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# **Lists Of All You Left Behind**

by

Brian Jansen

A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada  
2011  
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Lists Of All You Left Behind

by

Brian Jansen

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April 15, 2011

### **Author's Declaration of Originality**

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone's copyright nor violate any proprietary rights and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices. Furthermore, to the extent that I have included copyrighted material that surpasses the bounds of fair dealing within the meaning of the Canada Copyright Act, I certify that I have obtained a written permission from the copyright owner(s) to include such material(s) in my thesis and have included copies of such copyright clearances to my appendix.

I declare that this is a true copy of my thesis, including any final revisions, as approved by my thesis committee and the Graduate Studies office, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

### **Abstract**

*Lists Of All You Left Behind* is a novella and an accompanying critical essay that together attempt to understand the relationship in contemporaneity between what people consume, culturally speaking, and who they are. The novel's narrative details a central character's growth toward an experience of the world that—while remaining open to the possibility that mass culture may still assist us in constructing *some* kind of valid contemporary meaning—is authentic and direct. The work proposes, in short, an interdependent relationship between cultural consumption and personal identity: culture both constructs our subjectivity in the world *and* reflects it.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Susan Holbrook for her enthusiasm and guidance with this project, and especially for tolerating my overlong, labyrinthine sentences. Thanks also to Dale Jacobs and Karen Engle for their input on the finished product.

Thanks are also due to those friends and acquaintances who graciously agreed to answer a bizarre, seemingly nonsensical question that I posed to them while writing this thesis (in no particular order): Anne Young, Sunny Ng, Sukhpreet Sangha, Angela Gaetano, Braydon Beaulieu, Kate Hargreaves, Brianne O'Grady, Mike Lavery, Olivia Lukawski, Jessie Beatty, Aaron Wrotowski, and Hollie Adams.

Additional thanks go to those who acted as editors and/or proofreaders (again, in no particular order—and self-consciously acknowledging here the considerable overlap with the previous list of names): Brianne O'Grady, Sukhpreet Sangha, Kate Hargreaves, Jasmine Elliott, Mike Lavery, Victor Kulinski, and Hollie Adams.

Finally, I would like to thank Mark, Rob, and the Dominion House Tavern for always being directly across the street whenever I leave my apartment.

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“I have never really felt like I was ‘from’ anywhere; home to me...  
is a shared electronic dream of cartoon memories, half-hour sitcoms and national  
tragedies.”

– DOUGLAS COUPLAND, “In the Desert”

“Art and love are the same thing: it’s the process of seeing yourself in things that are not  
you.”

– CHUCK KLOSTERMAN, *Killing Yourself to Live*

When Nathan was six years old he had chicken pox, and he sat at the dinner table every evening during his illness in his two-piece Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pajamas, scratching wildly while his mother implored him to stop. She would lecture him and swat at him haphazardly and harmlessly, and he would dodge the soft blows as he remained with his backside planted in the seat, squirming and frowning and rubbing and scratching and bleeding all over those favourite pajamas—ones she eventually had to throw out (she knew he would try to reclaim them, and so she was forced to throw them in the kitchen wastebasket, layering food scraps over them, before tying the Glad bag and taking it out to the corner on garbage night).

Nathan remembers his father, on these nights, scooping him from his spot at the dining room table and carrying him upstairs by the armpits—his legs swinging, kicking playfully at his father—and planting him in his parents’ master bed. His father would pull the sheets up over Nathan and tuck them tightly around his form and then he would march over to the massive wood-cabinet stereo receiver in the corner and turn it on. He would look out the picture window, considering the cloudless sky, and tune in every night to the same frequency, a classic pop station broadcasting out of Detroit that they could just barely pick up on calm nights. It was the same station he told Nathan that he listened to when he was growing up on a farm in Rodney—except then, he said, it wasn’t classic; all those songs were contemporary hits. He patted Nathan’s head and called him champ and returned downstairs to the kitchen to help clean up the hunks of dry meatloaf that Nathan had covered in ketchup and pushed around his plate. Nathan listened to that station, over the sound of unclean silverware rustling and water running.

He listened to pop and soul and R&B and rock. He liked hand-claps and back-up vocalists and four-part harmonies.

He liked Creedence Clearwater Revival and their twangy, rootsy, percussive guitar rock. They sang “Bad Moon Rising,” but he mistook the chorus line as “There’s a baboon on the rise.” Or sometimes “There’s a bathroom on the right,” depending on how silly he felt. Maybe it was the music, or it might have been his dad’s precision tucking-in, but he scratched less frequently there than he did at the dinner table.

He bought his first album—actually, it was a cassette, even though by then the cassette section in record stores (he remembers record stores!) had been hidden shamefully in the back like a nudie booth—when he was nine years old. He’s too embarrassed, in retrospect, to admit to most people that it was an album by the Barenaked Ladies he’d purchased after accumulating his \$3 weekly allowance for two months, inspired by the video he’d seen on MuchMusic for the single “Brian Wilson.” Now—years later—he defends that song to the death, though that might just be explicable on the grounds of his abiding affection for the artist who happens to be the song’s subject. He tells people, instead—and the subject comes up far more frequently than perhaps it should, given that *everyone* has terrible taste in pop culture consumption (and in fact, in pretty much *everything*) as a child, and that doesn’t make them bad or stupid or wrong—that his first album purchase was Nirvana’s *In Utero*, but he feels the lie is defensible on the grounds that he did steal his older brother’s copy of that record. He wasn’t a teenager, but he still loved the album’s opening couplet: “Teenage angst has paid off well / Now I’m bored and old.” This appreciation could have been a sign that he was not progressing through a particularly well-adjusted childhood—or maybe it was play-acting and he was

a perfectly normal, perfectly respectable and respectful young man. Not knowing, in any event, that compact discs do, as it turns out, deteriorate in quality over time (suddenly and irrevocably, in a manner far more disturbing than the charming analog deterioration of a vinyl LP), he had to buy his brother a replacement copy ten years later, which he then also stole.

When Nathan was ten, his father would sometimes come home from work with a thick wad of Xeroxed pages. He'd drape his Ford racing jacket over the coat rack and drop his empty Thermos lunch bag on the landing floor and he'd wander down the carpeted staircase to the basement where Nathan was playing with Lego toys. His father would ask, with a devious smile, whether Nathan wanted to make five dollars and when Nathan would nod his head eagerly he'd toss the stack of pages on the coffee table and say, "Help Dad order these invoices." And the two would sit on the mildewed basement couch and they'd divvy the pile and, carefully eyeing the sequence of seven or eight digits on the top right corner of each page, would re-order the papers into some semblance of chronology, from lowest to highest numbers. And as they worked—Nathan making piles, his father watching for mistakes—his father would sigh heavily and lean back on the couch. He'd adjust his striped tie and draw a pack of Player's Light cigarettes and a lighter from the breast pocket of his white button-up shirt. He'd light up and take a few puffs and ash in a tray on the coffee table, and with his free hand he would grab the remote and turn on the television. He'd cycle through the channels. He'd stop on a syndicated episode of *The Simpsons*, which Nathan was not at the time allowed (or

supposed to be allowed) to watch.<sup>1</sup> Nathan and his father would continue sorting through pages, glancing up occasionally at the television screen. Nathan would smile while he worked, and his father would focus periodically on the TV and he would laugh and then cough a bit and then laugh some more.

Nathan's grandmother died when he was twelve. He's never admitted to a soul what he was doing when he heard this news, on a day which corresponded roughly with his wide-eyed discovery of Internet pornography as it was then circulated: in grainy .jpeg photo-sets taking long stretches to download on a 56K dial-up phone modem. In fact, his father's first call from the nursing home met only with the busy signal, a noise Nathan hasn't heard in so long that he's not sure he can even mimic it. By the time of the second call, he had logged off the Web, but he was cleaning up and found himself rushing to wash the hand moisturizer from his palms so he could pick up the receiver and answer. He felt guilt, and swore off that particular activity forever.

He lasted three weeks, give or take.

When he was fourteen, his parents divorced. Nathan took this news better than anybody expected him to, but it was probably this year that was the most responsible for the deterioration of his (brother's) Nirvana CDs. Grunge was no longer cool by this point,

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<sup>1</sup> A partial list of other things banned from the Wilder household: professional wrestling (when Nathan's brother performed a finishing move on him called the Pedigree, which involved locking his arms behind his back and then slamming him to the ground, resulting in a Christmas Eve trip to the Emergency Room), chewing gum (after Nathan blew a bubble that somehow ended up in his own hair), Nerds (the tiny candy, not the social outcasts [when his mother became sick of the repeated vacuum cleaner clogs they allegedly caused] ), Play-Doh (simply because his mother hated the smell), any brand of chocolate breakfast cereal (because breakfast was no time for chocolate).

but then again neither was he, and so his three disc CD changer—a guilty gift from his mother after the proceedings were finalized—usually housed *In Utero* along with the first disc of the Smashing Pumpkins’ *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* and whichever Soundgarden album he’d found for cheapest at the record store (and he remembers how expensive CDs were in those days). It was around this time that Nathan’s father introduced him (or maybe re-introduced, because Nathan failed to recall that oldies radio station from his younger days) to classic rock. Nathan saw through this as a transparent attempt to curry favour, especially on account of he’d thumbed through his dad’s actual record collection years before and had found only Billy Joel and Hall & Oates and Olivia Newton John. Which is not to say that the attempt didn’t work, because he took to the Zeppelins and the Sabbaths in a way that only disaffected youths can, wandering through school hallways in oversized band t-shirts memorializing musicians who had died sixteen years before he was born.

The sex talk that Nathan received at age 15, the talk about the birds and the bees, went like this: he was sitting on the couch watching *CSI* with his father. Nathan didn’t like *CSI*, but his father had the remote, and during one particular commercial break his father turned his head and eyeballed Nathan and said—after much thought, and in a voice that implied he was maybe but not really joking—“Son, if you knock up some girl, I swear to God I’ll murder you.”

Nathan said, “Umm.” Then he said, “Sure thing.”

His dad said, “Good.” He turned his attention back to the screen.

Nathan thinks about Gil Grissom whenever he purchases prophylactics.

Nathan wasn't listening to any music or watching any television program or movie during his first kiss, which is still—curiously—a sore spot for him. But he remembers precisely what album he was listening to on the night of that first kiss, as he drove his father's Barney-the-Dinosaur purple Chrysler Caravan from Kitchener to Cambridge along Highway 8 and then the 401 to meet a girl he'd met through one of his few close friends, a girl he desperately lusted after but was too terrified to approach until that same girl's best friend more-or-less ordered him to stop circling uncomfortably and 'make a move, *for Christ's sake.*' The girl's friend attended a Catholic high school. Nathan was secretly titillated by her blaspheming. The honest truth is he doesn't remember the kiss itself, in particular. He's sure it was awkward and terrible and uncomfortable and either too dry or too warmly salival and he suspects, moreover, that he may have been so terrified that he forgot to use any tongue. But he remembers that he enjoyed it, in some way—he must have. And he remembers that excruciating drive in the Caravan, and he remembers Neil Young's 1974 masterpiece *On The Beach* playing on the car stereo, a fact that he is hesitant to reveal because any *true* music fan would know how insanely long it took for Young to authorize the release of that particular album on compact disc, the obvious inference being that Nathan's first kiss came at a time he considered (and still considers, though maybe less so) to be uncomfortably late in his life.

He's less hesitant about admitting that 50 Cent's "Candy Shop" was playing on his then-girlfriend's iTunes library when he lost his virginity. It's debatable to him whether this *is* in fact more or less embarrassing than the *On The Beach* first-kiss incident, but he admits it regardless because it illustrates that—by some confluence of fate, or maybe just owing to the benefits of alcohol—some moderately attractive female

deigned to sleep with him (and at a moderately respectable age, he felt), and because the actual details of the event are considerably more troubling to him. He couldn't finish, being half-drunk on a sickly-saccharine, but appropriately-youthful mixture of strawberry-flavoured vodka and Coca-Cola. She'd grimaced and oww-ed her way through the act. And that they were even there, at that moment, in her single bed, one thin wall away from her parents' bedroom, was a result of the fact that he'd lied and told her he loved her. Or perhaps the word 'lie' is misleading; he'd blurted it without thinking after having received the best—actually *only*, to that point—oral sex of his life. Nathan had broken up with her just a few weeks after that abortive first attempt, bolstered by the sure knowledge that—as a full-fledged, more-or-less virile man—a whole new sexual world had opened to him and that beautiful women would prostrate themselves lovingly before him. In his defence, he would argue that this was probably a widely-held (though admittedly stupid) belief amongst recently de-carded men and even of men more generally ('boys' might be more appropriate), and it didn't take long to understand his grave miscalculation.

By which point it was too late.

Anyway, she had terrible taste in music, which is how he justified it to himself and others, but it's worth mentioning that Nathan hadn't, to that point in his life, read (or even seen the film adaptation of) *High Fidelity*.

Nathan met Jill at the Starlight in Waterloo. She had dark hair and big eyes and she was wearing absurd open-toed heels and an impossibly tight skirt. His jeans weren't much looser. He was sitting at one of the wobbling Formica tables adjoining the dance floor because he never danced, not even when he liked the song, which at the Starlight he

usually did. His friend Stephen might have danced, but was having trouble standing and so instead sat slouched over the same table with his head pressed down into his crossed arms. He'd occasionally lift his head and look alertly around, grab and take a pull from his beer, and then return to his previous position. They were both nursing brown longneck bottles of OV.

She took a seat at the table immediately next to them, lifting her legs and letting them rest on another chair. Stephen looked up for this and swatted Nathan and slurred that he should go for it. Nathan intimated that he wasn't yet done objectifying her. Stephen said "now or never" and proceeded to mime a laundry-list of lewd acts with his arms, and so after an excruciating silence which in reality could have been no longer than a few moments—the same song was still hammering through the bar's public address system and making his entire body uncomfortable—he inched his chair closer to her table.

What Nathan thought he told Jill that night, or at least what he imagined he said, was: "My friend over there has spent the last five minutes telling me that I should hit on you. I insisted that you're so far out of my league that it wouldn't even be worth the effort to do so. So, my point, just for the sake of brevity: do I even stand a chance?"

What he actually said to Jill that night was: "Umm... hello."

There was still discarded Christmas wrapping-paper scattered through their apartment's living room on the day Jill told him she was leaving. He had been joking earlier in the month about how he could save money by breaking up with her before Christmas and getting back together with her after the New Year, thus saving the cost of a present and the embarrassment of admitting he had no idea what to get her anyway. He

ended up purchasing a silver pendant necklace, which is what he'd been directed to do after confiding in the jewellery store employee that this was all new to him and he was totally lost. She'd opened the present and said she loved it, but he was convinced she was lying. Nathan thought the half-smile, half-grimace on her face was because she didn't like the necklace. In fact, it was attributable more to the decision that she'd already made to leave. Actually, she loved the necklace, and if anything it made her hesitate—it made her linger just a little bit longer on her decision and her degree of certainty.

She told him they needed to talk while they were doing the dishes—he washing, she drying—and he knew more or less what was coming. He skipped over the discussion in his mind and he sat on their—his—flower-print couch staring at the eggshell-white walls as she packed a few bags and told him she'd be back for the rest. She took a tentative step toward him, as if she wanted to give him a hug, but then she seemed to think better of it and she just stood, looking oddly helpless. Her father was waiting outside in his SUV. She was moving back home with her parents, into the bedroom that had remained untouched, just the way she left it a year and a half before.

Nathan looked at the walls and washed the dishes and opened and closed the refrigerator door a dozen times or more without removing anything, and then he wandered into the living room and drew the mismatched window curtains closed and sat down to watch a movie. He slid *Almost Famous* into the DVD player.

His favourite part of the film is when Patrick Fugit's character asks, "Do you have to be depressed to write a sad song? Do you have to be in love to write a love song? Is a song better when it really happened to you?" and Billy Crudup's character laughs and

shakes his head and looks momentarily distressed and finally asks in response, “When did you get so professional?”

*Every time I see SpongeBob Squarepants, I think about my ex-roommate's junk because he used to wander around in SpongeBob boxers; I laugh hysterically because this particular roommate also embarrassed himself by accidentally flashing me (and others) repeatedly. Consequently, SpongeBob Squarepants always cheers me up.*

*I think all this has to say about me is that I'm still immature enough to find penises funny.*

**Nathan Wilder**

If you went into a bar and ordered a ‘George Thorogood Special’, do you think they’d know what to serve you?

about a minute ago • Like • Comment

From: Nathan Wilder <nathanfWilder@gmail.com>  
To: Stephen Culver <steve\_culver@gmail.com>  
Date: Tue, Dec. 28, 20— at 4:41 AM  
Subject: ...but my cuffs are bone-dry!  
Mailed by: gmail.com  
Signed-by: gmail.com

Merry Islamofascist-mas!

(I’ve decided that if I’m going to be accused of trying to take the Christ out of Christmas, I might as well replace it with something more profound. It’s my only sad regret that I couldn’t quite fit ‘Commie-liberal-homosex’ in the name without jamming it up. Communislamosex-mas, maybe? Eh, it still needs some work. It really needs to roll right off the tongue if it’s going to catch on.)

I was at Conestoga Mall yesterday and I ran into Charles. Not that this is really relevant or exciting news. I know you guys aren’t the best of friends (don’t know why—someone told me you were pissed because he brought his own beer to a kegger and undersold you guys, but that hardly seems like a reason to hold a grudge; actually, it’s kind of admirable in terms of its subtle, hilarious evilness and business acumen). But whatever. My point is, in any case, that it was uncomfortable, and not just because Charles and I aren’t the best of friends, either, and we therefore have nothing to talk about. For reference, the conversation, more or less as it went down, is reproduced below.

Him: How’s school.

Me: It’s Christmas break. I’m trying not to think about it.

Him: What are you in again?

Me: I dabble. [*which, by the by, is more or less my stock answer, because no one wants to hear the detailed story of me having spent four months floundering in pure math where I was just completely at a loss before theoretically jumping ship to sociology before being informed that I spent so much time taking introductions to languages and religions and fields in the humanities that it was going to take me five years to even graduate with a general three-year degree. But I digress.*]

Him: ...

Me: And you're in engineering?

Him: Computer Science.

Me: ...I just operate under the ignorant assumption that those are the same thing.

Him: ...

Me: ...

[*and scene.*]

Actually, he's sort of irrelevant to my point, because there's a generalized discomfort I inevitably experience in the moments *before* the vast majority of social interactions, at the precise moment when one of your friends/colleagues/relatives appears in the distance but before they're close enough to exchange words.

You know what I'm talking about: that period of thirty (or however many) seconds as you're walking toward the person you know, and you agonize over at what point you're supposed to acknowledge their existence with—let's say—a wave, and at what point you're supposed to actually *say* something. Because if they're too far away, it seems like you're yelling at some random person and you look like an idiot; but if they're too close, there's that intense awkwardness where you're wondering why nobody's said

anything yet, and you also look like an idiot. Are there rules for this kind of thing? Is there an instruction manual that was handed out at some point that I never received? Was I sick that day in kindergarten when everyone else was taught basic socialization? And do I get some additional grace in a situation like this because my vision's so bad? And what, moreover, if you say something at too far of a distance and it turns out the person isn't who you think it is—like the time I thought I saw Heather but I was terribly confused because it looked like she'd gone ghetto-princess on everyone, even though I'd seen her dressed like her usual self the day before; or the time I tried to high-five a guy who turned out *not* to be you (additional defence in this latter situation: I was drunk)...

But sorry... the original purpose of the e-mail was to mention that, just so you don't put stock in any wild rumours going around, Jill left. She moved back in with her mother. Awful convenient that she waited until *after* I bought her an awesome Islamofascist-mas present, but... On the plus side, well, I guess the apartment is a bit less cluttered. I guess I missed wandering around naked. And it's the perfect opportunity to eradicate the stink of domestication that must be all over me and my possessions....

Do I even own a shirt she didn't buy for me?

Also (not to dwell on my profound social discomfort, as explicated above), if you don't want to talk to the person at all, is there a way to gracefully dodge away and pretend they don't exist? Is there some kind of visual cue whereby two parties can agree to pretend that they never saw one another? Are there cases when the curt head nod is appropriate?

Anyway, come back. It's cold and my mother and father decided that for Christmas what I needed more than anything else were, respectively, a waffle maker and a George Foreman grill. Meanwhile, I don't own a pair of socks without a hole in them.

Seriously. Waterloo. Now.

Cheers,

- N.

(Remember when you were a kid and you *hated* getting socks? The world is cruel, isn't it?)

From: Stephen Culver <[steve\\_culver@gmail.com](mailto:steve_culver@gmail.com)>  
To: Nathan Wilder <[nathanfwilder@gmail.com](mailto:nathanfwilder@gmail.com)>  
Date: Wed, Dec. 29, 20— at 10:24 AM  
Subject: RE: ...but my cuffs are bone-dry!  
Mailed by: gmail.com  
Signed-by: gmail.com

Umm.... Are you alright?

You do know that normal people pick up the phone and *call* their friends when they want to talk to them, in lieu of lengthy Unabomber-esque missives?

I'll be back on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

- Stephen

(P.S. The rule I've heard is two arm lengths. Or at least that's when you're supposed to extend your hand for a handshake. Make me waffles.)

From: 1519985----  
You OK?  
Call: Stephen Culver  
11:16am 12/29/--

From: 1519985----  
Seriously. You OK? Want to talk about this?  
Call: Stephen Culver  
12:24pm 12/29/--

From: Nathan Wilder <nathanfwilder@gmail.com>  
To: Stephen Culver <steve\_culver@gmail.com>  
Date: Thurs, Dec. 30, 20— at 2:32 AM  
Subject: RE: RE: ...but my cuffs are bone-dry!  
Mailed by: gmail.com  
Signed-by: gmail.com

Phones are terrible. I hate using the phone. It magnifies the awkwardness of in-person interaction to an unprecedented level—and I think we can agree, if only based on my original concerns regarding what I'll term the 'approaching face-to-face encounter,' that I'm not especially good with any of this stuff. Well, OK, that's not entirely accurate. I suppose I can read facial and physical cues reasonably well, but my problem is that the phone totally leaves you (I guess literally) blind in that regard. Even with people you know. In fact, it might be *worse* with the people you know. When it's customer service or something, you know you can muscle through it and take care of everything you need to in a precise, orderly fashion, and then you can hang up and both parties feel satisfied: you got what you needed taken care of, and I guess theoretically *they* took care of you and should therefore feel some pleasure in having done their job well (that supposes that customer service can help, but even when they can't, at least you know where things stand!).

But when you're on the phone with a friend—or at least when *I'm* on the phone with a friend—there's this tentative dance, this cut-with-a-knife tension that I think everyone recognizes but maybe no one wants to acknowledge. I ask how you are and then you say you're OK, and then you ask how I am and I say I'm OK (presupposing I am, of course, OK) and then there's a strained silence, and then we start talking over one another and then we both stop and then we do it again as we both try to tell the other "No, go

ahead. You first.” Then I say what I called for, and you respond to that, but then where does it go from there? Are you required by rules of telephonic engagement to then exchange a piece of information or narrative in return for my own shared tidbit? Is there supposed to be banter? A witty back-and-forth repartee? And in the back of my head, especially now, I’m always wondering “Does this person have a monthly cell plan, or am I using up their minutes? And for that matter, how many minutes do I even have?” I know when someone says, “I should be going” it’s time to end the call—but the thing is that what that phrase *screams* to me is that I should have ended the call minutes ago and I’m suffering crippling anxiety about what this person on the other end of the line thinks of me, wasting their time like that to the point where they have to go out of their way to cut me off. And then there’s that probably even more common variant where you say “I should let you go,” which clearly means pretty much the exact opposite of that: that *I* desperately want to be done with this conversation. I remember I dated a girl, this was before Jill, who didn’t have a cell phone, and I would come up with every excuse not to call her, to the point where I guess she finally broke up with me. Maybe it was over something else. I don’t know.

By the way, have you ever noticed, with the rise of cellular phones, when you call someone *and someone else answers* you’re so taken aback that it’s like a cue to panic, and it utterly defies the tacit rules of social engagement? I’m so used to immediately getting through to whomever I need that any kind of middleman is grounds for interpersonal crisis. Sometimes I just hang up the phone. It’s bad. I’ve even done it to my mom a few times, when her boyfriend answers the phone....

...Self-conscious topic change #1: Two arm-lengths, though? That seems... too close. What is the status of the restrained head nod of recognition (I do believe you'll know the one I'm talking about), and at what distance is it acceptably deployed? Or the mock salute—you know the curt two-fingered one—for that matter.

Self-conscious topic change #2: January third? But I'm thirsty *now*. Then again, you're not drinking alone when you're drinking with Jesus.

-Nathan

(P.S. I haven't figured out the waffle recipe. They're still coming out... 'needlessly charred' is how I would describe it. I'm attempting to rectify the situation via an intensive regimen of six hours of the Food Network daily.)

**Nathan Wilder**

is still waiting for Subway to tessellate their cheese.  
about a minute ago • Like • Comment

From: Nathan Wilder <[nathanfwilder@gmail.com](mailto:nathanfwilder@gmail.com)>  
To: Stephen Culver <[steve\\_culver@gmail.com](mailto:steve_culver@gmail.com)>  
Date: Sat, Jan. 1, 20— at 8:12 PM  
Subject: RE: RE: RE: ...but my cuffs are bone-dry!  
Mailed by: gmail.com  
Signed-by: gmail.com

By the way—I was listening to the Jay-Z song “99 Problems” today (I was totally rocking my iTunes hip-hop playlist), and I found myself wondering something. In the song's hook, when he raps that “I got 99 problems but a bitch ain't one,” is the implication that Jay-Z isn't currently in a satisfying, productive romantic relationship and so therefore doesn't have a ‘bitch’ to present a problem, or that he *is* in a relationship, but that it's going so well it isn't presenting any problems?

I guess there's alternately the tertiary possibility that he's just Jay-Z and therefore a bitch is *never* a problem, but consider this: the song was perhaps the second-biggest hit of 2004, second only to "Crazy in Love" by Beyoncé (which, just as an aside, might be as good as a contemporary pop song gets—just listen to those horns!), with whom Jay-Z was (still is, actually) famously in a high-profile relationship. With that in mind, you'd be tempted to go with the second option. But then again, maybe the song symbolizes Jay's public disavowal of a relationship that—if I recall correctly—hadn't yet been confirmed; or perhaps it was representative of his unease at finding himself (having come up from nothing, having escaped the violence of the inner city) in such a high-profile relationship with such a glamorous figure.

And by the same token, aren't we compelled to consider the possibility that "Jay-Z" and "Sean Carter" are not one and the same, that the former is a persona presented to us by the latter, in the same way that the "I" of any novel or poem or short story is but an invention of the author? Or perhaps there's overlap, but surely they can't be identical: for your further consideration there is, after all, the Jay-Z/Beyoncé duet "'03 Bonnie & Clyde," which pretty clearly implied a relationship between the two, although said relationship is presented rather hyperbolically. So I checked one of those song lyric aggregator websites where people can submit comments and discuss what they think songs are about. And that... didn't help. Like at *all*. In fact, it sort of shook my faith in humanity.

I'm not sure I actually had any faith in humanity.

I mean: what am I to think here, really?

**Nathan Wilder**

has 99 problems. Or 100 problems. Or maybe 98 problems?  
about a minute ago • Like • Comment

*This has nothing to do with anything, but I had an epiphany at the gym this evening. I was listening to The National's "Racing Like a Pro" (yes, quite the uplifting, motivational song to run to, let me tell you), and anyway I realized--for the first time--that he isn't saying "your mind is racing like a pronoun" but "like a pro, now." I have heard in my head a hundred times "racing like a pronoun" which I thought was strange but rather fascinating. How fast are pronouns anyway, I asked myself. Now I am completely disillusioned. What else have I been mishearing? I suppose the name of the song should have tipped me off but I always thought my iPod was just cutting off the "noun" part. However, this does mean I am free to use the line "racing like a pronoun" myself whenever I can figure out how to give it some sort of meaning.*

By the time Nathan arrives at the bar, Stephen is already standing outside the massive storefront window, between the two black-and-yellow pillars and beneath the awning. He's in a tuque and a navy pea coat, twirling an unlit cigarette between his fore and middle fingers and talking to a stranger in an olive military cap who's smoking beside him, simultaneously leaning against the glass and drawing into himself for warmth.

Nathan learned many years ago how to identify people from warmer or colder climates. The warm-weatherers always hunch into themselves in winter, keeping their heads low and pressing their shoulders down and forward into their core for warmth. The cold-weather ones are always standing tall. Their coats are only casually buttoned. They hardly bother with gloves until it's 5 or 10 below freezing.

The stranger, clearly unadjusted to the cold, has a mildly perplexed look on his face as he alternates long drags of the cigarette with quick breaths into his fist for warmth.

Nathan hears Stephen say, "That's him now" as he draws closer to the pair. Nathan leans against one of the pillars and blows air into his own fists for warmth. It's frigid even by January standards and it's been snowing languidly for several days, though none of the powder has yet been able to form a layer on the sidewalk, and the accumulated drifts and piles of shovelled snow look no different than they did days before, after the last heavy snowfall of the year prior. Stephen gives Nathan a searching look and opens the door. Then he pauses. He holds the door open, despite the protests of everyone seated at the tables inside. He turns to the stranger and he says, "Thanks for the cigarette."

The stranger says, "No problem," but he's looking at Stephen curiously.

“Can I ask you a question?” Stephen says.

The stranger gives him a quizzical look. He says, “Huh?”

“I asked if I could ask you a question.”

The stranger takes a puff; he nods his head.

Stephen asks, “What do you think of me? Really. Honestly. Do you think I’m a nice guy?” The stranger is silent and he says, “No. Seriously. Humour me.”

The stranger shrugs. “Yeah. You seem alright.”

Stephen seems satisfied. He smiles broadly and gives the stranger an oddly sincere thumbs up. He says thanks and tells the stranger that they’ll see him around. Then he directs Nathan to enter, following closely behind.

Nathan’s been in living rooms larger than this bar; there are no more than five or six low tables, positioned so close to one another that Nathan suspects the owners had played a lot of Tetris at some point in their lives. There’s an overhead projector unit bolted to the ceiling; the white screen accompanying it takes up what little wall space there is not reserved for kitschy beer advertisements. The beer fridge doesn’t actually fit behind the bar, which is only about eight or ten feet long, and the row of beer tap handles is so crowded you can’t really see the back wall. Every available shelf and crevice is crammed with glassware: pints and pokals and tulips and elaborately etched stemware. From the front door, Nathan can see into the kitchen. It’s a mini-fridge and a microwave and a personal deep-fryer crammed into what looks like a converted closet. Given the decor and the menu and what he’s seen of the washrooms, Nathan is reasonably certain no woman has ever set foot in this bar deliberately. The bartender, Bill, has admitted as much in the past, and on the rare occasion when a female enters (Nathan can remember

this happening only twice), Bill dotes on her until she inevitably leaves, probably unsettled less by his mildly lecherous nice act than by the fact that the owners seem to forget or refuse to restock any kind of alcohol that isn't beer or single malt whisky.

These are the beers on tap here: Boddingtons Pub Ale, Mill Street Cobblestone Stout, Tuborg, Labatt Blue, Alexander Keith's, Robert Simpson Confederation Ale, Hoegaarden, Stone Hammer Pilsner, Czechvar, Big Rock Gopher Lager, Wellington Special Pale Ale, Hacker-Pschorr.

There are eighty-three additional beers in the beer fridge, not counting the assortment of vodka coolers. Bottles of Carib Lager are on sale for \$2.50, but they come in clear glass and they've been sitting under lights in the fridge, untouched for months, and even if they weren't—although most likely they were—they're all skunked to hell, regardless.

Bill and the scattering of current customers are glaring at Stephen for letting the cold rush in. Stephen shrugs apologetically and pulls off his coat, draping it over the seat of an unoccupied table. Nathan does the same. He sits and instinctively fiddles with the beer coaster at the table.

“What was that about?” he asks.

Stephen says, “What was what about?”

“You don't smoke.”

“Nope.”

“So...”

“...Why did I bum a cigarette?”

“Right.”

“I was testing a theory.”

“That being?”

Stephen has sat down across from Nathan. He holds up a finger and Bill, rubbing his hands together, wanders over from behind the bar. He asks how they're doing and they say they're fine and they both order pints and Stephen silently watches the bartender pour as Nathan waits for an explanation. Bill returns and places the pints on the table. Nathan's slops a bit over the edge of the glass and onto the table. Stephen takes a long, deliberate sip.

Nathan repeats himself. “That being?”

Stephen sets the glass down. There are already more than a few fingers of beer missing from the pint. “OK.”

Nathan says, “OK.”

Stephen says, “OK. So there's this psychological theory that if you ask a complete stranger for a small favour, that stranger's opinion of you will improve, because they have to reconcile the fact that you're completely unknown to them with the fact that they've done something nice for you. So they conclude that you must be a good person for them to have done you a favour. I can't remember what it's called. I was bored the other day and clicking the 'random article' button on Wikipedia.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“What do you mean 'and what'?”

“Were you satisfied by the results?”

“Oh. Well, the scope of the experiment was somewhat limited, and the parameters were sort of flawed insofar as I don’t even smoke and so therefore probably convinced the subject that I was an enormous dick when I just played with the thing in my hand for a few minutes. And I guess I also sort of know that guy, just by face, anyway, on account of he hangs around here constantly. But generally, yeah—you were here for the conclusion. You heard it from the horse’s mouth. I’m an alright guy.”

Nathan doesn’t say anything.<sup>2</sup> He’s taking many small sips of his beer, attempting to keep up with Stephen’s big gulps. There’s a hockey game playing on the overhead projector, and that’s the dominant sound in the bar, augmented by the boisterous conversation of three engineering students crowded around a table and a pitcher of Blue. Nathan makes like he’s watching the game. Stephen does the same. Nathan doesn’t mind the conversational lull, but he can tell what’s coming.

Several minutes pass. Stephen is already nearing the dregs of his first pint. Nathan isn’t far behind. Nathan looks back from the screen to Stephen, who arches his eyebrows and allows a long, sighing “Soooooo...?”

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<sup>2</sup> Despite his best efforts later, Nathan will not be able to identify the name of this theory. He assumes, however, that it is a variant of the ‘Door-in-the-face’ technique, in which a persuader will follow a (declined) extremely large request with a second, more reasonable request (which, owing perhaps to a sense of reciprocity or guilt or a shifted frame of reference, is acceded to at a much higher rate than if the first, unreasonably large request had never been made). When Nathan reports this to Stephen, Stephen has immediate insight into its use: “I’m going to go up to women and ask them for sex,” he’ll say. “And when they turn me down—assuming they don’t hit me or storm off—I’ll get their number instead.” This strategy, astoundingly, is marginally more successful for Stephen than Nathan would have anticipated.

Nathan shakes his head. He takes another small sip. “Yeah. No. We’re... just not going to talk about that.”

“We’re not going to talk about this?”

“No. We’re not going to talk about this.”

Stephen shakes his head and takes the final gulp and puts the empty pint down. He kneads his fingers into his forehead but doesn’t say anything. Nathan follows suit, killing his glass and placing it at the edge of table. Bill, drawn by the sound of empty glassware, wanders over from behind the bar. The front door opens and a gust of freezing air follows a couple of students inside. They wander over to the stools and sit. Bill yelps and shivers.

Bill’s an older guy, in his mid-fifties, tall with a pronounced stomach and greying hair that’s long and curly but also patchy. He wears thick glasses and he spends less time bartending than he does conversing with customers. He was in the military at one point and his favourite stories are about the stupid things grunts did when they were on leave in foreign countries. He’ll pull up a chair and explain in vivid detail why it’s never a good idea to buy a glass of champagne for a prostitute in France (although he supposes the maxim would extend to prostitutes in any country): because it’s a scam, and the champagne costs \$250, and the bouncers and the bartender certainly don’t care whether you’re a military man, they’re going to get their money one way or another.

Nathan has heard him tell this story three times. Bill hovers over their table for a moment contemplating a fourth, but changes his mind. Instead he asks if they want another round and they tell him yes and while he’s back behind the bar pouring two more Boddingtons from the tap, he asks them how their Christmas was.

Nathan looks at Stephen and says, “Oh yeah. I forgot to ask how your Christmas was.”

Stephen says that it was a banner year at the old Culver house.

They both laugh a little too hard at a reference that’s a little too obvious and a lot too stupid. Bill shakes his head; he returns with the refilled glasses. He heads back to the kitchen where something’s microwaving. Nathan says, “No, really. How was it?”

“Typical. Cold and lonely and celebrated in the company of bears.”

Stephen is from a small town in northern Ontario, so small and so isolated that it’s about a two-hour drive to the kinds of places Nathan considers to be the middle-of-nowhere. The trip there involves a drive to Toronto and a flight to Thunder Bay and then another drive, of indeterminable length based on how cold it is and how recently it’s snowed and how deeply the Ministry of Transportation’s winter maintenance officers care about northern communities so far off the map.

Here is how Stephen describes his hometown to the people who stare at him blankly when he tells them where he’s from (which is nearly always): The town is a former mining and forestry hub. It’s largely been picked clean by now, and when the industries left so many years ago, so did all but a population of about 400, a number that’s remained stable for years. There’s no cell phone service. There are no streetlights, no restaurants besides the Chinese take-out place operated by the town’s only immigrant family; there’s only one stop sign. The Beer Store is located in the rear half of a post-office and the town’s newspaper is a four-page rag published once a week from Stephen’s neighbour’s basement. The strip club (really, the only bar) has an unlaminated hardwood dance floor and busses in one stripper a week from Winnipeg. Stephen likes to imply that

the dark and cold and isolation of his town lead more than a few of those strippers into his bed.

The nearest McDonald's is two hours and forty-five minutes away and now—even in the presence of a fast-food place on every block—Stephen has never been able to shake the subconscious belief that what he's eating is a rare treat and he may not be back for four or six months and so his usual order is heroically gluttonous: a supersized Big Mac combo, a 10-piece order of Chicken McNuggets, and a hot apple pie.

Nathan has never been there, but Stephen paints a vivid picture of what he comes from. Accordingly, Nathan has created his own imaginary version of this world, and he has populated it with a list of some or maybe all of the things you could do for fun in a place like that:

- Drink beer and build massive bonfires in the bush, and take turns jumping over or sometimes *through* them;
- drink beer and go out in speedboats on the lake when it's pitch black and the moon is a waning crescent and periodically toggle your flashlights on-and-off to discover how close you are to crashing into another boat playing the same game;
- drink beer and think up ways to get yourself in the weekly newspaper's Police Blotter, which usually involve stealing garbage bins or recycling bins or scattering logs and waste across Main Street to hold up traffic, all the while (for the more astute drunks) reflecting on why it is that bonfires and drunk boating don't seem to be a going concern for the miserable OPP officers stationed here in the early years of their police career;

- drink beer and have sex with your girlfriend or even someone who's not your girlfriend, usually without protection because even though it's not really a good excuse, the only pharmacist in town keeps the condoms behind the counter and you're too embarrassed to request them from her because she is one of only four participants in the local PTA and your mother and father are two of the others; and when your girlfriend's period is late you go to one of the many churches (which might actually outnumber homes) and pray even though you're not at all religious and you realize why it is, exactly, that the town's population remains stable even as your elders die and so many others escape in droves. You and your beer and your fertile teenage girlfriend are the reason the town's population remains stable. You and your beer and your fertile girlfriend and your friends and their beer and their fertile girlfriends.

Nathan concedes that some of this is probably hyperbole; maybe all of it is.

Nevertheless, he sometimes marvels not just at the fact that Stephen has escaped, but also that someone from a place that sounds so foreign can have such a similar cultural frame of reference. Stephen explains it thusly: that if you don't have cable or an Internet connection where he's from, you don't just die of boredom. You might *actually* die, since in all the years this place has refused to surrender itself back to the deep woods of northern Ontario, the region's cable access television channel has been the only remotely effective way to inform a massively spread-out population of people that yet another Boil Water Advisory is in effect.

“I got a sweater,” Stephen says, “from the General Store. And my dad drove down to Thunder Bay and bought all kinds of surplus stuff from the Giant Tiger. Pillows and blankets and pajama pants and cookies in bulk. Never mind that I couldn’t fit most of it into my bags for the plane trip back. Oh, and we had Chinese. I ate the shit out of some chicken balls and red sauce.”

“Exciting.”

“Yes. It was. Terribly exciting,” he says.

They watch the hockey game for a bit. Or Nathan pretends to watch the hockey game while Stephen watches Nathan. Stephen takes a sip and his face hardens a bit.

“Seriously. Are we going to talk about this Jill thing? What happened? Are you alright?”

Nathan waves his hand dismissively and turns back to the game.

Stephen: “Listen. I don’t want to be that guy, but—”

Nathan says, “Then don’t be.”

Stephen says, “But—”

Nathan turns his head back from the projector screen and cuts him off again. He says, “Do you ever wonder about continuity?”

Stephen sighs and shakes his head. “*What?*”

“My mom always yelled at me when I said ‘what.’ You’re supposed to say ‘pardon.’”

Another exasperated sigh. “Fine. *Pardon?*”

“Continuity. Television continuity. Like the continuity within and between series. Do you ever wonder about it?”

Stephen shrugs and takes a pull of beer and says, “What about television continuity would I wonder about?” He pauses. Then he rephrases, “*Why* would I care about television continuity?”

“Like, for example: you might wonder about how if the various *Law & Order* franchise incarnations, *Homicide: Life on the Street*, and *The Wire* all exist in the same television continuity—and we can safely assume that they do, given a) the four explicit *Law & Order* and *Homicide: Life on the Street* crossovers, and more importantly, b) Richard Belzer’s reprisal of the role of then Detective—now Sergeant—John Munch on both *Homicide* and *Law & Order*, as well as his cameo in a fifth season episode of *The Wire*—how we are supposed to reconcile ourselves to the sudden, unremarked upon reappearance of actors on one show who have already played different characters on one or more of the others? How, for example, is it possible for Clark Johnson to be *both* Baltimore *Sun* journalist Gus Haynes in the fifth season of *The Wire* and Detective Meldrick Lewis in all seven seasons of *Homicide: Life on the Street*? At the very least, would not the stunning physical resemblance between these two characters be alluded to by, say, a police beat reporter for the *Sun*? And how, moreover, can Michael Kenneth Williams play both the stick-up boy Omar Little in *The Wire* and find himself cast as three different no-good New York street thugs in three separate episodes of *Law & Order*? The possibility alone that all four characters would possess the same instantly recognizable facial scar and yet have no connection to one another is surely nothing short of unbelievable.”

“Umm... Okay.” Stephen is absently running his finger around the rim of his glass. “So you’re not just talking about how Homer Simpson hasn’t aged in twenty-one years.”

“Twenty-two. Wait. Twenty-three? No. No. It’s twenty-two. And no, that doesn’t interest me. And... But where was I? OK, so yeah. The whole *Wire/Homicide/Law & Order* thing is complicated by the fact that the Munch character was inspired by a real-life Baltimore City police officer by the name of Jay Landsman, whose name was in turn given to an entirely *different* character within the universe of *The Wire*. And then, to make matters even more convoluted, the real-life Landsman actually played a role as a third, also unrelated and completely fictional BPD officer by the name of Dennis Mello.”

Stephen says, “But that last bit doesn’t have anything to do with continuity.”

Nathan admits, “No. Granted. But while it doesn’t *explicitly* poke holes in this elaborate television continuity, it certainly is a surreal bit of three-deep meta signification.”

“Granted.”

“And that doesn’t even include the problematic nature of Belzer’s other guest star appearances as John Munch. Now, I’m willing to overlook his guest spot on the comedy series *Arrested Development* as a meta-joke in which Belzer was playing his own parodic take on his best-known character (especially given that Belzer plays *himself* in an earlier episode of the same series). And similarly, I’m willing to overlook his appearance on the UPN police drama *The Beat*, seeing as that only lasted six episodes and no one ever anywhere has, I suspect, seen it.”

Stephen interrupts, “Does UPN still exist?”

“What?”

“Just as an aside. Does it exist? Does the network still exist?”

Nathan thinks this over for a moment. He says, “No. Not that I’m aware of. I know there’s no local affiliate. I think they merged with the WB and they’re calling it the CW these days.”

“Huh. Good to know.”

“Yeah. But, so, anyway, what I find harder to ignore is his crossover spot in the fifth season *X-Files* episode ‘Unusual Suspects,’ where he interrogates a member of The Lone Gunmen, the gang of three dorky conspiracy theorists who later had their own short-lived spin-off series (and of whom Fox Mulder was an honorary member). If we accept that this is *the* John Munch—and there’s no reason not to—we must by extension accept the entire continuity of the *X-Files* as informing the universes of each of the aforementioned programs. And maybe it’s just me, but there’s something about the tacit background awareness of the existence of aliens (not to mention the confirmation of various wild conspiracy theories) that lessens the carefully developed verisimilitude of gritty urban crime dramas like *The Wire* or *Homicide: Life on the Street* (though one must admit it grants a certain surreal symmetry to Detective Steve Crosetti’s paranoid ramblings in the first season of *Homicide* about how Abraham Lincoln’s assassination was an inside job, although I don’t think the *X-Files* ever touched on that one explicitly). There are difficulties with this, of course, like why was Munch—despite this scene taking place *in* Baltimore, for example—interrogating John Fitzgerald Byers in a room completely different in appearance from the ‘box’ used for interrogations in the actual *Homicide: Life on the Street* universe. What I’m saying is that I can reasonably be

expected to believe the layout of the Baltimore Police headquarters has changed in the intervening years between the narrative action of *Homicide* and *The Wire* (and, to an admittedly lesser extent, that the chain of command of the Baltimore Police Department has been utterly gutted and overhauled as well, explaining the absence of several key high-ranking officials in the latter series), but it's another task entirely to explain the difference at a time when *Homicide* and the *X-Files* were airing concurrently on network television—and presumably being set in the 'present day'. The only reasonable conclusion I can muster is that the interrogation is taking place in a different district within Baltimore Police jurisdiction, although we can eliminate the Western District because we see their interrogation room at least a few times during the series run of *The Wire*.”

Stephen says, “Umm.”

“And while we're on the topic, whose decision was it to cast Diane Neal as Assistant District Attorney Casey Novak in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* two years after playing the part of Amelia Chase, a high-powered autoerotic asphyxiating female rapist in the same series? Are you telling me that no one in the District Attorney's Office ever did a double take when Novak was hired and checked the police records to ensure Chase was still incarcerated for her brutal sex crimes? And then, well, that actually reminds me, too, of the multiple cameo appearances in *Homicide: Life on the Street* by characters from *Chicago Hope* and by other actors (including Alfre Woodard and Ed Begley, Jr.) who reprised *their* roles as Dr. Roxanne Turner and Dr. Victor Ehrlich, respectively, from the critically acclaimed 1980s hospital drama *St. Elsewhere*.”

“I never saw it,” Stephen says.

“Saw what?” Nathan asks.

“*St. Elsewhere*,” Stephen says.

“Oh. It was good. It was sort of like a precursor to *ER*. With maybe some *M\*A\*S\*H* mixed in.”

Stephen says he never really cared for *ER*, and that he never found *M\*A\*S\*H* funny when he watched it as a kid with his parents.

He adds, “But now I’ll watch an episode here or there, when it’s on. And it’s always on. It’s not bad. Maybe I just didn’t get it at the time. Or maybe it was one of those things that was revolutionary at the time but just seems dated now.”

Nathan says, “I do enjoy that the series ran for more years than the *actual* Korean War.”

“Actually, you could technically argue it’s still going on. It’s just that there’s been a cease-fire armistice in effect.”

Nathan says, “Wait. What? The show?”

Stephen says, “No. The Korean War.”

Nathan says, “Oh. Yeah. Obviously. I’m an idiot. Whatever.” He says, “Anyway, it’s not really important.”

Then he says, “But my point, I mean, is that the reason for the connection between *Homicide* and *St. Elsewhere* is obvious, because Tom Fontana was producer for both series. But here’s the thing: so I think everyone remembers the final episode of *St. Elsewhere*, titled ‘The Last One,’ and how the camera panned away at the end from a scene of snow falling in front of St. Eligius Hospital to, eventually, an image of Donald Westphall’s autistic son Tommy shaking a snow globe replica of St. Eligius—the obvious

implication if you've ever seen the episode in question (given, at least in part, because Westphall is also portrayed in this mini-scene as being a construction worker rather than the doctor he played for every other episode of *St. Elsewhere's* television run) being that the entire six-season arc of *St. Elsewhere* was nothing but a product of little Tommy Westphall's imagination. And I bet I can anticipate what you're going to say, because what that means, by process of basic extrapolation, I suppose, is that little Tommy Westphall is directly responsible for virtually every television show ever aired."

"That's actually not what I was going to say."

"Oh. Anyway, of course, you know what's also interesting, now that I think about it, about this Tommy Westphall thing is that Jay Leno appeared as himself in an episode of *Homicide: Life on the Street*—"

"—if only he'd played a victim."

"—and so did Tim Russert. And Michael Bloomberg is the mayor of New York in both the *Law & Order* franchise and in real life and I could think of a bunch of other examples. So, you know..."

"Know what?" Stephen asks.

Nathan looks down at his pint glass. "Fuck it. Never mind, actually. I think I'm already kind of drunk."

Stephen says, "Hmm."

Nathan says, "Umm."

Bill is behind the bar, seated with his feet resting on a table. He's got a Paul Auster novel folded open in his big hands and he's reading casually. The engineering students are arguing over who's going to pay for the next pitcher. The two students who

came in earlier are at the stools doing homework, with their textbooks spread out, scattered across the length of the bar. They're talking quietly.

Nathan and Stephen are silent for awhile. The hockey game on television has wrapped up and Bill looks up from his chair and searches for the remote. He finds it and jogs through the channels. Nathan is sucking on the inside of his cheek and staring distantly out the large front-window. Outside in the parking lot the snow is falling more heavily or maybe it's just a trick the streetlights are playing on Nathan's eyes.

He distantly hears Stephen say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa! Stop right there. Go back a channel" and Nathan turns to watch him gesticulating excitedly as Bill looks back down at his remote and presses a button.

"Yes! That one." And Stephen and Nathan turn their chairs to better see the projector screen, which is tuned to a cable television broadcast of *The Shining*. It's only a few minutes into the film and they watch without comment for the next two hours, shifting only for bathroom breaks and to refill their empty glasses.

When the film is over and the network is running one of those between-program bumper advertisements and the voiceover is informing viewers that back-to-back episodes of *Kenny vs. Spenny* are next, the bar has mostly emptied and Bill has switched off the neon OPEN sign and dimmed the outside lights, and Nathan and Stephen are drunk and teetering visibly even in a seated position. Each throws down crumpled handfuls of twenties and they stand and gather their things. Nathan is struggling with the top button of his coat when Stephen pats him on the back and looks him clear in the eyes and says, without the hint of a slur, "Seriously. You need to deal with this." Nathan purses his lips and nods and exhales deeply. Stephen eyes him for a moment and then he turns and

salutes Bill, casually pulls his coat on over his shoulders, opens the front door and exits. A burst of frigid air hits Nathan as he watches Stephen turn left, into the wind, casually wadding his hands into his pockets. The tails of his coat blow back in his wake.

Nathan remembers reading a news story about hypothermia, explaining how alcohol increases blood flow to the skin, making someone *feel* warmer even as they're losing heat. He imagines Stephen's walk home: he stops to rest and becomes disoriented and he shivers and as his skin changes colour—first lips, ears and fingers, then his entire face becoming blue and puffy—he exhibits classic hypothermic behaviour, burrowing into a drift of snow or between rocks while his organs fail and die, clinically speaking, even as reduced cellular activity means spikes of brain activity will continue for minutes or even hours.

Then again, it's possible—even probable—he'll make the five minute walk to Lester Street without incident and tuck himself into bed, where he'll wake up the next morning, stomach-aching and muscle-throbbing and painfully hung-over—but nevertheless toasty warm.

Nathan resists the urge to follow. He wins his battle against his coat button and echoes Stephen's salute and steps gingerly into the cold. He makes a right; he cuts through the parking lot up to University Avenue and trudges through accumulating snow—over the train-tracks and past the university's sprawling mid-century, functional brick-buildings and past Westmount Road. He turns up Keats Way and eyes an oversized real estate sign with the faces of two blonde women smiling vacantly at him. It's in the last blocks of his walk that he tears the mitt from his hand with his teeth and digs in his pocket for his vibrating cell phone and a message on it from Stephen that says MADE IT.

Nathan exits the message screen and he checks the time—it's late—and he clicks over to his contact list and scrolls up and down for a moment. He finds her name and he highlights it and he stops walking. He can feel cold gnawing on his fingers and snow dampening his tuque and something very different drying his mouth. He thrusts the phone back in the pocket and continues on under the hazy halogen streetlights.

**Nathan Wilder**

Here's Johnny!

about a minute ago • Like • Comment

*I like to watch television shows about severely overweight to morbidly obese people. I have divided these shows into two categories:*

- 1. The tele-documentary about gastric bypass surgery or liposuction or the obese woman who decided to abstain from physical activity altogether, who had refused to move from her couch (for months? years?), whose thin husband had waited on her, changed her bedpan and the batteries in the television remote and then cursed the paramedics who showed up to pry her from the couch whose fabric had quite literally melted into her skin (or perhaps her skin had melted into the fabric), after neighbours complained of a smell they assumed was rotting garbage, not woman and couch fusing into something that would have to be surgically separated like Siamese twins.*
- 2. The reality show that sequesters its contestants on a ranch of half-starvation and what appears to be grueling exercise (judging from the amount of sweat and vomit), mostly for my viewing pleasure, though I suppose they are losing weight (unnaturally quickly, actually), and in doing so are becoming relatively healthy again, though I can't help but consider the shame they must feel during their weekly stripping down to what amounts to the equivalent of a two-piece bathing suit (for the women anyway) on national television, exposing their rolls and beer bellies and the precise number of pounds they've managed to weigh to people watching at home, people whom they presumably went to high school with—not that this makes me like the show any less, of course.*

*What does it say about me that I like to watch these shows, despite also being of the opinion that they are objectively boring and almost exactly the same season after season?*

*There are two ways I could answer this question:*

- 1. I have some deep-seated emotional and/or psychological issues pertaining to my own weight.*
- 2. I find the struggles of obese people particularly entertaining.*

*However, both of these answers are inaccurate (or at least I hope they are). The only answer I have is that I don't really know but am nonetheless compelled to watch as a medical team performs an operation on a woman, face down on the operating table, couch in the air.*

When he's home and warmed up and on his third tall glass of cool water poured from the tap into an old Waterloo Dark pint glass, he finds himself in front of his computer, booted up and logged onto Wikipedia. He mouses over the RANDOM ARTICLE button and left clicks.

***Modris** is a Latvian masculine given name, borne by over 2,500 men in Latvia<sup>[1]</sup>.*

*The name means "watchful" or "vigilant". Its nameday is celebrated on 21 September.*

Click.

*The **1990 MTV Video Music Awards** aired live on September 6, 1990, honoring the best music videos from June 2, 1989 to June 1, 1990. The show was hosted by Arsenio Hall at the Universal Amphitheatre in Los Angeles.*

Click.

***Takotsubo cardiomyopathy**, also known as transient apical ballooning syndrome,<sup>[1]</sup> apical ballooning cardiomyopathy,<sup>[2]</sup> stress-induced cardiomyopathy, broken-heart-syndrome, Gebrochenes-Herz-Syndrome, and simply stress cardiomyopathy, is a type of non-ischemic cardiomyopathy in which there is a sudden temporary weakening of the myocardium (the muscle of the heart).*

Click.

***Andrew McCulloch** (born 1864-Jun-16, Ontario Canada; died 1945-Dec-13 Penticton Canada) was a civil engineer with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).*

Click.

**Chronology** (from Latin *chronologia*, from Ancient Greek *χρόνος*, *chronos*, "time"; and *-λογία*, *-logia*) is the science of arranging events in their order of occurrence in time, such as the use of a timeline. It is also "the determination of the actual temporal sequence of past events."

Click.

A **rolled chord** is a sequence of notes played almost at the same time like strumming a chord on a guitar. They are mostly seen on piano, producing a harp-like effect. When a chord is too large for a pianist's hand, the chord is expected to be rolled. An arpeggiated chord can be quite difficult to execute especially if spanning more than two octaves.

Click.

**Fatal familial insomnia (FFI)** is a very rare autosomal dominant inherited prion disease of the brain. It is almost always caused by a mutation to the protein  $PrP^C$ , but it can also develop spontaneously in patients without the inherited mutation in a variant called **sporadic fatal insomnia (SFI)**. The mutated protein, called  $PrP^{Sc}$ , has been found in just 40 families worldwide, affecting about 100 people; if only one parent has the gene, the offspring have a 50% chance of inheriting it and developing the disease. The disease's genesis and the patient's progression into complete sleeplessness is untreatable and ultimately fatal.

Nathan sleeps terribly on this night and it has nothing to do with the room spinning around him and it has nothing to do with being on his own. He was never good at sharing a bed with her because he'd roll over onto the centre of the mattress and tug away all the covers and she'd playfully jab him in the back and tell him how sleeping

with him was like when she was young and she shared a bed with a yellow Labrador retriever who'd stretch across the mattress and constantly burrow under and then out from beneath the sheets. Here he is now alone, sprawled in his Jesus Christ pose, splayed prone under the flannel sheets and thick blankets and blue-and-white patterned afghan weighing upon him, staring at the textured white ceiling tiles, probing his memories of extended family members for mysterious deaths. His cousin Jeffrey overdosed on heroin and his aunt Anne died in a plane crash and his great-grandmother caught the Spanish influenza and his grandpa Wallace had colorectal cancer, although his pickled liver would have gotten him sooner than later anyway, and Nathan remembers his grandpa's hacking laugh and the joke—or maybe it was simple fact—that he repeated day-in and day-out in his hospital bed while the doctors debated amongst themselves whether the chemo was even worth it given the liver and his advanced age, that “Son, let me tell you: this is a *shitty* way to go.” And then more laughs and then the hospital room silence that's never actually really silent and then he'd rest his head back on his pillow and close his eyes and whistle tunefully the melody of “Ring of Fire” or “I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry.”

Nathan never remembers his dreams.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This is not strictly, only practically true: in 1993, when Nathan's father took him to see *Jurassic Park* in its original theatrical run, Nathan had the same recurring dream for weeks—some might have characterized it as a nightmare, but he found it too surreal to classify it as such—in which it was Halloween and he was trick or treating dressed as a Velociraptor (a Velociraptor as portrayed in the film, not the small, presumably feathered creature as it actually historically existed). He would ring a doorbell and shout “trick or treat,” only to find himself face-to-face with a Tyrannosaurus Rex. The T-Rex would promptly devour him.

**Nathan Wilder**

Liquor in a mug warms me like a hug.  
about a minute ago • Like • Comment

*I don't own a television anymore. I didn't have to join a support group or anything but it was a difficult process. Now the only thing I watch is the 126 episodes of the original Twilight Zone series. I've almost worked my way through each one of those vignettes from modern life. Some of them are horrific and surreal while others are so unintentionally awful they kind of transform into works of art. Many of them were adapted from short stories and the others were created by the best screenplay writers of their time. As an English major, I feel it's important to look down on contemporary reality television and fondly recall an era of television that my father could have watched in his diapers. You might point out that there are many great shows today that have great writing and gripping drama. But I'd counter that by letting you know that the fourth season of Twilight Zone featured a then experimental hour-long format, which produced the best episodes. The most comical episodes however are the conventional thirty minute ones in which the plot progresses so rapidly it makes the characters seem completely insane or like impulsive actors desperately trying to resolve a plot that was faulty right from the credits. Then there are the episodes that are so one-dimensional they could be done in ten minutes but require a lot of filler to satisfy the network. Take for example the episode about the failed jockey who wishes he could be bigger so he could beat up his enemies. Five minutes in and you just know he's gonna come to the realization that he can't ride a horse anymore. You have to watch him awkwardly bump into furniture and brag to his rivals for fifteen more minutes. But there is one person that can save even the worst episodes.*

*Rod Serling emerges from the shadows, holding a cigarette, and launches an epigrammatic assault on the audience. Even when the episode has been a forgettable*

*failure Serling puts it all in perspective, showing us that maybe we've missed something. He's been waiting to size up that situation and doesn't waste a single syllable, every word counts. I've watched him being interviewed by CBC's Mike Wallace at least ten times. The verbosity and suaveness of this man makes me feel like an awkward teenager that has no business in the world of letters. Even his "um" takes on poetic significance. I'm sure if someone took the time they'd realize he's always speaking in iambic pentameter. I'm hoping that someday I'll do something important and meaningful with my life. Every moment of my life up until now has been the lead up, the first three or four minutes of a Twilight Zone episode. Once my story really starts happening, Rod will step in and offer a pithy and insightful monologue that sets up the really good parts. Then, on my death bed, he'll deliver the eulogy, taking long inhales in between moving passages about my long and strange trip through life.*

Nathan was enamoured with Jill from the start, but found himself terminally incapable of sealing the deal; in fact, even the phrase ‘sealing the deal’ would have been misleading given that—for the better part of several months after he’d Facebook friended her and wrangled her phone number out of her and sent her witty or what he thought were witty text messages almost daily—he found himself terminally incapable of expressing any emotion beyond his best version of cool, disinterested satisfaction with their burgeoning friendship (even though Stephen and the others had told him how that act so poorly veiled his true feelings and his obedient puppy-dog sense of devotion to her). The thing was, of course, that he was so self-absorbed and self-conscious about all this that he never noticed the way she always sat down in the seat next to him, or how she’d buy him drinks at the bar, or how when they hugged she’d linger just a little too long, probably entirely aware of his budding erection even as he attempted to subtly shift it in his pants (which would always lead him to cough awkwardly and then, later, as if seemingly by coincidence, tell the exact same story about what it *really* meant when old-school tailors asked you whether you dressed to the right or to the left), or even how she volunteered her phone number so eagerly in the first place. In retrospect it was all rather obvious—but then everything *is* obvious in hindsight, like Rocky losing the final bout in *Rocky Balboa*, or Kurt Cobain’s suicide,<sup>4</sup> or Freddie Mercury being gay—which is why he doesn’t like

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<sup>4</sup> Nathan is not—excepting a brief phase in high school—a conspiracy theorist with regard to Kurt Cobain’s 1994 death. Although he fully acknowledges that Courtney Love is the worst person in the world, regardless of her lack of direct culpability in Cobain’s suicide. In retrospect, that phase in high school was still probably preferable to having been an Ayn Rand devotee, which he’s sure he would have been if he’d gotten around to reading her back then.

to talk about the night he calls his own personal 9/11, even if it ended (he thought at the time, at least) surprisingly well for him.

He was drunker than usual because they were at Morty's eating wings on a Monday night and there was a promotion going on—in addition to it being cheap wing night, obviously—where you got a free pint glass for every pitcher you drank of Waterloo Dark, and they were seven free glasses in and aiming for an eighth so that all four of them there—Nathan and Jill and Stephen and another friend, Rebecca, who kept on looking at Nathan with eyes that screamed *seriously, if you don't say something I'm going to sleep with her and then I'm going to revoke any claim you have on being a man because a girl beat you to the punch*—could take home two wide-mouthed nonic beer glasses for themselves. And then someone, someone probably being Rebecca in a further attempt to force Nathan's hand because she knew full well that (as she put it) “*drunk* is as close as you get to *human*, Nathan, even if it's still a bit of a stretch,” *someone* ordered shots of Jameson's whiskey, which no one felt like they could legitimately decline, even though Stephen went out of his way to mention that he preferred his whiskey distilled by Protestants. So someone kicked Nathan and, surveying the faux-oak table covered in overturned shot glasses and empty pitchers and baskets of bones and free glasses gathered in a septet to one side, and uneaten blue cheese dressing<sup>5</sup> spilled and half-assedly covered with a cocktail napkin, and—he was pretty sure—wing sauce smeared across his chin and upper lip, he decided *now* was the perfect time.

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<sup>5</sup> Curious linguistic oddity discovered by Nathan one evening shortly after the night in question—the cheese is *bleu*; the dressing is blue cheese. This may reflect the lack of anything approaching actual *bleu* cheese in blue cheese dressing. Alternately, it could just be an issue of inconsistent translation.

When he was seventeen, Nathan's mother had told him in what she must have thought was her sweet-parental-advice voice, "Nathan, if you ever bring a date—and I'm not saying I ever expect you to find yourself a date, not that you don't have your charms—but if you ever bring a date to an Italian restaurant, for the love of God, don't order anything with spaghetti noodles; you eat spaghetti like a retarded person." Nathan could feel the stickiness of the sauce on his face and wondered why her edict was only against spaghetti when he was pretty sure he couldn't eat *anything* without caking it all over himself, but the knowledge that he hadn't been eating spaghetti may yet have still—in his state—fuelled him on when he asked Jill if she wanted to play pool though he'd never once played pool in his life, and she readily agreed, jumping eagerly if somewhat unsteadily to her feet.

But before they even racked he had her cornered under a decorative Steamwhistle-branded mirror and he said *something*. Actually, well, he's not sure what he said because he was drunk and he was nervous and—though he'd practiced his speech on a loop in his head for months, he'd had it down to the length of a charming and irresistible sound bite that he knew would have melted *his* heart, were the situation reversed—the moment that he actually looked at her everything went blank in the parts of his brain that weren't reserved for song lyrics and film references and incidental childhood anecdotes. And so in his brain, in the way he reconstructs the conversation for himself in spite of the fact that he'd like to gloss over it and just forget it, this is more or less what he thinks he said. What he said without ever slurring, or so he recalls it.

He said, "I spent the last couple of weeks watching terrible romantic comedies and... well they weren't *all* terrible, I guess *The Devil Wears Prada* wasn't without its

charms, or maybe I just liked looking at Anne Hathaway for two hours and but... Oh, and *The Princess Bride*. But that's not really much of a romance so much as it is just a brilliant film, although at one point I did have it mixed up with *The Princess Diaries*, which is a romantic comedy I guess, and which also stars Anne Hathaway and... Anyway. Okay, so here's the thing is that I'm just going to come right out and say it because I've been trying to hint at it for like the past month-and-a-half and I don't know whether you weren't getting my drift or whether I was being too subtle or whether I was being such a coward and being so self-consciously obtuse about all of this that no-one would have been able to place what I was saying and doing in context, unless they were able to read my mind, and even then they might be confused because I've been maybe lying to myself off-and-on for this whole time wondering whether it's worth it to risk the plainly apparent potential for awkwardness, and then when I'm cognizant that I'm thinking that I tell myself *god how stupidly clichéd* but I guess I can't help it because I keep going back to that headspace and re-thinking everything, and then analyzing everything you've said to me and the way you react when you see me because there has to be some kind of key that unlocks the mystery door—key? Door? Awful, hackneyed metaphor, I know—or at least makes this talk easier for me, and I guess for you too, and you know I had this entire speech planned out in my head last Tuesday and even before in earlier iterations but I'm so not getting where I want to go with this and—did we order another pitcher yet? I'm pretty sure Stephen ordered another pitcher like ten or twenty minutes ago and I haven't see any sign of it; have you seen the waitress?—okay, so let me just get to it.

“But here's the thing, too, is that I keep thinking that you must have this figured out by now, that it's so absurdly obvious that Stephen and Rebecca and Chris have

already done the legwork and deduced it in their heads and it seemed to me like they had it figured out before even I had it figured out, the way they were winking and saying what you maybe thought were weird things and then going *Eh? Eh?* all suggestive like, like they had everyone fooled and they were just being *so* super subtle about all of it, which they clearly weren't, because then Charles and Heather caught on or maybe they were already in on it, because they started nudging me in the shins under the table—and I swear, I have bruises, I'll show you later; in fact, Rebecca was doing it too, just a few minutes ago, or I think it was Rebecca, but it could have been Stephen or maybe you were doing it accidentally—and doing that ridiculous thing where you raise your eyebrows and gesture with your entire face, and even though everyone recognizes what that kind of expression indicates, if you look at it it almost seems like they're overcome with this combination of impotent rage and spellbinding fear. And like I said—seriously, my mouth is *really* dry, where's that beer? And I want that second glass, and I totally have this sneaking suspicion that they've run out and we're going to have to draw straws to see who goes home with just one—it wasn't the least bit subtle to me, but I guess you missed it, unless you were being wilfully ignorant, or maybe it only seemed way-too-obvious because I'm in on the joke. Not to say that it's a joke that I'm getting to here because that would be quite ridiculous to have wasted so much of your time at your own birthday party for a punch-line that couldn't possibly be worth it based on whatever it is I've said already.

“And but so—”

She tried to interrupt, “—”

“—so no, don’t interrupt me, you said you wouldn’t interrupt me—did you say you wouldn’t interrupt me? Well, I need you to just listen to me, promise you’ll listen to me—and this is already like intensely uncomfortable for me because I’m really not well-adjusted to putting myself out there and doing this kind of thing because I usually just stupidly sit and wait for these situations to sort themselves out without my direct participation, and yeah playing it that way probably hasn’t helped me much in the recent or even the distant past but it’s hard to go against the individual twitching of every muscle fibre in your body and every synapse firing in your brain telling you to stop because this is a horrible idea and you’re only going to get hurt or embarrassed or alienate a friend and, if at all possible maybe you should run away, too; and I’m sure this is uncomfortable for you, too, which is why I didn’t want you to interrupt because I wanted to get through this as fast as humanly possible so I could just be done with it, but I do need to emphatically assure you that whatever discomfort you’re feeling right now, it’s nothing compared to how completely stupid and unprotected from everything and just unnecessarily vulnerable I feel right now; I mean look at me, I’m sweating and I’m bouncing up and down as I’m standing here holding a pool cue and we’re not even playing pool, not yet, and I’m sure I’m just generally looking as ridiculous as I feel, I’m sure—but so for awhile I thought I could just brush away the looks that Stephen and all the rest of them were giving me until I actually sat down and thought about it and I thought to myself that they were right and that I was going to do this, but then I tried and I still couldn’t muster up the courage, even when—you remember a couple of Saturdays ago, when I was drinking my face off and I guess I was acting kind of cranky and aloof;

obviously you remember, it was less than two weeks ago. So I resigned myself to cowardice—and god I’m really awful at this.

She said, “Nathan—”

“*No*. Let me finish. You’ve got to let me finish. Anyway, though, I resigned myself to cowardice until Stephen and Rebecca decided to make things worse last week by making us go out to dinner together with them—or maybe making isn’t the right word; they asked me and I sort of nervously, laughingly said yes, and you were drunk and you agreed, so I couldn’t infer anything there—and I thought the implication was pretty sucker punch-level obvious because, well, it was just the four of us, and part of me thinks you just didn’t even think about the implications because hey, it was a free meal, and it was sort of—maybe—an early birthday gift from a few of your friends, even though I’m not actually even sure how well you know Stephen, and just as a side note I should also mention that I’m really unsure about how I feel about Stephen, because he’s kind of a dick sometimes, but other times he’s like the best friend you could have but—but yeah, he’s just so aloof and hard to read sometimes or maybe I’m just projecting; but then, anyway, the other part of me thinks, or wants to think that—hey, there’s our pitcher! And another beer glass and I think I maybe also need some water because my throat is dry and hold on a second.”

And he flagged down the waitress, he’s pretty sure, and said “Hey, can I get a glass of water, maybe? Thanks,” and Jill doesn’t say anything at this point because her mouth is sort of open in a look Nathan almost thought he remembered from *National Geographic* specials, of exotic species in some kind of immediate peril, and then he started back in on her “—you must have known where that was going, and you consented

for obvious reasons. But then maybe you consented just because you didn't want to hurt my feelings, or maybe even Stephen and Rebecca's feelings. Which is perfectly acceptable, but even at dinner I kept trying to read you and I couldn't, and it's possible you were throwing hints because Stephen and Rebecca certainly seemed to think you were and maybe I'm just completely inept when it comes to reading women, and in fact I think that's actually a distinct possibility; but maybe you should have been obvious enough about it for a half-retarded chimp like me to decipher. I mean, I guess we haven't known each other that long—but you've always been really nice and cool to me, just by the way, and I just have to mention one of my favourite things that happened is when we were playing euchre that one night and there were five of us, so we were alternating in and out; and I remember you were playing that time when Charles and Stephen decided my new nickname was Captain Renege on account of I'd somehow managed to renege on three consecutive hands—but I guess getting back to the point you *had* to have known how generally stupid and socially awkward I am. It's my *thing*. Or but maybe sometimes I get the sense that virtually *everyone* thinks they're super-awkward and uncomfortable in social settings, or maybe I'm being unreasonable for expecting you to know the traits of someone who you've only know for a few months and who has had virtually no impact on your life whatsoever to this point, and figured to never have any such impact, in the near or distant future. And then you guys drove me home that night after dinner and all I could think about was what a disaster it had been and I decided to just stop bothering again. Until the other night with the whole bowling thing.

“Nathan—”

He never even acknowledged her interruption, just talking over her, not even looking at her, seemingly free-associating as he stared at his reflection and the reflection of the back of her head in the Steamwhistle mirror, “And okay and the funny thing is— actually, what’s funny is that Stephen made a joke on the way to meet you guys there at the bowling alley, he said ‘Getting drunk in a bowling alley is a shameful activity; it’s like having sex with a dead person,’ and there was this drawn-out and unbelievably awkward silence in the car because we all happened to know personally that each and everyone in the vehicle at that moment had wrecked themselves one time or another in a bowling alley, and within the past six or eight months no less, and everyone clearly disagreed that doing so was equivalent to necrophilia, but they almost seemed to tacitly agree that it *was* still at least somewhat shameful because no one spoke up or said anything to Stephen in response.

“And, sorry, so I’m getting off track. The thing was that we went bowling, the five or six of us—I don’t even remember who showed up, even though we’re talking about something that happened literally four or five nights ago, on Thursday or Friday I guess, and I think that’s only partially because we did end up getting drunk and changing our names on the scoring computer to characters from *The Big Lebowski*, and even Stephen had more to drink than he should have (especially since he was driving), despite what he’d said earlier—and but that’s not important because we went out to the bar afterward, for \$2.<sup>50</sup> domestic beers at Philthy’s and I was drinking OV and all you guys were laughing at me because everyone knows that *OV stands for something other than ‘Old Vienna’*—but I don’t care, ‘cause I actually like the taste of OV, sort of, and by that I’m referring to the beer, in case I’m not being clear; I don’t want to be on record as having

admitted to some unsettling sexual predilection—and even though I was pretty tipsy I remember you peeled your label from your bottle of Blue... But wait no, it actually wasn't your bottle of Blue because you don't drink Blue; it was Charles's Blue, and he'd started peeling but never finished, and when he swallowed the last couple of sips and set aside his beer you sort of grabbed it and played with the bottle for a few moments and you finished peeling it, and you gave it to me, and that's not to say like you '*gave it to me*' gave it to me—you made like *here's Charles's label, he wants you*, as if we were all in on a big gag, but I think the general feeling at the table was that there were two different jokes and one of them had gone unspoken and that a couple people were only laughing at the one because they hadn't gotten the other: that there was some kind of subtext there—I mean, but of course that's what the table would have thought because Stephen and Rebecca and Charles were there, and I think Rebecca might have dropped in at that point too, but anyway.

“And so but I'm scratching my head, thinking on the ride home after that—I think actually Rebecca must have been there because she gave me and Charles a ride home because there was no way we were getting in the car with Stephen at that point—and Rebecca is driving and Charles is riding shotgun, and Rebecca turns back around in her seat to look at me in the eyes, completely ignoring the road by the way, and she says: 'I'm giving you a week,' and it's so obvious what she's talking about that I don't have to ask, and so instead I ask her who gave her the authority to dictate who does or does not do what with whom—or for that matter, who does or does not have the permission to ask about doing what with whom, if that makes any sense—and she just shrugs and says that she doesn't know, but that that's her official proclamation and that I really need to *man*

*up* because—and I’m quoting, or at least paraphrasing with as much accuracy as possible, ‘Seriously, Nathan. I’m a straight girl and even *I’d* be all over that.’ And so then for the rest of the drive it was really quiet and at first, after they dropped me off at my place and I was sitting on that La-Z-Boy I found on the side of the road, watching late-night infomercials and drinking water to sober up before going to bed, I’m thinking *what the hell?* except then I realized that she was right; or maybe ‘realized’ is the wrong word, because it wasn’t an epiphanic sort of thing. It was really obvious all along, I guess. I mean, she obviously didn’t have the authority to withdraw you from anything, but that the point she made—in its broader context, anyway—was pretty accurate.

“So that’s what this... Like I said earlier it’s been so long and I’m so bad at it and I guess I’m also, even after all this time thinking about it, worried about the friend thing and so I, well, I guess what I want to say, what I guess the long story short is that—”

It was at that point that she kissed him, or that’s how he remembers it, and he’s reasonably certain he didn’t imagine that part because—well, because there was the relationship, though never mind that now—he distinctly remembers the taste of dark lager and Irish whiskey and mesquite barbecue wing sauce on her lips and tongue which, in any other circumstance, he might have felt odd being aroused by. It wasn’t a heavy kiss or a long kiss, but it was a kiss with the kind of meaning Nathan could appreciate. Not a peck or a pity kiss or a kiss between friends who are going to awkwardly laugh it off later when they’ve sobered up and taken a measured look and thought ‘really? *Him?* What was I thinking?’ which is the kind of kiss Nathan was and is all too familiar with. No, it was the kind of kiss that said—and maybe this is just hindsight again—‘We’ll be naked together later tonight’ and maybe also (though Nathan suspects he might really be

projecting here, or maybe he just listened to Led Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker" one too many times), 'Eventually, I'm going to break your heart.'

Needless to say, Stephen and Rebecca, in the corner booth, watched the entire episode, and at its climax stood and attempted to instigate their somewhat rhythmically-challenged version of a slow clap, which obviously failed because a slow clap is something you have to earn, according to the rules of bad 1980s movies, and people have to actually be paying attention to what's going on in the first place anyway, and Nathan's extraordinarily thankful in this regard that his crowning moment of humanity went largely ignored; and when Stephen waved his hands dramatically in frustration, as if to say "fuck you all, anyway" in dismissal of the packed bar's poor showing as slow-clappers, he knocked two of the Waterloo Dark pint glasses off the table and onto the hardwood floor where they shattered in dramatic fashion. Stephen looked around the bar and he gently kicked at some of the bigger shards and generally looked as guilty as a kid caught with a hand in the cookie jar or a teenager caught watching soft-core porn on late night cable television by his mother. He scratched his head at this point and said, slurring and probably a bit too loudly, "Guys, I guess maybe we should maybe pay our bill and leave. Maybe?"

**Nathan Wilder**

wishes he could be like David Watts.

about a minute ago • Like • Comment

*I like Modest Mouse. And I have for about four years now. I remember the duration of my appreciation unusually well because of its provenance. There I was, a largely inexperienced eighteen-year-old girl, playing Ophelia—the Stoppard one—chatting with my Hamlet. Who happened to like Modest Mouse. And who I happened to be in love with. That old chestnut.*

*“Their new album comes out soon! Aren’t you excited? I am!” Followed by an (in)appropriate showcasing of my Bambi eyes.*

*Only, I had never even listened to them before. At least, not consciously; maybe they’d been on the radio in my presence. I was barely past my days of thinking Keane was cool (actually, that’s a lie: I wasn’t). And yet, there I was, doing that insidious girl thing of pretending to like the same things as some crush in order to woo him. Ridiculous. And shameful. And fortuitous.*

*Hamlet bought me We Were Dead Before the Ship Even Sank. Only thing he ever really gave me. Well... And, what a relief, I actually really liked it! I ended up liking Modest Mouse more than he did. It turns out he wasn’t nearly as into them as I had thought; I’d have been better off feigning fandom for Alice in Chains. Maybe he was faking it because he thought I liked them so much...*

*I even got the Woolf reference in their name; I read “The Mark on the Wall” in first-year, thank you kindly. I swooned for Isaac Brock and his highbrow literary allusions, while wondering if he’d stab himself as I watched him sing at the Sound Academy. I thought about sleeping in autumn beds with him.*

*So what does all this waxing nostalgic about my Modest Mouse appreciation say about me? Well, perhaps that I’m not too proud to dislike them based on the*

*embarrassing origins of our first encounter, which is somewhat of a surprise, considering my relationship with pride. Or that any music that can have the descriptors alt, rock, and/or indie applied to it in any way is likely to appeal to me, irrespective of any other considerations, because I will always think it's cool. Especially if it features strained vocals and angsty lyrics layered with pretension because, well, honestly, I'm a bit angsty and pretentious. Throw me a literary bone and I will bite, even if it's sung with a lisp that intense editing has to work to mask. Besides, it's unlikely that I'll hear it until after I read about it: I'm tone-deaf and I have a bad ear for music, generally. And—maybe most significantly—that my feminism wasn't always fierce enough to prevent me from lying about my interests in an attempt to get into a man's pants. And, that it paid off. Just not how I intended it to.*

Nathan wakes up the next morning—technically, actually, the next afternoon, although just barely, and so he’s still willing to give himself credit as an early riser—to all of the following:

- a single ray of sunlight spilling through the narrow opening between his window curtains and landing directly on his face;
- a headache whose explanation— most likely dehydration caused by diuresis—doesn’t sound nearly as bad as it feels;
- a dry mouth, probably for the same reason, but compounded by the pool of dried spittle on his cheek and his pillow;
- halitosis so fierce he can identify it without resorting to that trick where you kind of subtly breathe into a cupped palm and inhale through your nose;
- on his nightstand, two Advil and a pint glass filled with Gatorade made from powder-mix (he silently thanks his intoxicated self for this bit of foresight);
- a cell-phone, on the same nightstand, indicating multiple missed text messages;
- an insatiable lust for any breakfast dish of which bacon is a primary constituent element, and also maybe eggs, because he knows eggs contain cysteine, and even though he doesn’t know what cysteine is, he is under the impression that it is considered beneficial in treating hangovers.

What Nathan does not wake to are many of the oft-reported *psychological* symptoms of hangovers, including depression, dysphoria, anxiety, or irritability. Which is not to say

that he isn't experiencing those things, just that they remain at the stable baseline they've been at for several days now.

Nathan paws blindly for the Advil and swallows them. Then he takes a long pull of Gatorade and replaces the glass on the nightstand. He groans. He curses. He rolls out of bed and snatches his phone and hunts for a bathrobe. Not finding one, he considers the relative danger of frying bacon shirtless and in boxer-shorts and, thinking to himself that safety comes first, reaches for a ratty t-shirt and a pair of jeans from a pile of dirty laundry coiled beside the bed. He smells them; he shrugs; he throws them on.

In the kitchen, he takes two frying pans from a cupboard and a slab of bacon and a carton of eggs from the fridge. He pulls off five strips and—stopping every few moments to close his eyes and take a deep breath and fight back the urge to be sick all over himself—places them into the larger of the two pans and places it on a burner over medium heat. He cracks two eggs into the smaller frying pan and breaks the yolks and adds a pinch of salt and pepper; he sets that pan aside to wait until the bacon is further along. As it sizzles and bubbles, he scans through his unread messages.

From: 1519985----

Heather's place tonight, apparently. If you're alive and can stomach the sight of beer.

Call: Stephen Culver

11:10am 1/4/--

From: 1519985----

Also, if you're alive, check your e-mail.

Call: Stephen Culver

11:15am 1/4/--

From: 1519985----

Seriously... are you alive?

Call: Stephen Culver

11:27am 1/4/--

From: 1519985----

Addendum: I feel like a hobo's asshole.

Call: Stephen Culver  
11:28am 1/4/--

From: 1519985----  
Call home. Love, mom.  
Call: Mom  
11:34am 1/4/--

Nathan responds to his mother by letting her know that there's no need to sign a text message, since the phone informs you who sent the message anyway. He responds to Stephen—quite wittily, he feels, given the circumstances—by keying WHY STEPHEN, I HAD NO IDEA. Nathan flips the bacon and pours off some of the excess grease; he begins cooking the scrambled eggs, stirring them lazily with a fork. Stephen answers WHAT? and Nathan responds I WAS SHOCKED BY YOUR APPARENT CRAVING FOR HOBO ASSHOLE. Stephen answers GO TO HELL. AND ALSO, SERIOUSLY, CHECK YOUR E-MAIL.

Nathan puts the phone aside and focuses on breakfast. He draws a bag of white bread from the cupboard and thumbs through mouldy slices to find a couple that look relatively untouched and he pops those into the toaster. He continues stirring the eggs with his left hand while he skilfully tongs the bacon strip-by-strip onto a paper towel-covered plate with his right. He pats them down with another paper-towel and then relocates them to another, empty plate and adds the toast when it pops burnt from the toaster. Finally, gauging the still-runny, pale yellow eggs to be good enough, scrapes those out onto the plate as well. He deposits the plate and a fork on his computer desk and he returns briefly to his bedroom to reclaim the glass of Gatorade before sitting down in front of his PC.

He takes the first bite and takes a moment to decide whether it will stay down. He gives himself the all-clear and opens his inbox.

From: auto-confirm@amazon.ca <[auto-confirm@amazon.ca](mailto:auto-confirm@amazon.ca)>  
To: Nathan Wilder <[nathanfwilder@gmail.com](mailto:nathanfwilder@gmail.com)>  
Date: Tue, Jan. 4, 20— at 2:59 AM  
Subject: Your Order with Amazon.ca  
Mailed by: bounces.amazon.com  
Signed-by: bounces.amazon.com

**Thanks for your order, Nathan F Wilder!**

**Want to manage your order online?**

If you need to check status of your order or make changes, please visit our home page at Amazon.ca and click on Your Account at the top of any page.

**Ordering Information:**

**E-mail Address:** [nathanfwilder@gmail.com](mailto:nathanfwilder@gmail.com)

**Billing/Shipping Address:**

Nathan Wilder  
300 Keats Way,  
Waterloo, Ontario N2L 2W4  
Canada

**Order Grand Total: CDN\$ 58.72**

Order Summary:

Shipping Details: order will arrive in one shipment

**Order #:** 702-0450357-3105029

**Shipping Method:** FREE Super Saver Shipping

**Shipping Preference:** Ship when entire order is ready

Subtotal of Items: CDN\$ 51.97

Shipping & Handling: CDN\$ 0.00

Total Before Tax: CDN\$ 51.97

Estimated Tax: CDN\$ 6.75

**Total for this Order: CDN\$ 58.72**

**Delivery Estimate:** Jan 7 – Jan 14 20—

**Shipping estimate for these items:** Jan 5 – Jan 7 20—

**1 “Sea Change”**

Beck; Audio CD; CDN\$ 14.99

Sold by: [Amazon.com.ca, Inc.](https://www.amazon.com.ca),

**1 “Blood on the Tracks [Original Recording Remastered]”**

Bob Dylan; Audio CD; CDN\$ 10.99

Sold by: [Amazon.com.ca, Inc.](https://www.amazon.com.ca),

**1 “Here My Dear (Expanded Ed) [Original Recording Remastered]”**

Marvin Gaye; Audio CD; CDN \$25.99

Sold by: [Amazon.com.ca, Inc.](https://www.amazon.com.ca),

**Where can I get help with reviewing or changing my orders?**

To learn more about managing your orders on Amazon.ca, please visit our Help pages at [amazon.ca/help](https://www.amazon.ca/help).

Please note: This e-mail was sent from a notification-only address that cannot accept incoming e-mail. Please do not reply to this message.

Thanks again for shopping with us!

Amazon.ca  
Earth’s Biggest Selection

From: Jill Armstrong <jilljilljill@gmail.ca>  
To: Nathan Wilder <nathanfwilder@gmail.com>  
Date: Tue, Jan. 4, 20— at 10:04 AM  
Subject: (no subject)  
Mailed by: gmail.com  
Signed-by: gmail.com

It's entirely possible you won't even open this e-mail. It's entirely possible you're going to trash it sight unseen. That's fair. But I'm going to write it anyway. I hope you're doing alright, or at least as well as you can be under the circumstances. Circumstances under which me hoping you feel alright, admittedly, seems kind of laughably cruel. Don't get me wrong; I think I did the right thing for *me*, but that doesn't mean that I can't still show some compassion. It doesn't mean that I don't care; it doesn't mean that I'm not sad and guilty about this.

Listen: things were good. And then things were alright. But they weren't going to be alright forever. Even if they were, I'm not sure if I could have been alright with just alright. We weren't right for each other, even if it took me years to figure that out. You're not a bad person, I really, really mean that. I wouldn't have cared so much about you if you were, but I honestly don't think it would have worked out, regardless. I kidded myself for awhile thinking that I could overlook so many little things. That they wouldn't bother me. Ultimately, I think I need time. I need someone more emotionally available than you are. I need to be able to talk about things. I need not to be afraid to say how I really feel. And I'm not saying that everyone needs that, or you're deficient in some way, because I think some day you could make some girl very happy, but that's just not enough for me.

I guess maybe it's too soon to be sending this e-mail; maybe it's cruel or to you it feels like I'm rubbing salt in your wounds. That's not my intent, obviously. Maybe I *am* writing this more for my own sake than for yours. But I think it's only fair that I get to record my feelings for posterity's sake. They're mostly feelings of sadness. For a few days it was sadness and guilt. But I realized that someone should never feel guilty for being honest. You should always try to be honest, even if it hurts sometimes (well, except for white lies, because you don't always need to be honest about *everything*). These things happen. That must sound really condescending coming from me in this situation. But here's the thing: I'm not going to lie and pretend that this isn't just an entirely, really sad situation in general. Sadder for you, especially because you didn't seem to see this coming. I'm not going to say that I'm not going to feel like shit for awhile myself... (particularly mornings; mornings are always the worst for me, waking up and remembering the thing that you're sad about), even though I know you hearing (reading?) me say (write?) that might make you laugh bitterly and hate me more than you already do, which I strongly suspect you do. It would be entirely within your rights to hate me if you feel like that's the best plan of action. I spent a couple of days trying to decide whether I was alright with you hating me over all of this. I decided that I'm not. But I also decided that there's not much I can do about that. It's your call because you're the victim here. You call the shots, and if your way of dealing is to hang me in effigy while listening to the Smiths, then I guess that's what you have to do. I would be a terrible person if I couldn't grant you that. My entire point is that I'm trying to say that I'm *not* a terrible person, and maybe I'm just trying to convince myself, but the fact that this whole situation has me fucked up as well maybe speaks well on my behalf.

That's why I wanted to say my piece. I could go on, but I won't. There *is* a secondary purpose to this e-mail, which is to try and negotiate when I can come get the rest of my stuff... Assuming you haven't burned it on your front lawn. Maybe it's easier if you box it up. I don't know. That way I can just come and grab it and we can move on, rather than dealing with the awkwardness of processing what would feel like me ransacking the place. Maybe you even want to mail it. I suppose that would be an amusing, strangely shaped package. But it'd probably be expensive. I don't think there's much, to be honest. A couple of ratty sweatshirts. My air popper. The stack of novels that I think were on the filing cabinet. I suppose I also have a claim on a couple of the Waterloo Dark pint glasses, but that'd be a bad move on my part. Cruel. Crueller than this e-mail. Sorry again. You can keep them. Or throw them at the kitchen wall and find your Zen place amidst the sound of glass shards raining upon a tile floor.

Let me know. I don't expect a response immediately, or even anytime soon. Maybe never. I guess I could live without most of those things for awhile... Please, *please* let me know, eventually.

... I have no idea how to end this e-mail. I hope you're OK.

- J.

P.S. I attached a picture of a kitten. You can't hate a kitten, can you?



From: Stephen Culver <[steve\\_culver@gmail.ca](mailto:steve_culver@gmail.ca)>  
To: Nathan Wilder <[nathanfwilder@gmail.com](mailto:nathanfwilder@gmail.com)>  
Date: Tue, Jan. 4, 20— at 11:07 AM  
Subject: Don't look at me, I just ate all the hot buttered corn!  
Mailed by: gmail.com  
Signed-by: gmail.com

Hey champ,

Check this out: we're celebrities. Maybe put better, we're accessories to celebrity, or we have some tangential relation to celebrity. Actually, it's complicated, but I'll try to explain:

Do you remember Phillip Chang? He lived in our residence building in first year. You might recall him as the quiet Asian dude who lived on the second floor. That description is probably going to bring back a flood of memories of the six or so quiet Asian dudes who lived on the second floor, so I'll be more specific: he was the 6-foot-2, 250 pound one who played DE for the varsity football team. And when I say played DE, I mean he actually *played* in his first year; he was the first-stringer right out of high school, which (because I know you don't give a shit about sports, and yes, I'm getting to the point) is sort of a big deal—even in Canadian university sports; my sense is it's unheard of in American college football—because every player sits out their first year. I believe 'red-shirting' is the term used. He was left-side DE, too, which is the spot they usually give to the faster player, because it's the quarterback's blindside. And, yeah, we've pretty much fielded a terrible football team for as long as the school has existed, but he was what they call a 'shining beacon of hope.' Sacks out the wazoo. Interceptions. Tackles. A total package. The kind of guy who might actually get an NFL try-out, which is saying something. He'd have undoubtedly been a first-round pick in the CFL draft, although I

guess you could call it damning with faint praise to suggest he might spend ten years playing pro football for less money than he'd make as a civil servant, and ending up with a lifetime of chronic injuries for his troubles...

Again, I digress.

I can tell you're reading this and saying "Jesus, get to the point." And so (alright, still not the point), long story short, it turns out the reason he was quiet wasn't so much because he was actually quiet; it was because he wasn't around to be making noise. When he wasn't practicing, he was at the gym. The only conversation I can ever remember having with him was this one time when I was coming out of a toilet on the second floor and I saw him carrying one of those stackable plastic schoolroom chairs into the shower stall and I asked what was up and he groaned—not like a self-pitying, drawing attention to himself kind of groan, but like a *genuine* groan of equal parts physical and mental anguish—and said he was so sore from practice and from deadweight lifts that even *standing* literally made his legs burn in agony (I overlooked his misuse of the modifier 'literally').

I keep going over this conversation because I just heard that he died. Killed himself by—strangely enough—jumping off the roof of the East 3 residence building over the holiday break.

Or... Well, the thing is that that's the rumour. You know how they have the place on total shut-down between semesters, right? All of the outer doors are locked so that you can't even access the inner doors, which are the ones students actually have the keys to. Well, *someone* got into the East 3 building and he found his way up the roof and he jumped off or fell off or *something* happened. A custodial guy found the body yesterday,

apparently. There's police tape around the common grounds of the East complex. There's already a shrine. Wouldn't it be surreal if it was dedicated to the wrong person?

I can't find any news reports about it, but a bunch of people have been telling me this. There's the possibility it was an accident, but if it wasn't then you also have to contend with the fact that newspapers generally don't like to report on suicides, as far as I'm aware. Except, you know, of people of a certain celebrity, where it's almost more glaring if you're not covering it. And so now I'm wondering whether the starting Defensive End for a (mediocre) university football team qualifies as criteria for notability. He doesn't have a Wikipedia entry, for what that's worth. But that's where the plot thickens, because the *other* rumour is that he was one of the nine guys who tested positive for steroids last year, thus precipitating the cancellation of the entire season... It makes a twisted sort of sense if you think about it: football is this guy's life. He can't play football. Not just that, but he's probably had himself blackballed, at least from Canadian university sport. Of course, I can't really see that as such a big deal, but I suppose it's a matter of perspective. And so anyway this guy goes out, he has nothing left, he ties one on and departs this mortal coil in the most dramatic fashion imaginable.

Maybe it sounds like I'm being glib. Maybe I *am* being glib. But if it's true... I dunno. I just can't process it. You always think different rules apply to people like that. Or maybe I can process it *too* easily, based on that one conversation I had with him. Maybe I should be taking the opportunity to probe and tell you—because I seriously cannot read you—that you shouldn't go jumping off any buildings just because Jill left.

Kidding. And by that I mean I'm kidding when I suggest that it's actually a legitimate concern that you might go out and do that, not that I'm kidding when I say you

shouldn't jump off a building. I dunno. Anyway, maybe I just needed to get it off my head. My ringing, throbbing, hung-over-as-hell head. I know it doesn't affect either of us on a day-to-day basis, but it's just so... surreal? Is surreal the right word?

More relevant to our current situation, and less depressingly (or is it), want to meet up before heading to Heather's?

-Stephen

**Nathan Wilder**

keeps his feathers numbered for just such an occasion.  
about a minute ago • Like • Comment

Nathan uses his hands to push himself, in his rolling chair, away from the desk. He bobs his head back and forth for a moment, as if in contemplation. And then with his feet he paddles himself back to it, and does a Google search for an article he knows he's read before. A link to the *National Post* is already highlighted in purple on the search results page:

*The University of Waterloo suspended its football program for one season yesterday after the revelation that nine members of the team committed doping offences, while officials overseeing university sports in Canada admit a lack of resources means they are at a loss to know the full scope of performance-enhancing drug use...*

Mildly curious, he begins randomly entering the names of the few Canadian Football League players whose existence he's aware of into his browser's search bar to check whether any warrant Wikipedia entries. It turns out—he's genuinely surprised—that they all do. Except then he considers the possibility that it's obvious the names he's familiar with would have Wikipedia entries because he knows nothing about Canadian football and so he finds a team roster and clicks on names at random and sure enough they're all stub articles, but they're all there. Or at least mostly there. Sometimes the practice squads are a bit hit-or-miss.

A short list of CFL player names, past and present, that Nathan actually recognizes on sight: Doug Flutie, Anthony Calvillo, Andy Fantuz, Casey Printers, Ricky Williams, Ben Cahoon.

Nathan navigates back to his e-mail inbox and stares blankly for a moment, unable to decide whether the feeling in his stomach and in his head is just dread or whether his hangover is attacking in waves. He's stuck, he realizes, in an odd sort of limbo—the paradox of the hopeless chump: he doesn't want to deal with her e-mail, but he doesn't want not to. If he responds now, he's convinced he'll look overeager and no matter what he says, because he's never been good at *saying* anything, it belies the impression that he's doing better than he actually is. Or maybe he'll appear pathetic, or she'll sense him virtually grovelling at her feet. If he puts off a response,... Well, if he puts off his response, not only does he risk completely forgetting about the time bomb ticking in his inbox, he appears bitter and stand-offish and he'll have done nothing to relieve her sadness. Then again, he *is* bitter, and he tells himself that that's something he'd freely admit to anyone who isn't her, even though it occurs to him at that moment that he hasn't expressed much of anything to anyone. But at all costs, he can't admit it to her. And if she's sad, well then let her be sad; she can deal with that feeling for awhile. But not for too long; he can't bring himself to want her *too* sad, because the thought of her sad still—in spite of everything—makes him feel that constricting feeling of anguish in his chest. The picture of the kitten *is* cute. Nathan paws a hand through his bed-headed hair. He says “fuck” loudly to himself and he closes the Web browser.

He'll do it later. But in the mean time, he searches his closets for a corrugated cardboard box that will serve his purpose. He finds one—an empty box of books originally shipped to a library that he must have used to hold his own books when he moved into this apartment—behind a stack of cases of empty beer cans and beer bottles and liquor bottles he's been meaning to return for a refund for months now. He pulls the

box out gingerly to avoid overturning the delicately balanced tower of empties, and tosses it out and open on the kitchen floor. Then he begins his sojourn through the apartment in search of all the things that remind him of her. T-shirts and CDs and DVDs and books; he piles them all in chaotic heaps in and beside the box. He moves from room to room with robotic focus—a cookie sheet in the kitchen, a reading lamp in the living room, a washcloth in the bathroom—working up a considerable sweat under his day-old clothes. He breathes heavily from his open mouth; he ignores the nausea that swells and deflates in his stomach. And when he's done and looking over the three distinct mountains of clothes and housewares and toiletries and media he can't even bear to look at, he understands that maybe he's going to have to re-evaluate his knee-jerk plan.

That's how he finds himself, mid-afternoon on a Friday, seated on his ass in the kitchenette of a basement apartment, sorting through mounds of virtually everything in his possession—setting aside in careful piles those which are his, and placing in the box everything that he knows to be hers. Which, sure enough, is mostly consistent with the list she provided: the air popper and a few novels and a few sweaters that he isn't too ashamed to draw up into his face first and inhale deeply for a sign of her scent, only to realize that he's an idiot because they washed their clothes together in the same machine and all they smell like is Island Fresh scented Gain Detergent. He finds a blanket too, an afghan of alternating navy and white zigzag stripes that he's sure belongs to her, and *it* at least smells ever-so-faintly like what he remembers of her, though its dominant odour is not so much of that memory as it is of mothballs and elderly lady. And of course the blanket reminds him of a song because everything reminds him of a song, though he can't remember the name of this one or even who it's by and he gets this mental image—as

clichéd as it sounds, but then everything about these sorts of things are clichéd and of course that's why all or most popular love songs through history have, at root, sounded more or less the same, lyrically<sup>6</sup>—of all the intangible things he wishes he could throw in the box as well: the pain in his chest chief among them, and the boredom and the loneliness and the gnawing all-over emptiness that's related to but (not interchangeable with) the chest-pain and the memory of that thing she does with her tongue which he's pretty much positive no other girl can do. But he supposes, and he still insists upon the inherent ridiculousness of this intellectual exercise since it all comes back to those clichés again anyway, that there are items he wouldn't set aside in the box, and the strange thing that he realizes is that they're coextensive with the same things he desperately wants to trash: he wants the pain in his chest and the empty feeling precisely because they're a reminder of the opposite of that pain and that emptiness and if he can't have their opposite than he'll willingly make do with what he can get; he doesn't ever want to forget that trick with her tongue because...well, *because* it was so incredible; and the good side of the loneliness, the side that's left him sitting here for more than an hour with his ass going numb and his back beginning to ache, actually being—well, maybe not genuinely, critically self-reflective, but somewhere close to being honest with himself, and on a kind

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<sup>6</sup> Another partial list, of Nathan's exceptions to this rule: The Decemberists' "Red Right Ankle" (2003), Journey's "Faithfully" (1983), the Righteous Brothers' version of "Unchained Melody" (1965), Death Cab for Cutie's "I Will Follow You Into the Dark" (2006), and Nine Inch Nails' "Closer" (1994) [although this might be more accurately characterized as a 'lust' song, but boy is it a good one]. The Beach Boys are also granted clemency out of consideration for the fact that "God Only Knows"—widely celebrated as one of the greatest love songs of all time—actually begins with the lyric "I may not always love you."

of day when he'd otherwise be lying in bed or watching daytime television, which is probably a first for him. And it would probably be a first to admit that if he was lying in bed right now, watching Maury Povich interview out-of-control teenagers or DNA-testing bastard children while someone onstage cries hysterically, he'd probably feel worse. Although, he's quick to tell himself, that would probably be mostly because he'd have never made himself a meal and—in the process—shaken off the worst of his hangover.

Now he's finished putting her things into the box and he's closed the cardboard flaps, but he doesn't get up. Even though he's now completely numb below the waist, he stays seated on the kitchenette floor cross-legged like he's parked himself on gymnasium tile at an elementary school assembly. He sits like this for awhile; he's not sure for how long because the nearest clock is on his stove and it's slightly above his line of sight when he's in this particular position (although actually, he could check his cell phone in his pocket, especially because it has been vibrating periodically, but he's more or less positive that it's Stephen and anyway he thinks the act of reaching for the phone would ruin the state of calm he suddenly seems convinced he's achieved). He can see the living room get darker and he assumes the sun is going down except then the room gets lighter and he decides it was just cloud-cover passing by or maybe even just a light bulb or a light fixture on the fritz.

And then at some point Nathan decides he needs a cup of coffee to really find the insight he's convinced he's chasing and so he lumbers to his feet and grabs a half-full pot from the drip coffeemaker and pours out the day or week old sludge and rinses the pot under warm water. He lifts the upper lid of the coffeemaker and tosses the mouldy old

coffee grounds, paper filter and all in the garbage, and then he grabs a new filter from a freshly-opened pack and pours in some grounds and adds tap water to the reservoir and closes the lid and replaces the pot on the burner and presses the button and watches as the machine gargles and steams and spits hot brown water into the pot. He's got a mug ready and he transfers the steaming contents before the device has even finished and he sits himself back down next to the box. He takes a sip.<sup>7</sup> He cracks his neck. He adjusts his ass.

It's not quite right.

He decides he needs music. He puts on a record, just whatever compact disc is nearest to the player, which as it happens is a CD-R he remembers burning for a road trip years ago:<sup>8</sup> back to the kitchen floor. He sips his coffee. He clenches and unclenches his ass. The clouds move again or maybe the sun actually falls a bit this time. He tries to rub feeling into his legs. He looks at the refrigerator and the wall and he takes another sip of the coffee. No luck.

The box of Jill's things sits untouched on Nathan's checkerboard-tile kitchen floor. He decides to go online and check CFL player salaries.

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<sup>7</sup> He hates the taste but cannot shake the feeling that drinking his coffee black might make him just a tiny bit cooler than he might otherwise be.

<sup>8</sup> The CD-R begins, a little too obviously, with Golden Earring's 1973 road-tripping celebration "Radar Love," which Nathan unabashedly loves but hasn't heard in years. Even in that first track's opening build-up, though, he can identify the fundamental flaw of all mix-CD compilations in the iPod age: no matter how awesome the songs—no matter *which* awesome songs—they're never the awesome songs he wants to hear *right now*.

The minimum salary for a CFL player is CDN\$ 42,000, compared with US\$ 325,000 in the National Football League. The CFL salary cap is currently set at CDN\$ 4.25 million. In the NFL, it's US\$ 127 million (actually, currently there is no salary cap in the NFL because team owners have opted out of a Collective Bargaining Agreement that had previously set the salary cap at 59.5% of annual projected league revenue). The highest-paid player in CFL history was Raghib "Rocket" Ismail, who signed a 4-year contract with the Toronto Argonauts for CDN\$ 18.2 million, taking advantage of what was then an exemption for marquee players in determining a team's salary cap hit.

**Nathan Wilder**

A girl walks into a bar and asks the bartender for a double entendre. So he gives it to her.

about a minute ago • Like • Comment

*The click, the buzz, the hiss, the brief clip of Celine Dion that no matter how far back you rewind you can't record over. I spent a good portion of high school sitting on my bedroom floor surrounded by a pile of CDs, cassettes, and cut out magazines. Friday and Saturday nights when I should have been partying in a barn, drunkenly wandering around dark concession roads or pouring out sugar packets onto the table at the 24 hour Tim Horton's like the other county kids, I was up until 3am pause rewind stop playing. Yeah, they had mp3s when I was in high school, but there's something that felt so much more real about mix taping. I cut pictures of robots, body parts, and disjunctive text out of magazines and pasted it in absurd combinations to hand written track listings. This, I figured, was probably art. I gave these cassette tape collages in their clear plastic cases to confused friends who hadn't heard of any of the bands. I passed them casually to boys I liked, weaving what I thought were blatant narratives into the lyrics. If I included enough Bright Eyes, I figured, maybe they would get it. I collected old cassettes, the Bee Gees, retro mixes free in the early 90s from Burger King and Disney sing-along-songs and scotch taped over the little holes in the top so I could record over them. It took hours, carefully timing every song, and listening to it all the way through on headphones that started to pinch my temples around the middle of side B. There was a sense of precision in realizing that side A only has less than two minutes left but that there's a great Belle & Sebastian song that comes in at 1:46. My dual tape desk three disc changer made this awful groaning noise as the discs spun and the gears spinning the reels of cassette tape clicked so loudly that my mum would get out of bed and order me to give it a rest.*

*A couple years later, I picked up a copy of Thurston Moore's book on mixtape art and discovered High Fidelity. When I got to university, I used both of these as sources for*

*a paper on the cultural significance of mix taping, in which I somehow managed to semi-convincingly connect the Frankfurt school and Homi Bhabha to my love of re-recording cassette tapes. I started swapping tapes with a few other people and could never be sure if the new lo-fi band they helped me discover three tracks in was actually lo-fi or if it was just the hiss on the tape. I kept stacks of tapes in my '94 Chevrolet to feed its grey plastic tape deck and when I worked the assembly line at a car plant and started to go crazy from all the country radio, I tossed tapes inside in my backpack with my lunch and extra work gloves, and picked one for the old cassette/radio combo at my workstation. One shift, when I was rotating stations with a middle aged auto worker, the buzzer rang and I stopped my tape, switched places with him and moved onto screwing the widget F into socket C another 100 times. Instead of tuning back into the country ballads, which seemed to be the only frequency that could successfully make it to factory radios through all the metal interference, I saw him hit play and eventually start bobbing his head to Ghost Mice and Metric.*

*A couple months later, during an afternoon shift right before dinner, that tape squealed and I reached my oily hand to hit the eject button between parts. I pulled the plastic case out, dangling magnetic innards, and tugged, tearing it from where it was caught on the tape deck head. I remember trying to glue the tear back together and re-coil the brown shiny tape back around the reel, sticking a pen in the holes in the cassette, but I ended up having to toss it. A friend mailed me a photo of a piece for her art class she had made out of the magnetic tape from a cassette with the plastic case in the centre. I recognized my own handwriting on the case and guessed she wasn't a fan of that mix. I don't have the car, the factory job, or a cassette deck anymore, but I do have three*

*typewriters, a record player, roller skates and a bicycle. I guess there is just something about analogue technology. Things with moving parts. Gears. Wheels. Grooves. Books.*

Stephen is right. It isn't any interest in football or Phillip Chang or a sense of school pride or any plans for his own dramatic eradication that compels Nathan to visit the residence building where someone allegedly jumped to their death so much as it is sheer morbid curiosity. And so after exchanging text messages and agreeing to meet up on the way to Heather's, Nathan throws on his coat and gloves and winter hat and crams his iPod in his coat's outer pocket and takes a detour: from Keats Way, he heads northwest on McDougall. At Shakespeare, he cuts between houses, treading a well-worn uphill path; he comes out on Algonquin, veering east and plodding carefully down the steep, icy and snowy descent of the road lined with SUVs and sprawling mansions.

He walks almost sideways, planting one foot tentatively, probing for patches of black ice and then shifting his weight and moving his rear foot, sidling like a penguin down the street's dangerous slope. His canvas shoes are already soaked through with snow slurry and his toes are numb. He turns northwest on Iroquois and northeast on Longfellow. He crosses the four lanes of Westmount in a near sprint and cuts straight north, between the Conrad Grebel building and St. Paul's and past St. Jerome's and over a footbridge and he follows the path of Ring Road until he can see his residence building and he veers sharply off the road and onto a path of heavily trodden, slightly discoloured packing snow to reach the East block of Village 1 residence buildings. He vainly makes kicking motions to restore feeling in his feet.

Village 1 is constructed around a massive central hub building containing a cafeteria and dining rooms and lounges and laundry facilities. Surrounding it in each direction—six on each side in roughly rectangular layout, plus two additional buildings set off at a curious distance, impinging on the territory of another residence facility—are

smaller, four-storey brick structures that look from above a bit like the invading alien bad guys in *Space Invaders* or maybe miniature outlines of the state of Texas and are connected to the central building by hallways or underground tunnels, sort of so that if you look at the whole affair from the sky you might be able to squint your eyes and see an enormous, malformed octopus.

There's a small parking lot between octopus's north and east tentacles and even approaching from the southeast, Nathan can see between the buildings and tell that it's empty. He can also see the yellow police tape blowing in the wind and reflecting the light of the sodium-vapour lamps high on posts around the facility. It's quiet. Most of the room lights and building lights are turned off; the residence is always on complete lock-down until a couple of days before the beginning of the Winter term. Nathan follows the path toward the police tape, which he can tell is set up around the perimeter of the courtyard formed by the placement of the East buildings. He stops long enough to try the door of East 4, which is locked. He ducks under the police tape. There are tire-tracks through the courtyard from a large vehicle. There's a leafless maple tree in the courtyard, under which knick-knacks are already accumulating. Even if the story about Chang isn't true, it's spread regardless: even from a distance he can see photos and stuffed animals and envelopes and flowers, all logged with moisture. Beside the tree, snow has been shovelled from each of the paths that run in loose curves between and through the six buildings, but they're all wet with the early stages of a new blanketing of snow. In one spot, closest to the East 3 building, the wetness—Nathan thinks, but maybe he's fooling himself—seems a bit darker. Nathan's eyes shift from the spot and up to the roof of East 3 and back to the spot and back up to the roof again.

When he was living here, in his first year, he picked up a block of ice and threw it through a third-storey dormitory-room window. He was pissed about something he no longer remembers and he'd been aiming for another room entirely, but when his throw went horribly awry, it was fortunate enough for him that the ice chunk slammed through the glass of the reclusive international student who'd already felt the longing of homesickness and (apparently, though no one could say for sure) packed up his things and just went home. Nathan had bolted for the cafeteria and though the Resident Advisor had heard the noise and grilled the audience of some twenty students who'd seen the entire affair, no one said a word, and it was two or more days before anyone noticed the broken window. By the time the RA went up to the third floor room and unlocked the door with her master key, the ice had melted and the carpet had dried and she left the dorm room shaking her head, entirely baffled not just by how the window broke<sup>9</sup> but also

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<sup>9</sup> Although the solution to a puzzle such as this seemed somewhat obvious to Nathan—and indeed to many of the witnesses of Nathan's misaimed throw when he'd broached the subject later—he was willing to concede that their unique positions, as perpetrators and witnesses respectively, offered them a certain amount of hindsight that the RA was lacking. Or perhaps Nathan just remembered too readily the silly mind-game riddle he'd heard when he was twelve, about the discovery of a dead man, hanging from a noose in a room that's completely empty save for a rather large puddle on the tile floor that's almost but not quite directly beneath the body.

(The solution, for the reader's edification, being that while the lack of a chair or table by which the man might have thrown himself off of to enact the neck-breaking rapid descent consistent with the body's condition *suggests* foul play, what really happened [and yeah, it's a *really* unlikely scenario, but this is a brainteaser-type situation and so we're going to momentarily suspend our disbelief] is that the suicidal man placed the noose around his own neck and jumped off a large brick of ice that then gradually melted—hours or days before authorities ever arrived on the scene.)

by the total absence of any signs to indicate that the room was being or had been lived in for some time: the international student had apparently left without a word, and news of his disappearance filtered up, from the guy who lived next door to the entire third floor and then to the second and first but without anyone ever stopping to consider (or maybe they considered, and withheld it out of spite) that it was possible this piece of information might be of value to a beleaguered and outnumbered RA.

By some weird accident, and though—despite that four months he spent trying at it, faking it, completely in over his head as a Pure Mathematics major before he saw the writing on the wall and switched programs—he thinks himself the furthest thing from being mathematically inclined, a host of equations for falling bodies come immediately and morbidly to Nathan’s mind. He knows that the formula for determining the time it

takes an object to fall is  $t = \sqrt{\frac{2d}{g}}$ , where  $t$  is time and  $d$  is distance and  $g$  is gravity, which—near the surface of the Earth, and that works for his purposes—is  $9.8\text{m/s}^2$  (and don’t ask him how he knows or remembers that either), and if each floor of East 3 is maybe eight or nine feet high (which seems fair), then that’s 36 feet for the height of the building and (because he doesn’t want a conversion error) that’s about 11 meters, and if you plug in the numbers then you get  $2d$  or 22 over  $g$  or 9.8, which is 2.2 something, and the square root of that is... 1.5?

1.5 seconds airborne, which Nathan thinks seems low, but he’s reasonably certain that he followed the steps right (BEDMAS—brackets, exponents, division, multiplication, addition and subtraction; but the mnemonic for order of operations doesn’t say anything about square roots even if it seems obvious enough that the square root sign

√ contains here the entire rest of the equation) and even if he didn't he has no way of checking, so he keeps looking: back and forth from roof to ground. Back and forth from ground to roof. It hardly seems like enough time to become fully aware of what's happening, but maybe relativity comes into play. Nathan has no formula for determining that, just the explanatory anecdote about the astronaut who returns from intergalactic travel younger—or is it older? this is why he was doomed to fail—than the twin he left behind. But still, he stands in the dark and the cold and the quiet trying to think of and mouth phrases like “oh shit” or “oh no” or “what was I thinking” or “I've made a huge mistake” (though none seem to him to really capture the essence of the enormity of a situation such as the one he's recreating) that might conceivably come to mind while falling from a roof and then say them again while trying simultaneously to count off one-and-a-half seconds, except he finds it futile trying to do both at once—and besides, he wonders what person who *really* wants to erase him or herself jumps from a measly four-storey building, given that the only guarantee is grievous bodily harm, not necessarily outright death?—and so he shuts up and bites his lip and looks at and walks toward the items accumulated under the tree. Nathan squats in front of the tree and scans over the items left to pay tribute.

More knowledge or maybe just theoretical conjecture that has stuck with Nathan even if he can't precisely source it: in physics, time is not a sequence of happenings, but a chain that is just there, embedded in space-time. Lives move along that chain, like trains on a track or blood through veins. There is no universal, capital-n *Now*. Events belong to a multitude of Nows, depending on other peoples' motions or positions. Time stretches away into past and future, just as space extends away from any place. This is an

interwoven thing we call space-time, and if it's a concept that you're willing to buy, maybe it's not such a leap to wonder about the possibility of different *kinds* of nows, the possibility of different universes or realities which branch off at every instant of time, meaning that the now you're experiencing and the now your friends are experiencing are a now entirely different from the now you—or some version of you—is encountering in another world.

Nathan imagines how it might have happened: maybe Phillip was drunk and feeling adventurous knowing that the place was empty and he found an unlocked entrance or he made his way in through the custodial tunnels that criss-cross campus. Or maybe that was how he got up there, but not because he was being adventurous, but rather he was depressed and searching for the place where his sulking would take on an air of gravitas. Maybe he wasn't drunk, or wasn't drunk when he got up there; maybe he brought a bottle of vodka with him. Maybe he wasn't alone; maybe the janitor was buddy-buddy with members of the football team because he was an alumnus and so he unlocked the doors to the residence and even led them onto the roof. Maybe the team members were drinking swigs of schnapps from a bottle and having a good time, living dangerously. Maybe it was just the nine who tested positive, commiserating over their fate. Maybe it was slippery on the roof—it's slippery enough everywhere else—and Phillip just outright lost his balance and tumbled over. Maybe one of his teammates playfully pushed him and he lost his balance and fell. Maybe there was a fight and there was a shoving match and he was forcefully sent over the ledge, and the rest of them fled in a panic. Maybe it was a dare or a series of escalating dares that spiralled out of control. Maybe Phillip had read on the Internet the same story that Nathan had awhile ago, about

the Russian man who survived five-storey falls—probably because he was so liquored up that his body didn't tense like it reflexively would have had he been sober and so he just bounced off the concrete limply like a ragdoll—after he decided not once but *twice* to escape his wife's nagging by jumping through their kitchen window, and wanted to prove its veracity. Maybe it was the site of a secret meeting; maybe Phillip was like Deep Throat (the man, not the pornographic movie) and he was exposing corruption that runs right to the core of Canadian Interuniversity Sport. Maybe he was alone and he did jump and maybe it's a lesson about liking something so much or investing yourself in something so much that it entirely consumes who you are and you can't see a way out.

Maybe it isn't Phillip's blood on the sidewalk at all; maybe it was someone else entirely. Maybe it's not even blood. Maybe the police tape has something to do with the annual rash of Christmas break robberies from unsupervised dormitory rooms.

Nathan stands up and looks around and turns back the way he came, heading toward Ring Road and south to University Avenue.

*I like Toothless the Dragon. He is black and black is beside pink in my pretend rainbow.*

Stephen is, as usual, waiting outside when Nathan turns up Lester Street from University Avenue. Stephen's holding a half-rack of cheap beer; his fingers are poked through the cardboard hand-grip slots. He's swaying a bit, back and forth like he's got a song stuck in his head, and he's staring off into space or maybe only watching his breath condense in the cold. He told Nathan, once, that he likes to breathe out in cold weather in short puffs and pretend he's blowing rings of cigarette smoke. Nathan's feet crunch and Stephen turns and nods and raises the box of beer as if it's a peace offering or a birthday gift or maybe a *fuck her, let's get you over this the only way I know how, which is to drink until you can't feel feelings* kind of present and Nathan cringes a bit and mock-shudders even though he knows that in a few hours there's very little chance he won't find himself six beers deep into the case.

Neither offers any real kind of greeting. They head north, trying to walk next to one another, but sometimes the sidewalks have been shovelled too narrowly or not at all and here Nathan falls a step behind to let Stephen lead. The glass bottles in the half-case clink as Stephen moves. There's no traffic and so that and the swish of Stephen's and Nathan's clothes are the dominant sounds.

Stephen looks back at Nathan and says "So?"

Nathan is looking down and watching his footing and not really paying attention and says "What?"

"So what do you think?"

"About what?"

"About the e-mail."

"Oh." Nathan shrugs.

They trudge silently.

Stephen says, “It’s not like it’s the first. I guess it’s to be expected.”

Nathan says, “Umm.”

“You know, there was that guy—in Physics, I think—a couple of years ago who did it pretty much the same way. And then, well, yeah. They don’t report them, like I said, but we *are* the capital.”

“Umm.”

“You know: university suicide capital of Canada?”

“What?”

“Yeah. Waterloo. More student suicides than any other Canadian university.”

“Not true.”

“Sure it is.”

“Nope.”

Stephen withdraws a hand from the half-case and scratches his nose. “Of course it’s true. Haven’t you heard that? Combine a university with a good international reputation and a bunch of overbearing Asian parents with kids in demanding technical programs and the result is a lot of parental disappointment and... umm... what’s it called? *Harakari*? Or *seppuku*? Maybe they’re the same thing.”

“I think that might be racist.”

“Not if it’s true.”

“It’s not.”

“Sure it is.” Stephen snuffles a bit.

Nathan stops walking. Stephen takes a few steps and notices and turns and raises his eyebrow. Nathan says, “It’s not. It’s one of those stupid rumours that you hear wherever you go that gets passed around by gullible people. You know how the library is sinking because the engineers failed to account for the weight of books?”

Stephen says, “Umm.”

Nathan says, “Exactly.”

Nathan explains. He says, “It’s not true. They say the same thing at the University of Toronto. Maybe just to see how many frosh buy it. Same with the whole ‘residences were built by the same architect who designed the Kingston Pen’ thing. And same with the suicide rate thing. They’re made up. They probably don’t even keep records. It would be morbid if they did. Here it’s just an epidemic of *harakari*. At Toronto it’s just regular academic pressure that gets to people. Trent, it’s the overwhelming and depressing concrete architecture. Same with SFU, along with the fact that it’s located halfway up what may as well be Mount Doom. Lakehead has a fall Reading Week because students will apparently otherwise erase themselves in mass numbers at the seemingly sudden self-awareness that they’ll be spending the next four years in Thunder Bay.”

Nathan is quiet for a moment. Then he says, “Actually... Actually, yeah, that last one probably has some validity to it.”

Stephen nods casually at this.

“But you get my point. It’s not like it gets written down somewhere how many kids are offing themselves per year. Not to sound callous, I mean. But yeah. It’s all, you know... It’s all really just made up, probably in some twisted way to create community—

to make people feel like they belong to something special, even if the thing that's special is really kind of perverse.”

“Hmm.” Stephen has started walking again. Nathan follows. Stephen says, “Makes sense. I guess. I mean... Are you sure, though?”

“I'm sure.”

The sidewalk widens and Nathan pulls up next to Stephen. They fall into the same slow, deliberate pace. They don't say a word. Nathan sees Stephen looking across the street and follows his gaze to three university students in parkas and boots standing in a semi-circle on a front porch. Two are leaning some of their weight on snow shovels. The front door of the house is open and a fourth student exits with a large pot of what looks like boiling water. The other three follow as he runs down the steps and down the driveway to the sidewalk. He splashes the scalding water onto the compacted snow on the sidewalk and steps back. One of the students with a shovel jumps forward and begins stabbing at the snow, attempting to chip it away with the blade of the shovel. The one with the pot moves a couple steps and pours more water. The one with the shovel again jumps forward and chips away. This continues until the pot is empty, at which point Stephen and Nathan have passed almost completely and are craning their necks to look backward. The one with the pot goes inside. The others shovel aside the chunks of compacted snow/ice they managed to chip loose.

Nathan wonders what they're doing.

Stephen explains how By-Law Enforcement tends to issue warning tickets for sidewalk snow accumulation at precisely the times when they know no students will be around. And so by the time students get back—from Christmas or Spring Break or

whatever—the snow has already piled up and been packed down so much that it’s impossible to actually shovel it and so the result is house meetings where residents decide either to take their chances on the ticket or come up with some innovative way of shovelling snow that really has no business being called snow anymore. Stephen says that the boiling-water method is probably one of the favourite techniques of the latter group, even though it ironically probably results in a sidewalk that’s covered in black ice and therefore probably less safe than if they’d just left the well-trodden snow as it had been.

Nathan says, “Oh.” He says, “That’s stupid.”

Stephen shrugs.

They turn east on Columbia. Nathan asks whether this is a party they’re going to or a get-together or what.

Stephen says he’s not sure. He says he’s not sure where the line between ‘gathering’ and ‘party’ is drawn.

Nathan says he doesn’t want to go if it’s a party.

Stephen asks, “Well why didn’t you say something before?”

Nathan shrugs.

Stephen asks if Nathan wants to turn around and go back.

Nathan says, “No.” He says, “That’s alright,” but he makes no effort disguising the fact that when he says no he means more or less the precise opposite.

Stephen shakes his head. He says, “We can turn around. It’s really not a big deal,” but he makes no effort disguising the fact that when he says so what he means is that he’s annoyed and that for him it is a big deal.

Nathan says, “No,” and this time he puts a bit more effort into the lie.

Stephen asks why he doesn't want to go if it's a party.

Nathan says that he doesn't want to be around a bunch of people.

Stephen asks why.

Nathan says that they're all going to ask about Jill.

Stephen says that if it's a party, aren't there going to be a lot of strangers who won't know and won't, therefore, ask.

Nathan says he guesses so. He says that he's still worried about people asking.

Stephen says he's pretty sure most of them know.

Nathan asks, "Most of who?"

Stephen says, "You know. Heather. The people who I figure might show up at Heather's."

Nathan says, "Oh." He says, "Who told them?"

Stephen says, "I did."

Nathan says, "Oh."

A Grand River Transit bus passes them. It's one of the ones that runs on natural gas. Nathan isn't really watching, but he assumes that it's the 7C, which loops between Conestoga Mall and the bus depot. A few other cars roar past as well. They send up slurries of brown, wet snow as they chug up the street's gentle slope.

Stephen says, "Sorry."

Nathan says, "What?"

Stephen says, "Sorry. For telling them."

Nathan says, "No."

Stephen says, "I should have asked you."

Nathan says, “No.”

Stephen says, “I should have let you do it. Or made you do it. Like it’d be therapeutic or something, maybe.”

Nathan says, “I don’t think so.”

Stephen coughs and snuffles. Nathan coughs and snuffles. He thinks about how when your nose is stuffed up and you snuffle back really hard to try and clear your sinuses you can taste the snot or phlegm or whatever it is in the back of your throat, and he thinks about how gross that is. He almost says so. But he doesn’t.

Nathan says, “She e-mailed me.”

Stephen says “Who?” Then he says, “What’d she say?”

Nathan says, “Never mind.”

Stephen says, “No, seriously.”

Nathan says, “Never mind.”

They reach Albert Street and turn north. Stephen pauses to rebalance the case of beer. He stretches and cracks the knuckles on each hand. He looks at Nathan like he’s going to ask Nathan to carry the beer. He opens his mouth. He closes it. His features are arranged as if to say *you’re lucky you’re heartbroken, or I’d make you carry this thing the rest of the way*. Nathan waits. Stephen starts walking again and Nathan follows. Heather lives past the IBM office and the steel scrap yard and the shopping plaza that are for some reason located right in a row, one after the other after the other.

Stephen says, “Did you know Fox almost cancelled *the Simpsons* after the very first episode came back from the Korean animators almost completely unsalvageable?”

Nathan says, “I did not know that.”

Stephen says, “Yup. You ever notice how Smithers is black in some of the first episodes?”

Nathan says, “I did notice that.”

Stephen says, “That’s why.”

Nathan says, “Oh.”

Stephen says, “Apparently, if one more episode came back from the animators with that many mistakes, they were just going to scrap the whole show.”

Nathan says, “Interesting.”

Stephen says, “I thought so. Can you imagine a world without *the Simpsons*?”

Nathan says, “I can’t.” Then he pauses and he says, “What would we do without *Simpsons* references? How would we fill all those awkward silences? We’d have to actually develop legitimate personalities, wouldn’t we?”

They walk in silence for a few moments. Nathan wishes—again, not for the first time—that he’d worn or even owned a more appropriate pair of shoes. He wiggles his toes.

Stephen says, “Serious question.”

Nathan says, “Serious answer.”

Stephen says, “Do you ever worry that you’re not so much *you* as you are just an accumulation of facts and songs and movies and TV shows?”

Nathan hesitates. He says, “The French word for a pomegranate is ‘grenade’, which explains why the pomegranate syrup they use at bars and in Shirley Temples is called grenadine. The naming convention allegedly arises from the fact that grenades (meaning hand grenades) bear some resemblance to the fruit.”

Stephen says, “No. I’m serious. Like, are you ever afraid that your identity is completely subsumed. Like that Wikipedia articles or liking some band have become a substitute for having a genuine, honest-to-god personality?”

Nathan says, “The spiciness—or actually ‘piquancy’ is the more accurate term, scientifically—of peppers is measured on the Scoville scale, which refers to how much of a water/sugar solution has to be added to the peppers before the heat is too diluted to taste. For example, green and red peppers are a zero because they have no spice. Jalapenos are approximately 3,000, depending on their ripeness and size and where they were grown. Pure capsaicin (which is the chemical that makes hot peppers hot—or, again, to be more accurate, the chemical that tricks our bodies into thinking that the hot peppers are hot) is 16 million Scoville units. The most piquant naturally occurring pepper in the world is the Bhut Jolokia or Naga Jolokia, which is about 1 million Scoville units. Pepper Spray, by comparison, rates about 5 million.”

Stephen says, “See? You can’t even give me a sincere answer. You’ve filled yourself up with things and there’s nothing left for, you know, *you*. Doesn’t that worry you?”

“The Schmidt Sting Pain Index is a scientific way of measuring the intensity of insect stings. It goes from 1 to 4+, and the gentleman after whom it was named—Justin O. Schmidt—essentially allowed himself to be stung by every insect he could think of in order to come up with it. The descriptions of what each level of sting feels like are bizarrely, almost synesthesiacally intense. A 2.0 sting by a bald-faced hornet, for example, is characterized as ‘rich, hearty, slightly crunchy. Similar to getting your hand mashed in a revolving door.’ Another 2.0 sting, by a yellowjacket, is described as ‘hot

and smoky, almost irreverent. Imagine W. C. Fields extinguishing a cigar on your tongue.””

Stephen smiles and shakes his head. He says, “This is exactly what I’m talking about.”

“The Bristol Stool Scale is a medical aid designed to classify the form of human feces into seven—”

Stephen interrupts, “I get it. Enough.”

They walk the rest of the way in near silence. Nathan opens and closes his mouth a few times during the short walk, as if there’s something he wants to say.

Nathan wants to say yes, that yes, actually, it’s something he’s thought about. But he doesn’t say it. He keeps opening and closing his mouth and watching his foot land with every step he takes.

Here’s how he would say ‘yes’ in a number of languages. In French—oui. In Japanese—hai. In Arabic—na’am. In English—yes, or yeah, or uh-huh or yup. In Russian—da. In Spanish—si. In Italian—also si. In German and Dutch and Danish and Norwegian—ja.

Heather’s house—inside and out—is like an embodied stereotype about student living, with the lone sacrifice to practical utility being that the front porch light is actually functional. The place is a one-storey yellow-brick house with an enormous front window looking into the living room. There’s a three step front porch, and the cement is cracked and gaping. Half of the porch appears to be falling away from the house. The other half is reserved for a couch that’s sitting directly in the elements. It’s burgundy with snowflakes or maybe dandruff or maybe expectant head lice speckled over it and it smells rank and

one of the cushions is missing and you can tell without touching the thing that it's a little soggy. As they walk up the driveway, Nathan asks whether anyone actually sits on it. Stephen shrugs and says sometimes when it dries out—which isn't all that often, because there's a reason they call it Waterloo—Heather lays a blanket on it and sits on the blanket with a couple of their roommates, listening to a portable stereo.

He says that's not even the worst part about the place. Nathan says, "You don't have to tell me," because he's been here before and he's seen Heather's roommate's beard hair clogging the sink drain and the damp, terribly insulated windows and the washing machine and dryer wedged in a narrow hallway so the laundry room could fit another tenant and the cheap, hollow, and not-at-all stable wall that the landlord put up himself in the middle of what had once been a decent-sized living room to cram in yet another tenant like a sardine in a tin can. There's a screen door that won't latch and it flaps, hanging slightly off the door frame, although calling it a screen door raises questions about whether such a name is appropriate given a lack of any screen mesh. It's more of a duct tape door. Nathan and Stephen climb up the porch steps and they knock on the actual front door, which is stained wood and at least sort of heavy to keep the interior of the house marginally warm.

Stephen knocks and someone says, "Come in," and Stephen and Nathan enter the living room and close the door quickly behind them. Nathan is quietly thankful that it's not much of a party. He kicks off his shoes and he takes off his coat and tosses it over a chair. Heather's sitting on the sectional couch with Chris and Rebecca and a couple of her roommates, whom Nathan recognizes by sight but not by name. They're watching

hockey. There are a few beers, full and half-full and empty on the coffee table, along with a bag of chips. It looks like no one was saying much until Nathan and Stephen got here.

Heather says, "Hi."

Nathan says, "Hi."

Stephen says, "Hi."

Chris and Rebecca say hi. The two roommates say hi. Stephen puts down the half-case of beer and plops himself into the chair that Nathan threw his coat over.

Heather says, "How are you? How was Christmas?"

Nathan shrugs. Stephen says, "He got a wafflemaker."

Rebecca says, "Neat."

Nathan says he guesses so. He realizes he's the only one standing. He looks around the room. He keeps standing.

He says, "I still feel a little hung-over."

Chris says, "Out last night with the miss—" and then he stops himself and cringes and everyone looks at him.

Nathan says "Erm..."

Nathan is no longer thankful that it's not much of a party.

Chris says, "Sorry."

Nathan says, "Never mind."

Rebecca says, "Are you OK?"

Nathan says, "Never mind."

Everyone is really quiet. Nathan thinks that they're all looking at him. He can't decide whether to look at each in turn or to stare off into space or maybe stare at his feet.

He stares at his feet. On television, one team scores. Someone claps and says, “Alright. That’s more like it!”

Nathan asks if anyone wants a beer or anything. Stephen has already pulled one from the case and twisted off the cap. He’s sitting sideways in the chair and his legs are dangling over one of the armrests. No one says anything, so Nathan grabs Stephen’s case and carries it into the kitchen. He opens the fridge door and looks inside and pushes around cartons of restaurant leftovers and bags of fruit that—if they haven’t already expired—look maybe like they have a day or two left at most, and he finds some space and slides the case of beer in the fridge. He tests the door to make sure it closes. It does, when he uses a little bit of force. Satisfied, he opens the fridge again and pulls out one of the beers. He closes the door again. He uses his shirt to twist off the beer bottle cap because he’s never worked a day of manual labour in his life and his hands are soft and weak. The beer hisses as Nathan unseals it. He watches a layer of foam rising up the bottleneck.

He tosses the bottle cap onto the kitchen countertop. He looks at the bottle. He cringes. He takes a sip. He swallows. He shudders. He takes another sip. He shudders again, but a little less this time. He moves his tongue around his mouth, trying to stimulate saliva production. He puts down the beer bottle and he picks it up and he puts it down again. He looks around the kitchen. There’s a window behind the kitchen sink that looks out on the backyard and Nathan walks to it and rests his hands on the edge of the sink and tries to see outside, but it’s dark out there and light inside and so all he sees is a faint reflection of himself and the walls and the fridge and the cupboards behind him. He keeps staring out anyway. He’s not sure how much time passes.

He sees Heather in the window reflection, entering the kitchen and tentatively walking up behind him. She's carrying a beer. She moves close to him. Then she takes a step backward. Then forward and then backward again. If Nathan were looking at her feet, he might picture the fancy footwork of a flyweight boxer. He isn't, though, so he doesn't. She seems to settle a step back. She asks, "What are you doing?"

He doesn't turn around. He says, "Staring out the window."

She says, "Why?"

He shrugs. He says, "I don't know. It seems like the thing to do."

She says, "And why is that?"

He says, "Situations like this. I feel." He pauses. He says, "I see it in TV shows and movies. They're always doing it in TV shows and movies."

She says, "Well... yeah. I guess they do. But isn't it just visual shorthand for a character who's thinking really deeply about something?"

He shrugs again.

She says, "What are you thinking about, then?"

He says, "About how I'm staring out a window."

She says, "Umm."

He continues. "About what I should be thinking about while I'm staring out a window. About how staring out a window seems to solve television problems but not real life problems. Maybe about how I look while I'm looking out a window and how maybe people will see me and understand what I'm thinking, even though I'm not thinking about what it is they think I'm thinking about at all. About how maybe if I fake it I'll actually have a real answer for you."

She says, “Oh.”

He watches as Heather puts down her beer and she takes a step forward and she wraps her arms around him. She presses her face into his hair and the back of his neck. She holds herself like that. Nathan tenses. He relaxes. He studies his reaction in the reflection in the window.

He says, “What is this? What are you? I—”

Her voice is muffled by his body. She says, “It’s a hug.”

He says, “Oh.”

He says, “It feels OK.”

She says, “Just OK?”

He says, “No. It’s good.”

She says, “I’m glad.”

They’re like that for awhile—him leaning against the counter, her leaning against him with her arms draped around his midsection. She lifts her head and they make eye contact in the window.

He can hear bits of conversation, unattached to voices and stripped of context, coming from the living room.

“—can see where he’s coming from if—”

“—cherry-flavoured bourbon. It’s delicious.”

“Seems fair.”

“—just want to scream and tell him to—”

“Which is when he—”

“—No. It was a bullshit call—”

And then he hears her, Heather, saying “Follow me” as she pulls away but takes his hand and begins to lead him (he snatches his beer up from the counter as they move and takes a swig, forgetting the nausea)—not back to the living room, but somewhere else—and he’s afraid because he thinks he knows what’s coming and he doesn’t actually have any interest (like none, whatsoever, and not because, it occurs to him, he wants something else instead that he can’t have, but just *because*: completely on its own terms) in what he thinks he knows is coming, but he also knows that he doesn’t know what to say or do to get out of what he thinks he knows is coming. He knows, too, that even if he did, he’s in no condition mentally to trust himself to say or do whatever it is he’d have to say or do to get out of what he thinks he knows is coming. And so when she leads him to her bedroom where the lights are off and tells him to sit down on her bed (which he does, crossing his legs with his beer resting on his crotch, leaning against the wall) he’s expecting the worst—except then she sits herself down at her desk and makes a few mouse gestures and clicks a few buttons and reaches for the volume knob on her speakers. She spins in her desk chair and faces him.

He says, “Uhh.”

She smiles. But it’s not the sexual come-on smile he was expecting, not that he’s ever been good at identifying that. Maybe he’s getting better.

He recognizes the song. He nods his head in time with the music.

He says, “This is a good song.”

She says, “I know.”

He says, “This is nice.”

She says, “I know.”

She plays another song and then another. He keeps listening. He sips his beer and when it's empty she gets up and gets him another one. And when she comes back she sits back at the desk chair and keeps smiling. He doesn't remember what songs she's already played. He doesn't make any requests. When they've been there for awhile the others wander by—from the living room they turn left down the hallway—and they poke their heads in the room and then they come in the room and they sit down. Stephen props a pillow against the wall and sits on Heather's bed next to Nathan. Chris and Rebecca sit cross-legged on the floor. One of Heather's roommates leans with his arms crossed and his shoulder against the door frame. They're all smiling. They're like that for hours. Someone gets up, grabs a round of beers, comes back. Distributes them silently. Chris looks like he's considering rolling and lighting a joint but he refrains. Someone gets up and goes to the bathroom. Someone else follows soon after. There's another song and another. Nathan isn't even sure whether he actually likes some of them. But he's still smiling.

Nathan enjoys himself.

The beer runs out.

Heather continues to cycle through the playlist.

Someone yawns.

Nathan yawns.

They decide, without a word, really, that maybe it's time to call it a night. They check their watches or the displays on their cell phones and they raise their eyebrows. Nathan's ass is sore. One of his legs has fallen asleep. He shakes it out. He's grinning.

Stephen pats him on the back and Chris does the same and Heather gives him another hug and Nathan and Stephen grab their things. They leave.

They walk home mostly in quiet, but there's not much that Nathan feels the need to say. He whistles—or, well, he can't whistle, so really he just hums—a song that's popped into his head. It's by Sloan. It's called "Coax Me." Stephen recognizes it. He's a bit better at whistling. He joins in. Nathan doesn't notice the cold, or the passing cars, or street signs or the snow filling his shoes.

Eventually, Stephen stops whistling. He looks at Nathan. He says, "You seem to be in a better mood."

Nathan pauses. He thinks about this. He says, "Sort of. I guess."

Stephen says, "Epiphany?"

Nathan says, "No such thing."

Stephen says, "Oh."

Nathan says, "Just a fictional construct. People don't change."

Stephen says, "Oh."

Nathan says, "But."

Stephen says, "What?"

Nathan says, "But maybe."

They reach Stephen's place on Lester. They shake hands. Nathan walks on home along the same route he took the night before. He feels considerably soberer. He makes it home without incident. He pulls the keys from his pocket. He unlocks the outer entrance and goes downstairs and then he unlocks his apartment door. He throws his keys on the counter. He tosses his coat onto a chair. He kicks off his shoes.

He sees the box of her things.

He says, “Fuck.”

He paces his kitchen, stepping carefully over the box on every pass.

Nathan enters the living room and sits down in front of his computer. He opens a browser and navigates to Gmail and logs in and looks at his e-mail inbox. He clicks on her message. He clicks reply.

He stands up and he walks to the bathroom and he looks at himself in the mirror. He’s trying to decide whether he’s drunk or not and he knows that the best way to tell is to watch himself in the mirror.

He knows that it’s only when he’s a little drunk that he looks into a mirror and thinks, *Hey—I’m not a bad looking guy*. He knows he’s moderately drunk when he thinks, *In fact, I’m actually pretty handsome*. He knows he’s really drunk when he says this out loud.

Nathan wants to be sober. He is looking at himself now. He doesn’t feel any more or less attractive than normal. He pulls down an eyelid with his forefinger and looks at his pupil. It appears to be properly dilated. He doesn’t have any cravings for pizza or shawarma or a pita or breakfast food. He decides he is sober. He decides that that’s a good thing.

He returns to the computer. He looks at the big white space where he’s supposed to enter his text.

He writes “Hey.” He erases it.

He writes “Hello,” He erases it.

He writes, “Jill,” and thinks maybe that’s alright, but then he erases it and goes back to “Hey,” which he thinks conveys a certain kind of informality or casualness that he doesn’t feel but he’s trying to achieve anyway.

He strikes the enter key a couple times. He starts typing. He writes, “Did you know that *The Simpsons* was almost cancelled in its very first season? Apparently the first episode produced came back so poorly animated—it was all but unsalvageable, they had to redo all but like 30% of the original animation—that Fox nearly pulled the plug. They said that if the next episode came back as bad, they were going to cut their losses. The next episode was enough of an improvement that the show ended up getting the green-light. Even though, now that I think about it, the animation was still pretty atrocious for pretty much the entirety of the first two seasons—Smithers was black; Wiggum was black; the Simpson family themselves were all over the map. But it was good enough, anyway.

“But so, yeah. I know, you never even really liked *The Simpsons*, did you? Which seemed weird to me. I guess my point is, can you imagine a world without *The Simpsons*? A world where people would have to have actual conversations and actual personalities and make actual human connections instead of reciting their favourite episodes verbatim (mine, FYI: ‘Flaming Moe’s’)? I...”

Nathan pauses and reads back what he’s written.

He says, “Fuck.” He shakes his head; he deletes it all, leaving only the “Hey.”

There’s the cursor, blinking.

He tries again. He writes, “I remember reading something somewhere. It must have been for school. Actually, I don’t care where it came from. I don’t know if it was

some full-formed theory of something or maybe just a tossed off observation, but what it basically said (or what I remember it as saying) is that there's a kind of tragedy inherent in the fact that it's precisely when we're at our most intimate or emotionally vulnerable that we're ultimately at our most clichéd. Like, for example, love is I guess this really massive, overwhelming and all-consuming and wondrous thing. But when it comes to describing it, all you've got is the word love, which is just tied up in so many stupid and hackneyed and clichéd images: hearts and flowers and a creepy naked baby with a bow and arrow. And so somehow you end up associating these enormous concepts with these ridiculous insignificant things, and then you never stop to think about it because it's easier to stick to the surface level and never try to make some deeper connection."

Nathan re-reads this paragraph. He starts to delete but stops. He re-types the deleted words. He adds, in another paragraph. "I don't know what I'm getting at. Is it weird that I would write that to you?"

He hits enter again. He thinks for a moment. He types, "I don't blame you."

He adds, "I'm not alright. I'm working on it, though. I will be."

He writes some other things.

He appends his name to the end of the e-mail. He clicks send. He doesn't immediately regret it. He powers on his stereo and puts in a disc and hits play.

He enters his kitchen. He steps over the box on the way to the sink. He pours himself a glass of water.

**Nathan Wilder**

Yes.

about a minute ago • Like • Comment

*Lately, I listen to the song “Sun In an Empty Room” by the Weakerthans whenever I'm stressed out. Obviously, this makes me a shameless hipster. But, since you asked, I guess I can use my over-priced Psychology degree to read more into it than that. The song is, superficially speaking, about moving out (and moving on). I started putting it on replay after I recently moved to a new town where I don't know anyone, can't find anything, and everything (at least for now) sucks. The connection there is pretty obvious. But, if I extend it in a grasping reach for deeply rooted personal truth, I guess it says more about me than I'd like to admit. The upbeat tempo of the song, matched with the apathetic-to-depressing lyrics, matches my mixed feelings about change. I always want to try new things and go new places—and often do—but I always go through an intense missing of the familiar immediately after. I've often wondered, then, if this seeming desire to be adventurous is just part of a self-constructed false view of myself as a modern, strong, independent woman who can make it on her own (thank you very much) and that really, I just want to stay at home, where it's safe, and be taken care of; maybe I'm just acting tough. So, maybe the song says this about me—that part of me wants to risk trying new things and that part of me doesn't. I don't think this is a unique experience—so maybe other people who like the song like it for the same reason. Or, maybe “I've felt around for far too much,” and this is complete bullshit.*

*Maybe it's just a good song.*

## Artist's Statement

### On the Difference between What You Like and What You're Like

As of March 16, 2011, my iTunes library contains 22,092 songs, the most frequently played (109 times) of which is Said the Whale's "Goodnight Moon." Coming in second, with a mere 107 plays, is "1901" by French alternative rock band Phoenix. I can only assume that I volunteer information such as this (here in the context of this artist's statement, but elsewhere as well, with startling frequency in myriad social settings) out of the belief that it says something about me as a person. Or perhaps that it says something about me as a person that actually describing myself traditionally—single, white, twenty-something English graduate student from a middle-class background—does not quite capture. Or perhaps there is a third alternative: that it says something not about me, but about the version of myself I put forth to the world on a day-to-day basis or the version of myself I would like to put forth. These nebulous observations about my own enthusiastic and yet frequently ambivalent relationship with artifacts of popular culture are in some sense at the core of my creative thesis, *Lists Of All You Left Behind*. But it is in fact a much more explicit observation that became the genesis for my novella—a seemingly throwaway remark made by popular culture essayist Chuck Klosterman in 2006.

*Now Playing: Elvis Costello – "You Belong To Me"*

In the opening paragraphs of an otherwise immaterial magazine piece, Klosterman makes an interesting point about the significance of popular culture in relation to those who consume it. He argues that only those uninvested in a cultural artifact can ever actually understand that artifact in any kind of broader context. More

importantly, he argues that the reason those invested in culture misunderstand it is that they are less interested in an artifact proper than in what that artifact says about themselves: if you ask a fan of a band or television show why that band or television show is important, Klosterman writes, “[h]e will tell you everything that doesn’t matter to anyone who isn’t him. He will describe paradoxical details and share deeply personal anecdotes, and it will all be autobiography; *he will simply be explaining who he is by discussing something completely unrelated to his life*” (“Three Things,” emphasis added).

*Lists Of All You Left Behind* takes this observation as a starting point in telling the story of a university student whose attempts to come to terms with the end of a relationship are mediated by his near-totalizing engagement with relics of popular culture. The novella details through both narrative and ‘artifacts’—emails, Amazon.ca order confirmations, text messages—the day-to-day minutiae of the life of an average (if somewhat socially underdeveloped and pop-culture obsessed) university student. Over the course of the work, which looks back through the course of an entire life but focuses roughly on a two week span, the central character Nathan undergoes a number of broadly typical ‘life’ experiences: he hangs out, he exchanges emails and text messages with friends, he watches television and listens to music, he experiences (in excruciatingly self-conscious detail) the end of a relationship.

*Now Playing: Elbow – “Grounds For Divorce”*

Each experience, however, is represented to some extent through the lens of Nathan’s pre-occupation with popular culture—a pre-occupation that mediates his understanding of the world around him. He understands relationships in light of song lyrics; he has labyrinthine conversations about the minutiae of obscure television

programs; he recites pointless and arbitrary trivia facts in lieu of processing his lived experience of the world. He couches direct feeling and emotional experiences, in other words, almost exclusively in terms of his encounters with popular culture. The novel's narrative progression, then, attempts to detail Nathan's growth toward an experience of the world that—while remaining open to the possibility that mass culture may still assist us in constructing *some* kind of valid contemporary meaning—is authentic and direct. Nathan moves, or at least begins the early steps of such a movement, from expressing feeling through song lyrics to expressing feeling through his own feeling—with the learned ability to differentiate his feelings critically from the song lyrics he would have cited. He discovers that he is not the sum of his tastes; that there isn't necessarily a one-to-one overlap between what he likes and who he is.

*Now Playing: The Weakerthans – “Time's Arrow”*

Nathan's epiphany (if we may use a word such as epiphany without self-conscious air-quotes) is not unlike the realization of the character Rob in Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity*, when he ultimately discovers that “it's not what you like but what you're like that's important” (280)—though it comes with the seemingly paradoxical caveat that, while our taste is not the be-all and end-all of who we are, it is important. There is an interdependent, two-way relationship between what we consume and who we are; culture both constructs our subjectivity in the world *and* reflects it. *Now Playing: Bright Eyes – “Light Pollution”* My thesis attempts to navigate this difficult bind by not coming down too readily on either side. I'd suggest contemporary popular culture is neither the evil proposed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their 1944 polemical essay “The Culture Industry as Mass Deception,” nor a completely innocuous,

completely invisible ‘thing’ (for lack of a better term). Television, for example, may not exude pure deception, but it certainly isn’t something that should be regarded “the way Reagan’s lame F.C.C. chairman Mark Fowler professed to see it in 1981, as ‘just another appliance, a toaster with pictures’” (Wallace “*E Unibus*” 27).

*Now Playing: Frightened Rabbit – “Good Arms Vs. Bad Arms”*

The truth lies somewhere in between: Nathan deflects serious lines of questioning by reflexively parroting trivia (‘trivia’ being notable as the root of the word ‘trivial’) that he’s absorbed from film or music or read online. He avoids a frank discussion of his life situation by examining—in near-obsessive detail—the continuity of little-watched television series. But by the same token, Nathan’s discussion of television continuity leads him to consider, momentarily, his place in the world: “Nathan is sucking on the inside of his cheek and staring distantly out the large front-window. Outside in the parking lot the snow is falling more heavily or maybe it’s just a trick the streetlights are playing on his eyes.” Nathan’s grandfather offers a glimpse of what he’s feeling when he “rest[s] his head back on his pillow and close[s] his eyes and whistle[s] tunefully the melody of ‘Ring of Fire’ or ‘I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.’” And it is through an act of collective consumption—listening to music in Heather’s bedroom—that Nathan really begins to appreciate that he is (eventually) going to be alright. *Now Playing: Metric – “Stadium Love”* In an essay titled “Elvis Costello as Cultural Icon and Cultural Critic,” critic Pamela Thurschwell explains what it is precisely that is going on in *High Fidelity*, and the parallel to my own thesis is worth acknowledging. She writes that:

As [Elvis] Costello puts it, ‘There’s a second-hand emotion on a battered forty-five.’ Emotions are second-hand because we must learn them, and the repetition

of the experience of the commodity actually functions to create subjectivity. Rob [in *High Fidelity*] maintains that music is life in a direct way: ‘Everyone knows *Al Green Explores Your Mind* is as serious as life gets.’ *High Fidelity* ironizes statements such as this yet never relinquishes their truth value. At the end of the novel, although Rob has acceded to new views on human relationships, one is by no means meant to take Al Green less seriously. (297)

In other words, the problem—in both *High Fidelity* and my own thesis—is a pathology in which “lives are lived out through, and only through, these cultural artifacts” (Thurschwell 299). The solution is not necessarily a radical reappraisal of our relationship with culture, but rather only a bit of perspective. It may be the case that, as Nathan realizes, “most popular love songs through history have, at root, sounded more or less the same, lyrically,” but that doesn’t mean they can’t have some kind of emotive effect—especially given that the emotions upon which these songs play, and which Nathan is feeling, are ultimately extraordinarily difficult to express on their own terms. Thurschwell may even be correct when she describes them as “second-hand because we must learn them,” and if this is the case, it is not unreasonable to look to art (be it high or low, popular or elite) as a guide for understanding them. Popular music (or popular cinema or popular television) isn’t, to reiterate, intrinsically wicked. Not by a long shot.

“Treating television as evil,” as David Foster Wallace argues in his essay “*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*,” “is just as reductive and silly as treating it like a toaster w/ pictures” (37). *Now Playing: Andrew Bird – “Not A Robot, But A Ghost”* Taking television as an example here, the problem becomes when we take the medium’s role as a guide entirely too far, ignoring the extent to which it is artfully and artificially

constructed. Wallace acknowledges that “television does a lot of our predatory human research for us... It’s an incredible gauge of the generic. If we want to know what American normality is—i.e. what Americans want to regard as normal—we can trust television” (22). Yet there’s a critical caveat here for Wallace:

...the people we’re watching through TV’s framed-glass screen are not really ignorant of the fact that somebody is watching them. In fact a whole *lot* of somebodies. In fact the people on television know that it is by virtue of this truly huge crowd... that they are on the screen engaging in broad non-mundane gestures at all. Television does not afford true espial because television is performance, spectacle, which by definition requires watchers... We’re just viewers. (23)

There is a fine balancing act at work here, in which the viewer can find or develop some sort of personal meaning or identity so long as he or she is aware of the extent to which what he or she is perceiving is constructed by a medium whose primary interest is—let us just acknowledge that this is the case—our continued consumption of it. To quote Wallace again:

...to the extent one begins to view pseudo-relationships with Bud Bundy or Jane Pauley<sup>[1]</sup> as acceptable alternatives to relationships with real people, one will have commensurately less conscious incentive even to try to connect with real 3-D persons, connections that seem pretty important to basic mental health. (38-9)

Nathan’s core problem, to some degree, is that mass media *overconsumption* has changed him in a subtle way. He has become, in Wallace’s words “more spectatorial, self-

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace’s essay was originally published in 1993 in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, so one can forgive the datedness of his particular choice of pop culture referents.

conscious... We spend enough time watching, pretty soon we start watching ourselves watching. Pretty soon we start to ‘feel’ ourselves feeling, yearn to experience ‘experiences’” (34).

Nathan is unable at times to escape a self-conscious loop of viewership. His dialogue with Stephen about television continuity constantly turns backward in upon itself to refocus on the lexis of himself as viewer. When he looks out Heather’s kitchen window “all he sees is a faint reflection of himself and the walls and the fridge and the cupboards behind him.” The reflection of himself *watching* himself is key. When Heather enters the room, he views the action through the lens of the reflection; when she asks what he is doing, he explains himself—or attempts to explain himself—in the context of a television viewer. *Now Playing: Cake – “Short Skirt/Long Jacket”* Though he remains unaware of exactly why he is doing what he is doing, he remains self-conscious of how he is being perceived, and seems to hope that someone viewing him will understand the significance of his distant gaze: that he is deep in thought (even if the only thought he actually is deep in is “[a]bout how [he’s] staring out a window”).

*Now Playing: The New Pornographers – “Challengers”*

The difficulty here is that it’s entirely too easy—tempting, even—to take Wallace’s argument too far and end up sounding like an anti-popular culture ideologue. It is too easy to accept the premise that “it’s not paranoid or hysterical to acknowledge the premise that television in enormous doses affects people’s values and self-perception in deep ways” (“*E Unibus*” 53) and conclude that television must therefore be an unredeemable evil. Easy, but incorrect. There is a long history of anti-mass media, anti-popular culture sentiment that isn’t worth parsing here in great detail. It is perhaps worth

glossing over one or two such arguments if only to demonstrate the kind of thinking to which I am opposed. An excellent example can be found in Franco Ferrarotti's *The End of Conversation* (subtitled *The Impact of Mass Media on Modern Society*), filled as it is with exactly the kind of frothing, hyperbolic, one-sided, anti-television and anti-popular culture sentiment my novella attempts to avoid. Ferrarotti argues that "television has deprived us already of participation by the human in the human. Conversation is dying... With the exception of sight, we are probably losing our senses through simple atrophy" (5). He adds elsewhere that:

The thread of the direct interpersonal tale has been snapped. And it was precisely the queen of the mass media, the ever-present television, which broke it, with its great cyclopean eye open day and night, the brand-new totem watching over the now dumb house where the dialogue has been extinguished, absorbed and replaced by its chattering repetitious voraciousness. (32)

The remarkable thing here is that Ferrarotti may have a point, at least with regard to the loss of the 'thread of the direct interpersonal tale'—*Lists Of All You Left Behind* is narrated indirectly in parts, scattering narrative through multiple forms of new media and old, in an attempt to capture the multi-modal nature of contemporary North American culture.<sup>2</sup> It is just that the point is both so exaggerated and buried so deeply beneath lethal quantities of venom and vitriol that it is difficult to take seriously.

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<sup>2</sup> An aesthetic that owes deeply to David Shields' 2010 manifesto *Reality Hunger*, in which he argues that—in part because the novel's origin "lies in its pretense of actuality" (13)—the contemporary novel should embody an aesthetic of "deliberate unartiness: 'raw' material,... randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; artistic risk,... reader/viewer participation... self-reflexivity" (5). For Shields,

*Now Playing: David Bowie – “Space Oddity”*

One may identify myriad flaws in Ferrarotti’s argument, even at a casual glance. For example, I would argue that it is not that conversation is dying *per se*, it is that direct conversation is being replaced by something else entirely.<sup>3</sup> We may return to Wallace, who describes a familiar experience for young Americans: “What most of the people I know do is they all sit and face the same direction and stare at the same thing and then structure commercial-length conversations around the sorts of questions that myopic car-crash witnesses might ask each other—‘Did you just see what I saw?’” (“*E Unibus*” 44). And this is to say nothing about the rise of email and instant messaging and text messaging in the years since Wallace penned this particular essay. These are forms that enable conversation. Different *kinds* of conversation, but conversation all the same.

A somewhat fairer (though still critical) assessment of television’s shortcomings might be found in the recent BBC Two series *How TV Ruined Your Life*—a program in which, each week, host Charlie Brooker discusses one aspect in which television has negatively affected contemporary life (for example, in the way that it has shaped our perceptions of the concept of ‘love’). Brooker has almost nothing good to say about television, but his critique is undercut almost entirely *by the fact that he is critiquing television for the purposes of a television program*—and Brooker himself seems keenly aware of this fact, given the program’s rapid-cut editing, rather remarkable visuals, and

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the “shards of the culture itself now form a kind of language that... everyone knows how to speak” (96); my thesis’s use of myriad media forms is an attempt to play with (though not necessarily to reassemble) these shards. *Now Playing: Ted Leo and the Pharmacists – “Bottled In Cork”*

<sup>3</sup> Something different, and perhaps not altogether untroubling, but something that is still conversation.

the extraordinary quick wit of the writing. The irony of a television program about how bad television is for people, though, allows for a certain amount of play. It allows the viewer to understand, explicitly, the point I have tried to make in my novella and in this accompanying essay: that television (or popular music, or cinema, or...) is not some monolithic good or bad thing, and that the onus—as marginalized a figure as he or she may be in late capitalism—may fall ultimately on the audience-member to be critical in his or her consumptive habits.<sup>4</sup>

*Now Playing: Clipse – “When The Last Time”*

The centrality of the consumer provides a much more productive way to look at the relationship that Nathan and the novella’s other characters have with mass media (and it is one that echoes Klosterman’s opening salvo about the curiously personal nature of popular culture): active audience theories in cultural studies assume that—as Kevin Williams explains it—“meaning is not solely inscribed in the messages produced by the media but is the outcome of the interaction between the audience and the text” (191). In particular, active audience theories attempt to understand “how audiences actively engage

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<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, it needs to be said that when the author of this essay first encountered *How TV Ruined Your Life*, he was immediately taken by it—to the extent that he watched five episodes back-to-back (something that—as the author—he would expect the character of Nathan might have done himself). This behaviour is probably *not* an example of being a critical consumer. Wallace might have been particularly critical here, arguing as he does that “irony tyrannizes us” in part because the “ironist is *impossible to pin down*” (“*E Unibus*” 67, emphasis in original). He argues elsewhere that “to the extent that TV can flatter [the viewer] about ‘seeing through’ the pretentiousness and hypocrisy of outdated values, it can induce in him precisely the feeling of canny superiority it’s taught him to crave, and keep him dependent on the cynical TV-watching that alone affords this feeling” (63).

in the process of generating meaning and the factors outside the media that shape the sense they make of media messages” (190). *Now Playing: The Radio Dept – “Heaven’s On Fire”* Under the umbrella of active audience theories, in particular, we might include Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding model (Williams 195), the reception analysis of feminist critics such as Janice Radway (*ibid* 198), and the theory of audience resistance espoused by Dick Hebdige (*ibid* 201).

An excellent argument for this kind of active and productive interpretive work is made by critic Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau’s text, dedicated to “the ordinary man... a common hero” (v), is focused on “the ways in which users—commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules—operate” (xi). More than studying cultural artifacts themselves, de Certeau argues, we must study the way that those artifacts are put to use by groups and individuals:

The presence and circulation of a representation... tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyze its manipulation by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization. (xiii)

What this means, in terms of a practical example, is that “the analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and of the time spent watching television (behavior) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer ‘makes’ or ‘does’ during this time and with these images” (xii). There are many studies concerned with *who* is watching television shows or listening to certain kinds of music and *how* they’re doing it, but the only things these studies yield are statistics which position people

as—at the risk of being reductive—somewhat mindless consumers. No one really studies what people actually do with these cultural artifacts; the research that *is* being conducted is quantitative rather than qualitative, ignorant of the ways in which people harness mass culture (and what they, in turn, produce through their relationship with it). *Now Playing: Dan Le Sac Vs. Scroobius Pip – “Get Better (Album Version)”* De Certeau himself seems to understand the challenge that such a qualitative undertaking might present, acknowledging that “the point is not so much to discuss this elusive yet fundamental subject as to make such a discussion possible; that is, by means of inquiries and hypotheses, to indicate pathways for further research” (xi).

*Now Playing: Curtis Mayfield – “P.S. I Love You”*

Studies within the field of active audience theory have tried ways to navigate the problem presented by the elusiveness of qualitative research. One research method that has been employed is a kind of ethnography—participant observation, broadly speaking, but featuring a heavy emphasis on “sharing their [i.e. participants’] experiences” (Williams 193). In particular, researchers attempt to understand audience approaches and uses of media by examining “textual analysis of transcribed interview material, produced through group discussion or individual conversation, or other forms of written communication such as letters” (*ibid*). This method is limited in some respect because it may not necessarily “reflect the natural settings within which people consume media products” (*ibid*). As a creative work, my thesis is not strictly bound by a necessity for scientific objectivity—and as such, I can approach the problem in a unique way: Nathan’s attempts to understand himself through his understanding of media function as a sort of fictionalized and highly subjectivized personal take on this kind of active audience

ethnography; a piece of ethnography in which the researcher has the opportunity to view the subject in his or her natural habitat (a habitat that is no doubt a fictional construct, but which attempts to provide access to some broader truth), drawing not just on personal accounts but actually witnessing his or her involvement with media through direct consumption, interpretation and (re)appropriation.<sup>5</sup> There is a more formal, traditional kind of ethnography simultaneously taking place in the text as well, in the form of the italicized interludes, each of which features a single contributor answering—in writing, and with full consent—a question posed to them by the author: “What is some popular culture product/object/artifact you like, and what do you think it says about you that you like it?”

*Now Playing: Dan Mangan – “Robots”*

An example of the de Certeauvian, ‘making do’—perhaps even achieving the status of bricolage, by which new meanings are created from established artifacts (Williams 201)—I’m talking about can be found even in the title of my novella: *Lists Of All You Left Behind* is a partial rephrasing (and repurposing) of a song lyric taken from the Weakerthans’ “Left and Leaving.” In it, lyricist and vocalist John K. Samson sings that...

Memory will rust and erode into lists of all that you gave me:

a blanket, some matches, this pain in my chest,

the best parts of Lonely, duct-tape and soldered wires,

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<sup>5</sup> This relation extends, once again, even to the incorporation of different formal elements—his e-mails and text messages are in some respects documents of his consumption of culture and personal records of what he “makes” or “does” (de Certeau xii) with that culture.

new words for old desires,  
and every birthday card I threw away.

Though only alluded to, these lyrics are in fact the roundabout source of Nathan's mental image while packing the box of Jill's things—the mental image “of all the intangible things he wishes he could throw in the box as well: the pain in his chest chief among them, and the boredom and the loneliness and the gnawing all-over emptiness that's related to but (not interchangeable with) the chest-pain...” Nathan has, perhaps subconsciously, appropriated an artifact of mass culture for his own purposes in a productive way that allows him to begin processing his issues. He does so too, it's worth noting, without feeling the need to source and attribute the thought to its original instance as media object. He has used mass culture not as a crutch or replacement, but as a stepping stone toward understanding his own lived subjectivity in, and experience of, the world.

*Now Playing: The National – “Mistaken For Strangers”*

What *Lists Of All You Left Behind* may ultimately come down to, however, is the importance of taste in social relations. In a book-length analysis of Céline Dion's multi-platinum album *Let's Talk About Love*—particularly as it relates to notions of taste—journalist and critic Carl Wilson points out that “[m]usical subcultures exist because our guts tell us certain kinds of music are for certain kinds of people. The codes are not always transparent... But it's hard not to notice how those processes reflect and contribute to self-definition, how often persona and musical taste happen to jibe” (17). This argument, so far, fits with what we've seen of the relationship between culture and subjectivity. *Now Playing: The Rural Alberta Advantage – “In the Summertime”* Where

Wilson's argument begins to offer something deeper is in his incorporation of Immanuel Kant and Pierre Bourdieu. Kant, Wilson suggests, "was the first to say that aesthetic judgments are by nature unprovable—they can't be reduced to logic" (82). Nevertheless, "they always feel necessary and universal: when we think something's great, we want everyone else to think it's great too" (*ibid.*). In *Lists Of All You Left Behind*, Nathan seems intent on sharing his taste with anyone willing to listen.

*Now Playing: Mungo Jerry – "In the Summertime"*

This impulse might be acceptable were he not guilty of assuming that his own personal tastes are the be-all and end-all of cultural value. And even that might not be terrible, were it not for the fact that—as Bourdieu argues—"aesthetics are social all the way down, just a set of euphemisms for a starker system of inequalities and competition" (Wilson 87), and that by assuming his tastes are superior, Nathan is ultimately (in Bourdieu's argument) perpetuating and reproducing class inequalities, because he cannot appreciate the extent to which a "work of art only has meaning for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is coded" (Bourdieu 2). For Bourdieu, "[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (6)—that is, it distinguishes the classifier from those who are above or below them on the social ladder. Wilson, pithily, puts it best: "if you flinch at seeing a copy of *Let's Talk About Love* or *The Da Vinci Code* on a friend's shelves, what you are trying to shake off is the stain of the déclassé, the threat of social inferiority" (87-88). Bourdieu's argument is admittedly somewhat inflexible, and probably not entirely accurate,<sup>6</sup> but it would at least partially

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<sup>6</sup> Amongst other things it ignores, as Wilson himself points out, "ethnicity, gender, and regional background" (99). Nevertheless, "even if Bourdieu was only fifty percent right—if taste is only *half* a

account for some of Nathan's more deliberately obtuse behavior: the apparent need he feels, for example, to justify or outright lie about his guilty pleasures ("He tells people... that his first album purchase was Nirvana's *In Utero*...").

*Now Playing: Hayden – "Dynamite Walls"*

*Now Playing: Nirvana – "Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge On Seattle"*

Still, even accounting for Bourdieu's argument, we must realize the importance of our cultural consumption habits in signifying who we are. If it is the case, as Wilson suggests, that "psychology and philosophy today often question whether there is such a thing as the core self, or only a shifting self-reassemblage" (67), then the need to hang onto tangible artifacts to help signify something stable about who we are becomes even more important. After all, taste is "part of the character you present to others. Personality is a creative medium" (Wilson 155). The disaster is in taking that too far by allowing our tastes to replace personality wholesale or to dismiss the tastes of others. Wilson again puts it best: "we ought to have musical loves and personal tastes, so long as we're not naïve enough to think personal is all they are, or so selfish to exclude other tastes from legitimacy" (155). *Now Playing: The Magnetic Fields – "Papa Was A Rodeo"* This is the lesson Nathan has begun to learn by novella's end (though it is maybe not an explicit, but rather a subconscious lesson). It doesn't matter what music he listens to with his friends. It doesn't matter that his ex-girlfriend never cared for *The Simpsons*. Or rather, it matters, but at the same time it doesn't. It is worth here returning to the argument Pamela

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subconscious mechanism by which we fight for power and status, mainly by condemning people we consider 'beneath' us—that would be twice as complicit in class discrimination as most of us would like to think our aesthetics are" (*ibid*).

Thurschwell makes above about *High Fidelity*. Nathan, like the character Rob in Hornby's novel, has begun to articulate new views on human relationships. And he has done so without having to abandon the things that he loves. What he needed, more than anything, was a little bit of perspective.

*Now Playing: Washed Out – “Feel It All Around”*

Of course this reasoning all leads us to the possibility that—Wilson's cautions be damned—maybe *Lists Of All You Left Behind* is—at root, in some way—an attempt to prove for posterity's sake the author's great taste. To shake off his own personal stain of the déclassé by subtly evangelizing on behalf of the cultural artifacts he most loves.

Maybe the author never should have admitted he has a soft spot for Taylor Swift.

As of March 22, 2011, my iTunes library is up to 22,317 songs. The most played song remains “Goodnight Moon” by Said the Whale. But it occurs to me: that track certainly isn't—not even by a long shot—my favourite song.

*Now Playing: The Doors – “The End”*

## A Note on the Text

*Lists Of All You Left Behind incorporates, as a formal conceit, the answers that friends and family provided to a question posed by the author—“What is some popular culture product/object/artifact you like, and what do you think it says about you that you like it?” Provided below, for reference, is the context for said question, as (self-deprecatingly written and) shared by the author on Facebook and through e-mail.*

“If you want to totally misunderstand why something is supposedly important, find the biggest fan of that particular thing and ask him for an explanation. He will tell you everything that doesn't matter to anyone who isn't him. He will describe paradoxical details and share deeply personal anecdotes, and it will all be autobiography; he will simply be explaining who he is by discussing something completely unrelated to his life.” — Chuck Klosterman

As some of you may know, I'm currently working on my thesis for my MA in English Literature and Creative Writing (if you didn't know that, this opening sentence informs you that this is indeed the case). What some of you have asked is exactly what the deal is with this thesis and what it's about, and in answering this I've been generally pretty noncommittal. This is not because I'm being an asshole, or because I'm being coy, or because I don't like to have my rough-draft thought process unduly scrutinized. No; I've been noncommittal because—despite writing a ten-page thesis prospectus, and having already handed in the first fifteen-pages of my thesis proper—I'm still not even sure what my thesis is about myself.

But here's the best answer I can offer, summarized in the vaguest way imaginable: as inspired by the Klosterman quote above (I ♥ Chuck Klosterman), it's

about the way we interact with cultural artifacts (particularly popular culture artifacts—songs or movies, or bands or genres or whatever), about how what we consume defines us, and about how what we are (or think we are) defines that which we choose to consume.

(If you're not clear on this, don't worry. Neither am I. But do, for reference, think of something in the vein of John Cusack in *High Fidelity*, when he wonders "Did I listen to pop music because I was miserable? Or was I miserable because I listened to pop music?")

But regardless of where this whole thing is going, I've encountered a problem. As my thesis advisor has pointed out—and I'm paraphrasing here—"Brian, your writing style is... interesting. But it's just damn near *unbearable* in large doses." I agreed. So we had a brainstorming session, and this is what we came up with: the idea of interspersing other people's writing in between chunks of my own.

Which is where you, the person whom I hope is still reading this right now, comes in. I need your help. I would love you forever if you answered for me, in writing, a fairly simple question.

The question is this: **Tell me about something—say a movie, or band, or a book, or a TV show, or a video game, or a sports team or a sport or a film genre or a kind of cell-phone or hell, like a brand of hair conditioner; *whatever*—you like. Be creative. The only guideline is that it has to be something that's associated somehow with popular culture. And tell me, more importantly, *what you think the fact that you like that something says about you as a person.***

I'm not expecting an essay. Just answer it truthfully. Maybe you like indie rock and you think that makes you better than everyone else. Maybe you like chamber music, and you think it has lead you to a better understanding of the human condition. Maybe you like film noir and you think it makes you dark and mysterious. A paragraph or two would be awesome. Or if you'd like to write more, that would also be amazing. Answer it straightforwardly, or answer it in a bizarre roundabout way. Turn it into a mini-story or use short, factual, declarative sentences. Answer it in English or in Klingon. Whatever. *It doesn't matter*. Just send your answers to my e-mail address, **b----j-----@gmail.com**. If you're feeling *really* charitable, pose the question to people you might know (siblings, parents, grandparents???) Yes, Yes, YES!) who don't fit into the stereotypical demographic that so many of my Facebook friends apparently do (you hipster fucks, you). Record their answers. Send them to me.

What matters, and what I'm really interested in here is collecting as many voices (varied voices, ideally) answering the same question as possible.

Standard disclaimers: I promise I won't alter your answers in any way beyond editing for grammar and spelling. I promise I'll ask permission—and grant you the right to see and approve a finished version—if I use yours. I promise I'll be responsible about not making you look bad. You can be anonymous if you want. Or you can force me to add your name to the acknowledgements. I would like to add, moreover, that *no one* will probably read the end-product anyway, since it basically just gets tucked away and forgotten in the University of Windsor's library archives.

So, If you'd take the time to do me this favour and answer this question, I'd be massively indebted to you. For those in the English Department, I will gladly spend the

next term proofreading *your* theses if you do me this favour. If you're not in the English Department, I'll buy you a beer. If you don't drink, I'll buy you a soda. If you currently owe me a favour, I'm calling it in (\*cough\* M--- M----- \*cough\*). Again, that e-mail address is ***b---j-----@gmail.com***.

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### **Vita Auctoris**

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