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EVERYTHING MUST GO

By

David Burke

A Creative Writing Project

Submitted To the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Through 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

2003

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ISBN: 0-612-83390-9

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 0-612-83390-9

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Canada

It's Unanimous! The Critics Agree on Dave Burke's *Everything Must Go*

"I've seen books before, and this is one of them."

— Saul Bellow

"Did you mean to do this? I mean, seriously - what were you thinking?"

— Dale Jacobs

"Dave Burke is a _____, _____, _____, writer of his generation. Honestly, I couldn't afford the adjectives - the ones I wanted to use he was selling in *Column D*. You'll have to read to figure out what I mean. Don't bother to read, though. Just skim, and then use the book to balance an uneven desk or something. What a ripoff."

— Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

"They made me read it. I was just doing a favour for Dale."

— Alan Sears

"*This*? Three years of living under my roof, and *this* is all you come up with?"

— Dr. Greg Burke

"Just because I signed my name to this thing, doesn't mean I approve of what's inside."

— Darryl Whetter

"I like the parts I'm in. Other than that, I was hoping for more *Beastmaster* references."

— Joe Gunn

"We love you, honey, no matter what you do."

— Helen Burke

"I wouldn't even wipe my ass with this book."

— Neal Pollack

"This book fucking rules."

— Dave Burke

EVERYTHING MUST GO

Stories, Diversions, and a Great Sales Event

By

Dave Burke

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David Burke, 2003

[Insert Touching Dedication Here]

[Insert Profound and Thoughtful Epigraph Here]

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Everything Must Go

The Show

You are going to the show.¹ You have been waiting weeks for this show. You are not normally a busy person, but there are a million other things you could be doing tonight (for example, working),² and you have cancelled them all for this (in the case of work, you didn't cancel, you quit). You have just passed through the tunnel and found yourself on Jefferson Ave, turning left on Brush Street and right on Congress. You are in Detroit, Michigan. You are now at the door of the show. This is where you must be tonight. But, the show is sold out.

You do not believe this. Your luck cannot be this bad. You skipped *Fields*, an Albanian rock-quartet that everyone is talking about, to be here. You quit your job delivering pizzas, a job you badly needed because you have no money. This night, tonight, was to be your one-hundredth show.

¹ *Mister Henderson*, LIVE @ St. Andrew's Hall, Detroit MI. With special guest -*BanjoMinnow*.

² Pizza Delivery Technician - *Paesano's Pizza*, Belle River, ON - \$7.50 per hour, plus tips. You provide your own vehicle (your mom's Toyota).

There are ninety-nine ticket stubs taped neatly on the wall of your bedroom in your parent's house.

The Shows

*n.b. **boldtype** indicates shows that rocked hard!*

1. **Mister Henderson**
2. The Frogs
3. J.J. & The Dynamos
4. 2001: A Space Posse
5. The Sense Monsters
6. Luscious Joe
7. The Superfreaks
8. JUNKY
9. The Commoners
10. The Mourning Woods
11. **The Customers**
12. Raw Fish & The New Soft Machine
13. The Funks
14. Mud Luscious
15. The Bum Chutney Trio
16. The Queerbait
17. Critical Ma\$\$

18. The Taylor Collins Band
19. Penny
20. Frosh
21. The Buddonz
22. Mister Henderson
23. Filth Nuggets
24. Talking 'Bout Willis
25. Shasta
26. **The Lippy Gypsies**
27. The Polo Ponies
28. Majestic
29. Furious Franks
30. **The Hair Diapers**
31. The Glove Gargoyles
32. Flaming Stu's
33. The Hooded Sweatshirts
34. The Freaks
35. The Fucks
36. The Whutnots
37. The Will-knots
38. Mister Henderson
39. Diaspora
40. Jimmy Danger Pay
41. **Braindelay**

42. Frosh
43. Phil
44. **Mister Henderson**
45. Gearbox
46. The Beast's Beast
47. **Hit Where it Hurts**
48. The Apologists
49. Joe's Misery
50. Full White Drag
51. The Flipsides
52. The Runts
53. Rivethead
54. Johnny Motel and The Quick Lays
55. The Jorge Society
56. Icy Redd
57. The Belt Buckles
58. Double Exposure
59. Mickey Wengle
60. **The Ogiltorps**
61. The Random Insults
62. The Pannies
63. Clubland
64. **The Browneyes**
65. The Coldnecks

66. The Shiznits
67. The Pocket Rockets
68. Sawteeth
69. The Ingrates
70. Lagoon
71. The B Sharps
72. The Orchard Boys
73. Mister Henderson
74. Cat Poster Philosophers
75. **The Rejections**
76. Dragline
77. Nightwood
78. The Zit Remedy
79. Mister Henderson
80. The Hard Liquorz
81. **The Donuts**
82. The Nords
83. Wyld Stallyns
84. The Knockarounds
85. Grass
86. Bantam Draper
87. One Hundred Year Grudge
88. Fillmore
89. The Gas Caps

90. Paul Sutton
91. The Tones
92. **The Transients**
93. Relish the Maltbies
94. Here There Are No Cows
95. POSER
96. Herk
97. Nordic
98. The Furies
99. The Knox
100. _____

"Music is my life," you once told a girl you met at a party. "If it's your life," she said, "shouldn't you play music? Be in a band or something?"

You've never once picked up a guitar and thought about practising. It never occurred to you that practice is what makes one: a musician, a rock star, perfect, and though you are one hell of an air guitarist, you never thought you had it in you. You are a fan. A fanatic. An *aficionado*.³ And you are content with this.

³ "Aficion means passion. An Aficionado is one who is passionate about the bullfights." - Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, Scribner, 1926, p.136 (with thanks to Mr. Terry, your Grade Twelve English teacher).

Your mom thinks this is a hobby. Hobbies are coin and stamp collecting, toy trains in the basement. This is far more important than that. Why else would you be hanging out in an alley in Detroit?

For Detroit scares the shit out of you. Detroit is not part of your conditioning. You were born in a Canadian suburb. You were raised in a Canadian suburb. You still live with your parents in a Canadian suburb. And so much of Detroit you will never understand.

You hang out in an alley beside the hall. People are milling about beside the greasy brick, the dumpsters, lingering among the smell wafting from the kitchen of the Sweetwater Tavern. This is where the city of Detroit thrives. Unlike the heights of New York, Detroit is a ground-level town, where dirt and decay are the city's vibe, like drug deals under the afternoon shadow of the Penobscot building, like hookers hanging out in Clark Park near Mexicantown. Detroit thrives in alleys and back kitchens and shows, no longer surviving - it hasn't for years - in tall buildings and car plants and freeways. You, preferring distance, see the city as a burnt-out forest, black dust, dried volcanic ash, your cigarette smoked to the stub.

You lean against the wall and sigh. You hear the rumblings of the opening band, can feel the small building

shake from the bass. The crowd waits, tickets in hand, and slowly make their way inside, to the show.

To clarify: this is not *the show* they speak of with reverence in minor league baseball. You are not going to the movies. This has nothing to do with Las Vegas or magic or television. You consider these things a disgrace to *the show* as you know it. Others call it a *concert*.⁴ You know the people who call it this. You have seen them arrive at the show in limousines, dressed up like it's the prom. And you have seen them inside, acting like hippies in the Woodstock movie, and you are embarrassed for them. You are too busy for dancing. You are too busy for peace and love and singing. Your only concern is the music. Your only concern is the show.

A kid waiting in line asks his friend, "What kind of set do you think they'll play?" And you know, having been to ninety-nine shows, that at this moment a roadie is writing the set-list with a black Sharpie.

*Number of Set-Lists you have displayed on the
wall of your bedroom in your parent's house: 29*

⁴ Others call it a *gig*, but this term is usually reserved for jazz bands in smoky underground clubs filled with beatniks, which you know nothing about.

You have waited long after the house lights came on, hanging along the barrier as the crowd shuffled out, kicking empty beer cups along the floor. You stuck around while roadies wearing black t-shirts promoting bands you've never heard of were packing the drum kit, winding miles of cord around their elbows, picking up the t-shirts, joints, and bras the audience threw on stage as gifts for the band. And you pleaded with these roadies for a set-list. You waited and stared at them until they peeled the set-list off the floor (where, during the course of the show, it had beer and sweat and sometimes blood spilt all over it), and handed it to you.⁵

Stadium

You Want It

Detroit

River

4/11/96

18

Flagrant Foul

That's What Your Mother Said

One Time

Dixie the Chick

Eloquence

⁵ Show #21, *Mister Henderson*, LIVE @ Harpo's, Detroit MI. w.s.g. Leif Hendy.

Al Has Crabs

SKY

Joe Gunn

You Better Run, Fuckers

Me and You Make Two

Yo! Yolanda

Flippant the Dolphin

Clownshoes

Here Is A Tasty Mule

Song for Alonzo

And you are without a ticket. You will not be there tonight to hear these songs.

It was a rookie mistake. You should have known better. You should have bought a ticket in advance like everyone else, and charged it to your mom's credit card. You should have known that *Mister Henderson* (whom you have seen on six other occasions, including your very first show), was finally getting their break. Radio stations played their songs. They began selling out small halls. Bubble gum rockers, high school kids who want to be cool but lack your passion, began buying your tickets and keeping you out of the show you had a right to, as a loyal fan, as a loyal

show-goer, a fanatic and an *aficionado*, on the night of your one hundredth show.

And you are standing in an alley in Detroit, waiting for something to happen. Nothing is happening. You walk around to the front of the building. A bouncer is guarding the door. His shoulders are bursting with muscle. He is a busy man, checking ID's and tickets, and he will want nothing to do with you.

Down Congress then through a side parking lot, thinking you can find your way in the back door. Here you find the band's tour bus. It is shiny with chrome, an old city bus, and if the licence plate did not read "MISTER H" you would be instantly transported to the 1950's. And from the bus would appear some band out for a cigarette break, jiving in purple velvet suits and sporting basketball sized Afros. Because this is Detroit. This is Motown.

Number of Tour Buses you have been on:

One. After show #10, The Mourning Woods.

*How long you managed to stay on said Tour Bus
before being kicked off by a roadie:*

About four seconds.

*How long you could have stayed on said Tour Bus
had you been a sexy blonde willing to be a
groupie:*

Indefinitely.

A man comes walking out of the shadows behind a dumpster. This is a black man. The dumpster might be his home. You often trade dirty jokes with Mr. Morris, the black man who is your neighbour in your Canadian suburb, but because you have crossed a river to the U.S.A., and because of the things you have seen on the nightly news, this is different. This is Detroit.

You knock on the tour bus frantically, but you haven't given the secret knock.⁶ There is nowhere for you to go. The black man comes closer. One arm of his shirt is tied at the shoulder.

"Change for a Vietnam veteran?" he says.

⁶ You could have tried *tap-tap-hold-tap*; or *tap-tap-slide-tap-tap*; or even the ubiquitous *shave and a hair-cut*, but really, there was no way of knowing the secret knock.

"Sorry, I'm out," you say. He is likely not telling the truth.⁷ He looks too young to have served in Vietnam. You wonder how a man can simply lose an arm, but remember that he lives in a different world than you.

"No change? Then how about a twenty dollar bill?"

You laugh.

"Can't spare any change for a one-armed brother?" He wiggles the missing arm at you, in case you haven't noticed it. You have change. You give fifty cents.

"Peace, brother. Thank-you," he says, and wanders back to the shadows behind the dumpster.

You smile.

You are back to your original spot on the wall, leaning against the dirty brick, smoking cigarettes, hoping something will happen. A man comes out of the crowd near the door. He is dressed in a black leather jacket. You wonder if he wants to sell you drugs, but instead he offers you a ticket. You have nothing but contempt for this man, but you need to get in.

He is charging twice as much as the normal ticket price. Things are tight. You just quit your job.

⁷ Neither are you. You have seventy-eight cents (American) in your pocket.

Amount of money show-going has cost you: \$2744.28 ⁸

You send the scalper away. You light another cigarette. Some kid waiting in line is watching you. He is wearing a Mister Henderson t-shirt, the one with the badge logo on the front, and the picture of the band riding the flaming banana on the back. You do not buy this shirt at a Mister Henderson show. You buy this shirt at a store in the mall. You want to tell this kid, who looks all of fifteen, not to wear this shirt.

⁸ Calculated at an average ticket price of \$19.12 U.S. dollars, with the current exchange rate of 40% to the Canadian dollar, giving an average of \$27.72 Cdn, times ninety-nine shows equals a Total Show Expense of \$2744.28 Cdn (a modest estimate, not including three shows you bought tickets for but could not attend for various reasons: first - a nasty bout of diarrhoea; second - stuck on the side of the highway with a broken transmission; third - a vicious fight with your mom who heard nasty rumours - all true - from a friend about the band *The Nutcrackers*, and who thence grounded you from leaving the house that evening.)

The Total Show Expense does not include the \$4.00 per ticket service charge, which goes directly to the good people at *Ticket Wicket Window*, where you purchase your tickets. Ninety-nine shows times \$4.00 = \$396

The Total Show Expense does not include gas spent travelling to these shows, bus fees, nor money spent on tunnel and bridge fees to cross the border (estimating only a one-way purchase, it being the rule that one person other than the driver pay for one crossing of the bridge or tunnel per show) and using an average of \$2.50 per crossing, that being the cost at the time of show #1, the cost having risen considerably since then. Extra expense: \$247.50

Nor does the Total Show Expense account for the purchase of Marlboro cigarettes (\$3.00 American, or \$4.20 Canadian at time of first show), estimating 74 packs over ninety-nine shows. Extra expense: \$310.80

Nor does the Total Show Expense consider the cost of beer and/or liquor purchased at these events (incalculable given the variants of thirst, money available, driving responsibilities), once a *Bob's Photo I.D.* was purchased for \$20 American dollars on Broadway Street in Detroit for the express purpose of gaining access to age-restricted shows such as Mister Henderson, show #22, at the *The Magic Bag*, and thus gaining access, as a side benefit, to the beer and/or liquor being served at all shows.

If he were your little brother, or your worst enemy, you would tell him to never wear the shirt of the band you are going to see. This is a rule.⁹ The kid leaves the line, comes creeping up to you.

"Hey man, can I bum a smoke?"

No one has asked this of you since you last lit up in the smoking section in high school.

"Seriously, man," he says. "I'll buy one off you."

*Amount of money made on show-going: \$345*¹⁰

You flip the kid a cigarette. He tries to give you fifty cents, but you won't take it. Since your pack is out of your pocket you light up another and lean against the wall, smoking. You brood.

There is someone leaning against the wall with you. "No tix for you either, bro?"

⁹ Another rule being, never listen to the band's albums on the day of the show. And another rule being, arrive at the show loudly playing the album of another band that the other show-goers are most likely to have never heard of.

¹⁰ Subtract from the *Total Show Expense* the amount of money made during shows, a grand total of \$345 Canadian dollars, having been the promoter for shows #61, 64, 65, 72, 73, and 78, an effort made to get behind the scenes of the show experience. Money was difficult to make on these promoting ventures, having to obtain the band by contract, rent the hall, rent sound equipment, stage equipment, get various permits (entertainment, liquor, etc.), pay for band and roadie motel rooms as well as satisfy the demands of the rider (See Footnote 19).

You recognise this man. You first saw him at Show #1, *Mister Henderson*, and approximately forty-eight percent of all shows after that. You have seen him in the most tightly packed crowds, nodding his dreadlocked head, always wearing the same (now heavily faded) black Gearbox t-shirt. You have always known him as *Gearbox*.¹¹

He has boosted you countless times so you could go crowd surfing. Back when this was your thing,¹² you would fight through the crowd, tap Gearbox on the shoulder, and ask for a lift. Gearbox would clear everyone out of the way, bend down, putting his cigarette in his mouth and his two hands together, and lift you onto the crowd. And you would surf away, buoyed by the hands of show-goers.

You talked to him briefly after the brawl that ended show #26, *The Lippy Gypsies*, early. You wonder where he lives. You wonder what life he leads and how his life is so connected to yours.

"No tickets, man. I'm pissed," you say.

"I could be seeing *The Trouser Snakes* tonight, but I gave that up to come here."

¹¹ Ironically, you did not see him at Show #45, *Gearbox*.

¹² This stopped being your "thing" shortly after Show #61, *The Random Insults*, when the lead singer exclaimed, "C'mon you laggards! Crowd surfing went out with acid wash jeans!"

"Shitty," you say, while making a mental note to see this band at the first opportunity.

The two of you are leaning against the wall.

"No show man, we might as well burn."

Drugs Enjoyed During Shows: marijuana, but not often.

Other Illegal Activities: fake ID, underage drinking.

Other Activities Your Mother Would Disapprove Of: smoking cigarettes, stage-diving, moshing, crowd-surfing, rubbing and petting members of the opposite sex.

The alley is swaying. The brick wall is thrumming. You feel like you are crowd surfing — like there are a hundred individual hands hoisting you up and you are buoyed by the crowd, buoyed by music, buoyed by the hands of show-goers. Then, the ride over, you are deposited over the barrier and shuffled off to the side by grumpy bouncers, only to fight your way through the crowd, find Gearbox, and do it again.

Perhaps it is the power of the weed generously shared with you by a man you call Gearbox. Perhaps the weed generously shared with you is laced with something; after all, you are smoking drugs with a man you barely know in an alley in downtown Detroit. But perhaps your need to see Mister Henderson live, to hear these songs and see your one-hundredth show has taken over. You have to get in.

"Hey, Gearbox," you say.¹³ He had wandered off, talking to some kids waiting in line. Until now, you were so stoned you hadn't noticed he left. "Gimme a boost." He looks up the wall. There is a window.

"You gonna squeeze in there?" he says.

"I'm going to try," you say. Gearbox holds his cigarette between his lips. He bends down and puts his hands together.

You get the best boost you've ever had. You are holding on to the window frame, your feet slipping on the brick wall, but you are slowly, slowly, pulling yourself up to the window and squeezing through. You hope no one waiting in line will see your flailing legs and say something to a friend. You hope you do not attract the attention of the bouncer taking tickets at the front door, who would run

¹³ You are nervous calling him this, for where you come from, this is an insult (you think).

around the side of the building, grab your leg, pull you unmercifully down to the hard dirty ground, and proceed to kick the shit out of you.

But you slip through the window. You are in.

*Shows You Have Seen For Free: One, #52, The Runts.*¹⁴

You find yourself in a kitchen. No one is in here. They do not cook food for a show like this. They do not cook food here ever, it seems, because you are pushing your way through old and dusty boxes that smell like century old refried beans. Dirty pots and pans are scattered everywhere. This kitchen is filthy. You look for rats. You are scared to death of rats.

But there is someone in the kitchen. A few someones. You can smell cigars and you hear talking.

A man in a grey suit steps from behind a big oven. "Hey, kid," he says, "I like your style." He is Italian. If you weren't intimidated by his greased-back hair and the expensive looking watch sneaking out from underneath his shirt cuff, you would make a joke about Italians and pizza

¹⁴ Not a complete show. You were walking down the street when you heard the noise. You slipped past the bouncers into the hall and saw the band play a two song encore. It was so loud your ears rang for days. You wondered briefly about hearing loss.

makers and big ovens. "You always sneak into concerts?" He said *concerts*. You dislike him immediately.

"When they're sold out," you tell him.

"That's cool of you. You seen this band before?"

"Mister Henderson? Tons of times."

"They put on a good show?"

"Always," you say. "They're nuts."

"That's what I like to hear. Tell me, what do you do for a living?" Why he is so interested in you, you'll never know, but he and his three Italian friends are blocking the door. You worry for a second, but there is no sound coming from the hall. The roadies are changing sets.

"I go to school," you say. You have been telling people this for a long time. The Italian man nods. You see a backstage pass dangling from his neck.

Souvenirs you have obtained from shows:

- One *Diaspora* t-shirt (Show 39)¹⁵
- Three drumsticks (Show 17, 41, 75: *Critical*

¹⁵ Plucked from the beer soaked wood floor of the State Theatre, Detroit MI, during show #39. Likely from the back of a greasy wanker who abandoned the shirt in the heat of the mosh pit.

Ma\$\$, Braindelay, and The Rejections,
respectively)

- Sixteen band posters
- Four promo CD's from bands you despised
- Nine guitar picks
- Four pins
- Eleven stickers¹⁶

There is one souvenir missing from your list: a backstage pass. You think about taking this backstage pass from the Italian man's hairy neck. You realise you will never be able to use it after the show, for if you were to try the Italian man and his friends would find you, would drag you into the alley, and would beat you senseless and leave you in a dumpster with ... rats.

Wounds you have suffered at Shows:

- One cracked rib (Show 20, *Frosh*)¹⁷

¹⁶ This list does not include t-shirts purchased, a habit deemed mandatory at early shows, but which became less cool around show number 11, *The Funks*, and stopped altogether after show number 17 *Critical Ma\$\$*, (except for brief expenditures at shows 44 and 86, *Mister Henderson* and *Bantam Draper*, where money was available and the t-shirts were far too good to pass up, yet never worn in public).

¹⁷ Suffered after pushing through crowds during the opening band to gain hold of the barrier. The damage became apparent weeks later, realising something was wrong when playing with cat who walked across stomach and

- One black eye (Show 42, *Frosh*)¹⁸

The Italian men lean against the oven. They are looking strangely at you, but you realise this is likely because you are stoned, and are looking strangely at them.

"Are you guys in the mafia or something?" You wonder if saying this will get you killed.

"The mafia? This guy thinks we're in the mafia," the Italian man says to his friends. "I am not in the mafia," he says, looking at you. And then, holding his fingers together in the *paesanos* style, like you've seen mafia guys do in the movies, he says, "I am a *food service distributor*."

You do not know what this means. "What are you doing in the kitchen?"

"I distributed the food to this here band,"¹⁹ he says.

caused an inordinate amount of pain. No medical attention was received, that being decidedly anti-rock and roll.

¹⁸ After being shoved into the mosh pit, and being bounced around by a number of head-shaven de-shirted sweaty men, you turned around and saw, or *think* you saw, for there was at that moment a spotlight shone directly in your eyes, a jean-jacketed man who resembled Cliff Burton, late bassist from *Metallica*, who was tossed into the air and seemed to be *flying* in slow-motion towards you, his black wanker hair floating behind him. Your heads collided and you both fell to the ground. You were pulled up from the floor by a kind-hearted man (Gearbox), and arose with a headache and one eye not functioning, being swelled shut and turning purple.

¹⁹ In the industry, this is referred to as the *rider*. Essentially a hospitality checklist, a rider includes things a band needs to be

"Do you distribute food? Or do you distribute food services?" You chalk the semantics up to your seven years (and counting) of post-secondary education.

He thinks for a moment.

"Don't ask questions, kid."

You hear the crowd get excited. The lights in the hall have dimmed. You hear notes. Not notes, but *fuzz*. You hear the buzz of amplifiers. The band is walking out from the wings. They are strapping into their guitars and warming up. You are not where you need to be. The backstage pass dangles around the Italian man's neck.

Things you have stolen at a show: Nothing until now.

Madness seizes you. It must be the weed. Why else would you plough through four Italian stereotypes, *food service distributors*, smoking cigars and blocking entry to the hall, and on the way, in the hustle, grab the backstage pass off the Italian man's hairy neck and run? Why else would you bust through the swinging doors of the kitchen and down the

comfortable and put on a good show. An example of one rider for a show you promoted, the band *The Browneyes* (#64), requested:

- 3 *Swank* magazines (current issues only)
- 1 meat helmet
- 2 pairs of castanets
- 4 bottles of Jim Beam whiskey
- 1 Swedish masseuse (preferably female)

hall as they chase you, then out another door and into the throng?

You slide around and in between people and through. You are in the middle of the hall, can see the Italian stereotypes searching from the balcony, but you are among the show crowd. You are surrounded by bubble-gum rockers, kids wearing the t-shirt of the band they are going to see. You look around you. You are inside St. Andrew's Hall, Detroit Michigan.

You have never gone anywhere, really, but music takes you places.

Places music has taken you:

Harpo's - Detroit, MI

State Theatre - Detroit, MI

Orbit Room - Grand Rapids, MI

Magic Bag - Detroit, MI

The Shelter - Detroit, MI

Windsor Arena - Windsor, ON

Blind Pig - Ann Arbor, MI

Toledo Zoo - Toledo, OH

Clutch Cargo's - Pontiac, MI

Pine Knob - Clarkson, MI

The Loop - Windsor, ON
Horseshoe Tavern - Toronto, ON
State Fairgrounds - Detroit, MI
The Majestic - Detroit, MI
House of Blues - Chicago, IL
The Press Club - Windsor, ON
Lee's Palace - Toronto, ON
The 8 Ball - Chatham, ON
LuLu's - Kitchener, ON
Okechobee Lodge - Killarney, ON
Wylde's - North Bay, ON
Riviera Theatre - Chicago, IL
The Odeon - Cleveland, OH
Fifth Avenue - Detroit, MI
Kee to Bala - Bala, ON
Chugapalooza - Lakeshore, ON
St. Andrew's Hall - Detroit, MI

You look beside you. Gearbox is there, nodding his head to the opening notes. You yell, "How did you get in?" and, because he can't hear a thing besides the opening notes, he nods and laughs and gives you the thumbs-up. You suddenly realise why his life is so like yours.

You look around you. There is no place you'd rather be.
Your contempt for bubble gum rockers has passed. These are
your people.²⁰ These are your friends. This is where you
belong.

Mister Henderson kicks in to the opening song. The
crowd goes nuts.

This is your one-hundredth show.

²⁰ "The show is not the show / But they that go." - Emily Dickinson,
XLIV, The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson. New York: Modern Library,
p.28.

This Hand Belongs To

Henry Huntington

It was a Sunday afternoon in April when Henry Huntington, seventy-six, raised his right hand above his head.

There was no prior thinking involved; he had no particular agenda. Lightning did not strike and he heard no hallowed voices from the sky. There were no tidal waves building from the lake to swamp the house in which Henry had lived with his wife, Doris, for forty-eight years. The sun continued to shine as usual, the wind blew from the west as it normally did, and the cars slid steadily along the road in front of the house as they had always done.

As he sat in the wingback chair in front of the bay window, Henry Huntington's right arm flew up from his side and hung in the air, as though someone, or something, had been holding it down his entire life.

Shortly after his hand was raised, Henry Huntington felt an intense ache in his shoulder. It began to throb and he winced in discomfort. The throbbing spread up his arm to his hand, where it turned into a tingling sensation and caused his hand to shake. He held up his right arm with his left. He leaned back, shifting toward the edge of his seat to take pressure off the quivering muscles of his shoulder, and held on.

Doris Huntington was baking carrot cake. Flour was everywhere. She peeked around the corner of the kitchen to check on Henry. She saw his hand reaching high over his wingback chair.

Doris said nothing as she slid the cake inside the oven. She cleaned up the kitchen, wiping little clumps of flour from the counter, and pulled the vacuum out of the closet. She padded with her slippered feet into the living room, and though she had just vacuumed the entire house the day before, she began running over the living room carpet, the whirr of the old vacuum almost deafening. She bumped the vacuum into Henry's chair, twice. Henry's arm swayed in the air, but didn't fall. Doris flicked off the vacuum and stood in front of him.

"What do you think you're doing?" she said, tapping her slippered foot on the carpet.

"You're blocking my view, Doris," he said.

Doris harrumphed. She pushed his wrinkly and withered arm towards the floor, and held it there. Then she let go. The arm, as if inhuman, sprung back high in the air. She pulled the arm straight, holding it out far and stretching the muscles, and, when she released it, watched as it quickly flung back to its original position.

"Thanks Doris," Henry said. "The old arm needed the exercise."

"Our basement ceiling tiles are falling, you know. You said you couldn't fix them because you couldn't work above your head. You said your arms would fall out of their sockets."

Henry stared deep into the blue cardigan that Doris wore draped over her shoulders. He said nothing.

"You should have thought of this years ago," she said, and padded back into the kitchen.

For the next hour, Henry's hand was shaking and the tips of his fingers were numb. The throbbing slid from his shoulder up his neck, dancing up to his skull, stopping in one location: *thump thump thump*, above his left eyebrow.

"Doris, could you get me some aspirin?" he called.

Doris stuck her head out of the kitchen. "Fat chance," she said.

Henry stood up from the wingback chair, his knees wobbling. He shuffled to the bathroom and flipped open the medicine cabinet. He hadn't thought about this. He normally pried at the container with both hands, sweating, cursing in his attempts to pop off the lid.

Henry was, of course, entirely right-handed. He wrote with his right hand, shaved, combed his hair, opened the fridge and cracked open a beer, all with his right hand. But this wasn't about convenience. Henry looked at himself in the mirror and smiled wryly, his hand hanging in the air beside him. He put the container in his mouth, clenched his teeth, and the lid cracked open. He popped the first, a second, then a third and fourth pill in his mouth, and went back to his chair.

Doris watched from the kitchen as Henry plodded across the living room carpet. After forty-eight years of marriage, she had seen many things, but Henry had never done anything like this. There was that time he turned vegetarian for six months. She tried all winter to entice him with shepherd's pie, or the roasted chicken that he loved. But Henry was firm, until he succumbed, by his own admission, to barbecue season in the spring. Then there was that winter he refused to shovel the snow off the driveway. "I don't believe in

it," he told her, as though it was against his religion.

"And besides, it'll melt by tomorrow."

But the snow didn't melt, as it usually did shortly after it fell in their city. And the snow piled on, day after day, and the weather stayed cold for a week. "You don't want me to go out there, do you?" Henry said, watching the snow fill the yard. "Haven't you heard about the heart attacks old guys like me are getting trying to shovel that stuff?"

Doris was pulling the car in the driveway after a trip to the drug store when the car slipped out of the tire tracks and was caught in a rut. She turned the car off and stepped out, only to slip on the wet ice and fall to her knees, her hands sinking deep in the cold. She saw Henry rush from his chair, outside, barefoot and in his robe, to lift her to her feet. "If you want to fight battles, Henry," she said, "fight your own. Don't get me involved."

The pain fought Henry as it had since the beginning, but it was specific now. He could locate it. It was a deep throbbing pain directly in the rear part of his shoulder, and he winced, soft moans escaping from his lips.

Henry got up from his chair and hobbled to the study. He returned, after six consecutive trips, with a number of books he carried one by one under his left arm. The exercise

and the movement did him good. It eased the pain in his shoulder, or at least made him forget about it for a while. He slid the piano bench beside his wingback chair, and piled the books there, including: four volumes of *Encyclopaedia International*, a coffee table book on *The Gardens of Derbyshire*, and the *Holy Bible*. He slid his right arm on top the pile of books, and found the *Holy Bible* made the pile too high, so he put it aside, resting his withered elbow on top a hardback of *Henderson the Rain King*.

Doris peeked out from the corner of the kitchen. She saw him carrying the books across the room. "Planning on doing some reading?"

Henry didn't answer.

"The hedges need trimming, you know."

"I haven't the time," Henry said.

Doris came creaking into the bedroom that night.

"You're on my side," she said. She paid no attention to the dusty brown tie Henry had tied to the bedpost.

"It's easier on your side," Henry grumbled. "This way my arm is on the edge."

"I've slept on that side of the bed for forty-eight years."

Henry didn't say anything as he slipped his hand into the tie. He shifted and tried to make himself comfortable.

If Doris was in a better mood, she would have made a joke about Henry being tied up, about how long it has been, but instead she went to the far side and crawled under the covers, sleeping with her back turned for the rest of the night.

The next day Henry found himself lapsing in and out of sleep. It was a calm day, warm, and his hand had been raised in the air for over twenty-four hours. Doris was out volunteering at the soup kitchen.

Many people were passing by on the sidewalk in front of the house, neighbours walking their dogs, or strangers new to the area who decided to walk a little further because the day was so fine. The walkers couldn't decide, by looking at the old man sitting in the chair in the bay window, whether or not they should wave back.

Henry wasn't paying attention. He could see, between the two houses across the road that backed onto the water, the sailboats slipping past, their masts high and brilliant white in the sharp light of the sun; they were among the first sailboats of the year. He loved watching the freighters plough through the lake as they always did, winter or summer, the water rolling behind their weight. He would pull out his binoculars and check his book to find the

port from which the ship was registered, and guess at what it was hauling.

For brief moments the day passed in great wonder, no sound in the house but a clock ticking. Most of the day, however, passed in fitful sleep and dull pain on the right side of his body. His back ached, too. He could not get comfortable. He swallowed a sleeping pill in the early afternoon. By the end of the day, he had popped fourteen aspirin. His hand shook. His fingers curled back into his palm. His face, too, felt the pain, turning red, his brow furrowed with wrinkle.

Doris served soup, as she did every Monday, and felt guilty for not being home.

The next morning Henry woke to shaking and squeaking. Someone was jumping on his bed. "Gramma says you gotta get up, Henry." A pair of red pyjamas flashed out the door. Henry untied his arm, and wiped the sleep from his eye. He slipped out to the living room where Jack was playing, his action figures flying across the room to collide in mid-air. The day was grey. It had turned cold. Doris had switched on the gas fireplace to take the chill out of the house. Henry turned his chair around to face the room.

Jack looked up at his grandfather's unshaven and wrinkled face, having just risen from bed at noon, and climbed atop his shaky knees. "What are you doing that for?"

"Because I'm angry," he said.

"At what?"

Henry winced as Jack squirmed. "I'm going to need a stronger set of knees to tell you that story."

Jack jumped to the floor and played with his action figures.

Then, he raised his arm. He stood there for a while looking at Henry, then resumed playing, his action figures flying too close to an imaginary force-field, the waving heat of the electric fireplace, and falling, melting, wrinkling to the ground. Doris peeked out from the kitchen, saw Jack's hand in the air, and shook her head. Jack held his arm high and proud, only lowering it to pull up his sock, and pick up an action figure forgotten on the floor.

"My arm hurts," Jack said after a while.

"I've got a trick that'll help you," Henry said. "Go stand in the middle of the doorway there."

Jack did as instructed.

"Now keep your arms down at your side, and push your arm against the door frame." Jack pushed as though trying to close a door in the wind. "Not there Jack, down at your

wrist. Push against the doorframe with the back of your wrist."

"Like this?"

"Harder," Henry said. "As hard as you can manage without hurting yourself."

Jack pushed, his face turning red. "For how long?"

"Just another minute or so." Henry counted by the ticking of the clock. "Alright," Henry said, smiling. "Now step out of the doorway."

Jack's right arm rose gently from his side. He felt the tingling, his arm rising on its own above his shoulder. He pulled it down to his side and relaxed, and the arm rose again.

"Wow!" he said, shaking the cobwebs down his arm and out his fingertips. "It really works!"

"That's a little trick I learned as a kid."

"How long did you hold your arm against the door?"

"About seventy years," said Henry.

Doris called from the kitchen. "There's a treat in here for anyone who's been good lately."

Henry said, "I think she's talking about you, Jack."

Jack gave Henry a kiss on his unshaven cheek, wrapped a hug around his wrinkled neck, and ran off to the kitchen.

Henry was sitting by himself in the living room, stuffing a ham sandwich into his mouth with his left hand, little splotches of mustard on his cheek. He was watching a television program that followed the life of a war veteran who lost his legs in battle, but could still, sixty years later, sometimes feel the pain. "It feels like someone driving bamboo shoots under your toenails," the man said. "Except, of course, you don't have toes anymore. Or legs for that matter."

His right hand raised high in the air, Henry had begun to have moments when he forgot about the pain, and his arm seemed to hang there alive on its own, as if that was where it was supposed to be. He felt, for moments, that he could keep it up forever.

Doris went on a search. She prowled around the study, scanning the shelves, pulling books out and stuffing them back to make them fit. Henry was sitting in his chair looking out the window when Doris dropped a book in his lap. It was the Guinness Book of World Records.

"Turn to page fifty-one," Doris said. Henry searched for it. She had circled an entry with a red magic marker.

*Longest Hand-Raising: Amar Bharti of India
claims to have kept his right hand raised*

for 26 years as a gesture of devotion to the Hindu God Shiva. In 1973, he decided to raise his right arm 90 degrees in the air. His fingers have withered into the palm of his hand, his knuckles are white with rot, and his nails have grown long and twisted.

"Don't go thinking you're original," Doris said. "You were reading this while sitting on the can."

"It's not that simple," said Henry.

"We're going to church on Sunday," Doris said on her way out of the room. "And you're not bringing any of this nonsense with you."

"Yes," thought Henry. "Church is the place."

Doris had her bridge ladies over every Saturday, and this week was no different. The ladies sat at the kitchen table in a hover of smoke, but they weren't talking as much as usual. They had seen Henry in the window as they pulled in the driveway, his hand raised in the air. They had seen him in the living room as they stood in the foyer, Doris stuffing their jackets in the closet, and hustling them into the kitchen. They hadn't said anything about it until now.

"He wrecked his shoulder playing catch with our grandson," Doris said.

"Oh my," the ladies cooed.

"It aggravated an old baseball injury - he used to be a pitcher, you know."

"Yes, I remember you saying that," one lady said, uttering a thought each one of the ladies was thinking, even though Doris had never mentioned it before at all.

"Anyway, his arm's stuck like that - and he's too stubborn to go to the doctor. He thinks it will fix itself."

"Oh my," the ladies gasped.

"The way I figure it," Doris said, "he'll be pretty handy if I need a light bulb changed around here."

The ladies laughed.

"Your deal," Doris said, and they played on.

The bridge ladies gone, the kitchen table clean and the lingering smoke fleeing through an open window, Doris ambled to the living room, and stood beside Henry in his wingback chair. He hadn't moved in hours, but sat watching night drop slowly over the lake. Doris watched as cars slid past, their headlights searching eyes in the dark.

"Henry," Doris whispered calmly in his ear, "in forty-eight years of marriage, you have never once raised a hand to me."

"This isn't about you," said Henry.

"It doesn't matter," said Doris.

She was quiet beside him.

"I'm going to bed," she said.

Henry woke, twisted and tangled among his bed sheets, sweating. Doris was beside him, her covers gone missing, huddled up in a ball, shivering. Henry untangled himself, put on his slippers and arranged the blankets over Doris. He saw the tie hanging loosely on the bedpost. He had forgotten to tie his hand the night before, and yet it was still high in the air on its own.

He shuffled out to the living room and sat in his chair. The lawn and the street and the lake was before him, lit by a moon hanging over the sky. The lawn was frosted with cold; blades of grass were huddled together with coatings of ice. Henry watched as the day arrived on the lake and the road and the sidewalk and the lawn, and he watched as each blade of grass, warmed by the rising sun, separated from its frozen centre and became alive on its own.

"Perhaps I am too old," he said quietly. "Perhaps no one will listen to me." He pawed at his unshaven face with

his left hand. His white hair lay a top his head in a tangled, frothy mess.

Henry stepped into the shower and scrubbed himself clean. He wiped the steam off the mirror with a wash towel and scraped the white scruff off his face with a dull razor. He tiptoed into the bedroom, Doris asleep, and pulled an old suit out of the closet: brown pants, white shirt. He sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed his shoes shiny with polish. He undid the knot of the dusty brown tie from the headboard and, somehow, in front of the mirror, managed to tie the wrinkly tie around his neck using only his left hand.

Doris woke, and, as she did every Sunday morning, prepared her oatmeal with a dollop of brown sugar. She put on her blue dress, curled her frosty white hair, and stood in the foyer. She waited as Henry got up slowly from his wingback chair, wiggled his coat on over his upraised arm, and followed her out the door.

At Fields United Church on University Boulevard, the minister, Tom Stirling, had just finished his sermon. The choir sang. The organ played. The congregation sat hushed in their seats. Henry Huntington dropped, at the nudging of Doris' elbow, a few dollars into the collection plate and passed it to his left. "You look handsome," Doris whispered in his ear.

"Now is the time," the minister said, "that we welcome the members of our congregation to give thanks, ask questions, or say a prayer." A few members of the congregation shifted in their seats, a few coughed. Many turned over their shoulder to gaze at Henry Huntington. Doris had been conscious of this since they turned the corner by their house and walked towards the church. She could sense them staring at her, too, but if anything she had learned over forty-eight years of marriage, it was when Henry needed support. "It seems we have one member especially eager today," the minister spoke. "Henry Huntington - is this something we can speak about in private?"

Henry shook his head, no.

"Well then, Henry, please stand and address the congregation."

Henry looked beside him, at Doris. Doris looked Henry in the eye.

Henry Huntington pushed himself off the hard wooden pew with a shaky left hand, and balanced himself on wobbly knees. As he stood, his right arm dropped slowly to his side. Doris picked up his hand in hers, rubbing the blood and the warmth and the feeling back into it. Henry cleared his throat, adjusted his tie, and began to speak.

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Araby' s

In a relationship, beef makes all the difference. Allow me to explain. Lindsay is a vegetarian, and I find this out the hard way. When we go out for dinner on our first official date, she shoots chickpeas around her plate with a fork, while I dab my bun in oily pools of blood, heaps of uneaten fat swept to the side.

We are trying to make this work. We are taking these steps: going out for dinner, having conversations, getting to know each other, learning to love each other. We are trying to make this relationship a reality.

To redeem myself, I take her for a walk through the streets and the thick grass of the park. We walk past the coffee shops and old bookstores on Dublin Street. We walk the asphalt path beside the river, past the old men out for late night walks, past the jogging women and their tongue-hanging dogs, past the skateboarders spinning tricks on the

parking lot curbs. We come to the footbridge, a hundred yards upstream from the dam. We stop in the middle.

She leans against the railing in a relaxed pose, looking at me expectantly. "I was walking past here in the spring," I tell her, "when I saw a guy standing on a pan of ice the size of a car. He was holding a stick and floating down the river."

"Like an Eskimo Huck Finn," she says.

I laugh. "I guess he was jumping on the shore ice when a piece broke free, and the current swept him down river. I thought he might need help — but I waved to him, and he waved back. So I guess he kept floating until he reached land somewhere."

Lindsay grins at me, and takes off her shirt. I stare at the black lace of her bra. She continues to undress and, naked, she climbs the iron rail and leaps off the bridge, into the dark water.

Swimming, her shape is indistinct, the lines of her body blurry. I climb between the iron guardrails and carefully drop down to a cement platform. I hold on to the railing, the river whisking past on all sides.

She swims up to the platform and climbs out, her delicate knees scraping on the rough cement. She stands before me naked and wet and brushes her hair to the side,

exposing the curve of her neck. She holds me tight to the rail, her breasts pushing against my chest, wetting my shirt. She kisses me and my eyes widen. She bites my lip so hard I worry it will bleed.

She climbs over the railing, puts her clothes on over her goose-pimpled body. I climb up beside her. She says, "Are you going to Araby's on Thursday?"

I found a postcard in my mailbox a few weeks ago. It was decorated with palm trees, drawn in crayon. It read, simply:

Thursday Nite

at

ARABY'S

I still have that postcard. Though it doesn't say much, it tells me everything. It tells me Araby's is a new bar in town. It tells me that, after waiting for hours to get inside on a Thursday night, the girls appear with sun-dyed hair, thin colourful sundresses and smooth skin; the boys with short hard haircuts, clean shaved faces and breezy collared shirts. Humid clouds of smoke and sweat linger over

the crowd and the smells commingle into a spicy, tropical scent, like cinnamon.

Of course I'm going to Araby's; it's funny that Lindsay should ask. We see each other there every week. We exchange glances across the crowded room, then look the other way. We bump into each other, sending electric shivers coursing through our bodies and leaving a tingling sensation on the back of my neck for the rest of the night. There is something – everything – between us, "but," she says, and this is where we disagree, "no one else needs to know."

Every Thursday night I leave Araby's alone. I walk the empty streets back to my apartment. She meets me there much later, coming in quietly after I have fallen asleep. It is best, she says, to do it this way – it makes it exciting, like an affair. We make love on the couch, where the flickering television lights her body in a kaleidoscope of colours. Her body is a late-night infomercial canvas: the scenes change and the yellows, blues, and reds are thrown on her golden skin; our actions are cheered by the canned laughter of the studio audience – they applaud when we are finished.

Despite my brutish meat-eating habits, she has offered to see me again. I can't wait until Thursday. We will be

there together. We will acknowledge each other. We will walk, hand in hand, back to my place, and our true relationship will begin.

I arrive at Araby's bursting with excitement. I have come late, in order to appear fashionable and to catch her off guard. I have spent all week waiting and worrying, and now, finally, I see her in the corner dancing, surrounded by friends. I slide my way through the crowd to get close. I stand in front of her, but she pretends not to notice. I tap her on the shoulder. I wave. She turns her back to me.

Lindsay comes to the apartment the next day. It is a surprise visit, but I am cooking her dinner anyhow – a vegetable stir-fry. Music is playing, candles are lit, and I am wearing an apron, looking like a true chef.

"I'm going away," she says.

"Where?"

"Away," she says.

I move in to kiss her on the cheek, but she steps back.

"Your apron," she says. "It's covered in grease." My eyes drop to the floor. "Sorry," she says.

I eat alone.

I cannot find sleep. I throw the pillows to the floor because the smell of her hair lingers there. I hear soft footsteps approaching my bed. I feel the cold air as she lifts the blankets and slips under. I feel her breath on me as she shudders to get warm.

I walk alone through the streets. I sit at our park bench. I go to our spot by the water, underneath the bridge, and I think of how she kissed me.

Lindsay doesn't call. I have no way of contacting her. I will not see her again until Thursday at Araby's.

The intervening days are long. I turn on the tap and listen to the creaking pipes, the rumble of water in the bathtub. I get in, turn the tap off, and listen. There is the odd, empty drip from the faucet. There is a hum from the fluorescent light above the sink. The fridge motor, when it jolts to a start, sends the half-empty wine bottles clinking together.

I put my head under, close my eyes and let the water creep around my face, submerging everything but a small circle around my mouth and nose. The sounds underwater are hollow moans and creaks: I imagine them as the weight of the ocean, pushing at the iron seams of my submarine.

Thursday arrives and I am sitting alone at Araby's. I have come early, and there is nothing yet to do except watch the bartenders stock the fridge with beer. After a time the bar fills with collared shirts, gelled hair, sundresses and glistening skin. The music starts. The room fills with noise. I watch the door closely, hoping to spot her when she walks in. I am looking at the same faces, seeing them through a crowd again, and again. I am hot and sweating. I head for the washroom to rinse my face.

I am stepping in puddles of piss and water on the tiles of the bathroom floor, so deep in places I worry it will spill over the edge of my sandals and seep between my toes. The bathroom walls are covered with crude drawings of palm trees. I look in the mirror and see a face, covered with dark stubble, sallow in the fluorescent light. I promise myself I will do something about it. As soon as I get through with this.

I make my way to the bar through the tightly packed bodies. I can sense her presence in the room. And then I see her out of the corner of my eye, laughing between the faces, dancing between the shadows of the moving coloured lights. My palms are instantly wet. I down my drink and order another.

She climbs up on a platform and dances there, elevated above the crowd and guarded by an iron railing. I notice her golden suntan under the black light. Her yellow hair is damp; beads of sweat rest on her shoulders.

I will bring her a drink. I push my way through bodies, past faces, to the middle of the dance floor, hoisting the drink high above the crowd. I try not to take my eyes off her, but my face becomes tangled in a mess of hairspray coated blond hair. I feel a sharp heel digging into my toes. I hunch over in pain, spilling the drink.

"Watch where you're going!" I say. The girl I am looking at is unattractive, her face plastered in make-up. She reeks of a heavy perfume.

"Likewise," she snarls between glossy red lips.

The beats of the music scratch, skip, and stop. There is a problem with the noise, and the crowd groans and sighs. Lindsay stands on the platform, her hand on the railing, gazing down at everyone.

The lights stop their circular spinning motions and come to a rest. Lindsay is lit with coloured lights from below and behind. A spotlight beams into my face and burns my eyes. I am unable to see. All I can do is imagine her there.

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The reader understands that the band Mister Henderson does not exist. The reader also understands that none of these albums exist, and that this is a ploy by the writer to get money, which he desperately needs if he wishes to avoid getting a job. Jobs are terrible things. The author discovered this at a very young age. If you are a Bible reader, and have a job, you will understand why job and Job are spelled the same. NO REFUNDS.

Maria

I slammed the door shut. I blocked it with my foot.

"Let me go," she said, her arms folded across her chest.

"I'm confused," I said. "About us."

"There is no us."

I stepped back from the door.

"I love you," I said.

"It's too late for that."

She slipped out.

I went into the bathroom where it was darkest, and sat huddled in the corner.

I woke hours later. I hurt all over. I turned on the light and looked in the mirror. There was a red scratch from my eye to my jaw. I found clumps of skin under my fingernails.

I don't remember doing it.

Josh and I talked about it over a beer. "Let's buy you a pair of wife-beater mirrored glasses," he said. "And a wife-beater undershirt. You can get one at Wal-Mart — that's where all the wife-beaters shop, right?"

"I'm not quite a wife-beater," I said.

"What did she say when you called her?"

"That I scared the hell out of her."

"That's it?"

"She was crying, Josh. I couldn't say anything. She told me to never call, write, stop by, any of that stuff. I'm cut off."

"Fuck women," he said. "Can't live with 'em." There was another half of the saying he forgot to mention. "Don't let it bother you."

I had trouble with his advice.

Josh was the first person I met at university, my roommate. One lazy Friday afternoon in October of our first year, some people from down the hall, including a girl named Julie, came piling into our room. Everyone was getting to know each other. I sat for a long time in the corner, listening. Then there was something I had to do. "I have a kid at home," I said. Everyone looked at me, the guy who hadn't said anything in an hour even though everyone was a

guest in his room. I had their attention. "Yeah, he's two-years old, but I hardly ever see him."

Someone asked, "How often do you see your girlfriend?" I think it was Julie.

"I haven't seen her since the kid was born. They send me those bills, but I don't pay attention to them."

I could hear people squirming. "It's not my fault she got preggers," I said. Two girls standing in the doorway slipped away.

"What's your boy's name?" Julie asked.

Think quick.

"Stephen," I said.

Josh timed the joke perfectly, as though he was in on it. "You're a dead beat dad," he said, laughing. The guys in the room laughed with him; the girls groaned. Julie punched Josh in the arm, lightly. She called him a jerk.

That night I saw them leave the bar together. Later I heard they spent time together, alone, in my room.

I waited almost three weeks before I told them it was a joke. I think jokes are funnier that way, the *delayed* punch line, when people think you are a complete asshole until they realise they were fooled. I'm pretty sure, however, that most of them continued to think I was an asshole long after that, including Julie.

This is how I think of Julie.

Every fall in my hometown there is a Harvest Festival. Besides the music, the rides, and the draft beer, there is the Harvest Queen Pageant, where the winner is jokingly referred to as the "Corn Queen." One year a girl I knew from high school, Shannon Walden, won the pageant. The pageant was on Thursday. Saturday night in the beer tent, she was still wearing her crown.

I spotted Shannon Walden dancing with Stan, one of the most popular people in town. But a retard, they'd say. When he moved here to live with a distant relative, it took everyone a while to get used to him. They began to accept him after they had it explained that he was born "that way," and he wasn't "like that," because he was dropped as a baby or witnessed his parents get murdered. Girls normally stayed away, but Stan and Shannon were dancing, Shannon keeping a sixth grade slow dance distance between them.

"Easy now," I said to her, my hand resting on the small of her back. I winked at Stan. "Don't let him put the moves on you."

She laughed. "It's nothing like that," she said. "I'm just a compassionate person." She said it as though I were

the beauty pageant judge, about to rip the sash off her neck and smash her crown on the floor.

That's how I think of Julie. Julie is the Corn Queen in some small town, somewhere, dancing with the retarded guy.

Josh and I look alike. That's what people say. We look alike, dress alike, act alike. We go to the same places. We drink the same beer.

I figured Josh and I would live together in second year, get a house and call it *the bachelor pad* or whatever he wanted, but that wasn't the case. He had different plans. I ended up living alone, but thankfully, through most of it, I had Maria.

Maria thought I was a hottie. A smoothie. She liked my sideburns. I know this because Josh told me so. The flirtation thing with Maria and I, the across the room glances, the smiles and the laughing and the unnecessary touching, would have gone on forever if it wasn't for Josh. He kept himself busy talking to Maria's friends, ensuring Maria and I ended up at the same place on the same nights, and after, that I played the part of a gentleman and walked her home. He made sure I "closed the deal" with her. And when I did, he was after me for every detail.

I asked him why he liked doing this stuff so much. He said, "Julie's a great girl, but I can't get around like I used to." But, boy, if he didn't have that girlfriend, no one has any idea how many chicks he'd bang. He lived vicariously through me, though I wasn't the best choice. I did very little living.

Josh dragged me to a college formal, outfitting me with one of his many suits so I could get in the door. I was sitting down after dinner, surrounded by empty glasses of wine, and Josh was across the table, some giggling, punch-drunk girl sitting on his lap. Julie was watching from the dance floor. She came over to the table. She had to push aside a chair, and swing her leg in front of me to sit down. Her black dress fell to the side, revealing her thigh. What do you do when a thigh is in your face? You look at it. Across the table, the punch-drunk girl was now sitting alone. Josh had left the table, pushed his way through the dance floor, and stormed out of the room.

In high school I had a friend named Stephen. I haven't talked to him since, but we were great friends at the time. One night when he wasn't around there was a party, and his girlfriend Claire and I, a touch drunk, got together in the bedroom.

I had to confront Stephen. He had to know. A week later we were at a party and out on the porch smoking.

"Look at me," I said.

He looked up for a second, half-smirking at my seriousness, then back down to the ash of his cigarette.

"I've got something to tell you," I said. "Look me in the eye."

He looked up. "Last weekend, when you were gone. I had sex with Claire."

"Whatever," he said.

"You're my best friend. I want you to know — Claire and I had sex."

"Get lost," he said, laughing. "Quit kidding around."

"I'm serious!" I said, grabbing him at the shoulders.

"You expect me to believe that Claire slept with you? Claire? With you? You ugly fucker!" He dropped his cigarette and ground it into the porch with his heel. "You're a clown," he said, laughing, as he moved towards the door.

Josh and I graduated. Not together, really, but at the ceremony he had his parents take a picture of us in front of our old residence, as if to say, "Look how far we've come!"

I hadn't seen or heard from Josh for two years after graduation until he called me up to invite me on a road

trip. An alumni weekend - back to school. He was persistent that I go with him; I got the hint somewhere that Julie couldn't make it. I had nothing to do, so I agreed.

When he arrived I threw my bag in the trunk and got in. When his end of the conversation dried up, after four long hours, Josh told me he and Julie were engaged. It made sense. He had a job, a car, a mortgage.

"She's a bitch," he told me, "but I love her. And, I could do a lot worse."

I never liked that word. People use it too freely.

Maria.

I slammed the door shut. I blocked it with my foot.

"Let me go," she said, her arms folded across her chest.

My chin dropped. I looked at my feet. I couldn't move.

Then it came. I felt the cold slap of her hand across my cheek. She grabbed hold of my arms, pulled out a clump of my hair. She clawed at my face. I fell back on the couch, and she kept coming at me, a flurry of fists and insults.

I heard the door slam shut.

I was bleeding. I ran my hand over my face, feeling a red scratch from under my eye, down the length of my face to my jaw. "Sorry," I said, moments after she left.

Josh showed up at my door the next day with a wife-beater undershirt, in my size. He even put a little mustard stain down the front of it. "One-hundred-percent authentic," he said proudly. I wanted to slap him, but I laughed instead.

After graduation, I was hoping I could disappear and never return, having contact with the university only through alumni letters asking for a chunk of the money we were supposed to be making. But as Josh and I sat in the corner of the pub on our pathetic road trip, it became painfully obvious anonymity wasn't on the agenda.

People walked by often, said their hellos. I heard a lot of "Hey! Good to see you! What are you doing now?" from people who never stopped to listen to the nothing I had to tell them. They went on talking to Josh. I spent my night smiling, laughing when I was supposed to laugh, and drinking my beer.

I don't recall moving, unless I went to the washroom, but I lost Josh that night. I wandered out to the streets alone.

I came across a red house, dark except for a few lights sneaking around the cheap blinds and Canadian flags covering

the windows. I sat on a park bench across the street, lit by a lamppost beside me.

Something inside me thought about knocking, seeing if she was there, if that was *her* window I was staring at. She couldn't live there anymore. She would have left a few years ago, been replaced by other university students. I was thinking maybe I'd meet up with her, get the chance to say things I'd been meaning for her to hear.

I sat there, lit a cigarette, and watched the window of a room in which some other innocent girl was sleeping.

I found myself at the door of our motel room. I didn't have a key, so I knocked. It was a while before Josh answered, his lower half covered with a towel. "I'm a little busy right now," he said. He handed me his car keys. "Sit in there for a while and listen to some tunes."

He tapped on the car window at eight in the morning. I didn't see the girl leave.

"I've never cheated like that before," he said on the ride home. "But you know what? Julie kissed some guy in the summer. She said it was an accident, she was drunk and all, but I can't stop thinking about it."

I figured his jealousy about that kiss is what made him buy the ring.

"What was her name?"

"That's the worst part. I'm not even sure."

"Do you feel bad?"

"Yeah. Cheating makes you feel kinda cheap."

"How long are you going to think about it?"

"I don't know," he said. "A couple days."

Josh called me in the spring. He and Julie were moving into their new house, and needed some help with the grunt work. Was I doing anything? Of course not.

You learn a lot about people when you're moving all their stupid things from one place to another, wishing you could throw most of it away so you don't have to carry it. I carried so many shoeboxes that day, all neatly taped and labelled "knick-knacks" in red marker. I dropped a box by accident and the tape broke. I looked inside. Among pens and pencils, erasers, a candle, a couple computer disks and some checkers pieces, there were three pairs of castanets. Who has castanets nowadays? And three pairs of them? But I did my job. I carried as much stuff as I could carry, and tossed it into the truck.

The next morning Josh would drive the truck to their new house. I was to come back then and help unload. Josh bought a pizza and a box of beer. We were lying on the floor

in the empty kitchen. Julie sat on the counter, knocking the empty cupboard with her heels.

Josh had something to do and walked outside. Julie and I were alone. I couldn't stand it.

"He fucked someone else, you know."

I had her attention.

"Last fall, when the two of us went up to school, for homecoming or whatever. He fucked a girl in our motel room." In a normal kitchen, all one would hear now was a fridge motor running, but this kitchen was empty. "He's just getting back at you for kissing that guy last summer."

A pause. Then she said, "What was her name?"

"Claire," I said. "I don't think you know her." She stayed for a moment, then hopped off the counter and left the room.

I don't know what got into me. I suppose I wanted to be more than the guy in the graduation pictures, more than the guy who helped us move the collection of castanets into the new house. It may have had something to do with wanting to get out of another moving day, but then there was Josh. I wanted to ruin him. Maybe not his whole life, but at least the part that kept him afloat, that kept his head above water.

Maria.

I slammed the door shut. I blocked it with my foot.

I moved closer, my chin resting on her shoulder. I could see the lines of her veins, the curve of her neck.

I kissed her there.

She stepped back. "Let me go," she said.

I pushed her with two hands. Her head hit first, making a dent in the drywall. I said some things I can't remember. She swiped at my face and it hurt me. She was yelling. The neighbours would hear. My hands clasped around her white throat, the soft skin under her chin. Her frantic hands clawed at me, her fingernails digging into my arm.

I let go. We fell to the floor in a heap. I put my arms around her tired, choking body. She flung them aside. She crawled to the door. She left.

Josh tried to cheer me up with a joke. "What does a girl do the second she leaves the battered women's shelter?"

I refused to say it. "What."

He said, "The fucking dishes if she knows what's good for her," and laughed wildly to himself.

The other day I received an invitation in the mail that I've been mulling over ever since. A wedding. Josh and

Julie. It occurred to me then, seeing his name in print, that besides a piece of paper conferring upon me the degree of Bachelor of Arts with all its rights, privileges, and obligations, Josh is about all I have left of those times. Had Josh not walked in the door as my roommate in first year, none of the rest would have happened. No Josh. No Julie. No Maria.

I think how free I would be without him. This thing I carry inside me probably wouldn't linger so long had Josh not labelled me a wife-beater at every opportunity. I don't even know what it means anymore. Firstly — if that's a requirement — I don't even have a wife. Secondly, I'm not even sure what happened that afternoon. It could have happened any of those ways.

You could ask Maria. She knows.

Order Form

You must use the following exercise before writing reviews and discussing the author and his work. You must match an adverb from *Column A* to an adjective from *Column B*, to a noun from *Column C*. The author has completed the first sentence for you already.

Column A	Column B	Column C
Deliciously	Erotic	Dynamo
Fantastically	Generous	Superstar
Super-Duperly	Indomitable	Genius
Extraordinarily	Gregarious	Poet
Outrageously	Svelte	Deity
Impeccably	Muscular	Mogul

If the above columns are insufficient to your needs, you may purchase adjectives from *Column D* at \$99.99 per.

Column D

Haemorrhoidal	White-bread	Nervous
Touchy-feelie	Malodorous	Unsound
Agonising	Embarrassing	Depressing
Pretentious	Rectal	Over-rated
Sentimental	Genital	Negligible
Painful	Crap	Is This For Real?

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The reader and critics realise, for obvious reasons, they will never need to use the adjectives in Column D. The author has only placed them there to be humorous. The reader may send money anyhow, just because he feels the author is a deliciously svelte genius. NO REFUNDS.

The Video Shop

I'm thinking of making a movie about us. How's this for a title:

The Video Shop. Dir. Lionel Heath. Perf. Lionel Heath,
Amanda Bettencourt. Prospect Pictures, 2003.

Here's the plot: you and I wander the aisles of a video store. We search for a movie to rent. It doesn't sound like much, you're right, but I don't think you understand the magnitude of this situation.

If we don't pick a movie we are going to break up. I know this. This is a fact. And I know this is a bad thing because we are in the middle of a cold February. You've read my screenplay, the tentatively titled and yet-to-be produced February Love, and you may recall one scene where the main character is talking about dumping his girlfriend, and the other guy says

OTHER GUY

Never break up with a girl in
February.

And why not, you ask? Because it's so damn cold up here, that's why. Because it's so cold and lonely, and in my particular case, because I have spent the last five months with you, and no one but you. If we are unable to decide on a movie, any movie, and if we stroll the aisles of the video store but fail to accomplish our mission, there will be trouble.

We are at The Video Shop on Parkhill Street. Not to be confused with The Video Store next to Hill Street Park. Also not to be confused with Ted's Palace of Film, on Charlotte, where I'd prefer to be. Ted's Palace of Film has a huge selection of foreign and independent films. I go there often, but never, ever, with you. It would be a disaster, like you taking me clothes shopping. Or to a student government meeting.

I wish I were in Ted's Palace of Film, where I would be more likely to encounter

Koyaanisqatsi. Dir. Godfrey Reggio. New Cinema, 1983.

than

Godzilla. Dir. Roland Emmerich. Perf. Matthew Broderick, Jean Reno, Hank Azaria. Sony, 1998.

that I see here, in the "ACTION" section of *The Video Shop*. I am hoping to find, when walking through these aisles, a movie I have never seen before that, when I watch it, moves me. I am hoping to find something that engages and enrages me. I wish that you and I could experience this movie together, and afterwards, talk about it for hours on end.

But I realise this is unlikely to happen. You are skimming the shelves, your blond hair curling in waves over your shoulders. You are beautiful still, in the pale fluorescent light and the grey walls of this stale video atmosphere. But your beauty was never in question. It is your taste in movies that I find objectionable. Tonight, if it were up to you, if you had a boyfriend with zero taste in these matters and who blindly went along with your decisions, you would be likely to choose one of:

Pretty Woman. Dir. Garry Marshall. Perf. Julia Roberts, Richard Gere. Buena Vista, 1990.

Dirty Dancing. Dir. Emile Ardolino. Perf. Jennifer Grey,
Patrick Swayze. Artisan, 1987.

Pretty in Pink. Dir. Howard Deutsch. Perf. Molly Ringwald,
Andrew McCarthy, Jon Cryer. Paramount, 1986.

that are lined up on the shelves here, together. You are reminded, watching these movies, of slumber parties when you were twelve, when you and your giggling girlfriends hugged pillows and screeched when the camera revealed the muscular butt of Patrick Swayze. And while what you and I are up to, tonight, and in our relationship as a whole, is not unlike a slumber party, I am unable to watch these movies. I find them unbearable.

We tap the plastic video cases in our hands as we consider, just to make a sound other than our creaking footsteps on the carpet, the pencil scratches on the desk from the clerk behind the counter. She is a woman in her thirties, pregnant and wearing glasses, who used to be attractive in her time, before she shackled up with her husband who probably owns the place. She is too preoccupied to rewind the preview video on the circuit televisions, too busy with the silence of her boredom to entice us to rent.

I consider:

Air Force One. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. Perf. Harrison Ford, Gary Oldman, Glenn Close. Columbia, 1997.

because all they have at *The Video Shop* are generic Hollywood films like this. I am willing to watch Harrison Ford in a movie intended to excite the American imagination about that fancy plane, a movie created to make U.S. citizens proud to have such a kick-ass president, and I am willing to suffer this Hollywood trash to be with you tonight. I lift the case over the shelf and show it to you. You shake your head, have already seen it, and counter with:

Armageddon. Dir. Michael Bay. Perf. Bruce Willis, Billy Bob Thornton, Ben Affleck, Liv Tyler. Touchstone, 1998.

I cannot properly convey my feelings for this movie but you must believe me when I tell you this will not work. This is what happens when art and life try to co-exist. I should have become a writer, for no novelist has to suffer his wife's penchant for romance novels, he simply chooses not to read them. But were it not for video rentals and the two hours of cuddling entertainment they provide on evenings and

weekends, I don't know what couples would do to survive. I don't know how we survived all this time.

I look for something the both of us can enjoy, I honestly do, but I find myself drifting. I am like a Christmas shopper who, although with the best intentions for others, goes shopping for himself. I've learned to forgive myself of this; it's human nature. I offer:

Deliverance. Dir. John Boorman. Perf. Burt Reynolds, Jon Voight, Ned Beatty, Ronny Cox. Warner Bros. 1972.

I know you are critical of Americans in your politics, so I have chosen this movie, firstly, because it is a fine film, and, secondly, to give you some material to work with. A friend of mine, Joe Gunn, who happens to resemble the banjo-playing albino in the movie, has a theory that Deliverance is so enduring because it contains three things all American men are scared to death of: 1) the wilderness 2) southern rednecks 3) getting breached. Put all three together, he says, and you've got yourself a movie. But watching the "squeal like a piggy" scene would probably not go over well tonight.

In return, you offer

A River Runs Through It. Dir. Robert Redford. Perf. Craig Sheffer, Brad Pitt. Columbia, 1992.

by hoisting the box over the aisles for me to see. You have perhaps picked up on the river theme, matched the frothing Cahulawassee of Deliverance with the fly-fishing trickle of the Big Blackfoot in A River Runs Through It. I can understand your fascination with all things river, considering your efforts to ensure the university survives its current debacles. I know you have come to love the river that runs through our campus. I know you love how it slides through the surrounding hills and spits out the dam, then races softly past our dining halls and riverbank residences, under the footbridge, and to the next swirling dam downstream. It makes you feel academic. It makes you feel Ivy League. Our campus is quite a sight, I'll admit. All the stone and concrete and grass and trees. A heck of a place to make a movie while you're in film school, and actually, not bad for Hollywood too, because this movie,

Urban Legends: Final Cut. Dir. John Ottman. Perf. Jennifer Morrison, Matthew Davis. Columbia, 2000.

was filmed here. You thought your good looks would get you a job as an extra, and were upset when the casting director didn't choose you. I know, being in my senior year of film school, that when they cast for extras, they skip past the beauties. They are not looking for your blond hair and angelic skin. They are simply looking for someone to fill space. You, not knowing this, were upset. Perhaps deep inside you harboured (before politics entered your life) a deep desire to be an actress, thinking your looks would take you there.

But back to us. (You will have to excuse me. You know, of course, that I cannot do anything without relating it to movies). I can see that we are already off to a poor start in this quest. We have seen great numbers of videos; we have poured over these same shelves countless times in search of something to keep us together. But I realise we have come tonight to the video store not out of the excitement and potential of watching a movie cuddled tight and comfortable on the couch, but because we are looking to prolong. We are looking for a mediator, some video to tell us a story and distract us, before we are forced to face each other alone.

Let me recap for you, at this juncture, the events of the past, our relationship, as I see it. Cut to Flashback. Cue the dream sequence.

With nothing better to do than each other, we spend whole afternoons, evenings, weekends, in my apartment. You have little energy for most things. You have a disease called _____ that makes you tired, that saps all your energy, that leaves you breathless and lethargic. I have forgotten the name of this disease. You were telling me about it, how it affects you, while we were watching

Gummo. Dir. Harmony Korine. Perf. Jacob Sewell, Nick Sutton, Lara Tosh. Fine Line Features. 1997.

and now I am too embarrassed to ask. It's nothing serious, I realise, more of an inconvenience than anything, and it's not contagious. I want to mention it at some point, perhaps talk about it over dinner, but now the moment is past. You should have known better than to tell me something so important during a film.

But perhaps this disease is what makes you so sexy, what makes you so cool and carefree, like you are not even trying. The way you smoothly wander the aisles of a video store, I admit, I find incredibly erotic. Perhaps this disease helps you with your politics. You maintain your cool, unlike all the other stressed out student politicians on campus, but it's not that you never suffer from stress:

it's simply that your energy level prohibits you from all but the necessary activities and emotions.

And soon after we met, I discovered what you consider the necessary activities and emotions. I can see us, our first time, rolling on the couch and the kitchen floor. You nibble on my ear, make soft noises; your hands envelop me.

LIONEL HEATH

For someone who's tired all the time, you sure have a lot of energy.

AMANDA BETTENCOURT

(wryly)

I always have energy for this kind of stuff.

LIONEL HEATH

Does that mean I'm going to get lucky?

AMANDA BETTENCOURT

It's not a lucky day unless you're getting lucky.

And so we did get lucky. That was five months ago, and it seems as though we've done nothing since. We've spent entire days mulling around on the couch, in front of the television. We've slid my mattress down the hall to its now permanent location in the living room, and here we have sex and eat and watch movies all day like every day it's raining and not worth leaving the house. Which isn't the case. It

was fall when this started between us, and the days were crisp but sunny and the hillsides were pungent with colour, and we had no desire to experience anything other than each other.

It was something like

Sweet November. Dir. Robert Ellis Miller. Perf. Sandy Dennis, Anthony Newley. Warner Bros., 1968.

or the re-make

Sweet November. Dir. Pat O'Connor. Perf. Keanu Reeves, Charlize Theron. Warner Bros., 2001.

that are placed on the shelves, side by side, in *The Video Shop*. I was a fan of the first; you, in admiration of the acting talents of Keanu Reeves, preferred the second. Our relationship is quite like these movies, except you never got sick and died and made me an unhappy but changed man. November has passed and now our evenings and weekends are spent the same way, except the crisp fall has turned to a cold winter. We are content with a bottle of wine in the evenings, dinner, a video, sex. We know there is much to do. You have student politics to take care of; I have a film

thesis that is sadly neglected. We know there are many out there doing many things, but these things, since we have been together, are not for us.

I can hear your creaking steps as you approach, a video in hand, looking for approval:

Benny & Joon. Dir. Jeremiah Chechik. Perf. Johnny Depp, Mary Stuart Masterson, Aidan Quinn. MGM, 1993.

Perhaps you think a romantic comedy will get us thinking about love and life and beauty, all the important things. Maybe, in your imagination, we will look in each other's eyes and all will be mended. I like the idea, but I despise the movie. I counter with:

Dumb & Dumber. Dir. Peter Farrelly, Bobby Farrelly. Perf. Jim Carrey, Jeff Daniels. New Line Cinema, 1994.

My solution is to laugh this off, but you shake your head, giving me a look that tells me you're not in the mood for buffoonery. Obviously you do not consider Dumb & Dumber the

Apocalypse Now. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Marlon Brando, Robert Duvall, Martin Sheen. United Artists, 1979.

of comedy, as I do, and you are unable to appreciate its many levels.

This is a difficult task. I am trying desperately to find the middle ground; honestly, I am. I understand your tastes lie in political parties, not films, and to make up for this I once rented something up your alley.

Mr. Smith Goes To Washington. Dir. Frank Capra. Perf. Jimmy Stewart. Columbia, 1939.

Did you not enjoy the political stuff? Were you not inspired to do your own filibustering? In the end, you thought it was boring. You were unable to appreciate my love for all things Capra. We argued after this, not about the movie, but about *something*, I can't remember what, in the way most couples argue when the sex is not going well (though this has never been a problem with us), and our argument continued through:

Buffalo '66. Dir. Vincent Gallo. Perf. Vincent Gallo, Christina Ricci. Lions Gate Films, 1998.

It is impossible to communicate to you how I was feeling while watching this film. I was enthralled, but you, bored, lie on the couch beside me, kissing me on the neck. And I rejected your advances, something I had never done before, but you must understand: this is the equivalent of me trying to look up your skirt during one of your political meetings. You, not understanding, went to the bedroom and slept there until the movie was over. And when I came down the hall, dazed from the experience the film had given me, you got up and left.

All this is in the past. All this is behind me. I want to look to the future, to tonight, but in order to do this let us think back to the one time we did agree on a movie. I suggested, one night, that maybe all I would ever be good for directing was porn films (everyone in film school says this at some point). You laughed and told me I was right. And the next time we were at *The Video Shop*, we wandered giggling behind the purple curtain in the back corner, and into a small closet, every wall filled to the ceiling.

AMANDA BETTENCOURT

Why are porn movie boxes so much
bigger than normal movie boxes?

It was the most astute porn observation I have ever heard. Porn video boxes are twice as big as the normal kind, so they can fit more smut on the cover. And for the moment you said it, I loved you. We laughed. You poked me in the belly. You leaned me against the rack and, surrounded by cardboard box covers plastered with big-breasted babes, cheerleaders leaning into enticing positions, you kissed me. We peeked out the curtain to make sure no one saw us. The woman behind the counter was engrossed in her tape-rewinding, and we snuck out.

As soon as we stepped out of the video store, you poked me again, and smiled playfully. I got the hint. I was nervous. I'd never rented a porn movie before, had always left that up to my friends. What if I rented the wrong film? What if there were farm animals involved?

LIONEL HEATH
All right. Okay.

I reached for the door.

AMANDA BETTENCOURT
Get one with a little bit of
everything.

I stepped back and looked at you, perplexed. You sighed and I thought that was it, we were leaving, until you walked in yourself. I watched you slip past the purple curtain and emerge, seconds later, with not just one, but *three* movies.

Sorority Sex Kittens. Dir. Jim Holliday. Perf. Ashlyn Gere, Shayla LaVeaux, Selena Steele, Peter North. VCA, 1997.

Trial by Copulation. Dir. James Avalon. Perf. Gwen Summers, Hershel Savage, Inari Vachs. Cal Vista, 1999.

These were interesting, you thought, but they weren't your first choice to throw into the VCR when we got back to my place. You had other ideas. Hence,

Where the Boy's Aren't: Part 14. Dir. Chi Chi La Rue. Perf. Brianna Banks, Taylor Hayes, Jenna Jameson. Vivid, 2001.

This was the only time we agreed on anything other than sex (though, of course, it had a lot to do with sex). Tonight, however, the sex over with for now, our faces flush with colour, my legs weak and my body spent, the movies behind the purple curtain are not an option. They will not save us.

With an already disappointed look on your face, you offer:

Captain Correlli's Mandolin. Dir. John Madden. Perf. Nicolas Cage, Penelope Cruz, John Hurt. Universal, 2001.

I can see that not only have I rejected your choice, but led you to think that I despise your taste in movies. This is not entirely true, but you place the video back with more than the required force. The shelf shakes a little.

I've decided we would not make a very good movie. This Video Shop is a bad idea. There's nothing to drive the plot; there's been no dialogue. We don't have interesting conversations with the pregnant woman behind the counter, we are not being held hostage by a terrorist, nor do we engage in dirty activities behind the purple curtain. There's nothing to show the agony of our decision. The subtle hints we're dropping each other, like the sighs I can hear across two aisles, the way you seem to be inching closer towards the door, wouldn't register in a high action medium like film. It's as though we're searching for a funeral casket, something final, to enclose ourselves in.

We have failed in our quest. We nod gently in the direction of the clerk behind the counter. The electronic

bell beeps as we leave the video store. We zip our jackets and walk into the February cold.

Before our quest began we had showered together and I was hot on the walk to the video store, but my fleece jacket is now insufficient, the cold seeping through to bite my skin. I gather close to you, try to find warmth in your pocketed hands. You are bundled up with a scarf. It is snowing lightly.

We arrive at the corner. Your place is two blocks left; my place is two blocks right. We stand next to the stop sign and shiver. Soon we are stamping our feet.

AMANDA BETTENCOURT
I guess this is it.

LIONEL HEATH
I guess so.

Not exactly driving dialogue, I know, but it is the first thing we've said all night. And here's the catch:

AMANDA BETTENCOURT
Don't worry. It'll be March soon.

It hits me like a hammer. February is forever from over, and the possibility of loneliness gnaws at me. But there is nothing to be done about it. Nothing to save us. Even if I

followed you back to your place and we tried to patch things together, we would surely fail. All this time, instead of searching for a video, another story to distract us from our own story, to give us life instead of taking it away, perhaps what we have been looking for is a way to end it.

How's this for an ending: you might consider this, the two of us on a street corner, lit by a street light in the winter cold, like the end of

Casablanca. Dir. Michael Curtiz. Perf. Humphrey Bogart,

Ingrid Bergman. Warner Bros., 1942.

except for a role reversal. You are the stoic Bogart; I am the weepy Bergman.

You go your way. I go mine.

A Funny One

This is the part that kills me.

Please send the rest of the story for only \$19.99.
I am enclosing \$_____, plus \$64.00 for shipping and handling.

Please complete the following form:

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State / Province _____ Postal Code _____

Send Cash and Order Forms to:

David Burke - 216 Flanders Rd. - Windsor, ON - N8N 3G3

The reader understands that the end of this story is not very funny. NO REFUNDS.

Girls I Have Kissed:

by gus vandersand

210 Dublin Street is where the ugly people live. There's the woman who has a thick Rollie Fingers moustache wriggling like a ferret above her lip; there's the wife beater who lives with a girl, presumably his wife, whom he constantly berates; and then there's the fat and balding man who works midnights and looks as though he hasn't seen the sun in decades.

It's also where I live, one more ugly person in the building. This is the worst: coming back to an empty apartment after the noise of a night like tonight. My ears ring, I stumble a little in the dark. I turn on the television and try to allay my loneliness with a glass of whiskey and M.A.S.H. reruns. I pick up some paper and a pen. I begin to write.

GIRLS I HAVE KISSED

by gus vandersand

This seems an adolescent pursuit for my twenty-six years, but I am nostalgic for all the women (girls, I should say) who have looked past my ugliness long enough for our lips to touch. I begin at the beginning:

#1) *Dawn Durocher*

When the empty beer bottle spun around the carpet and came to a stop, fate forever linked me with Dawn Durocher, a cute girl with brown hair that fell nearly to her ankles (not such a feat – we were in eighth grade and she was then only four and a half feet tall).

The host of the party, Tim Prospect, thrust me into a closet with Dawn. Tiny slants of light slipped through the cracks of the closet door, and were lost in the thick winter jackets. I had the benefit of the dark. We leaned into each other, our mouths met. Our tongues slipped out uneasily, like a turtle sticking its head out of its shell.

Dawn and I stayed in the closet much longer than expected. We could hear the others laughing outside, but we were enjoying it — I was, at least — and I could feel Dawn grabbing fistfuls of my t-shirt as she pulled me closer. A gasp escaped from her lips. I stuck my tongue out and wiggled it in her mouth. I flicked it up and down. I tasted her.

Her hands were moving slowly up my side and over my shoulder, her fingernails lightly scratching the back of my neck. Dawn stopped kissing. She played with the hair curled behind my ears, tugged on my ear lobe, then ran a finger softly over my cheek.

I kissed her finger. She ran it over my lip and began searching, feeling, exploring my face.

I slapped her hand away. I pushed through the winter coats and tried to escape. Dawn muttered something — apologies, maybe. I could see light underneath the closet door but I couldn't find a way out. The clothes hangers rattled. I found the doorknob, and as I turned it and stepped outside, the others were waiting to laugh, but were silenced when they saw the expression on my face.

I left the party and went home.

I should perhaps make a note, before I proceed, on the nature of my ugliness. I was born with a cleft palate and a cleft lip. There is a picture of me as a baby: my face looks sour, all bunched up under my nose, like someone sucking on an industrial strength lemon. I nearly died at eighteen months, I'm told, on the operating table during my first corrective surgery.

You may think all such problems are cleared up with ease in the first few years after birth - biggity bang, a few surgeries - and a normal life resumes. Not in my case. For my first eight years a slimy fluid leaked often from my nose and built up in a phlegmy mass in the back of my throat. I still suffer often from sinus and ear infections, and fight a continuing battle with the orthodontist over how I can make straight - once and for all - the teeth that were never straight in the first place.

Now only a scar remains: a long ridge splits my upper lip in two and slides up the right side of my face. It looks like someone took a miniature axe and gave my face one solid hack.

My mother, while pregnant with me, made fun of a child with a cleft lip. Later that day, my father came home from hunting and fed my mother a freshly killed rabbit for dinner. Believe them or not, these are stories told in the

old days, folk tales used to conjure up an explanation for one stricken by this curse, but there is no explanation to be had. I was born with this. And other than the awkward stares and troubles it has caused in my romantic life, I have learned to live with it. But don't let anyone with a deformity ever tell you they learn to forget it's there.

#2) *Missy Horton*

Before I ever kissed her, she invited me to meet her family on Thanksgiving. When I walked in the door I was greeted by her grandfather, who got up from his chair and stood on shaky knees, looked me in the eye through a thick pair of glasses, and said, "what happened to your face?"

I didn't get a chance to respond, for I was lost in the hubbub of introductions, but I saw Missy whisper the answer, as far as she knew it, in her grandfather's ear. I have learned to forgive people their rudeness in such matters, and actually, I have come to prefer it this way. It is better that they get it out in the open.

When the staring subsided and the afternoon drifted into boring chitchat, Missy took me on a tour of her grandparent's house. The last stop was the laundry room in a creepy basement. Missy locked the door, leaned me against

the dryer, and slathered me with kisses. She cooed a number of times, sending shivers down my spine. Now experienced in the art, I kissed her with all my might. She leaned back and looked at me with sweet and affectionate eyes.

"Are you okay?" she said.

She was feeling sorry for me.

"What's the matter?" she said.

I stormed out the door. Or at least, I wanted to storm out the door, but I couldn't figure out the lock. Once Missy unlocked it for me, I slipped out and left her grandparent's house and their Thanksgiving feast.

I saw Missy again at school and she apologised. We remained friends, but I never kissed her again.

Kissing is important to me, as it would be, I suppose, for anyone with a facial deformity. It's the most intimate of all the sexual acts, I think, and the most revealing. Nothing is closer to love; nothing is further from loneliness.

I tap my pen on the page. I've noticed, while constructing this list, that either through my own foolishness and fear, or by the fear and ignorance of my kissing partner, I have never kissed a girl twice. And hence this list, which I've constructed to look back upon all the

wonderful girls I have kissed, and to perhaps find out what went wrong.

I hear the front door to the building close and the shuffling footsteps of the moustache woman entering her apartment. I wonder how long it has been for her. She works at a convenience store two blocks away – she must have just finished her shift – and when I come in to buy a litre of pop or a bag of chips at night, I stare at the thick wire bristles. We pretend not to recognise each other as neighbours, but go about business as usual, and like the kids who hang out beside the store, I ask myself, “why doesn’t she shave that thing?” The moustache is so thick, however, that it is obvious she has shaved it before. So much so that it has grown back thick like a man’s. Maybe she keeps this moustache because she has already learned a very great lesson, that beauty is on the inside. When people stare awkwardly while trying to purchase a jug of milk, however, she can never forget what’s there.

3) *Keri Goulding*

I am proof that it is possible to lose your virginity to a girl before you have ever kissed her. By then I was in university, living away from home, and had managed to meet a

friend who lived in town at his parent's house. He had a party one night when his parent's were gone, and he introduced me to Keri Goulding.

Keri and I didn't know anyone else at the party so we clung to each other, and got very drunk. The host had a younger brother, and before I knew it, Keri and I were rolling around the floor of a rec room, squeaky toys trapped underneath us and squealing for help. There was no kissing, only touching, as Keri and I lay on the floor a few feet distant, reaching.

Soon we were naked. I just sort of perched over her and entered. She seemed a million miles distant, so distant that the normal kissing I assumed would attend such an event wasn't even an option. We went on for a while. I was having fun, sure, but I found myself thinking about something else, Ping-Pong, of all things, the back and forth *tock - tock - tock - tock*. I couldn't stop *tocking* and I was unable to finish.

We lay on the floor, a wooden rocking horse staring at us with glued on googly eyes. I kissed her on the neck. Eventually we cleaned up, dressed, and before we rejoined the party, we hugged for a good long while. And then, despite having already achieved what most guys want to achieve through kissing, I held her tight against the

doorframe and kissed her on the lips. She kissed me back. After that I never saw her again.

I have found myself becoming, despite my limited experience in the matter, and the frightful implications of revealing this to my friends, a connoisseur of kissing. Kissing is more important to me than it is for the guy who hopes tongue means nipple. By my own count, through stories I have heard and by first hand witness, Tim Prospect has kissed thirty-four girls. He is not terribly handsome, but there's something about his refusal to give up that makes even the better looking girls fall weak in the knees and into his clutches. Tim has slept with over half of these girls, and is of course looking to get in their pants; he thinks of kissing as simply a means to an end, rather than the ultimate goal. I resent this.

#4) *Kathy Broughner*

She was a girl who lived down the hall from me in residence. She was not extremely attractive, but because of my deformity, I have always prided myself in my selection of the girls you didn't notice the first time you walked by.

Kathy Broughner was new at this. She made up for her inexperience with extra effort, and straddled me in my chair as she sucked at my mouth with gusto. I could feel her fingertips touching the smoother reaches of my face, the tip of her tongue exploring my ridge. By then I had gotten used to this sort of thing. Kathy and I kissed hard and long and there were wet smacking noises.

When we ran out of breath, she eased off and sat back, smiling at me. The lower part of my face was soaking wet with her slobber. Though a little disgusted, I kissed her some more, but after that night I never kissed her again. There are some things you just can't teach.

I am not sure if my deformity affects my kissing abilities. My lips are generally moist and smooth, but I wonder if the ridge in my upper lip makes kissing me uncomfortable in a physical sense. I like to think that girls will look past my deformity, imagining how handsome I might look, as I often do, without the scar on my face.

The building's metal door clangs to a close and the wife beater and wife are bounding drunkenly up the stairs. I have heard these two discuss plans for moving out of this apartment, for buying a house and starting a family. He is tall and handsome, and has nothing, on the outside, to hide,

but I can hear through the thin walls, as I do now, the low rumble of their argument about to burst.

The scenario, as I have heard it played out every Saturday night for months now, goes like this: he accuses her of cheating; she defends herself; he smacks her around, knocking over furniture; she yells and cries; he cries and apologises; after much pleading, she accepts his apology. To top the night off, they have terrifically loud make-up sex. Next Saturday, I'm sure of it, they will repeat the process, and never go through with their moving plans.

#5) *Sandra Carroll*

I offered to walk Sandra Carroll home from the bar one night, giving the excuse that the place where ugly people live, 210 Dublin Street, was on the way.

During the walk I regaled her with tales of the moustache woman, the wife beater, and the pale-faced factory worker, all the while hoping that she'd excuse me from the list of ugly people living in that building, and offer to kiss me when we reached her place. I made her laugh, more than once, and the long walk turned quick and before I knew it we had passed my place and I was standing under her porch.

She leaned in to kiss me. I kissed her back. And the lips belonging to Sandra Carroll were smooth and clean and wet and the most glistening artefacts; her mouth tasted like cinnamon and the smell of the air and her hair drove me wild.

We kissed for a long time there, on her porch, and our noses were red in the cold but we kept kissing. And I wanted it to continue, I wished it would, but Sandra Carroll pulled her keys out of her pocket, opened the door to her apartment, gave me one quick last kiss on the lips, and disappeared inside.

I leaned weak-kneed against her porch railing, and I walked home on clouds. This was the one time, walking up to 210 Dublin Street late at night, when I didn't consider the ugliness of the people inside. Everyone and everything was beautiful. Sandra Carroll was beautiful. I was beautiful.

It was not meant to last. I happened to be walking by her house the next day and I called on her, and stood on her porch as she peeked her head outside, but didn't invite me in, and didn't come outside to continue what we started the night before.

I was devastated, having lost the girl with the best mouth, the best kisser. Did I do something wrong? Was it just a moment of romance on the walk home? I would never

know. I walked around for days, not on clouds, but in a fog, not being able to see where I was going or where I was coming from.

It was with this last episode in mind that I found myself on a dance floor tonight, in a dark corner of the bar, only occasionally lit by a passing and flashing neon light. I hide there often. In a dark corner, I am on the same level as all the other guys.

It was there that a girl caught my eye. She was dancing, bound into a corner by a throng of dancers. I was surprised to see her there; normally an unaccompanied girl is snatched up by a sleazy guy at the first opportunity. But she was alone, and perfectly content, it seemed, dancing to the undulations of her own rhythm.

I pushed my way through the crowd and into her corner. I couldn't see much of her, but she smiled at me. I leaned into this dancing girl, her skin glowing with sweat. I danced with her and quickly found her rhythm. She turned around and began rubbing into me. I wrapped my arms around her, breathing deeply the scents hidden in the curve of her neck. I leaned over her shoulder, she turned her head, and, dancing slyly together, we kissed.

Someone interrupted us. Her friend, I guess, tapped her on the shoulder and gave me a dirty look. She was being protective and she urged my girl to hurry; a taxi was waiting to take them home.

Dejected, I offered her a cigarette as a parting gift, hoping she'd remember me while lighting it up on the way home. She declined, making a hacking cough with her hand at her throat, but grabbed the cigarette package from my hands and pulled a pen from out of her purse. She wrote something on the cigarette package that I couldn't see in the dark. She smiled, squeezed her way through the bodies on the dance floor and left the bar.

I hear a car door slam. It is the factory worker, ugly person number four, coming in from his shift as the sun creeps over the edge of the city. 210 Dublin Street is complete; we are all home. The factory worker will crawl into his basement apartment and sleep the day long, until the sun sets, when he will emerge and work again.

The cigarette package stares back at me from the coffee table, and behind the depressing picture of a diseased and blackened lung are seven hopeful digits: 555-7121. Even more hopeful is the name attached to them:

#6) Cara

This brings me to the end of my list. I have given equal weight now to the whiskey and nostalgia, and find myself drunk and exhausted.

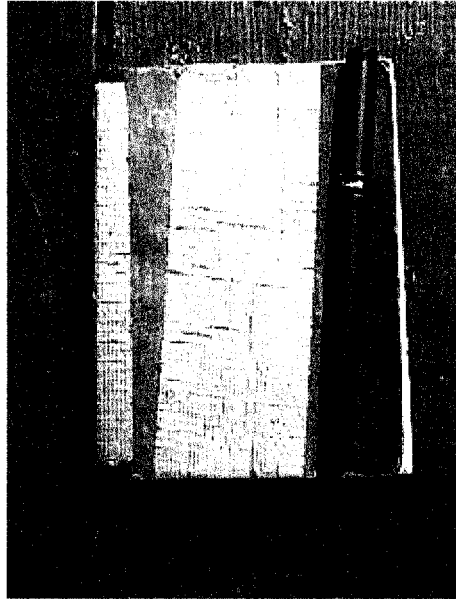
But the fog has cleared. I have kissed girl number six, and I will kiss her again.

It's time I find a new place to live.

Order Form

Be the proud owner of a fine piece of literary trash!

During the writing of this collection, the author carried this blue journal around wherever he went.



Now that the collection is finished, he is offering the journal for sale. It is full of interesting insights, observations, poems, fragments of the stories you've just been reading, as well as bonus things he couldn't squeeze into a story, such as:

Q: How was your trip to Cuba?

A: Revolutionary.

Be sure to snap up this collectible at the low price of \$299.99 before some other shlub does and pawns it on E-Bay!

Please complete the following form:

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State / Province _____ Postal Code _____

The reader realises the blue book is a very private thing in which the author has written letters of love to various females. He has also written very private poems about the nature of his sexuality, and he doesn't want this information leaked to the public. The author will likely destroy this material after his book is complete, so that future biographers and literary historians do not use it to dig up dirt. NO REFUNDS.

The Priorities of Paul Pringle

Though he knew he would be tired in the morning, Paul Pringle stayed up late Sunday night, a blank piece of paper and pen enticing him from the coffee table. With a flurry of inspiration he hastily scrawled:

The Paul Pringle Priority List

#1: MOVE UP IN THE WORLD

Sure, there were other things he wanted, needed, required: like beating Kratz's record of thirty-nine consecutive Wednesdays of cheap spaghetti at *Harry's Pasta Shack*, and meeting the love of his life, but these all depended on one thing: moving up in the world. And he needed his job at *Office Co.* to help him.

The priority list was well timed, too, because for the past three months, all Paul Pringle had thought about was selling. The head office in Toronto had implemented a plan to ignite the sales in the languishing *Office Co.* stores. If anyone wanted to work for their store, they had to sell things. Lots of things. They had to sell office chairs and pens and paper and desks and bookshelves. They had to sell filing cabinets and erasers and day-planners and computers. They had to sell word processors and mouse pads and printer cables and bubble jet printers and ink refill cartridges for bubble jet printers. They had to sell staplers, too. And if they didn't sell enough of these things, they would be "released."

But on the sleepy drive to work the next morning, Paul Pringle paused and held his coffee midway between his mouth and the coffee cup holder on the dash of his '94 Honda Prelude, wisps of Colombian steam lingering in the air before him. He drove past an *Office Co.* sign, as he did every morning, and glanced perfunctorily at what it had to say. The sign itself, until then, had only advertised sales, had only greeted customers with a welcome, had only meekly commented on the weather.

This morning, a new message glared at him. Under the red "*Office Co.*" logo was *Mr. Staples*, the company mascot, a

sapient-looking stapler with bushy eyebrows and an Einsteinian white moustache, under which read this message, hoisted over the expressway, for all to see:

THE AVERAGE
PERSON THINKS
HE ISNT

Paul knew that as a business owner, in this day and age, you needed something to make your sign jump out from the neon jungle. You needed pizzazz; you needed verve. Many business owners used the neon read-o-graph sign with the interchangeable letters to announce sales, holiday greetings, the birth of an employee's baby. But what really brought in the bucks, they thought, were the clever sayings foisted on an unsuspecting public. A neon sign next to the expressway was something every commuter shared, like a giant fortune cookie.

But this was ridiculous. This was an outrage.

Paul Pringle calmed himself by imagining the good old days, when signs used to say simple things, like

AT RONS AUTO
SERVICE COMES FIRST

or make inane comments about the weather

A LOT OF WEATHER WEVE BEEN HAVING

Kratz had sent an email a few weeks ago that had a number of funny Confucius sayings. If Paul Pringle had access to fifty thousand people passing his sign every day, on their way to work in the morning commuters would encounter

MAN WHO RUN IN FRONT OF CAR
GET TIRED

and on their way home they'd read

MAN WHO RUN BEHIND CAR
GET EXHAUSTED

Paul would leave out the Confucius part, so people wouldn't think the *Office Co.* was pretentious.

Paul Pringle hobbled into his stale office, the first one there. He was a little tired, his eyes only half-open,

but he turned on the coffeepot, warmed up the photocopier, and stood before his desk. He would spend his day here, filing TPS reports and attaching cover letters, making telephone calls to strangers trying to convince them to buy the trendy new ergonomic staplers. But as he stood above his desk, looking at the ordered chaos of paper and post-it notes, Paul Pringle became convinced that staplers were not important.

The other office workers wandered in at various stages of lateness, and herded towards the coffee machine, greeting Paul as they walked past his desk. Paul Pringle checked his email.

To: paulpringle@officeco.com

From: kratz-man@officeco.com

Subject:

Yo! How are things in the trenches? Beware of your job, fella, and keep selling - word from down the pipe says one of the Office Co. stores in your town is gonna close. Better sell some staplers to make sure its not you!

Kratz

"I'm telling you, Pringle," Kratz told Paul on a number of occasions, "you gotta move up to the big-time in Toronto. I'm surprised they aren't paying someone to hold my dick for me when I piss." Despite his crudeness, Kratz, only twenty-five years old and two years younger than Paul, was the company golden boy. To his fellow employees he was the ultimate nice guy, and it never seemed like he was kissing ass, though of course he was. Paul was jealous of Kratz's success, his easy slide up in the world, and wondered why he couldn't follow.

Paul's headache wouldn't leave him alone. He resorted, as he did in all such situations, to the one thing that helped sort out the mess. He wrote on a yellow sticky-note pad.

The Revised Paul Pringle Priority List

#1: Look for New Job

Writing it down made him feel a little better, but it also reminded him of the hopelessness of it all.

The morning slowly passed, marked by the hiss and drip of the coffee pot. Paul went through the motions. TPS

reports done. Filed, with cover sheets attached. As the clock neared twelve, still thinking about neon signs, he remembered one he saw long ago.

EVERY OBSTACLE IS ONLY
A STEPPING STONE
TO YOUR SUCCESS

With this in mind, Paul Pringle left work during his lunch hour, and sped down the expressway, driving quickly, but catching the flow of cars at an unusual, softer time. It was a break in his routine. He felt like a kid who stays home from school and spends the whole day wondering what his class is up to.

He parked. The sign glared at him.

THE AVERAGE
PERSON THINKS
HE ISNT

Underneath the sign was a garden full of measly shrubs. There were rocks. He thought about throwing one, but he remembered a neon sign he drove by one day.

ANGER IS ONLY
ONE LETTER SHORT
OF DANGER

He would not throw rocks. He would get even.

He was at the door of the competing *Office Co* warehouse. He had never been inside before. He stepped into the range of the sensors and the sliding doors opened up to him, the mascot *Mr. Staples* perched high above, his eyebrows wiggling. He stormed over to the sales counter desk, behind which lazily leaned a gum-chewing girl.

"Who is responsible for that sign?" he snapped.

"What sign?" the girl said, snapping her gum in reply.

Paul looked up from the floor. This girl, her dark hair parted in the middle and floating down to her shoulders, was no faceless employee. She was not responsible for the layoffs or the nasty message or his bad morning at work. This girl, even dressed in a red *Office Co.* golf shirt, was beautiful.

Paul caught his breath. "The sign out front. The one with the nasty message."

"I think Peter takes care of the signs. I'll get him for you." She picked up the telephone. He loved the sound of her voice, soft and silk, over the intercom: "*Peter at*

checkout. *Peter, please come to checkout.*" She put down the telephone and smiled. "He'll be with you shortly."

Uncomfortable silence. Paul checked her nametag - *Mr. Staples* was speaking her name, Shalise, in a cartoon bubble, just like his own nametag hidden under his jacket. Paul feigned interest in the staples, white-out and felt pens at the checkout. He watched as she leaned her hip against the counter and cleaned under her fingernails and snapped her gum.

He would do nice things for this girl. He would buy her things, like a stapler, for a gift. This would be a joke, of course, between two people who worked at an office supply warehouse.

He would leave her beautiful name, fifty feet high, towering above the expressway for everyone to see.

SHALISE

What had been nagging and gnawing at him for so long was finally here, the answer before him, as if all he had to do was kiss her and cross her off the list. Except he didn't think of it that way. This was a human being - a beautiful one - not a report to be filed or a priority to be achieved. He tapped his fingers on the desk. She looked up at him, her

dark hair tucked behind her ears. He cleared his throat.

"So," he said. "A lot of weather we've been having..."

A metal door clanged at the top of the stairs. Paul Pringle watched as a man, presumably Peter, walked down the iron staircase to the main floor. He was tall, his brown hair gelled neatly to one side. He stopped once to tuck a display chair under a display table, and continued his walk along the warehouse floor.

"I'm Peter. Can I help you?"

"I'm a concerned customer," Paul said. "I think your neon sign out front is ridiculous. It's depressing. It's an outrage!"

"Hmm. Hey. Don't you work here? I mean, don't you work at the other Office Co.?"

Paul shook his head. He tried to look as though it was a weird question.

"I swear I've seen you there before."

"I'm a schoolteacher. I'm here on my lunch break." He zipped his jacket all the way to the top.

"I imagine you've heard," Peter said, "that they're closing one of us down, huh? I mean, there'll only be one Office Co. in town by Christmas. Big news. It should be in the paper by tomorrow."

"It's scary to hear you'll be losing a job," Paul said.

"To tell you the truth, I think the other *Office Co.* will be the one that gets it. Look at all the cars going by this place everyday."

"Yes," Paul said, "but do they stop? Most of these people are just flying by on their way to work."

"Actually, many of them do stop. They pay more attention than if I were just announcing a sale on staplers."

"Do you have any idea what that sign means?" Paul said.

"Well, I'm *supposed* to get approval for sign messages. Why don't I call somebody for you?"

Peter was dialling before Paul could object. Shalise stood idly by.

"I have a customer here who would like to file a complaint." Paul shuffled a little where he stood. He smiled sheepishly at Shalise. "Here," Peter said, handing Paul the telephone. "This man would like to hear your concerns."

Paul snatched the telephone from Peter's hand. "Yes," he said, putting the telephone in the crook of his neck and cracking his knuckles. He wouldn't give the person on the phone time to interrupt or disagree. "There is a sign outside this *Office Co.* store that reads THE AVERAGE PERSON THINKS HE ISNT. Do you know what this means? I have a little story about a guy named Sisyphus that might help explain.

You see, Sisyphus spends all of eternity pushing a rock up a hill. And the trouble is, every time he gets near the top, the rock rolls back down to the bottom. Being the resilient type, Sisyphus tries to push this rock back up, even though *he knows* it's going to roll down again. But you see - and here's the catch - Sisyphus didn't have a neon sign at the top of the hill telling him he couldn't do it. He didn't have neon flashing lights glaring in his eyes and saying NO! NO! NO! *You are not capable of doing this!* Right? Is it too much to ask that those who are responsible for neon read-o-graph signs with interchangeable letters put up a cheery message that makes people smile, instead of ruining their whole day?"

He was exhausted. There was silence for a second.

"Jesus," the voice on the other line said. "Pringle? Is that you?"

Paul slipped the phone back on the cradle. The voice on the other line? It was Kratz.

"What did he say?" Peter asked.

"He said, ah, 'use your judgement'." Paul was shaking. He swallowed hard. But then he realised Kratz was the one to be nervous. Paul knew some people on the complaint line in Toronto, and they weren't paid much more than him. It was a

lousy job, one Paul had been offered himself, only he didn't want to move up to Toronto to take it.

"Well, I'm not sure what to do," Peter said. "Would you like me to change the sign to something else? We like to keep our customers happy, you know."

Paul Pringle looked over at Shalise, standing beside the cash register. She looked him in the eye. She smiled.

Paul Pringle made a mental note. He would re-prioritize as soon as possible.

The Paul Pringle Priority List

#1: Shalise

"No," Paul Pringle said. "That's alright. You keep your sign up."

"Alright then," Peter said. "Sorry to have caused you trouble." Paul wasn't listening. He was looking at Shalise. He could picture her driving in to work among the traffic, her eyes wandering over a neon sign for *Paul's Office Supplies*, and underneath would be a set of interchangeable letters reading:

SHALISE

WILL YOU MARRY ME

PAUL

"Listen, while you're in here," Peter said, "can I interest you in a stapler or something?"

Paul Pringle checked his watch. 12:57. He backed slowly towards the exit, stepping under the laser eye that opened the sliding doors, and let the sweeping sound of the rushing expressway into the store. He stepped outside, Peter and Shalise watching the doors close in front of him, Mr. Staples looking on from above, wiggling his bushy eyebrows.

Order Form

Order tickets for one of the world's great literary tours!

A team of literary historians and biographers recently discovered the boyhood home of one of the world's great literary figures.



See the porch where the author fought off a pack of wild dogs to protect his family. See the upper attic bedroom where masturbation fantasies turned into great literature. See the basement where the famous author hid to escape from the hordes of sex-starved women.

I would like to order ____ round-trip tickets to see the world's greatest literary destination, at the low-low price of \$999.00.

Please complete the following form:

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State / Province _____ Postal Code _____

Send Cash and Order Forms to:

David Burke - 216 Flanders Rd. - Windsor, ON - N8N 3G3

The reader realises this picture is of an abandoned barn on a dirt road, and that the author's home is quite nice, thanks to his hard working parents, but other than the swimming pool, the big tree in the backyard, the hot-tub and the big screen television, is quite unremarkable. NO REFUNDS.

Run

Kevin Campbell looks out his bedroom window at his father's truck, lit by a streetlight, sitting quietly in the driveway. He slides out of bed and dresses. He creeps down the stairs. He slips his father's keys off the rack and escapes out the door.

He has no driver's licence, he has never driven before, but he quickly learns how to navigate his father's grey truck in the night streets. The long ribbon of highway disappears under his headlights and falls in line behind him. The steady flash of white lines - dot - dot - dot - are Morse code, a signal of all the reasons he is running.

He leaves in the middle of the night. He'll arrive by morning.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

It is July, three months previous, and Kevin is stuck at the cottage. There is nothing for him to do except spend the afternoons training for track and cross-country races, running up and down the long hills of the cottage roads. He searches for the right rhythm, the huff puff of pine tree air, the slip of gravel underfoot, the jumping heart and smooth breathing, so that once the rhythm is in motion it is difficult to stop.

Tomorrow is his father's birthday. His mother is heading to town to get things: a newspaper, groceries, a birthday cake, and she needs Kevin to come along and pick out a fishing lure as a gift. Kevin looks out the window at the rain. He finished his run early this afternoon. He will enjoy the drive through the woods, at least, and he always likes the general store, perched atop the hill in the centre of town.

Kevin spots the girl walking the aisles, the wood floor creaking underneath her sandalled feet. Her blondish hair is damp, her shoulders wet. She fingers the shelves, and flips through the magazines. Her ankles are smooth, the right one braceleted, sliding down to sandy feet ending in perfect toenails painted blue.

Kevin and the girl share a glance. The store bell twinkles as she slides out the door and into the rain.

That night Kevin's father comes sneaking out of the bedroom. He's holding the fishing lure, daringly stolen from his mother's hiding place under the bed. "The rain's done," he says. "Want to go fishing?" Kevin realises that avoiding this will cause his father disappointment on the eve of his birthday. He feigns enthusiasm. He and his father slink down to the dock, paddle off a ways so his mother won't hear the engine starting, and then drive the aluminium boat to the far reaches of the lake.

Kevin is afraid of the water. Though he's a practiced swimmer, both in the backyard pool and during swimming lessons in training to be a lifeguard, the water up north has always frightened him. It is dark and cold. The underwater rocks and logs look fuzzy, indistinct. It is for this reason that Kevin has stayed clear of triathlons, avoided the wild melee that is the swimming portion of each race. He prefers swimming in water that has no mystery, in which you can see all the way to the bottom, that contains no creatures or foreign objects.

Kevin avoids looking at the long shadows of the trees reaching out from shore onto the surface of the lake, and watches as his father casts the spinning lure deep into the bay. Kevin's father tells him that fish bite madly at night and after a rain, chase after anything that moves, but the

new lure is a dud. Or at least that's his excuse, for he catches nothing. It begins to rain again, coming down straight and hard and tapping against the leaves on the shore, the water, plinking off the cold aluminium boat. On the way back to the cottage, the rain drives into their faces.

Kevin sleeps in a loft. A wet mist blows in through an open window. He dries off as best he can, dressing in warm and dry clothes, but he still shivers in his sleeping bag. He runs his cold hands under the waist of his long johns. He closes his eyes and dreams of the girl in the general store, the damp hair, her bare shoulders, the ankle bracelet, her sandy feet. He pulls himself to warmth.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Any confusion in Kevin's mind is contrasted by the light rumble of the engine, the roll of the tires on the highway, the easy way he guides the truck into curves and out. He plays music, whatever tapes his father has left behind, tucked under the bench seat next to cigarette butts that escape from an overfilled ashtray. He plays *Goin' Mobile* by The Who, screaming the Pete Townshend vocals:

Watch the police and the taxman miss me, I'm mobile!

He smokes his father's cigarettes and flicks them out the window, their sparks dying on the highway behind him. He would be miserable were it not for the fun of driving. He is after all, a kid. And he is a kid in command of a vehicle that can take him anywhere, as fast as he dares to go.

He is driving north. The highway slides under him with ease, surprising because the truck is old, rusting, and loud. The dashboard lights flicker. Kevin needs the passing streetlights, perched above the highway, to tell how fast he is going. An orange light peaks on, and stays. He is running out of gas.

Kevin slows and gets off the highway at the next exit.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Kevin finds a rusty bike under the cabin and rides it along the gravel hills of the cottage road to town, his legs pumping hard on the inclines and stretching easy on the way down. He rides past lakes that are bright with the reflection of the sun.

The general store is closed, but a sign points him to a craft fair being held on the baseball field.

Kevin walks his bike through the gaggle of crowd under the hot sun, insects buzzing in the trees. There is a smell of fresh cut woodcrafts and trampled grass. The fairgrounds are filled with old women in straw hats, wrinkly and withered feet in sandals, purses dangling about their arms. The tabletops are covered with cottage accessories, loon-shaped place mats, home-made board games, trinkets of every shape and colour and kind. The locals sit by their tables in deck chairs, under umbrellas, next to coolers filled with sandwiches and beer.

Kevin sees the girl, reclining in a lawn chair, her sandy feet propped up on a table loaded with picnic baskets. He feigns interest in a set of pine tree oven mitts, pays no attention to the man who asks him if he wants to buy a pair. His eyes are on the girl. She is biting her fingernail, twisting her hair into curls, damp as though she has just finished a swim in the lake.

He stands in front of her table.

"Want to buy a hand-weaved picnic basket?" she says, a wry smile on her face.

"You live up here?"

"Yeah. My mom makes these silly things and my dad makes me sell them. Where are you from?"

"Toronto. Well, not really, a suburb of Toronto."

"There's a lot of suburbs. Which one?"

He tells her.

"I've never heard of that one."

"It doesn't matter," he says. "They're all the same."

"Not to me," she says.

Kevin picks up a picnic basket and holds it in his hand like Little Red Riding Hood, prancing through the forest. She laughs.

"I'm Kelsi," she says.

"I'm Kevin," he says.

Soon they are packing up the baskets. Soon they are walking out together.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Kevin drives through a neighbourhood where all the houses look the same. All the garage doors are closed, even the one's painted a bright colour so as to be recognisable to its owner.

He heads for the county and finds houses spread apart by long swaths of farmland. He parks the truck under a tree at the side of the road, then creeps quietly up a gravel driveway. The garage door is wide open. Hockey equipment - gloves, sweaters, knee and shoulder pads - is scattered

about, drying atop a tractor and a riding lawnmower. A large red gasoline can is in the corner, next to a covered snowmobile. He hears a dog growl.

The dog, a fat yellow lab, struggles out of a cardboard box and ambles over on arthritic knees. Kevin kneels, extending his hand and looking away. The dog sniffs, then licks, soaking his hand. Kevin pats the dog on the head as he grabs the gas can, but it's empty.

He finds a short hose and he slides it into the tractor's belly. With a long breath, he feels the gas sliding up the hose and over the edge, and watches as it drips down into the red gas can. Though he's never done this before, he doesn't spill a drop.

The dog watches as Kevin empties the gas into the truck, and tosses the can into the back. When Kevin starts the engine, the dog barks. Kevin drives, losing the wobbly barking dog in the rear view mirror.

The sky begins to lighten, and the cars slip onto the highway from the on ramps with greater frequency. He no longer has the highway to himself, and he becomes nervous as the cars rush beside and around him. As he heads further north and leaves the city behind, he knows that soon he will be alone again.

He has never driven there himself, but he knows the way.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Kevin and Kelsi sit quietly in the front seat of her car; the edge of the dump is a few feet away. Beyond, crawling among the heaps of garbage, are bears.

Earlier that day they climbed the fire tower and sat overlooking the lake and the town, watching the boats slipping along the shore. They hiked to the cliff at Mirror Lake and ate sandwiches from her mom's picnic basket. They walked the creaking floors of the general store and flipped through the magazines.

Now they watch as bears trample among the heaps, digging their noses deep into trash, tearing plastic bags open for watermelon rinds, coffee grounds, and whatever cottage barbecue leftovers they can find. In the shine of the headlights, before the lip to the garbage abyss, sits a tall pile of cheezies.

"What's orange and red and lies in a ditch?" she asks.

"I don't know."

"A wounded cheezie," she says.

Kevin groans. Kelsi giggles and pokes him in the ribs. "I'm sorry," she says. "I had to."

They are responsible for the cheezies, had purchased a big bag of them at the general store, and at dusk, before the bears arrived, had run nervously to the front of the car to dump them in a pile.

They wait for a bear to take the bait. Meanwhile, she passes a bottle to him and he takes a quick pull.

"You ever been to Toronto?" Kevin asks, his face turning sour.

"A couple times. We did the CN Tower thing, the shopping thing."

A bear lumbers past their window, and they hush. Though protected by the metal hulk of Kelsi's car, a lump grows in Kevin's throat. The bear sits down a few feet in front of the car and sniffs around, then extends a pink steaming tongue, lapping each cheezie up from the ground. Kelsi flicks the headlights on and off. She shines the high beams directly in its eyes, and the bear doesn't seem to care, but eats the cheezies a few at a time, showing more restraint than Kevin had imagined. He'd expected a ravenous feast.

"How long are you around for?" she asks.

It surprises him. He was thinking of bears.

"The end of July," he says.

She is quiet for a moment.

"Are you sure you'll remember me?" she says.

"Of course," he says, startled. "Of course I'll remember you." He leans in to kiss her.

Kelsi honks the horn, and Kevin jumps. The bear also jumps, and scatters, running over the edge of the landfill and into the garbage froth, staring back at them from behind the shell of an old refrigerator.

"Sorry," she says, laughing. "I had to."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The town is quiet as he approaches, driving through the tight S curve of the road by the baseball diamond and the fairgrounds, pulling past the general store, quiet when not in use, like a building that belongs in a museum.

He pulls in front of her house. He wants to go up the steps and knock on the door. He wants to be invited in, he wants to apologise, he wants to meet her family and talk about the future. He wants to cry on her shoulder, and for her to do the same, but this all seems unlikely now. It is too early in the morning for this much reality.

Kevin coasts down the hill and pulls into the marina parking lot. He drives around the picnic tables, shuts off

the engine. The rumble finally quieted, he imagines the frantic morning at home. His father, furious that his truck is missing, will have to take a cab to work. His mother will spend the day in her housecoat, cradling a cold cup of coffee and talking about her worries on the phone with her circle of friends.

Exhausted, he falls asleep.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Kevin and Kelsi are paddling a canoe down the lake. "Two people drowned out here a couple years ago," she says. Kevin is seated in the front. He doesn't turn around to look at her but stares off instead to the edge of sky and trees. "It was national news," she says.

"What happened?"

"A couple in their thirties, guests of a cottage in town, were paddling around out here," she says. "They crawled under the thwart and were *getting it on* when the canoe flipped over." Kevin turns around uneasily to look back at her. "They were stuck," she says. "He was still inside her."

They paddle down the lake, then through a shallow and short river into a small, quiet, out of the way lake with no

cottages on it. At the far end, in a small bay tucked behind a rock, is a floating dock for swimmers.

The dock is crudely made, four rusty oil barrels underneath a few plank boards nailed together, covered by a green turf carpet. Kelsi ties a rope from the canoe around a cleat nailed to the side with a rusty spike. She steps out and the dock rolls underneath her.

Kevin eases out, sliding along the carpet floor, and lies in the middle. Kelsi crawls on top of him, lets her hair hang over his face. She touches her cheek to his cheek and whispers in his ear.

"Scared you're going to fall in?" she says.

"A little," Kevin says.

She leans in and kisses him. Her hair tickles his forehead. She slips the strap of her bathing suit down her shoulder.

He is conscious of the stilted gasps of his own breath, her hair, damp with sweat, clinging to his face. He stares over her shoulder at the shoreline, where the small trickle from the hills runs down through pockets of marsh, and along the rocks to where it enters the lake. A light wind blows goose bumps on his flesh. Where they join, he is warm. He pushes softly but deep inside her, holds her there, then

collapses. She falls into him, breathes deeply into the nape of his neck.

Moments later they roll off the edge of the dock, into the water.

"Good thing we didn't do it in the canoe," she says, laughing, treading water. He dips under the surface, swims to her fuzzy underwater form, wraps his arms around her naked waist, kissing her on the hip. "That would have been trouble," she says as he surfaces, not really listening.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Kevin wakes, the parking brake a stiff prod in his side. He wipes his eyes free of sleep and peeks over the edge of the dash. Leaves dirty the ground. The sun has swung to a high peak over the lake and is ready to descend on the other side. He has slept for a long time, the sleep of a boy who wishes to escape and forget, hoping the morning, in his case the afternoon, will make things different.

The town itself looks different in the brighter light of the afternoon, but nothing has changed. He drives around the S curve by the baseball diamond, past the general store, and he is struck by an uneasy feeling, a creeping sensation

that will not let him go. It is no longer summertime. He doesn't belong here.

He hasn't counted on this. He was hoping this was as far as he would go. He thought this place, the town, the girl, was the answer. He cannot face her any more now than he could in the morning. He presses the gas and the rumble of the engine soothes him. Kevin turns onto the highway, speeding quickly away. He drives quickly and with confidence and soon the summer, the girl, and the past are behind him.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Kelsi offers to let Kevin sit in the stern of the canoe. He watches, paddle in hand, as Kelsi moves into the bow seat and pushes the canoe out into the lake.

Kelsi turns and looks back at Kevin, who sits there uneasily, unsure of what to do. "You put the paddle in the water," she says, giggling. "Same as in the front, except you try to keep us going straight, is all."

Kevin paddles and finds it difficult. The canoe turns to shore, then towards the centre of the lake. He is aiming for the small river that will lead them home, but because of his paddling, it is taking them forever. Kelsi turns around

and smiles at him. "Good thing we're not in a hurry," she says.

His face turns red in the sun. He sees her sitting in the bow seat in her navy bathing suit. He puts the paddle in the canoe and, hands balancing along the gunwales, he slides quietly toward her. She is not paying attention, is trying to right the direction of the canoe after it has veered suddenly to shore. He sneaks up behind her and breathes on the back of her neck.

"What are you doing?" she says, surprised.

"What was that story you were telling me?" he says, "about the two people who drowned in a canoe?"

"That?" she says, looking forward. "That's a myth. I tell that to everyone I go canoeing with."

"I'm leaving tomorrow," he says.

And before she has a chance to say "I know," Kevin pulls her, despite her surprised yelp, backward over the seat. He lays her beside him in the bottom of the canoe. "My paddle!" she says, but it floats away to the centre of the lake. Her head is under the thwart, and he digs his nose into the curve of her neck to smell the suntan lotion and sweat.

He wants her completely. He wants her to live inside him during the cold winter, so he can call on that moment on

the dock or in the canoe under the hot sun and the whole feeling will return to him – the hotness, the hunger, the need.

The canoe rocks, water slapping at the side of the hull, but it doesn't tip over. There are grunts and sighs and tears inside.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Kevin drives past highway souvenir stands, cheese shops and burger joints. The towns become sparse and small, four lanes of highway dwindle to two, resorts and general stores give way to hunting camps and trading posts. He has never been this far north. Soon there are only burnt out gas stations and deserted restaurants.

Kevin needs gas again, the orange light peeking on, the needle flirting dangerously with the "E", and this time, there are no garages to steal from. For a long while there is nothing but the straight ribbon of road and the darkness of thick trees on each side of the highway.

A sign points to a lodge. Kevin hopes someone there can at least top him off with gas from a lawnmower or boat. He turns off the highway. A washboard road leads him through a thick forest, and opens next to a small river, banked by

tiny red cottages. Kevin sees an old gas pump next to a crude dock. He pulls up.

There is a rusty marine bell hung on a tree. Kevin rings it, and a fat man comes hobbling out of a cabin.

"Fill 'er up?" the man asks.

"Yeah," says Kevin. The fat man flips open the gas cover and twists off the cap.

"Now, I've been around here a long time," the fat man says, inserting the nozzle and pressing the lever. The gas pump rumbles and the man speaks louder. "And I can tell when someone is lost."

"I'm not lost."

"What are you doing up here?"

"Driving."

"Oh yeah? Where you heading?"

"I don't know," Kevin says. "North, I guess."

"Well, you can't do that for long, I'm afraid. You'll run out of road. The highway turns west a few hours from here."

Kevin shrugs. He didn't know this. He figured it went north forever, until he'd see polar bears jumping around on ice floes beside the highway.

"Not that kind of a road trip, though, is it?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Old people go south to retire. Middle-aged people go east to see old stuff. Young people go west to smoke grass and go skiing. Now people, of any age, go north for something entirely different."

"Huh," Kevin says.

The man screws the cap back on the tank and closes the cover with a metallic flick.

"How much do I owe you?" Kevin asks.

"Whatever you can spare," the man says. Kevin reaches into his pocket tentatively, pulls out a couple bills. The man waves it away. "No worries. Just think about what you're doing."

The man watches as Kevin sits down in the truck cab. He is comfortable sitting on the vinyl seat and turns the key. The truck coughs to a start, and settles into the familiar rumble. As he pulls away, Kevin looks in the rear view mirror to see the man leaning against the pump watching him.

Kevin drives through the tight winding forest and pulls to a stop at the intersection of the gravel road and the highway, far to the south, and long to the north, stretched out before him.

The Gadget¹

He was a middle-aged man, he played for the *Beer Rangers* softball team, and he had gone eighty-four days without getting a hit. Though Don Hermanson's team only played every other week, it was still a lousy display of hitting. He felt out of place at the plate, and the balls that normally went sailing sharply over the short-stop's head to land in the grass instead dribbled weakly to the second baseman. But he had a plan. It was his birthday. And because he received two gifts for his birthday: one, the *PowerMAX 3000* softball bat; and two, a small hand-held thing he called the "gadget," he thought he had the answer.

Don brought his new toys to the ball diamond for the Friday double header. And during ground rules, as he stood on home plate with the umpire and the captain of the other team, he held his *PowerMAX 3000* bat in one hand, and in the

¹ My name is Stafford Brakeman. I can count all the books I've read on one hand, but a friend of mine is making me read this book, *Everything Must Go*. He says it will change my life. I am bored to tears - I mean, what a rip off! - but this story I can't resist.

other, the gadget, which did many things, but at the moment told him his exact location on the surface of the earth.

N 42° 13' 02.5"

W 082° 43' 12.6" ²

The Beer Rangers were playing a team called *The Crooks*, out of the town of Ahvell, ON, in the centre of Hector County. Lewis Cantini, the manager of the Beer Rangers, had slid Don all the way to the ninth spot in the order because of his eighty-four day slump, despite Don's protests that he would soon escape.

² My guess is "the gadget" is a G.P.S. - A *Global Positioning System*. No other gadget, as far as I know, can pinpoint your exact location on the surface of the earth. Mine is the Garmin E-Trex Legend, 2.00, purchased at Wal-Mart for \$299.99 (on sale).

So I get to these co-ordinates, and I type them into a map program on my computer (www.mapquest.com). To my surprise, the location isn't far off from my house.

It's late on a Saturday night in February. I am alone in my bedroom, feeling sorry for myself, hiding from my old man and his repeated reminders that I should "Get a Job!" so I grab my own G.P.S., and head out on my first literary excursion. For entertainment, I sneak a six pack of my old man's beer out of the fridge.

The roads are slick so I drive carefully, the wind blasting snow sideways across the fields. My G.P.S. tells me I am headed for the county. I know the general location because of that computer program, but I have to turn on the interior lights of my truck and follow the digital changes on the G.P.S. to get wherever it is I'm going.

I park on the side of a dirt road. There's nothing here. Just the cold and hard stubble of a cornfield. I get out. I have a little pen light from work, and I use this as I wander into the field, nearly twisting my ankle on humps of frozen mud.

Then I am standing right on the exact location. And what's here? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I am in a cornfield in the middle of nowhere. Nothing to be seen. There's no chance that this used to be an old baseball diamond. Is there something I'm supposed to see? Should I dig? I don't have a shovel and the ground is hard as a rock. I'm not sure what to do. So I sit around and wait for a sign.

"With what?" Lewis said. "That fancy bat of yours? What's it do that your old dad doesn't?"

"It's got an electric charge," Don says. He had picked the gift out himself, pointed it out to his wife Lynn as they wandered the aisles of a sports store. "Wherever you contact with the ball, it sends an electric charge, concentrating all the p.s.e., that's *per swing energy*, into that spot on the bat."

"Did you plug it in before the game?"

"Yeah, only don't tell the ump. They're illegal on most continents."

After the first two innings, when the Beer Rangers went down one-two-three, Don Hermanson arrived at the plate. He dug into the batter's box and settled in, did a little hip wiggle. The bat felt good in his hands.

He looked up at the pitcher, a lanky moustachioed man named Joe Fielding, a police officer in the town of Ahvell. Joe Fielding lobbed the ball high in the air. Don could see the red stitches rolling, and as the pitch came in he muttered under his breath: "North 42 degrees, 10 minutes,..."

He saw the ball hit the fat part of the bat, and he felt the *per swing energy charge* as the ball rocketed outwards, narrowly missing the pitcher's head, and sending him spiralling backwards.

Don Hermanson stood on first base as his teammates cheered and jeered him, the pitcher Joe Fielding adjusting his cap, leering. The streak was over. A new streak was beginning.

Six pitches later, Don had six base hits. His teammates thought it was a little birthday luck. Though the bat was good, it couldn't account for the way Don felt at the plate. He attributed this to the gadget.

Sensing a hot streak, Lewis Cantini moved Don Hermanson up to the four spot during the second game. By the fifth inning, Don had a base hit in every at bat, but the score was 7-6 for the Crooks. Don Hermanson stepped up to the plate. The centre-fielder, tired of scooping Don's relentless base hits out of the grass, moved in to cut them off. He snuck in as the pitch was in the air, but Don Hermanson, hot and sharp on his birthday, stepped in and drove it. The ball went scorching low and then high as it blasted past Joe Fielding, who spun around like a top as it whipped past his ear, and fell to the dust. Don saw the centre-fielder pivot and turn, his number 17 racing backwards, as the ball flew long past him, hit the ground, and rolled.

Don trotted around the bases. His teammates swamped him at the plate. Don had hit a three-run homer and the game was

out of reach. Joe Fielding got up from the ground, dust himself off, and walked off the field.

The Beer Rangers celebrated their pair of victories by sitting on the hatch of Don Hermanson's work truck, dangling a leg over the decal *Don Hermanson Painting and Decorating*. Since it was his birthday, and since he was a perfect 10 for 10 on the day, his teammates tossed him beers from the cooler and listened as he regaled them with stories, although they were all present, had all seen it, of his home run. "It was a night like this..." Don began, and the team roared with laughter.

"How far do you think the ball went?" asked Lewis Cantini, smacking Don on the back. "Can that gadget figure that out for you?"

Don Hermanson and Lewis Cantini walked to the outfield, Don holding his *PowerMax 3000* like a cane. They decided on a spot, deep in the outfield, right next to a lawn sprinkler, and they used the gadget to determine the landing spot of Don's magnificent home run.

N 42° 18' 40.8"

W 082° 50' 12.4"³

"What's the matter with that thing?" said Lewis. "Is it broken?"

"Nah," said Don. "It's brand new."

"Well, how far did that home run go?"

"I can't figure that out yet."

The gadget, the box told him, could measure distances, track locations, find directions, elevation, time of day, what time the sun would rise, what time the sun would set, discover what speed he was travelling, if only he knew how to do all these things.

"So?" said Lewis. "What good does a bunch of numbers do me?"

Don smiled.

Don and Lewis were walking back from the outfield when they spotted Officer Joe Fielding stepping out of the Crooks

³ I've had enough of this literary crap. I swear I'll catch pneumonia sitting out here in the field, but I have to admit, the beer is tasty and the view is nice. This is just what I need - a quiet Saturday night. I've been drinking too much lately anyhow. I figure I am after some fictional co-ordinates - so everything will be screwy and lost in the translation. I mean, it's all lies, right? But I am headed for home, my beer gone, my buzz doing alright, when I glance down at the gauge. I'm almost out of gas. So I drive on for a bit and pull up to a gas station. It's a self-serve, and as I stand out in the cold, leaning against my truck, waiting for it to fill, I check my GPS. The co-ordinates I am looking at are the exact same as the home-run landing spot in the story.

clubhouse dressed in his uniform. They watched as he glided across the parking lot to his service vehicle, parked across two spaces.

"Better watch out," Lewis said. "You have a day like that the pitcher cop's going to be out to get you for sure."

"You think so?" said Don.

"I know so," said Lewis. "Be careful with the drive home tonight before you end up with a D.U.I."

Don Hermanson and the Beer Rangers drove in to the town of Ahvell. Don had never been to Ahvell before, at least not since he was a kid, so he followed Lewis Cantini, struggling to keep up with his speeding Volvo sedan, and when they got into town Don parked his truck out front of a place called *The Redwood Tavern*. Before he got out, he marked the co-ordinates of his parking spot.

N 42° 19' 41.0"

W 082° 52' 34.9" ⁴

Miles away from the supposed ball diamond, at a gas station. At the precise moment I need gas. This is freaky.

⁴ I can identify with Don Hermanson's fear of the D.U.I. The last thing I need right now is to meet up with a cop who'll stick his head in here and see all the empties lying around. But I drive on. I am convinced I am on to something, or at least the story is, and the coincidence is too much to ignore. I drive my truck toward the next set of co-ordinates. By the looks of things, I am headed for the city.

Don walked into the Redwood Tavern, saying to Lewis, "sure, I'll come in for a quick one."

When Don Hermanson woke in the morning, his face dug deep into the cushions of his living room couch, he tasted cigarette ash on his tongue and the back of his throat was dry as sand. He felt his son, Don Jr., sitting on his back, smashing his head with a plastic toy hammer.

But when he turned his face out of the cushions, the sun blinding in through the windows, the house was quiet. His wife Lynn had taken the kids out for the day, he remembered, and they wouldn't be back until dinner time. Don peeled himself from the couch, then wobbled outside looking for the Saturday paper, shielding his eyes from the bright stabbing pain of the sun. He didn't make it to the end of

It's tough to find where I am going, or where the story wants me to go, what with the tall buildings getting in the way of the satellites and the passing streetlights and all the traffic, but I manage. I get into the right neighbourhood and park my car on a side street, then walk around the block of a busy commercial section. I look like a Japanese tourist with my G.P.S. in hand, but I am on a mission.

Bingo. The location pinpoints to a hot-dog cart. But this can't be it. The profound coincidence of the gas station, at the exact moment I am running out of gas, and then this? I don't even like hot dogs. The hot dog man says, "Hey there! Going in?" I look behind him. I can't believe I didn't notice. I'd been looking at the sidewalk the whole time, expecting some revelation to come pouring out of the cracks, when where I need to be is right before me, flashing in brilliant neon lights. A club - called *Dixie the Chick's*.

Just what I need - a refill, and some naked ladies to look at. I should read more often.

the driveway, but stopped when he found a parking ticket stuck on his windshield.

Don Hermanson was too hungover to be surprised. But he snatched the pink paper from under the wiper blade and mumbled, "a parking ticket in my own driveway?" and then squinted and looked closer: the parking ticket was issued from the town of Ahvell. The fine: *fifty dollars*. The charge: *parking in front of a fire hydrant*. The parking ticket signed: *Officer Joe Fielding*.

Without showering, without breakfast, without brushing his teeth, Don Hermanson found himself backing out his driveway and heading for the town of Ahvell. But before he left, he flicked on the G.P.S. and saved his co-ordinates for home.

N 46° 4' 43.9"

W 081° 25' 29.3" ⁵

⁵ I wake up, my face stuck with drool to a pillow fragrant with a familiar smell. I know this smell. I know it well. Stripper smell. They must all wear the same perfume. I manage to crack open my eyelids, the sun pouring in from the window. I unstick my face from the pillow and turn over. And there she is. The stripper.

What brought me here? I'm not sure. But I manage to groan. She stirs. Her face is hidden by the swarm of her hair, almost plastic with hairspray. Who is this? Linda? Karma? Traci? There were so many. All I remember is being stuck in a back room, surrounded by them. There were three or four around me at all times. This is going to cost me.

I slip out from underneath the bed sheets. I stand there naked, my clothes in a pile at my feet. Placed neatly on the bedside table is the book, and on top of it, my G.P.S. I flip open to the story. The co-ordinates are circled - the ones locating Don Hermanson's home before he takes off on his search. The G.P.S. doesn't work inside, the satellites

As the gravel and dust spit up behind Don Hermanson in the rear-view mirror, he felt that was leaving his hangover behind, as he drove on into freshness, the windows open and the breeze pouring into his lungs. He was on a great tour of Hector County, was seeing things and discovering places in his travels he had only heard legend of. There was the cat lady's house. There was the trailer park where Joe Gunn grew up. There was the house where *Baaaad Haaaary* was rumoured to live, and the sheep farm right next door. But Don was on a mission.

This was his mission: to go to the parking office, the town hall, the police department, wherever, and argue that he didn't rightfully deserve that parking ticket. He wasn't parked in front of a fire hydrant, and he had the co-ordinates, saved in the gadget's memory, to prove it.⁶

The novelty of the tour wore off after he had been driving for a couple hours. He drove the same roads, again,

can't reach it, so I stumble over to the window. It takes a while to register. Sure enough - my co-ordinates are the same. It's like the story knew I would be coming here. This is all too weird.

She stirs, and rolls over, digging her face into the pillow. I catch a glimpse. But that is all.

I slip on my clothes and sneak quietly out of her apartment.

⁶ I'm not sure how well a set of co-ordinates would stand up in court. Even the best G.P.S. can only pin you down on the surface of the earth within three or four metres - it depends how many satellites can locate you from above. And think about it - Don Hermanson locked into those co-ordinates from the seat of his truck. There's no telling if the front

and again. He got close, once, driving down a long road he thought would turn into Main Street Ahvell, but the road veered to the north and spat him far back into the county.

Don could see the town across the fields. He could see the farm silo at the centre of town, and beside it, the tall steeple of the church. He could see it, but he couldn't get there. Some curse made the town of Ahvell a mirage, seen right before his eyes, but impossible to reach. He had spent the last two hours peering through his hangover haze, looking for a way to get there.

His wife Lynn had bought the gadget so Don wouldn't get lost hunting. Neither of them thought he'd ever get lost in Hector county.

It would be easy if Don just got out of his truck and hiked his way over the fields, through the ditches and into town, but judging by the shape he was in and the throbbing of his hangover, this was unlikely. The gadget had certain roads labelled, but these were only main highways and arteries, not the back roads and side streets of Hector County, and anyhow Don Hermanson hadn't figured out that part of the gadget.

bumper was in the way of the fire hydrant. But I don't blame Don Hermanson for trying. That Joe Fielding guy is a jerk-off.

He couldn't, for the life of him, find a way to get to the town of Ahvell.⁷

Don Hermanson, driving, looked up to see a stop sign, and he slammed on the brakes, the truck stopping sharply. The gadget slid off the vinyl bench seat, and landed on the floor.

The dust and the gravel that had been trailing him for hours finally caught up to him and swirled over his truck, enveloping it in a cloud. Don draped himself over the steering wheel and coughed for air. The engine made a steaming sound. Don was caught in a haze, and he couldn't see.

He reached around the floor and picked up the gadget. He dusted it off:

⁷ I suppose it's foolish to expect my truck to be waiting outside, parked neatly in front of the stripper's apartment. We must have taken a cab. My first job is to get as far away from here as possible, so I begin walking. No doubt my hair is bedhead wild, no doubt my breath smells awful. I get the sense it's a little later in the afternoon. The sun is high over the city. The sidewalk walkers look at me strangely, and give me ample room to stumble along.

Where to from here? Back to the strip club, I guess. I read on in the story as I check my co-ordinates - I am far, far away. I must be on the other side of town. I'll have to take a cab. I can identify with Don Hermanson - that's what I like about this story. With a G.P.S. you can pinpoint your location on the surface of the earth to within a couple metres, you can know exactly where you are, without having any idea where, exactly, you are. Or how to get where you're going.

I need to read on. I'm having a hard time walking, anyhow, the back of my throat dry, my head dizzy, so I sit down on a park bench and I read on. I must.

N 45° 42' 41.3"

W 078° 23' 54.2" ⁸

The dust settled. A strange feeling came over him. He looked up, around him, beside him, above him, below him. And everything was there. The answer, as it were, right before his eyes.

All he could say was, people should see this. People should go here.

⁸ I get to the end of the story. Not terribly exciting, but this last set of co-ordinates is much closer than my truck. I can probably get there on foot, which is a good thing, because I'm out of cash.

I hike along the sidewalks. Where is this story taking me? Home? My home is nowhere near this place, but maybe that's what this story is trying to tell me - that I need to move out of my parent's house, get a place on my own. Maybe my old man is right. Maybe I should get a job.

My hangover is almost clear as I walk under a tree-lined avenue. I have time to think, and I feel a little guilty about my one-night stand with a stripper. I can't even remember her name. I follow the co-ordinates onto a busy street. I watch as they get slightly closer to the magic number. They flicker, they change. I nearly bump into a woman pushing her baby in a stroller, narrowly miss a parking meter, just about step off the sidewalk into traffic. I have a mission. I am almost there. I am so close. What a reading experience!

I am standing on a sidewalk, next to a lamppost, a parking lot. I look up. The co-ordinates are locked into place.

You'll never believe me.

Appendix

A Geographical Study of "The Gadget"

by Dr. R.J. Brownstein.

In critical studies of Dave Burke's "The Gadget," it is understood that the electrical nature of the *PowerMAX 3000* softball bat has caused errors in the geographical positioning of various locations in the story. Thus, Stafford Brakeman, without the assistance of the electrical softball bat, went on a fruitless search for locations he could never possibly find.

Recent studies by David Glassic and Stephen B. Yawnit argue that the inconclusive nature of these stories suggest the author, immature as he is, has only used G.P.S. coordinates as an avenue for readers to explore locations on earth he finds appealing.

In a display of inter-departmental goodness, the Dept. of English at Shisser University has sent myself, R.J.

Brownstein of the Geography Department, and my assistant, Alicia E. Bowser (*M.A. In Progress*), in pursuit of these co-ordinates. The English Department has funded this trip, having purchased a *Garmin Etrex Legend* Global Positioning System, which we have fiddled with during our long flight, and a *PowerMAX 3000* softball bat, which we will carry in hopes the electrical charge will allow us to properly track the co-ordinates present in the story.

My thanks to both Departments, Shisser University, and the Grants Council for their assistance in this research. Although I was reluctant to go on this venture - I am one month away from retirement and a healthy pension, and am hoping to get this over with as soon as possible - I promise to go on a dutiful search.

I come with no literary training or pre-conceived interpretations in mind. The co-operating departments have asked me to locate the co-ordinates and answer this question as scientifically and objectively as possible: What do I see?

Location 1 - Home Plate / Corn field

N 42° 13' 02.5"

W 082° 43' 12.6"

My assistant and I rented a car at the airport and travelled directly to this location. What I see: a baseball diamond. I know little about the author of this story, but I imagine he is a baseball player of some sort. Or thinks he is. But we can assume we're on the right track - the author has used this story as a tracking device for finding him, for discovering him through locations, rather than through a strict biographical reading.

There are a number of rather unathletic looking men watching us. They are drinking canned beer and sitting on the bleachers in dirty baseball uniforms. My assistant and I disregard their various suggestions for us to go to hell.

Location 2 - Home Run Landing / Gas Station

N 42° 18' 40.8"

W 082° 50' 12.4"

We are in a backyard in a suburban neighbourhood, a quite nice home, actually. I've had a bum knee ever since a fateful squash match with the dean, so the available ladder is out of the question, but Ms. Bowser, my assistant,

offers her help. I hold the ladder as she climbs up to the window. She knocks.

The man I assume is the author peeks out of the window, says welcome, invites us in. He says, "I've been expecting you."

Location 3 - Redwood Tavern / Dixie the Chick's

N 42° 19' 41.0"

W 082° 52' 34.9"

The author has invited us for dinner to a place he calls his favourite, *Ted's Fish and Chip Shack*, which he says us English folk should appreciate. This might be a pleasant dinner, filled with delightful literary and geographical chat, but the author is engaged in "making out" with Ms. Bowser, his tongue shoved deeply down her throat. She seems to be enjoying it very much. I consider using the *Power MAX 3000* softball bat for something other than its designated purpose, but I remind myself of my pending retirement. I eat quickly.

Location 4 - Don Hermanson's Home / Mystery Stripper's Apartment

N 46° 4' 43.9"

W 081° 25' 29.3"

Now what? We are on the highway, in our rent-a-car, and headed north. I am driving. This is a beautiful stretch of highway, the pine trees ready to topple over rock cuts high on each side. Ms. Bowser and the author are in the back, covered by a blanket. I have long since tilted the rear view mirror to the roof of the car. I play Mozart to drown out the noise.

Location 5 - ???? / ????

N 45° 42' 41.3"

W 078° 23' 54.2"

This may not put me in good stead with the department just a month before I retire. We have followed the author on a hike through the woods. I pondered mutiny on a number of occasions, as I imagine many readers of the author's work have also considered, but the result is definitely worth

the effort. All of my geographical studies and training culminate at this point.

What do I see? I can't explain. You don't see this place with your eyes.

Reading Group Discussion Guide

1. Is the proliferation of footnotes in the work an effort by the author, as Norman Mailer suggests, to compensate for his small genitalia?
2. The author writes primarily of lonely, college-age men who live in quiet apartments. As a biographical reading, can this be seen as a fear of aloneness considering the author's inability to move out of the house in which he still, at age twenty-six, comfortably lives with his parents?
3. The author has asked the reader to send, in total, \$1941.09. Given the author's penchant for sleazy women and Snapple, where do you think he will spend this money?
4. An attentive reader will notice there are few happy couples in this collection. All sorts of nasty things are happening to relationships between men and women. There are break-ups and smash-ups and lost loves and heartbreaks. There is no question here, but in light of this, the author would like to mention his availability. He enjoys long walks and reading group discussions. Please call: 519-979-8518.
5. Consider possible reasons why a group of strangers would want to sit in a living room with a bottle of red wine, discussing silly things that have nothing to do with the book to be discussed. (The author rescinds his earlier statement about enjoying reading group discussions, having said this only to meet women, but he wishes no harm to anyone involved in one, except for the person who tries to dominate the discussion with their pretentious opinions and the literary terms they learned in their undergraduate English courses, which are all very useless.)
6. What is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?

A Note On The Type

This thesis is set in Courier New, a typeface designed by Howard Kettler in 1956 for IBM, and redrawn in the 1990's by Adrian Frutiger for the Microsoft Corporation. It is a fixed pitch font, monotone in weight, slab serif in concept. It has proven a popular typeface for shlubs who write their M.A. theses while living with their parents, and who wish their words to look, on the page, the way Hemingway's did while hacking away at his Underwood.

Acknowledgements¹

You'd like to thank God for the love. And a big FUCK YA! goes out to the following: Dale *"I seem to have misplaced my pants"* Jacobs, Darryl *"I enjoy tacos"* Whetter and Alan *"Squirrels also have feelings"* Sears. Not to mention your parents, for giving you a place to sleep, and your friends, for all the many beers: Matt *"Profound Silence"* Vukanovich, Tommer *"The Bommer"* Scott, Dave *"Lunchbox"* Moncur, Dave *"Putz"* Powrie, and Nasser *"Enjoy the Paralyser"* Hussain. You don't have the space to name you all, but you couldn't have done it without you. *You know who you are! You fucking rule!*²

¹ Inspired by the liner notes for the Mister Henderson album, *That's What Your Mother Said*.

² Seriously and Sincerely. Thank-you.

About the Author

If you've read the preceding work closely, you should already know these things about the author.

- That he pines for a girl.
- That he has terrible ideas about male/female relations/ships.
- That he writes stuff, and is therefore kind of weird.
- That he wrote this in order to get an M.A. degree at the University of Windsor.
- That, in order to get accepted to this program, he must have done a B.A. somewhere, so that somewhere might as well be Trent University, Peterborough, ON.
- That he thinks he's funny.
- That he is twenty-six-years old and still lives with his parents.
- That he has very little in the way of money.
- That you might find him at this location:

N 42° 18' 40.8"

W 082° 50' 12.4"

At an elevation of 653 ft. Or another way of putting it:

Dave Burke
His Room Upstairs
216 Flanders Rd.
Tecumseh
Essex County
Ontario
Canada
North America
The Earth
The Milky Way Galaxy
The Universe

- That he sometimes rips ideas off James Joyce.
- What else do you need to know?

Disclaimer

The author is not a member of the Better Business Bureau. He will not be held responsible if you are silly enough to put cash in an envelope and send it to his house.

However, should you be interested in suing, the author would first like to warn you of his financial situation.

The author owes \$1989.60 in tuition fees, which, while he doesn't believe school should be free, he finds a pain in the ass to pay off nonetheless. And as of May 1st, 2003, the author's bank accounts look like this:

VISA: -\$1298.23

Chequing Account: -\$1,842.66

Total debt: \$5130.49

You will notice that both his bank accounts are in the negative, meaning the author has less than zero in the way of money. *How is this possible?* you may ask. *I know credit cards work this way, but a chequing account?* The answer - the author was signed up for some program unawares called "overdraft protection" that allows him to withdraw more than he has. The author's chequing account has not gone above zero in three years, well before the writing of this book began. You may ask, *where do I find such a kick-ass bank that enables me to pursue my financial and lifestyle dreams?* The author is thankful to the bank for this opportunity, but he warns you not to get too excited. It's not all it's cracked up to be, and would like to show you a sample of last month's service charges.

Overdraft Protection Fee: \$2.00

Overdraft Interest: \$36.42

VISA Retail Interest: \$44.91

Bank Charge: \$3.50

Student Plan Fees: \$3.45

Withdrawal Fees: \$3.00

Other Bank Fees: \$6.00

Total: \$105.83

So therefore, the author is hugely in debt. *Hugely! you say! Why I...* The author realises that he, in comparison to many other hard-working and decent people, is not very much in debt, and has no kids to feed, no groceries to buy, no car or house payments, and he lives in a nice house with his parents, but nonetheless, his two major expenses are beer and books, and he would like to maintain a healthy budget for these. (The author realises if he were truly frugal he would go to the library, but

he's frightened of the library, finds it too hot, and doesn't want to turn into the guy who goes there to read free newspapers).

So, if the author's financial situation is poor for the moment, why doesn't the author simply get a job? Why doesn't the author simply take care of himself rather than beg for money? Why all this continual foisting of cheap and non-existent things in this book? Why can't we escape from crass commercialism? Why can't a book be an oasis from the mighty buck?

And the reason: the author doesn't know. Also: the author doesn't care. While he believes great art should be (and is) free of commercial interruptions, he certainly does not hold his own art in such high standards. He asks you: do not films have previews? Was not Andy Warhol's most famous painting a design and an advertisement for a soup company? Does not the Louvre have a gift shop? (The author does not know the answer to this last question, having never been to France.)

The truth behind all this petty commercialism, this salesmanship, is that the author does not want a job. He despises jobs. He has many bad experiences with jobs, which he would love to write about in a book called "GET A JOB!" if only he had the time and the freedom and the money (this is where you come in) to write it. Why the title? Because in the world the author lives in, this is an insult. Think of it this way:

INT. EVENING. LIVING ROOM.

Dad comes home late from work, drops briefcase on the floor, finds son sprawled out on the couch playing video games.

DAD

What did you do all day?

SON

Get a job!

DAD

I've got one!

SON

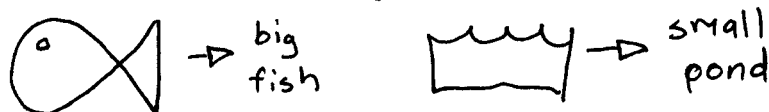
Get another one!

See? See how this could work? How "Get a job!" could be a popular insult, like "you suck!" (The author doesn't know whether he is the originator of this insult, and probably isn't, but he can't remember where he heard it first.) The author promises it will be a very entertaining book, full of delightful adventures such as the time he got fired from Taco Bell, the time he climbed into a twenty-foot high bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken in order to change the light bulbs inside, the many years he spent under the influence of roofers; he would also, if the reader allows him, enter into discussion of his fear of pigeons.

Did you enjoy the story "Run?" If you did, the author would like to tell of his plans for this story. He has many ideas for stories, all of which are centred around a person who is running. One example could be: a boy who is running around a racetrack. Another example could be: a man who is running away from his wife. These are all very mundane examples right now, but the author assures you, by the time he is finished with them, they will be very entertaining. The author would like the opportunity to write this book. This is why he asks for money.

Were you suspicious when you came upon the dedication page, only to find [insert dedication here]? The author bets you were, but he tells you he spent much time thinking about it. He realises the importance of this practice, especially in regard to this, his first book, but there are no recently dead people in his life; his parents are nice and good but the author feels would not want their names attached to such a shameful thing. There is no crazy wife *Zelda*, no sons or daughters or *John Hadley Nicanor*, no mysterious mistress *A.B.*. There is no woman, or girl, or friend, anything or anyone in the author's life at this moment that will be of interest to future biographers, should there be any, or to you, the current reader, because the author feels dedications are for the reader, not the dedicated. If the book were to be truly dedicated to some one, the author feels one should just say to the dedicatee, "Hey. I wrote this book for you," rather than have it printed where it falls under the scrutiny of all readers. He also shows the same distrust of people who propose in public.

On second thought, there is (was) a girl. The author is haunted by her. Or, the author is haunted by that time in his life when, as they like to say in the U.S.A., he was a "big man on campus," only to later discover a theory which explained the phenomenon, illustrated by a rebound girlfriend with this diagram:



Dedicating the book to this haunting ex-girlfriend was certainly an option, although this might be a creepy and wasted exercise since the ex-girlfriend now has a job, lives in her own house, and is married to a boy who goes to church (this is all the author knows). The author laughed like hell when he heard the news, only to become rather sad as time passed and reflection became possible. It should be made clear, however, that the author was the *dumper* as opposed to the *dumpee* in the previously mentioned relationship, and it was only much later that he realised his error, and began to pine.

This is only the first edition of this work. The author is banking on the hope that there will be more, and in doing so, the author would like to welcome you to a once in a lifetime literary sales opportunity. You may have this book dedicated to you, for a price. The highest bidder wins. Further editions of this book will have your dedication listed there. Sound like fun? You can show all your friends. You can pretend to be in very good literary company. You could even dedicate it to your boyfriend / girlfriend, if you are so inclined, and this could be a very sweet gesture which might end up getting you laid, if this is what you are after.

If you do not wish to have such a shameful book dedicated to you, but would like to test your literary abilities in a not-so-prestigious place, you will notice the author has also left the epigraph page empty. He is looking for a good one, so send lots of money (you should know the address by now), and your epigraph, and the author will include it in all future editions of the book. Show your friends, and they will be impressed. Hopefully it is something like:

Who are these sailors? Where do they come from?
And why are they always on *The Price is Right*?

An attentive reader like yourself will have noticed the name Joe Gunn being tossed around at various points in this book. *Why?* you may ask.

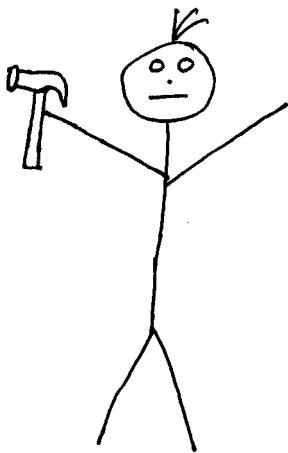
The author says: because *The Adventures of Joe Gunn* is truly his first book, though upon re-reading it the author discovered it is a lousy one. But the author has faith in the idea, and he would like the opportunity to rewrite it. Here's the idea: an albino named Joe is born in a trailer (he's not really an albino - only really white), and goes to university, where he dismisses his trailer-park past, and decides he wants to become a poet.

A cliché? Of course. But all such plots are clichés, all such plots are rehashed and rearranged and just a little bit different so as to be unrecognisable or at least a bit refreshing to the reader. He promises you it will be a very entertaining book. It will be full of sex and violence and drugs. It will not be full of poets, only one, because the author thinks that poets become annoying after a while.

Not your cup of tea? The author promises you there is something in it for everyone. It has all the potential in the world, and is certain that there is room for a movie option, and plenty of room for merchandising at various fast-food joints. The author, being the entrepreneur that he is, knows the value of product-placement and merchandising, so he has already looked into this. If *The Adventures of Joe Gunn* is not your cup of tea, dear reader, then perhaps some of you would like toys for your children? I mean, normally kids play with the skinny dolls, or the muscular action figures, but how often do kids play with poets?

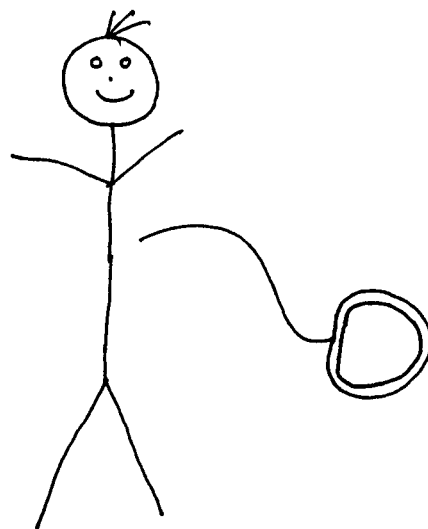
PROTOTYPES - MAY NOT RESEMBLE ACTUAL FIGURES.

ROOFER JOE



Features a rapid-action right arm for swinging a hammer - and for taking care of business!

JOE THE POET



Pull-string releases catchphrases such as "Take me to those mountains!" and "Words should be withheld from vegetables and nerds."

A soundtrack for the movie is also in the works.

Soundtrack for Joe Gunn: The Movie

Hey, Joe - Jimi Hendrix
Little Joe - Soundgarden
Lookout Joe - Neil Young
Theme Song from the cartoon "G.I. Joe"
Joe - Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers
Joe Mama - Mister Henderson

The author realises it is a short cd. You could call it an *ep*. The author found it exceedingly difficult to think of songs with Joe in the title. The author is still looking to get rights to these songs, so in the meantime, you may download them.

Though he gave, on a number of occasions, the exact location of his house on the surface of the earth, the author is not responsible for expenses undertaken or time wasted in an effort to reach this location. The author has given his exact location because he expects, soon after this book is released, that a horde of literary buffs will arrive at his house and wish to touch him. Though he's hoping the horde will be limited to scantily clad and horny women, he is not picky. He wants you to visit him. He wants to see you there, because not only is he poor, he is often lonely. If you come to the location, you will notice a ladder nearby. Feel free to use it to climb up to his window, but please knock before looking, and allow the author time to cover himself with a towel.

You may notice, if you visit, that the author is living a very comfortable life with his parents. He is not going to lie: his parents are what you would call "wealthy," though they decline that term based on the amount of taxes they pay, the minimal amount of free time they have, and what cars the neighbours are driving.

The author would like to take this opportunity, now that he has used every last ounce of his energy, and shredded every last bit of his dignity, to discuss the role of advertising, or product-placements, in the world of literature. Would the short story *The Priorities of Paul Pringle*, be any different, say, if the author had opened it like this:

Though he knew he would be tired at work in the morning, Paul Pringle stayed up late Sunday night, sucking back his fifth delicious



of the evening, a blank piece of paper enticing him from the coffee table. With a flurry of inspiration,

he cracked open a sixth delicious



And hastily scrawled...

So? Would it be any different? Of course a little. Of course it destroys the main intention of the opening paragraph, of course it riddles the language with advertisements, but think of all the money to be made! Say the author gets a deal with the good people at



and every time someone buys his book, he gets one dollar. And, say, the author sells 5000 books, well then, the author gets \$5000! Think of all the beer and books the author could buy! Certainly it is an offer worth taking into consideration, especially if it is a crappy book by a crappy author. It is doubtful that the guys who wrote *The Bible* would be interested in doing this. It is doubtful that Saul Bellow or Margaret Atwood would be interested in doing this, but then again, they already have money. As for the bottom-feeders of literature, is there anything they won't do?

Other than writing and selling his soul on the page, what other options did the author have to make some cash? Not many, but he thought of a couple.

Sell his body for sex: undesirable (too hairy)

Government grants: Dr. Greg Burke would be very upset if he found his tax dollars were spent on something like this.

Drawing: Not very skilled in this endeavour.

Treasure Hunting: Unlikely, metal detectors too expensive.

Get a job:

[illegible]

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HA!

The author realises this is the end of the book. He has taken every opportunity to show you how clever he is, how funny he is, how smart he is, how many interesting stories he has to tell, and now he has run out of room. He wants to leave the reader with a distinct impression, something different from the advertising and lawyer-type discussion he has undertaken in this disclaimer, so he offers a couple things he hopes you will like. They are small, but he thinks they are good.

"Someone told me once that love is a choice,
and I say, sure, but who's doing the choosing?"

and

"His laugh was the laugh of whoever he was
nearest, but when he cried it was all his own."

That is all for now.

