all

the things I'd been too immature to say while he was still alive. Things like: "I forgive you for everything," "I wish I understood you more when you were alive," "I know you loved my mom until the day you died," and "I know your suffering is finally over." Maybe these are the things I said then, or maybe they're just the things I think of now that I wish I had said sooner.

Sanctuary

*Home, home again
I like to be here when I can*

Pink Floyd
-Time

As a child, my favorite place in the entire world was my grandma's apartment. Many of my first memories come from the countless hours I spent there while growing up. Still, it was the presence of my grandmother that caused this significance, not the apartment itself. She was as important to me as my mother.

Later, when I found myself at the lowest point of my life, fate brought me back to this place to heal the wounds I had unwittingly inflicted on myself. If it hadn't been for my grandma, and the things she instilled in me as a boy, I'm not sure if I would have ever recovered.

My grandmother first moved into this apartment in 1968 after my mother, the youngest of her three children, graduated from high school and left for Bible School in Minnesota. Widowed a few years previously, my grandma was now alone and the modest one-bedroom dwelling seemed

sufficient. She settled into the place, and it became her home for the next 28 years.

In addition to the bedroom, there was one large room that served as a kitchen, dining room, and living room all in one. The entire place had white tile floors throughout, which she partially covered with rectangular throw rugs commonly called "rag rugs." These rugs were homemade by my mother's Godmother, a family friend who spoke only Finnish, who wove them on a loom out of strips of old cloth. As a child, we would take these rugs outside on cleaning days and I'd help my grandma shake and beat the dust and dirt from them. A cleaning lady by trade, my grandmother appreciated the value of a well-kept home.

The apartment's walls were also white and decorated with simple pictures and paintings, many of which portrayed Jesus. One print bought by my mother showed the classic image of Christ with long hair and a beard, another depicted him as a boy at tabernacle, and another was of the Last Supper. Framed wedding and graduation pictures of family members spanning decades were relegated to the shelves below a counter that served as a makeshift desk.

Like the apartment itself, the furniture and its placement didn't change much over the years. A table and chairs were set up to separate the kitchen from the living

room. By the time I was old enough to remember their lime-green upholstering these chairs already wobbled under my insignificant weight, yet instead of replacing them we merely tightened their screws every so often. In the corner diagonally across from the fridge and stove sat a couch, a shade of green darker than the chairs, with pillows and an afghan on it. The pillows and afghan may have occasionally changed over the years, but the couch remained the same. Next to the couch stood a rocking chair where my grandma often sat reading or crocheting while I played with my toys. I can still picture her looking up from a book or the Bible just long enough to give me a smile before going back to her reading.

A 19-inch color TV and a recliner occupied the other corner of the living room. The TV sat on top of a wooden table that my oldest uncle had made in high school shop class, while a coffee table made by her other son sat between the chair and couch.

In that corner, past the recliner, was a large picture window overlooking downtown L'Anse, a non-descript little burg nestled in a bay on Lake Superior in the northwest portion of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The town's only stoplight, a flashing red at the main intersection, directed traffic between the bank, a hardware store, and a

drug store located on the corners. My grandma often chose to look out the window instead of watching television. Content to sit and observe this little town where she'd spent most of her life, she would say, "You can see the whole downtown from right out my window," as if there were little more that life could offer her.

Always a deeply religious woman, my grandmother displayed the pictures of Jesus and other Christian symbols as a reminder of her faith, not for her, but to others. Her husband had been a Lutheran minister, a calling their second son followed as well. In addition, my grandmother also had another grandson who served as a pastor, a calling she hoped I would follow as well.

Still, she never really forced religion on me as a child. Church was just something you did on Sundays, and I went willingly with my grandmother and mother. I never doubted the things taught to me in Sunday school back then, and I'm thankful for the good moral base this instruction gave me.

Raised by strict Finnish parents, my grandma believed that any form of work on Sundays, even the use of scissors, was a sin. She also didn't believe in dancing, movies, playing cards, and most anything else worldly, but she never imposed these beliefs upon me as I grew up. She

didn't like Halloween because it superseded a Christian holiday, but every year she bought my sister and me a full size bar of our favorite candy. She accepted that the world was changing, yet she held onto her faith and beliefs.

This was the nurturing environment that my mother brought my sister and me when I was nine months old, after my parents' divorce and my mom decision to return to the small town where she was raised. My grandmother had never approved of my father because, among other things, he was Catholic and drank.

Once, before he married my mother, while on visit from downstate, my father brought fresh fish to my grandma's place hoping she would cook it for him. She eventually did cook him dinner, but only after making him stay outside on the porch to finish his beer. In her mind, her negative impression of my father eventually was proven right.

Upon arriving in the U.P., we moved into my grandma's apartment. Once thought to be sufficient, the one-bedroom place now had two adults, a toddler, and an infant living in it. We made due for a few months before finding a place of our own a few blocks away.

The fact that I was still a baby when I got there made my grandma feel especially attached to me. She used to

talk about rocking me to sleep when I had pneumonia at age one. "Bow bow," she would say as she repeated the rocking motion that coaxed my sick little body to sleep. She could never enunciate what these words meant when describing this to me, but the emotion with which she said them came through quite clearly.

During these early years of my life, a bond formed between my grandmother and me that would remain deep and everlasting. Throughout all the time I spent with her at her apartment, I never felt bored or angry, only happy and content. I would pass the time playing with G.I. Joe action figures, reading volumes of Hardy Boys novels, or watching cartoons or sports on TV while my grandma just enjoyed having me around. Other than having to sit through the 700 Club with Pat Robertson in the morning and the six o'clock news with my grandma, I usually could watch whatever I wanted. Quite often I'd chose The Golden Girls or Wheel of Fortune just because I knew she liked them.

In a similar fashion, she also bought me all of my favorite foods when we went grocery shopping. From chicken nuggets and sour cream and onion chips to ring bologna with cheese and crackers, many of my bad eating habits began with our two block walk to Fraki's Finer Foods. As I grew a little older and my grandma's arthritis got worse, I

would walk on her right side and hold her arm in mine to alleviate pressure on her bad hip during these walks. Eventually, when the pain in the hip became unbearable, she bought a cane—which she simply called “her stick”—from the drug store on the corner.

Some family members viewed my freedom to do—and eat—whatever I wanted as being spoiled, but I also was a fairly well-behaved child. For all the time I spent doing what I wanted, I also spent innumerable days visiting my grandma’s friends in nursing homes and her brothers on the family farm. Wherever she went, I followed as her willing companion.

On one of these visits, one of my grandma’s female first cousins told me that God would bless me someday for how good I was to my grandma. I would recall this later in life after frequently finding myself in places and situations where I didn’t belong. Through it all, the guiding principles of my youth stayed with me, though, and now I feel blessed just to be alive, inhabiting a sound body and mind.

Part of the stability I felt in my grandmother and her surroundings must have come from her appearance, which always remained consistent. She kept her long gray hair

pulled back into a bun, except when it was drying after a bath. During the summer she wore long drab dresses; while in the winter her wardrobe consisted mostly of pants and a sweatshirt or sweater. Even bifocals couldn't conceal the constant love and affection that beamed out of her faded blue eyes. She was already in her mid-sixties when I was born, and this love and affection—like the wrinkles on her face—only deepened over the years.

Other than the thin wedding band she wore through over thirty years of widowhood, my grandmother wore little jewelry except for an occasional broach or necklace. She never had her ears pierced, seeing this as a form of materialism. The wedding band would eventually have to be cut from her finger because her hands had become so twisted with arthritis. My mother now wears it, along with her father's, on fingers that show the first signs of bending at the knuckle. Once identical, his ring looks nearly new with the engraved initials still visible, while my grandma's is little more than a sliver of gold.

From my earliest memories very little changed about my grandma or her home. Everything seemed to have its place, from the rugs on the floor to the pins in her hair. Unlike the chaotic experiences that would plague me later, this realm of my existence stayed constant. My grandma, and the

feelings of home she inspired in this meager dwelling, would never waver.

My favorite past time while at my grandma's was playing with my G.I. Joes. Instead of reenacting war, though, I'd set up elaborate games of baseball played out on that dark green couch. While kneeling on the throw pillows at one end, I would use a dried up spitball and a pen to mimic the bat and ball, with the other end of the couch serving as the outfield wall. With nine action figures set up around the baseball diamond to "play defense," I would flip the ball in the air and swing. Entire seasons were played out in this fashion while I kept track of the "players" stats on paper, quite often with a Cubs game playing on the TV in the background.

When other boys my age were outside playing baseball, I stayed inside at my grandma's playing it with toys or watching it on TV. In addition to playing it with G.I. Joes, I used a Nerf ball to pretend to rob homeruns. As I ran across the tile floor, slipping on rag rugs as I went, my grandma never complained as I crashed against the kitchen cabinets that represented the outfield wall.

I still played Little League and Legion baseball with my friends, but the lack of practice usually showed. I

often found myself in right field or at second base, the two positions where the ball is least likely to be hit at you. Even though I never shined on the field, I wouldn't trade the time I spent with my grandma to have been a star pitcher or shortstop.

Throughout the remainder of her life, I realized how important this time was, not only to me, but to my grandmother. In her strong Finnish accent, she would tell anyone who would listen that, "My little Gabrol came to live with me when he was just nine months old. And he's never said a bad word for Grandma." Honestly, I don't ever remember being angry with her.

As I grew into my teenage years, I stopped spending nights at my grandma's place, but I still visited her often. Even then, the apartment still didn't change much, except for small updates, like a touch tone phone with over-sized buttons and an extended cord replacing the black rotary dial phone.

I started spending more time with friends and less time with my grandma. I started drinking when I was in the ninth grade and began smoking pot shortly after. I began drifting down paths she would not approve of or even understand. Despite not being raised around him, I had as

much of my father in me as I did my grandmother and mother. Through it all, though, the bond I shared with my grandma never weakened.

When I left for college in the fall of 1994, my grandma was already in her eighties and still climbing a dozen stairs to get up to her second story apartment. Her left hip had gradually deteriorated from arthritis and too many years on her hands and knees scrubbing other people's floors. She finally retired at the age of 75, telling a friend who asked her why she had kept working, "I needed to buy toys for those kids."

When the rigor of climbing those stairs, and my mother's fears of her falling, became too great, my mom convinced my grandma to move into an adult foster care home. When my mother finally cleared out the apartment, she said, "I think she saved every box from every present she ever got."

In addition to the boxes, my mom found hundreds of grocery bags and anything else that might be put to use someday. Having survived the Great Depression, my grandma felt nothing should be wasted.

My grandmother would live in assisted living for two years before being placed in a nursing home. Her mind

remained fairly sharp during these years, but her hip continued to worsen, causing her mobility to become more and more limited. On numerous visits home from school during this period I remember her telling me that she wished I lived closer, but she knew I had my own life to live. Sometimes I wish I'd stayed closer and spent more time with her during these final years. Maybe I wouldn't have gone so far astray if I had.

During these visits from college, I would often just sit by her bed and hold her frail hand while whispering two simple words, "My grandma," to which she always responded "My Gabrol." After over twenty years and a few thousand "I love yous" I think these four words best expressed the affection between us.

In August of 2000, for my grandma's 90th birthday, my mom held a party at the nursing home. Both uncles were there, as well as numerous other family members and friends. When I arrived, I went up where she sat in a wheelchair and gave her a big hug. My grandma looked at me and asked, "And who are you?"

Throughout my childhood, my one consistent wish whenever I blew out all the candles or saw a shooting star was for my grandma to live to be 100. To my childhood

mind, 100 seemed like forever. After that birthday party, it seemed like forever again. I didn't want to see this woman I had admired my whole life suffering in the shell her body had become for another ten years.

A few days later, I went to visit her again before returning to school. As I looked down at the withering mass beneath the stark white sheets, I told her and whatever higher power I still believed in at the time that it was OK to let go, hoping to free her from my childhood wish. I would get to see her one last time at Christmas before she died the following spring.

During this period, my own life had begun to deteriorate. Gambling and drugs were things I had experimented with for years, but they had finally begun to consume me. The drinking and smoking pot that had begun in high school had only escalated once I went to college. I started using psychedelics and other drugs. The occasional casino night eventually turned into a compulsive habit; recreational drug use started morphing into abuse. My life had gotten hopelessly caught up in the ruts of my own excess as the wheels of self-destruction kept spinning deeper.

Everything culminated on that night in March of 2003 when I was arrested for malicious destruction of property

and possession of marijuana. In the middle of a drug and alcohol binge, I ended up destroying my own apartment, forcing my roommate to call the police. I felt like the strung-out rock star from Pink Floyd's *The Wall* trashing his hotel room.

Later, my mother would tell me that the incident occurred on the same date, March 6th, that my father almost killed her 26 years earlier. Luckily, I didn't hurt myself or anyone else, and only spent a couple of days in jail instead of years in prison.

Still, this would be followed by a brief hospitalization for drug-induced psychosis. I had finally pushed myself to the breaking point and it would take several months, and a lot of anguish on those who cared about me, before I fully returned to my former self.

Like my mother, I returned home to try putting my life back together. I'd pushed myself to the edge of the cliff in life and forced myself to take a long, hard look at the abyss that waits below. Only the love and help of family and friends keep me from falling over the precipice and into madness.

Broke, jobless, and with nowhere else to turn, I stayed with friends from high school. After a couple of months of

this however, I knew it was time to get my own place. I'd been completely sober since returning from downstate, and the lifestyle of my friends wasn't conducive to maintaining this sobriety.

My mother realized that it was time for me to get my own place again and agreed to help me with rent until I found a job. One day, while looking at the classified ads in the local paper, I decided to call on an apartment. It was a one-bedroom and the rent was cheap enough so I made arrangements to view the place the following day.

When I arrived to view the place, I found myself being led up the same stairs my grandmother had climbed all those years. I couldn't believe that the only apartment I called about happened to be my grandma's old apartment. Somehow, when I needed it the most, I'd been returned to the spot where I felt happiest as a child.

When I first walked in to view it, everything looked the same. Of course the old furnishings and decorations were gone, but the white tile and walls remained. So did the feeling of being back in my grandma's apartment, the feeling of comfort, of being home. The manic state I'd been in for weeks slowly started to subside. I spent less time pacing the floor and more time reevaluating my life. How had I let things get to this point? How could I have

been led so far astray? The story of the Prodigal Son kept echoing in my head.

I wouldn't stay in the apartment for 28 years like my grandmother did, but in the four months I spent back in this safe haven I slowly regained my equilibrium and my place in the world. I found a job and began to reflect on how lucky I was to simply be alive and somewhere I felt comfortable.

Almost everything I owned at the time had been given to me: a couch from a friend, the TV that used to be my father's, a bed given to me by one of my mother's co-workers, and large push-button phone that once belonged to my grandma.

Without a driver's license or a vehicle, I found myself once again walking to the local grocery store, buying only what I could carry home. This time I had a limp of my own, from the sprained left ankle I had suffered that night in jail. Buying many of the same foods I ate as a child, I regained a level of comfort and self-confidence while standing at the same gas stove my grandmother did, frying slices of ring bologna just like she used to do for me.

I'm not sure if I felt her presence there with me in that apartment, but I do know I ended back there for a reason. I may not ascribe to the same religious beliefs that my grandmother did, but I know that there is something bigger than myself at work in my life.

The chances of my own collapse coinciding with my father's and then ending up back in my grandmother's apartment are just too great of merely coincidence. It showed me that there was a plan to life greater than my own, that life isn't made up of chance events. The key is how we react to these life-changing moments, and what we do after them, that truly matters.

The summer I spent back at grandma's place before returning to school for my master's degree allowed me to renew my life. Many people, including family members, wondered if I would recover from the depths to which my life had sunk. I believe that without the time spent at my grandma's apartment, both as a child and as a fractured adult, I may not have recovered. The upbringing she helped instill in me never left me despite how far away I strayed.

The events in my life that I once thought were random have eventually been revealed to have an underlying connectedness. Everything that has happened to me has happened for a reason, even if sometimes the reasons still

seem unclear. The "coincidences" are too great to ignore;
the chance to atone for one's mistakes is too important.

The Farm

*Rain on the scarecrow
blood on the plow
This land fed a nation
this land made me proud
And son I'm just sorry
there's no legacy for you now
Rain on the scarecrow
blood on the plow*

John Melloncamp
-Rain on the Scarecrow

As my mom eased the car into park, a slight hint of decaying apples seemed to linger in the air. I asked my mom if she wanted to come with me, already knowing the answer before she shook her head and looked the other way. While easing out of the passenger seat, I zipped up my sweatshirt and pulled the hood over my head to protect against the cold fall drizzle.

This was our first visit to the farm together in twelve years. We both had found reasons to make separate pilgrimages there during the years since that dreadful Christmas morning. But even these occasional sojourns into the past had become infrequent. On the drive there, my mom explained why she hardly ever makes it out this way anymore. "It just breaks my heart to see it," she said. "Uncle Kaarlo must be spinning in his grave."

*

The year before, I'd driven past the farm with a friend on our way up north while on a fall color tour. Only a few miles out of our way, I wanted to show her the place where my mother's family originated, a part of my roots in Upper Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula. Despite the warm, sunny weather, we didn't stop to get out of the car. She didn't want to waste any more time getting to Copper Harbor and that haven for touristy scenic beauty, Brockway Mountain Drive. We never did make it past the friend stage.

Instead, I stood alone in a field while my mother waited in the car. Fumbling with the camera function on my new iPhone, I inadvertently started recording a video while trying to take a picture. Technology, like women, had never been my strong suit.

The idea had been to take a few pictures of the old place to use as a reference when the time came to write about it. But suddenly it felt all wrong: the weather sucked, my mom clearly didn't want to be there, and the more I struggled with the phone the more I just wanted to heave the damn thing into the air.

Trying to avoid getting my feet too wet from the day's persistent rain, I drifted a few paces out into the knee-high grass, towards the small apple orchard that separated

the house from the road. The crooked limbs of all the trees were bare, the fruit lying below.

After realizing a simple push of an icon shifted the setting from video to picture, I started snapping photos of the two-story wooden farmhouse a couple hundred feet away. From that distance, the dark, low-hanging clouds seemed to almost touch the top of the sagging metal roof. Two smaller structures, both in similar states of decay, stood adjacent to the dwelling in which my grandmother and all five of her siblings were born.

In my youth, when I made frequent visits to the farm with my grandmother, we referred to this main building simply as "the big house." This was in contrast to the smaller, one bedroom structure my grandmother's two bachelor brothers shared. Other than the two years the older brother, Henry, spent in the Army during World War II, the two brothers spent their entire lives on this piece of property. As their sisters moved away to raise families, Henry and Kaarlo remained, stewards from simpler times.

Now, the farm looked like any other abandoned homestead on a country road, dilapidated and on the verge of falling down. The last remaining leaves on the trees in

the distance gave the only sense of color to an otherwise grey afternoon.

Once I got back in the car, my mom insisted on backing out of the driveway onto the main road instead of taking the short, looping path we would have always used before. This overgrown two-track looped along a slight downhill slope connecting the spot where the old farmhouse stood to the smaller home, barn, and sauna.

During my high school years, I helped Kaarlo, my last remaining great-uncle, put up a snow fence along this same hill every fall. First, we would drive worn wooden poles into the ground, before attaching an old-fashioned wood and wire fence, not the orange plastic variety seen along highways today. Despite already being several inches taller and outweighing my slight, wiry seventy-year-old Uncle Kaarlo, he still outworked me. No matter how hard I tried, I would be gushing sweat while trying to keep up as we lifted the heavy rolls of fencing from the tractor and stretched them tight to the poles.

I sometimes wondered why he went through all the trouble just to keep snow from drifting into his driveway. *Wouldn't it be easier just to buy a snow blower or a truck with a plow?* I would silently ponder. Now, in my late

thirties, I no longer wonder about his reasons. Sometimes simpler is better, without iPhones or Brockway Mountain Drive.

As my mom and I coasted down the hill and into the lower driveway, she noticed with a sigh that her cousin Wendell's name still remained on the mailbox. My mom parked the car beside the large barn covered with knotty wooden planks. Once, the barn housed more than a dozen dairy cows that the brothers milked by hand, but now, nailed to the same boards I used to bounce a baseball off as a child, was a tin Private Property/No Trespassing sign. Again, my mom let me get out to take pictures by myself. As I looked back at her staring out the driver side window with her hands gripping the steering wheel, I wasn't sure if she feared trespassing on someone else's property or her own happy memories of this place.

Born in 1948, two generations removed from immigration, my mom remembers the farm when it was still active. Never a large farm, it consisted mostly of dairy cows and a series of dogs. The harsh realities of the Upper Peninsula's winter didn't lead to the best growing conditions. Long winters and short purse strings were endured with faith and

an occasional empty stomach. The food that did grow was used for sustenance, for the family and their cows.

In later years, the men in the family would have to find work in the woods or at local sawmills to survive on the farm. Still, the climate suited my Finnish immigrant great-grandfather just fine, mirroring the region he had left back home. No one seems to recall exactly when he had come to this country or why he had decided to settle in this rural area now known as Askel Hill or Arnheim, but he did join a local population with significant Scandinavian roots.

According to family lore, he sent back to Finland for a wife, in what today might be considered the equivalent of mail-order bride. For some reason, the girl he had sent for was substituted with one of her younger sisters. As devout Lutherans, these two individuals would teach their children the moral conduct that my grandmother maintained throughout her life. Her immigrant parents also taught their children the importance of hard work and the insignificance of material possessions. My grandmother often reminded me how happy they were just to receive an orange on Christmas morning. These lessons served her well when she later married my minister grandfather.

At the age of 38, my grandmother had her third child, my mom. By this time, only the gray bearded patriarch and his two bachelor sons remained on the old homestead. His wife had already passed away many years before, while all four of the girls were married with children of their own. Still, the daughters and their families made frequent trips back to the farm. Even after moving all the way to the Detroit area, one of the sisters and her family traveled home every summer for a month-long visit. The big house would be reopened for their stay—a brief but yearly reminder of the life the place once held.

During these visits, my mom and her brothers got to spend nights at the big house too, an extension of the exhilarating days they had so often spent on the farm in their youth. The inconvenience of having to use an outhouse was offset by the hours spent running through the seemingly endless fields of grass. My mom's cousins from downstate may have owned the newest toys, but she always knew the best spots for sneaking away when playing Hide and Seek. Back then, time at the farm meant extended family and experiences outside of her normal life in town. As a girl, she first learned to drive by steering the tractor while the men bailed hay.

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My own first memories of the farm come from those frequent visits I made there with my grandmother while growing up. It may have been less than twenty miles away from my home in town, but somehow it felt like a completely different world. Part of this was the rustic nature of the place. I wasn't aware of it then, but looking back it must have been like stepping back in time thirty years or more.

I recall standing mesmerized as I leaned over the wooden lip of the well as one of my great uncles lowered a bucket tied to a rope into the darkness below. As soon as the bucket resurfaced, pulled to the top by sinewy arms darkened by the sun, they would let me take sips from a metal dipper. In the years since then, I've had times of unimaginable thirst, but these remain the coolest and cleanest drinks of water I have ever tasted.

Like the well, almost everything on the property had stayed the same since the days my mom frolicked in the fields with her cousins. From the four-foot iron bar that fit perfectly into the time-worn wood of the barn door holding it closed to the tin washing buckets in the sauna, everything had a place and a purpose. The same pattern of days had played out for decades, giving the whole place a sense of permanence in my childhood mind.

One sign that time had not stood still was the big house, though, leaving me without the same feelings of nostalgia for it that my mom still holds. By the time I remember seeing it, the life had already gone out of the home. Aunt Helen, the sister from the Detroit area, had passed away, leaving the house almost completely unused. As a child, it reminded me of a skull, with its lifeless windows resembling empty eye sockets. I was always more afraid of it than intrigued by it. During the few times I actually went inside, the creaking floorboards sounded like whispers from the past, the layers of dust creating a barrier I feared crossing.

Instead, the smaller house, the one shared by the two brothers for the second half of their lives, is what I remember most about the farm. Consisting of only a dining room, kitchen, and bedroom, the place was just big enough for the two brothers and an aging collie mix named Sheppie, the last in line of canine companions that extends back to the first grainy black and white photos of my ancestors. While my grandma and her brothers shared stories over endless cups of coffee, I searched the small dwelling for something to keep me occupied. Unlike my mom and her cousins, I shied away from exploring the eighty acres on my own, choosing instead to stay close to my grandmother's

hip. As I tinkered with whatever makeshift toy I had found, the conversation would slip back and forth between English and the Finnish on which they were raised. This wasn't to mask any harsh or forbidden words from reaching my young ears.

In fact, the only times I remember them having any type of heated exchange was over who got to pay for the lunch tab when the brothers visited town. My grandma and her brothers honestly got mad at each other for not allowing the other to pay. I quickly learned two things from those lunches: one, don't ever get in the middle of angry Finlanders fighting, and two, order what the old-timers order. Uncle Kaarlo always got a hot beef sandwich and, once I tried it, it became one of my favorites too.

Uncle Kaarlo always seemed timid alongside his more personable older brother, Henry. When I was a child, Uncle Henry would turn on college football games for me or find a baseball bat carved out of a 2x4 for me to play with in the yard. Kaarlo remained more reserved, preferring to stay in the background. He always refused to have his picture taken, to the point where he would become upset if someone pulled out a camera. Having never spent any real time away

from home, Uncle Kaarlo seemed more shy and quiet as an adult than even I was as a child.

Uncle Henry, on the other hand, had gotten what his parents might call "a taste of the world" while in the Army. Like a couple of the other siblings, he had taken up the habit of drinking and smoking, while my grandma and Uncle Kaarlo still adhered to the religious teachings instilled in them by their parents.

On the brothers' trips to town, after grocery shopping and other errands were completed, Uncle Henry would often stop at a bar for a few drinks. Uncle Kaarlo, refusing to enter such an establishment, would sit outside in the car and wait to drive his brother home.

It wasn't until after he had major heart surgery at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, during the mid-1980s that Uncle Kaarlo started to slip out of his cloak of vulnerability. This was the first, and only, time he ever left the Upper Peninsula in his life. Doctors estimated the pig's valve inserted into his heart would last about a decade. Either this fact or the time away from home seemed to change Uncle Kaarlo. After the surgery, he started to blossom into the man I later considered my favorite uncle. Still, when ten years passed, he refused to return to Minnesota for another surgery.

*

Only a few years after Uncle Kaarlo's surgery, Uncle Henry died from cancer. After that, Uncle Kaarlo started making concessions about modernizing the house, beginning with a telephone and eventually resulting in the installation of indoor plumbing. The phone allowed my grandmother to call him regularly to make sure he was all right. Other than a couple of neighbors who occasionally stopped by, he didn't get many visitors besides the family anymore. If he didn't make a trip into town for shopping or to visit my grandma, he might go weeks at a time without seeing anyone. This left my grandma in a panic anytime he didn't answer the phone for a couple days in a row. She would call my mom to drive out to check on him. "I've called many times and dere's still no answer," she'd tell my mom in a heavily accented and deeply concerned voice. "I'm just so worried he's lying dere all alone." My mom would drive to the farm fearing the worst, only to find Uncle Kaarlo working in the field or tinkering with something in the barn.

Throughout my school years, I continued to visit the farm with both my grandmother and mother. Sometimes, when he knew we were coming ahead of time, Uncle Kaarlo would cook a roast in the wood range because he knew how much I

enjoyed it. The slow, all-day cooking process produced a smell that was only surpassed by the meat's flavor. I've cooked many roasts in my life since then, but none have replicated the savory goodness of those meals shared with Uncle Kaarlo.

During these later visits, I often just sat and listened while the older generations continued to drink their black coffee over conversation. They would talk about the past, how different the world had become. But for them, little had really changed. Other than a few modern "luxuries" like a television, telephone, and an indoor bathroom, Uncle Kaarlo was living a life quite similar to the one he had always known. Things had changed drastically in the world around him, yet he seemed so content with the common things in life. No specific conversation stands out, yet the feeling of contentment these visits brought remains. Just being in the presence of these family members that were so important to me was enough for me then. Sometimes I wish I had soaked up more of their happiness with the simple things in life.

On a visit to the farm while in high school, Uncle Kaarlo excitedly took me outside to show me two four-leaf clovers growing in different spots in his yard. How he managed to

spot them growing among the rest of the limitless blades of grass and dandelions I will never know. I would have trampled them underfoot long before I ever acknowledged their presence. He told me I could pick one if I liked, which I did, placing it inside a Stephen King book where it stayed for almost a decade. Then one night, I tried showing it off to a group of friends and it crumbled as soon as I tried to pick it up. Uncle Kaarlo never picked his good luck charm. He was happy just having seen it.

To individuals of my nomadic generation, the idea of living one's entire life on the same property seems almost absurd. To not go out and see the rest of the world is viewed as a major disadvantage, almost a shame. To live more than a few years in the same place feels like a milestone for me. The respect and attachment Uncle Kaarlo had for his land is something most individuals from my generation will probably never fully grasp or be able to share in.

The previous trip my mother and I made to the farm together occurred on Christmas Day in the year 2000. We arrived late in the morning with armloads of baked goods and other gifts, excited to see Uncle Kaarlo. On my previous trip home from college for Thanksgiving, I didn't have, or I

didn't make, the time to come visit. My intention of making the short twenty minute drive from my mom's house to the farm got swallowed up by other obligations. The long weekend quickly passed between visiting my grandmother in the nursing home, eating leftovers while watching football, and partying with my friends from high school. I'll be home again in a few weeks, I thought, I'll just go see him then. And then the time home for Christmas started to slip away too, leaving only enough time for a quick trip that morning before I headed back downstate.

Still, it felt good to be there to visit him on Christmas morning. If we had come earlier, he most likely would have spent the holiday home alone. I was glad my grandmother showed me the importance of these visits while I grew up.

The chill of the northern Michigan winter wind was quickly replaced with a different form of icy unease when our repeated knocks on the shed door went unanswered.

"Hello, Uncle Kaarlo, are you home?" I boomed over the sound of the whipping wind while exchanging nervous glances with my mom. Another check of the door's handle confirmed it was locked. I sunk into the snow as I stepped off the hard packed path in an attempt to peek into the bedroom window of the small, three room house. Unable to

see anything in the unlit room, I returned to the stoop where my mother waited.

"Something's wrong," she said. Worry started to shift towards impending despair. After a few more frantic attempts at knocking and calling his name, I finally shouldered in the door. We hurried through the house's shed, past the wood box and Uncle Kaarlo's pair of black, zip-up Arctic boots and through a second unlocked door that led into the main area of the house. Without the usual scent of coffee percolating or something cooking over the woodstove, the place felt cold and empty. We both edged closer to the open bedroom door, fearing what we would find. I will never forget my mother's wail as we saw him lying face down next to his bed.

While checking for a pulse, I noticed that the body still felt somewhat warm, but for some reason I didn't attempt the CPR I'd learned in high school. We called 911 and within ten minutes two female first responders were on the scene. We recognized both of them—one had been a basketball star at my high school, the other, the mother of a boy I had played hockey with while growing up. I think our familiarity with them made things easier somehow, just a little less painful than if strangers had barged through the door. The basketball star performed CPR on Uncle

Kaarlo until the hockey mom, seeing the looks of anguish mirrored on the faces of my mother and me, told her, "It's too late."

I really have no idea how long he had lain there, or if he was even savable in the first place, but part of me still holds some remorse at not having tried. Looking back, I wonder if I unconsciously realized that Uncle Kaarlo would have preferred dying in the place he had always called home instead of inside the foreignness of a hospital room or nursing home. Maybe this was why he never had a second heart surgery. At least I had been there with my mom so she didn't have to find him by herself, and he hadn't been left there lying alone. As my mom would say, "Everything happens for a reason."

Without any descendants or a will, Uncle Kaarlo's land became the property of the thirteen children of his four sisters. With the intention of keeping it in the family, the other twelve sold their rights to the land to their cousin Wendell. A little more than a year later, Wendell sold the property to the neighbor across the road—a man Uncle Kaarlo had never particularly cared for—without ever informing anyone else in the family first. After being in

our family for over a century, the land my great grandparents had homesteaded now belonged to a stranger.

The neighbor did make an agreement with Wendell that he could still stay at the farm whenever he came to visit from Ohio. The following summer, while burning trash in a barrel, Wendell caught himself on fire, receiving minor burns. He hasn't been back to visit the farm since.

Several relatives, including my mom, hold differing degrees of resentment towards Wendell. If he had notified others of his intent to sell the place, another relative would have been willing to buy it. Did he buy it with the thought of just selling it for a profit in the first place? No one is entirely sure. Most of the cousins prefer not to talk about it.

As I took more pictures that rainy afternoon, I couldn't get over the feeling that despite everything looking the same, it had all changed so much. Not only had I lost this physical link to the past, I'd also lost the sense of family that came with it. Of everyone in my mom's family, I had always been closest with this older generation. I know the names and faces of her twelve cousins, but I have no real connection to them. On that Christmas morning I lost a part of who I am. A link to my past had been

broken, my childhood illusions of permanence forever shattered.

Walking by the small, green house with its addition for the bathroom left me feeling somewhat hollow. Objects of Uncle Kaarlo's remained in the windows, but the house had already begun to look and feel like the big house did when I was a child. The signs of his life—a modest, simple life that I haven't been able to replicate—were no longer there.

As I went around to the front of the barn, I noticed that the iron rod was no longer there to hold the door in place. After opening it a crack I peered inside and saw two new Ski-Doo snowmobiles. I realized I'd seen enough. I quit taking pictures and joined my mom in the car.

Dirty Davis

*You my friend
I will defend
And if we change,
well I love you anyway*

Alice in Chains
-No Excuses

For years, I claimed with a degree of certainty that I had learned more outside the classroom while in college than inside it. During my undergrad years, this was probably true. Coming from a tiny town in the northern part of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, I didn't realize how naïve and clueless I actually was until I began to encounter individuals who had thoughts that differed from my own. In my hometown, being different meant liking the Packers instead of Lions, or being Lutheran instead of Catholic. Mt. Pleasant may not have been the most diverse college town back then, but it still seemed like a world away from where I was raised. My homogenous worldview would begin to be tested, and one of my early instructors would be Dirty Davis.

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When I first met Tom Davis in the fall of 1994, we were freshmen at Central Michigan University living across the hall from one another. At the time, he epitomized everything I thought about spoiled rich kids from the city. Cocky and arrogant, with a thorough disregard for anyone—or anything—other than himself. He seemed to have this “fuck you” attitude towards the world and everything in it.

When Davis first saw me, I’m sure images of a country hick lingered in his mind too. I spoke in this sped-up Yooper accent, a vague cross between English spoke in Canada (with all its long, drawn out vowel sounds and a frequent interspersing of the word “eh” throughout most sentences) and the Scandinavian dialects spoken by a majority of the region’s former immigrants. Combine this with my lack of designer clothes and limited knowledge of urban environments, and I was left feeling like I had grown up somewhere outside of civilization.

In addition to the two of us, we each had three roommates in a suite of sorts. One individual shared a bedroom with you, while two more occupied another bedroom that was separated from your room by a common area and a bathroom. The main door to these dorm rooms opened into the common room, which was big enough for a couch, a

recliner and a mini-fridge. The bedrooms weren't much larger.

I couldn't imagine trying to share that type of limited space with my three closest friends in the world anymore. When we arrived at school that first year, the eight of us living in those two dorm rooms were complete strangers. We would become each other's main social circle, hanging out together and managing to get along, to varying degrees. We ate the same shitty dorm food together, watched SportsCenter on repeat every morning between classes, fought over the stereo, and tried to put up with each other's smells and strangeness.

The guy who lived in my bedroom was also from the U.P. He had won a state championship in football his senior year, and was trying to walk on to Central's team. His girlfriend, a cute brunette who he'd been dating throughout high school, did her best to keep our room neat and smelling good. He would go on to set receiving records for Central that have since been broken. Last I heard, he was married—not to the high school sweetheart—with twin girls. These girls must be in their teens by now.

Another one of my roommates, Chuck, grew up in a small farming town in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula. We bonded over sports, both having a passion for team

competition despite our lack of athleticism. We would remain roommates for my first three years in Mt. Pleasant. Besides Davis, Chuck is the only one from this group that I am still in contact with. We've played fantasy football together for years and still talk on the phone frequently, most often about sports.

Our third roommate was a transfer from Ferris State University who quickly evolved from a good-natured and goofy preppy into grungy and often google-eyed hippie. We called him Doof because his last name was DuFour, but it seemed to fit his personality as well. A lot of people assumed the nickname was short for dufus before having it properly explained. He wasn't stupid, but came off as kind of flighty or scatterbrained, probably from all the pot we smoked. He came from a well-off family that didn't understand his scorn for material excesses. I wonder if his outlook has changed any since his parents quit paying his rent.

The three guys sharing Davis' dorm room were equally diverse yet similar. We were all young white males from Michigan, but we had also all grown up in different social and economic environments. Though our differences may seem rather slight now—given the vast range of individuals I've met since—back then they seemed pronounced and fascinating.

We would spend hours teasing each other about our differences. Somehow, I made the strongest bond with the individual least like myself.

Davis drove a new cherry-red Mustang convertible, bought for him the day he turned sixteen, or so I envisioned. I also drove a Mustang, a '77 with a decent paint job and a lot of rattling parts. I'd paid \$2,700 for it, and was just realizing I'd probably paid too much. It had taken my mom's help to buy it, even with the money I'd saved working at a grocery store after school. Davis had yet to work a day in his life.

During that first few weeks of the school year, I had to teach him how to use a washing machine. I laughed as he stood staring at the washer, as if turning it on took an engineering degree. "We always had a maid to do this kinda shit," he said with a scowl when I harassed him about it. It seemed as though Davis had never done anything for himself in his entire life.

Over the years, we've talked about and retold the simple facts of the first night we met so many times that the rest of the story has become lost. What we did or said to each other to pass the hours doesn't matter much anyway, I

guess. I'm sure we fought over whose music to listen to and probably played Madden or NHL '95 on Sega, but none of that matters much. What we both remember is splitting a fifth of lime vodka and a 12-pack of Bud bottles on the first night of our freshmen year. "When I first met this kid, we split a fifth and twelver," one of us would invariably tell people. That was it. Nothing more needed to be said. We felt it clarified how a chubby kid with a crooked smile from the U.P. could be friends with a short-tempered Italian punk with a self-assured grin. We found common ground in alcohol.

The lime-flavored Arrow brand vodka was my idea. Mixed with Sprite, my eighteen-year-old self thought it made the perfect drink. Davis hesitantly agreed, but also insisted on Budweiser bottles. Despite having to sneak the inaccessible glass bottles into the dorms, drinking out of cans was just unacceptable to him. I don't think I've drunk lime vodka since our freshman year; however, I do still enjoy an occasional Bud bottle.

One afternoon, I walked into Davis' room to the sound of some strange music coming out of his stereo. "What is this country shit?" I demanded.

"It's Pink Floyd, The Wall, you fucking moron."

At the time, Pantera was my favorite band, followed by Ozzy Osbourne and Metallica. Anything that didn't have loud, driving guitars and a screeching singer sounded like country to me. Lessons in Floyd, Zeppelin, and The Doors were soon to come. My mother had never listened to any of this type of music when I was growing up. She preferred Christian singers or a top 40 station. Somehow I had made it to the age of eighteen without having been exposed to hardly any classic rock.

Davis would end up being the person who turned me on to more of the music I now like than anyone else in my life. I like to think I passed him on the search for appreciating quality rock and roll, but I'll always admit that he had to guide the way through *Zeppelin II* and quite a few other classics to get me started.

This was how we often spent our time hanging out—music on the stereo and a drink or joint in hand. Only a few days after the lime vodka and beer, Davis asked me if I wanted to split a bag. I said, sure.

I'd been smoking pot since the 10th grade and enjoyed getting high. It wasn't yet the daily habit it would

become, instead something I did occasionally, maybe once or twice a week at the most.

When asked if I wanted to split a bag, I assumed we'd be splitting an eighth of an ounce, even though I didn't even know the terminology for this at the time. In my sheltered realm—being a high school student in secluded U.P. of the early 1990s—there were two ways you bought pot, either as five dollar joints or as a bag. I'm sure I'd seen more than an eighth before, in the possession of one friend or another, but I'd always just thought of buying a bag as a certain, set thing—the extravagant alternative to buying a couple of joints. Most often, I'd pitch in five or ten bucks to buy a bag with some friends. A few of us would get together and get high on our lunch break from school or at a party on Friday night.

So when Davis asked me if I want to split a bag, I naturally assumed we were going to be getting what I consider to be a bag. "Huh?" he said, giving me the same look I got when I mistook Pink Floyd for country. "You only wanna get an eighth?"

"Well, like thirty bucks worth. Whatever that is."

"I'm sure we can probably get a quarter for fifty. I'm not sure how you fools in the U.P. smoke, but I like to

blaze, bro. If we get an eighth, it'll only last like a day."

Never one to stand up against any semblance of peer pressure, I quickly agreed. Later, after procuring the pot and properly partaking, Davis told me with a smirk, "I'll just hang on to it. Don't worry, I won't smoke any without you." I would soon come to recognize that smirk, and the shadiness that accompanied it, as the Dirty part of the Dirty Davis moniker he had earned amongst his high school friends. I've been calling him some form of that nickname ever since.

On those nights spent drinking, smoking, and listening to music, we would sometimes try explaining ourselves to each other. We would try to figure out how two kids from the same state could come from such completely different worlds. Or we'd discuss what had happened to us during our relatively young lives to make us the type of people who split fifths and twelve packs. Not that we thought of it like that back then, or even considered why we were prone to overindulgence. Alcohol just proved to be the social lubricant needed to discuss our most painful moments in life.

I'd try to talk about my dad, not a subject I breached often. It took a special level of inebriation for me to want to discuss him at all. In high school, I'd shied away from talking about my father with my friends, who all had some idea about who he was already. They knew him was an alcoholic or someone who had spent time in prison. But now, I had to explain him to this new group of friends who didn't have any preconceived beliefs about him.

When my dad called my dorm room and I wasn't there, he would keep talking to whichever roommate answered the phone. He called Chuck the Poli-Sci Guy because of his major, and even though my roommate insisted that he liked talking to my dad, I cringed every time Chuck, or anyone else, told me my dad had called.

Davis also had stories he liked to tell only after he'd been drinking. He would tell me about losing his mom as a child. How she went to the hospital one day and never came back. Or about his best friend in high school who died in car wreck.

Because I never heard these stories when we were sober, my memory of them remains somewhat hazy. I doubt we will ever cover that ground again together, or at least I won't be

the one to initiate the journey. Some things are just better left half-remembered.

I'm not even sure how old Davis was when she died, but, thinking back, I picture a shaggy-haired 10-year-old boy, small for his age, clinging to the banister at the top of a staircase in the middle of the night. He looks down with his big, brown tear-filled eyes as his father helps his mom to the bottom of the stairs. "Don't worry, Tommy," she calls back up, struggling for breath. "Go back to bed. I'll be home soon."

"Mom! Please, don't go." The child sobs as his father helps her across the polished mahogany floor and out the front door. Davis' mom takes a look back over her shoulder at the son she will never see again.

That is what I remember. His mother left for the hospital one night with a condition that wasn't considered overly serious. He never saw her again, at least conscious and outside of a hospital room. I'm not sure what she died from, but I do know it would affect his ability to trust and care for others later in life.

A second sudden death would have similar effects on him in high school. This time it would be his best friend in an automobile accident.

During a party at Davis' house one night, he got into a drunken argument with the friend. It ended with him leaving, only to return to Davis' house shortly after to make amends. After driving away a second time, however, the friend crashed his car and died. When the sound of sirens cried out in the night, Davis knew where they were headed.

The police would investigate, questioning Davis and all the other kids who were there. The grief of losing a friend was compounded with the stress of legal repercussions. The police would question Davis and other people who were there that night, trying to determine where the alcohol came from and who should be held responsible. Ultimately, there were no charges filed.

Despite their reconsolidation, Davis would continue to blame himself for allowing his friend to leave. In addition to losing his best friend that night, Davis also lost a little more of his ability to care.

After knowing each other for a while, Davis explained his inability to care about most people. "When everyone around you keeps dying, what's the point of getting close to people? If you never give a fuck about anybody, it doesn't hurt when they die." This gloomy outlook would have

sounded depressing coming from most people, but somehow, coming from him, it made sense.

His attitude wasn't always this grim, though. When he was young, his father told him, "You can count your good friends on one hand." These were the people who will be there for you whenever you need them, no matter what. Davis told me one time that I would always be one of these people for him. I agreed with him then and still do today.

Despite only seeing each other about once a year nowadays, we still remain close friends, talking on the phone or texting each other more days than not. Whenever I'm in the Detroit area—either visiting my sister or attending a sporting event or concert—I go out of my way to hang out with him for at least one night. Davis even made his first trip to the U.P. this past fall, proposing to his girlfriend, Diane, at Tahquamenon Falls.

I met them for drinks a couple of days later. We played bean bag toss and drank Bud bottles on the beach at one of the Pictured Rocks parks. No one else was there that day because the U.S. Government was in the second week of its October 2013 shutdown. Park officials told Davis to use his conscience when deciding whether or not to go to the park that day. Davis' conscience told him that it

would be a shame to let the government stop him from seeing Pictured Rocks on his first trip to the U.P. As we watched the sun dipping below the pristine ripples of Lake Superior, Davis told me, "I never knew you had it like this up here, bro."

"Well don't tell everyone," I responded. "We wanna keep it like this."

Before Diane, while we were still attending CMU, Davis dated Stephanie Pittel, the girl I always thought he would marry. She was from Shelby Township, the same suburb of Detroit as Davis. She attended Michigan State University, and came up to Central to visit most weekends. They stayed together for years, despite his infidelities and the lack of trust they produced. He always managed to maintain some level of doubt, though, never actually getting caught cheating, making her wonder if it was all just her own insecurities.

I watched them argue more often, and more vehemently, than any two people I've ever met, but through it all I always believed that they would end up together. Eventually, Davis' legal troubles—multiple drunk drivings with a couple of possession of marijuanas sprinkled in—along with his general lack of direction in life, forced

her away. With Diane, he was determined that he would not let it happen again.

The legal troubles that would haunt him later in life were foreshadowed during the first semester of our freshmen year. Despite several incidents that led to his expulsion from our dorm and an unlikely cautionary warning, Davis continued to disregard the signs, instead choosing to live by the mantra, "Not here for a long time, just here for a good time."

One Thursday night late in the fall semester, Davis came home from a night of drinking and staggered across the hall with a lit joint, hoping I was awake. By that point in the semester, I had started staying in on Thursday nights to study for the Psychology 101 quiz I had every Friday morning. Too many hung over quizzes already had left me doubting my final grade. When Davis found the door to my dorm room locked and no one responded to his fist pounding, he turned back towards his own room. A glance down the hall revealed two figures walking towards him. Davis yelled, "Smoke it," to them in a nonchalant slur. When they started to run towards him, he realized his mistake and hurried into his room to hide the evidence. Two resident hall advisors arrived at his door moments

later, finding the half-smoked joint. This, combined with previous alcohol violations, led to another proverbial slap on the wrist—a transfer to another hall, instead of the help he probably needed.

Just days later, our group of friends were eating in the cafeteria when, out of nowhere, Davis shouted, “What the fuck?” He was staring down at the two halves of a fortune cookie held in his hands. My roommate, Chuck, and I exchanged puzzled looks. The outburst wasn’t really out of character, but what had a fortune cookie done to incur this most recent bout of instantaneous anger.

Davis silently handed over the fortune, turning our wonder into utter perplexity. We had never seen such an ominous fortune. Above the lucky numbers the slip of paper read, “There is still time to change the path you are on.”

Chuck still remembers the experience vividly, telling me recently, “I bet I’ve told that story a thousand times. I wouldn’t believe it if I wasn’t there.” I don’t think Davis ever thought about it again. He admits to not remembering it at all. He was oblivious to any and all warnings.

The summer after our freshmen year, while returning from a night of drinking in Windsor, Canada, Davis managed to get

his Mustang stuck sideways in the underground international tunnel. Long before 9/11, border crossings weren't as difficult as they are today. Still, when the border patrol found a drunken 18-year-old blocking traffic, they undoubtedly didn't find it humorous.

Like border crossings, drunk driving laws were also less stringent back then. Davis never lost his license or did any jail time for this first offense. He would for his next three.

His second and third drunk drivings came a few years later, within months of each other. His court date for the second was still pending when the police found Davis sleeping in his vehicle one night. Because the keys were in the ignition, Michigan law allowed for it to be counted as if he had been behind the wheel. Neither the police nor the courts had any sympathy for him this time.

Davis would have to return home from school on weekends and over breaks to serve the jail time he was sentenced to. The Christmas break he spent behind bars had to have been especially difficult. By then, his father was remarried and had two more sons. I couldn't imagine having to tell two little brothers why you wouldn't be home for the holidays.

*

Davis' father, Jack, always played a powerful role in his life. Jack had done well for himself as a financial planner, and expected similar success from his son. When I met Jack, it became clear where Davis got his confidence and drive in life.

When his father was diagnosed with bone marrow cancer, Davis was in his senior year at Central. He immediately wanted to return home to be near his father, but Jack persuaded him that he would be fine and to stay at school. Looking back later, Davis told me, "He had terminal cancer and the asshole convinced me I should stay in school. I would have had my whole life to finish school. I should have been there with my dad."

When Jack died, I took the day off of work and drove down from Mt. Pleasant for the funeral. Davis was in his mid-twenties and parentless. After the funeral, we went to a bar and got drunk.

A fourth drunk driving would follow in the early 2000s. His date to a wedding reception had too much to drink, so Davis drove her vehicle and got pulled over on the way home. Driving at all after three offenses is inexcusable,

yet part of me couldn't help but feel somewhat sorry for him.

This time the punishment would be even more severe. Facing prison time, only a good lawyer and pleas from his older sister for leniency allowed him to spend most of a year in county jail instead. Still, after four drunk drivings and a couple of possessions of marijuana, the court never once mandated any in-house treatment program, choosing to incarcerate rather than rehabilitate. Over a decade later, he is still waiting to get his license back.

A couple of falls ago, while driving across campus on a Friday night, I noticed packs of freshmen wandering the sidewalks everywhere. I thought about how eighteen years ago that was Davis and I walking the streets looking for a party. I picked up my phone and called him.

"Do you realize I've known you for half my life, bro?" I asked when he answered. I went on to explain how old I felt, being back in graduate school after all this time. We talked and joked for a while about all the stupid shit we used to do as freshmen. How on the way home from parties Davis used to holler out, "I love drugs. I do 'em all. Heroin, crack, PCP." He hadn't so much as touched

anything other than a pot back then, but it humored him to watch people cross the street to avoid walking past us.

Davis reminded me about how we used to imagine ourselves as old men sitting on a porch swing still smoking pot together. He told me how disappointed he was in me that I didn't smoke anymore. "I don't even like the way it makes me feel anymore," I explained.

Neither one of mentioned the night we split the lime vodka and a twelve-pack, but I know at least I was thinking about it. Our friendship has been cemented by intoxication ever since.

Instant Zen

You see, I think drugs have done some good things for us. I really do. And if you don't believe drugs have done good things for us, do me a favor. Go home tonight. Take all your albums, all your tapes and all your CDs and burn them. 'Cause you know what, the musicians that made all that great music that's enhanced your lives throughout the years were rrrreal fucking high on drugs.

Comedian Bill Hicks
As used in the Tool song
"Third Eye"

When I first took LSD the second semester of my freshman year, I knew almost nothing about psychedelic drugs. My limited knowledge of lysergic acid diethylamide consisted mostly of horror stories about people who took "bad acid" only to never return.

In my hometown, "Acid Andy" served as the cautionary reminder parents used to warn their kids of the dangers of taking such substances. While growing up in the 1980s, I'd seen him many times standing on a street corner talking to himself while swatting at imaginary flies. Different rumors circulated, but all of them centered around drugs. Was it just the alliteration that made this connection so easy? If his name had been Bob or Randy would he have

gotten the psychiatric care he probably needed? Maybe it was drugs that scrambled his brain. Or maybe in small towns it's just easier to perpetuate the worst about people to help insulate yourself from their problems.

Between this and the propaganda pushed by Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign, I had very one-sided information pertaining to illicit drugs. For most of my life I had been taught that they would turn my brain into a frying egg. Even though I'd dabbled with pot in high school and found I enjoyed its effects more than alcohol early on in college, a heavy fear of harder drugs still prevailed. Yet when Davis entered my dorm room late one night with three hits of LSD, it only took a few minutes of convincing before I ingested my half of those three small squares of paper adorned with hearts and diamonds. It would forever change my life, for better and for worse.

Swiss chemist Albert Hoffman first discovered LSD in 1938 while attempting to synthesize a respiratory stimulant using fungus ergot. It took five years after this first synthesis of the chemical for him to accidentally absorb enough of it to become more interested in it. After realizing the powerful effect it had on him that day, he

decided to intentionally ingest the substance a few days later.

At first, Hoffman felt overcome with the sensation that he had poisoned himself, but after calling on a doctor friend who assured him that there were no physical abnormalities occurring, Hoffman began to enjoy himself and the "kaleidoscopic, fantastic images [that] surged in on [him]." Hoffman knew he had made an important discovery and believed the drug could be used as a powerful psychiatric tool. He did not imagine anyone would want to use it recreationally, though, because of its intense introspective nature. He couldn't have been more wrong.

My own first experience with LSD was not nearly as profound. Davis always recalled watching the dorm room wall melt while we sat listening to The Doors, but I didn't have any real visual effects. I'm sure the dosage was rather small and considerably less pure than what Albert Hoffman first ingested. I also didn't experience any of the severe introspection that would mark some of my later drug revelations.

My most lasting memory of that first trip comes from walking home later that night. As I made my way back to my dorm room, the streetlights reflecting off the fresh snow

covering the ground, gave me the illusion that millions of tiny diamonds were shining back at me. Everything appeared more vivid and intense than I'd ever seen things before.

With the snow untouched by anyone else's tracks, I felt like the first man on earth, or at least the first to take the steps I was taking then. A vastness that I couldn't explain engulfed me. The world was so much more infinite that I had ever realized before.

This, along with a new sense that maybe these drugs weren't so harmful, is what I took away from that first psychedelic experience. The handle had been turned on that door to another realm of consciousness. This first trip hadn't opened the door yet, but it made me curious enough about what might lay behind that door to make me want to try opening it again and again.

Writer Aldous Huxley, probably best known for his novel *A Brave New World*, first used the metaphor of the psychedelic experience opening a door in one's brain when writing about his experiences with mescaline, the active ingredient in the peyote cactus, in the book *The Doors of Perception*. Quoting the poet William Blake, Huxley said, "If the doors of perception were cleaned, everything will appear to man as it is, infinite."

Huxley believed that mescaline, and later LSD, was the key to opening, or "cleansing," these doors. He likened the human brain to a reducing valve that only allowed enough information in for the human species to survive. Huxley believed that the most wondrous parts of the human brain's potential were being screened by this reducing mechanism. He felt that one way of opening this portal to allow all of the sensory information in, to open the ancient doors, was through the ingestion of psychedelic drugs. Huxley closes *The Doors of Perception* by saying:

"The man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never quite be the same as the man who went out. He will be wiser but less cocksure, happier but less self-satisfied, humbler in acknowledging his ignorance yet better equipped to understand the relationship of words to things, of systematic reasoning to the unfathomable Mystery which it tries, forever vainly, to comprehend."

Huxley's own psychedelic experiences were so profound that he chose to take a small dose of LSD on his death bed, with his wife at his side, in the hopes of helping his transition to the other side.

I'm not quite sure when I eventually made it through that "Door in the Wall," but I do know that I've never quite been the same. After that first trip, I don't recall exactly when or how long it was before I took LSD again.

It may not have been until the next school year, but it became something I indulged in with a fair amount of frequency over the next couple of years. "Tripping" became a common social activity among my group of friends. Dropping acid or eating mushrooms was a preferred activity, substituting splitting a case of beer or going to a keg party. We considered ourselves in some way better than the average college frat boys who seemed content to numb their brains with alcohol. We were exploring regions of our brains that were normally inaccessible, and liking what we found there.

Some experiences were like the first, less than monumental, but on some occasions I had a truly transcendental experience. The world would begin to sharpen, to take on that ethereal quality. Everything became brighter, more vivid. The beginning of a psychedelic experience, something truly beyond words. Moments of epiphany seemed to await. By the end of a positive psychedelic experience a feeling of oneness endured, not only with my friends but with the whole universe and all of its existence. I'd feel a sense of peace and harmoniousness that nothing else in my life could create.

This all happened in increments. It wasn't something I experienced all at once. There are fragments of various nights that last in my mind. Hours spent on CMU's football field after sneaking into the stadium, or painting my bedroom wall with Day-Glo paint that glowed under a black light, or walking my dog in a park the morning after coming down from a trip, or watching the only sober guy fall into a stream while the rest of us laughed and tried to help.

As the story goes, these experiences are impossible to properly put into words. But once you've had a good psychedelic trip where your entire perception has been turned around and you've seen the holiness and glory of dirt and death, trees and life, you realize that everything is part of the same vibration and you can never unsee it and wouldn't want to if you could.

I know that psychedelics had a profound effect on me then, and even now, well over a decade later, I consider them the closest I have ever come to God or realizing the interconnectedness of all existence. Because of these experiences, I feel like I have tasted a bit of divinity. I have tapped in to at least some part of the immortality of man.

*

In his book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Tom Wolfe describes the experiences of Ken Kesey and his group of friends known as the Merry Pranksters. Throughout the book, Wolfe depicts their journey as having almost religious overtones. He continually compares the experiences they are having to the beginning of other religious movements of the past.

"On the face of it there was just a group of people who had shared an unusual psychological state, the LSD experience—But exactly! The experience—that was the word! And it began to fall into place. In fact, none of the great founded religions, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, none of them began with a philosophical framework or even an idea. They all began with an overwhelming new experience what Joachim Wach called 'the experience of the holy,' and Max Weber, 'possession of the deity,' the sense of being a vessel of the divine, of the All-one."

Kesey and his friends, including Neal Cassady, were not interested in using the religious terms and ideas ascribed to them by Wolfe. Instead, they were more intrigued by trying to recreate their experience for others. The best way they found for doing this was by hosting mass multimedia events with LSD as a main component. These events became known as the Acid Tests.

The Acid Tests became a huge catalyst in the ever-burgeoning movement among young people at the time. During

the 1960s, the widespread use of LSD left many feeling that a new path to God had been discovered. The ingestion of the drug frequently produced the transcendental state most often associated with the mystical experience, leaving some to label it "instant Zen." The trouble was, the fast route to enlightenment didn't leave you with the spiritual groundwork necessary to make it last. It has been compared to someone taking a ski lift to the top of a mountain as opposed to a mountain climber making the same ascent. Both may get the same view from the top, but only the mountain climber has put in the work to properly appreciate what he is seeing.

My own experiences seem to follow this path. Even my most memorable psychedelic moments leave me grasping at the words to properly define them. The most life-changing of trips always led back to the same routines I lived before. This doesn't mean that I hadn't learned something from my moments of transcendence. I often felt like I had achieved a new level of spiritual growth after such experiences, it just felt like they didn't have the permanence one would hope for. The insights into to my life that were possible during the use of psychedelics couldn't be achieved by my every day, rational mind. I would discover character flaws

or aspects of myself that needed improving. I would look in my fridge and be repulsed by the types of foods I chose to eat, my porno mags got thrown into the dumpster, I became less confrontational and more self-effacing as my ego slowly slipped away. The effects seemed monumentally life-changing at times, but it was as if I'd been handed the keys to a brand new sports car without ever being taught how to drive.

Even though I had made the use of psychedelic drugs a common practice in my life, I still had little knowledge about their actual attributes and detriments other than what I had learned from my own experience or had heard about through friends. I knew that certain situations were more agreeable to a positive trip and that certain moods should be avoided when considering taking psychedelics, but I had no idea how closely the effects of the drugs could mimic psychosis as well. I'd seen and heard the horror stories of people who taken "bad" acid and had bad trips or never came back at all. During my sophomore year, a student at CMU jumped out of his second story dorm room believing he could fly. I realized the some of the dangers of using these drugs, but I never thought it could happen to me. Some of my early introspective trips had been grueling ordeals, but I always felt that I'd come out a

better person because of them. Only later would I learn the true other side these drugs were capable of taking me to.

In *The Beyond Within: The LSD Story*, a book dedicated to uncovering some of the myths about the drug, Dr. Sidney Cohen dedicates a chapter to whether the state produced by LSD—and other hallucinogens—is, “a model for madness, a touch of schizophrenia, or a short cut to satori, nirvana for the millions.”

In the chapter titled “Model Psychosis or Instant Zen?” Cohen relays his own experiences as a clinical psychologist experimenting with the drug and the research of others who worked with individuals participating in LSD therapy. Cohen illustrates how early practitioners of such research often had vastly different results. Some concluded that their investigations showed no subjects having transcendental experiences while others had a ninety percent positive reaction to the drug.

Cohen goes on to explain that the effects of LSD can most certainly be either highly positive or excruciatingly negative. Even though some may feel that the visionary state produced by drugs should not be compared to those produced in the religious setting, he feels they are

closely related. Cohen also sees the level of psychosis that is sometimes produced as strikingly similar to different forms mental illness. Because these opposite states depended so much on mood and setting, Cohen concluded that the direction the experience would take was "a result of factors other than the drug." It wasn't so much the individual taking the drug, but the outside factors they were exposed to that would determine whether the visions they had were of heaven or hell.

Most of my early psychedelic experiences were overwhelmingly positive. They usually involved a similar cast of characters, friends from my early years at college. We took psychedelics in a variety of social settings, but preferred to be outside, away from large gatherings. One maxim that we tried to follow was that drunk people and tripping people didn't mix. Neither mindset could understand the level the other individuals were on, often leading to bad vibrations and even confrontation. Instead of putting ourselves in that situation, we usually tended to stay to ourselves, exploring nature during the day or wandering around town late at night.

The use of psychedelics seemed to form a strong bond amongst that group of friends. We may not have been

experiencing the level of group communion that Ken Kesey and his collection of misfits did, but the shared moments of heightened consciousness allowed us to understand one another in ways we never would have otherwise. It felt like we held a common bond that had been, at least in part, created by our psychedelic experiences. Those early trips included so many mini-epiphanies and flashes of self-discovery that we couldn't help but feel a collective sense of advancement. We were turning ourselves on to the ways in which the universe was meant to be. We never really expressed it, but I think we all felt as though this path led to a better society, one in which individuals weren't caught up in the trappings of greed and material excess. I thought then that these were the friends I would have for the rest of my life.

The first of my "bad" trips occurred the summer after my sophomore year. I had returned home during the break from school to work at the Native American casino I had dealt cards at the previous summer only to be told I had failed my background check because of a Minor in Possession of Alcohol ticket I'd received while at Central. This left me scrambling for a job, and, with no other options, I took one working security for 12 hours a day, six days a week.

My boss paid us six dollars an hour cash with no overtime to guard a variety of posts on tribal property.

My first day on the job, the guy I was working with asked me if I wanted to get high. I did. Every day thereafter, I brought my own pot, staying stoned throughout most of my shifts. After work, I usually spent more time smoking mediocre grass with the guys I worked with or a pretty young blonde named Alyssa.

I'd known Alyssa for a couple of years, seeing her at parties mostly. She was a few years younger than me, so I didn't really know her from school, even though we went to the same one. She was still in high school and lived with her Vietnam vet father. Having not had the most stable home environment, she had been forced to grow up quick.

We hung out quite a bit that summer, just riding around or going to parties on the weekend. I kept hoping that the friendship would develop into something more. Eventually, I decided that the way to advance it to the next level was to trip together. I thought that the experiences I had at Central of extending bonds with individuals through psychedelics would transfer over to initiating a lasting relationship with Alyssa. What I failed to consider was the set and setting.

On two different occasions that summer I took LSD with Alyssa. The first time it was just the two of us, but we took it at a party of mostly strangers. I have conflicting memories of that night. I remember driving to the party in Houghton, a town about a half hour from where I grew up, in the Blazer that belonged to one of my best friends from high school. He was dating the younger sister of a girl we had graduated with. She rode shotgun with Alyssa and me in the back seat. My friend's little sister was also in the vehicle. She was Alyssa's best friend, and had just broken up with her boyfriend. I clearly recall her crying the whole way there.

I don't recall much of being at that party. It was daylight when we got there, and the effects of the drug were much stronger than either of us had anticipated. Neither of us had taken such a strong dosage before. Unable to cope with all the people, we headed back to the car. This is where my memory conflicts. I remember going back to my car, a Cutlass Supreme. Am I confusing two different nights? Did the drugs effect my memory of that night? I'm not sure. It's been so long and only certain things stand out vividly. Could we have been in my car all along, with my friend driving because Alyssa and I had already taken the acid? It all feels so convoluted, like

these specific events are just snapshots shuffled together like a deck of cards.

What I do remember clearly is having to flee the gathering of people surrounding a fire pit. There were too many people we didn't know. The acid was just starting to kick in and it wasn't like anything I'd experienced before. When we got to the vehicle, I opened the passenger door and pushed forward the front seat, as if we were going to get in the back. Why I did this, I do not know. I didn't have intentions of trying to have sex with Alyssa right then, but that was the impression she got. It caused an awkwardness and fissure that would persist for the rest of the night.

Later that night, back at Alyssa's house, I kept trying to close my eyes to avoid the distorted vision I was having. I had never had that type of visual hallucinations before. It wasn't as if I was seeing things that weren't there, but my perception was completely askew.

There was a plant on the kitchen table we were sitting at. When I looked at it, it appeared as the focus of my entire universe, so large and with every leaf and fiber standing out in the minutest detail. Little bugs crawled on the plant, only they seemed much larger and more detailed than anything I'd ever seen before. I couldn't

cope with these distortions. I kept wanting to close my eyes, to stop seeing this warped sense of perception. While Alyssa sat breaking up my bag of pot, I thought about the irony of men "growing" their daughters until another, younger man came along to "harvest" them. I started talking less and less, eventually became withdrawn and almost catatonic.

One of Alyssa's younger brother's friends kept shining a light in my eyes, thinking he was helping. All I kept saying was that I had to get out of there, meaning I wanted to be outside in nature like I had been on my good psychedelic experiences before. I needed to get away from her younger brother and his friend who didn't understand what was happening and weren't helping the situation. Misunderstanding me, Alyssa got mad, saying she had to spend her whole life in that house. The night would end hours later, after I'd already come down, with me having a slight panic attack in my car when I didn't know where to drive us. I returned Alyssa to her house and went home alone.

Our second trip together that summer went about the same. My inability to properly express my affection for her led to confusion and awkwardness. We went to a party where a bunch of friends from high school were mostly just

drinking. My instable constitution couldn't deal with the stress of the situation. I felt uncomfortable and out of place. I didn't belong at the party, not while tripping. If I had just been drinking beer like I always had in high school, everything would have been fine. But in the state I was in, I didn't know how to relate to my friends and they couldn't relate to me.

Again, an improper setting had resulted in the wrong vibrations. I was beginning to learn that there was a lot more to the psychedelic experience than just bonding with my buddies.

This other edge of the psychedelic blade would inevitably cut me rather deeply two times. In both instances, I would be hospitalized in a psychiatric ward for drug-induced psychosis. Doctors had difficulty determining whether the psychosis was because of the drugs or an underlying predisposition to mental illness. My father's medical history gave them reason to believe that what I was dealing with might be hereditary. I feared that my life had been irreparably altered and that I would be on medication forever. Both times, my mind slowly returned to its normal functioning. In the meantime, I would put family and

friends through hell as they tried to understand and deal with what I had done to myself.

Maybe if I knew more about psychedelic drugs early on, I would have heeded these early warnings and quit using them before I had real problems with them. Maybe if I'd been properly educated on their effects instead of just being told about "Acid" Andy and a frying egg, I could have made better choices. Maybe, or maybe this was all the path I needed to travel to become the person I am now.

The Trip

*What else should I be
All apologies
What else should I say
Everyone is gay
What else should I write
I don't have the right
What else should I be
All apologies*

Nirvana
-All Apologies

Sitting, staring out at the Atlantic Ocean, I buried my feet further into the sun-warmed sand. On this late March afternoon, the wind off the water had only the slightest bite to it. While waves continued to collide with the shore, I slipped further into the subterranean expanses of my mind. Far off, as if whispering from a detached universe that no longer made sense, the cries of gulls and gleeful shouts of children playing in the surf echoed back to me. Neither seemed to register. My gaze remained focused on the endless horizon of water before me, while my thoughts kept looping around the supposed psychedelic revelations of others.

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With two friends, I had finally managed to escape the cold restraints of Michigan on my third spring break from college. This would be my first, and only, trip to the ocean. On the beach that day, I repeatedly described the awe-inspiring energy of the sea as "the bomb." This phrase, which during my high school years had been commonly used to describe something thought to be exceptionally cool, had already been replaced by newer hip jargon, but at that moment it was the only term my twenty-year-old, drug-addled mind could find to encapsulate the immensity of all that water spread out before me.

This journey, with its eventual destination in Ocean City, Maryland, wasn't something well thought out. It was more of a jump-in-a-car-and-go kind of adventure than anything, something Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise would have been proud of. Back then, though I may have heard the names of these famous Beat pseudonyms mentioned, I wasn't familiar with who they were or the freedom they represented.

Before we left on that road trip, I was explaining our plans, or lack of them, to a friend when he brought up Kerouac, excited that we were mimicking the author's epic travels. I tried my best not to let my ignorance show.

Only later would I become infatuated with the Beat legend's writing, and the figure of his mythical muse Neal Cassady.

I wasn't thinking of any of that as I sat on the sand that day. When I looked at my friend Doof and asked him, "You are too?" I wasn't just contemplating my own sexuality, but all of humanity's.

The progression of events and thoughts that left me confounded on the beach that day had begun the week before when a few friends from my hometown came to visit Mt. Pleasant for the weekend. This same group had been making the seven-hour one-way trip a couple times a year ever since I was a freshman. They would spend a few days away in a college town before returning to their 9-5 jobs in welding shops and auto garages. I enjoyed the visits, welcoming them whenever they wanted to come.

These were some of my closest friends from my high school years, the guys I played hockey with while growing up and later went to parties with on weekends. They didn't always understand my new group of college friends—who liked playing bongos and didgeridoos while wearing tie-dyes, and preferred hikes in Mother Nature over 4-wheeling through her. Still, the two sets of friends always intermingled, their differing perspectives on the world rarely clashing.

They all enjoyed a good party, and that's what was planned for the weekend—hang out and have fun, with everyone indulging in varying degrees of intoxication.

During their last night in town, a relatively small gathering took place at my apartment. We had gone to bigger parties the previous couple of nights, wandering on frat row and bouncing between house parties, and decided to stay closer to home. Maybe a dozen or so people were there, with several of us tripping, while others just sat around smoking dope or drinking beers.

One of my friends from my hometown, who had joined the Air Force and was just getting ready to ship out for basic training, took mushrooms for the first time. Like my roommate Chuck, he was one of just a few of my friends back then who preferred drinking to drugs. Earlier that weekend he had commented on how surprised he was that "this drug shit" could take all day. By that, he meant the phone calls and waiting on people involved with the process of acquiring a bag. He never realized the effort it took sometimes to coordinate such things.

That night, while sitting at my kitchen table during his first psychedelic experience, he kept looking at an upside-down pack of orange one-and-a-quarter Zig-Zags trying to figure out what they were. "Daz Diz?" he kept

repeating. Finally, someone acknowledged him and his confusion, deciphering the code for him by flipping over the pack of rolling papers. His perception had been altered a little bit at least, even if the doors remained mostly bolted shut. He kept his head down on the table, resting it in his arms for most of the remainder of the night.

A little later another friend from home, someone we always called by his last name, Sprenkle, sat on my knee for a few seconds, laughing. I quickly pushed him off, trying my best to laugh it off. Usually, this would have been simple enough. I had been good friends with Sprenkle ever since he had moved to my hometown in middle school. This type of goofy, somewhat obnoxious behavior wasn't that out of the ordinary.

While tripping, though, actions and communication sometimes take on greater meaning or significance than they normally would. Something that wouldn't bother you in the least while sober can have a profound effect on one's mood while under the influence of psychedelics. I'm not sure how much more receptive we are with regards to interpreting the intentions of others by their nonverbal cues while in such states, but at the time it certainly seems like you are able to. Even if some of this is misinterpretation,

you don't perceive it as such in the moment. What you feel and what you think has a degree of certainty to it. Later, you may look back and wonder how you could ever be convinced of some of the things you thought you knew for certain, but while tripping there remains no doubt.

At least this was my experience while using these drugs. I know that I often had a more introspective experience than many of my friends. While they were content to laugh and joke around, I often felt like I was on a path of self-discovery.

The vibe that surrounded this one simple action—my friend sitting on my knee—led me to have feelings of insecurity and doubt. The looks I felt I was getting and the whole tone of the conversation seemed to perpetuate this growing suspicion. I began to wonder if my old friends were getting the wrong impression about me and my college friends. *Do they think we were a bunch of fags?* I wondered, too young and clueless to think anyway but in the derogatory. Finally, in that moment that seems to halt the music and stop all sound in an otherwise active room, I loudly declared, "I'm not fucking gay." These four words would create a ripple effect that changed how I viewed the world for quite some time.

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Instead of having the convincing affect I had hoped it would, my declaration had the opposite effect. My friends, most, if not all, of whom probably weren't all the concerned about my sexual orientation beforehand, now were left wondering where this outburst had come from. Things became more muddled and confusing as I tried explaining myself while irrationally reading too much into my friends' intentions. Was the whole point of their trip to Mt. Pleasant to see if I was gay? Why had Sprenkle sat on my knee? What the hell was going on? The enjoyable atmosphere of tripping around a group of people I liked and trusted shifted to one filled with paranoia and doubt. The fine line dividing the ecstasy and agony in my psychedelic experiences had been crossed yet again.

The reverberations continued out from there. I had opened myself up to having my sexuality questioned for the first time. It didn't help that I was still a virgin who kept this fact a closely guarded secret. I had always hid this from even my closest friends because it felt like something I should be embarrassed about.

Being a twenty-year-old virgin wasn't that horribly uncommon. In fact, one of my roommates from my freshman

year, Chuck, was one too. Unlike me, though, Chuck readily admitted to the fact, telling everyone he was saving himself for marriage because of his religious beliefs. Looking back, I think things would have been a lot simpler if I'd just been willing to acknowledge my own inability to get laid.

It also didn't help that one of my best friends in Mt. Pleasant thought that these events would serve as a catalyst for him to express his own closeted homosexuality. No one seemed overly surprised, but I hadn't realized he was gay. With years of perspective, it shouldn't have come as much of shock. He wasn't the most masculine dude and he had refused the advances of more than one pretty girl at parties. Back then, though, this just wasn't something I even considered. This was in the mid-'90s, back before Ellen or the passing of same-sex marriage laws, when pro athletes wouldn't have ever considered coming out of the closet. Homosexuality was still taboo, not nearly as widely accepted as it is today. I'd never had to confront it before, especially in my small, isolated hometown where expressions outside the norm weren't commonplace.

Even then, it never really bother me that my friend was gay. I just felt the pressure of being viewed as guilty by association. I had already signed a lease to live with

him the following school year. His coming out combined with our close friendship and those four words seemed to have all my friends whispering and wondering about me behind my back.

The night before leaving on the spring break trip to Maryland, I again took psychedelic drugs (I'm not sure if it was LSD, "magic" mushrooms, or mescaline that night—all of which would have been a possibility at the time), this time with a different group of friends at the apartment of a kid we called Troll. Davis had become friends with Troll after being kicked out of our original dormitory, and I had gotten to know him through Davis. He was small, wiry guy who liked the nickname Troll because it gave him anonymity while he sold drugs. He figured that if no one knew his real name, he was less likely to get busted.

We had gathered at his apartment that night at the beginning of spring break, hoping to have some fun while other students departed for places like Fort Lauderdale or Lake Havasu. Some of my friends had warned me not to trip again before going on my own spring break trip, but I didn't listen. By then, everybody had heard about what I'd said a few nights before. It felt like my every action and

reaction was being evaluated that night. My sexuality had been placed on trial.

When a couple of girls stopped by the apartment to see what we were doing, I innocently responded, "Nothing. Just hanging out playing some video games." I felt everyone's eyes turn to interrogate me, as if my intention was to scare off our female visitors with my less than exciting reply.

When they left a little later, no one blamed me—not verbally at least. Still, I could sense an element of tension in the air, the heightened awareness that I hadn't said the right thing to keep the girls from leaving. I realized then that everything I said or did would be scrutinized for any hint of lacking manliness for a while.

The next morning, me, Doof (the roommate from my freshman year that had since evolved from a preppy into a hippie), and a girl named Shelly prepared to leave on our trip out east. Originally, the plan had involved only Doof and me, but Shelley got invited along after my four-word flare-up. I'm not even sure how the idea for this trip evolved. I think we just wanted to get out of Mt. Pleasant for a few days and started talking about taking a drive. We didn't really have a particular destination in mind, other than my

desire to visit a resort town in Maryland. Some friends that I had worked with at the security job the previous summer had told me about it. They had lived there for a while and I wanted to tell them I'd been there when I saw them again.

That morning, Berg, my friend in the process of coming out of the closet, got into the backseat of my Cutlass, the vehicle we were using for the trip. I think he hoped I was actually gay so we could come out of the closet together. Shelley, a short brunette hippie chick who I had known since our freshmen year, asked if he was actually coming with. This would make an uncomfortable ride, both physically and socially, even that much more difficult. Somehow I made it clear that we wouldn't be adding a fourth rider to our travel plans. When someone asked if anyone needed a Xanax, Berg quickly accepted.

The ride out to Maryland was similarly chaotic. While Doof drove and Shelley tried to navigate, I sprawled across the backseat, trying to recoup the sleep I'd lost the night before. On occasion, sleep came, only to be interrupted by a sudden shift of the steering wheel or an excessive use of the brake pedal. I started to wonder if they were trying to keep me awake on purpose. Was this another glimpse into

the deepening paranoia that would come to permeate my mindset by the end of the trip, or were they actually hoping to keep me sleep-deprived with my nerves raw and emotional? I think I know, but I'm still not certain.

After one of these abrupt shifts caused by Doof's erratic driving, I awakened to them apparently snorting something. I think they told me it was Ritalin to appease me. I hadn't yet ingested any drugs up my nose at that point in my life, knowing I liked drugs too much to try substances as addictive as coke.

Like many of the events from that trip, this memory remains hazy. I know it happened, but I'm unsure of the actual sequence of things or how it fits in the greater context of the story. It feels as if many of these memories are still shots in a picture album, vivid in their intensity of the moment yet lacking the clarity of cohesiveness. Part of this might be the fact that all this happened half a lifetime ago, but it might also illustrate my deteriorating mental state. Lack of sleep and excessive use of psychedelics counted to accelerate the fraying of my nerves. Instead of participating in a cross-country trip with no plans for lodging and little hope for any proper rest, I should have been spending the weekend in bed. The

longer the trip went on, the more erratic and confused my thinking became.

When I've struggled with my mental health at other times in my life, I would experience similar patches of spotty memory. I wouldn't liken these instances of memory lapses to those of the famous fictional accounts of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, despite the elixirs that seemed to precipitate their arrival. It wasn't as if I was turning into a beast that couldn't be controlled.

Instead, these periods of my life feel more like one long extended night of excessive drinking, where certain things fade into the background and are only recalled when someone reminds me about them. The feeling of intoxication isn't there, but the longer this mental state continued, the harder it was to clearly define what actually happened. The pieces start to become jumbled or missing and you begin to wonder if you're trying to build a puzzle without all of the edges.

After another jarring awakening during the drive out east, I discovered that we weren't on the path I thought we should be travelling. Doof had changed our agenda, planning a new route while I slept. He wanted to go to Woodstock, New York, the site of the original mass hippie

happening. I insisted on Ocean City. The first fissure of tension between us dissipated when he agreed to head to Maryland.

Before leaving Mt. Pleasant I had made it clear that Ocean City, Maryland, was the one place I wanted to go. The three friends I'd met while working the security job in my hometown had told me it was a pretty cool town. They described a boardwalk filled with sunshine and a nightlife that sounded appealing.

Their descent into addiction to crack cocaine led them to flee Ocean City, back to the safer area in the U.P. where they had grown up because hard drugs were less accessible there. These friends were candid with me about their drug use, telling me never to try crack, saying how easy it was to get hooked. I listened, avoiding it, as well as other drugs people warned me about, like heroin and meth.

I never saw any of these three friends again. My hope of telling them I had been to Ocean City never materialized, as our paths never crossed. If they had, I could have told those guys that my time in Ocean City had been nearly as destructive as their own.

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After driving through the night, we arrived in this unimpressive coastal town as the mid-morning sun finished drying the rain from an overnight storm. We spent a couple hours wandering around, looking in different head shops and thrift stores, walking down the town's lengthy boardwalk. During the early spring season the town was still relatively unpopulated, with the summer surge of vacationers yet to overwhelm the area. The sight of us, with our long hair and beards, bell-bottoms and tie-dyes, must have given the resort town's occupants a flashback to the '60s.

I know I was wearing one of only two tie-dyed shirts that I ever really like to wear. One of these was a Grateful Dead shirt I bought to try impressing Alyssa. The other, I liked to wear whenever I was tripping. This one was light blue with swirls of white running through it, as if reflecting the sky on a cloudy day. If you looked closely into the patches of "clouds" on the front of the shirt, Jerry Garcia's face poked through with the line "let there be songs to fill the air" from the song "Ripple" written across the bottom. I remember one friend of mine (he had been at Troll's apartment that night before we left for Ocean City) seeing Jerry's face and the line from the

Grateful Dead song for the first time when we were tripping one night. He apologized for having not properly respected the shirt before.

At one point, while we walked along the boardwalk, a group of young guys starting whistling and catcalling to us. Shelley said, "Will one of you two turn around please?" We both did, and when those guys saw they had been trying to chase down a couple of dudes they turned to head back the other way.

Along that same boardwalk Doof and Shelley first tried telling me that it wasn't just Berg, that in fact everyone was gay. As we wandered down worn wooden planks that thousands of people passed along every year, the two of them pointed out the absurdity of some of the couples we passed, some arguing, others clearly mismatched. They used two of our other friends, guys who I would never have expected, as examples of individuals who had accepted their sexual identity. They thought when I spoke out that previous week at the party that I had been trying to do the same.

We had all dropped acid early that day. It wasn't as powerful as the stuff I had taken with Alyssa the summer before, not causing the type of visual hallucinations I

experienced then. Still, the overwhelming nature of what they were trying to convince me of caused an introspective examination common to the drug.

What I remember most about that day in Ocean City is sitting on the beach trying to process the idea of mass homosexuality. Could this actually be the world's deepest, most hidden secret? Was it something we tried to hide even from ourselves? Were we just perpetuating this universal joke by breeding and passing it on to the following generations? If true, where did this lead the eventual fate of mankind? Was I partaking in this dark paradox? While I curled my toes in the sand, these types of questions swirled through my mind.

I'm not sure to what extent, but I know Kurt Cobain's lyrics must have influenced my friends' perspective. His suicide a few years early had elevated him into the realm of rock god, alongside the likes of Jim Morrison and Jimi Hendrix. Some people were analyzing and scrutinizing Nirvana's lyrics the way people did with The Beatles a generation before. Every word Cobain sang seemed to have a hint of prophecy or hidden meaning behind it.

"All Apologies" was the last song on the last album released by Nirvana before he killed himself. Many viewed

it as a suicide note of sorts. Was the line, "What else should I say, everyone is gay?" meant to be taken literally or was it some type of metaphor? Clearly, my friends, or whoever influenced their opinion, were not taking the lyrics allegorically.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of self-examination that still left me doubting their assertion, I looked at Doof and asked him, "You are too?" He was one of my best friends at the time, someone I frequently referred to as "the coolest man alive." I could understand and accept Berg being gay, and our other two friends that they had used as examples didn't faze me that much either, but I was having serious trouble rationalizing the idea of Doof being gay too.

He seemed so naturally at ease around the opposite sex, having a quality that girls instantly gravitated towards. If he was gay then maybe what they were saying was true. Maybe the whole damn human race was doomed and headed for extinction. I don't remember if Doof ever gave me a direct answer to my question. It was more of a mumble, then a look away.

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At some point during that day on the beach, the first in a series of seemingly unusual occurrences took place. After repeatedly rejecting their summation on sexuality, I stood a little ways off from where they were discussing how to proceed. Clearly, the day hadn't gone as they had planned. Instead of convincing me of this extreme belief, they had only exposed others who wished to keep their sexual preference personal. How would things be handled once we returned to Mt. Pleasant?

They exchanged looks of worry and whispered to one another. When Shelley made a motion to her wrist I looked up and told them, "I don't like Mandy." They both stared at me with shocked confusion. I had somehow managed to reference the girl they were mutually wondering about me being interested in by this rather random physical motion. Despite my attempts to explain and dismiss the incident, Shelley placed special importance on it, continuing to reference it when things got even weirder later on.

That evening, we set up a blanket on a remote part of the beach and drank a few beers. Doof was nervous, worrying that the cops would come hassle us. Shelley seemed to share his unease. I realized then that neither of my

friends had ever been cool outside of Mt. Pleasant. Back there, they were the hip kids who others looked up to, or at least tried to associate with. Outside of that safe area, though, they didn't know how to act. They hadn't gone to parties in high school, didn't know how to relax outside of that environment. I tried telling them not to be paranoid as I popped the top on a fresh Sam Adams.

Sometime after the day turned into dusk, Shelley said, "Come sit closer." I instantly reacted, going to sit by her side. Only later, looking back, would I realize the invitation had been intended for Doof.

At the time, I thought Shelley was dating a guy named Rob, who I liked to call Rob Zombie because of his long dreadlocked hair and propensity for wearing strange hats. I later realized that their relationship was, in fact, a cover for Rob, who shared in, and may have helped perpetuate, the "everyone is gay" philosophy.

In the meantime, Doof and Shelley were maintaining a hidden sexual relationship, something I grasped only after Doof refused to leave me and Shelley alone. The tension between Doof and I grew throughout the remainder of the trip as we seemed to be vying for her attention and affection. Little things, like the choice of pizza toppings or the ability to read into unspoken actions,

carried what felt like monumental significance. Every word, both spoken and left unsaid, contained a gravity of importance that kept mounting. As things went on, I began to see everything from what I thought was a cosmic level. Thoughts of death, disease, and the end of the human race began to churn in my head.

The sequence of events again starts to shift and become fuzzy. I'm not sure if the snapshots are in the correct order or if they've been shuffled somehow. I know we spent part of that first night on the beach before going back to the car once it began raining. It was there in the car that I realized that Shelley and Doof were more than just friends when he refused to take a walk and leave us alone in the car. He tried to play it off, saying he wouldn't let that happen because he was friends with Rob. Later, while they thought I was asleep in the backseat, I heard him complain to her about being excited by my move to sit closer to her. The jealousy made their relationship obvious. The secrecy and lying about it became one more thing that caused tension between us.

Sometime the following day, after being trapped in the car with nowhere to go during what felt like a colossal coastal

storm, we decided to check into a cheap motel, despite our dwindling budget. I believe that is where I first told them I had AIDS. I don't remember the exact context or the reason behind telling them this, only that at the time it felt completely necessary. Somehow, my mind rationalized that having contracted an incurable disease was better than being a virgin, or being gay. When I later admitted that I wasn't dying, I explained that I only lied when I had to. At that time, I felt as though I had a superior set of morals to my friends, who seemed to have been lying and manipulating things ever since we had left Mt. Pleasant.

I also recall a black man commenting on the Bob Marley hat I was wearing as we crossed on the stairwell outside our motel. The hat had a large burn hole from a cigarette, and I perceived the man's positive acknowledgement of this as a sign that he agreed with my stance on homosexuality. I can't adequately explain why I felt this way, but I have a distinct recollection of knowing that this man understood why I couldn't agree with my friends on everyone being gay.

The irrationality of these moments stand out now, but back then I felt so convinced of everything. The lingering effects of not properly coming down from my LSD trip had left me in a highly suggestive state where just hearing

certain things mentioned or alluded to could send me down a whole tangent of convoluted thought. All of the talk about sexuality had left my mind fixated on the subject. I am certain the man's comment about my hat had nothing to do with sexuality, but at that moment everything was shaded by that perspective.

At some point earlier in the trip, I had realized that Doof had stolen CDs out of my dorm room the previous year. He had slowly pilfered a disc here and there, taking ones he didn't think I'd miss, and selling them at a local record store. When I finally noticed that parts of my music collection were missing, I loudly espoused to anyone that would listen how much I hated liars and thieves. I went back to the record store and repurchased some of the discs that had been stolen. I blamed a friend of my roommate Chuck, someone who had been caught stealing in another dorm room.

How I came to comprehend that Doof was the actual thief during the trip remains unclear. I know that after that day on the beach ethics and morality became a focus of the trip. At times, I felt as though I was having to defend my higher moral standing, and not just in areas of sexuality. While at a Pizza Hut they tried to plan a dine-

and-dash before I refused and paid the bill. There lingers in my mind talk about how you could roll joints out of pages from the Bible because of the thin quality of the paper, and how this made me feel squeamish even though we never tried it.

At some point, Doof's tendency to pocket things that weren't his came to light. I don't remember how or why, but I distinctly recall him showing me a glasses case that he admitted to having taken from his mother. The snapshot that remains is his look of personal disgust in what he had done glowering on a face that had so often carried a carefree smile.

I don't know how I knew about the CDs but I know it wasn't something Doof would just tell me about. There were these moments of intuition reoccurring throughout the trip. It got to the point where Shelley wanted to know how I could know some of this stuff. I just told her acid made you smart, along with chess and intro to logic.

These moments of insight were something that Doof and Shelley kept inquiring about. At times, like on the beach when I knew they were thinking about Mandy and later with the exposure of Doof's stealing, it seemed like I knew things I shouldn't be able to know. These aren't the best

examples, but they are the ones that come to mind. What I do remember is their feeling that I had an ability to see through things to get to the truth of the matter, a special sense or talent for reading into people's intentions. When questioned about it I just repeatedly told them that "playing chess made you smart" and to "take a course in logic."

These may not have been the best answers, but they were what was fresh in my mind. I had only recently started playing chess, and the game seemed to be a fixation with me then. It opened up pathways of thinking I hadn't believed possible, or so it seemed. The low level Philosophy course had awakened similar aspirations for the intellect. I doubt either really had much of an effect on the way I was thinking, but it felt like it at the time.

I also commented on how taking psychedelics gave you special insight into things. I believed then, and still do to some degree, that these drugs could open avenues of the brain that made you more receptive to comprehending your surroundings. They also make you susceptible to believing you understand things better than you actually do. As the days went on, my thoughts started to grow more delusional, more concerned with matters beyond my control. Instead of trying to cope with my friends and our problems at hand, I

began thinking I could solve all of the world's problems by myself. I distinctly remember saying later on—when we were already on the way home and I had lost any hold on reality—that we should all take acid and try to figure out the Book of Revelations sometime.

Sometime before that (did we leave the motel for some reason? was it the following day? it all starts to blend together), Doof decided he was sick of being the one doing all the driving, especially since we were in my vehicle. By this time, my nerves had already started to fray. The days of little sleep and overstressed drug use had begun to have their effect on me. I didn't belong behind the wheel of an automobile, but I agreed to drive anyway. I didn't realize that the brakes were almost completely shot, even though Doof must have warned me about them (or did he?).

I do remember that it was at night and on a city street with two lanes heading in the same direction (were we even still in Ocean City or had we moved on already? I'm not sure). The car in front of me hit their brakes and by the time I reacted and attempted to stop, the brakes didn't have nearly enough power to work in time. Our tires screeched and we rear-ended the other car—HARD. Instantly, both Shelley and Doof told me to keep going. I listened,

pulling into the other lane and speeding away from the accident. The other car didn't move. *How badly are they hurt?* I wondered. *Have I killed someone?* Panic pulsed through me as I burned through red lights, blindly disregarding the threat of oncoming traffic. How we didn't get into another accident, I'll never know.

"Now I'm paranoid," I told them when I was finally able to put the car into park.

Maybe it wasn't until after the accident that we got the motel room. Or did we get a different one that night? I know we didn't sleep in the car. After driving far enough away that we felt safe that it wouldn't be spotted, we parked the car where only the backend could be seen. Or did we park it the other way to hide the license plate? So many of these little details remain muddy.

I do recall the waves of fear and paranoia that rippled through me like never before though. In some ways, I can see the point of fleeing the accident. Most of the drugs we had brought with from Mt. Pleasant had to be used up by then, but I'm sure we still had some pot and a pipe on us. Besides, one look at the frantic state I was in and any officer would have hauled us into jail for questioning. Still, the emotional and mental strain of worrying about

what would happen to me if the cops showed up just added to my ever-decreasing ability to properly process information.

Who knows, maybe somebody had seen my license plate number and called it in, I thought. It felt like only a matter of time before they found me. Why had I ever listened to them and fled in the first place? The divide between us continued to expand. This trip, which had ceased being any fun long ago, had become torturous.

The following morning we found a garage that could get the brake work done that day, at an accelerated price I'm sure. As we sat outside the garage waiting in the sun, Doof told a story about getting stranded in similar situation while on a road trip in high school. "Yeah, we weren't supposed to have my parents' car, but luckily my friend's dad paid to get it fixed," he said in closing.

Hearing this I started to cry and went to throw away the paperwork I was holding. *Somehow the bill is getting paid, I thought. I wouldn't have use the money I'd set aside to pay for the dealer training I would be starting at the new Soaring Eagle Casino after spring break.*

"No, you can't throw that away," Doof said, stopping me before I stuffed the check I had written out into the

trash can. "We need that to pay the bill." Confused I handed it over.

This is one of the more vivid examples I have of how fragile my mental state had become. Everything seemed to leave me on verge of an angry outburst or shedding tears. The fraying that had begun earlier had turned into a complete unraveling. It was only a matter of time before my nerves were stretched too far.

Sensing a collapse, they decided we should start back towards Michigan as soon as the vehicle was fixed. With Doof and Shelley now trading turns behind the wheel, I returned to my spot in the backseat. Becoming more manic with each passing mile, my thoughts grew steadily more irrational and illogical.

At some point earlier in the trip, I became convinced that some of my friends in the U.P. had AIDS. This stemmed from stupid small town rumors that had been spread in a slanderous way about people having the disease. When I told Doof and Shelley that I thought these friends would be happier living in Mt. Pleasant, Doof told me to please keep them away from us.

Part of this gossip included my friend Alyssa. During the drive home I called her to ask if she "had something."

She told me yes. I assumed she meant AIDS, which obviously wasn't true. I told her I did too, referring to my virginity I guess.

By then, I was starting to believe the whole world would soon be dying from the epidemic. This was only a few years after "Magic" Johnson had announced to the world that he had contracted the HIV virus. It may seem ludicrous now, but at the time there was certainly a greater fear of the disease than there is today. That said, my belief that it was spreading throughout the population was far from rational.

My thought patterns would continue to get even more sporadic and less sane as we went along. I began to feel my place in the universe had an exponentially increasing importance. At first, I thought I had the ability to make road signs disappear. By the time we reached home, I felt like some type of savior sent to repopulate the earth while all the gay men tore down the manmade distractions polluting our environment.

Doof and Shelley did little to ease my anxiety and mounting grandiose delusions. In fact, they may have helped perpetuate them. Only after a call made to Rob, Shelley's supposed boyfriend, did the idea of being a Christ-like figure enter into my mindset. They called him

at the same rest area that I called Alyssa. Sometime after that, I remember bolting awake in the backseat to ask Doof why he hadn't told me he was Jesus Christ. I'm almost certain he responded by saying, "I'm not. You are." Did my friends actually believe I was some type of messiah? Or was it Rob's idea to plant this seed, a means to keep me from exposing his sexuality, as well as the others Shelley and Doof had told me about?

Shortly before this, Doof and Shelley were trying to get through a toll booth by saying they didn't have the money to pay for it. For some reason, I remember the toll being something ridiculously expensive, like six dollars or more. Again, I think I had been half-asleep in the back. Doof tried to explain that we were broke and couldn't pay the toll. He asked if they wanted us to turn around and go back. When I finally realized what was going on, I told them to check the glove box, where I'd been throwing change throughout the trip. Somehow, the amount in the glove box exactly equaled the price of the toll. I'm not sure if it was Doof or Shelley, but one of them said, "What the hell is going on here?"

I remember telling them to talk to Troll about it because I felt he was the one person who could sort it all out. I know it wasn't all just in my head. There was

something going on during that trip that I'll never be able to properly explain, or understand.

When we got back to Mt. Pleasant, they gave me Nyquil to try getting me to sleep. I may have dosed briefly, but was up rambling again shortly after. My mind had been thrown into a full-blown manic state.

Eventually, Doof would call my sister to come get me. She had graduated from CMU with a major in psychology, but her studies hadn't properly prepared her for my condition. After trying to calm me, she called the hospital for advice. I believe, they recommended some type of shot to help me sleep. A friend of hers named Ray, a man who would later be her boyfriend and then my boss, came to drive us to the hospital.

I remember telling my sister that he was gay. When she tried to apologize to him, I said, "But just look at him. He's obviously fucking gay."

In the end, I would spend three weeks in the psych ward of the Mt. Pleasant hospital trying to piece things together, wondering who and what to believe. The doctors would diagnose my condition as drug-induced psychosis. They warned my family that I may never come down. There was

reason to believe that I might just be another acid casualty, like Acid Andy swatting at flies on the corner in my hometown.

During this time period I was pretty heavily medicated most of the time. The things I remember most are falling asleep while trying to watch a game of the NCAA Basketball tourney, singing the parental advisory version of the lyrics to the song "Signs" during a group sing along, and thinking the pregnant exercise lady was my sister—much like I'd see my dad and grandma in the turnkeys at the jail later on.

Later, when I had recovered and had control of myself again, my mom told me that when I was in the hospital my eyes had reminded her of father's when he was in a similar frame of mind. "You just looked vacant and not yourself," she explained.

Reentry

*Cover Me
Cover me
When I walk alone
Cover me
When my stance it stumbles home
Cover me
We'll trip on through the sands of time
And cover me
'Cause I've been branded
I've lost my mind
Lost my mind
But you'll cover me yeah
Won't you give me
Shelter from the storm*

Candlebox
-Cover Me

After getting released from the hospital, I struggled to reestablish the life I had beforehand. After missing almost a month of school, I would have to take incompletes in all my courses. Most people didn't know how to act around me anymore, or maybe I didn't know how to act around them. An awkward tension seemed to exist everywhere I went for quite some time.

Some things did stay the same, though, like my family continuing to give me more love and support than I probably deserved. If anything, my time spent in the hospital had drawn us even closer, especially me and my sister. She had graduated from Central with a degree in psychology and

child development, but was still living in Mt. Pleasant working at a day care.

While I was on the fourth floor, Katherine cleaned my apartment, scrubbing the Day-Glo paint from my bedroom wall, and washing all of my clothes. She left all of my shirts neatly folded inside my dresser, with the tie-dyes tucked away at the bottom. She had placed more conservative clothes on top, obviously hoping for a shift in my priorities after going through such an ordeal. The Jerry Garcia shirt wouldn't stay hidden away for long, though, as I resumed taking psychedelic drugs again periodically before long. Sometimes, when I tripped out really hard, the old grandiose beliefs would resurface. I wouldn't take psychedelics nearly as often anymore, but when I did I preferred to be alone or in the company of only a few close friends.

I also went right back to smoking pot on pretty much a daily basis—what the doctors would have called “self-medicating.” I tried to take the medications prescribed to me for a while, but I never cared for their effects. They left me feeling blasé and not myself. I was starting to understand why my father continually waivered on taking his pills for all those years. I feared that the doctors would want to keep me on pharmaceuticals long-term too.

I remember having to visit a psychiatrist a few times after leaving the hospital, but this didn't last long. Seeing quick improvement in my condition, he agreed that the episode was most likely just drug related and allowed me to discontinue taking the prescription drugs. Or maybe I just quit going to see him and stop taking them on my own. Everything still remains a little fuzzy from back then.

My friendships with Doof and Shelley continued, but I would never be as close with either of them as I had been before our journey out east. While I was in the hospital, my family tried finding where I gotten the LSD from. My sister was especially angry with Doof, who she had known since I'd lived with him my freshman year. I think she hoped to prosecute whoever had given me the drugs, which she blamed entirely for my mental state. Even in my impaired condition I knew enough to lie and say we'd bought it off some guy in Ocean City.

I would have an even more difficult time trying to reintegrate into the larger circle of what I considered my hippie friends. I knew some of them pretty well, but there were a lot that I had never been very close to. I had always been more of a fringe member of this group anyway, never accepting the hippie label when it was applied to

myself. Still, I thought of most of these people as my friends. At the time, I wanted to be accepted as one of them again, made to feel as though I belonged. This desire wouldn't last.

I went to a house party one sunny afternoon later that same spring. It couldn't have been more than a couple weeks after getting out of the hospital because school was still in session and my breakdown was still fresh in everybody's frontal lobes. Everything was cool for a while—just hanging out, drinking a few beers, kicking the hacky sack around while people lounged about enjoying one of those days that makes you feel like summer has returned.

It was a pretty solid day, until a few guys, whose names I must have known then but have long since forgotten, got a little too much of a buzz on. A couple comments about sex and AIDS led to references to my delusional thinking. My face darkened as eyes darted my way before quickly looking away. The same dudes who used to complement me on my Pantera and Black Crowes t-shirts were now mocking me with jokes about what condoms were for. Doof had the decency to shuffle me off on a walk to the nearest party store, reminding me along the way that things were probably going to be a little different now.

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I didn't really hang out with large groups from that circle too much after that. Doof would stop by on Sundays to watch the Packers and smoke my pot. I went to see Shelley when I needed to buy a bag. I did honor my lease with Berg, though, deciding that maintaining my friendship with him was more important than what narrow-minded people might think about me for being his roommate.

Of all the people who I knew as students at Central Michigan University, he is one of only five that I am still in contact with today. We don't talk as much as we should, but I admire him more than I can convey and am glad he was my friend so he could teach me how to properly respect individuals with alternative lifestyles. My understanding and compassion has greatly evolved since those early days of having my own sexuality questioned, and I owe most of that to him.

I haven't seen Berg in well over a decade. I was trying to cope with a second instance of drug-induced psychosis the year he got married and couldn't attend. Actually, that's a bit of a copout. By the time of he and his spouse Ryan's ceremony, I had myself well enough put back together to go to a wedding. I just wasn't prepared to go to a same-sex wedding. Back then, I still felt quite

a bit of anxiety and trepidation when dealing with the topic of homosexuality. I guess I still do to a point.

Not that I didn't (or don't) accept my friend and his lifestyle choice. I have been a long advocate of the belief that you should support anyone to do whatever makes them happy in life as long it doesn't infringe on the wellbeing of others. I hope people extend me the same courtesy. It's just that ever since that trip out to Ocean City I've had a major short circuit in my synapses when it comes to the word gay. I have never felt completely comfortable discussing matters of sexuality ever since then. Maybe writing about it after all these years will finally allow me to confront these feelings of tension I have towards the topic.

The importance placed on the people you know when you're twenty is like the lingering effects of that first heartbreak. At the time, you think these are the friends you will have for the rest of your life. Only later do you realize that they may not be the best friends you'll ever have, they were only the ones there when you took your first ride without the training wheels of life. They might have been kind enough to help you back up after your first

spill, but they damn sure weren't wise enough to keep you from getting back on the bike.

While I drifted away from Doof, Shelley, and that group of friends, I started hanging out with Davis again. He had returned to CMU that fall after living back in his hometown for a year, and was sharing an apartment with Troll in the same complex Berg and I lived in. This is the time period where Davis and I really became the friends we are today. We had been close during our first two years at school, but I was probably better friends with Doof up until our spring break trip. During that school year, I spent time around Davis, Troll, and Troll's girlfriend Stephanie just about every day.

By then, I was much more of a pot smoker than a drinker. In fact, even on my 21st birthday, my sister and friends got drunk while I stayed relatively sober. I remember sitting in a little dive bar in downtown Mt. Pleasant wondering why I had even gone out for my birthday. I would have been much happy just sitting home getting high.

Part of my aversion to alcohol was not wanting to live like my father. Having experienced my mental collapse had allowed me insight to what he had to deal with on a daily

basis. I didn't want to use alcohol as a means of coping like he did. Of all of the things in life, being an alcoholic who drank daily is what I didn't want to be the most. The stigma of mental illness was something I'd never considered until I had to deal with people viewing me differently after leaving the hospital. My father's constant struggles were now something I could relate to.

He would die the August after my spring break collapse, but during that summer Katherine and I were closer to him than ever before. We shared an apartment that summer, getting a chance to talk with him on the phone frequently. It seemed that our relationship with our dad was just starting to blossom, we were finally getting old enough to accept him despite his flaws.

I'm not sure if he ever even knew I was hospitalized. I know that when my mom told my grandma about it, she asked my mom if she thought I'd been drinking beer. I remained a relative angel in my grandmother's eyes until the day she died.

I have always felt thankful for having had that summer to better come to terms with my dad. I wish we had been given longer to really understand one another, but at least we had that summer. If I hadn't have gone through what I did when I did, I would never have been able to comprehend

the years of social alienation he had to endure. I don't think I could have ever forgiven myself if he had died before I came to realize just how difficult his life had been since Vietnam.

Early that school year, shortly after my father's passing, Davis called to ask if I could meet him outside in a minute. "Sure, what's up bro?" I asked, hearing the stress in his voice.

"Nothing. Just grab your keys and meet me outside."

After hanging up the phone, I hurried to put on shoes and a coat, wondering what the problem could be. I thought maybe he was having problems with his girlfriend again. After spending the summer back home together, the distance between Central and Michigan State was proving difficult. When I got outside Davis was already rounding the corner between our two apartment buildings.

"We gotta run to the store."

"Ok. No prob." Davis hadn't turned twenty-one yet, and trips to the party store for him or Troll weren't all that uncommon. This didn't explain the urgency in his voice earlier though. "Come on. What's going on?"

"I'll tell you in the car. But you have to promise not to say a word to anyone."

"Of course."

"No seriously, man. No one."

I agreed as we got into my Cutlass and headed towards the store.

"Troll got popped," Davis said while watching to catch my reaction.

"What? Are you fucking serious?"

"Yep, some undercover just knocked on the door and I let him in thinking nothing of it. He looked like just a normal dude. The next thing I know the guy's searching the place and telling Troll he had sold to someone working for BAYANET."

Things started to sink in with the mention of the Michigan State Police's local drug enforcement division, the Bay Area Narcotics Enforcement Team. If they were involved, Troll was in some serious shit.

Davis made me promise not to even tell Troll he had told me about the bust. I kept this promise, acting as though I knew nothing about it until one day I found a piece of paperwork about it sitting on their coffee table. "You should be more careful about what you leave laying around," I told Troll, handing him the folded up pieces of paper.

When he realized what they were, his face became ashen. His usual gift for eloquent speech temporary lost, Troll stammered as he pleaded with me not to tell anyone. Again I agreed to keep silent about it, never explaining to Troll that I had known all along.

As part of a plea agreement, Troll would have to make a series of controlled buys while working as an informant for the cops. For every drug he been busted with (a list that included marijuana, mushrooms, and coke among other things), Troll had to turn over one person. I knew both of the people he ratted out for mushrooms and coke, but the one that was most difficult to accept was Shelley for the marijuana. I didn't know he would chose her as part of this process, but I had a suspicion he would. Part of me felt obligated to warn her, while another part of me didn't want to betray the trust of Troll and Davis. If I alerted Shelley, I would not only be breaking my promises to them, I'd be putting Troll in quite a bit of danger. People have never taken too kindly to narcs. In the end, I decided to act as if I never knew anything about any of it, feeling more than just a tinge of guilt when Shelley got in trouble.

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Troll would be struck with similar bouts of a guilty conscience. One day while walking home from class, I heard him holler my name, so I stopped as he hurried to catch up to me.

"So I just got done with this Philosophy class," he started after we exchanged greetings and continued walking towards our apartment complex. "And my professor said that some people believe that we're all born with souls, while others think that you have to earn one. What do you think?"

"I was always taught growing up that we all have a soul."

"I sure hope not," he responded as the wind blew fallen leaves and a Subway wrapper across the parking lot.

CaSINO

*I've seen the needle
and the damage done
A little part of it in everyone
But every junkie's
like a settin' sun.*

Neil Young
-The Needle and the Damage Done

"It's the only place you can work with sin right in the name," a guy named Brim told me when I first started working at the Soaring Eagle Casino. He was a big dude with a long goatee who worked as a server, running beers and cups of free soda to customers while they fed money into quarter slots or let their hours slip by playing blackjack. He may not have been the sayings originator, but I had never heard this witty remark before and I don't recall ever hearing it used by anyone else since. I've used variations on it sometimes, replacing the word "work" with "go", but few people seem that enthused by it. At least it hasn't caught on like the multitude of gambling clichés one might hear nightly in casinos across the world. Despite the popularity of time-honored blackjack "rules" like "Always split aces and eights" to the less helpful

"Winner, winner, chicken dinner", Brim's allusion to the sinfulness of casinos has always held more meaning to me.

Years later, when we both no longer worked at the Soaring Eagle, Brim would let me and my friends into Rubbles, the grimy bar where he worked as bouncer, without charging us cover. We went there to listen to live music, despite the place's musty basement smell and overpriced drinks. He was also a friend of Berg's, but other than that Brim doesn't fit into the overarching theme of this story. His words, though, implicating the overall immoral nature of casinos and gambling, do.

I'm not sure if it was in Rubbles or another one of Mt. Pleasant's not so clean or well-lit establishments that I told my friend Callie that working in a casino "warps your perspective." I'd known Callie since high school, and we had gotten to be good friends when she moved downstate to work at the Soaring Eagle as a box-person on the craps table. This supervisory position was a step up from jobs she'd held in other casinos in the U.P.

On that night, while overindulging in Crown Royal, I ignored Callie's claims that working in a casino was just another job, telling her, "How can anyone spend that much

time being besieged by desperation and cynicism and not have it affect them?"

This was one of the few times in the two decades that I've now know Callie that she ever got mad at me. I was making this argument only after I no longer worked at the casino. By then, I had become one of those pessimistic, all-too-frequent paying customers. It was during these last couple of years spent in Mt. Pleasant that I got firsthand experience of what it felt like to have your life spiral in on you because of gambling.

My first memory of participating in any form of gambling came at that little café called The Nite Owl back in my hometown. While eating another meal there with my dad, he bought me a couple of scratch off lottery tickets. I must have been a few years older than the first time seeing him there, the feeling of awkwardness with being around him isn't as distinct. I'm not sure if my grandmother accompanied us that day. If she did, I'm sure she disapproved of the lottery tickets.

For him, this was part of the appeal of doing things like this, trying to be the "cool" dad who bought or did things with his kids that the other adults in their lives might not approve of. Or maybe he was just a big kid

himself who never really learned how to be a parent.

Either way, my sister and I got to experience things that we normally wouldn't.

My dad took Katherine and me on a shopping spree to Toys "R" Us on one of our visits downstate, letting us fill a cart full of whatever toys we wanted. He also took us to see one of the Death Wish films when we were way too young. We lasted about ten minutes into the movie before he hauled us out of the theatre, demanding his money back. The manager refused, saying he never should have brought young kids into that type of movie in the first place.

Like the movie, the lottery tickets were probably ill-advised. One of them happened to be a winner. I don't remember how much, maybe twenty bucks at the most. He let me keep the money, though, and it felt like a huge amount at the time. I couldn't have been more excited. The money probably went to G.I. Joe guys or baseball cards.

I don't think this first exposure to games of chance in any way led to my problems with gambling later on. I'm quite certain that comes down to the way I'm wired, my self-destructive nature, but it does show how far back my contact to the world of gambling goes though.

Around the same time, I remember betting friends in my class packs of gum on Packers-Lions football games. When

the Packers lost the first time the two teams played that season I convinced my mom to buy me all the gum needed to pay off my debts. When the Packers beat the Lions later that same year, I don't think any of my friends paid me back the gum they had lost. We didn't bet on sports much again until we got older.

Throughout high school, one of my favorite things to do was play nickel-dime-quarter poker with my friends. We spent countless nights sitting up playing variations on the game that seemed fun at the time but that I probably couldn't tolerate now. These poker games, held either at my house or another friend's whose parents allowed us all to sleep over, often lasted until the sun started to turn the darkness of night into a softer shade of grey. Those of us who hadn't already lost the money from our change jars would then lumber our ways towards sleep, the big winner having made twenty or thirty dollars in change.

When I first started attending Central Michigan University I had never been inside a casino before. Well, other than the night spent at my senior lock-in. Every year, the small Native American casino in my hometown closed down a portion of the place to host an all-night party for the graduating class, with the hope of keeping kids from going

out drinking after graduation. Instead, they initiated us into the world of compulsive gambling. Actually, no real gambling was allowed at these events, only blackjack with fake chips, because the legal gambling age on the reservation being twenty-one back then. At the Soaring Eagle in Mt. Pleasant, though, you only had to be eighteen. I would take advantage of this difference on my first visit to CMU for freshmen orientation.

This first casino experience also occurred with my father, who had driven me the seven hours from my hometown for the weekend. My sister had just completed her sophomore year at Central, and was excited that her little brother would be joining her there in the fall. The drive down was supposed to be a chance for father and son to bond, to make up for some of the time we had missed out on while I was growing up. Instead, it became a test of nerves, who could endure the other the longest without making a scene. All along the trip, my dad kept wanting to stop at a bar for a beer to calm his nerves or a restaurant he been to years before with my mother, while I just wanted to get there as quickly as possible.

In the casino, our dad handed both me and my sister twenty bucks each to gamble with before bellying up to the bar. He had no interest in gambling, we'd just gone there

for something to do. Maybe my sister had taken us there because it was the biggest attraction in town. Or maybe I had wanted to go, having just turned eighteen the month before.

When I came back 45 minutes later with over a hundred dollars in chips, my dad immediately started bragging to the bartender about my skills as a card counter. Words like professional gambler were throw about. This couldn't have been further from the truth. I didn't even a clue about basic blackjack strategy, let alone counting cards. Still, in his loud, obnoxious voice that always made me want to shirk away from him, he continued to carry on, even as heads turned and began to stare.

On the verge of losing the test of nerves, I told him, "I'm gonna go look for Katie. I saw her over on a slot machine a little bit ago."

My dad barely acknowledged this weakly disguised attempt to escape his presence. He was too busy being a proud father in his own strange way. Instead of looking for my sister, I went to the cashier and turned the chips into cash. *Who knew gambling could be so easy?* I thought.

During my sophomore year, my roommates quickly realized that if I didn't show up at dinner time I had almost

unvaryingly went to the casino after my work study job at the Michigan Employment Security Commission (M.E.S.C). This job was usually reserved for veterans attending school on the G.I. Bill, but my sister and I also qualified because we were the dependents of a disabled vet. In addition to having our tuition paid for and access to this cushy office job, we also received a monthly check to help with room and board. It didn't make up for having my father so mentally scarred from the war that he couldn't function normally, but it did make the financial difficulties of attending college much more manageable.

I would work at the M.E.S.C. for my first two and half years in school, filing paperwork and answering the phone. The office served unemployed individuals looking for work, similar to what Michigan Works does now. It closed at five each day, and, when I had extra money, I often slipped out to the casino after work to play blackjack. This had begun my freshman year, but really escalated during my second year at CMU. It got to the point where my roommates were giving me shit about going out there too much. At the time, I had been doing good, going with forty or fifty dollars and leaving with a small profit rather consistently.

To prove to my roommates that I was winning more than I lost, I started a log on the back of my psychology class's notebook, meticulously calculating the amount won or lost after each trip out to the casino. About half way through that year, when the losses kept exceeding the wins, I quit keeping track.

When I first started gambling in Mt. Pleasant, the new casino and resort hadn't been built yet. Instead, the gaming operation was divided into two buildings, one housing just slot machines with the other containing mostly table games. The latter of the two, known simply as the card room, held over fifty blackjack tables in two divided rooms, one for smoking and the other non-smoking. Slot machines lined the outer walls of each room. With just a long hallway separating the two, even the non-smoking side developed a bit of haze on busy Saturday nights. The low ceilings and improper ventilation left you smelling like you had spent the night beside a campfire instead of inside a casino. The smell of cigarette smoke on your clothes made you want to leave them outside or bury them in the back yard.

Quite often on weekend evenings, a line would start to form outside the card room around dinnertime. If I

couldn't make it out there early enough, I usually didn't go. The idea of waiting in line to lose my money just felt too absurd.

Besides, the weekends were when the worst card players came out. The cocky drunken frat boys who split face cards and the little old ladies who hit 16 no matter what card the dealer had showing. These players always seemed to stack up chips while causing the rest of the players at the table to lose. I learned early on that blackjack was a team sport, and you almost always found better teammates on a Tuesday afternoon than a Friday night.

The recreational gamblers came out on the weekends. It took a certain kind of dedication to spend a sun-soaked fall afternoon indoors hoping the dealer would bust out their break cards. Waiting for that one good run of cards every gambler knows is waiting for them right around the corner, I let many sunny days slip into dreary evenings.

During my third year in Mt. Pleasant, I decided that it was probably in my best interest to get a job at the casino. If you worked there, you weren't allowed to gamble there. Not that my gambling had developed into a serious problem—yet. I just thought that if I was going to spend as much time inside of a casino as I was, I should at least be

getting paid for it. I also believed that dealing would help make me a better gambler because then I would know all of the tricks that gave the house the advantage.

I applied for a dealing position, having already worked as one for a summer at the casino in my hometown. After getting a call about a month later to come in for interview, I was hired along with a room full of other people. The new multimillion dollar complex was just about to open. It would draw gamblers in from all over the Lower Peninsula, and the tribe needed every employee they could find. All I had to do was pass a drug test and have my background check come back clean.

I had a couple of Minor in Possession of Alcohol tickets, but nothing serious on my record. The drug test was going to be more difficult. I had been smoking pot daily for the better part of the last two years. I tried cleaning out—quitting smoking for a couple weeks, drinking tons of water, and attempting just about any remedy someone told me about that helped you pass a piss test. The worst two were taking large doses of niacin, which made my skin red and blotchy if I didn't drink enough water, and a mixture of Squirt and vinegar that made me throw up all over my bathroom the morning of the test.

In the end, my piss would be too diluted from drinking too much water and I would have to take a second test. Having already started smoking again in between the time of the first test and the notification I needed to take a second test, I needed an alternative. I took my roommate Chuck's piss into the testing center in a Robitussin bottle, figuring it was just for a job, not court or anything like that.

After hearing back that I had passed both the piss test and my background check, I prepared to cross over to the other side of the table. I would be shifting from lowly customer to the one shuffling the cards. I would be the granter of luck's good fortune or the inevitable evener, the caretaker of house odds.

I missed my training group for the Soaring Eagle while I was in the hospital following my spring break trip. Luckily, the husband of a lady I worked with at my work study job was employed by the tribe and got me into another group. Having already dealt for that summer after my freshman year, combined with my gambling experience, gave me an advantage over some of the other trainees who were just learning the game. I still had to pay the \$400 training fee (money that had went towards my brakes while

in Ocean City), but the casino was nice enough to take it out of my first two paychecks instead of making me pay for it up front.

Because I was a new dealer, I spent a lot of time during that first summer working at the Soaring Eagle on the graveyard shift, going in at 12:30 at night and getting out at 8:30 in the morning. On many of those nights I would be left standing on a dead table without any customers for hours. While I stood there, probably with the same thousand-yard stare my dad got at times, I thought through the whole spring break trip over and over again, analyzing every moment and trying to understand what had happened. I don't think it made any more sense then than it does now.

I worked at the Soaring Eagle for over three years while slowly finishing up my degree from CMU, which I would finally finish in December of 2000, just weeks before finding Uncle Kaarlo on Christmas morning. During my time working at that casino, I did my best to distance myself from the clientele. Unlike most of co-workers, I didn't want to know the customers' names, preferring to keep them as part of the mass of nameless humanity that walked through the revolving doors every day.

For me, it was easier if they could be reduced to a number of caricatures my mind had established for them. There was the quiet guy whose face puckered in a sour grimace as if he were sucking on an eternal lemon and the chronic complainer who seemed to bitch even when he was winning. Another night it would be the drunk lady whose cackle sent shivers all through you from three tables away, or the kindly old-timer that you wished was your grandfather because his smile never seemed to fade even as he passed hundred dollar bill after hundred dollar bill across the table.

Only later, when I returned to dealing at a smaller casino in the U.P. did I realize that for many of the regular customers these places serve more than just the purpose of gambling, they are also a social outlet. It's their equivalent of Cheers, the place "where everybody knows your name." Some may come with their spouses, but for many it was where they went to feel the comfort of others, even if it meant losing money. Only then did I start making an effort to get to know the customers by name and on a more personal level.

In a casino as large as the Soaring Eagle, I didn't often deal to the same customers on regular basis. I might recognize some of them, but I didn't have to establish any

connection to them. Back in the U.P., I would see the same people several nights a week. How much of a social life can one have if they're inside a casino gambling almost every night of the week? These people wanted you to know their name, to ask about their kids and job. For some of them, that was why they were there.

My own trouble with gambling really began after I lost my job at the Soaring Eagle. Without realize the importance of it, I failed to renew my gaming license which expired on my birthday in June of 2000. The following Monday I was called into the shift-manager's office and told I no longer had a job. I started working as a grunt doing carpet work for my sister's old boyfriend, Ray (yes, the same Ray who I accused of being gay during my first mental collapse). It would be good to get out of the smoky environment of the casino and doing something a little more physical anyway, I thought. Besides, it wouldn't be for long, I was graduating that following December. Little did I know, that instead of pursuing a job with my degree, I would continue working that floor covering job for another three years. Content with my life, or so I told myself, it would take a second hospitalization for drug-induced psychosis before I ever left Mt. Pleasant.

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While working at the Soaring Eagle, I made occasional trips to the nearest casino in Traverse City to go gambling, but this was over a two-hour drive away. These trips were limited to once or twice a month at the most. After losing my job there, I started getting back into the habit of going to the casino too often. It didn't happen at first, but over the course of the next couple of years I kept getting deeper into the cycle of denial that becomes problem gambling.

Part of this was caused by having a constant supply of money on hand. Around the same time that I lost my job, I also made a connection with the man who had been supplying me and my friends with top end marijuana that we called the chronic. This man, who I always just called Uncle when referring to him around other people, had been part of the grow operation for this strand of pot for years. I'd been getting it through various people since my freshman year, but had only recently been getting it steadily through the maintenance man for the apartment complex I lived in. When he decided to move away, Uncle—who I knew already, but didn't realize was the main guy—gave me his number. I now had a direct connection to what one of my friends called, "the best, most consistent grass in all of mid-Michigan."

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At first, I had to have the money up front for whatever I wanted, but once he started to trust me more, Uncle would front me a few ounces at a time. After what I watched Troll go through, I didn't want to be considered a drug dealer. Instead, I tried to just hook up a few of my good friends and let them parcel it out. This lasted for a while, until I started taking Uncle's money to the casino.

It started with me being behind on what I owed him a few times and going there to win what I needed to pay him back. This worked sometimes, but other times I'd just create a deeper debt. On more than one occasion I had to go borrow money from Ray and then work it off installing carpet. Eventually, the losses became too big—over a thousand dollars on several occasions—and I had to tell Uncle that I didn't have his money. I finally realized that I'd gotten myself into something that I could no longer control.

I remember walking out of the casino into a bright summer morning after being up all night playing blackjack. I was broke and had to be at work in less than an hour. I had just lost a lot of money that wasn't mine to lose and had no way of paying it back. I had borrowed all the money Ray

was going to loan me, had even made a tearful plea to my mother, telling her I thought I had a gambling problem. I had nowhere left to turn. For a moment, as a tour bus roared past the casino entrance, I felt a compulsion to just step in front of it. It was then that I personally understood why all of the windows in Las Vegas open only six inches. I wonder how many messes had to be cleaned up before this became standard policy.

I've often said that, for me, gambling was always worse than drugs. Drugs may have helped scramble my mind and left me in worse positions in life, but I've never felt so low and helpless as I did during this period when gambling took over my life. Even when I knew that it was destroying me, I kept going back to the casino. I would stay away from a while only to return again. I've never been addicted to hard drugs, even though I dabbled with a few, but I can understand the mind of an addict. When you know something is ruining your life and you still cannot stop doing it, there is no more hopeless feeling in the world.

March Madness

*Since the Prehistoric ages
and the days of ancient Greece
Right down through the Middle Ages
Planet earth kept going through changes
And then the Renaissance came
and times continued to change
Nothing stayed the same
but there were always renegades
Like Chief Sitting Bull, Tom Paine
Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X
They were renegades of their time and age
So many renegades*

*Now renegades are the people
with their own philosophies
They change the course of history
Everyday people like you and me
We're the renegades we're the people
With our own philosophies
We change the course of history
Everyday people like you and me*

Rage Against the Machine
-Renegades of Funk

"You take the fucking piss test!" I howled at the E.R. doctor as I threw the lidded plastic container in his direction. I hadn't touched any drugs in days, yet I wanted no part in having to prove this. "Look at him. I know he smokes dope too," I said, pleading with my mom and step-dad to see my point. Ignoring my accusations about the doctor, they turned away with expressions mixed with anguish, fear, and frustration.

"I'm sorry, Doctor. Two of his friends brought him home from downstate like this yesterday. We just didn't know what to do anymore," my mother explained, interrupting my ravings temporarily. "This happened once before, but this time I think it's worse."

"I'm telling you, he's got a fucking joint in his pocket right now," I continued. My suspicion of everyone and everything ran deep. Unable to sit still for more than a moment, I hobbled around the hospital room they had put us in to keep me from further alarming any other patients. My behavior had already created quite a stir in the emergency room. My left ankle was severely sprained from the night I'd spent in jail shackled to floor almost a week previously. I kept telling my family and anyone else who listen to just cut my damn foot off.

In the days following my arrest, my mania had only increased, reaching a point where no one around me knew what to do. I'd been admitted to the hospital downstate already, only to be discharged because I didn't have insurance. Since returning to the U.P. I hadn't been able to sleep for more than an hour at a time. Unable to cope with my frantic state any longer, my parents had brought me to the hospital with hopes of having me once again placed under psychiatric care.

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Occurring over a decade ago, this was the end result of my last psychedelic experience, a trip from which I almost didn't return. Precipitated by years of self-abuse, the effects can hardly be blamed simply on "magic" mushrooms. For quite some time, I had been trying to maintain the dangerous distinction between drug and alcohol use, and abuse. My definition of abuse varied considerably from the prevailing wisdom on the subject. As long as my life wasn't crippled by my actions, I thought I was OK. Keeping a job had never been a problem, and I had even earned a college degree during these years. But that March, my world disintegrated for a second time.

The ingestion of psychedelics would again cause the breaking point in my life, but the cracks in my psyche had been surfacing in the months leading up to this night. This time, the stress caused by excessive gambling would be a major factor. Being financially destitute, owing both Uncle and Ray money from gambling debts, I saw no way out of my present situation. I had wasted a lot of money gambling before, but never to this extreme. I barely had any money to live off of, my rent was months overdue, and

just about everything I earned from my job was going to pay back Uncle.

I had even tried to pawn my collection of 500 CDs, but the first wave of digital music had made them all but worthless. The pawn shop wouldn't give me anything for them. Instead, I was forced to bring them to a local record store, where the owner and his wife picked through what they wanted, giving me a couple dollars per disc. I felt like running away, yet had nowhere to run to or any means of getting there.

The previous September, I had moved into an apartment with a friend named Beltz, who was starting his last year at CMU. Beltz was from the Detroit area, way past materialistic, of Armenian descent, constantly full of shit, and continually referred to himself as Beltz Dog. If I thought Davis and I were opposites my freshman year, it was only because I hadn't met Beltz yet. The one thing we had in common was the good pot I got on a regular basis.

By then, I was pretty far removed from the college scene. Almost all of the friends I had gone to school with had long since left Mt. Pleasant. I, on the other hand, had failed to leave after graduating, making me, as one of our neighbors put it, a common-law townie. Without any other real options for roommates, and without the financial

resources to live on my own in a college town, I figured what the hell.

One night early that March, a call came out of nowhere. I was sitting around watching college basketball, preparing for the March Madness as defined by the NCAA basketball tournament, when Beltz brought me his cellphone. "It's Wish," he said, only half irritated that someone was calling me on his phone again. I hadn't gotten a land line hooked up when I moved in, and it would still be years before I relented to need for my own phone.

"What's happening, Mr. Wish?" I asked, still concentrating more on the game than our conversation. Mason Wish was one of the friends I made in the years while transitioning from being a college student into just another guy living in Mt. Pleasant. Like many of my friends then, he had grown up in the area.

"Not much, man," he responded. "I'm just hanging out with that Fun Guy you like so much."

"Really?" My interest had perked up considerably. "You mean that fungi?"

"The one and only."

After some minor haggling over who was going to venture out into what remained of winter, I stretched back

out on the couch and tried to focus on the game again. My trump card in winning the debate: a handle of Crown Royal. This half-gallon bottle of Canadian whiskey had been purchased just a few days prior, and was still over half full.

As I lay there on the couch waiting for Wish and his best friend Jimmy to arrive, I was filled with tentative anticipation. I knew that I had to work at eight in the morning and that eating mushrooms would make this difficult. On my other shoulder, though, old pitchfork kept whispering that I hadn't eaten "mushies" in a long time. Besides, I had been to work after a lot of rough nights, I thought. This night would probably be the roughest of my life. There wouldn't be any work the next morning.

After Wish and Jimmy arrived, I forced them to go through some minor coaxing before being convinced that eating a few 'shrooms was in my best interest. We even got Beltz, who had never really tripped before to eat a few.

As the night progressed, everything seemed to be going fine. We were all in good spirits, drinking, smoking dope, and occasionally pooping another mushroom into our mouths. I had assumed my usual role as D.J., carefully selecting

CDs from what remained of my collection. The music, and particularly the song "Renegades of Funk" by Rage Against the Machine, started to set me off that night. I had tended to over-personalize the lyrics to songs before, and that night I felt as though their lyrics of influential individuals who changed the course of human history were speaking directly to me. When The Doors song "Wild Child" played and I heard, "Wild child, full of grace, savior of the human race," I was once again beginning to consider my special place in history. The winds of madness were starting to swirl again.

Later, when Beltz decided it was time to break up the party because he had school in the morning, things escalated. I tried to ignore him, continuing to laugh and joke with Mr. Wish and Jimmy. When Beltz turned off the stereo and again said it was time for my friends to leave, Wish finally said, "Fuck it, I'm leaving." Before he would go, however, he made me promise him that we would all still be "boys" in the morning. He clearly sensed the doom that followed.

At some point, the argument I was having with Beltz about who made the decisions on when people left our place shifted and I was face to face with Jimmy. To this day, I have no idea what initiated our dispute, but I distinctly

recall him breaking down into tears and through sobs which I have rarely seen out of any grown man he begged me, "Please Gaber, don't do it. I was there. Don't you understand? I was there!"

At the time, this could only mean one thing, he had been at Christ's crucifixion and he didn't want to see me face a similar death. Moments later, we were wrestling in the snow outside my apartment door in what I believed was a life or death struggle between good and evil. As we rolled around choking one another, all I could think was *They're going to kill me. They know who I am and they're going to fucking kill me.*

Hearing the uproar, Beltz came outside and managed to get us separated. I dashed inside, and after surveying the living room for something to defend myself with, grabbed the glass top off of the coffee table, using it as a shield to put distance between Beltz and I. As he advanced towards me, trying to assure me that he meant me no harm, I swung the rectangular piece at him, shattering it. I was now completely convinced that my roommate was the devil himself. I knew that I needed to defend myself if God and humanity were to win out.

In an utterly frenzied state, I grabbed the Crown Royal bottle off the kitchen table before locking myself

inside Beltz's room. As he pleaded with me through the locked door, I swung the whiskey bottle as if it were a weapon, smashing the mirror that ran along the headboard of his bed before taking out my rage on the nearest wall. I remember eyeing up his big screen TV and computer monitor, but thankfully Beltz found his keys and started to unlock the door before I destroyed anything of real value.

I quickly turned my attention towards the door, effortlessly putting a hole over a foot in diameter into its fake wood with just a few swings of the heavy bottle. As I stared at Beltz through the jagged opening, I think he finally realized the severity of the situation. "I'm calling the fucking cops, man."

"Good I'd like to see the cops tonight," I responded, still under the impression that I was fighting the devil for my life. Then I shouldered my way through the door, knocking it completely off its hinges. As Beltz fled outside, I would proceed to do this with the door to my bedroom and bathroom as well.

I was in the process of stripping out of my wet clothes, sopping from having rolled around in the snow with Jimmy, when I heard sirens and then saw the blue flashing lights outside. Clothed in only that tattered pair of No Fear gym shorts, I advanced towards the front door with

plans of telling the police about how my life had been threatened. I had only made it about half way across the living room when a voice on a bullhorn boomed, "Gabriel Waskiewicz, are you in there?"

"Yes," I answered, stopping and facing the door.

"Get on your knees with your hands up."

I did what they said, stunned when at least a half dozen officers hurried into my apartment with guns drawn. Only later, while reading the police report, would I learn that the guns they were holding contained bean bag rounds.

After forcing me into the back of a squad car with the assistance of their batons, the cops brought me to jail on charges of malicious destruction of property and possession of marijuana. During that night in jail, while shackled to floor, my mind completely gave way. The flood of mania and near-insanity that ensued in the weeks that followed almost destroyed me, while wounding almost everyone that was close to me. This time, it would be months before I fully recovered.

When I returned to Mt. Pleasant to retrieve my belongings, my old boss Ray hugged me while he sobbed and told me, "You really hurt me." He had been in a serious relationship with my sister years prior, and told me he

never cried throughout their breakup. Here he was trying to explain how much pain I had inflicted on him.

My mother spent night after night crying herself to sleep, wondering if this time she'd lost her son for good. The first time around, she didn't know anything was happening until I was already in the hospital. This time, she had to make the decision to bring me to the hospital, to plead with the doctor to admit me because this wasn't her son.

Psychosis is generally defined as a symptom or feature of mental illness typically characterized by radical changes in personality, impaired functioning, and a distorted or nonexistent sense of objective reality. All of these aspects were present around the time of my hospitalization. My mild, non-confrontational personality became one of aggression and often outright anger towards others. My behavior got so erratic, and my thoughts so impaired, that friends and family were concerned not only for my safety, but for those around me as well. My sense of reality was severely distorted, the grandiose delusions about my role as either a potential savior or destroyer continued.

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As the days in the hospital turned into a week, the question of what to do with me upon my release arose. The hospital staff purposed the idea of sending me on a bus back to Mt. Pleasant, which I agreed to but my family fought against. Without a job or a place to live, my options were bleak. Still, none of my family members felt secure bringing me into their home either. Later, I would realize that they discussed the possibility of assisted living. I believe now that if I had been placed in this type of facility, my mother probably never would have gotten her son back. Once you go so far out, especially for a second time, it's that much more difficult to come back from. The outbursts I continued to have in the weeks that followed my release would have certainly led to an increase in medication and heavy scrutiny from the medical profession.

Luckily, Sprenkle, my friend from high school who has sat on me knee all those years ago, allowed me to move into the house he shared with two other friends from high school. This place in the woods wasn't exactly the ideal location for me to regain my bearings on the world because it was kind of a party house, but being around my friends definitely helped. I wouldn't stay there long before

moving into the apartment my grandmother had lived in for all those years, but the time there allowed me to regain my social bearings.

I would continue to take the medication prescribed to help my brain return to its normal functioning for year after the hospitalization, visiting psychologists and counselors as recommended. During this time, I abstained from any drug or alcohol use. I still didn't enjoy the effects of the medication, however. They made me feel like someone just going through the motions. It felt like one long drive through Iowa or Nebraska, not a peak or a valley in sight.

After the year of medications and doctor's appointments, the doctors agreed to steadily wean me off the prescription drugs. They warned that if any symptoms resurfaced, I needed to seek immediate help.

That was eleven years ago this past March. I haven't had any struggles with mental illness since. I also haven't taken psychedelic drugs since then either. Do I believe that this episode would have occurred without the drugs? Certainly not to the extreme that it did. Do I condemn psychedelic drugs because of it? Not in the least. I blame my fragile brain chemistry for its inability to "pass the acid test." After all of it, I honestly believe

I'm a better person for having been through all this. I thank God I didn't hurt myself or anyone else that night. I must admit that my emotions may occasionally spike one way or the other, but nothing out of the ordinary realm. And certainly nothing like the peaks of Everest and Kilimanjaro that I experienced in my twenties.

Wishless

Hey, I ain't never coming home
Hey, I'll just wander my own road
Hey, I can't meet you here tomorrow
Say goodbye don't follow
Misery so hollow

Alice in Chains
-Don't Follow

Well past midnight on a chilly April night, I decided to Google the name "Mason Wish" for the first time in what felt like weeks. This was something I'd gotten into the habit of doing frequently in the last few months, typing his name into my laptop while wondering if I'd want to read what I found. But as his trial date neared, the trickle of new information about the case seemed to have stopped, as had the phone calls from friends still living in that area. The media and others seemed to have moved on to new topics. Why couldn't I?

Maybe distance was to blame, both physical and emotional. Living almost 400 miles away for the last decade had left me feeling disconnected with this group of friends, with that portion of my life. My contact with the Wishes had devolved into sporadic text messages and the occasional visit when I happened to be in town. When the

tragedy occurred last November, everything I learned about it came from phone calls and the internet. The space between me and my former life never felt greater. Maybe my obsessive Googling served as a feeble attempt to reconnect after it was already too late.

This latest nocturnal internet search happened to be well timed. Several new articles popped up; the previous day Mr. Wish had pled no contest to second-degree murder. According to one news story, the no contest plea serves "not an admission of guilt, but is treated like one for sentencing." Sentencing is scheduled for next month with a minimum of 35 years expected.

The first phone call came while I was still in bed on a Monday morning. Awake but still unwilling to exit my blanketed cocoon protecting me from the northern Michigan dawn, I rolled over to check my cell phone, expecting some form of unknown number, probably a bill collector. People who know me rarely call before noon. But it was someone I knew, Ray, an old friend who I had worked for downstate. I sat up quickly to answer his call despite the chill of my under-heated house against my bare skin.

"Well, Mr. Coney. How the hell are ya?" I asked. Like many of my life-long friends, I commonly call him by

his last name instead of his first, with or without the honorific.

"I'm alright, Gabe, but I wish I was calling with better news," he responded in a somber tone. My excitement upon hearing from him immediately turned to unease, which rolled right into near disbelief as he described how my friends, the Wishes, had been the subject of an Amber Alert that weekend. Their four-year-old boy Brody was found safe with his father at a rest area sometime the previous evening, while the body of Stephanie, the wife and mother, had just been found by police at the couple's home early that morning.

"Well, do they know how she died?" I asked, pulling a long-sleeved shirt over goose-pimpled flesh.

"I'm really not sure, Gabe. Maybe it was a drug overdose." I could tell from his voice he didn't care to speculate any further. "I just thought you should know," he concluded. "I remember how close you all were."

"Alright, well keep me updated ok."

"I will," Ray said, but when I called a few days later he didn't answer.

I have no distinct memory of when I first met either Stephanie or Mason, but I knew both for most of the eight

and a half years I lived in Mt. Pleasant. I met Stephanie sometime during my sophomore year while still in the dorms. At the time, she was dating Troll, a nickname he both embodied and embraced. I think early on Steph reminded me Alyssa, my pretty blonde friend from my hometown, but I never made this conscious connection until years later when she showed me a picture of herself from high school. I realized then why I had always been somewhat smitten with her. The picture made the two girls look almost like sisters.

Mr. Wish materialized a year or two later, while Davis, Troll, and I were neighbors in that apartment complex near campus. He was a local guy who worked the night shift at a small motel near where we lived. He didn't attend school and already had an infant daughter, but we found common ground in our love for smoking pot. As the years went by and more and more of the people I went to school with moved away, I found myself hanging out with the friends I'd made who were from the area.

After the phone call from Ray that morning, I called my mom to tell her about Stephanie. I knew my mom would be awake, and her sincere sympathy and unequalled understanding always soothed me at moments like this. A week before she'd

called to tell me about a friend of mine from high school who died from kidney and liver failure. This was the second classmate out of a class of about forty who'd passed away within the last year, the first a drug overdose and the second a result of alcohol and prescription drug abuse.

Now, a third person my age had died, again possibly drug related. It made me wonder if I wasn't in fact lucky to have escaped my hometown and Mt. Pleasant when I did. My own days of drug experimentation had all but ended by the time pharmaceuticals became the popular drug to abuse in this country, or at least in the circles I frequented. Still, I've dabbled in them enough to know that had I not left the environments and groups of friends I once found myself immersed in, I certainly could have developed addictions similar to the ones I've seen affecting several of my friends in recent years. Was it simply circumstance that saved me from this type of fate? When those your own age begin to die, it only seems natural to start considering your own coffin.

Talking with my mom seemed to help though. Her unwavering faith in a reason behind everything calmed the waves of uncertainty forming inside me. I left my house that morning, stepping out into the bright November sun, with a renewed sense of purpose. I'd been spared from the

various fates that had befallen my former friends for a reason. Maybe it was to tell their story for them, or possibly to tell my own with the hope it may prevent others from slipping into the same ruts I once found myself in, hopelessly spinning my tires for years.

The sinkhole on my life's path that Mt. Pleasant became was just starting to be defined in the fall of 2000. I was working for Mr. Coney at his floor covering business and finally found myself ready to graduate with my undergraduate degree in December after five and half years of classes. Smoking pot still maintained a daily presence in my life then, and it was for this reason that Mr. Wish stopped by one afternoon. He'd just found out that his long-time girlfriend, the mother of his daughter, was leaving him for another guy and he really needed to get high.

"Yeah, I guess she's been talking to this Hector dude at work and she says she just doesn't wanna be with me anymore," he explained while exhaling a cloud of smoke that further distorted his features in my hazy sense of perception. His signature reddish goatee and wire rim glasses helped hide the discomfort on his face. He looked more bookish than he was; I once lent him Huxley's *The*

Doors of Perception, but I doubt he ever read it and I know he never returned it.

"The funny part is," he continued. "I lost all this weight this summer hiking water back to those plants I've been growing and it's almost as if that's why she doesn't want to be with me anymore. Like me looking better makes her feel worse about herself or something." I dismissed his convoluted logic, ignoring the fact that the pot plants probably had as much to do with the breakup as anything.

"Well, you never know, maybe she'll change her mind." I tried to sound as hopeful as possible, passing him back the joint as if that strengthened my point.

"Naw, you only get one shot with Mr. Wish." I'd learn later this wasn't always the case.

As the conversation continued, I offered him the spare room in the house I was renting if he needed a place to stay for a while. He accepted and within a week of him moving in, Steph came up to visit from her suburban Detroit home. She'd left Mt. Pleasant after dropping out of school sometime the previous year.

Before leaving, Steph had served as my chauffer after I got a drunk driving while drinking with her one night. I had left were we'd been drinking at because it became apparent that she was more interested in another guy than

she was in me. I got stopped by the campus police while swerving my way through the heart of CMU's campus. Afterwards, she would cart me back and forth to my job at the local casino in exchange for use of my vehicle. Oftentimes of those rides homes, Steph would play George Michael's "I Want Your Sex." Somehow, we never so much as kissed. The rides ended when she got her own drunk driving on the way to pick me up from work one night.

On the night she arrived back in Mt. Pleasant, Stephanie looked a little frazzled. She had on ripped whitewashed jeans and a black sleeveless t-shirt, and appeared to have been drinking on the way up. Other than seeing Stephanie again for the first time in a of couple years, I have no distinct memories of that night other than the fact that I'm pretty sure the three of us got good and drunk, mostly likely on Crown Royal. By the end of the night, Stephanie ended up in Mr. Wish's room while I passed out alone again. Having little to return home to, Steph decided to stay in Mt. Pleasant after that night. After a few months the two of them got their own place less than a block away.

After leaving my house that cold November morning, I met a co-worker at the Carpet Shoppe to prepare for the day's

work. As we cut the twenty-some-odd feet of carpet intended to go into someone's living room, I explained to Dale, my co-worker, the phone call I'd received that morning. Being someone I see and talk with regularly, but not someone in my extended social circle where rumors circle like a pack of wolves, I felt comfortable talking to him. He'd been my sounding board the week before when my friend from high school died. He was someone who would listen without passing judgment.

During a lull in the preparation process, one of many when working with Dale, a constant meanderer, I decided to use the internet option on my phone for something other than checking sports scores. By typing Stephanie Wish and Isabella County into Google, I found multiple links. Most involved the Amber Alert from over the weekend, detailing the search for the missing 34-year-old mother and her four-year-old son. But the newest news story, posted just minutes before, explained how she'd been found dead in her home from an apparent gunshot wound. To say my heart sank is clearly too cliché and these words don't begin to touch the anguish I felt like a brick of remorse in my stomach. A drug overdose could be rationalized. It was something one did to themselves. But this? This happens on TV; this shouldn't happen to people you know.

Over the course of the day; while Dale installed carpet, smoked cigarettes, drank coffee, and scratched off lottery tickets; I answered phone calls from people wondering if I'd heard the news. The first came from the girlfriend of another local guy I'd met around the same time as Mr. Wish.

"Hey, Gaber, it's Summer. Mark wanted me to make sure you knew about Wish," she said when I answered the phone. Like most people, she called him only by his last name.

"Yeah, I got a call from Mr. Coney earlier. I just saw online that she was shot, though. What the hell do they think happened?" I asked, still not wanting to accept the logical solution.

"I'm not really sure, but it's all over the news down here."

"Do they think it was Wish?"

"They have him in custody now," she explained with a sigh. "But I don't think it was him. He was calling me this weekend and said she left with another man. Said he couldn't go home because Stephanie hadn't been paying the mortgage payment."

Summer would go on to explain how Mr. Wish told her Steph was strung out on pills and was mean to their son. He told her he didn't have anywhere to go. Less than an

hour later she would call me back to tell me Wish had admitted to everything. She was the first person to ask me if I thought he could really do something like this. "I'm not sure," was all I could meagerly answer.

When the Wishes first started dating and they were still staying at my house, we took a ride one night in Stephanie's Ford Explorer. The purpose of the fifty-mile round trip journey from our place in town was to check on a group of pot plants Wish had growing on the property he had, until recently, shared with his ex. It was a beautiful fall night with a near full moon lighting the sky. After discovering that the plants, only weeks away from being harvestable, had been uprooted, the mood in the vehicle worsened considerably. Not even the partaking of a pre-rolled could lift the tension in the mid-90s Ford Explorer being driven by Stephanie. "That fucking bitch," was all he kept repeating as I watched the rage boiling beneath his skin.

With nothing else to do, we started heading back down the gravel road towards town. When a beautiful buck bolted out of the right ditch a few miles down the road, it appeared there might still be enough time to stop, or at least to slow down and attempt to swerve around the

bounding beast. Instead, Stephanie gunned it, in what she later described as a failed attempt to beat the deer across the road. She hit the 8-pointer hard, sending it spinning into the opposite ditch. After the first seconds of shock subsided, all three of us jumped out of the vehicle and hurried towards the fatally wounded creature. Wish made it there first, and proceeded to take his frustration out on the dying deer. With kicks and punches, he repeatedly beat the buck, which was too injured to do anything but feebly bleat a protest. Far from taking an animal out of its misery, I could only watch this act for a moment before going back to the vehicle. Stephanie stood there for a little longer before following.

Until now, I've never shared this story with anyone. It disturbed me then, but not to the point where I felt compelled to stop it. Maybe that's my own weak will, or just my belief that you have to let others live their own life. There are moments when we should or must intervene, but this didn't seem like one of them at the time.

As the hours and days passed after I first learned about Steph's death, a slow trickle of new information kept coming in from friends and news sources. First came

accounts of Mr. Wish's conflicting testimony of the events of that day. Originally, he told police during an interrogation that Stephanie had run off with another man, but later claimed he got in an argument with her about leaving with their son while intoxicated. He said she had come home drunk so he took her vehicle behind their house and got it stuck so she couldn't leave. When he came back inside, she was pointing a rifle at him and it went off when he tried to take it away.

A later story described how Wish and his four-year-old son, Brody, were found two days later at a rest area near the Ohio border. Police questioned them separately. The father maintained that he hadn't seen his wife since the previous Friday when they'd argued after she returned from her shift as a bartender at a local bowling alley. The son, on the other hand, gave a different account to the arresting officer. "Daddy shot mommy with a gun. Bang-bang."

After that, I found myself searching the Wishes name online almost daily, hoping for something that might help this all make more sense. Instead, it only got worse. Mr. Wish was being charged with open murder. Coroner reports confirmed the double bang described by the son; Stephanie had indeed

been shot twice, once through the cheek and a second time in the back of the neck. One of the last pieces of information I learned was the most difficult to stomach: Steph's body had been found hidden under gravel in the crawlspace of their home. Any last hope for any form of innocence fluttered away when I read that.

Originally, I had hoped to attend Steph's funeral, asking Mr. Coney to keep me informed about when it would be. Because an autopsy had to be done as part of the murder investigation, the funeral was delayed quite some time. Then her family chose to hold the service in the Detroit area instead of Mt. Pleasant. In Mt. Pleasant I would have seen many people I knew and could have talked to about what had happened. In Detroit I expected something entirely different. Besides, the drive seemed too long, and what if I really didn't know anyone there. I'd only met her mother and younger sister once or twice. I almost felt as if I would be intruding on their space, on their grief. What would I say to them? To her boy? My own emotions seemed insignificant by comparison. Regrettably, these are the excuses I allowed myself for not going.

Davis did attend the funeral though. He had lived with Stephanie when she was dating Troll, back when we all

lived in the same apartment complex. He said the hardest part of the service was reintroducing himself to the family at the end. As he struggled to remind the mother who he was, he watched as the four-year-old boy smiled and pointed at pictures displayed by the urn saying, "There's mommy!"

"I had to get out of there," Davis told me.

The last time I visited the Mt. Pleasant area was in the fall of 2010 to attend Mr. Coney's annual pig roast. The Wishes were also invited, so I went to their place to have a few drinks before the party. I had only seen them once since their wedding a few years earlier, so it was nice to reminisce about old times over a quick pint of Crown Royal. Mr. Fish stayed sober so he could drive, or I should say he didn't drink. When he tried to pass me a joint they were both flabbergasted that I wouldn't smoke it. I explained how I didn't really like the way it made me feel anymore and they looked at me even more stunned.

When I'd left Mt. Pleasant I clearly had the look of someone who'd smoke weed until the day he died. Somehow it had lost its appeal.

At the pig roast later, Stephanie and Mr. Wish tried to get me to leave early to go to a friend's who had some type of pills. Again I declined, content to eat swine and

drink beer. That was the last time I will probably see either of them.

Scrolling through the contacts in my phone one day, I came across Steph's number. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to delete her contact yet. Scrolling further down, I noticed I had two different numbers for Mr. Wish. It made me hope that one belonged to the person I once knew and the other belongs to one behind bars because in my mind I still can't understand how they are the same man.

Death of a Wage Slave

I. Build a Machine

*Man ain't meant to work
come on build a machine
So we can live for
our own pleasure
Please yourself
please your queens*

Jane's Addiction
-So What!

In May of 2010 I was fired from a job I'd held for seven years. It wasn't the best job, just a gig at a tribal casino dealing blackjack, poker, and craps. I didn't receive benefits and wasn't using my degrees, but it was a means for paying my bills, or at least trying to. The job kept me in a comfort zone where I didn't feel the need to try bettering myself. Most of my friends in the area either worked there, or had worked there at some point. On good days it felt like getting paid to hang out with my friends; on bad days I convinced myself that I was just lucky to have a job in the current economy.

In all actuality, though, I was only getting deeper in debt working there, with the consistent paycheck keeping me pacified enough to still come back every week to punch the time clock. The debt I'd been accumulating for years—

mostly from trying to live beyond the lifestyle the money I made afforded—only continued to mount. Getting fired forced me to reevaluate life and what I wanted to do with mine. Was I willing to waste the precious moments I'd been given in the drudgery of unfulfilling employment, or could I forgo the safety and stability that a steady job offers in the hopes of making something more out of my time here on earth?

II. Slaves

You're all a bunch of slaves

Jim Morrison

During this period of unemployment and uncertainty, I heard the story of Albert Parsons for the first time. Primed for alternate ideas on the conditions of the working man and issues in the labor movement, I was instantly intrigued while reading about Parsons, a political activist from the 1800s who defended workers' rights.

On what must have been to be a rainy November day in 1887 Albert Parsons, along with three other men, were hanged in Chicago for their involvement in what came to be known as the Haymarket affair. This rally, also referred to as the Haymarket riot, began as a peaceful demonstration

in response to violence by Chicago police who had killed six striking workers the previous day.

The labor strike was made up of an estimated half a million workers nationwide, and was held in support of the eight hour work day. At the protest rally, Parsons addressed the crowd, emphasizing that the leaders' intent was not to incite violence. Still, as the event wound towards its conclusion that evening, a group of policemen and local Pinkerton guards forcefully attempted to disperse the remaining crowd. At that moment, while Parsons sat in a local establishment enjoying a schooner of beer, an unidentified person threw a bomb into the crowd, killing a policeman. The resulting gunfire led to at least a dozen more deaths and hundreds wounded.

Years later, the same Chicago police force would savagely beat protesters at the 1968 Democrat National Convention in eerily similar manner. Images of Hunter S. Thompson's accounts of Chicago in '68 linger in my mind. Because police and military men had reverted to using billy clubs instead of guns on crowds during the '60s (at least most of the time) the carnage wasn't as extreme, but the sentiment of keeping the masses down clearly remained.

Albert Parsons, along with seven other defendants, were ultimately charged with murdering the policeman

despite having left the rally long before the violence occurred. All eight men were found guilty and sentenced to death in what is now considered one the greatest injustices in American legal history. Some of these men had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment, but Parsons refused to ask the governor to do so because he felt it would be an admission of guilt.

In the weeks before his execution, Parsons published a letter in the anarchist newspaper he had founded giving his final advice to supports,

"Falter not. Lay bare the inequities of capitalism; expose the slavery of law; proclaim the tyranny of government; denounce the greed, cruelty, abominations of the privileged class who riot and revel on the labor of their wage-slaves."

Less than six years later, the three co-defendants who had accepted life imprisonment were pardoned by the governor.

III. Hours for Dimes

*Trade in your hours
for a hand full of dimes*

The Doors
-Five to One

I first heard about the Haymarket affair while reading John Smolens' *The Anarchist* in the weeks after I lost my job.

I'd purchased the book months before because the author taught a fiction workshop I attended while in school, but it sat on a shelf waiting until I was ready for it. In it, Smolens fictionalizes the story of Leon Czolgosz, the man who assassinated President William McKinley. It wasn't Czolgosz's tale that intrigued me most however. Instead, I latched on to the references to the Haymarket affair, explored more about Albert Parsons and his ideology, and learned about the concept of wage slavery.

I wasn't completely unfamiliar with the idea, but at the time it resonated with me. Like most things in life, I found it when I needed it most. Wikipedia defines wage slavery as "a situation of quasi-voluntary slavery where a person's livelihood depends on wages, especially when the dependence is total and immediate." For many of us who live from paycheck to paycheck, I think the term at least loosely applies.

Unlike Parson, I am not an advocate of anarchy or the over-throw of the government, but I do feel that I've been a glorified wage-slave for most of my adult life. Since the age of twenty I've either been employed as a dealer in casinos or as an installer of floor covering. Both only led to someone else's financial gain, while I struggled to support myself. I realized two years ago that if I wanted

to change this pattern, I needed to reconsider my beliefs about success.

Even though I'd managed to avoid the pitfalls of the corporate ladder, I still generally equated success in terms of financial gain. Not that I felt a better job was the ultimate answer either. Many people in business or other such pursuits seem just as caught up in the beliefs that make them a slave to their job. They only drive a little nicer car and live in a bigger home. They're still caught in the endless cycle that leads to them spending a majority of their time doing something they'd rather not be doing.

Still, I bought a house and a car, doing my best to live up to the typical version of the American Dream. It wasn't that I longed for material success really, but felt that this is what was expected of me. To be considered a successful adult in America, you buy a home and drive as nice of a car as you can afford payments on. What I needed was a serious alternative to this idea of material success, something larger than a good job and the security it brings. I decided to return to school that fall with the hopes of working on the writing I had neglected in the years since graduating last. Maybe this could be my outlet to produce something meaningful with the hours I've been

given.

IV. Shallow Graves

All our lives we sweat and save
Building for a shallow grave
Must be something else we say
Somehow to defend this place

The Doors
-The Soft Parade

On the gallows that day in 1887, a man condemned to die with Parsons shouted to the crowd, "The time will come when your silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today!" As for Parsons, his final words were, "Will I be allowed to speak, oh men of America? Let me speak, Sheriff Matson! Let the voice of the people be heard! O—" Before he could finish the trapdoor was let out from underneath him.

For some reason, I imagine both men being buried in their own shallow graves, martyrs to belief that men shouldn't work their whole lives for nothing. Not that they deserved the fate of an unmarked grave, but because it would have seemed fitting for the way those in power often treat men like Parsons. In fact, though, they are buried in a cemetery in Chicago with a monument commemorating the Haymarket affair, symbols of the working class' struggle against the oppression of the elite. Maybe some of us can

be the voice for these silenced martyrs.

V. Don't Miss the Starting Gun

Ticking away the moments
that make up a dull day
Fritter and waste the hours
in an off-hand way
Kicking around on a piece of ground
in your home town
Waiting for someone or something
to show you the way

Tired of lying in the sunshine
staying home to watch the rain
You are young and life is long
And there is time to kill today
And then the one day you find
Ten years have got behind you
No one told you when to run
You missed the starting gun

And you run and you run
to catch up with the sun
but it's sinking
Racing around to
come up behind you again
The sun is the same
in a relative way,
but you're older
Shorter of breath
and one day closer to death

Pink Floyd
-Time

In my time spent back in school, I've found life still too distracting even without having to worry about punching a time clock. I woefully allow writing to take a back burner to frivolous pursuits, spending time with friends or have hours lost watching sports that would be better served in

front of the keyboard. Yet I don't feel the weight of the billy club on my back or the tug of a noose around my neck.

Please don't misjudge my sentiment in all of this; I'm not opposed to work. We all need to earn money to survive. I have a graduate assistant and still need to lay carpet to help make ends meet. I just no longer want to spend years of my life tied to a job without any intrinsic value to me— or anyone else. Hopefully others will throw off the shackles of monotonous labor at the first opportunity and not wait over ten years to start to run like I did.

Krazy Karl

Locked in among skeletons
Broken hearted and damned
Sorry to have to break it to you friend
But life seldom goes exactly as we plan
Strange cousins from the west
overstay their welcome
Peculiar manner and strange dress
Who will ever dare to tell them?

Clutch
-Minotaur

After parking my aging Monte Carlo outside the open loading bay door, I get out and holler "What's up, buddy?" The hunched over figure dragging a roll of carpet across the carpet shop's warehouse looks up a little startled. Apparently, Karl didn't hear me pull up or my car door close. I wonder if football point spreads or plotting his next destination have Karl's mind preoccupied, while examining his shabby, unfitting clothes that clearly once belonged to someone else.

Still, Karl looks better than he did just a couple of weeks ago, after first getting back into town. His head and neck don't look nearly as weathered anymore; the sweatshirt he's wearing doesn't expose his collar bones like the dirty wife beater he wore the last time I saw him.

Maybe all he needed was a few consistent meals and a steady roof over his head to return to the land of living. Terms like gaunt and emaciated no longer jump off him like fleas from a mongrel dog.

Noticing the Greek letters on his faded blue sweatshirt, I think about asking him when he joined a frat but decide not to comment. I know the closest he came to a fraternity was probably passing out on the lawn of a frat house in Ann Arbor twenty years ago.

"How's it goin', brother," Karl finally responds while shuffling over to slap me on the back before launching an unfathomably large chaw of Kodak out the door in the general vicinity of the dumpster. Without the snuff in his mouth, I catch the sour scent of stale beer on his breath. It's shortly after noon. "So did you come to see your daddy or dicksucker? They're both up front."

By my "daddy" he means the guy I've laid floor covering with part-time for the better part of the last decade, while the more vulgar reference alludes to the owner of the shop, a man who has helped out Karl more than he'll ever be able to repay. I tell him I've just come to pick up a check as he follows me toward the front of the store in a rambling gait not unlike that of Hunter S. Thompson's, or at least Johnny Depp's portrayal of him in

the movies. We discuss football, one of our few common interests, as we walk.

I first met the man I later dubbed Krazy Karl while working as a dealer in a small Native American casino. One day when I was leaving work, my shift manager asked me if I could give a guy a ride into town, about a fifteen minute drive. The guy had come to the casino on the shuttle, was now broke, and the next shuttle didn't leave for over an hour. Having already had one bad experience driving home a random person from there, I asked if he was crazy. "Naw," my boss responded. "He's just a drunk." Never being very good at saying no, I begrudgingly agreed.

On the way into town, I did my best to keep up my end of the conversation. The specifics have faded over the years, but I'm certain that at some point Karl told me he worked at a carpet store. This gave us something to talk about; I had worked for one of my sister's exes doing carpet while going to college. In what I would later recognize as a classic Karl monologue including the usual peppering of obscenities and an occasional "brother" or "cousin," he explained how badly they needed carpet installers at "the shop."

"I'm telling you, if you come in we can put you to work steady. The shop's been busier than hell this summer. It's gotta pay better than flipping cards for the fucking Indians, brother," Karl insisted at a level at least two notches higher than necessary while spraying a fine mist as he spoke. "What the hell you doing that for if you know how to lay carpet, anyway?"

As he talked, I did my best to nod or mumble agreement in the right places, just waiting for the moment when I could drop off this drunken maniac. When I left him outside the front of a small carpet store I hadn't even know existed, I thought I'd never see him again. Instead, I went in looking to pick up some side work the following week, intending to use the money towards an expected move out of state. That was seven and a half years ago.

After getting a check from Marty, the shop's owner, I try ducking out without Karl seeing me. He knows I don't like to borrow him money anymore, but that doesn't stop him from still asking on occasion. I almost slip out the front door when he comes out of the bathroom. "Hey, do ya think you can give me a ride up to the store? I need to take care of something." I decipher this to mean he needs another beer.

Relieved that he didn't ask for money, and unable to come up with a plausible excuse, I simply say, "Sure." How bad can a simple ride to the store be anyway? "I don't have much time, though. I have to be at work in a little bit."

"It'll just take a minute, cousin. I just need to go to the grocery store around the corner."

As I hop into the driver's seat of my car, he walks away from the vehicle. "I need to grab a couple pieces of rug," he shouts over his shoulder as he opens the back of Marty's pickup. "I'll just throw 'em in your backseat. They should fit."

I turn up my car stereo and fight the urge to sing along to the obscure 90s metal band I have in the CD player. Strange cousins from the west, overstay their welcome grunts the band's lead singer. If he only knew Karl, I think.

Early on, Karl got me almost all the work I did out of the shop. It started as a bedroom here and a living room there, before evolving into bigger projects. After a while, I found myself making almost as much doing floor covering as I was at the casino. Occasionally, Karl would come with on a job to help tear out the old carpet or set

up the tack strip and pad, but mostly he just worked at the shop, selling material to customers and doing the heavy lifting. He didn't seem to have the patience to learn how to install floor covering properly. Haste and a short temper usually lead to shoddy work in any trade.

Karl did have more of a knack for being a salesman though. He had at least some of that inherent ability—or willingness—of a used car salesman to tell customers exactly what they need to hear to make them think they're getting a deal too good to pass up. Some customers bristled at his aggressive nature, but he had just enough charm to make his abrasiveness tolerable. As the economy worsened, though, and the steady stream of customers started to slow to more of a trickle, both Karl and my workloads suffered. Without an abundance of work coming in, Karl could no longer get me much work on my own and I started having to do jobs with Dale.

During this time, Karl continued to live in a rundown house owned by Marty, working off rent by putting in hours at the shop. This allowed the ever-frivolous Karl the freedom of not having to worry about coming up with a rent payment every month. In addition, he'd rent out rooms in the house to help pay for bills and to keep him in beer and snuff, in his mind the two necessities in life.

Usually the tenants he rented to were desperate and didn't last long, only staying until they found a more peaceful living environment. When one left, Karl would put another ad in the paper or post one on the local university's webpage. Someone is always looking for a place to live in a college town. One roommate he found liked to drink and argue as much as he did though.

For at least the last two years, Karl has spent most of his time on the road, traveling from place to place without any real destination in mind. He'll return every couple months, be around for a few days or weeks, maybe work for a while at the shop and then be off on a Greyhound again. He manages to survive on odd jobs and whatever he can beg, borrow, or steal from people. Sometimes churches put him up in motels, other nights he sleeps under the stars. I'm not sure when he last had an actual address of his own.

These trips began as visits to Florida or Texas in search of work during the winter months, a way to escape Michigan winters and the slow season for carpeting. He'd leave Marty in charge of his sheepdog, Otis, and head out in hopes of finding something better, or at least different, out of life. When he got bored or broke enough he'd return and work at the shop again for a while.

For all his faults, he actually served as a fairly good salesman; his ability to convince people they were getting a good deal was uncanny at times. Still, Karl managed to burn bridges with just about anyone who associated with him. He stole carpet from Marty and a large change jug from me. The girl he lived with started calling the police on him. He spent time in and out of jail and the hospital, both causing him to detox severely.

When his dog finally had to be put to sleep after several bouts of a turning stomach, Karl started spending more time on the road and less time around town. He'd still call me occasionally to talk about football or a run of good luck with churches, often bragging about how many days in a row he'd been given a free room. "I can make more money hustling than I can working," he would say. "I haven't been without beer or chew for a month. Why should I work?" The lonely, desperate times on the road got less airplay. He prefers to call when things are going well.

Marty once told me that he seems to get along better with Karl when he calls from a different area code, and I have to agree. I don't mind talking to him when I know he's too far away to ask for a favor. Actually, when he's out on the road and I haven't heard from him in a while, I start to worry if he's dead or just in jail again.

"Hopefully this bitch will give me cash instead of a check," Karl says after managing to stuff the two pieces of carpet into the back seat of my two-door car.

I pull out of the shop's parking lot and head towards the store, trying to ignore the fact that Marty will never see the cash if the lady doesn't pay by check. To change the subject, I ask, "You've stuck around longer this time. How long you planning on staying?"

"Well the old man's given me like six hundred bucks already, brother, and keeps putting me to work around the shop. I've spent half on booze and the other half on keno. Plus I've been staying at his camp for free. No point in leaving yet."

I just nod and fiddle with the radio's volume button again. Fate is the idiot's excuse! Freedom is the sucker's dream!

"So how about that Packers game last night? Can you believe them fucking replacement refs?"

"I just hope it doesn't cost them a spot in the playoffs," I respond, still feeling disheartened. We pull into the grocery store's lot and Karl directs me toward a maroon SUV.

"Just pull up here. I hope she didn't lock it." He gets out and trots over to the vehicle. "Shit! I'll be right back."

"Hey, close the damn door anyway," I holler after him, but he ignores me and keeps going towards the store. I get out, close the passenger door, and pull into the nearest parking spot. I check the time, starting to worry about being late for work.

Karl returns a few minutes later with a middle-aged female cashier. As he's pulling the carpet out of my car and putting it into her vehicle, she remembers she's forgotten her checkbook in the store. We both sigh. I'm definitely going to be late for work, and Karl won't be able to pocket the cash he was hoping for.

"Hey, ya think you could tip me a couple bucks for delivery so I can buy a beer?" Karl asks.

"Yeah, sure I'll buy you a beer," says the smiling, kind-hearted cashier.

They head back into the store and when Karl returns he's carrying a 40 of PBR and sporting a grin. His faded blue eyes shine as he lowers his wiry frame into the passenger seat. "I tell you, brother, I can scam anyone."

*

Karl first moved to Michigan's Upper Peninsula about a decade ago to enter a treatment program. After completing the program, he met Marty and started working around the shop, doing whatever grunt work he could. He told me once that he tried to stay sober at first, but, "it's just so hard to go to sleep sober." By the time I met him, Karl was back to drinking every day.

During the first few years that I knew him, Karl often caught rides to the casino with me on my way to work. He usually had a six pack ready when I picked him up, and did his best to drain as many as possible on the ride. His outlandish behavior quickly resulted in an alcohol ban from the casino, and eventually a permanent ban for trying to pick a fight with the grey-haired shuttle bus driver and spitting at a security guard. These antics, along with similar ones witnessed in public and at the carpet shop, compelled me to start calling him Krazy Karl among my circle of friends and co-workers.

His propensity for verbal confrontation and sudden mood swings would later make me realize that some type of mental condition, such as bi-polar disorder, might actually be the root of his behavior and substance abuse. Karl understands that his actions often cross the realm of what

is publicly acceptable, but he shrugs this off with a yellow-toothed grin, saying, "I just have a communication problem, brother."

This communication problem now extends to his parents and the rest of his family, who have little to do with Karl anymore. Raised in what appears to be a typical middle class family, Karl seems to be the proverbial black sheep. I never met either of his parents when they used to come to town to visit, but Marty always spoke highly of them, especially Karl's mother. By serving as a surrogate father of sorts, Marty seems to understand their pain.

As we drive back to the Carpet Shoppe, I'm left to my thoughts while Karl cracks the 40-ouncer still clad in its brown paper bag and takes a hefty pull. As a deep sigh of satisfaction escapes him, I wonder if I've tolerated Karl for all these years, even after he admitted to stealing from me, because my own father was an alcoholic. Having not known him until later in life, I never experienced my father's disease on a daily basis. Maybe getting to know and understand Karl is my way of trying to better understand my dad.

I'm broken from these musings when Karl barks at me to pull up by the shop's back storage building to drop him

off. "I can hide my beer back there," he tells me. As he gets out we say goodbye and I start trying to think of an excuse to tell my boss why I'm late for work. As I pull away, one last lyric resonates from the song I've been listening to, Sorry to have to break it to you friend, but life seldom goes exactly as we plan. This seems to be true, even for the ones who don't seem to have any plan at all.

Hope: Spring's Eternal Gift

Baseball season's on the way
Well you better get ready for a brand new day
The Cubs are gonna win today

They're singing, Go Cubs go, go Cubs go
The Cubs are gonna win today
Go Cubs go, go Cubs go
Hey Chicago what do you say?
The Cubs are gonna win today

Steve Goodman
-Go Cubs Go

I've heard it said that spring is the most hopeful of seasons. I must agree, but only partially for the reason most people feel. The change in weather brings an immediate lift in mood, especially after months spent indoors in the northern climate I call home. On those first sunny days, I can't help but smile and soak up the camaraderie I feel towards others. After spending all winter fighting off the urge to hibernate, I finally feel capable of socialization again. The sense of rebirth in nature stirs up similar emotions in me, yet my real attraction to spring hinges on the rejuvenation baseball brings. Because of baseball, I feel like I am able to start over again each spring.

*

Ever since I was a child, I've been drawn to watching the Chicago Cubs. It began during summer vacations spent at my grandmother's place when they were broadcast on WGN almost every day. When I would try turning on my favorite cartoons, the Cubs would be on instead. Always interested in sports, I started watching them and became fascinated. Soon I found myself playing baseball with my G.I. Joe action figures instead of war. I would set up elaborate games on my grandmother's couch, mimicking the game I saw on the screen—my favorite toys taking the place of my favorite team. Hours would be spent swinging a pen at a dried up spitball, as I meticulously kept track of my imaginary stats on paper.

Throughout Little League, I spent most games in right field and second base, positions where the ball is least likely to be hit. As I stood there fearing the ball might be hit to me, not wanting to make a cruel, game-deciding error, visions of Ryne Sandberg playing second for the Cubs flickered in my head. He was the best player on a perennially bad team. Maybe someday I'd be able to scope the ball hit up middle like him, turn on a dime, and throw the guy out at first. Maybe, but usually the balls hit to

me still bounced off my glove or trickled helplessly through my legs.

Even early on, I was able to relate to this team commonly known as the Loveable Losers. Despite having not won a World Series for over a century, the Cubs franchise still boasts some of the most loyal and optimistic fans in all of sports. Every year, thoughts and whispers of 'Wait 'til next year,' echo around the team. Now, as spring training begins in early March, I start to realize I've survived another long Michigan winter. Snow may still lie on the ground and the thermometer may still hover around freezing, but I can't help but find optimism beginning to blossom in my heart. I know snow storms are still coming, that driveways may have to be shoveled well into April, yet the idea that baseball is being played in Arizona and Florida gives me hope. Soon we too will know the freedom of shorts and flip-flops, the privilege of enjoying a beer and a ballgame on a sunny afternoon.

When I was thirteen, my mom took me to my first Cubs game. As we sat in the bleachers smelling fresh cut grass and stale beer, I shook with nervous excitement. When a homerun ball arched its way towards us, I kicked over my five dollar Coke. The ball landed a few rows ahead of us,

leaving me without a souvenir or a beverage. I also remember the fans around us heckling the opposing team's centerfielder with chants of "Want a beer, Lenny?" He had been in a serious car crash the previous year while drinking and driving with a teammate. This may have been the first time I started to realize that the men I idolized were just as flawed as the rest of us.

Years later, I sat in almost the same seats, drinking a beer of my own. If the Cubs centerfielder caught the last out of an inning, he would throw the ball into the fans in the stands. On one such toss, it slipped through a lady's hands, hitting her directly in the nose. As blood gushed between her fingers, an usher led her away to get medical attention. Drunken fans rained down calls of "You broke her nose, Corey!" He didn't throw any more balls into the stands that day.

While in high school, my mom always let me leave school early on opening day so I could come home to watch the game on TV. They played almost all of their home games during the day back then. Like most things, that's changed over the years. The feeling of rushing home, hoping that I would make it there for the first pitch is one I'll never forget though. Even then, I had a sense that there was something special about it.

In the years that have followed, I've often felt like I'm still that kid in right field, afraid to have the ball hit my way. I've made more mistakes than had accomplishments. I've been fired, lost a girlfriend, been thrown in jail on my birthday, and been pushed to the point of bankruptcy, and that's all just in the past year. I've still never caught a souvenir baseball. Never had my nose broke either.

Now as spring training begins, I realize I've survived another long winter in northern Michigan. Snow may still lie on the ground and the thermometer may still hover around freezing, but optimism flows in my heart. As opening day approaches, the feeling that this could actually be the Cubs year continues to build. Right now, we all have unblemished records, and can dream of this year's potential. Maybe, just maybe, if everything falls into place, this could be the year we put it all together.

By the Fourth of July all this hope may be extinguished, but for now, on opening day, everyone's potential is limitless. The past—last year's record, last year's heartbreaks—no longer matter. It almost seems as though time itself begins anew. We've been given a clean slate to start over. Make what you will of the coming year, your past failures no longer matter. Only this year,

and what you do with it, matter now. Let all of our
optimism come to fruition.

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