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# Love in the Time of Cyberspace

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LOVE IN THE TIME OF CYBERSPACE

By

Joseph L. Janca

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2011

## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Joseph L. Janca is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

### LOVE IN THE TIME OF CYBERSPACE

By

Joseph L. Janca

The opening sections of *Love in the Time of Cyberspace*, a memoir, recount an affair the author had at the age of fifteen with a much older woman he met via the internet. What follows is a sort of coming-of-age tale centered around the author's connection to the internet as a social outlet and the rotating cast of women it brings into his life: an heiress to Wyoming oil money; a mousey bookworm who may be too nice for her own good; a troubled, born-again Christian struggling to keep her faith while battling demons from her past. As he becomes obsessed with the idea of meaning something to somebody—anybody—the author ultimately realizes that he must first mean something to himself. Along the way, there are some surprising discoveries, not only about the narrator and the objects of his affection, but about the way technologies have changed how we as a culture socialize—and especially the way we love.

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

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## INTRODUCTION

### **From Memory to Memoir: On Writing *Love in the Time of Cyberspace***

Creative nonfiction has become one of the most popular literary forms over the past few decades. Readers have increasingly found themselves eschewing fictional tales in favor of those based in fact, grounded in the reality we all share. Despite its growing popularity, it seems that the exact tenets of the genre are hard to pin down. I've been a self-proclaimed practitioner of the art for nearly a decade, and even as I prepare to finish up my Master of Fine Arts in Creative Nonfiction, I still find myself occasionally struggling to explain the genre to the uninitiated, to show them where my own work fits into the grand scheme of things.

I've encountered many definitions of the genre over the years and, at a basic level, the one common notion seems to be that creative nonfiction is the application of techniques—voice, structure, description, etc.—normally associated with fiction to create a narrative based on true events. Within the genre fall a number of forms: the personal essay, travel writing, literary journalism, memoir, the list could go on. What they all have in common is a focus on immersion, on presentation. They attempt to draw the reader into the story, as opposed to presenting it in dry, objective statements like traditional journalists.

Of course, the genre of creative nonfiction has its detractors. Their main criticism is the very notion of creativity being applied to nonfictional material. If the presentation of facts is colored by the author's experience, isn't it inherently going to vary from the

truth? I once got into an argument with a colleague which, after a few too many beers, became rather heated. He was convinced that there was, in fact, no such thing as nonfiction. He argued that any time we sat down and put paper to pen or fingers to keyboard, the result would be a work of fiction. Even if the author's intent was to present a factual account, it would inevitably be filtered through that author's viewpoint and sensibilities, making it impossible to objectively transcribe any event with complete factual accuracy. He was threatening the very fabric of my art, questioning that which I had devoted years of my life exploring and practicing.

And he was right. It is impossible to recreate any given moment with one hundred percent objective, factual accuracy. To my mind, the more important factor is intent. A fiction writer sits down with the intent of allowing him or herself to simply make things up, to invent as necessary to tell the story he or she wants to tell. A writer of creative nonfiction must be honest. His or her intent must be to present events in an interesting way, yes, but also in a truthful way. A creative nonfiction author can use knowledge of craft to shape the presentation of facts and events, but must strive to avoid outright invention. This is often difficult, despite one's best efforts. Consider Annie Dillard, who famously began her seminal nonfiction work *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* with a rather striking description of a cat which, years later, she would admit to having fabricated. Many readers felt betrayed in the wake of the revelation, and many questioned whether or not the work could even be considered nonfiction, given the author's admitted invention.

Such deviation from cold, hard fact can be especially tempting in the world of memoir. In fact, the very word *memoir* has its roots in memory, which is nothing if not

fallible. Memory is subjective. Nobody else in the world can recall the past the way we do. Even when an experience is shared, each party involved will have a different take on it. How, then, can one even try to claim that a work based on memory is a work of nonfiction, a work rooted in the truth?

I believe the answer, once again, lies in the author's intent. If we acknowledge that memoir is, in fact, a work of memory and attempts to explore those memories to the best of his or her ability, we are certainly presenting truth while being open about the fact that it is our version of truth that's being explored. In the process of exploring those memories, exploring our subjective truth, things may occasionally be invented in an attempt to fill in the blanks. If you can't remember word for word what was said during a conversation that took place five years ago, but you do know that the conversation happened and can recreate dialogue that at the very least captures the spirit of what was said, does that make it any less true? I would say no. As long as it remains true to your memories. As long as you don't go the route of someone like James Frey, who caused a huge controversy when it was discovered that his supposed memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, was highly fictionalized. Far worse than Dillard's poetically symbolic cat, Frey had greatly exaggerated accounts of his drug abuse and criminal history with the express intent of making the tale more sensational. After the truth was revealed, public outcry was so great that the publisher offered refunds to anyone who had purchased the book and felt betrayed by the author.

That sort of sensationalism is something I have always tried to avoid in my own writing. Thomas Montgomery Fate, in an interview with Scott Russell Sanders, once said that "the best memoirs seem to be not about a remarkable life, but about a life that is

remarkably seen” (Fate, 9). This speaks to Sanders’ ability to find the remarkable in seemingly insignificant moments, to find the awe in the mundane. It also hits on what makes the memoir form so compelling. We have all lived lives which may seem plain or boring to us, but if examined in the right light, we might begin to see how unique our experiences are.

This notion of an unremarkable life remarkably seen would become a driving force behind my work on my own memoir, *Love in the Time of Cyberspace*, though my intentions were not always so humble. In the very beginning, I began work with one singular incident in mind, an affair with a much, much older woman whom I met via the internet at the tender age of fifteen. The very premise smacks with the potential for sensationalism, for exploiting my past to create the most compelling version of those twisted events possible. I could easily have spun things in a way so that the woman in question was some sort of predatory monster and I was a hapless victim. I could have made it a heroic survivor’s tale. And it was tempting at first.

When I first began to write about that incident, several years ago, I had no idea what form the resulting work would take. I had no idea where the narrative would go or what it all really meant. I simply knew that I had been part of this messed-up entanglement and that those sorts of stories seemed to attract a fairly wide audience, so why not try to add my voice to the mix?

I struggled. For years, I struggled, trying to trudge my way through an account of what happened. I could manage to get down a play-by-play of the incident, a basic sequence of events, but I couldn’t seem to get any deeper. I couldn’t capture the

significance, the importance of what happened between that woman and I and the impact it had on my life. I lacked the perspective.

Perspective is perhaps the single most important—and most overlooked by fledgling writers—aspect of strong memoir. All too often, authors attempt to write about events too soon after they initially happened. This often results in the author still being too close to the events, too connected to them. They may be able to relate the details of what transpired, but often fail to capture the impact of the moment. They can capture the who, what, where and when of what happened, even why it happened. But they can't touch on the more important why—why it matters. Why it had such an impact on them and why the reader should care. What they lack is perspective, the ability to take a step back and look at not only the event that seems so important, but to trace the connections it has had to other aspects of their lives.

It wasn't until relatively recently that I was able to finally take a step back and look at that affair in the context of my own life. I was struggling my way through some version of things when a title came to me, *Love in the Time of Cyberspace*. It suggested an unjust comparison to the great Gabriel Garcia Marquez, yes, but it also suggested a larger theme. I had been so focused on that one singular affair that I'd never stopped to consider the impact it had on the rest of my life. Even more profound was the impact the technology that had led to that affair had on my existence. I suddenly had some perspective.

That newfound perspective set me on the path to begin work on my memoir in earnest. My vision was to use that initial affair as a starting point to trace how the internet had influenced nearly every single relationship I've had over the course of my

life. The idea was to use my own personal experiences as a springboard into exploring technology's effects on society as a whole, the way the internet has shaped the way we communicate over the past decade or so.

Of course, as tends to happen over the course of the writing process, that initial vision changed somewhat as I progressed. I've heard it said that the best writing has the ability to surprise. This can apply not only to the reader, but to the author. One of the most rewarding things about writing memoir is that through the exploration of memory, you often find yourself on a journey of self-discovery, and there can be a fair amount of surprises along the way.

Perhaps the biggest surprise—and, in many ways, the hardest to deal with—was the discovery that I was not a hero in my own story. When revisiting past relationships, there is a temptation to make oneself the hero. Whatever went wrong was clearly the fault of the other party. Perhaps it's just a coping mechanism we construct to protect ourselves from having to face our own shortcomings. While working on this memoir, I found myself confronted with my own failings over and over. What could have been a simple story of love and loss, or of romantic conquest, instead became a look at my social anxiety, my awkwardness, my crippling, desperate desire to have someone, anyone, make me a priority in their life.

That shift in focus happened largely as a result of my desire to tell the tale as truthfully as possible. It was helped greatly by the very technology I was exploring. I had, for many years, been obsessive about archiving e-mail exchanges with certain people. I still had conversations from five years or more ago saved, which allowed me a glimpse at certain moments in my life. Perhaps more importantly, I had kept an online

journal, or blog, for several years, and though I'd long since abandoned it, I knew it was still active.

That blog became a valuable resource as I wrote, and had a great influence on the memoir. It also helps to illustrate the way memory can change over time to fit the way we wish things were. I was writing about a transitional period that occurred in a long-distance relationship between myself and a girl who lived in Wyoming. JaNel and I had an on-again off-again relationship for a couple years, and she decided she wanted it to be off again. My memory constructed a scenario in which things wrapped up rather neatly. It was mostly mutual—I'd seen it coming and wasn't particularly broken up over it.

After I'd already written about that era from memory, constructing a painlessly neat transition into the next stage of my life, I revisited my blog posts from that time. I was astonished by what I read. The entries—some of which I've included in the memoir itself—reveal an entirely different course of events. There was no neat breakup, no simply moving on. Rather, she didn't want to be “on-again” in the first place and I couldn't stand it. I whined and obsessed over it constantly, unable to figure out why she didn't want to be with me. When things finally did end between us, something that didn't transpire until far later than I'd initially thought, it was only because I'd found someone new to latch onto. Someone else had come along and shown me a bit more attention, and I jumped ship all too readily to pursue that new fixation.

The information contained in those blog posts, that desperate need for someone to latch onto, would go on to shape the rest of the work. Rather than adhering to the initial, grandiose plan of looking at technology in the larger context of its influence on the way society as a whole communicates, it became much more personal. It became about my

own inability to communicate with the outside world, about the awkwardness of “real” face-to-face exchanges after so much time spent hiding behind a computer screen. In many ways, I feel that only served to make the work stronger. By focusing on the intensely personal, I hope to strike a chord with the universal. The technologies I’d planned at first to explore explicitly have instead become woven into the fabric of my story, a part of who I am. I think this mirrors the way the internet has evolved to become so intrinsically woven into society as a whole, into the way we communicate with each other.

Though the searching I did through my own archives led to some amazing discoveries, I chose to rely on memory for most of the content. Tobias Wolff wrote in a dedication for his memoir, *This Boy’s Life*, “I have been corrected on some points, mostly of chronology. Also my mother thinks that a dog I describe as ugly was actually quite handsome. I’ve allowed some of these points to stand, because this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell.”

Wolff once again raises the issue of fact versus truth, of memory versus history. This is something every nonfiction writer struggles with, and something I faced throughout the writing of my memoir. I did do a bit of “fact” checking against my own blog posts and e-mail archives, and made some corrections to chronology. In the early stages, I even contacted some of the people who were there at various points to see if their recollections matched up with mine. In the end, though, as Wolff did, I let many potential points of contention stand. If I had gone back and fact checked as much as possible, not only would the project likely never have gotten anywhere, but it would cease to be *my* story. A colleague of mine well versed in South American literature likes

to point out that in Spanish, the word “historia” can be used to mean both “history” and “story.” The line between these two concepts is perhaps never more blurred than in the realm of memoir.

And so, in documenting my story, *mi historia*, I found myself relying most often on my recollection, on, as Wolff suggested, the story that my memory had to tell. I acknowledge at some points that there are things I cannot recall, events that transpired or reactions people had that have escaped me over the years. I admit that I have likely invented in some places, or rather my memory has, in the process of attempting to channel my life as I have viewed it onto the page.

It is that process of capturing things in words that perhaps leads to the creative part of creative nonfiction. As mentioned earlier, a basic definition of the genre would be that it applies techniques associated with fiction to true events. Where, then, do those sensibilities arise in my work?

On a general level, it begins with structure. I chose to write chronologically, which is a departure from most of my shorter works. In my essays, I usually employ segmentation to weave various moments together. When approaching this memoir, I made the decision early on to stick to a more traditional, chronological approach. I thought of some of the other memoirs I’d read, Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*, and more recently, Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*. Both cover similar periods in their authors’ lives, the coming-of-age journey from adolescence to young adulthood. By presenting such a journey chronologically, the reader is able to take the journey along with the narrator, to share in the author’s growth. The structure would also allow me to follow the growth of technology, from a time when people who used computers on a regular basis

were viewed as “geeks” or outcasts to present day when it’s strange not to be constantly connected to the internet.

In later sections, I decided to experiment a bit with structure by adding excerpts from my blog. Rather than attempting to re-capture the mood of the time, I thought it might be interesting to insert some material directly from the source, to throw it on the page and say *this is how it was*. The resulting sections serve both to move the narrative forward and to give further insight into my mental state during the time period I’m writing about in a way that no amount of recollection could.

Description also becomes important when crafting a memoir. Whereas more traditional nonfiction techniques would restrict the author to objective details, creative nonfiction fully allows the author’s views and opinions to enter the work. This became critical when describing the various women I found myself entangled with over the years, as my own feelings and desires could come out. JaNel, then, develops into a sort of symbol of lost innocence. Her childish cuteness falls by the wayside when Christina enters the picture, with her air of worldly experience and dangerous curves. Descriptions of other women—the ones I had brief encounters with through dating sites, even larger figures like Molly and Emmye—are often a bit more vague, a reflection of the role they would have in my memory.

Overall, this memoir has been both incredibly difficult and immeasurably rewarding. It is, in many ways, the culmination of a decade spent studying and practicing the art of creative nonfiction. If nothing else, I feel it stands as a testament to perhaps the greatest power of the genre—the ability to lead not just the audience, but the author, on a journey of discovery.

## Love in the Time of Cyberspace

### 1.

The year was 1998, and I was fifteen. Google was not yet a verb in the Oxford English Dictionary. Only a quarter of all American households had access to the internet, though that number was quickly rising. A relatively new technology known as the cable modem began to spread across the land, with promises of blazing fast speeds and the ability to surf the web without hogging a user's phone line. Only twenty percent of Americans owned cell phones.

The internet, at that time, was an exciting place to be. There was no nationwide fear of online scams or predators. No family groups decrying the ease with which a child might access the random pornography that could be summoned with the stroke of a few keys. The internet was a way for people to connect with each other. A way to share information and ideas. A way for socially awkward shut-ins to feel like they weren't alone in the world.

Being one of those shut-ins, the concept appealed to me. I'd always been the fat kid, always been a nerd. For some reason, electronic devices always seemed to make more interesting companions than other kids ever could. Maybe because I didn't have to worry about seeming cool or fear rejection when pushing the power button on my Intellivision II, Nintendo Entertainment System, or Sega Genesis. Maybe because in the worlds those machines allowed me to enter, I could become anyone I wanted: the jock, the sword-wielding barbarian, the gun-toting All-American hero, all rippling muscles and clever one-liners, saving the world and earning the gratitude of women everywhere. The

internet presented the next logical step in this introverted desire to connect with the world while not having to put myself on the line in the process.

And so early each night, I would sit in an office chair in our living room and fire up my family's massive Compaq Presario. It was a beige beast, its tower standing nearly two feet high packed with then-cutting edge technology that today would easily be outpaced by the tiniest netbook. It was my gateway into the world of cyberspace.

My parents would often sit just a few feet away, watching television. I can't remember any exact programming; it's hard to imagine a world before American Idol, Dancing With the Stars, and other soulless reality shows consumed their evenings. Whatever they were watching, their focus never strayed to my virtual ambling, not due to lack of parental concern, but because they trusted me. They knew I was smart enough to stay out of trouble. Thus they gave me free reign over the web and all it had to offer.

The first step in joining the internet revolution was choosing a screen name, a pseudonym that the whole rest of the online community would know you by. I became known to the cyber world as Spanky\_23, not because I was a fan of the Little Rascals, but because my fifteen-year-old mind found the name suggestively hilarious. Well, the Spanky part anyway. The 23 came out of necessity. The server for whatever game I was trying to play at the time would only allow unique screen names, and there had apparently been 22 Spankys before me.

At first, my internet usage was restricted almost entirely to playing video games online. I'd always been an avid gamer, but suddenly I could fight, shoot, race and otherwise compete against other real live people from the comfort of my own home. I didn't pay much attention to the social aspect of the experience; I wasn't interested in

talking to some nameless, faceless entity I'd probably never encounter again anyway. All I cared about was winning, being the best at whatever game I happened to be playing. That changed, however, when another player complimented my technique after I'd won a race in Monster Truck Madness 2. We talked briefly after the game, and he introduced me to a chat program I hadn't heard of before.

That program was Microsoft Chat 2.5, known to most of its users as Comic Chat. The most unique and, at the time, revolutionary feature of the program was that it allowed users to select a cartoon character to act as their avatar, a virtual representative of themselves. As chats went on, rather than simply displaying traditional text-based conversation, the program would generate panels showing the users' avatars talking to each other via speech bubbles. Using an "emotion wheel," one's on-screen persona could be made to reflect feelings such as anger, surprise and happiness. It was like being part of an ongoing comic strip and greatly added to the feeling of talking to other people with unique identities. I was intrigued.

Much of my early experience with Comic Chat was devoted to dropping into random chatrooms and trying to piss off as many people as possible. I didn't understand how anyone could take such online interactions seriously, wasting their time forming so-called relationships with people they'd likely never see in person. I looked down on them, deciding to implement what I saw as clever antics, like seeing how many times I could say "fuck" and other profanities before an administrator would kick me out of a room. Sometimes I'd lurk silently for a while, waiting for someone to say something I thought was funny or pathetic, then I'd latch onto the statement and unload on the poor

fool who'd typed it. The certainty that I wasn't nearly as sad as those people made me feel better about myself.

Eventually I realized that I was even sadder than those "losers." I was using my random assaults on them as a way of working out frustrations I had with my own life. Since starting high school, the whole "fat kid" thing wasn't as much of an issue, but I was still struggling to feel like I belonged. My family had chosen to send me to St. Joseph High School in Westchester, an all-male Catholic school whose biggest claim to fame was its basketball program, which had produced NBA great Isaiah Thomas and served as the setting for the film *Hoop Dreams*. Needless to say, I was not much of an athlete. What appealed to my parents about the school was the fact that, unlike the public school in our district, it was not overrun by gangs, metal detectors, and minorities. The three always seemed to go hand-in-hand from a white, middle-class suburban viewpoint.

Oddly, I think the thing that appealed to me most about St. Joe's was the lack of girls. I'd been alright with them up until the past few years, when they'd started to grow boobs and had transformed from being kids like me into some beautiful, mysterious creatures to be feared and desired. Having seen my grade school crushes practically throwing themselves on the athletes in our class and knowing I couldn't possibly compete, I figured maybe I'd be better off without them.

I actually enjoyed high school for the most part. The absence of the fairer sex allowed me to focus more on academics, and I had no problem remaining a straight-A student. I was in the honors program and therefore shared most of my classes with the same twenty or so students. We all got to know each other fairly quickly and I soon found myself with a fairly large group of "school friends." The problem was that I could

never really turn those “school friends” into simply friends. There was something inside me (my inner fat kid, perhaps) that made me feel like no matter what I did, nobody would ever really want to hang out with me outside of school. So I never even bothered to try.

At least the “losers” online were trying in some capacity. They were outcasts, like me, who for various reasons felt shunned by society. They were the fat kids, the freaks, the geeks, the people who couldn’t just pick up the phone and instantly have someone to hang out with. They were onto something, and the minute I recognized that, Comic Chat began to fill a void in my life. It gave me a sense of belonging. For the first time, I was able to open up a little and actually communicate with people. I discovered an entire community of people with similar interests and desires, people like me who were forging their own society in cyberspace.

To go along with my change of attitude regarding my fellow chatters, I decided to change my avatar as well. When Comic Chat was initially released, the choice of avatars was limited to a selection of hand-drawn, black-and-white comic characters. Soon, however, a character editor was released, enabling users to generate their own avatars. This development added a whole new level of personal expression to the experience, and many people took advantage of it. With the program, you could either draw your own characters from scratch or import images from other sources. Many chatters began to use pictures of their favorite celebrities as avatars. I chose to hide behind a picture of Eric Clapton, whose music I’d become obsessed with. I created my very own character file using various pictures of Mr. Clapton I’d compiled for a website dedicated to him and unintentionally hid my fifteen-year-old self behind the face of a musician thirty-eight years my senior.

Armed with my newly assumed guitar god identity, I permanently set up shop in a chatroom, the cleverly named #ComicCafe. It was populated by a pretty wide range of people. There was Merlin, a fifty-something coffee addict who boasted a six pack a day smoking habit and whose avatar, consisting of a collection of hand-drawn wizards, belied the fact that he was very much the wise old sage of the group. At the opposite end, there was CNSB (an acronym whose meaning I never learned), a twelve-year-old terror who liked to poke fun at the older members of the room even while often seeking their advice. In between were a variety of people from their teens on up to their sixties, coming together in this shared virtual space to talk about the latest news, movies, music, and sometimes just to talk about their day. I looked forward to joining them every night, to the chance to forget about school and life and just be part of something, intangible though it was.

One day, I found myself engaged in a heated discussion with a chatter who called herself Missi. She'd seen my Clapton avatar and, being a fan herself, asked what I thought of his latest album, *Pilgrim*. I told her that discussion could take a while and that we'd better excuse ourselves to a private room, so as not to bore the others to death. I set up the room, sent her an invitation, and proceeded to do my best impression of a music critic while I discussed the pros and cons of the album. It felt like Clapton's most personal album in ages, with some of the most compelling lyrics he'd ever composed. At the same time, the album felt a bit overproduced, which detracted somewhat from the intimacy of the experience. Producer Simon Climie had Clapton playing largely by

himself, while drums and bass were filled in by a computer program, likely in an effort to make the music sound more timely and relevant.

Missi mostly agreed, though she admitted that she wasn't as familiar with the album's history as I was. She just liked the music and, of course, Eric's guitar playing. She was impressed by my knowledge of Clapton's history and my analysis of the album, though she disagreed with my disdain for the modern sound Climie had imposed on it. Our exchange concluded with a mutual agreement that we'd enjoyed the discussion and that we should chat again sometime. She left the room, and I sat thinking about things I could not yet share with her.

What I didn't tell Missi was that I had a far more personal reason for liking the album. Many of the songs were written after Clapton's son Connor tragically died in 1991. They deal not only with Connor's death, but with the exploration of what fatherhood itself means, something Clapton always struggled with, since he'd never known his own father. It took seven years for the musician to get such personal material down on record.

Shortly after the album's release, my own father's longtime heart problems and unhealthy lifestyle lead to his undergoing a triple coronary bypass surgery. In the days leading up to and following the procedure, as I was faced for the first time with the idea that my dad would not live forever, Clapton's album became a sort of coping mechanism. I listened to it almost constantly, letting the warm tone of Eric's Fender Stratocaster envelop me, assuring me that everything would be all right.

I didn't tell Missi about this deeper, more personal reason behind my love for Eric Clapton during our first chat. In fact, I didn't tell her for a long time afterwards. The

internet had become a different kind of coping mechanism for me after my brush with my father's mortality. It was a place I could go to take my mind off more serious matters, to joke around and goof off for a few hours without worry. I wanted to keep it that way, to keep it a means of escape from life's harsh realities. That's why I didn't tell Missi how much the album meant to me.

I couldn't tell her, no matter how much I wanted to.

## 2.

Along with new communication opportunities, the growth of the internet spread the possibility of a new kind of romance. Many people began hitting it off with friends they'd met online and carrying that over into romantic relationships. Just as the internet allowed for fast communication, these online romances could blossom at surprising speeds. I soon found myself growing a deeper interest in Missi.

She represented herself in the virtual world using an avatar based on actress Sandra Bullock. I'd had a crush on Ms. Bullock ever since seeing her in the movie *Speed* when I was eleven, so it seemed an interesting twist of fate that I'd find myself talking to a girl using Sandra's likeness. That, paired with the fact that there was a real, live woman (I was fairly certain at least) on the other end who actually seemed to enjoy spending her nights chatting with me was enough. I was hooked.

We began chatting every night. At first we spent most of our time in public chatrooms, sending each other private messages now and then while chatting with others. We mostly discussed music, building on the mutual love of Eric Clapton that had been the starting point of our relationship. After a while, I started opening up to her a little more. I told her the real reason *Pilgrim* had such an effect on me, and I could tell that my personal connection to the music drew her to me even more.

Eventually, we abandoned public chatrooms almost entirely. We would start our own room, where we could be free to talk about whatever we wanted, without having to constantly hit a special button to hide the conversation from others. We spent our time talking about those others behind their backs, having even more in-depth music discussions, and, eventually, expressing our feelings for each other

I can't remember exactly when the idea of romance entered the equation, but I do remember an extremely awkward chat that likely went something like this (I distinctly remember using a lot of ellipses for added awkwardness):

[Missi has entered the chatroom.]

Spanky\_23: Hi there.

Missi: Hi yourself.

Spanky\_23: Listen, I um...wanted to talk to you about something.

Missi: I'm not in trouble, am I?

Spanky\_23: No, no. It's just that...well...I was listening to "Wonderful Tonight" earlier and um...it reminded me of you.

Missi: Really? Why's that?

Spanky\_23: Well...um...I think I'm starting to like you.

Missi: Like me in what way?

Spanky\_23: You know...*like* you.

Missi: Well if it makes you feel any better, the feeling's mutual.

Once our relationship got to the point where we were throwing around the "L" word, I realized that there were still a few blanks that needed to be filled in. I had learned that her real name was Kathy, short for Kathleen, and that she was from Indiana. I found this second point promising, since my home in Illinois was not too far from the Indiana border.

I began constructing fantasy scenarios in my mind. If Kathy had her license, maybe she could drive to Chicago sometime and we could meet up and see what happened. I'd heard a couple of the guys at school talking about fooling around with

girls lately, and admittedly the thought of such scenarios had begun to pique my own hormone-fueled interest. I wasn't even really sure what exactly one did with a girl, but I wanted to find out. I'd seen Playboy and other nudie mags, sure. I'd been masturbating for a couple years like every other red-blooded American boy. But I'd never actually seen sex, not in a magazine, not on video, and certainly not in person.

So, in the name of research, I began staying up later so I could investigate some of the porn that was so freely available online. I would wait until my parents went to bed, launch Internet Explorer, and scour Yahoo for whatever free video clips it had to offer. I liked what I saw: people doing it missionary, doggy style, standing up, sitting down, any position the mind could imagine and some I'd never thought possible. I started to feel like I had an idea of what sex was. And I knew it was something I wanted to try.

I also thought sex might add some normalcy to my life. I knew from movies and TV that it was something you were supposed to experience when you were a teenager. My (school) friends were starting to talk about it, and I didn't want to be left out. Maybe if I could add losing my virginity to my list of accomplishments, I could finally find the confidence to pursue some real friendships.

This was all just fantasy, of course. I never dreamed of bringing the subject up with Kathy. I had no idea how she might react. In fact, I began to realize that I wasn't sure how she might feel about a lot of things. I wasn't even sure who she was. All I really knew about her was that her name was Kathy, she was from Indiana, and we had similar tastes in pop culture. It suddenly felt odd trying to carry on a relationship with someone I literally knew almost nothing about, but I didn't want to bring up my

reservations for fear of ruining a good thing. Then one night, I got hit by some truth head on.

Kathy and I were in our usual chatroom, the one we had first met in, hanging out with the other regulars. I was, for the most part, listening to music and joking around occasionally, because Kathy was busy conversing with a woman I'd never seen in the room before. I sent Kathy a private message asking who the woman was, and she explained that it was her best friend "in real life," Pam. Kathy also asked me not to say anything romantic in front of Pam, because Pam didn't know about us yet. I agreed, though the request seemed a little odd. Why wouldn't she want her best friend to know that she had a budding romance?

Pammy: So how's hubby?

Missi: Oh, he's fine.

I left the chatroom, but remained signed on to the server. I had no idea what the hell was happening. Who was this woman I'd been talking to? How long had she been married? Why hadn't she told me about it? And just how old was she, anyway? How old did she think I was? I suddenly had a very bad feeling about the whole situation.

"Joe, I want to talk to you." Since I had remained signed onto the chat server, Kathy could still send me private messages. She invited me to a different room, and I accepted.

Spanky\_23: What the fuck is going on, Kathy? You're married?

Missi: Yes, I am. But I won't be much longer.

Spanky\_23: What do you mean?

Missi: I'm leaving him, Joe. I just can't stand to be with him anymore. I can't stand to be around him. I'm going to file for a divorce. I have to get out of here, especially now that I've found you.

For the first time since I could remember, I actually felt my age. I was in way over my head, a kid in the middle of an adult situation. Clearly Kathy was not the fellow teenager I'd imagined her to be. I decided it was time to set some things straight.

Spanky\_23: Kathy, I need to ask you something. We've been talking every night for a while now, and there's one thing we've really never discussed: age. I get the feeling we've both kind of avoided the topic because we weren't sure what might happen if it came up. But I need to know. How old are you?

Missi: How old are you?

Spanky\_23: How old do you think I am?

Missi: I guess I always assumed that the 23 in your screen name was because of your age.

I had a feeling she was going to say that. People had voiced the same assumption before and they were usually shocked when they found out how old I really was. I'd heard that I seemed "so mature for your age" more times than I cared to remember.

Spanky\_23: Well, no, not exactly. It's just a number.

Missi: So how old are you then?

Spanky\_23: Fifteen.

The screen was still for a moment.

Missi: You're telling me that you're only fifteen years old?

Spanky\_23: Yes, that's what I'm saying. So how old are you?

Missi: I'm afraid to tell you.

Spanky\_23: Why? It can't be that bad.

Missi: I don't want to scare you. I mean, I've really enjoyed chatting with you. I love you, Joe. And I feel like this is going to change everything. Let me ask you, how old do you think I am?

I was afraid to even guess, but I knew I had to say something.

Spanky\_23: I was thinking you were in your late teens or early twenties. But after what happened with Pam, I'm guessing I might be just a little off.

Missi: Oh God, I'm so scared. I don't want you to think I'm too old.

Spanky\_23: I don't really want that either, Kathy. I mean, as long as you're not like fifty or something, I don't really care.

The screen paused again.

Missi: I'm forty-seven.

I didn't know how to respond. For a second, I actually laughed out loud. I couldn't even believe that I'd somehow found myself in this situation. I'd been flirting with someone more than three times my age, someone old enough to be my mother. My own mother was, in fact, only forty-two at the time.

### 3.

After the initial shock wore off, I began to reflect. Sure, she had a good thirty years on me, but we certainly had fun talking to each other. They say age is just a number, don't they? Besides, it wasn't like I was being coerced into any kind of sick or illegal relationship. She hadn't lured me into a van with toys and candy. She honestly had no idea how old I was. Neither of us had gone out of our way to disclose our true age, and I could definitely see how she might think I was older. I decided that maybe I wanted to pursue the relationship anyway. We had a lot of common interests, and it wasn't like I had any better prospects.

Kathy was more than receptive of the idea. We agreed that age didn't matter and that we were in love with each other no matter what. From then on, the personal information began to flow freely. She had been married to the same man since just after high school. She'd never even slept with anyone else, and hadn't slept with her husband in years. She stayed with him because she was afraid to try to make it on her own. She stayed with him for the sake of their two daughters, both of whom were older than me. Now, though, she was finally ready to break free. She had a good job, a savings account, and had finally built up the confidence to leave.

We had these conversations, got this far into our "relationship," without ever having seen photos of each other, without ever speaking on the phone or hearing each other's voices. In my mind, she was Sandra Bullock, and I'm sure that in hers, I was Eric Clapton. That's the inherent problem with using someone else's image to identify yourself: the person behind the avatar becomes inseparable from the face they show the world. I began to want more.

Kathy didn't have a scanner, so the best she could do was to send me her old work ID card. That was when I knew I would have to start taking precautions to conceal the relationship from my parents. I checked the mail every day as soon as I got home from school, waiting impatiently for an envelope from Indiana to arrive, praying it would come on a weekday so I wouldn't have to make up a story to explain who it was from.

When it did finally arrive, I was pleasantly surprised. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and a pretty face that didn't really reflect her age. She was much more attractive than I had expected (or feared), and looked a good ten years younger than she actually was. I suddenly felt more excited than ever about our "affair."

Phone calls proved even trickier than mail. We only managed to arrange a handful of them, as neither of us had a cell phone, and I was too afraid to risk talking to her while my parents were home. Not to mention the fact that she had to call me, to avoid questionable long distance charges showing up on my parents' phone bill.

One night, after we'd been carrying on our secret online relationship for a couple months, the notion of meeting "in real life" came up. Kathy was going to be in Chicago for some sort of work-related convention, but she would have some free time on the weekend and wanted to know if we could get together. I'm not sure what her motives were for the meeting, but I had become increasingly interested in the idea of losing my virginity and saw this as the perfect opportunity to accomplish that goal. The fact that I had (or at least thought I had) strong feelings for Kathy certainly didn't hurt matters, though.

We arranged to meet at the Midland Hotel in downtown Chicago. Kathy liked the place because she'd stayed there for a business meeting and appreciated its five-star

luxury. It was convenient for me because it was within walking distance of Union Station, which could be reached via a train I could catch at a station near my house.

All that was left was to come up with a cover story. One of my school friends, Sean, agreed to be my alibi. We'd been in Science Club and Academic Team together, which was about as social as I got. I would tell my parents I was going to spend the night at Sean's. If they happened to call his house for any reason, he would lie and say I was in the bathroom or make up some other excuse to cover for me. Sean was the first to learn some degree of the truth. I told him I was meeting an older woman, but of course I couldn't disclose the real age difference. Instead, I said she was in her mid-twenties. That seemed old enough for her to have a job that could bring her to Chicago but young enough to be too gross. Sean was happy to help me out, and my mom went along with the story without much trouble.

"You're not going to get into any trouble, are you?" She asked.

"Of course not. We're just gonna hang out and play some videogames, maybe watch a movie or something. It should be fun."

"And his mom's okay with this?"

"Yeah, it was her idea, really."

"And you'll call me and check in at night?"

"Yes, of course." That would be no problem, as my family didn't yet have caller ID.

I was nervous on the train. Metra's Burlington Northern Santa Fe line. I'd ridden it dozens, if not hundreds of times since I was a kid, but this was the first time I'd ever done

it alone. I looked around at the brown faux-leather seats, the businessmen reading newspapers, the world tinted green through the windows, and wondered what the hell I was doing. As we bounced past houses, businesses, industrial parks, I found myself reflecting on the series of events that had put me on that train, as well as wondering what I'd find once I got to the Midland. I honestly believed that I loved Kathy, that I was in love with her and she with me. I figured we'd keep the long distance relationship for a couple years, at least until I turned eighteen, and then we could pursue something a bit more real. I'd even started looking at colleges near her hometown in Indiana, figuring things might be easier if I could set up closer to her. I wondered what sex would be like, if it would be as amazing as what I'd gathered from the videos I'd seen or the stories I'd heard the other kids tell at school.

“Next stop Union Station.” The robotic voice over the intercom brought me back to the train. I was almost there.

Navigating Union Station by myself proved a bit difficult. I'd been there countless times, but I'd never really paid attention to where I was going. I just blindly followed my parents, safe in the knowledge that they wouldn't lead me astray. This time, I had no such comfort. I was in the middle of a sea of people who knew exactly where they were going and were in a hurry to get there. I kept feeling like I'd be trampled or suffocated by the weight of the moving mass. I somehow managed to find my way to the Adams Street exit, and the cool air that greeted me as I walked out the door provided some much needed relief from the stifling heat of the thousands of bodies in the underground station.

The relief quickly disappeared as I realized that I was only two blocks away from the Midland. I was scared. I thought about turning around and waiting for the next train home. I thought about walking right past the hotel and exploring the city a bit, seeing what happened. But I knew this was something I had to do.

As I started the walk down Adams, I was suddenly struck by how old everything looked. The rusty bridge across the Chicago River. The great stone buildings, monuments to an earlier time when architecture was as much an art form as a means of creating new office space. The people around me rushing from place to place like they meant it, like they knew exactly where they were going.

When I found myself walking through the doors of the Midland, I was astonished by its elegance. Dark mahogany everywhere, with gold leaf on the ceilings and marble accents all around. This was a five star hotel. I'd never stayed anywhere nicer than a Comfort Inn. I tried to stay calm as I approached the suit-coated woman behind the large, intricately carved mahogany desk. She seemed to hesitate for a moment before speaking to me.

“Hi there, how may I help you?”

“I, um, I was wondering if you could ring the room of a Kathleen Reed.”

“Of course. Just a minute here—“

She dialed a number and handed me the receiver.

Rrrring. Rrrrrrrring. “Hello?”

“Kathy?”

“Joe? Is that you?”

“Y—yeah. I'm in the lobby.”

“Well why don’t you come on up? I’m in room 535.”

“Okay, sounds good. I’ll be up in a minute.”

I handed the receiver back to the woman behind the desk, who gave me a polite smile. I walked over to the elevator and pushed the call button. I glanced over and noticed the desk woman still looking at me. Mercifully, the elevator came and I stepped inside, trying to ignore her gaze.

Once I reached the fifth floor, I found Kathy’s room and paused outside the door. *Do I really want to do this? What if she’s not who she says she is? What if she’s some kind of rapist or murderer? Maybe I shouldn’t have lied about where I was spending the night. Maybe I should just go home right now. Maybe I should just knock, since I’m already here anyway. Worst case scenario, I can just run for it once whoever’s in there opens the door.*

I knocked.

The door opened and standing there in front of me was the face from the ID card I’d gotten in the mail. I was relieved at the familiar sight. We hugged each other briefly and she invited me into her room.

I’d never seen anything like it. There was a king bed with a bench at the foot. The furniture looked as though it had been selected specifically for the room and was nothing like the generic hotel furniture I was used to. There were fancy sconces on the walls. There was a chaise lounge (and I didn’t even know what it was called at the time). This was not a Comfort Inn.

“I can’t believe this room,” I said.

“It’s pretty nice, isn’t it? I stay here every time I come to Chicago.”

“How often is that?”

“Usually once or twice a year for business, but I might have to make it more frequent.”

I was intrigued by the idea that someone could move so freely from state to state. To me, riding the train the twelve miles or so from Lyons to the city seemed like a big achievement. I rarely ever strayed from within a five mile radius of my house. I didn't have a driver's license; I didn't even have a learner's permit.

“Here, I have a present for you.” Kathy reached into a bag and handed me a copy of Eric Clapton's *Crossroads* box set. “I know you're not a fan of compilations, but this one has some previously unreleased material on it, so I thought you might like it.”

“Yeah, it's great,” I said. “You can never have too much Clapton.”

“Sure can't.”

There was an awkward pause, as neither of us seemed sure what to say.

“So, want to go get some dinner?” she said, breaking the silence.

“Sure. Where do you want to go?”

“How 'bout the Italian Village? It's just a couple blocks away and it's my favorite restaurant in the city. You'll love it.”

She had a favorite restaurant in Chicago. She knew the city better than I did.

#### 4.

Arriving at Italian Village, I was surprised to discover that it actually consisted of not one, not two, but three restaurants stacked on top of each other. Kathy insisted we dine on the top floor, at The Village, an appropriate name since the dining area had been modeled after a night time street scene in a small Italian town. The walls were made up to look like a fenced-in courtyard, painted with distant mountains and trees. In the foreground there were faux buildings, complete with three-dimensional awnings and windows. It reminded me of something I'd expect to see at Disney World, not in the heart of Chicago.

At first, I was incredibly nervous. Even though I didn't see anything wrong with Kathy and I being together, I knew the rest of the world wouldn't feel the same way. I was sure that, being in such a public place, people would find us out. I was relieved, then, when we were seated without incident. Nobody shot us any questioning looks or condemning glares. Our table was in a corner, which I was thankful for, as it afforded us the most possible privacy.

My nerves flared up again when the waitress came. She was a pretty young brunette, the kind of girl I probably should have been interested in. At the time, though, I was just hoping she wouldn't sense anything amiss.

"Can I start you off with something to drink?" She asked.

I couldn't find any words. I just looked over at Kathy.

"I'll have a Diet Coke," Kathy said.

The waitress looked at me again.

"I—I'll have the same."

Once the waitress left to get our drinks, I relaxed a little. She had behaved perfectly normally, and as I looked around, I saw that everyone else was just going on with his or her life. Bus boys were bussing, servers were serving, diners were dining, and not a single person was paying any attention to Kathy and me. It briefly occurred to me that everyone else probably just assumed that Kathy was my mother, but I dismissed the thought.

Ordering dinner went much more smoothly than drinks. I don't remember what Kathy had, but I had manicotti, which I tended to order at any Italian restaurant I found myself in. Knowing that the bulk of my interactions with other people were over for the night, I settled into a conversation with Kathy.

“So how often do you come to Chicago, anyway,” I asked.

“Usually a couple times a year. Whenever an opportunity arises, I try to jump on it. I like being in the city, and it's nice that it's only a really short flight away. And it's always nice to get away from home for a while.”

“I'm sure it must be nice a nice change of pace,” I said. I didn't want to pry too much about her home life in public.

I don't remember much else from the conversation. I'm sure we probably talked more about Clapton and music in general, maybe some movies (The Big Lebowski was a favorite of mine that year). Nice and innocuous. What I do remember are the things we didn't talk about: my age, my being in high school, my lack of experience with women and with the world in general. We never talked about those things.

We finished dinner and skipped desert. Kathy naturally picked up the check, as I didn't even have a job yet. We made our way out of the faux Italian night and into the

real Chicago one. On the walk back to the hotel, I asked if I could hold her hand. She agreed, but as soon as our fingers were interlocked, I felt I'd made a mistake. Over the course of dinner, I had grown comfortable with the idea that people probably assumed we were related. At least it provided some sort of cover for the situation. But how many mothers walked around holding hands with their teenage sons? The hand-holding only lasted a couple minutes before paranoia got the best of me and I untangled my digits from hers.

When we got back to the hotel, I started getting anxious. We were alone in the elevator, and that feeling of safety reminded me of why I was there in the first place. I decided to go for it. Well, I decided to ask for permission to go for it, at least.

“Can I kiss you?” I said.

Kathy looked surprised at first, but then she smiled. “Of course.”

We put our arms around each other and our faces moved closer. I wasn't sure what to expect. This would be my first kiss, aside from an innocent peck in grade school that may or may not have even existed outside the realm of my memory. It would be my first real kiss. I closed my eyes, as I'd seen other people do. Our lips found each other and—it was okay. At first it was just plain, closed-mouth, lips-pressed-against-lips, grade school-style kissing. I was underwhelmed. We made a few more attempts, but the results were pretty much the same. When we got to the fifth floor, we put our efforts on hold, playing it cool until we got back to the room.

Once we were behind closed doors, Kathy tried to kiss me again, but I resisted.

“Is something wrong?”

“I just don’t feel like this is working. I mean, I’ve never kissed anyone before and it seems like there should be more to it, or that it should feel better or something. I’m sorry I’m such a crappy kisser,” I said.

Kathy smiled. “You’re doing just fine, Joe. I’m certainly enjoying it.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

I moved in close to her and our lips met again. I grew bolder and soon our lips were parted, our tongues dancing around each other. The appeal of the whole kissing thing started making a lot more sense, and I felt some movement in my pants. That development only served to embolden me further.

“Hey look, there’s a bed,” I said.

“Yes there is.”

“Maybe we should investigate it.”

Kathy laughed and kicked off her shoes. She made her way over to the king-size bed and slowly laid down on it, looking at me the whole time. “You coming?” She asked, patting the mattress beside her.

I took off my shoes and joined her on the bed. We kissed some more and I began exploring her body with my hands. Trying to feel her breasts and behind over her clothes got old really fast, and before I knew it, I was undressing her.

The shirt went first. I surprised myself a little by just going for it. I was beyond the point of asking permission. After she helped me wrestle her sweater over her head, I began fumbling around with her bra. I’d never encountered one before, and soon learned

that there was a reason people in movies always joked about guys having a hard time unhooking them.

“I’m probably making this a lot more difficult than it has to be,” I said.

“Just a little bit,” Kathy said. She turned her back to me. “Here, like this.”

I watched as she unfastened the top hook, then I reached over and tried to replicate the technique on the rest of them. After a little more struggling, I managed to get them all undone, and the bra was flung to the floor.

Her breasts were smaller than I’d expected. Then again, my expectations were built up by the masturbatory fantasies I’d bought into over the past few years, the Pamela Andersons and Carmen Electras whose silicone-enhanced physiques I admired greatly. Kathy was certainly no Pamela, but I still liked what I saw.

Propping myself up on my right arm, I began sliding my left hand over her body. I started with her stomach, making small circles, gradually radiating outward. Her skin was soft, smooth, and secretly I was grateful for that. I leaned over her and began kissing her breasts, teasing her nipples with my tongue. She began to breath heavily and moan slightly. I could tell she really liked what I was doing, and I liked that she liked it. After a couple minutes of that teasing, I decided it was time to take things a little further. I kissed my way down from her breasts to her stomach. I paused there, unbuttoned her jeans, and slid them off of her. Another article of clothing for the collection on the floor. Her panties soon joined her jeans, and she lay there completely naked.

I wasn’t sure what to do next. There was a part of me that was begging for some release, and I was tempted to do its bidding. But I had learned from some of my research that foreplay was usually a part of the whole package, and I didn’t want to disappoint. I

began kissing her again where I had left off, making my way down toward her legs, toward that part of her I wanted very much to enter.

It's an odd feeling, seeing a vagina in person for the first time. Even though I had seen pictures and videos before, none of that prepared me in any way for the experience of looking at one up-close and personal. I knew that it was something that was supposed to be desired, that men were always talking about vagina, pussy, snatch. How amazing they were, all the things you could do with and to them. How great it felt to be inside one. Laying there, my head between Kathy's legs, I had a hard time imagining how this thing could live up to all that talk. I'd reached the gates of the fabled city of El Dorado, only to discover it was made out of pyrite.

I tried not to let appearances deter me. Maybe all would be revealed once I finally reached that crucial moment of insertion. Before I did that, though, I was determined to continue my quest for foreplay. I continued kissing her legs, her thighs, finally coming to the place where they met. I extended my tongue and moved in for the kill.

It was disgusting. None of the smell I'd heard guys talking about, but a strong, oddly acidic taste that was decidedly unpleasant. There was no way I could continue. I was a failure at foreplay. I withdrew my assault, pulling my head away (and trying to do so as calmly as possible).

"Is something wrong?" Kathy asked.

"No, everything's fine. It's just—I'm getting anxious."

"Me too," she said.

Pushing myself back to a kneeling position, I moved myself between her legs. Thanks to my teenage libido, I'd remained ready for action even through the unpleasant attempt at oral sex. Now I was ready for the real thing. I approached with brute force, trying to jab myself into her. It didn't work. I understood the basic idea behind the situation, this goes in there, but somehow I couldn't figure out the execution. Before I could get too frustrated, Kathy took charge.

“Why don't you lay down?”

I did as she suggested. She climbed on top of me, positioned herself over me, and slid down. It was finally happening, and it felt pretty good. That was it, for the most part. Stereotypically, I lasted about a minute or two and then it was over.

Lying there afterwards, I couldn't help feeling a little disappointed. *That's it? That's what all the fuss is about?* I didn't really get it. Sure, it had been pleasurable, but it wasn't exactly the earth-shattering, mind-boggling experience everyone made it out to be. I couldn't imagine spending significant portions of my life chasing after that experience, as it seemed so many others did. It felt like a lot of work for little reward. It was nice to feel wanted, though. To have someone who wanted to engage in such activities, who wanted to be with me despite our different backgrounds. Someone who wanted to talk to me, spend time with me. Someone who could take the initiative, so that I would no longer have to fear rejection.

“Well?” Kathy's voice pulled me from my thoughts.

“Well what?”

“What did you think?”

“It was nice,” I said. “Really nice. It felt really good.” I realized that maybe the problem was me. Maybe I just needed more practice, needed to get used to it in order to really enjoy it. I didn’t want to blow my chances of that happening.

It happened again later that night, in fact. The second time was a little better than the first. We skipped the foreplay, and I ended up lasting a few minutes longer. During that second time, I began to see the appeal. It was the ultimate form of connection with another person, the ultimate form of acceptance. Yes, the physical aspects felt good (especially when it lasted more than two minutes), but it was the emotional connection that really hit me. This woman’s acceptance of me, the fact that she was willing to take me into herself, made me feel okay about being me. Maybe I was a worthwhile person after all.

After the second time, we were both ready for sleep. This led to a couple other firsts for me: the first time I ever shared a bed with a woman and the first time I slept naked. I found the two went together rather well. Something about the openness of it, the two of us lying there, totally exposed and vulnerable really got to me. A lot of the doubts I had about our relationship began to fall away as I looked at Kathy’s body, covered only by the thin bed sheet. She was no great beauty, but she was pretty enough. And she was mine. That thought stayed in my mind as I drifted off.

When I woke up the next morning, Kathy was already showered and dressed. She greeted me with a smile and a cheerful, “good morning.”

“Hi there,” I said. “I guess I should take a shower and get ready to go.”

“Want some breakfast? I could call for room service.” Room service? Another reminder of how far outside my element I was in that hotel.

“No, thanks,” I said. “I really want to get going. Don’t want to miss my train.” Much as I would have liked to have stayed a bit longer, I was quite anxious to get home so I could see if any suspicions had been aroused.

“Oh, okay. Well, I like to get to the airport early anyway, so I’ll just leave when you do.” I could hear a note of disappointment in her voice.

I showered and dressed, and then it was time for us to part. We did so without a lot of ceremony. Kathy walked with me over to the door of her room and we embraced, then kissed. It was a polite goodbye kiss, none of the acrobatics I’d only just learned the night before. We looked into each other’s eyes.

“I love you, Joe,” she said.

“I love you too, Kathy.” We’d said the words to each other countless times online, but this was the first time they were exchanged in person. I realized then, in the moment, that for the first time I felt like I knew what those words meant.

After another brief hug, I walked out the door. I made my way to the elevator, through the lobby (not bothering to notice any glares from the desk clerk), and out to the street. The short walk to Union Station went by quickly, and I made it just in time to board the 10:30 train.

On the train ride home, I thought about how silly I’d been for worrying so much on the ride there. I’d been talking to the woman for long enough that I should have known everything would be all right. I thought about the intimacy we’d shared, the connection I’d felt. The fact that she accepted me, wanted me the way I was. She loved me, and I was starting to suspect that I really loved her.

## 5.

When I returned to school the Monday after my meeting with Kathy, it was as a hero. My friends gathered around as I regaled them with the tale of my sexual conquest. They looked to me with admiration as I delved into every detail of what it was really like to finally lose *it*. At least that's how the scenario played out in my mind.

In reality, I never quite achieved folk hero status. Instead, I had to wait until lunch time, when we could safely gather without risk of being overheard. Once everyone had picked up their random assortment of cafeteria food and bag lunches, I leaned in toward the six souls who made up my core group of school friends and began my hard sell.

“So, guess what I did this weekend?”

Nobody said anything at first. Most of them had already known what I was planning, so there wasn't much room for the element of surprise.

Finally, Andy chimed in, “So you did it?”

“Yeah, I did it.”

“What was it like?”

“What do you think? It was awesome.”

The group listened intently (though not excitedly) as I recounted the details of the journey: the cover story, the train ride, the hotel, and of course, the sex. I altered two items out of necessity. For one, I told them that Kathy was in her mid-twenties. Even though I had accepted the real age difference between us, I knew that most people wouldn't be able to. Somehow, the idea of hooking up with a woman who was ten years

older seemed not only acceptable, but alluring. Hooking up with a woman twice that age would be something else completely.

The other detail I altered slightly was my enjoyment of the experience. Though I had come to really appreciate the intimacy I'd shared with Kathy, I knew that a group of teenage boys didn't want to hear about the spiritual connection, the feeling of being wanted, needed. I didn't want them to see my loneliness, my desperation for some human connection. So instead, I became one of those guys I'd always overheard. Vagina, pussy, snatch. I was giving it to her so hard and she loved it. You guys don't know what you're missing.

That conversation represented the extent of my attempt to build my own lore. Everyone seemed mildly interested and slightly impressed, and that was it. It came up one or two more times, but I didn't want my bragging to seem too obvious, so I dropped it.

It didn't matter anyway. All that did matter was Kathy. She was on my mind constantly. My days seemed to exist only as torturous stretches of loneliness I was forced to endure before I could talk to her again. Much of my time at school was spent daydreaming, fantasizing about the life we could have together in just a few short years; once I was eighteen and she finally left her husband, nothing could stop us. We could be together then, just Kathy and I, and we wouldn't have to worry about what anyone else thought. We could make love whenever we wanted, could lie together as long as we liked.

These thoughts made being apart from her even more unbearable. Our nightly chats weren't enough anymore, not since we'd shared the real thing. I wanted nothing

more than to see her again, to be with her again. She wanted the exact same thing. After two long months, we had our chance.

Kathy managed to find another excuse to come to Chicago, and I magically had another sleepover scheduled at Sean's. All the arrangements were nearly identical to our first encounter. She would get a room at the Midland, and I would take the train downtown to meet her. We would have dinner, spend some quality time alone, then part ways in the morning.

On the train ride to the city, I once again found myself thinking. None of the nervousness I'd had the first time was there, but neither were the wishful daydreams I'd been working on since I last saw Kathy. Instead, I found myself dwelling on one question: *what the hell am I doing?* I mean, I loved Kathy, but how realistic was it to think that our relationship could last? If she had been on the train with me, not a single passenger was likely to assume our relationship was romantic. That wasn't something that would go away in time. She would always be 32 years older than me. She would die well ahead of me, and then what? I'd just be alone again. That is, if she even meant it when she said she wanted to leave her husband for me. In all the time we'd been involved, she'd shown no progress on that front.

I tried my best to push such thoughts out of my mind. I loved her. And I was sure that she loved me. We just had to bide our time until circumstances allowed us to be together. For the time being, I just had to relax. After all, I was on a train on my way to meet her. Nothing was going to change that fact. Nothing was going to change what would happen that night, either. I managed to calm down as the world continued to fly past the window, and before I knew it, I'd arrived at Union Station.

Once I got off the train and started the walk to the hotel, excitement overtook me. I was going to get to see the woman I loved. We had a whole night all to ourselves, and short of someone catching on to the whole affair, nothing could stop us. I looked forward to what the evening had in store.

Once I reached the Midland, things played out much as they had the first time: I rang her room, she greeted me at the door, we hugged. This time, though, there was some kissing before she informed me that she had a gift for me. She reached into her bag and pulled out Eric Clapton's *Crossroads 2* box set.

"Another compilation, huh?" I said playfully.

"This one's all live recordings from the '70s. A lot of the tracks have never been released before, so I thought it was pretty neat."

"Well, I guess I'll allow it, then."

Looking down at the cover, I got the strangest feeling. Why did she feel the need to give me things every time I saw her? Was she trying to buy my affection? Maybe I was being lured into that van after all.

I tried to put such thoughts out of my head before they ruined the whole night. After a little more making out, we headed out for dinner. This time, Kathy recommended Miller's Pub. It was a short walk from the hotel and she said they were famous for their ribs, a claim reflected on their sign.

During this second dinner outing I was much more relaxed. I'd learned that Chicago was a city where people rarely went out of their way to acknowledge the

existence of others. I'd also accepted the fact that most people probably assumed Kathy and I were related, and I didn't care. Whatever kept their eyes off us was fine with me.

I appreciated the atmosphere of Miller's Pub. It felt less formal than the Italian Village, fitting for a rib joint. We were seated at a green vinyl-upholstered booth and quickly decided we'd both have the ribs, which led to my only concern of the entire meal.

I knew from experience that there was really no graceful way to eat barbecue, especially ribs. I didn't want Kathy to think I was a pig or had poor table manners if I got sauce all over myself, which seemed inevitable. I considered trying to use a fork and knife to eat them, but I didn't want her to think I was a weirdo or too stuck up to eat with my hands. Not knowing how to proceed, I sat staring at my porcine tormentor until Kathy finally read my mind.

"Well go on, dig in," she said. I looked up to notice that not only had she started eating, she already had barbecue sauce on her face.

I followed her command and discovered the ribs were deserving of their reputation. Once I tasted them, I stopped caring about what anyone else might think and dug in.

Walking back to the hotel, my appetite for other things began to grow. In the months since I'd last seen Kathy, it had occurred to me that perhaps my initial feelings about sex were due to the fact that it had been my first time and I wasn't sure what to expect. I'd been looking forward to having another chance at it, and as soon as we got back to our

room, I got Kathy on the bed and discovered that things were, indeed, better the second and even third time around.

Lying there afterward, we began to talk about our relationship. She wanted to know how I felt about her, what I wanted to happen between us. She wanted reassurance. And for the first time since I'd started chatting with her, I realized that I wasn't really sure how to respond.

"I love you, Kathy. All I know is that I love you and I want to be with you." I tried to convince myself the words were true as they left my mouth.

"I'm so glad to hear that. I just worry sometimes, because we're so far apart and we can't see each other too often. I'm just afraid you'll find someone else."

"Don't be silly, Kathy. I never want to leave you."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. Because there's something I want to tell you."

"What is it, sweetie?"

"This is hard, because I don't want you to think of me differently." She looked concerned.

"You can tell me anything. You know that."

"Joe—I kind of lied to you about my age."

"What do you mean?" I was almost afraid to ask.

"I'm older than I said I was."

"By how much?"

"Well, I'm really fifty-one."

Silence.

“It’s just that, well, when you asked how old I was, you said ‘as long as you’re not like fifty or something.’ And, well, I really didn’t want you to think I was too old.”

“It’s—it’s okay, Kathy. I mean, a few years is no big deal, right? It doesn’t make a difference in how I feel about you.”

For the first time, I realized that she really did look her age. She looked every one of her fifty-one years. I noticed the wrinkles on her face, especially around her eyes. The blonde of her hair suddenly seemed unnatural, like it had just crawled out of a bottle. The tired look people have about them when they’ve spent too many years working a dead-end job and living an empty life. She looked like somebody’s mother. She *was* somebody’s mother. Hell, she was technically old enough to be my grandmother. And I was lying in bed next to her, both of us naked. I began to panic.

Thankfully, she bought my line about how I felt. We talked a bit more and went to sleep. In the morning, we got up and parted ways. On the train ride home, I couldn’t help thinking about Kathy. Odd that on the way there, things had seemed so certain. Now certainty swung in the opposite direction. I knew I had to end it, but wasn’t sure I had the courage. Besides, the sex was fun, now that I’d sort of gotten the hang of it, and it wasn’t like anyone else would want me anyway. But I knew that wasn’t enough. The whole situation just felt wrong, and I knew that feeling wasn’t going away. It had to end.

It would be another week before I finally told her. In that time, I did plenty of thinking. I began to see things for what they were: we were two lonely people who let our desire to be loved get in the way of our brains. But was it that simple? I mean, at her age, she should have known better. I was just a kid. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. Maybe she had used me, violated me. It was technically statutory rape,

wasn't it? Maybe I should press charges, let her husband and daughters see what kind of sick, twisted woman they'd been living with. I could ruin her life if I so desired.

I wanted to hurt her, to get some vengeance for what she had done to me. But what had she really done, aside from making the same mistake I had? We'd both agreed to everything every step of the way and whether the law said I was too young to know better or not, I knew exactly what I was doing. Besides, I didn't want my family to get dragged into things. It would be bad enough if there were court proceedings, but I couldn't deal with my family knowing I'd lied to them. My parents had trusted me, trusted that I was smart enough to stay out of trouble, and I couldn't let them know how far I had sunk.

I decided to try to end things as amicably as possible. I invited Kathy to a private chatroom one night and simply explained to her that I didn't want to talk to her anymore. It just didn't feel right, and I thought maybe we both ought to try people our own ages. She was upset and confused, but I think she understood. The truth is I didn't care if she understood or not. For the first time since I'd started chatting with her, I didn't care how she felt. I just needed it to be over.

In the years that followed, I would never tell anyone the whole story about how I lost my virginity. Different people got different shades of the truth. Friends were mostly given full disclosure, with a slight variation in Kathy's age ranging from mid-twenties to thirties. At one point, my mother revealed that she had suspected the "sleepover" stories to be a cover. I admitted she was right, and fabricated a version of the tale involving an only-slightly-older girl of eighteen or nineteen. I remember her seeming relieved, as if

she was just glad I'd had some dealings with the opposite sex. I guess that's one advantage of being a socially-awkward nerd: people tend to adopt a "good for you" attitude when you engage in anything even remotely resembling normal human interaction.

My affair with Kathy would become my own personal tall tale of sorts: a legendary encounter, the basic elements of which remained the same but whose details changed depending on the listener. Looking back, I realize that I took this approach not only to conceal the sordid details and their possible legal ramifications, but because it gave me some stronger degree of control over the situation, if only in hindsight. By tailoring the details as I saw fit, I could make myself the hero of the tale, instead of some sad, lonely kid who got in over his head.

## 6.

After things ended with Kathy, I decided to be as up front about my age as possible. I'd never really lied about it, but I let people assume whatever they wanted to assume, and I'd seen how that could pan out. I started to avoid the chat room we'd met in, not just to avoid Kathy, but because I got the feeling that the majority of other chatters were closer to her age than mine. Where I used to feel like I could hold my own in the room, I suddenly felt barraged by things I couldn't really relate to: jobs, spouses, money. It was all too much for me.

I found a new room which just happened to be full of people closer to my age, people who knew what it was like to feel like an outcast. There was Justin, a young Canadian who was struggling with his homosexuality in a conservative household. There was Eric, a not-so-closeted kid from California who would introduce me to a life-long love of Natalie Merchant. There was me, a straight kid who knew what it was like to have secrets of his own. And then there was Melody.

Melody was from Iowa. She was about two years older than me and had just started college. She was a vocal music major—a mezzo soprano. I'd never really known a girl who could sing, and I was enchanted by the notion. She was a redhead, which had been a plus for me ever since I fell in love with Jessica Rabbit when I was a kid.

Best of all, she was a geek. She had great taste in music and liked videogames and Kevin Smith movies and comic books—her online avatar was Wonder Woman. And she was a girl. A girl who was not too far from my own age. And I could talk to her—in the online world, at least—without hesitation.

We soon found our friendship moving outside the confines of Comic Chat and expanding into a program called ICQ. It was one of the first instant messaging programs, though in its early incarnations it was not quite so “instant.” Rather than seeing a conversation unfold on the screen, you sent messages back and forth one at a time. It was like a fast-paced e-mail conversation, with notifications popping up every time a new message was received.

One of the more interesting advantages of ICQ over Comic Chat was that the recipient didn’t even have to be online. You could send someone messages all day long and they would receive them the next time they signed on. It was a good way to arrange chat times, or just to throw quotes from *Mallrats* at someone at whatever time they randomly occurred to you.

Our friendship began to blossom once we started using ICQ. We would still visit Comic Chat and have fun with all our friends, but ICQ felt more personal. Perhaps on some level, it had to do with the removal of the avatars—it was easier to associate the text with the actual person doing the typing than with whatever fantasy they chose to depict themselves with. Whatever the case, we started chatting all the time.

It wasn’t long before I started to develop a crush on her. I knew nothing would likely ever come of it—she lived even further away from me than Kathy had—but I couldn’t help being attracted to her. I loved how unabashedly geeky she was. I felt like I could be myself, in all my awkward glory, and she wouldn’t care.

I was surprised when I expressed my feelings to her and she didn’t freak out. She didn’t reciprocate, but she also wasn’t horrified. She said she liked me as a friend. She thought I was smart and funny and loved how much we had in common, but she just

didn't see me in *that* way. I was more like a little brother to her—the last thing I wanted to hear.

I was getting to the point in my high school career where I had to start thinking about the next step. I'd always loved school and did very well grade-wise, but I never had much ambition when it came to picking a college. I knew I wanted to go to college—had to go, really. And I knew I wanted to study something computer-related. I'd started getting into programming in high school—had even won an award for Computer Science. I just had no idea what I wanted the backdrop of my further nerdy pursuits to be.

Melody suggested I check out her school, Iowa State University. Sure, Iowa might take some getting used to after living in the Chicago area my whole life, but Ames was a nice city. She thought it would be fun to have another friend to hang out with, and I did like the idea of going to a school where I knew at least one person.

I told my parents I was considering the school and we arranged a campus visit. It wasn't until shortly before my mom and I were going to embark on the 350-mile drive to Ames that I told her about my ulterior motive for wanting to visit the school.

And so we were off. We would spend most of the day driving, arriving in Ames in the evening. Melody would come pick me up from the hotel and we'd go hang out for a few hours. I'd come back, get some shut eye, and in the morning, Mom and I would head to campus to meet with someone from the Computer Science department and take a tour.

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I didn't get nervous until after we'd checked in to the hotel. Up to that point, we'd been driving, moving all day. Now I was just waiting, and I wasn't entirely sure what for. I went in the bathroom every couple minutes to make sure I still looked alright. I paced back and forth, waiting to hear a knock on the door. Why bother sitting down, when I might have to hop to my feet again at any moment anyway?

When the knock finally did come, I was wholly unprepared. I realized at that moment that I didn't have any money and asked my mom if I could borrow forty bucks and got agitated when she took her time fumbling through her purse. I didn't want to keep Melody waiting, but I also didn't want her to see me borrowing money from my Mom.

I finally got the cash, dashed to the door, and paused to take a breath before opening it. Standing there was the very same girl I'd seen pictures of: red hair, glasses, a little on the thick side, but cute. I invited her in briefly so Mom could see she wasn't some creepy serial killer, and we were on our way.

Melody wanted to go to a restaurant called The Pizza Ranch. Being from Chicago, this prospect made me nervous. "Pizza" and "ranch" were two words that had no business being in the same sentence. She insisted that their food was good. She'd been to Chicago and yes, our pizza was amazing, but theirs wasn't too shabby.

I agreed, and we went to The Pizza Ranch, and the pizza was actually pretty decent. The same could not be said of the conversation. I froze. Poor Melody tried, but could barely manage to get monosyllabic answers out of me. I just didn't know how to

talk to a girl my age in person. I hadn't really been around girls my age since grade school.

After dinner, she took me to meet another guy friend of hers. Maybe she thought being around another male would help me relax, or that I might hit it off with him because he played guitar. Maybe she just didn't want to be alone with me anymore. Whatever the case, we were there for maybe a half hour before I said maybe I should get back to the hotel so my mom didn't start to worry about me. Melody drove me back to the hotel and we said our goodbyes.

I toured the campus the next day, and it was nice, but I knew I wouldn't end up going there. I wouldn't talk to Melody much anymore. If we couldn't even have a conversation in real life, what was the point of trying to carry on an online friendship? I wanted to blame her. She was the one who made it awkward. Once she met me in person, she couldn't accept me for who I was. The truth, of course, was that I didn't even know who I was. I knew who I wanted to be, and I knew how to portray myself as such online. But in person, in real life, I had no idea how to express myself, how to be the person I wanted to be.

## 7.

One interesting feature ICQ offered was the ability to search users' profiles. Your profile could contain as much or as little information as you wanted, but many people chose to at least include their age and location. This made it possible to find other people in your area to chat with.

Unfortunately, the feature also made it possible for other people to find you. After what happened with Kathy and, subsequently, Melody, I took an extended vacation from Comic Chat, leaving ICQ as my only means of communication with the virtual world. Having to deal with random messages from people (or advertising programs) I didn't know who had found me through the search function quickly became annoying, and I considered turning my back on the online community entirely. After all, I had finally gotten to know some of my high school classmates well enough to consider them friends, had even started hanging out with a couple outside of school on occasion. If I wanted, I could just call them and make "on occasion" into "fairly often." That was what teenagers did, right? They called each other and "hung out," whatever that meant.

I never really got to learn what hanging out consisted of, because I never built up the courage to pick up the phone. Every time I considered the prospect, an overwhelming fear of rejection would hit me and I'd end up back where I'd started. Once in a while, my "real" friends would call me to go to a movie or concert or something, but for the most part, I continued to spend my evenings online, chatting with a handful of virtual friends, and ignoring all the random ICQ messages from people I didn't know and had no interest in knowing. Most of them were nothing but advertisements for porn sites anyway, and the ones that weren't were probably creeps looking for their next victim.

One day, something strange happened. The little flashing envelope popped up in the lower right corner of my monitor, alerting me to a new message on ICQ. I double clicked to open the message, saw that it was from someone named JaNel, whom I'd never heard of, and—I paused.

Perhaps it was the simplicity of the message. There, against a grey background, in black letters, was simply written “Hi.” The creeps and advertising bots usually wrote more, trying to lure the reader in. Maybe I wondered if this JaNel person was like me, looking for someone to connect with. Maybe I was just bored. Whatever the reason, instead of ignoring the message, I responded.

“Hi there,” I wrote. Clicking the send button, I immediately wondered why I'd bothered. It was probably just an advertisement anyway. Not all of them went into the hard sell right off the bat. Some waited for a response, so they knew someone was actually reading it. I'd seen them before.

Another blinking envelope. Cla-click of the mouse. “How's Chicago treating you?”

Chicago? How did—how the hell did this person or thing know where I lived? Paranoia gripped me for a moment. Maybe it was a creeper. Maybe I was being stalked. Maybe they were—my profile. He, she, or it had read my profile. Maybe even searched for people in the Chicago area, and found me somehow. I was terrified. And intrigued. I had to explore the situation further, see how things played out.

“Do I know you?” I wrote back. The direct route seemed best under these circumstances.

“No. I just saw you were my age and from Chicago, so I thought I'd say hi.”

Now this mysterious entity was claiming not only to be a female, but the same age as me. I had to know more.

That first night, I learned a lot more about JaNel, starting with the fact that JaNel (capital J, capital N) was her real name. She was my age, seventeen. She lived in a small town in Wyoming, where everybody knew everybody. She'd been dating the same guy on and off for the last four years. She'd messaged me for no other reason than that I was from Chicago, and she'd never been to a big city before. Well, that and the fact that she had a cousin named Joe, and she took the similarity in our names as a good omen. She no doubt hoped I'd shower her with tales of my sordid adventures in the city's underbelly. The best I could muster were the same old moves. I told her about my love of music, of Clapton especially. She was mostly into country, but liked some rock. She seemed impressed with my high school's *Hoop Dreams* connection. It was a strange, superficial conversation and at the end, I felt I'd fallen completely flat.

The next night, she messaged me again.

In the weeks and months that followed, JaNel and I formed a strong friendship. We'd talk about things that happened at school: teachers, tests, friends, fun things like that. Normal things. I realized that it was a nice change actually being able to talk to someone my own age about matters teenagers should be talking about.

One topic JaNel and I spent some time discussing was college. More specifically, trying to decide which colleges to attend. The extent of my college searching had been that ill-fated trip to Iowa State University. Ever since that ended so disastrously, I hadn't given the whole college thing much thought.

By the time I reached a point where I really had to choose a school, I only had two viable options: Loyola University in Chicago, or Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Michigan. The former was a prime option because my mother, a nurse, worked for a hospital owned by the University, whose benefits included free tuition for any family members of full time employees. Nice as the campus was, I was put off by my visit. Located between State Street and Michigan Avenue, the campus is right smack dab in the heart of the city. I could already imagine the anxiety a shut-in like myself would experience amidst the hustle and bustle of such an urban environment.

That left Northern Michigan University. It was really an option for one simple fact: my brother, Ed, had gone there. In fact, he would still be there during my freshman year, since he'd found himself on the five-year plan. I'd visited the campus and surrounding community enough in the time he'd been there to know that I liked the area. Nestled in Michigan's Upper Peninsula (a place I'd never even heard of until Ed decided to move there), NMU is located in Marquette, a small (or large, depending on where you're from) city of about 20,000, surrounded by forests and Lake Superior. The perfect place for a recluse. Another draw was the fact that the school had a program wherein all students were issued a laptop computer. I'd never had a laptop, but the notion of being able to access the internet from anywhere certainly appealed to me.

JaNel had decided to attend Black Hills State University in Spearfish, South Dakota. She chose the school because of its location, about an hour away from her hometown. Close enough that she could see her family regularly, but far enough that she could still meet some new people and have fun away from her parents.

As high school drew to a close, JaNel and I continued to chat on a regular basis. We exchanged pictures, and I was surprised by what I saw: she looked like a normal teenaged girl. Long dark brown hair, brown eyes, and dimples on either cheek that showed when she smiled (which seemed to be quite often). She was a couple months older than me, but I couldn't get over how young she looked. Not that she looked young for her age, just that she was so young compared to Kathy. It was refreshing—and attractive.

Eventually, JaNel broke up with her boyfriend, Derek, an event I may have at least partially set into motion. Over the months we'd been talking, it became obvious that she had self esteem issues, and he preyed upon them to establish control over her. I encouraged her to assert herself, to stop playing into his hand. Eventually, she built up the courage to break up with him. I was there to comfort her, as much as I could in text form. My intentions were entirely noble; after all, as large as the distance between Kathy and I had seemed, it was nothing compared to the thousand-odd miles that separated JaNel from me.

Whatever my intentions were, they quickly fell by the wayside, as JaNel and I both realized we had started to develop romantic feelings for each other. The timing couldn't have been better, with both of us preparing to move on to new chapters in our lives, surrounded by new people, places, and possibilities. We both knew we were doomed from the start, and yet we couldn't help the way we felt.

Moving away for school wasn't as traumatic as I'd feared. While I'd always been a complete homebody, knowing that my brother was in the same town made things a lot

easier. He even hooked me up with a job at the Wildcat Den, one of the cafeterias on campus, washing dishes in the kitchen. Though far from the most glamorous job, it was nice to have some spending money, and some added structure to my days in addition to class.

Also helping to lessen the trauma was the fact that Josh, one of my best friends from high school, had also decided to attend NMU. We became roommates, and having a familiar face around certainly had its benefits. Of course, living with friends also tends to have its downside, and that held true in our case.

One thing that added to the tension was the fact that I'd begun talking to JaNel on the phone. A lot. I had a cell phone, but it was really for "emergency purposes" only. This was still in a time when usage minutes cost a lot of money, so for the most part, I was forced to use the landline supplied in our dorm room. I went through a lot of phone cards and Poor Josh often had no recourse other than to hope listening to music through headphones would drown out the conversation.

Preparing to talk to JaNel on the phone for the first time was one of the hardest things I'd ever done up to that point. I literally shook with anticipation and nervousness. Josh was at work or at a football game or somewhere, leaving me all alone in a very large, very empty dorm room. There was no reason for me to be nervous. We had just been chatting online. It wasn't like I had never talked to her before. That was the thing, though. I hadn't ever *talked* to her before. The importance of that distinction hit me all at once.

I dialed the number she had given me. Then I hung up the phone before a single ring could make its way through.

I dialed again. Same story. *This shouldn't be so hard.*

I breathed deeply, deliberately. *In through your nose, out through your mouth.*

*Wax on, wax off.* I dialed again. Ring. Ring.

“Joe?” My name being spoken in a voice I’d never even heard before. She didn’t even bother saying hello, which would have eased me into the conversation. No, she went for the throat, made things personal right off the bat.

“Uh—hi,” I said. “How are you?”

“I’m great. It’s so good to finally hear your voice.” Her enthusiasm belied none of the nervousness I felt.

“It’s—it’s great to hear your voice too.”

Despite the awkward note the conversation began on, I eventually calmed down, and we talked for over two hours. Such long conversations quickly became the norm, leading to a deeper connection between the two of us and a deepening divide between Josh and me. Apparently he didn’t enjoy having to listen to our lovey-dovey chatter whenever he wanted to spend time in *his* dorm room, and I honestly couldn’t blame him. Still, I couldn’t stop talking to JaNel.

Fortunately, around the same time tensions were running high enough that Josh and I didn’t speak to each other even if we were in the same room for extended periods of time, I got a better cell phone plan. I could finally take advantage of the mobile nature of the device to talk to JaNel from virtually anywhere, and I usually tried to be anywhere but in my dorm room when I did. I still had to be careful about minutes, though. They were extremely limited during the day. My new plan included unlimited calling on nights and weekends, but unfortunately “nights,” according to my service provider, didn’t

begin until 10 P.M. This fact lead to many late nights spent sitting in my parked car or walking around campus, hoping I wouldn't lose coverage mid-conversation.

The more JaNel and I talked and the more I learned about her, the more I liked her. She'd lived in the same small town her whole life. In fact, her family owned a huge spread of land, which most of them lived on. They were wealthy, being involved in the oil business in some capacity, though she stressed the fact that their fortune had come as the result of endless hard work. They drove pickups and rode horses and drank and played guitar. The Old West fantasies I'd never had as a kid began to slowly creep up on me.

## 8.

By spring of 2002, the end of my freshman year, a number of things had changed. Josh and I had patched things up, though he decided to move back home to be closer to his family and girlfriend (who promptly dumped him within a month). My major had changed from Computer Information Systems to English Writing, a decision based simultaneously on the encouragement of a composition instructor and my realization that I hated math. I had a growing appreciation for the freedom inherent in living four hundred miles away from my family. And I was infatuated with a girl who lived half-way across the country.

Fortunately, things were looking up with regard to that last point. My dad's brother and his family, along with my grandma, had recently moved from their homes on the very same block my parents lived on in Illinois to Billings, Montana. We weren't really sure what prompted the move, but as my parents and I planned a trip out west to visit our family, I began to feel the footsteps of opportunity strolling along into my mind.

We planned our vacation to last ten days. We would leave Saturday, making two overnight stops before arriving in Billings on Monday. We'd spend the week there, then leave for home the following Saturday. As fate would have it, one of our planned destinations along the way was Deadwood, South Dakota. My parents were excited about experiencing the history of the location, remembered for its Wild West gamblers and gunslingers. I was excited because I realized Deadwood was only about twenty miles away from Spearfish, the town where JaNel lived.

When I talked to JaNel about it, we were both ecstatic.

“I can’t believe this is finally happening,” she said. “I can’t wait to be with the man I love.”

Our relationship had reached that level and we’d never even met in person. I was excited, but part of me was afraid the whole situation would turn into a repeat of the Kathy ordeal. What if we got together and everything just wasn’t as great as we’d imagined it to be? Some degree of disappointment seemed necessary, given all the time we’d spent building each other up. Still, I had a feeling that things would be okay. I felt a real connection to JaNel, something I realized Kathy and I never had. The fact that we were both teenagers, just starting college and struggling to figure out what we wanted from life gave us a lot of common ground. The city boy/country girl dichotomy just made things even more interesting. Plus it just seemed like it would be nice to spend some time with someone my own age. Maybe I could even be intimate with someone my own age, an outcome that seemed very possible given some of our recent conversation.

We’d been chatting on Microsoft’s MSN Instant Messenger when she told me she had to talk to me about something.

“I feel kind of weird talking about this,” she said.

“Don’t, sweetie. Whatever it is, I’m sure I’ll understand.”

“Well, you know that I was with Derek for a long time, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, in all that time, we never…”

“Never what?”

“We never had sex. I’m still a virgin.”

I was shocked. How could someone as cute as her still be a virgin, especially when someone like me wasn't? My mind was full of questions—and excitement at the possibilities the situation presented.

JaNel went on to explain that it wasn't for lack of trying on her part. Apparently Derek was incredibly shy about any physical intimacy, wanting to save himself until he was sure he had found “the one.” I had to wonder if perhaps he didn't have some deeper issues he wasn't ready to face, but whatever the case, I started thinking of his loss as my potential gain. There's something about the idea of being the first that appeals to men of a certain age group, and at nineteen, I was firmly in that range.

As our trip out west drew nearer, I realized that I would eventually have to talk to my parents about the JaNel situation. I was nervous, not just because the chances of their going along with it seemed slim, but because the more I thought about things, the more I realized how crazy the scenario really was. The idea of maintaining a relationship with Kathy, who lived just a few hours away in Indiana had been bad enough. Now I was staring down the barrel of holding down a relationship over the span of nearly a thousand miles. And what if she wasn't who she said she was? Sure, there had been the countless pictures exchanged, the phone calls. I could at least be sure by her voice that she was most likely female. But what if the pictures weren't really her? What if she was another Kathy, a desperate old hag looking to take advantage of little old me?

Supposing that there was only one way to really be sure, I resolved to approach my mom first and try to gauge her reaction. She didn't seem very surprised.

“I think you spend too much time online,” she said.

“Gee, thanks, Mom,” I replied. “I know it sounds kind of weird, but we’ve become really good friends.”

“Are you sure about this girl?”

“About as sure as I can be. I mean, I’ve been talking to her for almost a year now, so if something wasn’t right, I think I would have caught on by now.”

“Where would you meet her? You plan on being safe about that, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I was thinking I’d have her meet me in the lobby of the hotel. That way, if she turns out to be a weirdo, I can just walk away or yell for help or something.”

“Well that sounds like a good plan.”

“Yeah. I have tried to think this through a bit. I mean, I do plan to be careful. I just feel like I have to do this.”

She agreed to talk to my dad about the change of plans and promised she’d persuade him to go along with it.

Having gotten parental approval, I was anxious to tell JaNel the good news, and did so during our nightly chat. She was even happier than I was, and we set about making plans for our rendezvous.

“So how long are you even going to be in Deadwood?” She asked.

“Just one night. I mean, we were just going to stop on our way to my uncle’s.”

“How long were you planning to stay in Billings, then?”

“About a week.”

“Well,” she said, “what if you stayed here with me for a few days?”

My mind went blank. I saw her words, but couldn’t even begin to comprehend them. Now this girl who I thought I was pretty sure I loved but who I’d never met and

who lived halfway across the country was asking me not only to meet her in the flesh, but to spend an extended period of time with her. Stunned though I was, my mind began racing toward other possibilities involving flesh. “Seriously?” I asked her.

“I don’t see why not. I mean, I have my own place. Assuming we get along in person as well as we do on here, I think everything should be fine.”

“But what about my family? We were planning on coming back through Spearfish on the ride home, but I would like to get to Billings to see my uncle and grandma.”

“I could drive you,” she said. “I go out that way all the time.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

“I just hope you won’t think any less of me because I live in a trailer.”

That part would be new for me. Being from the Chicago suburbs, I’d always heard people talk about “trailer trash,” and had driven past a trailer park (or trailer court, as they’re so regally referred to on occasion) once or twice, but I’d never actually known anybody who lived in one. JaNel had told me that a lot of people out that way lived in trailers, because it was easier and cheaper than trying to build a more traditional home, especially in more rural areas. She lived in one her parents had bought for her to use while she attended Black Hills State University. Since I had been stuck living in a 12’ by 12’ cell of a dorm room, I couldn’t help being envious of her trailer.

“Of course I won’t think any less of you,” I said. “I’ll be happy just to spend time with you, wherever that might be.”

With that, we set about making our own plans. She would pick me up from the hotel in Deadwood Sunday night. Then I’d stay with her until Wednesday, when we

would depart for Billings. It was surprisingly easy to convince my parents that spending three days with our relatives was more than enough for me, and that it was a good idea to let me go off and live in sin with a strange girl for a couple days. Perhaps they were once again just happy to see me showing some interest in women.

## 9.

The drive was excruciating. Two days stuck in the car with my parents and only one thing on my mind. My family and I had gone on countless vacations over the years, most of them road trips. I loved nothing more than sitting in the back seat, watching the country blow past me while I listened to my CD player. This time, though, I was nothing but impatient. I couldn't stop thinking about her, wondering if she was really as young and beautiful and funny as she seemed. Wondering if she'd go running in the opposite direction once she saw me in person. Wondering if my parents were crazy or amazing for going along with the whole venture.

I survived somehow, and on the second day of our trip, we arrived in Deadwood in the early afternoon. Wild Bill and Calamity Jane were far from my mind as I spent the remainder of the day exploring the historic town with my parents. I was to stay with them until after dinner, at which point they would continue enjoying the nightlife while I took a trolley back to our hotel to await JaNel's arrival. We had decided it would be best to meet in the lobby—a public place—just in case. Not that we didn't trust each other, but one could never be too sure.

The trolley ride back to the hotel felt even longer than the two day car trip. A lot of the same questions came up, along with some new ones. The one that kept hitting me over and over again was what if she's another Kathy? Now that we were on the verge of meeting in person, it suddenly made no sense that such a young, attractive girl would have to resort to strangers on the internet for love. What if she was another old, washed up hag? Or worse, some creepy old man looking for a bad time? At least I had known

Kathy was old when I went to meet her. This time it seemed like there was a fairly high likelihood of an unpleasant surprise.

I got back to the hotel around 6:30, which gave me a half hour before our planned meeting time. I took the opportunity to fix my hair a bit and make sure I looked good. I also tried to do some deep breathing to calm my nerves. I felt like this moment could change the course of my life. This could be the first time I connected with a girl my own age, a pretty one at that. It would be new territory on both fronts. Most girls my age seemed preoccupied with pretty boys and jocks. As for the “pretty” part, Kathy may have been fairly attractive for her age, but her days of turning heads had long since past. It was strange to think that I might soon be with a girl I could be proud of.

After I was sure I was as calm as I’d ever be, I headed downstairs to the lobby. I made my way to a couch that had been sat on so many times its cushions may as well have not even been there and had a seat. I waited a few minutes, looking around impatiently, then another unwelcome thought found its way into my mind. What if she simply didn’t show up? This was before the age of nationwide cell phone plans and roaming fees were astronomical, which meant that there was no way I could contact her. I could (and would, if necessary) sit in this stupid lobby all night waiting for a dream girl who would never materialize.

I tried to distract my mind by looking through a display of brochures for area attractions. Most of them sought to offer tourists like myself a chance to experience a taste of the Old West first hand. There were opportunities to pan for gold, witness a staged shoot-out, and of course, gamble (still one of the biggest draws of the West). I decided to look through a brochure about the daily, historically accurate gunfights

(“Right in the heart of downtown Deadwood!”) in an attempt to both kill time and try to make myself feel less awkward for sitting in a hotel lobby by myself for an indeterminate amount of time.

Shortly after I finished reviewing the map on the back of the brochure for the umpteenth time, I noticed the automatic doors opening out of the corner of my eye. I turned, expecting it to be yet another middle aged tourist couple returning from dinner, but instead my glance was met by a beautiful young brunette looking rather comfortable in shorts and a t-shirt. It was JaNel. I couldn’t help noticing how smooth her legs looked, how her shorts hugged her hips so closely—how her t-shirt seemed tailored to her curves. I was simultaneously relieved and excited. Then I became terrified. She was even more beautiful than I’d ever imagined. No, not beautiful. Sexy. JaNel was sexy. And I was still just a fat kid from the Chicago suburbs. As soon as she took one look at me, she would laugh in my face and leave. I found myself wishing the Authentic Wild West Shootout brochure was five times bigger so I could hide behind it.

It was too late, though. She’d seen me. She bounced over to me with a smile and I stood up. We hugged.

“Hey, stranger,” she said.

“Hey yourself,” I replied.

She smiled wider. I smiled too. We decided to head back up to my parents’ room so we could talk for a while and I could gather my things.

It helped that my parents had rented a suite. When you first walked in, there was a living room area with an armchair, a couch, a television and other amenities aimed at making

the traveler feel at home. Of course there was also an abundance of drab colors and generic paintings, but it wasn't entirely unpleasant. Certainly better than walking into a room containing little more than two beds and a lot of sordid ideas.

She had a seat on the chair and I grabbed my guitar and headed for the couch. I'd made a point to bring the instrument with me on the trip, in hopes of impressing JaNel with my half-assed acoustic renditions of Pink Floyd and Eagles tunes. Now, though, I found myself holding it because it gave me something to hide behind. I hoped that the large, hollow body would obscure my own large, flabby body.

I started toying around with the opening notes of Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here," one of those songs everyone who is starting to play guitar seems to learn. I kept glancing over at JaNel, trying to figure out what to say to such a lovely creature, then turning my gaze quickly back to my fingers on the guitar's neck.

"So, how was the drive?" She asked just as I reached the hardest part of the intro, the part requiring the most concentration and finger work.

I kept playing for a moment before hitting the wrong string and giving up in frustration. "It was okay," I said. I told her about the sights we'd seen and how much I enjoyed seeing America like that. I also told her about the anticipation, how I couldn't wait to see her and was afraid she wouldn't show up.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know. I guess I was just nervous because you're so beautiful and I—"

"Joe, I love you for who you are."

"I love you too."

She stood up. I set my guitar down and joined her. We embraced, then she moved in and kissed me, full on, her tongue finding its way into my mouth. All my nervousness suddenly disappeared with the rush of blood I felt in that moment.

10.

The drive to Spearfish was a quiet one. JaNel had made a mix CD for us to listen to, and listen we did. It was an eclectic mix, with some country and pop (I seem to recall Shakira making an appearance), but mostly the type of older stuff I enjoyed listening to. There were a few Clapton tracks and at least one by The Eagles, who were her favorite band. It was a great mix, and the fact that our musical tastes were so similar helped me relax a bit. I couldn't get too comfortable, though, as every time I glanced over at my beautiful chauffer, my pulse quickened.

As we pulled into town, Van Morrison's "Into the Mystic" came on. JaNel turned the volume up to the point that I could feel the opening bass line.

"I love this song," she said.

"So do I."

She began to sing along, her voice surprisingly capable. Just as she and Van reached the opening line of the chorus, "I want to rock your gypsy soul, just like way back in the days of old," she reached over and grabbed my hand. As our fingers intertwined and her grip tightened, I knew that we were, indeed, sailing toward something mystical.

"Welcome to my humble abode."

I'd never been inside a trailer before, but it wasn't the terrifying experience I was expecting. It looked like a house. Or maybe an apartment. But I could definitely imagine people living in places like that, despite the dark wood paneling and hideous shag carpeting which suggested it hadn't been remodeled in quite a while.

There were two bedrooms, and JaNel explained that she had a roommate but that the other girl was out of town for a while, leaving her all by her lonesome. She'd been thinking about kicking the roommate out anyway, as she was a partier and disrespectful. She had the power to do that because she owned the trailer. Her parents had bought it for her outright, so that she could have her own place to stay while at school and not have to worry about dorm life.

“Hold on one second, let me go check something.”

She went into one of the bedrooms, the one I would soon learn was her roommate's, and came out holding a sweater.

“This is gross,” she said. “I let her borrow this last week and she never gave it back and now it smells like smoke and whore.”

I laughed at her description. “I guess it's a good thing she's gone, then.”

“Yeah, it is. I hate that bitch.”

“I can see why. Plus, her absence means we have a lot of alone time.” I surprised myself by coming right out with a line like that. I always felt awkwardly reserved when it came to talking to women, and girls as pretty as JaNel usually scared me silent.

I was even more shocked, then, when I found myself walking toward her. She didn't back away. Instead, as I put my arms around her and moved my face in, she closed her eyes and returned my kiss.

We kissed some more and I started exploring her young curves with my hands. I couldn't wait to see her naked, and fortunately I didn't have to. While we were making out, we had somehow maneuvered our way to the door of her bedroom, and I just went for it. I pulled her shirt up over her head and threw it on the floor. Her shorts soon

followed. And there was a gorgeous nineteen year old girl standing before me in nothing but a black satin bra and matching panties.

The rush of blood I'd felt at the hotel was nothing compared to what hit me now. I pushed her down on the bed and kissed her some more. I slid my hand down her body, homing in on that most sacred of entrances. Part of me expected some sort of protest. Things were moving pretty fast and I wouldn't have been surprised if JaNel asked me to slow down. She never did, so I kept going.

Before I knew it, we were both completely naked and, less than two hours after we'd met in person for the first time, I was preparing to enter her.

"Go slow," she said.

I had to remind myself that this was her first time, that it would be best to ease into things. Restraining myself was a bit difficult. I felt oddly more confident than I had with Kathy, maybe because I was the "experienced" one this time. Or maybe because JaNel was so young and attractive that I just couldn't wait to have her. Either way, I did my best to be gentle and due to my eagerness and her tightness, the first time lasted only a few minutes.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I guess you got me really excited."

"It's okay, baby. It felt amazing. Besides, we have plenty of time to work on it."

Baby. I was now baby. I couldn't believe someone like her could see me that way. It had been easy to say that we loved each other before, but I was beginning to really feel it. I already felt more comfortable with JaNel than I ever had with Kathy. I couldn't wait to see what the rest of our time together had in store.

I didn't have to wait long before I found myself engaged in another round of lovemaking. We tried to switch things up a bit by attempting doggy style, but couldn't figure out the logistics of it. After several failed attempts at getting the right angle, we gave up and went back to missionary.

"I feel like this is how old people do it," JaNel said.

I couldn't tell her how right she was. Instead, I tried to push any thoughts of Kathy out of my mind and focus on the present. She asked me to be a bit rougher this time, and I was. Despite the increased activity, I lasted significantly longer and when I finally finished, I collapsed next to her on the bed, looking over in wonder at this girl whose life had somehow become entangled in mine.

She looked back at me with brown eyes that always seemed to have a spark in them. "I love you, Joe Janca," she said.

"I love you, too." I wrapped my arms around her and we both fell asleep, naked and smiling.

When I woke up the next morning, JaNel was still sleeping next to me, her head resting on my arm. I had to go to the bathroom, but I didn't want to disturb her, so I just lay there, looking her naked body up and down and replaying the previous night in my head. The ensuing erection paired with my need to urinate made the situation agonizing. I needed to get to the bathroom and, more importantly, away from that curvy nineteen-year-old body.

I took a moment to consider options for retrieving my arm. I could try to gently wake her, as I was starting to get anxious about starting the day. I could just jerk my

appendage out from under her head and let fate take its course. Instead, I opted for an option somewhere in the middle, gently sliding my arm upward and out from under her head. Once her head hit the pillow, she rolled over but appeared relatively unfazed. I got up and slowly tiptoed to the bathroom, not wanting to wake my sleeping beauty.

When I returned, she was still asleep, her back toward me, the white sheet gathered against her chest, exposing the entire back side of her body. I felt my erection returning as my eyes stopped to consider her perfectly shaped ass. I knew I wouldn't be able to go back to sleep with that lying next to me. I suddenly stopped caring about letting her sleep and instead slid into bed behind her and began kissing her shoulder and the back of her neck.

“Mmmm,” she moaned as she began to wake. She turned over to face me. “Hi there.”

“Hi yourself,” I replied.

“How long have you been awake?”

“Not too long. Maybe ten, fifteen minutes. I'm not the only one who's awake, though.”

Her eyes followed my gaze downward and, much to my surprise, her hand soon followed her eyes. We made love for the third time, then I took a shower. When I came back into the bedroom, I was surprised to find she'd stripped the sheets off the bed.

“We didn't make that big of a mess, did we?” I asked.

“No. It's just—“

“What's wrong?”

“It’s just that there was a little blood, and I didn’t want you to see it. It’s embarrassing.”

“Well I guess that proves you were really a virgin,” I said.

She didn’t laugh.

JaNel spent the next couple days showing me around the area. We visited a fish hatchery, where I spent as much time looking at JaNel’s rear end as she leaned over the railings to get a better view as I did actually looking at the trout in various stages of growth. We ventured into her native state of Wyoming to visit Devil’s Tower National Monument, a giant monolith I’d never heard of before but would never forget. We laughed, we made love. We fell in love.

Wednesday came far too quickly, as did our arrival in Billings. We traveled the over three hundred miles through Wyoming and Montana in what seemed like minutes. I didn’t want to leave this amazing girl I’d only just begun to know and, as far as I could tell, she didn’t want me to go. I was nervously excited for her to meet my parents. They’d been incredibly supportive of the whole venture and I wanted them to see that their trust was warranted. I also wanted them to see that their awkward, nerdy son was capable of holding his own with an attractive girl.

We met my parents in their room at the Comfort Inn, where JaNel greeted each of them with a hug and a giant smile. They invited JaNel to have lunch with us, an offer she eagerly accepted. Since JaNel said she visited Billings fairly often, we turned to her for restaurant suggestions. She mentioned that there was an Olive Garden (which happened to be her favorite restaurant) within walking distance from the hotel. I pushed aside the

distaste for mass-produced Italian fare that comes with growing up in the Chicago area and supported her recommendation. I had to stand by my woman.

At lunch, JaNel charmed my parents with her bubbly personality and tales of growing up in a world they couldn't imagine. She talked about her family a lot, how hard working they were. Most of them worked for the company her grandfather had started and which her parents now owned a major stake in. It was somehow related to the oil drilling business, though I never understood the exact nature of the endeavor. It didn't really matter, though. It involved oil and making lots of money and that made it excitingly exotic for city folk like me and my parents. Mom and Dad were especially tickled when they found out that JaNel's family owned cattle and that she had experience in roping and driving them. This would later lead Mom to refer to her simply as "The Cowgirl." Apparently, I wasn't the only one with a romanticized idea of The West.

After lunch, we returned to the hotel and it was time to say goodbye. I asked Mom to take a picture of JaNel and I, something to remember our first meeting by. We stood in the grass, the pale yellow siding of the Comfort Inn behind us. We looked like a couple in as much as we had unintentionally dressed in matching colors. We both wore blue jeans. JaNel had a baggy navy blue sweatshirt that obscured the tight curves of her body. I wore a dark blue t-shirt inspired by Kevin Smith's film *Clerks*. The words "I'm not even supposed to be here today," printed across my chest in plain white lettering stood in stark contrast to the way I felt in that moment.

The moment, as photos tend to do, faded too quickly. JaNel exchanged hugs with my parents again, then they returned to their room to give us some privacy as we said our

goodbyes. Still standing outside the hotel, I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close to me.

“I don’t want to go,” she said, her voice cracking.

“I don’t want you to go.”

I loosened my embrace and saw wet streaks running down her cheeks. I ran my hand down the side of her face, tilting her chin up so her eyes met mine. I leaned in for a kiss, which she returned. Our tongues found each other and soon we were making out right next to the parking lot of the Comfort Inn. Concern about what others might think was the furthest thing from my mind.

Eventually, JaNel pulled away. “Joe, I have to go,” she said.

“I know you do, baby.”

“I’m going to miss you an awful lot.”

“I’ll miss you too, JaNel.”

We kissed one last time, then I watched as she got in her car and backed out of her parking spot. She stopped and rolled down her window.

“I love you,” she yelled.

“I love you too.”

She threw her car into drive and turned out of the lot. And then she was gone. The most incredible girl I’d ever met, one I’d spent the best week of my life with, and she was gone. I had no idea when I’d see her again. I couldn’t even be a hundred percent sure I would see her again. All these things rushed through my head the moment I lost sight of her car.

I managed to make it back upstairs and almost all the way to the hotel room before I started crying. I was grateful for that fact. I knocked on the door and when Mom opened it, she didn't seem surprised at my condition.

"Come here," she said, opening her arms for a hug.

I did as I was told, wrapping my arms around Mom and quite literally crying on her shoulder.

"It'll be okay," she said. "I know it must be hard, but you'll see her again."

"You think so?" I asked.

"I don't see why not. You two seem to like each other an awful lot."

"Yeah, we might like each other just a bit," I say. "What did you think of her?"

"I liked her. She has a really bubbly personality—and a really cute figure."

I couldn't help smiling at the last part. She did have a really cute figure. She had a really cute everything, and I couldn't stop thinking about her, about her figure, about sex, about all of it. We hadn't even started our trip back to Illinois yet and I already wanted to come back out West.

JaNel and I talked nearly every day for the rest of the summer. We would chat on MSN Messenger, keeping each other updated on every little detail of our lives. I'd grown to hate chatting online, though. It felt so impersonal, so cold, especially after the passion we'd shared. Still, it was a necessary evil since we both had to be careful not to go over our allotted number of cell phone minutes.

That's not to say we didn't talk on the phone. JaNel would call me randomly when she was out running errands and we'd chat for ten or fifteen minutes. If I was with

one of my parents at the time, I'd throw them on the line to say hello and both parties would get a big kick out of it. My parents were quite fond of JaNel, and I think JaNel liked talking to them because it made her feel closer to me in some roundabout way.

Sometimes she'd call me at night and I'd have to talk quietly for fear of waking my parents, whose bedroom was next to mine. Just the sound of JaNel's voice was enough to get me excited, a feeling that was compounded by memories of what we'd done together and the simple knowledge that here was a beautiful young girl who could be out there doing anything with anyone but instead she was at home talking to me. I'd tell her about the excitement she stirred in me and we'd talk in hushed tones about all the things we wanted to do with and to each other. We talked about fantasies, things we wanted to try next time we got to see each other. The fact that neither of us knew when that would be was unbearable.

## 11.

Things changed a bit once classes resumed in the fall. Since Josh had left, I was going to be randomly assigned a new roommate. I dreaded the prospect, as I'd always been shy around strangers and had never even dreamt of having to live with one. I feared I would get stuck with a party animal, a frat boy. I had visions of sitting awkwardly in the room while he and his "bros" drank and talked about women. Worse, what if he wanted to bring a girl back to the room and I had to leave or be forced to listen to things I could never un-hear?

The dorms were open the week before classes started, but I didn't move back until the weekend before the semester started because I wanted to be with my family as long as possible. My parents helped cart all my stuff back up to Michigan, and when we got to my old room, 239 West Hall, there was evidence that someone else had already moved in, but no sign of the culprit. We unloaded everything from Mom's minivan and my tiny Cavalier, then headed off to the hotel. I was going to spend Friday and Saturday night there in my parents' suite, allowing me to postpone being stuck in a 12'X12' white cinder block cell with a stranger.

When my parents dropped me off outside West on Sunday afternoon, my fears seemed to be realized. The door to 239 was open, and as I entered the room, I could see two pairs of feet hanging over the edge of the lofted bed. I thought about turning around, but instead I walked right into the room.

"Oh, hey," a male voice called down from the loft.

"Hey. I'm Joe. I'm guessing I'm your roommate."

“Oh, right, yeah. I’m Mike.” He leaned over the edge of the bed, reaching down to shake my hand.

“I should probably go,” a female voice said from behind him. Suddenly, a cute blonde girl was making her way down the ladder and out the door.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—“

“Oh, no worries,” Mike cut me off. “That was Stephanie. We were just taking a nap together.”

“So are you two—“

“No, it’s not like that. We’re just friends. Just met a couple days ago, actually. Besides, I have a girlfriend back home.”

I wasn’t sure how to feel about that statement. My girl (who I was still hesitant about even calling a “girlfriend”) was a thousand miles away and I couldn’t even think about other women, let alone consider inviting one into my bed, for a nap or otherwise. I’d just met Mike but I was already starting to form a less-than-flattering opinion of him.

That opinion didn’t last long. Mike and I became friends fast. We soon found ourselves skipping our morning classes and sleeping until noon every day so we could stay up until five in the morning watching reruns of the old “Batman” TV series on Nick at Night. He was extremely obsessive compulsive, which was great because it meant he kept our room neat and clean. The fact that he labeled nearly everything in the room (including labeling his bed “Bed”) may have been a bit much, though. Either way, it was nice to know that even an extreme extrovert who shared his bed with females other than his girlfriend had his own quirks and flaws.

I don't remember when or how it happened, but at some point, we started talking to each other in our idea of British accents. Working class British, a bit cockney, how we imagined The Rolling Stones talked to each other offstage. Soon, we lost the ability to speak to each other any other way. Mike and Joe became Mick and Keith.

“Right, how's it goin', Keif?”

“Yeah, I'm good, mate.”

While I was busy playing rockstar with Mike, JaNel was apparently having some fun of her own. She started going out more, going to parties, enjoying the typical college experience. We still talked often, but it became obvious that our lives were going in different directions. One night she called me after she got home from a party and casually mentioned that she'd played strip poker there.

“You what?”

“I played some strip poker with some friends. Why?”

“What do you mean, why? You took your clothes off in front of other people?”

“Well, I still had my panties on. I was just having some fun, Joe. Besides, it's my body. I can do what I want wi—“

“I thought you loved me.”

“I do love you, Joe.”

It didn't matter. Nothing she could say mattered in that moment. I had lived and breathed for her for over a year, never even giving a second thought to another woman. She had betrayed me and she couldn't even see it. She tried to claim that it was innocent, that she had no desire to do anything with anyone else, but I didn't want to hear it. She

might as well have just screwed someone else. That would have been the decent thing to do.

We carried on for a while after that night, but things were never the same. She kept going out all the time and I kept staying in, only really socializing with Mike. After a couple weeks, she called me to say she didn't think we should talk anymore. It wasn't good for either of us. She needed to focus on being herself, blah blah blah I kind of tuned out after I got the gist of it. I had seen it coming, but that didn't really make it any easier.

Mike decided to help me get over the breakup the best way he knew how. Neither of us was 21, but he had connections in the dorms and managed to score a bottle of 100 proof Smirnoff.

“Mate, neither of us is going anywhere until this bottle's gone,” he said.

“Right, I hate you.”

“You love me, me little wanker.”

I'd never really been one to drink much, especially hard liquor, but I knew one of the most basic ways to drink vodka was mixed with orange juice, in a screwdriver. I started out rather easy on myself, pouring just a splash of Smirnoff and filling the glass with juice. Soon, Mike took over mixing duties and caution was thrown to the wind. Before I knew it, I was on my back on the floor of our dorm room with a paper napkin resting on my forehead.

“I love me nappy nap,” I said.

“I know you do, mate.”

The napkin fell off my head and I was devastated. “Oh no, mate. Mick, I need me little nappy nap.”

I don't remember much after that, but I'm told I was on the floor for a good hour, carrying on about my love for the napkin and lamenting every time it tried to part from my face. At some point, Mike helped me get up and steered me toward the toilet just in time for the contents of my stomach to stage a violent upheaval. I awoke the next afternoon in a sort of triangle, my face and knees flat against my mattress, my ass straight up in the air, and I can honestly say JaNel was the furthest thing from my mind in that moment.

## 12.

I spent the rest of the semester trying to further eliminate JaNel from my mind. Mike once again helped in this by insisting I hang out with him and the group of girls he spent most of his time with: Stephanie (whom I'd first met as she left Mike's bed), Ashley, Tracy, and Stacy. They were all from the same town in lower Michigan and had been friends forever. Various configurations of The Girls (as they became known) would randomly drop by our room to see if we wanted to join them for a meal at the cafeteria, go adventuring around town, or just chat for a while.

One night, Ashley, who worked part time as a custodian in the dorm, stopped in while she was supposed to be vacuuming the hallway. I was watching a French film, *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, and she asked if she could join me. The movie's convoluted plot, which involved, amongst other things, werewolves, incest, and limb regeneration, soon became the subject of ridicule. I broke into my Keif accent and Ashley followed suit.

“Bloody Frenchmen,” I said.

“Nuffin' but a bunch of bloody wankers.”

“Right, yeah, look at me, I'm sleepin' with me sister.”

“Only the bloody French could make a movie like this,” Ashley concluded.

She sat there with me, shirking her duties and tearing *Brotherhood of the Wolf* apart for at least a half hour before realizing she needed to get back to work. When she got up to leave, I couldn't help noticing the way her jeans and camisole hugged her slender, athletic frame. I wished I could conjure some sort of compelling reason for her to continue missing work.

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Mike and I often had lengthy conversations at night after we'd turned the lights off, our voices traversing the void between our beds, which sat on opposite sides of the room. We'd discuss music, movies, classes, and most often, girls. For the most part, Mike would tell me about Julie, his long-time girlfriend back home. He was hopelessly in love with her and talked to her every day. The Girls really were just his friends and he had no intention of pursuing anything with any of them.

“Still, though, mate, they are pretty cool, aren't they?” He once asked.

“Yeah, they're a lot of fun,” I said.

“Right, yeah. Let me ask you this, mate: if you could have sex with any of them, who would it be?”

“Wha—what? I mean, I guess I'd never thought about it.”

“Really?” Mike seemed genuinely surprised. “I mean, I love me little Julie, but I think it's normal to at least think about such things.”

“Well what about you then?” I asked.

“I guess I'd probably go with Stephanie,” he said.

I wasn't surprised, given the circumstances under which I'd first met her. The two of them did always seem to have a certain amount of tension between them. “Steph, huh? That's cool, mate.”

“Yeah. There's just something sexual about her, you know? Like she gives off this energy—“

“I guess so, mate. I mean she's definitely pretty.”

“Right, yeah. I mean, who would you pick then?”

“Well, if I had to, I guess I'd go with Ashley.”

“Ashley? Really?”

“Yeah. I dunno. She just seems really nice. And she's cute. I mean, she's got a really nice body.”

“No, mate, I didn't mean to sound negative. I guess I was just a little surprised. I mean, she's the most innocent of the group.”

“Is she?” Mike knew them far better than I did.

“Right, yeah. She's still a virgin. I don't think she's ever even been drunk before.”

“I didn't know that. But maybe that's why I like her. She just seems the most down to earth.”

“Right, mate, well you should get to know her better then.”

“You think so? I mean, you think she'd go for someone like me?”

“Sure, why not, mate? You're pretty bloody cool. You're me little Keif, after all.”

Mike's vote of confidence meant a lot, but I still had a hard time believing that someone like her would ever go for a fat slob like me.

Still, I began to make an effort to get her to notice me more. When Mike, The Girls, and I broke into an old abandoned orphanage near NMU, I stuck with Ashley the whole time, trying to play down her fear of whatever supernatural powers might lurk inside or what policemen might be waiting outside to pinch us for trespassing. It didn't work, as The Girls all freaked out before we could even make it past the basement we'd entered through, but Ashley and I had spent some time talking, and that was a start.

Not long after the orphanage excursion, our group took a late-night field trip to Watersmeet, a small town two hours away. Watersmeet's claim to fame is the Paulding Light, an unexplained glowing orb that appears in the distance over a valley. We arrived there around 1AM and first spotted the light shortly thereafter. Legend has it that the light is a lantern carried by the ghost of a long-deceased railroad worker. More skeptical minds have claimed that it's merely the result of car headlights along US highway 45, which runs across the valley from the viewing area. I can't personally explain what I saw that night, a yellow-orange ball that seemed to hover among the trees in the distance, moving slightly from side to side, but remaining mostly stationary. Our group agreed that it was unlikely a car's headlights could appear so still for so long, and we wanted to do our best to investigate the source of the phenomenon, despite the fact that so many had failed to sniff it out in the past.

Mike found a trail down into the darkness, and the rest of us followed. No one had thought to bring a flashlight, so we had only the dual orbs of the moon and the Paulding Light to guide us. It wasn't long before The Girls got scared again.

"This is kind of creepy," Stephanie said.

"Yeah, maybe we should go back," Tracy agreed.

"Nah, we'll be fine. Joe and I will protect you," Mike assured them. I didn't want to admit that I was just as nervous as our female counterparts.

There was a pickup truck parked at a place where the trail intersected with a narrow gravel road, but we neither saw nor heard any sign of its occupants.

"I don't like this," Ashley said.

“It's fine,” I replied. “Probably just some crazy rednecks out here looking for their next victim.”

“Joe!”

“What? If there's one thing I've learned from movies, it's that rednecks always attack groups of young people in dark forests.”

“He's right,” Mike said. “They'll probably kill me and Joe first and then have their way with the rest of you.”

“Yeah, rednecks are the worst,” I said. “They'll probably keep you and use you.”

Stephanie and Tracy laughed and joined in our banter, but Ashley didn't seem very amused.

“Right, I'm just kidding, little Ashley,” I said, hoping the accent would calm her down.

“Yeah, I know, mate. It's just a bit creepy out here is all.” She stopped walking and I followed suit.

“We can turn around if you like. I don't think we're getting any closer to that light anyway,” I said.

“Yeah, I think I would like that. I'd feel a lot saf—where did everyone go?”

I turned to look up the trail and all I could see was darkness. We tried calling for Mike, Stephanie, Tracy, but got no response. We went further up the trail, but there was no sign of our friends. We searched for twenty minutes or so to no avail.

“Maybe they got past us somehow and headed back to the car,” I said.

“Maybe. I guess wherever they went, they'll probably head back there eventually.”

“Yeah. Our best bet is probably to just wait for them there.”

“Joe—stay close to me.”

Our friends were lost, we were probably lost, and there were possibly murderous, sex-crazed rednecks lurking about, but those words instantly removed any sense of dread from my mind.

“I will, Ash. I will.”

We began to walk back up the trail, and I was sure to stay close to Ashley. There was a sudden rustling of leaves off to our left, and she grabbed hold of my arm.

“What the hell was that?” she said.

“I—I don't know. Probably just a squirrel or something.”

“Must have been a big squirrel.”

Determined to be brave, I instructed her to wait right there while I investigated. I walked toward the spot where the sound had come from, not sure what I would do if I encountered something other than a squirrel. I looked around for a moment and, convinced it had been nothing, returned to the trail.

“Nothing to worry about, I'd say.”

“Good,” Ashley said. She locked her arm in mine as we began to walk again. I tried not to react outwardly to this development, knowing she was simply looking for some semblance of safety as we ventured through the unknown, but part of me wanted it to mean something. At the very least, I hoped this new-found physical closeness would lead to a closer friendship, if not something more.

Once we were within sight of the Paulding Light viewing area and its proximity to civilization, Ashley relinquished her grasp on me. We made our way back to the car and were relieved to find Mike and the other girls waiting for us.

“Right, and where the bloody 'ell 'ave you two been?” Mike asked.

“I could ask you the same, you bloody wanker,” I said. “We just turned around and the lot of you were gone. We tried looking for you, but there was no bloody trace.”

“Yeah, well, we found a different path. I thought it might take us closer to the light, but we just ended up back out on the road, so we walked back here.”

“Wankers,” Ashley said.

“Right, we are that, mate,” Mike said.

We all piled back into the car for the drive home. I ended up squished in the back seat with Tracy and Ashley, a position I didn't have much time to reflect on as we all promptly fell asleep. By the time we woke up, we were back in Marquette, a much brighter orb lighting the world.

The trip to Watersmeet would be our last great adventure as a group. The semester began to wind down, finals approached, and winter break loomed, meaning we would all be parting ways. As it turned out, some of those departures would be more permanent than others. Mike announced that he would be leaving NMU at the end of the semester to move back downstate. He loved us all, he said, but he couldn't stand to be away from Julie anymore. Ashley also announced her plans to leave. She'd lost her direction and wanted to move back home to figure out where life was taking her. I wasn't sure who I was sorrier to see go.

### 13.

Winter break came and went without much incident. One of the few positive developments during the month off was that my request to keep my dorm room as a single for the Winter semester was granted, meaning I wouldn't be getting saddled with another roommate. This was no small feat, as NMU required most freshman and sophomore students to live on-campus, despite the student population slowly outgrowing the number of available dorm rooms.

I looked forward to the solitude of having my own room. I loved Mike, but I couldn't imagine a new roommate being anywhere near as cool as him. And it would be nice to not have to share that tiny twelve-by-twelve room with anyone else. I could put my stuff wherever I wanted, not have to worry about conflicting schedules, not have to deal with any of the issues that arise with any roommate, no matter how cool they are. I wouldn't have to worry about conflicting sleep schedules or agreeing on what to watch on television; I wouldn't have to worry about someone walking in while I was enjoying some quality "alone time." I could simply do as I pleased.

As it turned out, what pleased me was mostly hiding away from the world whenever I wasn't in class or working. Most of my free time was spent practicing guitar or playing video games. With Mike and Ashley gone, I no longer felt much of a connection with The Girls or anyone else for that matter.

I enjoyed my solitude for the most part, but I occasionally found myself longing for the days of JaNel. I had no desire to get back into a long-term relationship, but it was nice to have someone who I knew would always be there for me when I needed her. I thought perhaps I should give a more traditional relationship a try. I'd loved JaNel, but it

would be nice to have someone in the same area code as me. Someone I could actually spend time with, get together with at the end of a long day. Plus, it would be nice to have certain physical needs met more than once a year.

Despite my desire for something more “real,” I turned once again to the only way I knew to meet people: the internet. Dating websites had been growing in popularity, and I decided to try my luck on Yahoo! Personals, one of the more popular sites of the day. I created a profile expressing my love of all things related to the English language, but was hesitant to put a picture of myself out there, for fear of scaring off potential matches. Even in an online world that was still largely populated by misfits and geeks, I felt self-conscious.

Once my profile was complete, I did a search for women aged 18-25 within 25 miles of Marquette. As it turned out, I must not have been the only one to feel self-conscious, as most of the results were sans picture. I spent some time browsing through the couple dozen or so profiles that popped up, but couldn't quite bring myself to reach out to anyone. Odds were nobody would want me anyway, so I just signed off of the site and went back to hanging out with myself.

As it turned out, I wouldn't have to reach out to anyone. Over the weeks that followed my signing up for the site, I began to get messages from various girls in the area, most of whom seemed to share my sense of isolation.

The first of these faceless-but-local girls to really capture my imagination was named Carla. We began to chat based on our mutual love of the English language. As it turned out, we both composed angsty poetry and posted it to the same soul-bearing website for all the world to see. We would read and compliment each other's drivel, and

eventually we decided that since we both lived on the same campus and seemed to have so much in common, we should get together in person. She dabbled in guitar as well, but only really knew chords. Perhaps I could come over to her room and teach her a few lead licks? I was only too happy to oblige.

When the agreed-upon meeting time was approaching, I threw on a button-down shirt, gave myself a quick glance in the mirror, and headed down campus. Arriving at her dorm, I walked right past her door and proceeded to pace up and down the hallway a few times before I built up the courage to knock.

When the door opened, matters only got worse. She was cute. A slim figure clad in jeans and a black t-shirt. Her heart-shaped face hidden beneath horn-rimmed glasses instantly reminded me of Lisa Loeb, who made the geek girl look sexy back in the 90s. She was the worst kind of cute girl. Not only was she physically attractive enough to be out of my league, but she was smart enough that I wouldn't be able to dazzle her with my would-be academic jargon.

She invited me in and we sat down, she on her bed, I on one of the desk chairs furnished by the university.

“So, this is my room,” she said.

“It's—it's, um, nice.” I scanned the walls for perhaps a little too long. “Nice guitar chord poster. I should get one of those myself.”

“Yeah, they do come in handy. I use mine pretty much every day.”

“That's awesome.”

“I like to think so,” she shifted a little on the bed. “So...”

“Um...”

I was gone within twenty minutes. I just didn't know how to talk to girls, especially not cute ones. Not in person, anyway. That wouldn't stop me from trying, though. The Carla incident would not be my last foray into the world of online dating, nor would it be the most awkward.

That honor would go to a girl who invited me over after we had been chatting a total of about an hour. I was a little put off at first, but desperation can have strange effects on people. I drove to the address she gave me—a large, two-story house in a sketchy neighborhood. I knocked on the door, and waited a good minute before knocking again. When the door finally opened, I was relieved at the plainness of the girl who stood before me. She was chubby, wearing faded jeans and a t-shirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. There was an air of not trying about her that appealed to me. Or maybe it was just the fact that she didn't seem out of my league.

Whatever the case, she invited me in and, without saying a word, lead me through the house and into her bedroom. She sat down at a desk in the corner and started typing on her computer. Figuring she was just finishing up a conversation with someone, I took the opportunity to look around the room. Some random framed posters on the wall, a few pictures of her with family and friends, a nice queen size bed. Nice, if not a bit unremarkable.

I turned my attention back to the desk where she was sitting to see if she was just about done and that's when I noticed a memo board propped in the corner. A memo board covered with pictures. Pictures of babies. Lots of babies. Black babies, white babies, Asian babies, large babies, small babies, naked babies, babies in silly costumes, babies playing with cute animals. Babies, babies, and more babies. Before I gave in to

my sudden urge to flee, I thought I'd give her a chance to offer a rational explanation.

“So uh...you like babies?”

“Oh, I don't like them. I love them,” she said. “I can't wait to have a baby of my own. Well, babies. All I've ever wanted is to be a mother.” She turned back to her computer and continued typing.

“That's cool. I'd like to have a family myself someday. Probably not for a while, though.”

Click click click. She just kept typing. I had no idea who she was chatting with, but they were apparently more interesting than me. I made a few more attempts at conversation, but she never so much as looked at me for more than a split second.

“So, I think I'm just going to go,” I said after about ten minutes.

“Okay.” That was it. No apologies, no attempts to stop me.

After my brief encounter with Crazy Baby Girl, I decided I should probably be a bit more selective in my online pursuit of romance. Rather than meeting up with any random girl who happened to show a shred of interest, I would try to find someone who I might actually be able to have a relationship with. Keeping that in mind, I once again set out to explore the world of Yahoo! Personals.

One profile immediately caught my attention, someone with the screen name “bookworm81.” She was twenty-one, a fellow English major and, as her online handle implied, loved reading. My kind of woman. She didn't have a picture on her profile, but neither did I, and she sounded so perfect that I had to send her a message.

Her name was Molly, and she worked in the university library, which immediately sent visions of naughty librarians floating through my head. We had a brief correspondence through Yahoo! before deciding to meet in person. Neither of us had ever done the online dating thing before, so we opted to meet in a public place. I suggested the dining room of the Wildcat Den (one of the school's cafeterias), as it had a nice open lounge area and seemed like a safe, low-key place to hang out for a while. She told me she had brown hair and glasses and a puffy pink coat. I told her to look out for a Kevin Smith-esque bigger guy with glasses and a beard.

I got to the Den a little early since my dorm was right next door. Waiting for Molly, I grew nervous. I had no idea what to expect physically, but I doubted she'd be able to compete with the sexy young thing that was JaNel. It didn't matter, though. The important thing was that she was here, in the same place as me. It was my first shot at "normal" dating, and I wanted to see how it would play out.

After about ten minutes, a small, mousy girl with glasses and a pink puffy coat approached my table.

"Joe?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'm guessing you're Molly. It's nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too."

There was silence for a moment.

"Have a seat," I said, gesturing to the empty chair across from me.

She took my suggestion and we started talking, awkwardly at first, but we soon warmed up to each other. I found out she was from Petoskey, a small town in the northern part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Her parents had both been devoted

students as well, both earning Master's degrees, something Molly herself aspired to. She was more into the literature side of things and hoped to eventually earn her MA. I was glad we had a common love of English and academics, though my competitive side was a bit relieved she wasn't also a writer.

We chatted for an hour or so before we both started feeling awkward hanging out in the cafeteria while people constantly came and went.

"I'd like to keep talking, but I'd feel a little forward inviting you back to my room," I said.

"Well, you could always come back to my room and we could watch a movie or something."

She lived in Hunt Hall, on the opposite end of campus from my own home in West Hall. On the walk down campus, we continued chatting and joking, until politics somehow came up. It turned out she was a hardcore liberal, going so far as to eschew the Democratic Party in favor of Ralph Nader's Green Party. I tried not to let my distaste for this revelation show, but must have failed.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing. It's just, well, my family's all pretty conservative."

"Your family? What about you?"

"Well, I try to be more open-minded. I mean, I guess I do skew toward the right on some things, but I'm generally more middle-of-the-road. It can take a lot to overcome your upbringing, you know?"

"I guess so." She didn't seem entirely satisfied with my answer, but quickly dropped the subject as we approached the entrance to Hunt.

We walked up to Molly's room and were greeted by her roommate. Molly introduced us and the roommate said it was nice to meet me but that she had to run. A sly grin crossed her face as she made her way to the door. I wondered if maybe it was because she wasn't used to seeing Molly with a guy.

Seating was scarce in the room, so we ended up sitting on two wooden desk chairs side-by-side in front of Molly's tiny 19-inch TV. I don't remember what we watched, but I do know that as the movie went on, we both seemed to lose interest in it as we gained interest in each other. I pulled what I called the "Greg Brady Maneuver," putting my arm around her shoulders as I yawned.

By the time the movie was over, she was nestled close to me, and I felt like it was time to make a move. I looked down at her, her brown eyes met my glance, and I leaned in for a kiss. It was closed-mouthed and reminded me of the awkwardness of my first kiss with Kathy, but she didn't pull away, which I took as a good sign. I backed off for a second, then returned with a vengeance, going for a real, lips parted kiss. She reciprocated and soon our tongues got involved.

"W—was that okay?" Molly asked when we finally came up for air.

I was surprised by the question, as it was normally something I worried about. I never expected to have a girl ask me about her performance. "Yeah, it was really nice," I said.

"Good. I was kind of nervous because I've never kissed anyone before."

"Never?"

"N—no." She turned her head away.

I couldn't believe it. I mean, she hadn't exactly struck me as the type of girl who got around, but it was inconceivable that someone a couple years older than me had never even kissed someone before. Still, she seemed like a nice girl, and after JaNel went kind of wild, a nice girl seemed like exactly what I needed.

## 14.

I became Molly's first boyfriend almost instantly after becoming her first kiss. For her part, she was my first “real” girlfriend—the first person I was involved with who I could actually see on a regular basis, the first who lived in the same zip code.

This is where my not having a roommate came in handy. We would get together when we were both done with classes and/or off work for the day and eat dinner together, usually in the Wildcat Den—the cafeteria whose kitchen I worked in and where we'd first met. Then we would go back to my room where we'd spend the rest of the night watching movies and making out, or listening to music and making out, or having lengthy literary discussions and making out. There was a lot of making out.

Given our mutual passion for the fledgling relationship, it wasn't long before the “L” word got involved. I don't remember exactly who said it first, though I suspect it was her. Regardless, after a month or so of dating, there it was: love. And suddenly, it was everywhere. Once the floodgates had opened, it was a deluge of I love you, no I love you, I love you more, and so on and so on, ad nauseum.

The thing was, I never really felt it. I used the words, yes, because it seemed like the thing to do. I liked having Molly around and she liked being around and it seemed like she needed to hear those words, so I gave them to her. But from the moment they first left my lips, I knew that I was lying. Perhaps at first I thought that might change, that I would grow into the L word. She was certainly a nice girl who deserved to be loved. Maybe eventually I could come to mean the words I spoke so often. After all, weren't relationships supposed to grow and feelings deepen over time?

I tried to make it work. I tried to be a good boyfriend. I took her out to dinner at real restaurants as often as I could afford to, accompanied her to events around the community that I couldn't have cared less about. I even went with her to hear Ralph Nader speak when he visited NMU's campus, an event that stood in direct opposition to my conservative upbringing. She met my parents and they liked her, or at least the idea of her. They stuck a picture of the two of us on their fridge and sent Molly her own Easter basket along with mine when the holiday rolled around.

Still, the more time that went by, the further from her I felt. I began to realize that I was just using her. We talked about the long run, the big picture, but I knew I didn't want any of that. She was just a nice girl who liked me and was willing to go down on me on a regular basis and I enjoyed that enough that I couldn't work up the courage to tell her that deep down that was all I really wanted from her. I also couldn't tell her that it bothered me the way that, as soon as I was finished, she would always run into the bathroom to brush her teeth and scrub her face immediately, as if the act itself had somehow made her dirty. I had never felt the need for such a cleansing.

I didn't even want to have sex with Molly, though the topic began to come up fairly regularly, because I didn't want to be responsible for that. I didn't want to be her first, the one who took her virginity. I wish I could say that it was out of some sense of nobility, that I felt she deserved to have her first time be with someone who truly did love her. But the truth is that I was scared that if we went that far, it would make it even harder to get rid of her when the time came.

And I knew that time was coming. I knew I couldn't keep stringing her along, but I didn't have the balls to end it. I'd never even had a real girlfriend before, much less

broken up with one. And it wasn't as though I had any ill feelings toward her. If anything, I hated myself for not liking her more than I did. After a few months of dating, though, I knew things were never going to improve.

When the semester came to an end and summer break arrived, Molly and I found ourselves geographically separated for the first time since we'd started dating. She moved back to Petoskey to spend the summer with her family, and I headed for Illinois to spend it with mine. There were, of course, a litany of I love yous and I'll miss yous and I felt guilty as I held up my end of the exchange. I doubted our relationship would last until school started again, and I knew that I should have just ended it right then and there. At least then we would both be free to enjoy the break to its fullest. At least then, I wouldn't have to continue trying to find a way out.

As it happened, an out presented itself. I got an e-mail from JaNel one day, just asking how I was doing. I told her I was fine, but was quite open about all the Molly business. We corresponded like that for a week or two before the phone calls started. Cell phone plans had evolved to the point where worrying about precious minutes was no longer a problem, and we took advantage of that fact by calling each other nearly every day.

It was all just friendly, of course. I talked to her about my family and my issues with Molly and how I had no idea what I was going to do with a Bachelor's degree in English. She told me all about her crazy college adventures, drinking and partying. Apparently after we'd stopped talking before, she went overboard and didn't stop until she hit what she saw as a low point, when she found herself going down on some guy she

didn't really know in the bathroom of a club. After that, she realized she needed to clean up her act a bit. She decided college really wasn't for her and she was planning to drop out and work for her family's company. She asked if I thought she was stupid for dropping out and if I thought she was a bad person for what she'd done with that guy and I told her no on both counts, though I didn't mention that the thought of the latter had kind of excited me.

I talked to JaNel a lot more than I talked to Molly at the beginning of summer. It got to the point where everyone knew we were talking again. My parents would grab the phone out of my hand to say hi. My boss at my summer job even talked to her a few times when I called her during breaks. Even the other people in my life began paying more attention to her than they ever had to the idea of Molly and me.

Things only got worse when my dad and I decided to take a trip out west later that summer. He rarely got to see his brother since he'd moved to Billings, and I always enjoyed a good road trip. Our game plan was the same as it had been the last time: we would take three days to get to Billings, spend a few days there, then take three days back. Our stop on our second night would be the same, too: Deadwood, South Dakota, a short distance from Spearfish, where JaNel still resided. I found myself wondering if other events from our last trip might repeat themselves.

JaNel would hear none of it. She liked talking to me and was glad we could be friends again, but she didn't want to get involved in my mess. She was afraid that if we saw each other again, I might expect certain things or she might want certain things and it just all added up to disaster. What about poor Molly? Didn't she deserve better than that?

I assured her that I didn't care. I didn't care about Molly anymore. And that didn't matter, anyway. I didn't expect anything to happen. I just wanted to see her again. It had been so long and I'd missed her. Besides, if we were friends and I was going to be in the area, what could the harm be? Couldn't we just get together, chat for a while, and go our separate ways?

She knew better.

15.

It wasn't until the first night of the road trip that JaNel became even remotely receptive of the idea. After driving nearly six hundred miles, Dad and I stopped for the night in Sioux Falls, on the far east side of South Dakota. We arrived in the late evening, had dinner at some chain restaurant nearby, then spent some time in the swimming pool and hot tub. After we both showered, Dad said he was exhausted from the long drive and wanted to get to bed. I told him I was going to run outside to make a quick phone call and I'd be back shortly.

I called JaNel and told her I'd be in Deadwood the next night. She still thought seeing each other was a bad idea, but I assured her that there was nothing to worry about. Worst case scenario, she had to drive twenty minutes out of her way. Best case, maybe she would actually enjoy seeing me again and we could have a few laughs together. We debated back and forth for nearly an hour before she ended things with an "I'll think about it."

I knew I had her.

The next day played out the same way: a few hundred miles of driving, checking in, eating dinner. Another phone call I had to excuse myself for. Another debate that likely wouldn't have existed if I'd just had the decency to break up with my girlfriend I'd stopped caring about instead of trying to sneak around a thousand miles behind her back. This time, I got a maybe. She said she still had to think about it, but that if she changed her mind and decided to come, she would call me.

I went back to the room and told Dad that I might be going out for a while. He remembered JaNel. He liked JaNel, and seemed glad to hear me talking about her again.

“Just don't stay out too late,” he said. “We still have to get on the road first thing in the morning.”

“I don't even know if I'm going anywhere. But if I do, it won't be for that long.”

It wasn't very long before my phone rang. My heart began to pound as I pressed the answer button and lifted the device to my ear. “Hello?”

“Hey—I'm on my way.”

“You ar—that's great. I knew you'd see things my way.”

“Joe—“

“I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Well, listen, I'll wait in the lobby and you can just pull up to the entrance and we can go somewhere.”

“Okay. See you soon, I guess.”

I went into the bathroom to make sure I looked alright and brush my teeth—just in case. Certain I looked and smelled as good as I was going to, I sat and watched TV with Dad for a few minutes before heading down to the lobby to wait for JaNel.

As I sat there, fumbling through the various brochures that hadn't changed since last time I tried to feign interest in them, I wondered if she would be the same. Sure, it hadn't really been that long since I'd seen her, but I hoped that all partying she'd told me about—and the bathroom encounters—hadn't taken a toll. I hoped that, on some level at least, she was still that exuberant country girl who just wanted to talk to someone from the big city. I hoped that her smile would still rob me of my breath.

I didn't have much time to ponder such things, as it wasn't long before a familiar Ford Taurus pulled up to the entrance. I set my reading material down and headed out the sliding door. The smile I'd remembered greeted me through the lowered driver-side window.

“Hey, stranger,” she said.

“Hey yourself.” I wasn't sure what to do, if I should try to move in for an awkward hug through the window, or maybe even try for a kiss. Instead, I just walked around to the passenger side and got in.

“Well, where to?” she asked.

That was a question I wasn't prepared for. My master plan had basically ended with her pulling up outside the hotel. I didn't know the area very well, but it didn't seem like there were many options aside from bars and casinos.

We ended up in a parking lot somewhere. It was dark and there were no other cars in sight and I was grateful for the sense of privacy. We sat there and talked for a while. I told her how great it was to see her again and she returned the sentiment and we agreed we'd missed each other and then Molly came up again. It seemed to bother JaNel more than it did me in that moment. I assured her again that Molly meant nothing to me anymore. I never felt for her anywhere near what I did for JaNel. In fact, I was going to break up with her as soon as I got home from my trip.

I don't remember exactly what was said after that, but I do know that she must have believed me because I soon had my tongue in her mouth and my hand reaching its way up her shirt.

“Joe, wait,” she said, pushing me away.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s just—I’m on my period.”

“So? That doesn’t mean we can’t still have some fun.” I tried to move in, but she pulled back again.

“What if someone sees us?”

“There’s no one around,” I said, “but if it makes you feel better, we can go somewhere else.”

She said she knew a place, and soon we were driving through Spearfish Canyon. It was a beautiful place in the daylight, but at night, away from the lights of the city, there was nothing to see but darkness.

She pulled off on a road I wouldn’t have even been able to see and stopped in a gravel parking area. We got out and she told me to follow her and I obeyed. I stumbled through the darkness with my hands held out in front of me, just in case. I didn’t trust what little my eyes could see once they adjusted to the lack of light. I mostly followed her voice, as she seemed to know exactly where she was going. We found ourselves at a picnic bench in the middle of a clearing.

She sat on the tabletop and motioned for me to join her. “I used to like to come out here and watch the stars. Come here. Lie down.”

I once again obeyed and joined her in reclining atop the table. I tried to just relax and enjoy the view, but I had more pressing matters on my mind. I reached over and grabbed her hand. She returned my grasp and I inched my way closer to her. We found ourselves making out again. Soon, her shirt was off, and then my pants were off, and then her mouth was down there and it was somehow so much better than it had ever been

with Molly. And when I finished, she did not run away to wash away any trace of what had just transpired between us.

“You taste so good,” she said.

I suddenly felt self-conscious, not because of what she said, but because I only then realized what I’d just done. I did have strong feelings for JaNel and I didn’t really care about Molly, but had I really just done that? I knew there were people who cheated on their significant others left and right without remorse, but I wasn’t one of those people. What I had just done—that wasn’t who I was. Was it?

I pulled my pants up in a hurry and sat upright on the edge of the bench. JaNel put her bra and shirt back on and joined me, reaching for my hand again. “Is everything alright?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, everything’s fine.”

We didn’t linger long in the park. It was late and I had to get up early to hit the road, to leave this place once again. JaNel dropped me off at the hotel and we kissed goodbye. Part of me wanted to jump back in that car with her and tell my dad in the morning that I’d see him in a few days. But I had to go. I had to keep moving before I sank any lower.

16.

I don't recall talking to JaNel during what remained of the trip, which came and went without incident. Dad and I had some fun with our relatives for a few days, packed up, and headed back east. We decided to drive further the first day than we'd originally planned, heading well into the state of South Dakota and beyond Spearfish and Deadwood. I was relieved.

As soon as the car was unpacked when we got home, I locked myself away in my bedroom, knowing full well what I had to do. I had been a coward for too long and now I had to at least be strong enough to end things.

I called Molly and she was incredibly happy to hear from me. She asked about the trip and I told her a little bit, but then said there was something we needed to talk about.

I told her the truth. Well, most of it, anyway. I told her I had seen JaNel and that things had happened. She asked for specifics and I gave them to her. I didn't tell her that I'd been talking to JaNel for a while before the trip. I didn't tell her that I had wanted out of our relationship for a long time and that, on some level, what I'd done with JaNel was the ultimate act of cowardice, because I knew that it would prompt her to break up with me and that, even though it made me the bad guy, it would save me from having to pull the trigger.

She cried. A lot. I expected that, had prepared myself for all manner of wailing to come through the receiver. What I didn't expect were the words she would speak.

“Well—can we still work things out?”

After what I had just told her—sneaking around with the ex, the park bench blowjob—she still wanted to work things out. She still wanted to be with me.

I knew that it was desperation talking. The same sort of desperation that had led me to stay in the relationship far longer than I really wanted to. She was clinging to me because I was the only lover she'd ever had and she was afraid to let go of that. I had to extricate myself from the situation, but I couldn't just tell her flat out that I didn't love her, that I'd never loved her.

“Molly, I think you deserve better,” I said.

More sobbing.

“You're a really sweet girl. You're smart and funny and cute, and I think you deserve better than what I can give you.”

“Are you—are you breaking up with me?” It was like she saw right through me, like she refused to let me off without hearing me say the words.

“I guess I am. I just think it's for the be—“

There's no way to describe the sounds that came through the phone. It was just suffering. One hundred percent pure human pain and suffering. I had never heard anything like it and never have since. I couldn't hang up. I knew it was over now, but I couldn't hang up. I deserved to hear what was coming from the other end. I deserved every sob, every ear-piercing shriek.

I was grateful when I heard a voice that I could only assume was her father saying in the background, “Hang up. Molly, just hang up!”

And then there was silence.

When I told my family about what had happened, they were mostly indifferent.

Everyone agreed that I was an asshole for cheating, but they knew I had been unhappy in the relationship for a long time. Only my brother took it upon himself to try and make me feel even worse about what happened. He took the picture of Molly and I off the fridge, drew devil horns on my head, and crossed out my face. Then he put it back in its place. I knew he only did it to get a rise out of me, but I couldn't help feeling he was right. I was a terrible person for what I'd done and I deserved such scorn.

Of course, such feelings of guilt weren't enough to stop me from continuing to talk to JaNel. I told her about the breakup and, though she felt bad for the way things had gone down, she seemed relieved that Molly was out of the picture. We tried to resume our relationship as just friends, where we had left off before my most recent trip out west. It never really worked, though. Our libidos got the best of us again, and soon we were having phone sex almost every night. She would ask me what I wanted her to do to me and I would tell her. She would take my suggestion and run with it, describing in detail how she would kiss, lick, suck, and so on and so forth. Even from a distance, she managed to turn me on more than Molly ever did.

Summer came to an end and I had to move back to Marquette to begin my Junior year at NMU. I was disappointed to discover that I no longer had my room to myself. Due to increased enrollment, I was arbitrarily stuck with a new roommate.

His name was Matt and he was a freshman. Making matters worse, he was only 17 and, at the time, seemed like a kid compared to my 20 years of worldly experience. I immediately hated him. I hated him for being so young. I hated him for invading the

room that had been my home for the majority of the past two-plus years. I hated him because he was a reminder of the fact that I was only stuck in that dorm room due to the fact that I had no friends I could share an off-campus apartment with.

The hatred soon became mutual. He hated that I was in the room all the time, that I never seemed to have anywhere else to go. More than anything, though, he hated the fact that I was constantly talking to JaNel.

In retrospect, he may have had a point. Once our relationship was rekindled, we were constantly e-mailing, instant messaging, and most of all, calling each other. Half the time, I was oblivious to the fact that Matt was even in the room. JaNel would call me or I'd call her and I would just sit there and talk to her for hours. Sometimes, if I was feeling charitable, I would go out to the parking lot and sit in my car, but for the most part, I felt like I shouldn't have to. It was my room, too, after all. And it had been my room first.

Things came to a head when the phone rang after Matt and I had both gone to bed for the night. Before I could even move, he jumped up, grabbed the phone, and shouted "It's two o'clock in the fucking morning, you stupid bitch," then hung up.

I threw some clothes on, grabbed my cell phone, and headed outside to apologize. She understood. She had forgotten about the time zone difference and didn't realize it was so late on our end.

I had also become frustrated with our relationship, but for different reasons. Since that night at the park, things had certainly rekindled, but JaNel could never commit to it. Despite all the constant talking, all the phone sex and mutual masturbation, despite

the fact that we both openly confessed our love for each other, she couldn't bring herself to place a label on what we had.

As far as I was concerned, what we had was all I really had, and I couldn't understand why she didn't want to be my girlfriend. I began to vent my frustrations the only way I knew how: I started a blog.

17.

*Tuesday, August 26, 2003 – 1:52PM*

I need to get out more.

Actually, I need to get out with other people more. I'm out enough as it is, it's just that all I do is drive around and visit the lake and wish I was like 1000 miles away so I could be with the girl I love.

Of course, that love is a complicated matter. I don't even know if I can explain it. Basically, JaNel and I seem to be in love again (or still), but we don't have anything official going on for reasons I'm not really sure of. She said something about wanting to wait until we can do things properly this time, meaning she wants to save money so we can actually visit each other and stuff. I'm kind of sad though because she said that we probably can't start doing that until after Christmas, which seems like an eternity away. I think I need to find something to do in my spare time. It looks like I'm going to have way too much free time this semester, and that's not a good thing. I'm already going crazy cuz I don't know what to do with myself. I really want to join the PEIF but for some reason I can't bring myself to do it. I always feel awkward going there and being around people who've been working out forever and have perfect bodies and stuff. They really need to have a gym for people who aren't in the best shape who want to try and do something about it :-\

My plan to meet people this semester doesn't seem to be working out either. If anything, the opposite seems to be occurring because I'm starting to remember just how shallow a lot of people in college can be. So, I guess it's back to my anti-social ways...

*Friday, August 29, 2003 – 2:35AM*

I dunno if I mentioned it earlier but I HATE when someone says they'll call and then they don't. I talked to Nel briefly earlier and I mentioned that I was hungry cuz I had a night class and the cafe was closed when I got out. So she told me to go get something to eat. I asked if I'd get to talk to her later. She said "maybe." So I said I'd wait cuz I wanted to talk to her. She told me to go, and that she'd call me later if only to say goodnight. Well, here it is at 2:30 and things are not looking promising. The worst part about it is she's going away for the weekend, leaving tomorrow, and I probably won't get to talk to her till Monday. So yeah...I'm a bit pissed. I mean hell, if she wasn't gonna call she could've just told me she couldn't talk and that would've been fine. Well this post is way too angry so I'm gonna end it. I think I'm off to bed.

*Friday, August 29, 2003 – 7:08PM*

I've come to the conclusion that I need to meet people. I don't know how or where but I guess maybe I'll figure that out. I know that I can't spend all my time sitting around waiting to talk to Nel. Don't get me wrong, I love her and all, but I need to find some people up here I can hang out with or I'll go nuts....well more nuts than I already am. Ah well....I'm off to do absolutely nothing all weekend. Later peoples.

*Sunday, September 14, 2003 – 2:16AM*

So it looks like today's just gonna be crappy all around. I've been trying to call Nel ever since I got home and I get nothing. Argh. I haven't talked to her since Thursday, which

isn't THAT long but it kind of is for us. We usually talk like twice a day. I'm just wondering where she is, since she told me she didn't have any plans for the weekend. I think my paranoid disorder is acting up.

*Sunday, September 14, 2003 – 3:13AM*

I cut off my last entry in the middle of a sentence because Nel finally called me. It's odd though because even though I cut it off it still reads just fine. Anyway...it was a weird conversation. I hate myself sometimes. I was so POSITIVE that something was going on that I found myself pissed off through our entire convo even though I know I had no reason to be. She said her phone wasn't working last night so it's a good thing I didn't try calling. She said she'd watched a movie and I found myself wondering whether she was alone. I know she was but gah. I have a suspicious mind. Then she mentioned that she had dinner with a friend tonight. Once again, I found myself getting infuriated because I was sure something was up. I asked who the friend was and she said it was this guy she works with. So then I felt like an idiot cuz the guy's like 50 and married and a family friend of hers that she's known like all her life. I was expecting her to say she went out with one of her ex's or something. God I don't know what's wrong with me.

*Tuesday, September 16, 2003 – 9:12PM*

I hate love. I really really do sometimes. My life is so fucked up because of it that it's not even funny.

I've realized that Nel has put me in a really shitty situation. Her being unsure about being in any sort of committed relationship is fine, but it's really unfair to me.

Because I know that I do want a relationship. And her hesitancy is really getting to me. And my eye is starting to wander. I'm starting to like one of my coworkers. The problem is that I'm in a position where it's like I can't do anything about anything. Obviously I can't force Nel to commit to me. But at the same time, I can't pursue anything with anyone else because a) I know Nel would get jealous and b) it wouldn't be fair to the other girl because I still love Nel.

So I really don't know what to do with myself. I think I need to just follow my natural tendencies and become an alcoholic or something.

*Friday, September 26, 2003 – 3:46PM*

So I'm sitting in my room listening to Pink Floyd's "The Wall." I decided yesterday that I was going to listen to it in its entirety but certain events prevented that. So I picked up where I left off. I love this album but one of the good and bad things about it is that you have to listen to the whole thing to get the full effect. Ah well.

Elsewhere in life, I think I'm pretty much giving up on that coworker I liked. I saw her walking to dinner with a guy the other day. I know that doesn't mean anything but blah. I guess my feelings for Nel are too strong. And things between Nel and I have been really good lately so I don't want to ruin that, even if I do still need her to commit. That being said, I'm thinking about doing a very bad thing. There's this girl who doesn't work in the same place as me, but our operations overlap a bit. And I've heard rumors that she gets around. And she's not bad looking, not at all. And today I was helping her with something and she made some sort of flirtatious comments. So I'm thinking I might

try to get something going there, for purely physical purposes. Does that make me a horrible person? Probably...I dunno. I just need some human contact.

*Tuesday, September 30, 2003*

Yeah so today was interesting. Nel and I had it out BIG TIME. We were talking online this afternoon and one thing led to another and well the whole commitment thing came up again. And I just couldn't understand why she's so afraid. She said that she loves me and is attracted to me, etc, but that she wants to have some time to herself. Something about how her time and money will never be hers again once she settles down so she wants to be selfish for a while. Well hey, that's great, but it's not very fair to me. She asked why I couldn't just be happy knowing that she loved me. I asked if she loved me so much why she couldn't commit to me. Yeah...it was NOT a fun conversation. And it didn't really get anywhere....

I'm not really sure where we stand. When I got home, I found an e-mail from her that was not too promising. It basically sounded like she didn't want to talk to me anymore because she couldn't give me what I needed. But then my roomie told me she called. So I called her back but got her voicemail and left a message. She called back but we only talked briefly cuz she had to do something quickly, but she's supposed to call me back anytime now. So I'm not sure what's up.....

*Tuesday, November 4, 2003 – 3:30AM*

So I talked to Nel a lot today. Incidentally, Nel kinda pissed me off a lot today. First she started getting on my case about money. See, I told her how broke I was like a week ago

and she offered to send me money. I refused her, cuz what kind of guy would I be if I borrowed money from a girl? So today I told her that I had a negative balance on my checking account and she got all pissed, yelling at me about how I should've let her send me money and blah blah blah. Well I really hate to be in debt to anyone. Yeah it's bad to have a negative balance on your account, but I'll have it back on the positive side before they start charging me for it or anything. And I only have to hold out for a couple more days till I get paid. This beats the feeling of having to borrow money from someone. I really hate that. Even if it's only like \$5, just knowing that I owe someone something makes me uneasy. I always pay it back as soon as humanly possible. And somehow borrowing money from her seems like an even more intimidating proposition.

Then for some reason we started talking about videogames. Sometimes we talk about what it would be like if we had kids, what each of our roles would be and stuff. Well my roomie was on this website today where they had animations based on some classic videogames. He was visiting that site while I was talking to Nel, and she heard some of the game sounds in the background and started saying how much she hates videogames. I was just like "uh...ok." And then she launches into this huge rant about how if she has kids, they're never going to be able to play videogames and blah blah blah. Something about how videogames make kids' asses get fatter while killing braincells. Being a fan of gaming myself, I was kind of offended by what she was saying. I asked what would happen if her and I got married, and I wanted to buy a videogame system. She said that if I was playing games then our kids would want to play too, so it wouldn't work. I brought up the idea of restricting playing time and she wasn't down with that. So

then I brought up the idea of me being able to play but the kids not being able to. And she called me a Nazi, saying that it was a horrible idea. So yeah...I dunno.

The way she thinks kind of freaks me out sometimes. She sounds like a bitter old woman and she's only 20. I think it's because she's not in college anymore and is working full time. So now she's all angry at anyone who doesn't have to deal with "the real world." Well hell, she did it to herself. Anyway, I still have feelings for her and all but if it comes down to it, I am NOT going to give up something I enjoy doing just to appease her.

*Sunday, November 23, 2003 – 3:35AM*

Change is a scary thing. I'm in a place right now where I'm considering moving away from someone who has pretty much been my life for the past 3 years. Well not literally moving away. We're physically far enough apart as it is. I mean I'm considering saying goodbye and moving on....and that's an imposing thought. I've realized lately that Nel just doesn't seem to be the same girl I fell in love with anymore. She used to be so carefree and fun-loving. I was rather conservative, so we sort of balanced each other out. Nowadays though, it seems that all she talks about are work and money. She tells me I should save money because I don't know what it's like in "the real world." Well yeah, that's true. But I shouldn't have to know what it's like, cuz I'm still in college. College is supposed to be about having fun and figuring out what you want to do for the rest of your life. She decided to give that up and work full time, hence casting her into the real world early. But she needs to realize that just because SHE made that decision, she shouldn't try to force me into growing up too soon. The fact is, I don't want to. I want to cling to

my dreams, foolish as they may seem. I want to write and play guitar and sing. I don't want to get caught up in a job which stifles my creativity. I don't want to make money for the sake of making money, and sell my soul in the process. I think that's what she's done. And as a result, she sounds older than my parents and she's not even 21 yet.

We've gotten into a couple arguments over videogames. I may have written about it. But I like to play games and otherwise just relax in my free time. I only have 8 credits now, so I have a lot of said free time. I do work 20 hours a week though. But Nel seems to think that since I have so much free time, I should get a second job or something. She says that by playing videogames and just chilling out, I'm "wasting my life." I'm sorry, but from my viewpoint, by doing nothing but working all the time, she is the one who's wasting her life.

I've never been able to put much value in money. I mean I like having things, who doesn't? But when I think of where I want to be in the future, what I want out of life, I never think in terms of the green stuff. I want a wife who I love and who loves me for what I am, and accepts who I am. Maybe a few munchkins running around, and a decent house to live in. That's about it. Oh, and a dog. Probably a St. Bernard. But yeah, that's my vision of happiness.

I think Nel has her sights set on career-oriented things. I think she wants to become a partner in her family company and eventually become filthy stinking rich. I must admit, that has always been one aspect of her I've found attractive. But lately she seems consumed by it. She's working 50+ hour weeks. It seems like she's always at work, even on weekends. And I just don't get that. I could understand if it was something where she had some input. Something creative. But it's not.

So yeah....I've been rethinking things. I don't know if I could spend the rest of my life with someone who seems to have no dreams for themselves. No creative ambitions other than to make money. I don't know if I could live with someone who would expect me to give up something I enjoy for them. And I really don't know if I could give up my dreams to move onto her family's land, which would be necessary if she became a partner.

That said, it's still a really hard decision. I still need to think about it some more. And I guess we'll see what happens...

18.

Despite my obsessively analyzing every minute detail of our relationship, JaNel was not the only thing on my mind over the course of that semester. Nick, one of my coworkers, had noticed my reclusive tendencies and took it upon himself to try and get me to come out of my shell.

It started with what was supposed to be a simple dinner party. He explained that he and his girlfriend Tasha were going to have some friends over for dinner and asked if I'd like to come. I tried to resist, but he insisted. I knew that I should make some effort to spend time with real people in real social settings, so I reluctantly accepted.

I'd never been to a dinner party. I'd hardly ever even been invited over to someone else's place before. All I knew about such occasions I'd learned from movies and TV. Good looking people getting together in good looking houses, wearing fancy clothes and sipping wine. It seemed like the guests almost always brought a bottle of wine as a token of appreciation for their hosts. Since I was under age, I opted instead to bring dessert.

I showed up at the appointed time, wearing my finest button-down shirt, a fancy cheesecake in tow, and was a bit surprised when the door opened. Nick stood there, a bottle of beer in his extended hand, and a devious grin on his face.

“Hey, Joey,” he said. “Thirsty?”

I suddenly felt foolish with my shirt and my gift and my expectation of a quiet, reserved night. It seemed the emphasis was going to be more on the party than the dinner.

It wasn't as bad as I'd expected. We did have dinner. Nick whipped up some fettuccine Alfredo and it was pretty good. My expensive cheesecake did not go unappreciated, and things were fairly civil, at least until after dinner.

As the night went on, more and more people crammed into the apartment and the alcohol started to flow more freely. Nick and his roommates had constructed a bar in their living room, and it was well stocked. Everyone was doing shots and drinking beer and laughing and having a great time.

The beer was my downfall. Nick was like a ninja, swooping in at the exact moment I emptied a bottle and replacing it with a full one before I was any the wiser. I never had a chance to refuse, and once the bottle was in my hand, it was too late. I had to drink it.

I hadn't been so drunk since the time with my old roommate Mike and the vodka. Nick was on a mission to show me the wonders of the drink, and he succeeded. The last thing I remember from that night was Nick tucking me into his bed—his girlfriend, Tasha, lived next door and he could stay with her—and giving me a large glass of water, with orders to drink it.

My head was killing me the next morning. In fact, my everything was killing me. My entire body seemed to hurt every time I tried to move. I managed to make it back to my dorm room around 11 and promptly went back to sleep. When I awoke again, the pain was more manageable. And on another level, I felt great. I realized that for the entirety of the previous night, I hadn't once dwelled on my confusion over things with JaNel or the guilt I still felt about Molly. I was just there, in the moment, at a party,

having fun. I'd managed to get outside my own head, to lose control, to simply be. I wanted more.

As it turned out, I got what I wished for. Nick's parties became a fairly regular thing and I looked forward to each and every one of them. I couldn't wait to have a cold beer in my hand and people around who didn't seem to mind my company. Those parties were the only times when I didn't feel isolated in the world, when I felt like maybe I could be part of society.

In addition to drinking, I began to notice that everyone at the parties seemed to smoke. In fact, most people I knew smoked. Not just Nick and Tasha and their friends, but most of our coworkers, too. I had never tried it, had never even considered it. My brother had been a smoker since he was twelve, a fact that broke our parents' hearts. He wasn't proud of the habit and always told me that if he ever caught me doing it, he would kill me.

Of course, that didn't stop me. Nick never tried to push smoking on me, but when I showed interest in trying it, he certainly didn't discourage me. Rather, he tutored me in the art, showing me how to properly inhale, and teaching me how to pack cigarettes against the palm of my hand or various other objects, to make sure the tobacco was properly settled.

Soon, I was not only a drinker, but a smoker. I started buying my own cigarettes—Camel Lights at first, since that's what I was trained on. I also discovered why so many people at work smoked. It provided a reason to sneak out of the kitchen for a while. As Nick and I had both ascended to the rank of supervisor, we could sneak out

back as often as we liked. It wasn't uncommon for three, four, or even more of us to be huddled outside in the Designated Smoking Area.

I relished the social nature of smoking. Sitting outside in the DSA, I often found myself conversing with people I'd seen around since I started working at the Den, but had never talked to. It was a kind of secret society, a bond that instinctually formed with others who shared the habit. If you smoked, you were in. And I was glad to be part of it.

As if drinking and smoking weren't bad enough, the little devil on my shoulder that was Nick took it upon himself to encourage me in the pursuit of another vice—women. He knew about the JaNel situation. He knew a version of it, anyway. I told him that she lived back home in Illinois. We'd met during high school and we'd had an on-again, off-again thing going ever since I'd moved up to Marquette for college. I was too self-conscious to tell him (or anyone outside my family) the whole truth; surely I would be shunned as a nerd, a geek, a weirdo, stuck in some sort of fantasy life.

Whatever the case, Nick knew I wasn't entirely happy with my current situation and started to encourage me to talk to other girls. We were in college, after all, and there were plenty of fine, single females all around us who would cause me far less mental anguish—or at least provide some physical benefits to go along with it. I started to realize that maybe I was that geeky, nerdy weirdo and it was time for me to attempt another foray into reality.

Under Nick's guidance, my primary course of study quickly became How to Talk to Girls. Socially awkward though I'd always been, women in particular tended to have a crippling effect on me. To a large extent it was probably related to my having attended

an all-boys high school, thus never having been around the fairer sex during those formative years.

Nick began to coach me, tutor me. He would do reconnaissance work to find out which girls at work were single and if they were looking. He would agree to host parties for the sole reason of giving me an event to invite a girl too. He was the best wingman anyone could ask for, providing me endless opportunities to engage with the opposite sex.

And none of it ever went anywhere. I tried. Oh, I tried. It's not as if my friend put in all this time and effort and I never even managed to talk to a girl. I just completely lacked the skills necessary to accomplish the mission. I had no idea how to be cool, calm, confident, smooth. Instead, I was painfully awkward, obvious. I may as well have just jumped out from around a corner and shouted, "I like you. Do you want to go out with me?"

Of course, I was oblivious to the many ways in which a man can be shot down. One of my first efforts was a girl who worked with us in the kitchen. She reminded me of a young Charlize Theron: tall, blonde, slender. She was single, had been for the longest time. She said guys never asked her out. I figured they were intimidated by her beauty, as was I. It turned out she went to the same Lutheran church as Nick and Tasha. They said she was nice, super friendly, she probably just needed a good guy who was brave enough to approach her.

After much coaxing, approach her I did. I don't recall exactly what I said, but I'm sure I invited her to dinner or coffee or one of the other cliché first-date activities. I do remember her response, though. She smiled and paused for a moment.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m just really busy right now with school and work and everything. I’ll have to think about it.”

I was too naïve to realize that having to think about it was code for “not in a million years.” Rather, I took it as a sign of hope. She hadn’t exactly said no. She just had other things to worry about. It was perfectly understandable. I’d just give her a couple days to consider the offer and approach her again.

When I did, she seemed even more surprised than when I’d first brought it up. She said she didn’t think it would be a good idea right now. She had too much going on in her life and so on and so forth. I felt like an idiot for even trying. Of course a creature as gorgeous like her would never give a second thought to a fat schlub like me.

There would be a few more attempts with other girls, mostly coworkers, and they all ended similarly. I just had no idea how to talk to girls in real life. And on some level, JaNel, my fantasy girl, was still in the back of my mind. We still talked fairly often, and though she had said she was okay with the idea of me trying to see other people, I always got the sense that she was jealous. For my part, there was something inside me that made me wonder if any girl I met in Marquette could ever compare with that country girl who lived far, far away.

## 19.

The fall semester ended and winter break came and went. The big news was that Nick proposed to Tasha over the holidays. It was hard for me to imagine being that sure about something, but I knew they would make it. JaNel and I, meanwhile, continued our cycle of ups and downs. One day I was certain we were closer than ever and the next I was ready to be done with it all. By the time I moved back to Marquette for the second semester of my Junior year, we barely spoke anymore.

I might have been able to deal with that if it weren't for the fact that Nick and Tasha's recent engagement seemed to have them both prepared to settle down already. I'm not sure exactly what happened over break, but they suddenly had far fewer get-togethers. I still saw them once or twice a week, but for the most part, I was alone. And I couldn't stand it.

I decided to give the world of online dating another try. I'd failed miserably at trying to meet someone in the real world, and internet matchmaking had become much more widely accepted since I last gave it a whirl. I signed up for Match.com, created a profile—with a picture this time—and started browsing.

The results weren't promising. Most users now had photos, but the majority appeared to either be older women who'd been around the block a few too many times, or eighteen year olds who were way too attractive to have any business on an online dating site and were probably, in reality, fifty-year-old men in disguise.

I set my aim low. I sent messages to a few women across a fairly broad spectrum of age, appearance, and background, just to see if anyone would reply.

One of the first to reply would have been one of my last choices, but desperation got the better of me and I responded. We messaged back and forth for a while and seemed to hit it off. Eventually, she asked if she could call me and I had no objections. We ended up talking for four hours straight, a feat I'd never managed with anyone aside from JaNel.

There were some downsides. She wasn't in school. In fact, she had no intention of going to school. She worked part time and relied on her family for a lot of help. She also had a kid. I had graduated from Crazy Baby Girl, who wanted nothing more in the world than a child of her own, to someone who had accomplished that goal. She swore she wasn't looking for another father for her baby, whose real father was no longer in the picture. She was simply at a place where she felt ready to move on and meet someone new. I believed her.

We went out a few times and had some fun. She dragged me to see the movie *8 Mile* starring Eminem, which I enjoyed more than I thought I would. But the fact that she had to drag me made me realize that we really didn't have much in common. Even worse, on the few occasions that we had gone to her place, she spent most of the time fussing over her daughter. I couldn't blame her. I was actually glad that she put her child first; it seemed that not enough young parents did that. But I couldn't deal with it. I knew that if we actually got into a relationship, I would always be resentful of the baby's constant needs. I had my own needs. I desperately needed to be number one in someone's life, and I couldn't put myself in a position where that was a clear impossibility.

I got replies from a few other people and went on some dates, but none of it ever went anywhere. They were inevitably too boring or too unattractive or some combination thereof. I gave up, or decided to stop actively looking anyway. I left my profile up on the odd chance that someone might be interested enough to contact me out of the blue, but gave up any real hope of finding anyone.

I started smoking more. A lot more. I went from going through a pack or two in a week to smoking that much in a day. It felt like something to do. I would take a break from screwing around online or watching TV or playing videogames to go stand by the light post outside the dorm and smoke, usually two or three cigarettes in a row. If I was lucky, I might see someone coming or going from the building and I'd nod my head and they might say hi. On the rare occasion that I was really lucky, I might be joined by another smoker and we would make small talk for those few precious minutes it took for us to get our fix.

One night, I was standing outside the dorm, smoking a cigarette near my favorite light post, when a voice snapped me out of my own head.

“Can I bum one?”

I froze. The voice was female, but different from those of all the young college girls I heard on daily basis. It was husky, seasoned. The voice of a smoker, perhaps, but in that moment it sounded like nothing less than the voice of a real woman. “Sure,” I said, without even looking at her.

I reached into my coat pocket, pulled out my Camel Lights, and slid back the top of the pack. She pulled one out and pressed it between her lips. I offered her a lighter

and she accepted, igniting the end of her cigarette and exhaling a plume of smoke. She handed the lighter back and I hated myself for not being cool enough to have just lit it for her.

We stood there, smoking side by side, until she finished her cigarette. The lack of words felt oddly comfortable.

“Well, see ya,” she said, dropping the butt on the ground and crushing it out with her foot.

“See ya.” I turned and looked at her full on for the first time as she made her way back to the building. She was wearing a baggy hooded sweatshirt, so it was hard to see what the top half of her body looked like, but I definitely enjoyed the rear view of the bottom half.

Deciding I wasn't quite ready to head back in myself, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my smokes again. I slid one out, lit it, and stood there in the darkness, pondering all the wonders of the universe—especially the female anatomy.

In the coming weeks, these silent smoking encounters would become more and more frequent. We eventually exchanged enough words to learn each others' names—hers was Christina. We began to make small talk, asking how classes were going, but never really getting to know anything substantial about each other.

I did hear a few things about her through the grapevine. It turned out my roommate, Matt, had hung out with her a few times. He'd tried to ask her out but she would never go for it. He mentioned something about her having been in the hospital. Too much booze or too many pills or something and she blacked out and fell and cracked

her face open. Lost a couple teeth. I had a hard time connecting that image with the kindly soul who spent so many smoke breaks keeping me company.

I was in my room one night, sitting on the edge of my bed and playing Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic on my Xbox, when Christina appeared in the doorway.

“Hey,” she said, leaning heavily against the door frame. “What ya up to?”

“Oh, nothing. Just playing some games.”

“Star Wars! I wanna play!” She stumbled closer to me and grabbed the controller out of my hands.

“Um—okay.”

She leaned back against me, so that I was straddling her. “How do you move?”

It took a second for her question to register. “Oh—use the left analog stick. Here.” I guided her hands to appropriate position.

“How do I swing the lightsaber?”

We sat there for about five minutes while the Jedi on my TV ran around in circles which were likely as graceful as those Christina would manage in her present condition. I tried to keep my thoughts pure as she shifted against me, until she finally got back to her feet, handed me the controller, and shambled out the door.

“See ya, Joe Joe.”

“See ya.” I was sad to see her go, though somewhat relieved that she was no longer grinding against me. I was also worried about the fact that she was moving about the hallways so obviously intoxicated. Maybe there was some truth to the rumors after all.

It didn't really matter, since this would be the last such encounter for a while. As the semester went on, I saw less and less of Christina, not that I'd ever seen much of her in the first place. Aside from the rare smoke break here and there, she faded back into the obscurity from which she'd appeared. I once again went from having one girl who was kindly enough to spend time with me on occasion to being alone in the universe.

Well, perhaps not entirely alone. As summer break approached, my friends Nick and Tasha approached me about the idea of moving in together. They wanted to rent a house so they could finally live together, but most of the ones available in the area were three-or-four bedrooms and having someone to fill one of those rooms would make rent a lot more affordable.

I was torn. I had never really had my own place. My dorm room hardly counted, even the semester I had it to myself. The thought of having my own room to do with entirely as I pleased was appealing. I could decorate however I wanted, come and go (or hide away from the world) as I pleased. And it would be nice to not have to listen to all the random stupidity going on all over the dorm at all hours. At least I knew Nick and Tasha, knew there was a mutual respect between us, so that if there was any random stupidity, we could talk about it. Besides, I had been in the dorms for three years, longer than most people. It was probably about time I moved on and got a big boy place. I accepted their offer and we began the search for a house. We looked at a couple duplexes centrally located in the heart of Marquette, but couldn't come to an agreement. The places themselves had a lot in common. They were spacious—each over 1,000 square feet—and they were both within walking distance of Lake Superior, as well as campus. They were also both on the expensive side. Split three ways, rent would be

about \$400 each, which, while not completely outrageous, was a bit high for our poor dishwashers' wages.

As it turned out, this was pretty common for houses in Marquette. It seemed landlords charged a premium based on location, and banked on poor college kids' willingness to cram as many people as possible into a house in order to keep costs down. We started considering other options. We briefly talked about looking in the nearby towns of Negaunee and Ishpeming, but decided that even the ten-to-fifteen mile commute would be unbearable in the U.P.'s long winters.

That's when we found a listing for an affordable four-bedroom house in South Marquette, a section of town separated from Marquette proper by Highway 41. It was a decent distance from campus, but not entirely unreasonable to think you could walk or bike there. More importantly, it was within walking distance of a number of bars.

The house itself was a mixed bag. It was old, and obviously hadn't been maintained well over the years. There were creaky floorboards, hideously colored walls, and appliances that were likely older than any of us by a good decade or more. The refrigerator was a shade of green that had to have been outlawed sometime during the '70s. Also likely a remnant of a bygone era was the floor plan. The layout was like some sort of square Panopticon, with the living room as its center. You could enter the house into the kitchen, which then opened into the living room. All of the bedrooms, and the bath, were located along the sides of the living room. This meant anyone trying to relax and enjoy a movie or a book in the common area would have to deal with the comings and goings of the other roommates. It also meant that none of those comings and goings

would ever be very private, as you had to walk through the living room to get to any other part of the house.

On the plus side, rent would be cheap, about \$200 each, plus utilities. And despite its distance from campus, we agreed that we could appreciate the location for its solitude. Being on a dead-end street in South Marquette meant that we would likely be the only college students around. Given that Nick and Tasha were ready to settle down and I was always happy to hide away from the world, the location worked perfectly for us. We agreed to take the place, signed the lease, and grew more and more excited about having a house of our own.

When word began to spread at work that we were getting a house, we learned that Jim, one of our coworkers, was looking for a place to stay. None of us knew him that well, but he seemed like a fairly quiet, respectful person, so we spoke with our new landlord and he agreed we could add a fourth person to the lease. Though it would mean losing the spare room we'd intended to use as an office/study area, we were excited to have rent drop even lower. And, though I liked Nick and Tasha, I was somewhat relieved that I wouldn't be the only person sharing a house with a couple.

20.

The semester ended and we all moved into the house. We decided that Nick and Tasha would share the largest bedroom, while I would get the next largest, and Jim, having been the last to sign on, would get the third largest. The fourth bedroom, barely bigger than a closet, was dressed up as Nick's, for the sake of Tasha's parents, who could deal with the idea of their daughter living in the same house as her boyfriend, but apparently not the same bedroom.

My room worked out wonderfully for my purposes. It was an odd shape, an elongated rectangle that ran most of the length of the living room. The length worked well for me, as it allowed me to set up my TV on one end and put some distance between it and the rear speakers of my surround sound system. I envisioned endless hours playing videogames and watching movies in my high-tech sanctuary. I would relish the days I had off while my roommates were working, so I could crank up the sound and hear X-Wings whizz past me in Star Wars and feel every explosion in Halo.

Sadly, these fantasies of nerdy isolationism would never quite come to fruition. On one of my first summer shifts, I was headed back to the kitchen after throwing some trash in the dumpster. I rarely paid any attention to my surroundings, as I had a tendency to live inside my own head, so it wasn't surprising when I nearly walked right into someone—Christina.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey. I didn't know you worked here.”

“Yeah, I just started. Anyway, how are you?”

“I'm good.”

“Yeah?” she asked, with a note of disbelief in her voice.

Something about her questioning tone made me question myself. Was I really good? Was I happy? Yes, I lived with some people I considered friends, but we barely ever saw each other due to conflicting work schedules and the fact that Nick and Tasha were always off doing couple stuff and Jim was always hiding in his room, having turned out to be even more of a loner than I was. And now, here I was, with this girl I only kind of knew and hadn't seen in quite a while asking how I was doing and seeming to want a sincere reply and I wondered if I could give it to her. “Well, to be honest, I've been kind of lonely lately.” The words seemed to just fall out of my mouth before I could catch them.

“Me too.”

“Really?” She didn't seem like the kind of girl who would ever be lonely.

“Yeah. We should hang out sometime.”

“Th—that would be cool,” I said, assuming she was just trying to be nice.

Then she asked for my phone number. I gave it to her and she wrote hers down and told me I should call her sometime and I knew I never would. I didn't want to test the boundaries of her niceness, didn't want to force her into thinking she actually had to hang out with me. We exchanged our usual see ya's, and I pushed the scrap of paper with her number on it deep down in my pocket and got back to work.

Two days later, my phone rang, the caller ID showing a number I didn't recognize. I hesitantly pressed the Send button to answer. “Hello?”

“Hey, it's me.”

I didn't have to ask who "me" was. She said she wanted to hang out, that we should watch a movie or something. We debated a bit over an exact course of action until she mentioned that she had recently seen X-Men 2 and liked it, but had never seen the original.

"Oh, it's great," I said. "I mean, not as good as the second one, but it's definitely worth watching. I have it on DVD, so I could just bring it over."

"I don't have a DVD player."

"I do. I could just bring it with me." It never occurred to me to invite her over to my private den of geekery.

"Are you sure? I mean—"

"Oh, it's no problem. I can just grab the player and the cables and be over in no time."

"Well alright. Sounds good."

She gave me directions to her house and I gathered up my bulky DVD player and all the necessary cables and headed over.

I parked on the street across from her house, turned my car off, and inhaled deeply. I sat there, breathing, trying to calm myself for a good minute or two before I worked up the courage to grab the equipment out of my passenger seat and knock on her door. When I finally did and she opened the door, my nerves returned. She was standing there with a crooked smile on her face, wearing a tight white t-shirt and hip-hugging jeans that showed off an amazing hourglass figure.

"Hey, Joe Joe," she said.

"Hey," was all I could manage.

She invited me in and we attempted smalltalk while I connected the DVD player to her TV. We sat on opposite ends of the couch while watching Wolverine and friends try to save the world from Magneto. When the movie was over, we talked a little about it, but any attempts at further conversation just felt forced. When the awkwardness became unbearable, I excused myself, making up some excuse for having to go. She said we should get together again sometime. I knew that she was lying.

A couple days later, my phone rang again. She said we should hang out. Maybe she could come over to my place. Oh, and could I maybe buy us some beer? She was only 20 so she couldn't buy her own yet. The awkwardness of our last visit quickly faded from my mind as I agreed to all of her terms. Maybe a couple drinks was all we needed to get us both to relax and open up a bit. I wanted to find out who this girl was, what would possess her to take an interest in an awkward fat guy like myself.

She didn't have a car, so I had to go pick her up. We stopped at a gas station on the way back to my house and I bought a twelve pack of Budweiser, along with my now-customary pack of Marlboro Milds. The drive back to my house was quiet for the most part. When we got there, I threw the beer in the fridge and showed her around. Nick and Tasha were out and Jim was locked away in his room as usual, so for the most part, it was just the two of us. I showed her my bedroom last, not wanting to seem presumptuous.

“This is my room. We could watch a movie or something in here, or we could just chill in the living room if you want.”

“No, this is fine,” she said. She walked into my bedroom and took a seat on my leather office chair, spinning herself around.

“Well, it's settled then. I'll get us a beer.” I went to the kitchen, grabbed two bottles, headed back to my room, and handed her one. “So what do you want to do?”

“Let's just sit and talk,” she said.

I feared the awkwardness that was bound to follow and decided to put on some music, so there would at least be background noise.

“Who is this?”

“Oh—it's Eric Clapton. Well, Derek and the Dominos, technically.” I went on to explain the history of the band, how by 1970, Clapton was sick of being Clapton and wanted to try being part of a band rather than a front man, a plan which never quite worked. Either way, it resulted in *Layla and other Assorted Love Songs*, my favorite album of all time. “There's something about his singing and playing on the album that you never quite hear on any of his other work. The whole thing is fueled by his unrequited love for a woman who just happened to be George Harrison's wife, and you can hear that passion on every track.”

“Wow, you know a lot about music.”

“Well, I know a lot about Clapton.”

My random music geek outpouring helped get some conversation flowing. She liked some of Clapton's work and a lot of classic rock in general, but also a lot of country, a genre I was never a huge fan of. We debated and laughed and drank and it felt great.

As we were getting toward the tail end of the twelve-pack, I suggested we go outside for a smoke break. We brought our beers with us and I grabbed my pack of Milds and we headed through the kitchen and out the door.

Christina took a seat on the bench Nick had fashioned from the remnants of a bar he'd had in his old apartment and beckoned for me to join her. When I did, my hip pressed against hers, and I fought my natural reflex to scoot over. I opened my pack of smokes, slid one into my mouth, and offered one to Christina. I handed her my lighter (I still wasn't cool enough to light a lady's cigarette), and leaned my head back to look up at the stars. "Hey look, there's the Big Dipper...or the Little Dipper. Hell, there's one of the dippers. I can't really tell."

Christina just took a silent drag off her cigarette.

"I guess I never really looked at the stars before. They tend to get drowned out by all the light pollution back in Illinois." I marveled at the fact that even though I'd lived in Marquette for the better part of the past three years, it had never occurred to me to stop and look at the night sky. I marveled at the fact that a beautiful girl who I didn't really know anything about was sitting next to me on some makeshift bench outside my house. A shock ran through my body when her angora sweater-clad arm brushed against the bare skin of my own. Looking over, I also marveled at the fact that even that sweater couldn't conceal the amazing curves of her body.

"Do you believe in God, Joe?" she asked, bringing me back down to Earth.

I froze. That was just about the last conversation I was expecting to have that night, and a topic I hated discussing. I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about the issue, and it seemed that no matter what you said, you were bound to piss somebody off. "I don't know if I can answer a question like that."

"Just be honest. It's not that hard. I mean it's okay if you say no."

I leaned hard against the back of the bench, as if expecting the wood to somehow

magically soften against my weight and embrace me. No such luck. Instead, I lit another cigarette and sat silent for a while, pondering the depth of the question she cast me into. I launched into some bullshit tirade that I subconsciously think will make me sound more intellectual, talking about the fact that I was raised Catholic and how that has a tendency to fuck up anyone's view of religion. I told her that I definitely believe in some higher power, but I hesitated to call it God, because I think it has taken many forms to many different peoples over the millennia. Basically, it seems like everyone's praying to the same thing and just assigning their own name to it because they want to feel special and unique. I believe in some sort of god-like power, but I don't want to try and assign human qualities to it like most religions do.

“Well, I've been saved,” she said plainly. That's when I noticed the gold crucifix hanging from her neck. I knew I was in trouble, but for some reason I couldn't resist the urge to dig myself in even deeper.

“Honestly, I've always struggled with Christianity,” I said. I told her about how I always struggled with the differences between the Old Testament and the New. After all, the Bible tells us that man was created in God's image. The God of the Old Testament was passionate and vengeful. Sure, he showed love and compassion to his followers on many occasions, but he wasn't afraid to smite someone every now and then. That always sounded pretty human to me. Then suddenly in the New Testament, Jesus came along and it was one giant love fest. “Love thy neighbor.” “Turn the other cheek.” What happened to all the smiting? People just aren't like that, not all the time. Then there's the fact that there are so many Christians who go around talking about how they can't wait to be with Jesus, how they're ready to die so they can be with him, and honestly it just

pisses me off. I refuse to believe that if there is a God who loves everyone, that he wouldn't want people to enjoy life while they can.

She grabbed the cigarette pack out of my hand and slid another one out for herself. "Well, when I lived in Colorado, I was in a bad place. I started hanging out with these guys, drinking all the time. I started doing meth."

I was sorry I said anything. Here I was with this girl I'd only just started to get to know and she was about to tell me all the horrible things she'd done. I really didn't want to hear it. How amazing would those curves seem if I knew all the places they'd been? I wanted to cover my ears with my hands and chant, "la la la I can't hear you," until she finished.

Instead, I just started chain-smoking.

She kept talking, telling me about how bad things were. She said she couldn't remember a lot of it, because she was high all the time. Something about a time when some guy showed up at her apartment and said he'd heard she'd dance for him if he paid her. A lonely, depressed existence full of lonely, depressed people. "One night," she said, "I almost shared a needle with this one guy just because he said he was so alone he wanted to die. I thought maybe if I stuck that needle in my arm, let his blood mingle with mine, that he'd feel better. I knew what might happen, but I honestly didn't care if I lived or died—and sometimes death sounded good."

Something stopped her that night, though. Something made her put that needle down. She began going to church with her aunt, who was a Christian. Jesus saved her. "If it wasn't for Him," she said, "I know I'd probably be dead by now. He took me out of that place, brought me back here. Now I'm in school, getting straight A's, meeting some

good people—like you.”

She looked as though she was about to start crying.

I had no idea what to say. All I could think to do was put my arm around her. She moved herself closer to me and laid her head on my shoulder.

We sat silently like that for what felt like eons, her head nestled against me, my arm around her, the whole situation feeling completely normal.

Eventually, we went back inside and finished our beer, though the conversation never picked up again. It didn't matter. I knew that what had happened out there on that rickety bench had surprised her as much as it did me. I knew that what she told me was not likely something she told a whole lot of people, and that sense of trust was enough to fill the spaces of the silence that followed.

I drove her home in the wee hours of the morning, after the beer was gone, after most of the cigarettes had been smoked, after the buzz had worn off. We were done indulging our vices for the night, though something told me I had just gained a new one.

I pulled up to her house and she said goodnight and thanked me for the beer and for listening. I told her it was no problem and waited until she was safely inside before driving away. And for the first time, I knew for certain that I would see her again.

21.

JaNel and I had fallen out of touch to a large extent, but started reconnecting a bit that summer. Things felt quite tentative, though. Ever since she'd turned 21, she had been going out a lot, drinking and partying and generally spending her time doing things other than talking to me. It was hard for me to just let her back in again, but there was something about her I just couldn't say no to.

She called me one afternoon and we chatted for a while before asking me what my plans for the evening were. I told her I was probably going to hang out with Christina. She asked who that was. I explained that Christina was a friend I knew from the dorms and work and JaNel was suspicious that I'd never mentioned her before. I told her that we were both in town for the summer and neither of us had many people to hang out with.

“Well, that makes me nervous,” she said.

“Why?”

“I don't know. What if something happens?”

I asked her what she meant and she said I knew. I accused her of not trusting me and we went back and forth about it for a while. It never even occurred to me that she had no right to be jealous.

She called me again the next night and asked what I'd been up to. I told her about my day and how I'd watched a movie with Christina the previous night.

“Oh, how was your date?” she asked.

“What date?”

“You know, your date with Christina.”

“What? Now I can’t spend time with a friend without you getting jealous?”

“Well, you had a certain time set aside to spend with a girl. Sounds like a date to me.”

I countered by pointing out that, by her own rationale, she had been on many dates since we’d started talking again because she was always setting aside time to spend with male friends. She said it was different in her case, because they were all guys she’d known for years. They were established friendships, so obviously nothing romantic was going to happen. I suggested that such things happened in old friendships all the time and we argued about it for a while, but the truth was that I didn’t really care. In that moment, I realized for the first time that I didn’t really care what JaNel thought. I had found a new obsession.

Christina called me again a couple days later and asked if I wanted to hang out. I naturally said yes, and she asked what I wanted to do. Seeing the question as an opportunity to steer things toward a more date-like environment, I suggested we grab a bite to eat. She said she was hungry and asked where I wanted to go.

I proposed The Vierling, a local restaurant and brewery. I’d been there countless times—it had become my default first date spot for the few of those I’d been on. The atmosphere was low-key, and if you were fortunate enough to be seated near the windows at the rear, you had a great view of Lake Superior. She said she’d never been there, but she’d heard it was nice. She didn’t really have much money, though, and wasn’t it kind of expensive? I offered to pay and was surprised when she accepted without hesitation.

I threw on the only decent button-down shirt I owned, checked myself in the mirror, and headed over to her house to pick her up. She answered the door wearing jeans and a form-fitting cable-knit sweater and I liked what I saw. The short ride to the restaurant was quiet, but I kept stealing glances at her whenever I could.

We arrived and were seated and made small talk while we waited for our food. Nice weather we're having. When do you work this week? Yeah, I'm looking forward to *Spider-Man 2*, too. It's supposed to be better than the first one.

"This is a really nice place," she said.

"Is it? I mean, I guess it's alright."

"I'm not used to going to places like this. It almost feels like a date." The tone of her voice was suspicious.

I decided to downplay my efforts. "Does it? I mean, can't two friends have dinner together at a decent restaurant?"

She looked away, then turned back to me. "Joe, there's something I should probably tell you. I kind of—well, I have a boyfriend."

I didn't know what to say. What kind of person would sneak around behind their partner's back to spend time with someone of the opposite gender? What business did she have approaching strange, lonely guys and saying she was lonely too and having late night beer-and-cigarette-laden conversations about faith and redemption? And where was this boyfriend, anyway? If I had a girl like her, there's no way I'd sit back while she ran around town, mooching free dinners off misguided strangers.

She went on to say that she had a boyfriend but didn't really want him. His name was Jason, and they'd been together on and off since high school. He was an asshole.

Verbally and, occasionally, physically abusive. He was into some bad shit. He did coke and drank all the time. Fathered a baby with another girl while they were dating. She was trying to distance herself from him, but it was hard. He kept calling her and she could only ignore him so much. Besides, she knew that beneath it all, he had a good heart. He just had some problems he needed to deal with, and she couldn't abandon him.

I wanted to get up and walk away. It was fucked up. The whole situation was fucked up. Not only had she not bothered to tell me about her boyfriend before we found ourselves on this date-like dinner outing, but he was an abusive asshole to boot? There were a million things I wanted to say. I wanted to leap up and start moralizing.

I didn't, though. I didn't say—couldn't say anything. It wouldn't make any difference anyway. If she'd stuck with him that long, nothing I could say would ever change her mind. The worst part was that I could tell she honestly believed what she said about him being a good person inside and needing to be there for him. I certainly couldn't relate to the level of abuse she described, but I knew what it was like to get wrapped up with someone you just couldn't shake.

Jason was just one of the male threats I would encounter in the world of Christina. I picked her up one afternoon to go see the latest Harry Potter movie, and from the time she got in the car, her phone was ringing constantly. I asked if it was Jason and she said no. I asked who it was, but she didn't want to tell me. She apparently didn't want to answer it, either.

“You know those things have power buttons, right?” I tried not to let too much annoyance seep into my voice.

“I know, but I don’t want to miss it if someone else calls.”

We got to the theater, bought our tickets, and found seats, with the phone ringing away the whole time. Finally, a few minutes before the movie was supposed to start, she answered it.

“Hey, I’m at a movie theater...Harry Potter...I’m with Joe, from the kitchen...yeah, we’re friends...listen, I’ll call you later, okay?”

The way she said my name made it seem like whoever was hounding her knew who I was. I asked her again who was calling her and she tried to avoid the question. I pointed out the name thing and asked if it was someone from the Den, and she said yes. I pressed for more information, and she finally told me. It was one of the supervisors from the Den. They had hung out once the previous week and he’d been calling her ever since. He said he really liked her and wanted to date her and wouldn’t listen to her refusals.

I asked why she didn’t just ignore him or tell him off once and for all and she said she couldn’t because he was such a nice guy and she still wanted to be friends with him. I knew that I had to continue being a nice guy. I had to play it cool. Between Jason and this other guy, she had enough male pressure in her life for now. It seemed like she needed someone she could vent to, someone to be there for her, and I was becoming that person. I didn’t want to take that away from her. I also didn’t want to blow my chances by coming on too strongly too soon.

We soon became inseparable. We would see each other almost every day, and spent a lot of time chatting when we weren’t together. We’d talk about work and school and music and movies and mutual acquaintances. And religion. Ever since that late-night

conversation we'd had under the stars when we first started hanging out, her Christianity was a regular topic of discussion.

She had been saved, yes, but she felt like she was losing her way. Between the issues with Jason and the drinking and smoking, she didn't feel she deserved to have Jesus in her life. I argued that everyone did, that Jesus was nothing if not forgiving and understanding. I didn't really believe in any of it, as my years of Catholic schooling had wrung me dry of any inclinations toward the faith I might have had. But I knew she needed it.

She invited me to church with her. She hadn't been in ages and was afraid to go alone. The entire congregation would surely know what a sinner she had been and judge her as such. I agreed. I hadn't been to church in ages myself, and had never been to a non-Catholic service. It might be interesting to see how the other side worshipped.

And so, one Sunday morning, I awoke far earlier than I was accustomed, put on a shirt and tie, dusted off my old dress shoes, and headed off to praise the Lord. When I picked Christina up, those praises were sung in my mind a bit earlier than anticipated. She was wearing a skirt and high heels and her legs were toned and smooth and I tried to block all the sinful thoughts that tried to rush into my mind. That struggle continued the entire drive to the church.

When we arrived, though, I found a different type of distraction: happiness. It was a non-denominational Christian church, something which never quite made sense after a lifetime of being indoctrinated in the One True Faith. As it turned out, "non-denominational" may as well have meant "non-self-hating." From the moment we

entered the building, everyone was smiling, welcoming. The church itself was incredibly well lit, a stark contrast to my dark, gloomy Catholic past.

And then there was the service. It was all about Jesus' love and acceptance and forgiveness. His sacrifice was mentioned, sure, but it was all aimed at inspiration. We were supposed to feel good about ourselves and lead good lives and be happy. Even the music was upbeat. There were guitars, for God's sake.

As we left, I wasn't exactly persuaded to claim Jesus as my Lord and Master, but I felt good. I could see how people might get caught up in that sort of thing, how being part of a community like that might help them get on their feet again. I could see how people might find themselves being "saved" or "born again," into churches like this. I could see why Christina was drawn to it, and why she seemed so desperately to need Jesus in her life.

After church, we went back to my house for a little while to smoke and talk and reflect, but before long I had to take her home. She had a lot of homework to do before class the next day. As she got out of the car, she thanked me for going with her. I told her I would go any time. Maybe next week? She said maybe, and we parted ways.

When I got home, I tried to tell my roommates about the experience, but they didn't get it. Tasha said she couldn't see me sitting through a church service for an hour.

"Oh, I'm sure he had plenty to keep him occupied," Jim said. "I saw what she was wearing."

I didn't even try to argue.

As August approached, I found myself once again preparing to head west. My uncle and cousin were planning to drive to Sturgis, South Dakota for its annual motorcycle rally. They invited my dad and me, and it was hard to say no to a few days of bikes, beer, and wet t-shirt contests. The plan was to spend three days at the rally, then caravan our way to Billings to spend a few days recovering and hanging out with the family.

JaNel wanted to see me. This time, it was her idea. I explained that there really wasn't any room in the schedule for a side trip. Since my uncle and cousin would be with us pretty much the entire time, there was really no way I could sneak off. Besides, she had moved back to her home in Wyoming, which was smack in the middle of the long drive between Sturgis and Billings. There wasn't even anywhere for us to meet.

She said she could drive to Billings. She'd get a hotel room for a couple nights and I could meet her there and stay with her. Then she'd drop me off and be on her merry way and I could still spend some time with my family.

I had to think about it. I did still care about JaNel. I suspected I always would. But I'd started to feel even more connected to Christina. Still, that didn't seem to be going anywhere and at least I knew JaNel liked me in that way. At the very least, it would be nice to get intimate with someone. I hadn't been physically involved with anyone else since the park bench incident the previous year.

I talked it over with my dad and he agreed. By that point, my family was used to my entanglement with JaNel, and I think they expected it to pop up at least once a year. They always seemed happy when it did, as if one day the stars might align and we might actually get our acts together and work out a more permanent solution.

Christina wasn't happy about the news. I didn't even tell her about my intent to see JaNel. She simply didn't want me to leave. As the trip approached, she begged me not to go. She couldn't stand the thought of not seeing me for that long.

The truth was that things with Jason had gotten worse. He called her more and more frequently when she was with me. Accused her of all manner of sin. She was no good, a filthy whore. Why didn't she just bring me over and he and I could tag-team her because that was all she was good for anyway.

The accusations were getting to her. She started to see herself as that whore. Started drinking more to try and cope. Jesus had surely abandoned her after all, and she didn't have much else left. She needed me.

It broke my heart. I wanted nothing more than to hold her and comfort her and tell her that everything would be okay. I couldn't, though. I wasn't brave enough to just grab her and embrace her, and I knew that things were likely not going to be okay for quite a long time, if ever.

As much as I wanted to be there for her, I knew that I needed the trip. I needed some time with family. I needed to party and be carefree, if only for a while. I needed some honest-to-God human contact, someone who was actually willing to give herself over to me.

And so, I headed west.

The rally was even crazier than I'd expected. We began drinking around eleven o'clock each morning, and didn't stop until well after midnight. There were food stands and beer

stands and live music everywhere. The streets were lined with motorcycles as far as the eye could see, and the sidewalks were equally lined with nearly-naked women of all ages. There were, in fact, wet t-shirt contests, nearly every hour on the hour. It was exactly what I needed after spending so much of the summer worrying about Christina.

Still, too much of a good thing can be bad, and by the time we were packing up to head for Billings, I was ready for a vacation from my vacation. I was excited to see JaNel, but three days of drinking and baking in the sun had left me looking forward to the bed as much as the person I'd be sharing it with.

That changed, of course, as soon as I saw her. She came to pick me up from my grandma's house, where the family tended to gather. She even came in to meet everyone, and they all adored her. I had my dad take a couple pictures of us for posterity, and then we headed off to shack up for a couple days.

She had already checked into the hotel, a Red Roof Inn, so we could go straight to the room. We sat and talked for a while, and soon we were making out, and then we were making love. I hadn't had sex with anyone for two years, since the first time we had met in person, and she claimed she hadn't either. Whatever the case, I had forgotten what I was missing. We had an encore before heading off for a quick dinner, then spent the rest of the night exploring each other.

That pattern repeated itself for two days. We would venture forth for a bite to eat, then return to the hotel room as quickly as we could to devour each other. It was amazing, and I found myself feeling more connected to her than I had in quite a long time. She seemed to be just as into me. We were once again proclaiming our love for

each other, and we both cried when she dropped me back off at my grandma's and headed back to Wyoming.

I spent the rest of my time in Montana trying not to think, and failing miserably. Initially, I wanted to run after her. I wanted to find some way to follow her back to Wyoming and continue what we'd been doing for the past couple days. I wanted to fling myself head-first back into our relationship and make it better, stronger, more real than before.

That of course burnt out, and I was left with the truth. I did love JaNel, and knew that to some degree I always would. And the time we had spent together was incredible. But this was all we'd ever had. It all boiled down to a few days of sex and a park bench blowjob. We'd never spent any real time together. Our lives had never coincided, never matched up in the same place at the same time. It seemed as though they never would. Even if it did, what would it be like? Would we even be able to stand each other if we were together every day, if we had to see each other for more than these occasional bouts of passion? Could the fantasy ever truly become reality?

23.

I was on my way into work the day after I got back to Marquette when Christina spotted me. I'd just walked into the kitchen when she saw me, dropped the pan she was carrying, and ran up to hug me. I held her tight as she told me how much she'd missed me. I told her I missed her too, and suddenly became conscious of the fact that everyone in the vicinity was staring at us. I didn't care. I knew that rumors would start flying, and part of me hoped they did. There were a few guys who worked there that had made passes at her, and I hoped they all saw her throwing herself at me. I hoped they all knew that she spent most of her free time with me.

She came over that night and we went through our ritual of drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. We talked about my trip and I told her how much fun I had, though I downplayed the appeal of all the scantily clad women running everywhere. I also neglected to mention the time I spent with JaNel.

After the first couple beers, Christina said she didn't feel like sitting around anymore. She suggested we go for a drive. I was hesitant, as I'd been drinking, but it had only been a few beers and I could handle it. Besides, I couldn't say no to her.

I asked where she wanted to drive to and she said she didn't care. I turned onto Highway 41 and headed north, with no destination in mind. When we passed the intersection with M95, I mentioned that I'd never been any further up 41. She said that if we kept going, we would end up in Houghton.

“Really? I've never been there,” I said. “Let's see how far we can make it.”

We got about twenty miles before I realized that it was 3 o'clock in the morning and we both had to work the next day. I reigned in my sense of adventure and headed back for Marquette.

Those late night drives would become our new ritual. We would hop in my car, throw on some music, pick a direction, and just go. My favorite route was heading up M550 toward Big Bay. There were rarely many other vehicles on the road that late at night and, more importantly, there were never any cops up that way. I'd jam down the accelerator while we sang along to Journey, Queen, and other classic rockers.

One night, on our way back into town, some sentimental song came on and I couldn't stand it anymore. I pulled off onto the shoulder and shifted into park.

"What's going on, Joe Joe?" Christina asked.

"I just—I need to tell you something."

She just stared at me.

I fumbled to get my pack of smokes out of my coat pocket. I couldn't say anything else until I had a crutch to help me through. I finally managed to get a cigarette into my mouth and lit. I was shaking.

"Well, what is it?"

I panicked. I couldn't do it. I couldn't find the words. I couldn't tell her how I felt about her, not face to face, not like this. I couldn't put myself on the line like that. Instead, I said it was nothing.

She didn't believe me and insisted I tell her, but I wouldn't. She got mad and sat silently the rest of the way home.

When I got back to my house, I immediately checked to see if she was on AIM. I couldn't tell her in person, but I had to tell her somehow. I double-clicked her screen name to start a new conversation, and tried to find the words.

I told her she was beautiful and that I thought she was an amazing person and deserved so much better than that asshole Jason. I told her how every time I saw her, I wanted to hold her and that I wanted to be there for her. We could be good together, her and I, and that was all I really wanted. To be together. It was all there in black and white.

AIM said she was typing, but then that disappeared and the screen was still. I needed her to respond.

janx218: So, are you surprised?

chrisseyb: no. i guess i've suspected it for a while now...

janx218: I just need you to say something. I have no idea how you feel about me.

chrisseyb: i think you're a great guy. you have a good heart, and a deep perspective.

I didn't know what the hell that meant. It certainly wasn't the "oh my God, I want you right now" that I wanted to hear, but it also wasn't "ewwww, get away from me." I decided not to push it. She knew how I felt and hadn't run away screaming, so I would leave it at that for the time being.

She made it hard to leave things alone. We continued seeing each other constantly, and she would always make gestures I couldn't help reading into. She would playfully punch my arm while I was driving, or wet her finger in her mouth and jam it into my ear.

Sometimes, when certain songs played, she would put her hand on my leg, or I would put mine on hers, and she wouldn't slap it away. Wasn't it grade school wisdom that if a girl punched a boy, it meant she liked him? And I'd always heard that any sort of physical contact was usually a sign of attraction. It all had to mean something.

It wasn't long before I found myself pulling over again. I once again pulled the smoking routine because I didn't have the courage to just go straight for what I wanted.

"I really want to kiss you right now," I finally managed.

"Joe, I—"

"—I know, Christina. I know you don't see me as more than a friend and you still have shit going on with Jason and whatever. But I know that somewhere inside, you feel something deeper. All the punching, the touching, the flirting. I just—please, just let me kiss you. Just once. Just to see what it's like."

I was surprised when she agreed.

It was raining out, but I didn't care. I got out of the car and walked around to her side. She got out, and we just stood there, looking at each other for a moment. And then I moved in. I put my arms around her and moved my lips toward hers, and they met. And it was obvious that she wasn't into it. She barely did more than just stand there and take it. I pulled away after a few seconds.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It's just too much, Joe."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you care too much. Your kiss was too passionate. No one's ever kissed me like that, and I don't deserve it."

I tried to argue but she just countered with the same old rhetoric about how she was a lost cause and didn't deserve anyone who actually cared about her and I deserved better and so on and so forth. I was disappointed. I had been hoping that maybe if we kissed, she would feel something more for me. There would be some magical moment of realization, where she saw that her Prince Charming had been standing there all along. Instead, I felt more defeated than ever.

24.

Steve Perry can do magical things. We were on one of our drives, listening to the song “Faithfully” by Journey and singing along at the top of our lungs. We’d been out to a bar, but I didn’t drink that much; she did.

“They say that the road ain’t no place to start a family,” Mr. Perry belted through the speakers.

Christina reached for the volume knob and turned it down. “You know, out of all the guys I know, you’re the only one I would ever think about starting a family with.”

I had no idea what to say. I wasn’t even sure I’d heard her correctly. “Really?” I asked.

“Yeah. You’re just such a great guy. I think you’d make a good dad. I would have a baby with you.”

I knew it was probably the beer talking, but it seemed like an odd notion to just manifest out of nowhere. I tried to concentrate on the road and the music, which became difficult when her hand moved over to my thigh.

“Have you ever seen that movie *The Chase*?”

“Is that the one with Charlie Sheen?”

“Yeah. There’s that scene where they have sex while he’s driving. She just climbs on top of him and—yeah. It was really hot.”

I’d never heard her talk like that before. I didn’t know she ever even thought about sex, based on the way she seemed to fend off any mention of anything even remotely physical. She continued rubbing my thigh, and I looked over at her, and it seemed like for the first time, she looked at me as a man.

I pulled over. We were somewhere midway between Marquette and Big Bay and it was the middle of the night and there could have been creepy rednecks lurking just outside, but I didn't care. I pulled over onto the shoulder and shut off my headlights. And almost as soon as I did, she was on me. She unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed halfway into my lap, and her mouth was on mine, and our tongues were involved, and there was none of the awkward self-consciousness of my pathetic first attempt to get somewhere. There were no complaints of too much passion, just hands and lips and tongues and we were together, in that moment.

And then it happened. I saw a car's headlights approaching in the opposite lane. Without thinking, I pushed her away. The self-consciousness had returned with a vengeance. I didn't even have the chance to process the thought before some stupid part of my brain became so afraid at the mere possibility that the other driver might be a cop or something—I didn't even know what—that I had to stop. She sat back in her seat.

Once the car had passed, I turned to her. "Well, where were we?" I tried to lean toward her, but she pushed me away.

"Forget it," she said. "It's over."

I finally had my chance, and I blew it.

25.

I met Jason once.

Christina wanted to go out to the bars in Gwinn, her hometown, located about twenty miles from Marquette. I was hesitant. I'd never spent any time in Gwinn, but I'd always heard that it was a rough area. That was where the real natives lived, far away from the college-town safety of Marquette. It was all tradesmen and pickup trucks and bar fights.

We went to a place called The Happy Hour, and I couldn't help wondering how many hours of happiness the people there had ever known. There was a kind of desperation in the air—most of the patrons looked worn-down, nursing giant cans of cheap beer and smoking off-brand cigarettes.

We stayed there for a few hours, drinking cheap beer of our own, though I couldn't bring myself to smoke anything less than Marlboros. A band started playing and they weren't bad, and I started to relax and enjoy myself. I was not quite relaxed enough to do any dancing, which Christina decided she wanted to do. She went off to shake her booty with some of her friends we'd run into, while I stood at a table and watched.

Suddenly, I felt an arm around my shoulder.

"You must be Joe," I heard a voice say.

I shook the arm off and turned around. "Y—yeah, that's me."

"I'm Jason," he said in a way that let me know he knew that I knew who he was.

He was tall, a good couple inches taller than me. And built—thin, yet muscular. I knew that if it came down to it, I wouldn't stand a chance. I couldn't let him know that,

though. I couldn't show fear, couldn't back down, or he would tear me up like the rabid dog I knew he was.

I tried to play it cool. "Nice to meet you," I said, extending my hand.

He grasped my hand firmly and my grip tightened. Then his grip tightened. We tested each other almost to the point of pain. Slight discomfort was enough for the time being.

"Listen, Joe, I've been wanting to talk to you," he said. He put his arm around my shoulders again.

My fear doubtless began to show. "Wh—what about?"

"I'm afraid I've gotten a bad rap."

I was surprised, but intrigued. He went on to explain that he knew Christina and I spent a lot of time together. He knew that I cared about her, and she obviously cared about me. He also knew that I had been around for some of his more colorful phone calls and that I'd undoubtedly heard all sorts of stuff about him from her. He wanted me to know, though, that he loved her. In fact, he loved her so much that he'd realized that if she wasn't happy with him, maybe he should let her go. He just wanted one thing from me. A promise that I would take care of her. I agreed and we shook on it. He patted me on the back and disappeared into the crowd and I was glad to have survived the encounter.

When the bar closed, Christina and I stopped to have a smoke with some of her friends outside. One of them, Rebecca, invited us back to her house to continue drinking and hang out for a while. I wanted to get back to Marquette, but Christina wanted to stay and she won.

We all piled into my car. Christina had shotgun, and Rebecca and some guy she'd met at the bar got in the back. And then, just as I was about to pull away, the door opened again and a third person climbed into the back. It was Jason.

I panicked. I thought about grabbing my keys and just getting out of the car and refusing to move until he left. I thought about calling the cops. I even briefly considered just telling the whole lot of them, Christina included, to fuck off and find some other way home. I didn't, though. Instead, I just drove. Without even acknowledging Jason's presence, I asked Rebecca how to get to her house and followed her instructions.

Jason disappeared almost immediately after we got there. He went to the bathroom and never came back. After he'd been gone for a half hour or so, Christina went to check on him. She disappeared, too.

After a while, I got suspicious and decided to investigate. I approached the bathroom door and, without even knocking, tried the knob. It wasn't locked. I paused for a moment, certain that whatever was going on in there, I wanted no part of it. Still, I had to find out. I had to make sure she was alright.

Slowly easing the door open, the first thing I saw was blood. There was blood all over the sink, all over the faucet, running down the drain. A lot of blood.

And there was a knife. Right smack in the middle of the sink, in the middle of all that blood, there was a large pocket knife. I pushed the door open further and saw Jason, crumpled up on the floor, apparently unconscious. Christina was sitting above him on the edge of the bathtub, crying.

He was dead. He'd killed himself. Good fucking riddance.

Except he wasn't. He hadn't. Before I could even say anything, Christina put her hand out. Blood was gushing from her middle finger.

"What the fuck happened?" I asked.

He was going to kill himself, or at least slit his own wrists. When she found him, he had the knife out. He was all fucked up on booze and coke and said he couldn't live without her. She went to grab the knife from him and he cut her. Then he just passed out.

I told her we had to get her to the hospital. It was obviously a severe cut. She probably needed stitches and something to make sure it didn't get infected. She refused. She didn't have health insurance and couldn't afford it, and besides, she couldn't leave Jason like that.

He came to while Christina and I were arguing about it and stumbled out the door. He made his way out of the house and kept going up the street. Christina tried to stop him, but she was drunk and the loss of blood probably wasn't helping. I tried to get her to hold still long enough for me to at least wrap the wound to try and contain the bleeding. She resisted. She didn't care about her finger. All she cared about was Jason.

I asked her if she'd let me wrap the cut if I went and brought Jason back and she said yes. I ran after him down the street and told him how badly she was hurt and that she wouldn't let me do anything about it until he came back. He was still messed up, but fortunately he was at least coherent enough to understand what I was saying.

When we got back to the house, Christina attacked him. She punched him and kicked him and told him what a fucking idiot he was for trying something so stupid. He

grabbed her, pinned her down on the ground, and held her arm still so that I could wrap her finger with a strip I'd cut off an old towel.

I thanked him. I actually thanked him for his help in getting the bleeding under control. Then I grabbed Christina by the arm and practically dragged her out the door and into my car so we could head home before she could attack him again.

When we got back to Marquette, I tried to convince her to go to the E.R., but she brought up the insurance issue again and insisted she would be fine. She just wanted to go home and I obliged her. It was morning, after all. I was tired of trying. And she had clearly made her choice.

26.

Spending time with other people started to seem like a good idea. Fortunately, the opportunity to do just that presented itself when Jim, my hitherto shut-in of a roommate, started hanging out with a group of girls. He had found one of them on some online dating site. It turned out that she actually worked in the office in the Den, but they never realized it until they started chatting. He downplayed any romantic inclinations, but they started spending a lot of time together.

And soon, he started inviting me along. It was odd. Even though we lived together, Jim and I had never been great friends. It wasn't that we disliked each other; we just never really saw much of one another. I was hesitant at first. I'd always had a hard time talking to new people. It was bound to be awkward.

It turned out that ulterior motives were involved. Emmye, the best friend of the girl Jim had his eye on, had seen my profile on Match.com and thought I was cute. When she found out I was Jim's roommate, she badgered him to try to get me to hang out with them.

I was flattered, but not interested. She was cute enough. Tall, a bit on the heavy side, but with a huge chest that made up for it. Still, she seemed nice, and it was a bonus that she was attracted to me. But she was no Christina.

It wouldn't hurt to make some new friends, though. I started spending some time with Jim and the girls, and it was fun. We would drink and watch movies and laugh. Occasionally, we would go out to the bars for trivia or karaoke. Emmye was a local and had her own house, which was convenient for when things got on the rowdier side.

The more time I spent with the group, the more it became obvious that the others were trying to get Emmye and me to spend some time alone together. Everyone else would conveniently end up in another room, talking or smoking. Or they would all have to go home early and would arrange to share rides, leaving just Emmye and I behind.

I didn't mind it. Emmye was fun to hang out with. She was really into the theater scene and loved musicals, an interest I secretly shared. When the others abandoned us, we would hang out and watch movies or talk about the big-screen version of the musical *Phantom of the Opera* they were finally making. We also spent a good deal of time talking about Christina. Well, Emmye spent a good deal of time listening to me talk about Christina anyway. I knew she didn't want to hear it, but it was a subject that was bound to come up anytime anyone engaged in conversation with me for a decent length of time.

Though I wasn't interested in pursuing anything more than friendship with Emmye, I thought I might be able to use my position as leverage. After the business with Jason, I'd lost a lot of hope, but the makeout session in the car had surely proven she had some feelings for me. We still spent time together, but there was less flirtation than there had been. I wondered if perhaps expressing interest in another girl might make her jealous, or, even better, make her see me as a desirable object.

I told her about Emmye. How we'd been hanging out and having fun. I mentioned the Match.com connection and the fact that she apparently thought I was cute. I told her that I wasn't really that into the idea, but I had considered it, since I didn't really have anyone else.

“I think that’s awesome, Joe Joe,” she said. “She sounds like a nice girl. You deserve that.”

It was the last thing on Earth I wanted to hear.

Matters only got worse when the two worlds collided. Christina and I were drinking at my place one night and she commandeered my computer. She randomly decided that she wanted to hang out with Emmye, and started to instant message her. Emmye was surprisingly game for the idea, and invited us over.

We stopped at a gas station to get some beer and cigarettes before heading over, and on our way out, Christina started talking to some guys. I’d never seen them before, but then again, they didn’t look like the kind of guys I’d want to know. They looked trashy, wearing wifebeaters and baseball caps cocked sideways. It turned out they were from Gwinn, the same small town she was from, about twenty miles from Marquette. She’d known them since she was a kid. They were friends of Jason. I was horrified when she gave one of them her phone number.

We got to Emmye’s and things went better than expected. At least until Christina’s phone rang. She went outside to answer it, leaving Emmye and I to sit and talk about how rude it was that she’d just taken off like that without even excusing herself.

When Christina got back, I asked her who called. It was Matt, one of the guys we’d run into at the gas station. He wanted to know what she was up to, if she wanted to go to a party. It turned out that Emmye knew the guy, too. She told Christina she should call him and invite him over because she hadn’t seen him in forever.

Matt and his friend showed up and I wanted to leave. Every bit as trashy as they looked, they were less concerned with socializing than with drinking. They were already drunk when they got there—one of them puked all over Emmye’s deck. I felt like I wasn’t even there. The girls were too busy talking to these guys I didn’t know about people, places, and things I couldn’t relate to. I thought about just getting up and leaving, but I hoped the idiots would take off soon.

I got my wish. They started talking about some kegger they wanted to go to and went to take off. I was relieved, a feeling that quickly disappeared when Christina started to follow them. She was trying to stop them because they were already drunk and had no business going to a party to drink even more. I followed after her, yelling for her to come back, but she didn’t listen. I thought about going after her, but I’d had it. In that moment, I just didn’t care. I’d spent too much time worrying about her over the past several months, and I was done.

I went back inside the house and apologized to Emmye for what had transpired. She asked if I wanted to hang out and I said yes, so we sat down in her living room to watch a movie, but ended up talking through most of it.

I vented to her about Christina. I cared about her and wanted to be with her, but she obviously couldn’t make up her mind about me, and I was getting sick of it. I was tired of being alone, of not having someone who actually cared about me. Someone to talk about my day with. Someone to cuddle up to at night.

“I like cuddling,” she said.

It hadn’t even thought about that. Here I was going on at length about how lonely I was and how I wanted someone who appreciated me, and sitting right across from me

was a girl who I knew liked me in that way. Still, I didn't want to assume she was suggesting what I thought she was. "Really?" I asked.

"Yeah—do you wanna cuddle?"

The next thing I knew, we were in her bed, spooning. I probably could have tried to make a move, could have pressed my luck to see how far I could get with her, but I didn't. I just lay there with my arms around her. In some way, it felt like an act of rebellion against Christina. Mostly, it just felt nice to be close to someone. It felt nice to be wanted.

I found out the next day that Christina was pissed at me. One of my coworkers came up to me at work and told me she'd shown up drunk at his house. She was blathering on and on, mostly incoherently. He said he'd never heard her curse so much. I asked if my name had come up at all. Oh yeah, he said. She was really, really mad at me for not chasing after her.

I didn't know what to say. I had spent so much time chasing after her and the one time I didn't, she felt let down. Maybe it was time to call off the pursuit. Or to change targets, at least.

*Tuesday, November 09, 2004*

So I just got home from Emmye's...again. lol. I've hung out with her like every night since Thursday. We watched "Anger Management," which I'd never seen before and which was really really insanely funny. And then we cuddled. It was kinda cute cuz I just kinda laid down close to her and she snuggled up next to me and was like "I get to cuddle with Joe!" Speaking of which, Saturday night (which my last entry was about, though it was brief) before we ended up spooning in my bed all night, I asked her if the cuddling Thursday night had just happened because she was drunk. She was like "No, Joseph. I would cuddle with you anyway. I'm sure Jim (my roomie) has told you repeatedly that I think you're cute." So yeah, that was kinda interesting.

I'm not really sure how I feel about this whole thing though. I mean I haven't hung out with Christina in a while, and I don't want to not be friends with her anymore. Tonight at work she was really friendly and such, so I guess she's forgiven me. But at the same time, I talked to her online for a bit after work and it just felt different. I guess I still like her, and it would still be cool if something happened there, but I've realized that I don't really NEED it. I don't really NEED her. I'm just not really sure how to balance the two situations. Like at work tonight she asked me why my arm was all beat up. The truth of the matter is that Emmye bit the hell out of me Saturday night. But I didn't tell Christina that. I just sort of avoided the question. But part of me wanted to tell her, just to see what her reaction is. Part of me wants to tell her all about the Emmye thing just to see if she gets jealous or something. So yeah, I dunno. I guess this is gonna turn into a tale of three women, since there are two more situations I want to comment on.

So going back to the women I don't need thing, the JaNel situation seems to finally be over. After four years, we finally seem to have reached a point where we have nothing to say to each other. We had a talk last week and pretty much decided to go our separate ways. She kept calling me though. I didn't answer, and she didn't leave voicemails. She left one Sunday saying she "needed" to talk to me, so I called her on the odd chance that it actually was important. Not much was really said. I told her that I was on my way to watch movies with a friend, so I couldn't talk long. She basically just cried and said how she didn't have anything or anybody. I think that's been her problem for a while now. I was all she had. She has no life, no real friends, etc. I told her she needs to go out and meet people and have fun. Seriously, she's 21 years old and she acts older than my parents. I think that's why we finally reached the breaking point. I'm just starting to learn how to live a little and have a good time, and she was dragging me down. But yeah....after that short and slightly awkward convo, I found an e-mail from her the next morning apologizing for calling me and saying she wouldn't bother me anymore. So that's about that.

And now back to Emmye. As I said earlier, I'm not really sure how to feel about the whole thing. I mean I really like her as a person. She's really, really cool and really, really nice. And she's so damn cute it drives me nuts. I mean she's cute physically, but I was referring more to her personality. She just has these mannerisms and sayings and such that are insanely adorable. And she seems to like me as a person. And she seems to like me at least to some extent as more. And the cuddling is really nice. And overall the situation is just real nice and real comfortable. But there's something that's not there. And I dunno if it will ever be there. It's like I just don't really get that...feeling...when I'm

around her. I guess maybe I just haven't been around her enough yet. And maybe the feeling is there to some extent and I'm just trying to suppress it. I do get the occasional urge to just kiss her. I think part of me really does want something to happen there, but I don't really know how to make it happen. Do I just make a move? Do I ask her if I can kiss her? I've always been bad at stuff like that.

So yeah, in closing, if there's one thing my last paragraph especially has proven it's that I'm confused. But ya know what? I'm also happy. That's right folks, Joe's happy for the first time in I don't even know how long. And it feels good.

*Wednesday, November 10, 2004*

I know I'm gonna get yelled at for this, but oh well...

So I spent a lot of time with Christina tonight. And it was great. And I realized that I really do love her. Now I'm not gonna let that stop me from doing anything with anyone else should that happen, but at the same time I know that I can't really get into a relationship with anyone else for a while.

*Thursday, November 11, 2004*

So I just spent the last couple hours making out with Emmye...

Yes, that's right. Joe's a mack daddy extraordinaire. Okay, maybe not, but it was damn nice. I went over to her house to watch movies, and after I nearly fell asleep like 20 times during "Fight Club" (nothing against the movie, I was just really tired) and she nearly froze to death, we decided to watch "The Neverending Story." Before I could suggest we move to her room for that flick so we could cuddle, she turned and said, "hey,

wanna go watch this on my bed so we can get under the blanket?" So we did that. Cuddling through most of the movie was just your typical nice spooning action. But toward the end, if not after, things kinda heated up. She turned to face me and pressed up against me. I put my arm around her and started rubbing her back. This went on for a good while, with us sort of pulling away and then ending up back all pressed up on each other again. I kept saying I should go, but she just kept being up on me. After a while (I'm slow on the uptake), the thought occurred to me that maybe she wanted something to happen, or at least I could get something to happen. This was sort of enhanced by the fact that she was breathing kinda heavy and moaning a little and stuff just from "cuddling."

So yeah, I kept acting like I had to go and she kept convincing me to stay. Then finally I sighed and she asked what was wrong. I told her, "see, the problem is, you're really comfortable, and this is really nice." She asked where the problem was in that. I said, "well the problem is that I think if I stay here any longer and this keeps up I'm gonna want to kiss you." She just looked at me without missing a beat and said, "so why don't you?" I asked, "really?" and she replied, "yes, really, silly boy." So yeah, the making out commenced. She told me that she'd wanted it for a while but was too chicken-shit to do anything about it. I told her I'd wanted it for a while too but was also nervous, until I kinda realized that she wanted it. So we spent a couple hours making out. It was really, really nice. I kinda get the sense she's a little on the freaky side just from some of what happened, but hey that's alright with me. I like 'em rough.

In the end, it was really hard for me to leave (in more ways than one, muahahahaha). I could have spent the night, and could have possibly ended up having

something more than making out happen. But I have to work at noon and I knew that if I stayed there I wouldn't get any sleep. So I pried myself away and came back here to write this entry for you good folks before I head to bed.

*Friday, November 12, 2004*

I got some booooty...I got some booooooty...I got some booooooty...

That's right, folks. Last night I had the best sex of my life. Speaking of life, ain't it grand?

The more time I spent with Emmye, the less I spent with Christina. I still cared about her and wanted her to find happiness someday, but I was starting to find happiness of my own. She was still wrapped up with Jason, and it didn't seem like she would break free of that mess any time soon. Emmye, meanwhile, actually liked me and wanted to spend time with me, and that was worth a lot.

Christina IM'd me one night and asked why I didn't seem to want to hang out with her anymore. She felt like I was ignoring her. I was her best friend; did I not want to be friends with her anymore?

I told her about Emmye. She knew that we had been spending a lot of time together, but I'd never told her that anything had transpired between us. Now, I told her everything. I told her we'd hooked up, that we were spending a lot of time together, that I was really starting to like her. I was caught off guard by Christina's reaction. She was angry, jealous, bitter. She felt betrayed.

I asked if I could come over, so we could talk about it in person. She said she didn't care. I headed over as quickly as I could. I didn't even bother knocking on the door. I knew she always left it unlocked, so I just let myself in and went upstairs to her bedroom.

She was sitting on her bed, a bottle of beer on the stand next to her. She didn't look particularly happy to see me. I noticed a crumpled-up beer can on the floor. On second look, I saw that it had been fashioned into a bowl. She'd been smoking weed.

I sat next to her on the bed and tried to talk to her, but she wasn't very responsive. When she finally started to open up, the same anger she'd shown online came out, only to be followed by sadness.

"I do love you, Joe Joe. I mean, of course I think about you in that way from time to time, but I'm so fucked up. I still have this shit going on with Jason and I just—I just don't deserve your love."

I tried to argue, but she shut me down immediately. She said that my getting involved with Emmye made her sad for selfish reasons, but that she thought Emmye would be good for me. She still wanted to be friends, though. I told her I wanted that, too. I always wanted to be friends with her.

When I got back to my car, I lit a cigarette and just sat there, across the street from her house, smoking. I wondered if what I had just told her was true, if I did always want to be friends with her. All she'd ever done was make me miserable. I had someone in my life now who'd never done anything but make me happy. I looked forward to the future.

That future would not come without a blast from the past. The very next day after Christina had finally admitted to having feelings for me, I was surprised to find an e-mail from JaNel in my inbox. I was downright shocked when I read its contents.

She missed me. She loved me. She had always loved me. She realized she'd made a huge mistake by letting me go. After all our history together, she finally knew what she wanted out of life, and that was me. Then came the kicker.

She said that if I would have her back, she would move to Marquette to be with me. She'd done some research and saw that there was a massage school in town, and that was something she'd always wanted to try. She was willing to drop everything, to leave her family, just to be with me. We could get our own place, get married eventually. We could be together.

It was everything I'd wanted for the majority of the past four years. The one person I'd never been able to cut out of my life completely. The one I'd obsessed over, agonized over. And she was finally mine for the taking. All I had to do was click "Reply" and simply say yes and I could have the happiness I'd always wanted.

I couldn't do it. I didn't even really consider it, in fact. JaNel was old news. She'd had her chance. Part of me still cared about her, just as part of me was still hung up on Christina, but Emmye was the here and now. She was the one who wanted to be with me. She was the only one who had never hurt me, had never flip-flopped in her feelings for me. She was the flavor of the moment and I wanted all I could get.

Of course, that didn't last long. Emmye liked me and had fun with me, but wasn't sure she wanted a relationship. I couldn't handle it. Here was a woman who was finally willing to give herself over to me physically, but still didn't want to *be* with me. She couldn't give me the one thing I so desperately craved: to be a priority in someone else's life.

I did my best to drive her away, of course. As my sense of isolation increased, so did my drinking. When friends would suggest I slow down or stop completely, I'd get pissed off and drink even more. I wasn't about to let anyone tell me what to do.

Things came to a head when Emmye hosted a holiday party shortly before Christmas. I had to work the next morning, but that didn't stop me from bringing a 1.5-liter handle jug of Jim Beam, which I intended to hit with a vengeance. I succeeded in that goal. As the night went on, I was clearly out-drinking everyone else at the party, possibly combined. People tried to get me to stop, or at least pace myself, but I would hear none of it. I made it a little more than halfway through the oversized bottle before I couldn't stay upright anymore.

That's when things got fuzzy. Emmye helped me to bed, tucked me in, and rejoined the party. The next thing I remember is waking up in the morning, kissing her goodbye, and heading off to work. I felt amazingly fine considering how much whiskey I'd consumed the night before.

That feeling changed when, a couple hours into my shift, a couple mutual friends showed up in the kitchen, saying we needed to talk. We headed out to the Designated Smoking Area, where they proceeded to tell me that Emmye was furious, that they'd never seen her so mad at anyone. She didn't want to see me or even talk to me, so she'd sent them over. I had no idea what they were talking about.

As it turned out, the night hadn't been as peaceful as I'd thought. Sometime between passing out and waking up feeling fine, I had apparently made a bit of a mistake. I had somehow climbed over Emmye to get out of bed, staggered over to her walk-in closet (which I must have mistaken for the bathroom), and proceeded to vomit all over. It was all over her clothes, they told me. All over some Christmas presents she had bought her family. Emmye knew my work schedule and she would be gone for a few hours after I got off. She wanted me to go over and clean up the mess.

I knew it was over. I knew in that instant that any hope I'd ever had of a relationship was over. I wanted to say no. I wanted to tell her to go fuck herself. She'd never given me what I wanted. Why should I care what she wanted?

I didn't say anything. I told them I would go, I would do it. As soon as I got off of work, I headed to her house, headed straight to the bedroom to survey the damage. I couldn't help laughing when I opened the closet. The puke really was *everywhere*. Up high, down low, sprayed in a one hundred eighty degree arc from side to side. I wondered if Linda Blair's head-spinning character from *The Exorcist* had somehow possessed me.

I got to work, spending the next few hours changing loads of laundry and scrubbing the walls of the closet. I tried to think of ways to make it up to her, to get back in her good graces. I ended up running to the store when I was done and buying some roses, which I left on her kitchen table with a note of apology. Even as I scrawled the words out onto the paper, though, I knew it was too little too late.

The mess was far too big to clean up.

## Epilogue

After things ended with Emmye, I tried to reconnect with Christina, hoping that perhaps we could finally move things into romantic territory. It was futile. We began spending all our free time together again, but it never went anywhere. She could never get over Jason and I could never get over my desire for something more, and things eventually burned out the way they so often do.

In the years that followed, Emmye, JaNel, and Christina would all marry. JaNel reconnected with a family friend she'd known since childhood. They became partners in her family's company, and undoubtedly wealthy. I hear from her from time to time; she'll send me a Facebook message once or twice a year asking how I'm doing, and we'll catch up briefly. She has a young son now and seems happy and, for the most part, I am happy for her.

Emmye went on to marry another guy she saw on an online dating site and thought was cute. As it happened, he is a rather awesome guy, and I consider them both friends now. They're trying their best to establish their new life together in an area with one of the worst economies in the country, and I hope they figure it out. They invite me out fairly often, and I accept occasionally, and we rarely speak of the past.

Christina finally got over Jason just in time to meet another abusive asshole and get knocked up. They've been together for years now, mainly because of the kid, and only recently married. She stays with him primarily out of fear that a judge might rule in his favor should a custody battle arise. The only joy she seems to have in life comes from her son, whom she loves fiercely. In him, she has finally found someone who will

love her unconditionally, and I'm grateful that she has found at least that much peace in this life.

As for me, my break from Christina would lead to the first real long-term relationship of my life. I met a girl the old fashioned way: through mutual friends. No online dating sites, no lengthy instant messaging conversations that could never translate into a real connection.

We soon moved in together and, over the course of our relationship, built a large circle of friends. We would have people over for drinks, for dinner, to play games, just to hang out. We would go see movies and plays and try new restaurants. We ventured into the outdoors to go hiking and sightseeing. I spent less and less time on my computer, less time searching for a connection to something somewhere out there in the ether.

That relationship would end amicably after nearly five years, but rather than returning to my old ways, I embraced the change. I spent even more time outdoors. I started hiking ten, fifteen, twenty miles or more a week. I discovered a love of fishing. For the first time ever, I realized that it was okay to be alone, to be unplugged from the world of cyberspace.

I discovered that there were things in the world even more amazing than the endless wonders to be found on the internet.

I discovered how to live.

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