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It's Hard Being Me

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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March 2013

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Running Crazy

The most important thing I learned in eighteen months of therapy was how to distract myself whenever I felt anxious. This technique works on two levels, both of which have saved my bony ass from a lifetime of Prozac.

On a micro level, distraction comes in many forms. These range from something as simple as running my fingers through my graying hair to text messaging, which, for me, is the most effective method of avoiding a panic attack. Normally, I dislike texting because it's slow, impersonal, cumbersome and tedious and I never have anything to say. However, texting is also an amazing way to focus on something that isn't the claustrophobic paranoia that kicks in whenever I'm trapped in an elevator, on an airplane or standing in a line at the bank. I don't know the science behind this practice, but I do know texting stops the sweat from dripping down the side of my body, lowers my heart rate and prevents my vision from becoming cloudy. So, if you ever get a text from me longer than "ok," "yes," "no" or those irritating emoticons I have to use because girls like them, it means I'm on the verge of a breakdown and you are my distraction.

But solving anxiety on just a micro level doesn't work. It's like putting a Band-Aid on a cut that needs stitches. Sure, you don't see the wound, but the blood seeps through and eventually that shit's going to get infected. Because I didn't want my brain to be a massive gash that maggots mistake for Thanksgiving dinner, I took my therapist's advice when he suggested I find situations that didn't cause anxiety and repeat them as often as possible.

“Are there times when you don’t feel like the walls are closing in?” he asked calmly, as if he moonlighted as an overnight jazz deejay at the local college radio station.

I went quiet for ten seconds thinking of an answer. Off the top of my head, I wanted to say no. But that wasn’t the truth.

“Yeah, when I play basketball.”

“Why basketball?” he asked.

“Because I suck and it takes everything in me not to dribble the ball off my shoe,” I replied.

“Then start playing basketball as often as you can,” he said so effortlessly I thought Miles Davis was in the room smoking a cigarette.

So I did.

Thanks to winter break at my community college job, I had nothing better to do than hang out at an outdoor basketball court in Long Beach. This area is nicknamed Horny Corner by the locals because it’s where the attractive people tan themselves and look to get laid. Crazy brains or not, it didn’t take much to get me to Horny Corner every day.

I was twenty-nine years old when I started playing basketball again. Fifteen years had passed since the last time I picked up a ball, which was during the summer between ninth and tenth grade. I was on the freshman team but hadn’t been playing much after a

week-long, mid-season illness took me out of the lineup and kept me on the bench for good. I wish I could say I got mono from kissing a girl, but, sadly, I cannot.

I assumed I'd regain my position as back-up power forward once sophomore coach Larry Mitchell took over the squad, but I was wrong. Not playing made me angry, but instead of channeling that anger onto the court, it made me retreat.

The guy who took my place was the sort of dude who missed lay-ups in warm ups. Like clockwork, he'd sprint to the rim and throw the ball off the backboard like he was trying to miss. It was embarrassing for everyone on our team – except for him. He just kept smiling and sweating, totally oblivious to how shitty he actually was. In fact, the only reason he was on the team was because he was athletic, something I was not. Something he was not was a basketball player.

I was almost six feet tall and I had a jumper. I could also handle the ball pretty well for a big man and – if I can toot my own horn for a second – I had court vision like no other. I attribute this to my formative years watching Magic Johnson, who made passing cool because you made the other team look foolish while making yourself look smart and unselfish.

Unfortunately, I was also fat, which meant I was guaranteed to come in last whenever we ran, I could barely touch the bottom of the rim and my lateral motion was akin to a turtle. Even I saw that my new replacement had something I didn't – athleticism – but he was stiff and should have been on a track field and not a basketball court.

Coach Mitchell took over towards the end of my freshman year. Rather than starting fresh with a new leader, my position on the bench got further from the court. We'd practice during sixth period, but I barely played because my spot was given to a kid who was still in eighth grade at the nearby middle school. His name was Jeffrey and he had a beard. Everyone talked about him as if he was going to play JV his freshman year and because of this, it was mandatory that he take my spot.

"Jeffrey. In," coach would yell, but to me, "Jeffrey. In" sounded like, "Ritchie. Sit."

In all my thirty-three years of insecurity and feeling like a schmuck, nothing to this day stings more than the feeling of Coach Mitchell putting in an eighth grader over me. Sure, he was only a year younger, but I was on the team and he wasn't even enrolled at the school. I felt like I should have been given priority over Jeffrey, which would have been my chance to prove to this new coach that I could play.

That chance never came.

We practiced throughout the end of the school year and into summer vacation. Once summer began, Jeffrey was officially on the sophomore team, rendering my position totally useless. I was jealous of Jeffrey, but also looked down on him because that's what insecure people do when they are pushed out of the way. I told myself Jeffrey was a Neanderthal-ish oaf, a man-child with more hair on his chest than the entire coaching staff combined, but the truth was that Jeffrey was also a very friendly person

who smiled all the time and worked his ass off on the court. I wanted to hate this kid, but the goddamn bastard was likable.

Summer practices were grueling, not just because we ran a lot but because my friends were doing awesome shit while I was sweating my ass off with a bunch of teenage boys inside a stinky gym approximately one mile from the beach. Perhaps this hard work would have been worth it had the coach let me play, but I'm still convinced he didn't even know my name. So, one day, I walked down the cul-de-sac to my friends Mike and Jared's house and stayed there all day. We watched MTV, bought Sluprees from 7-Eleven and rode skateboards in their driveway.

It was the best day of the summer.

I planned on going to practice the next day, but I didn't. Pretty soon, I couldn't remember how long it had been since I showed up. Just like that, I was off the team. And I didn't care.

Someone once told me that we can regret only the things we didn't do. I agree. If I could do it all over again, I wouldn't feel sorry for myself when I was demoted to benchwarmer. I'd get a backbone and work harder than anyone had ever worked at South Torrance High School. I'd devote every waking second of my life to getting in shape. In practice, when I did get in, I'd go at Jeffrey. I'd box him out. I'd jump over him. I'd beat him in sprints. I'd dribble past him. I'd make no-look passes when he was guarding me. I'd hit jump shots in his face and talk shit to everyone as I got back on defense.

I was a wimp who backed down when I should have stood up. The coach wanted me gone and I let him have his way. More than anything in my life, this is my biggest regret, not so much because of basketball but because I let another human dictate what I could and couldn't do. There was an angry kid inside desperate to scream, to feel the emotional release that comes from saying "fuck it," putting your head down and running straight into a brick wall at full speed, picking yourself up with a knot on your forehead and saying, "let's do it again."

I never said "fuck it." But I ran, alright. Away from the team, away from a pivotal moment when I unknowingly set a precedent for the next decade of my life. When shit got rough, I ran.

They say sports exemplify life, that we learn how to work with others and how to push ourselves to previously unknown boundaries. This sounds like something you'd read on a motivational poster at an elementary school, but it's the truth. Unfortunately, I didn't begin to think about how weak I acted as a sophomore until years later, when my younger brother Kevin became the star player on his basketball team.

I hadn't been inside the South Torrance basketball gym in approximately five years, but there I was, back for as many of my brother's home games as possible. Sitting in the stands, it all came back to me. The camaraderie. The sense of having a goal. The compiled stench of millions of drops of sweat. The squeaking of the shoes. The thud of the ball against the hardwood. The cheerleaders. The homemade signs. The scoreboard.

I felt fine at the few road games I attended, but home games were different. I'd tense up once I saw that green court with the Spartan logo in the middle. I'd see my brother's coach, LaMont Henry, and get uncomfortable because he knew who I was. He knew my story. He knew I ran. He knew I quit.

Every home game had the potential for disaster because if South lost, within ten seconds, my thoughts went directly to what sort of failure I was on the basketball court. It was as if I was still part of the team and the black cloud that hung over my career had infected my brother's squad.

But that uneasy feeling, as if I didn't belong in the one place where I so desperately wanted to belong, went away during Kevin's senior night. South was playing North Torrance High School and I sat in the top corner of the bleachers behind South's bench, where most of the stands were filled with North fans. I wore a sweatshirt and kept the hood on for most of the game. My youngest brother Sean and our cousins Samantha and Jessica sat with me.

Everyone in the area knew my brother because he was the best player on the team. To distract him, North fans began chanting "OVER-RATED" whenever he touched the ball. They laughed when he missed a shot, which I took this personally, as if they were making fun of me. Their jeers brought out the angry, competitive kid inside, the one who should have fought hard to regain my playing time from my freshman coach Kevin Pfau and Coach Mitchell.

North got out to a large first quarter lead thanks to phenomenal play from their starting point guard named Jarrod Carroll and maintained its lead for most of the game, which meant nonstop chanting. The more I heard the crowd yell “OVER-RATED” in unison, the more I worried for my brother because I assumed he was me, that he’d run just like I did.

I kept looking over at a group of North fans, wanting to say something, to sub myself into the game and dominate these crosstown fuckers. But I couldn’t, so I thought of ways I could help. I wanted to pull Kevin aside, to get in his face and say something motivational, something prolific. Something like, “Do it.” One of those simple phrases that don’t mean anything yet would resonate with the competitor inside him.

Not being able to control the outcome of the game made me restless, nervous, anxious, scared.

I was inside the same gym where my confidence was permanently destroyed. I felt threatened. Cornered. Desperate.

North was ahead going into the fourth quarter, but South slowly dented the opposing team’s lead. And the closer the game became, the more Carroll began unraveling. With South down by one, North’s guard threw a cross-court pass that Kevin intercepted. He dribbled down the floor and dunked the ball, giving his team its first lead of the game.

Without thinking, I stood, looking like the Unabomber in my hood, and yelled, “OVER-RATED!”

The crowd, having no idea who I was, stared at me as I stood alone with a “fuck you” smirk on my face. The entire gym heard me – including my young brother and cousins, who looked at me in amazement – and in that moment, every regret I’d had about quitting the team during my sophomore summer had vanished. A charge of electricity shot through my body as I let those North fuckers know they weren’t going to get one over on my brother – or me. There was a problem and, combined, we solved it – him by his play on the court and me with my mouth.

My words made me feel like I was part of the team, like I belonged.

I pushed back, and this time, I wasn’t sitting on the bench. I was playing, albeit vicariously through Kevin. My brother was me and I was my brother. Each shot Kevin made was as if he was competing for his team – and for my redemption.

The game went into overtime, where South’s left-handed shooting guard (also the starting quarterback) Sean Flynn missed a floating baseline jumper with the clock nearly at zero. The North crowd exhaled because they assumed the missed shot meant another overtime period, but Kevin – positioned in the middle of the key – grabbed the rebound above his head and put the ball back in as the buzzer sounded. South won and the fans stormed the court.

Before this game-winning shot, simply driving down Pacific Coast Highway and passing my former high school was enough to make me think about the humiliation of having an eighth grader play in my place. But now, I could walk out of that gym with my head held high because no one there knew me as Ryan Ritchie, the guy who made the team but couldn't get in the game. I was Ryan Ritchie, older brother of star player Kevin Ritchie. And that was good enough for me.

Watching my brother's success on the court reminded me that I used to be good at basketball. Exiting the gym, I stopped to look at the trophy case, where a ball with my signature used to be on display. One year prior to quitting the sophomore team, I was a member of a freshman squad that won a summer tournament at Mayfair High School. Prior to that weekend, I'd never heard of Mayfair High School, but I'll never forget it.

Henry coached our team, which was comprised of the twelve best freshman players. Because our incoming class had a lot of talent, the varsity coach made up two freshman teams that would split the summer schedule. But for this tournament, he brought his A team. And I was part of it.

I didn't just make the tournament team – I got in the games and contributed. From that moment on, I knew when the real season began and twenty-four players would be cut to twelve, I'd be one of the lucky dozen teenage boys to wear green and white for the South High Spartans.

My signature on that ball meant I had arrived, that all those years of being the best player at Seaside Elementary and one of the best at Calle Mayor Middle School lead to

something larger. I was the second coming of the Ritchies – my dad and his twin brother played three years on the varsity team at South. My uncle later became head coach. The first time I walked into that gym, Coach Henry knew me not as Ryan, but as a Ritchie.

Unfortunately, my status as a basketball messiah with a family pedigree disintegrated once I caught that week-long illness. I couldn't have known it at the time, but the damage done to my body during those five days would pale in comparison to the destruction to my psyche.

A few months after the summer tournament and weeks after my illness, Coach Pfau put me in towards the end of a game. I don't remember who we played or how well I did – all I remember is a blonde girl named Tiffany sitting behind our bench.

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaay Ryan!!!!!!!!!!” Tiffany screamed as I took off my warm ups. “Let's goooooooooooooo!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Tiffany was someone I knew, but not well. Her words were meant to encourage me, to show support for a fellow classmate who was finally getting in the game. But I didn't take them like that. Rather than feeling like a Ritchie, like a fighter, I was embarrassed to be getting in when the score was out of reach. I wanted to play, but not during garbage time. At 5'10" and one-hundred-and-sixty pounds, I felt two inches tall. I wanted to run, to hide. I thought Coach Pfau putting me in was nothing more than a favor and I didn't need favors. I wanted to play when the game mattered. If Coach Pfau had asked, I would have told him to keep me on the bench. At least that wouldn't have drawn attention to me.

I was not the second coming of anything. I was the first coming of a quitter.

A few others guys who never got into any games didn't get that call from Coach Pfau. But that didn't matter. I was a loser. A bum. A kid who was given – and accepted – handouts.

During the months when I was riding the pine, I'd drink from the water fountain near the trophy case. Making sure no one was looking, I stared at that ball and wondered when I'd get my chance to get back into the rotation. It never happened, but that night when Kevin and his team defeated North High, I left the gym feeling like the guy whose name was prominently displayed on a championship-winning ball.

A few days after Kevin's put-back, my dad showed me a picture from the play.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"The fans on the court?" I replied, assuming it was a fairly obvious question.

"Look closer," he said, pointing to the upper right corner of the picture. There, in a sea of people, was me, ejected from my seat with my arms raised in the air, unable to control the excitement of seeing my brother stand up to the crowd that mocked him. I was elated because he didn't back down from the challenge. He stood his ground in the same location where I ran.

My dad doesn't talk about his feelings, but I knew what he was alluding to. And I knew he knew why I was standing with my arms raised. He never said so, but all those years earlier he was just as hurt as I was when I quit the team.

Quit.

It still hurts to think about, to know I backed down, that I didn't have it in me to fight.

I ran.

I quit.

I thought about that quitting feeling and wanted to erase it from my past.

I wanted a second chance.

Fifteen years since I last laced up a pair of sneakers, I got it.

I took the most beat-up pair of shoes from Sean's closet and headed to Horny Corner. Right away, I felt out of place. Instead of the latest, coolest Nike shorts dangling below the knees, I was rocking some above-the-knee gym shorts I'd had for longer than I could remember and a five-year-old pair of Jason Kidd sneakers. I was also wearing a parks and recreation shirt from my hometown of Lomita while everyone else was either shirtless or sporting a sleeveless Nike shirt.

Somewhere between my sophomore summer and this moment, I had become the old white guy at the basketball court.

No one wanted to pick me for their squad. Based on my appearance, I didn't blame them.

I gave myself one goal: "Just don't fuck up," I said. "Just don't fuck up."

The game started and I was intentionally timid. I set screens, passed to the best players on my team and made sure the guy I was guarding didn't score on me every time. I don't remember making a shot. In fact, I don't remember even taking a shot. What mattered was I didn't fuck up.

For the next month, I was at Horny Corner all day, every day. Sometimes I went twice a day – once for the lunch crowd and back again for the after-work players. Regardless of the time, I always wore shades when I played. Other guys made fun of me, but I didn't care because my sunglasses hid my insecurity. If they could have seen my eyes, they would have been able to see how scared I was, how I wasn't just playing basketball. How being on the court meant much more than hitting an open jump shot. For whatever reason, my self-worth became wrapped up in a brown leather ball. If that ball didn't go through the basket, I'd never be the person I wanted to become. I'd always run, always back down.

Over the course of that month, my game improved and my shots began to fall because shooting jumpers was like riding a bike. There was rust, but once that rust was gone, I could hit. And because I looked like the goofy white guy, no one ever guarded me. I used to read about how Michael Jordan would create scenarios to motivate him. He'd take things personally, assuming everyone doubted his abilities. I did the same. I took my defenders' lack of defense, often leaving me wide open to help on another player who couldn't shoot a lick, as not only as a challenge, but a personal attack. *How dare they not respect my game?* I asked myself.

I was never going to be the player I was as a kid. I stopped growing and instead of being fat, I was a skinny adult with bad knees and no health insurance, which meant there was a certain level of physicality I wasn't willing to cross. Still, I viewed every day as an opportunity to prove to someone that while I wasn't necessarily better than they were, I was capable of more than they were giving me credit for. So maybe I couldn't drive to the bucket or leap over a defender for an offensive rebound. But I could shoot and I could pass. And once I hung around the court long enough making open shots, the regulars began to recognize that I wasn't a complete waste of space. Within a matter of weeks, the same guys who used to drive to the basket and put up terrible shots in traffic because they were afraid to give me the ball were the same guys picking me for their squads, driving and dishing to me not by necessity but by choice. They knew I could shoot and the more confidence these strangers had in me, the more confidence I had in myself.

After a month, I was no longer the white guy who wore shades and hit jumpers. I was Ryan.

I tried not to play much on weekends because that was when the crowds grew. Once you finally got a game, you needed to win or else you'd wait at least an hour for another turn. These same large crowds also kept a running commentary during each game and I did not want to be the butt of anyone's jokes. Luckily, no one said much to me or about me because I blended in. I wasn't going to win the game, but I wasn't going to lose the game, either. However, I also wasn't going to back down when another player called me out, which is what happened one Saturday afternoon.

I debated going to Horny Corner because of the guaranteed crowds, but I did, which later felt as if some higher power had made me play. By the time I got on the court, approximately thirty guys were waiting their turn. My squad matched up on defense and I got stuck with a black guy in his forties. He had these tiny dookie braids similar to what NBA star Chris Bosh was wearing at the time. The difference was this guy's hair was gray and his shirt-less body was flabby.

My man stood near half court, waiting for me to check the ball. He sized me up, laughed and told his teammates he had a mismatch. I didn't take this personally yet because he was about four inches taller than I was. So, technically, he did have a mismatch.

He passed the ball to a teammate, ran to the post and had me pinned. His team gave him the ball and he made a decent jump-hook to score. It was neither flashy nor eloquent – just the sort of thing he should have done to someone four inches shorter than he was. But instead of keeping his mouth shut, this guy began to tell everyone on his team – using a voice loud enough that everyone could hear – that my sorry white ass couldn't guard him.

I didn't touch the ball on our first offensive possession. He took this as a sign that I was afraid. I know this because he told me – and everyone else.

“He don't want it,” he said. “I'll help on yours.”

On their next offensive possession, he got me in the post but didn't score. Still, he kept talking. I had had enough.

I came around a screen from the left side of the court and caught the ball at the top of the key. My man was a step behind from getting around the screen, so I pulled. And I hit.

Running down the court, I told him, "Don't leave me open."

He took offense to the fact that I retaliated to his verbal diarrhea and posted me again. He missed for the second time and I took off running. I scored on a fast break while he was still underneath his basket. Coming down the court, I remembered what he said about me not being able to guard him, so I told everyone at Horny Corner, "Give me the ball. He's too old. He can't guard me."

My man was cherry-picking and scored a bucket, which is the cheapest, lamest move in pick-up basketball. He acted like he had redeemed himself, but I wasn't having any of that.

"You gonna count that?" I asked as he guarded me on my next offensive possession. He said he was before telling me I'd better be quiet or he'd embarrass me.

It was officially on.

I ran the baseline, telling my guys to set me screens. Even if I never touched the ball, I was in better shape than this old guy and was going to run him until he had a heart attack. I started the fast break every chance I could and stayed with him on defense.

Still, he kept talking.

Finally, with the score close, my team was checking in the ball when I said, “Give me the ball. Broke Bosh can’t keep up with me.” The thirty guys on the sideline burst into laughter, which only upset Broke Bosh even more. But he was done. He was too tired to run or jump and get back on defense, so I kept running his ass while he kept running his mouth.

By the time the game was over, my team had won the game and I had won the personal battle against someone who thought he was going to walk all over me. I felt like a fucking king and wasn’t about to back down when he started talking shit from the sidelines.

“It’s not our day anymore,” Broke Bosh told some other old guy from the sidelines. “We’re old. We had our time, but it’s ok. These white guys can think they’re taking us. But we know. We know.”

I walked over and said, “You could never guard me.” He didn’t say anything. “You’re bigger than I am and you couldn’t score. Stop talking.”

And he did.

From that moment on, I felt confident enough to step on the court and play without fear of fucking up. And, when I did fuck up, I used it as motivation to come back even stronger on the next play.

Guys could beat me down the court. They could out-jump me for a rebound, block my shot, steal the ball or dominate me in the post. What they couldn't do was make me quit.

Unfortunately, I suffered an injury that could.

It was mid-afternoon, mid-week. The sun was shining and I was playing two-on-two against a couple of white dudes who smelled like beedi cigarettes. My man had the ball on the right side of the court, ten feet from the basket. He faced up and made a move to the inside. I saw it coming, so I went for the steal, but instead of getting the ball, I got his right knee. My pointer finger went "POP!" against his body and instantly went numb. I walked away from the play, conceding a lay-up, hoping I could shake off the pain.

I couldn't.

For the remainder of the game, I stood at the top of the key and gave the ball to my teammate because I was unable to touch the ball with my right hand. After the game, I said goodbye to the other players and headed home to put ice on what I hoped was a bruised finger.

I didn't have insurance, so I'll never know the severity of the damage. I do know, however, that four years later, there's still a slight painful resistance whenever I bend that finger.

I wrote for a living, freelancing for an array of publications, and worked at a community college, where my job was to correct students' essays. At work I placed my

pen between my thumb and middle finger, but typing for freelance gigs was impossible. A week passed before I could touch a keyboard and another few weeks before the pain was gone entirely.

Right when my game was coming back, I had to bench myself from basketball for financial reasons. This really sucked because even though I wasn't in practice every day like when I was in high school, and even though I was older than most of my competition, my skills had never been better. This, my therapist reminded me, was confidence.

I'm not saying I was the best player on the court because I definitely wasn't. But I was the best version of me I'd ever been, which caused a dilemma: continue to play and risk another injury or keep playing at a less-intense pace. At twenty-nine years old, the adult in me knew what I had to do, even if what I had to do went against everything I wanted to do.

Playing at half-speed meant no more driving to the bucket, no more defensive stances, no more reaching for steals, no more boxing out. It also meant I could play and still be able to work.

As much as I loved my re-found interest in playing basketball, I slowly came to terms with this style of play because, this time around, I was dictating my terrible performance. And any time I was beaten off the dribble or a shorter man got a rebound over me, I knew I could have gone harder. I also knew keeping up with a defender

increased my chances of bumping knees or that leaping for a rebound meant landing on someone else's foot and possibly breaking my ankle.

Still, there were plenty of times when really slow, shitty players would take me to the bucket and my teammates would get upset at me. I wanted to explain, but when you are competing against college freshman, it's hard to describe what real life, ie with commitments and without health insurance – is like. Besides, I could still shoot, so I decided that if I was going to be able to do only one thing, I had to do that one thing better than anyone else.

There were no lights at Horny Corner, but that didn't stop me from practicing. I'd come home from work, change into my basketball gear and get a few games before the sun went down. Then I'd shoot by myself well into the night. I'd even go down on days when it rained just so I could put up some shots. Eventually, my jumper went from pretty good to lethal.

But being a player who did nothing but shoot well was nearly impossible because guys who didn't know me assumed my lack of defense meant I couldn't play a lick. They never passed me the ball and I rarely complained because I wouldn't have given me the ball either. So, after a few weeks of being a half-assed version of myself, I decided that if I couldn't go full speed, I needed to stop playing basketball.

Just like that, my career had once again come to an end. I knew I had more to prove to myself and the friends I had made at Horny Corner, but I walked away in good spirits because I had discovered things about me I had never known – that I could fight,

that the limitations in my head were bullshit, that I could push myself harder and faster than I'd ever assumed, that it's ok to talk shit to a stranger and not feel bad about it, that even though I was the quintessential metrosexual hipster there was still something primal – something uniquely male – inside me that enjoyed physicality and sweating.

Not once during my trips to Horny Corner did I think about why my therapist told me to play basketball to counter anxiety. After being away from the court for a few days, however, his advice made sense because my self-imposed pressure returned. The walls began closing in and I knew I needed to get out of the apartment – and to get out of my head. I needed to do something that wasn't writing, that wasn't related to alcohol and/or weed. Something challenging. Something outside of my comfort zone. Something with a goal. Something that broke a sweat.

Something that tapped into that kid who wanted to run head-first into a brick wall.

Golf was my first attempt at finding a replacement for basketball, but not only was it not physically demanding enough, my skills were beyond terrible. I felt like one of those guys on the basketball court who was right handed but would shoot with his left from twenty feet away just to be silly. Except, on the golf course, I was right handed and I was playing right handed.

My tee shots with an iron flew an average of fifty yards, but anytime I used a driver, I was guaranteed to hit the ball three feet down and to the left.

I never mastered the art of the chip shot because I couldn't get the form down – I wanted to smash the ball every time while the proper way to do it is to get underneath so the ball pops up. Mine rarely popped up. Instead, I was the king of what is known as a “worm burner,” a ball that never gets off the grass. Basically, the equivalent of a grounder in baseball. I'd hit the ball hard, so it often made it near the tee. My friends would say, “Great positioning,” which really meant, “That was an embarrassing performance and you're lucky as hell to be where you are.” I hated being the king of the worm burn, which often resulted in me chucking my clubs down the fairway.

And putting? Let's not talk about my putting.

The walk across the course was always nice, but I needed sweat running down by forehead before I could be distracted from the real world and golf didn't provide that. Rather than making me focus my energy and attention on the ball, all golf was doing was dumping one more item on my “Things I Suck At” list.

The only redeeming quality about golf was the drink girl. She drove a cart and officially sold beers while unofficially sold drugs. She was a gorgeous brunette from Cal State Long Beach who loved flirting with me and my friends because we were some of the only guys on the course who weren't going to need Viagra to fuck her. She offered us weed and all sorts of pills, but we weren't interested for two reasons: 1. We didn't do pills. 2. I already had weed on me.

Thanks to a live-in girlfriend, I never got to hook up with the drink girl, so a knock-out co-ed who drove a golf cart for a living wasn't making up for what I lost from

not playing basketball. Without hesitation, I quit golf and felt damn good about my decision.

Still, I needed something to fill that void from basketball, something that was physically challenging.

Don't ask how or why because I don't remember, but with basketball too risky and golf too difficult, somehow I got the crazy idea that maybe my exercise routine should involve running along the bike path at the beach. This was absolutely out of the question for most of my life because I used to think runners were the craziest people on the planet. But, when you are poor, you live three blocks from the ocean and you need to exercise, running is what you do.

The closest I'd been to running was the time I "volunteered" to work a turkey trot once. And by "volunteered," I mean the pet-sitting business I worked for paid me to be there. I'd heard about turkey trots starting at the ungodly hour of eight a.m. and told myself that as these crazy runners were breaking a sweat, I would be four hours away from waking up with a hangover because, as a debaucherous vegan, Thanksgiving was nothing more than getting wasted on a Wednesday night. This particular morning, I was, of course, hungover, and have only one memory of the event: As I stood atop the Belmont Veterans Memorial Pier in Long Beach, a 12-year-old boy crossed the finish line, leaned over the railing and barfed. Maybe it was my job to help him. Perhaps I should have looked over the edge to see if he puked on some unsuspecting beachgoer.

But I didn't, partially because I was laughing and partially because I was on the verge of throwing up myself.

The image of the vomiting pre-teen was enough to keep me away from turkey trots forever. It was also a major factor why I have never participated in what masochists like to call a "fun run." These events automatically elicit the response, "Fun run? How can running be fun?" Running from responsibility – that's fun. Running from the cops – can be fun if you get away. Running from your past – not necessarily fun but damn near essential. But actual running, ie moving one leg in front of the other without a ball in your hand? Sorry, but that's not fun. In fact, if you look up "fun" in one of those opposite dictionaries, you see a picture of an 80-pound Nigerian dude with short shorts, a tank top and a bib with the number XK8821400 on it whose name starts with six consonants.

Yet, there I was, new Nike running shoes and sunglasses, standing atop Bluff Park, asking myself, "Am I really going to do this?"

I really did it.

My goal was to run about a mile from the Molino Avenue stairs to the pier (where I saw the kid puke) without stopping, which I succeeded in doing. Fairly easily, I might add.

Looking up from the bike path, I could see the tall apartment complexes that line Ocean Boulevard, which I used as landmarks to push myself. For instance, when I saw the tall blue building at Orizaba Avenue approaching rapidly, I forced myself to sprint

until I passed it. Then I could slow down for a second, but never did I allow myself to stop completely. I did the same thing with trash cans.

“Ok,” I told myself, “bust ass until you hit that can.”

I put my arms atop my head for a small break in front of the Belmont Brewing Company and told myself I could make it back to Molino without stopping. Again, using trash cans as motivation, I was successful, so the next day I ran through the pier and down to where the Belmont Plaza Pool and outdoor volleyball courts were. This added maybe an eighth of a mile to my run, but I wanted to add small distances that I could complete without having to take breaks.

Getting to the pool was easier than I assumed, so the next day I pushed myself to forgo my break atop the pier in favor of a non-stop jog/sprint/jog routine. Naturally, I jogged this area because I didn't want to run into any people.

Once again, getting to the pool/volleyball area wasn't enough, so one weekend day around noon, I ran to the pier, then passed the pool and kept going. I got to the end of the bike path near the peninsula – another mile at least – and needed a water break. The only fountain I knew of was at Horny Corner.

I ran until I hit the court. There, I watched from outside the chain-linked fence as a few dozen men surrounded the area. A game was being played. I recognized a few guys running and a bunch more waiting their turn. These were my people and I missed them.

I thought about asking who had last game to see if I could play with him. But I didn't because that time, that era, although in my very recent past, was now gone. However, that feeling like I had to push myself to an unforeseen limit, to sweat until my body was devoid of moisture, to go so hard I wanted to vomit, to fight against the worst opponent I'd ever known – me – was still there. No shortcuts. No half assing. No bullshitting.

I never got that water. Instead, I made peace with the basketball gods at Horny Corner, turned around and ran back to the ramp at Molino Avenue.

Crashing Down

“This was a mistake,” I told myself as I gunned the accelerator on my 1999 Toyota Corolla. But just like my life up to that point, my car wasn’t going anywhere. And similar to every bonehead decision I’d ever made, the fact that my automobile had careened across the oncoming lane of traffic and landed in a pile of snow on the side of a Nevada mountain was one hundred percent my fault.

Initially I remained calm because I figured I could throw my vehicle into reverse, back out and return to the two-lane road in order to be in Las Vegas before midnight. I pushed down on the gas pedal, but like a gym rat on a treadmill, my car exerted a lot of energy yet went nowhere. Once the smoke from my tailpipe clouded my back windshield and I had moved not one centimeter, I knew I was wrong about easing my way out of this problem just like I’d eased my way out of all twenty-eight years of my life.

I was stuck. And fucked.

I shut off Howard Stern and took my cell phone out of the glove compartment in hopes of cashing in on one of those one-hundred-mile tows promised from AAA. “Searching For Service,” the phone said. I stared at the screen for a few seconds because I was a native Angeleno and we aren’t versed in the ways of bad weather.

A minute passed and not one single car drove up or down the mountain. I stared some more and felt like a cruise ship passenger left behind in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

If my forthcoming year-long battle with anxiety had a literal beginning, this exact moment was it.

For the first time in my life, my mind betrayed me. My brain began yelling, “HEY DIPSHIT! RUN! RUN FAST AND FAR BECAUSE YOU DONE SCREWED UP!” But I was immobile. The only thing running was sweat from my armpits down my sides.

The internal abuse I could handle, but it was the doubt and the second-guessing that upped a Level One anxiety attack to a solid Three. Rather than coming up with ways to get my Corolla out of the predicament I put it in, I began going over all the ways I messed up and how this situation was completely avoidable.

I began with the replay of the actual skid across the two-lane road. With my right foot on the accelerator, I drove fifty-five miles per hour down that windy Ely, Nevada, road when what little common sense I had in my pea brain began telling me to slow down. I finally listened to that voice, but that voice was wrong. Whoever that guy was, he must have been a native Angeleno too because another thing we don’t know is whether or not we are supposed to brake or not brake when driving in snowy/icy/rainy weather. Now I know: Don’t brake.

Because I hit the brake, the left-leaning turn took me away from the side of the mountain and toward the mountain itself. Halfway through, my steering wheel started operating like the wheels on the cars at Autopia at Disneyland. I pulled right, but my Corolla went left, sending me headfirst into a four-foot pile of snow at fifty miles an hour.

Once I was done beating myself up over that mistake, my mind went back to an hour earlier when I entered a gas station on Aultman Street in Ely. My windshield wipers had begun to freeze, so I stopped to wipe them off, but it was so cold I didn't have much success. Someone else, someone smart enough to know when they are out of their element, might have asked the attendant for help with the wipers, but not me. After leaving the station with ice streaks on my windshield, I headed down the mountain towards Sin City. Five minutes outside of Ely on the 93-south, I noticed I was totally alone. No cars, no homes, no birds. Nothing. The visibility out of my windows shrank to nearly zero.

My mind then thought about why I couldn't see out of my windshield, which was attributed to the three-hour hailstorm I had driven through somewhere along the 93-south prior to my crash. It was the first hailstorm of my life. The once-clear sky quickly turned gray and clouds that once looked fluffy and comforting looked menacing and blood-thirsty. The caravan of vehicles slowed from its rapid pace to a cautious forty miles per hour. Rather than feeling safe and secure, I became agitated that we weren't moving faster. However, once the tires of my 1999 Toyota Corolla couldn't find its footing and I slushed back and forth atop a patch of ice for a brief moment, I came to my senses and embraced the slow pace that dominated the road for the next few hours.

This unraveling next took me back to that morning, when I sat alone in my friend Taylor's living room in Boise, Idaho, trying desperately to figure out how to get ten hours to Vegas. The original plan was simple: Once Taylor got home from work, we were

going to the college town section of Boise to get wasted like history majors. But as I stared at the blank television screen, something told me I had to leave. The barren white walls of my friend's house seemed to be inching their way towards my luggage and without warning I began having intense feelings of longing for my mattress in Long Beach. I'd traveled many times before and had, in a literal sense, missed my bed thanks to countless nights on couches or in the back seats of moving vans. But never had I missed my bed on any sort of emotional level. It was like that California King stood for something and whatever that something was was calling my name from across four statelines. My hands shook as I wrote a note for Taylor that apologized for leaving without saying goodbye and within a matter of minutes, my bags were in my trunk and I was out of Boise.

Naturally, these minor events forced me to begin thinking about the big picture, about why I was racing through Nevada when I should have been six Coors Lites deep in Idaho, drunkenly admitting to Taylor that I wanted out of my eight-year relationship with Claire but what I really wanted was to make out with a co-ed drunk enough to believe my twenty-eight-year-old ass was a college student. But I wasn't in Boise. I was in Ely, Nevada, a town that bucks conventional pronunciation by rhyming its name with "freely" when no one in their right mind would think it's pronounced as anything other than "ee-lie." With this big picture in mind, it should come as no surprise that the impetus for my stupidity that day and night was a female. It should also come as no surprise that the impetus for the anxiety caused by my accident stemmed from the same female.

Her full name was Rebecca, but she went by Becky. She was from Venice, Italy, and her European charm meant she never flinched when I referred to her as B. We met during the opening night of the 2009 Venetian Carnival and the instant she introduced herself was the moment I began to question the future of my relationship with Claire.

With the sun up, I drove through Idahoan speed traps where highways become cities and the speed limit goes from seventy to thirty-five within a mile while cops sit behind roadside billboards. I sped through northern Nevada stateline shambles masquerading as casinos and kept pushing through the hailstorm all so I could see B. She had moved to Las Vegas a few months prior to work for the Italian consulate (or something like that) and ever since she landed on the tarmac, B and I either spoke on the phone, emailed or sent Myspace messages approximately once a week. Each time we communicated, she'd tell me how excited she was to be in the United States, but how lonely and bored she was in Sin City. Each conversation included the obligatory, "When are you going to come and see me?" question, but the fact that I lived with Claire meant I couldn't just walk into the bedroom one day and say, "Hey, I'm going to Vegas to see a girl I met in Italy and if things work out I probably won't ever come back to you."

I got goosebumps whenever I thought of the time we stood on that serene Venetian bridge long past midnight. B laughed at the lame drunken jokes I told while I stared at the cobblestone streets so as not to make eye contact for fear that everything I was thinking could be read off my hazels. I sat in my Venetian hotel room drinking wine from a plastic cup and wrote poems about the moment, about how majestic our lives

would be if only there wasn't an Atlantic ocean and a girlfriend between us. I longed for a European passport and a royal wedding in an Italian province I couldn't pronounce. I wanted to sip espresso each morning in the courtyard of the apartment B's mom owned in Venice, to run through paved streets in the afternoon, to down house vino at local eateries for dinner and to pen the great American novel by candlelight once the sun went down and the booze kicked in.

Through our weekly communication, I got a vibe that B might have felt the same about me. But the only way to find out if I was destined to spend eternity with my potential Italian mistress was to see her and get the sense that she wanted me. If that happened, then I could profess my love.

Perhaps "love" is too strong of a word, but at that time I was confused about everything in my life, particularly my relationship with Claire, and B offered an alternative solution – and an alternative reality – that I hoped would provide answers to the many questions I had. Questions such as, "Do I really want to live with a woman who thinks having four cats is normal?," "How will we ever buy a home if she won't even tell me how much debt she owes?," "Why does she start a fight anytime I speak up for myself?," "Is she really going to blow more money on a tattoo she doesn't need?," "Is it rude of me to leave her passed out on the couch?" and "Does she think the laundry just magically does itself and that's why she never can do it?"

These doubts helped justify my trip to see B. Also, and perhaps more importantly, I wasn't going to Vegas with the sole intent on fucking her. I had never cheated on Claire

and I didn't want to. What I wanted was romance, the kind my girlfriend and I used to have, the kind that had died and wasn't coming back. That said, had B invited me into her bedroom, I don't know what I would have done.

However, I definitely would have kissed her. In fact, I tried to in Venice. We stood alone, far away from my friends, towards the outskirts of the city, where B had parked her car. We spent what I thought was a very flirtatious evening together and – Claire be damned – the vino in me told me to go for it. First I went for the cheek. I wrapped my arms around her and went left. Then, remembering how Europeans do it, I went right for the other cheek. She welcomed this move and as her body pressed against mine, I knew she wanted me to kiss her on the lips. So I did, but B seemed surprised at my move. Her head flew back a bit and her eyes opened wide. She didn't mind when my lips hit hers, probably because I didn't hit them square-on like I wanted to. I wouldn't say she didn't reciprocate, but I also wouldn't say she did, either. There was no make-out session, but my lips hit hers for a brief moment, which was good enough for me. I released my arms from her waist. We gave each other awkward smiles after our pseudo-kiss and promised to stay in touch.

The memory of locking lips with a voluptuous Italian beauty with stringy black hair, erotic Betty Page –esque bangs, inch-long eyelashes, fishnet stockings and thick accent were the sort of sex-filled Molotov cocktail strong enough to get a faithful boyfriend to stick his tongue down a throat not belonging to his girlfriend. They were

also strong enough to make that same faithful boyfriend crash risk his life driving in snow for the off-chance of a full-fledged make-out session.

The realization that I was the common denominator in the situations leading to my crash heightened my anxiety because here was three-dimensional proof that I was incapable of taking care of myself. You might think you have low self-esteem and that you are just barely succeeding at this whole “adult” thing, but once your flip phone has no service, your vehicle is immobile, you’re on the wrong side of a two-lane road and you’re coming to terms with the notion that you’re going to be late for the date with the Italian girl waiting for you in Vegas, then you understand just how unprepared you are to be a responsible adult who makes good decisions.

You also begin to comprehend just how much you rely on your girlfriend, the one who you’ve been with for eight years, the one who’s four-and-a-half years older than you are and who seems to be more interested in getting stoned than getting out of debt.

Then you feel shitty for busting ass through terrible weather for the chance to cheat on that girl.

All of these thoughts occurred in four minutes.

The self-torture ended once I saw the headlights of another vehicle coming up the mountain. Here was an opportunity to get my sorry ass out of the pile of snow, so instinctively I jumped into my passenger seat, threw open the door and flailed my arms. A guy pulled up beside me in a mini-van with two kids in the back. I pleaded for help and

he replied that he didn't have any chains. At this moment, I wasn't thinking about no goddamn chains: I was thinking, "Get me the fuck out of here," completely oblivious to the notion that chains were my way out of here. I was panicked, my brain in the midst of chaos, and unknowingly switched subjects like a mad man. Rather than continue with our conversation like a regular person, out of nowhere, I said, "I don't have cell service." He gave me a look that suggested he already knew that.

"I'll call Highway Patrol once I get into town," he told me. This gave me a false sense of hope, mainly because I had no idea how far the actual town of Ely was from my position on the mountain.

"Awesome," I replied like a California jackass. "How far is that?"

"'Bout ten miles," he said. "How much gas you got?"

"I just filled up in Ely," I said.

"Good. Turn on the heater and don't go anywhere."

I liked to think of myself as a smooth brother, but waiting for Highway Patrol was another lonesome moment that made me realize just how far out of my element I was. I had no food, no water and no phone service and was wearing eighteen-dollar wino shoes, white Nike calf-length socks, grey Dickies and a stretched green long underwear top from the Gap that was so old it used to be black.

To make matters worse, not only did this driver have an uphill drive in the snow before reaching Ely, but my hope for survival rested in the assumption that he would

actually remember to call the police. Then, if he did, there was no guarantee that Highway Patrol was anywhere near where I was because wherever I was was in the middle of fucking nowhere.

I'll be lucky, I told myself, if someone shows up within an hour.

Hoping for a miracle, I looked at my phone again and still it read “Searching for Service.” This time, however, I noticed something else. It was Friday the 13th.

I'm not superstitious, but the date made me think I was going to die, which, of course, I did not want to do. Suffocating on my own vomit (or someone else's) in a Vegas motel room I could live with (not literally), but freezing to death and turning into a pile of bones on the side of a Nevada highway was not the way I envisioned my obituary to read. Uncontrollably, I began to shake, partially from the freezing weather and partially from knowing I was fucked and there was nothing I could do about it.

Thinking about the date also made me realize that the odds of making it to Vegas with enough time to see B and then drive home to spend ample time with Claire for Valentine's Day were slimmer than the odds of winning at an Ely blackjack table. With the mini-van driver gone, I had plenty of time to think, which made me realize two things.

First, I thought about how poorly I had planned this trip. This poor planning confirmed my idiocy and complete lack of ability to function without Claire making all of my large decisions. I shouldn't have cut this so close to Valentine's Day. But I did. As a

guy with a girlfriend, I had to be home or else forfeit my sexual intercourse rights for a very long time. Needless to say, getting home on time was crucial.

Second, the stress and aggravation of trying to hang out with two women within twenty-four hours was the exact moment when I realized I was not cut out for cheating.

Crashing had ruined my schedule with both Claire and B and now I was scrambling to figure out how to see them on the same day – once I got out of the snow, of course. Having control of everything in my life was my top priority, but I held on so tightly to the idea that everything had to be perfect that simply maintaining control was (ironically) the issue that often caused me to be a mess. However, the crash created a total lack of control, which acted as the starting pistol that set my mind racing for a sprint with no finish line in sight. Had things gone according to plan, I would have had plenty of time to see B, do whatever we were going to do and then drive home to see Claire before the sun went down on February 14. But that was before the accident. Knowing I wouldn't get into Vegas until late wasn't an issue because the city never closes. But, rolling into town around midnight would have meant partying until the sun came up, which would have meant sleeping all day and driving the six hours to Long Beach in a rush so as not to upset my girlfriend. Now, my timing was off and the more I sat alone in the snow, I understood that the smart move was to head straight home to Claire.

Still, I was going to see B.

Five minutes passed and the highway patrol still hadn't arrived. Neither had another vehicle. The isolation began. Level Three anxiety became Level Five. Time

moved in super slow motion, yet everything felt as though my life was happening at a rapid-fire pace. I had never experienced this acid-esque time warp before, like I was the subject in my own private Salvador Dali painting.

Sweat continued dripping from my armpits, but was engulfing my forehead as well. My heart raced and my palms were moist. The Claire/B ordeal was enough to make me anxious, but somewhere in that hectic moment, I understood that if I didn't get out of the snow alive, I wouldn't be seeing anyone, a fact I was reminded of as each lonely minute passed. Sure, I wanted to find out what B thought of me and I also wanted the issues with Claire to magically disappear so I wouldn't have to be thinking about other women. But right then, my car was in the snow and wouldn't budge. I didn't have a jacket, so I couldn't go outside. I had a problem much larger than a potential love triangle.

Painters and photographers make lots of money off the tranquil environment I was in, but for me, Ely was anything but picturesque. The mountain to the left of my car was the oversized beast daring me to fight back. The snow mocked me each time I thought about giving my car just a little more gas while the rain was a constant reminder that I was not in charge of my destiny – Mother Nature was and at this moment, she was a raging bitch.

The inside of my vehicle was my entire world. I couldn't see more than a few feet outside my windshield and the side windows were a lost cause. There I was, just me, my steering wheel, my satellite radio and gray seats, sitting and waiting.

I thought about lots of things, none I could remember because it was as if every thought entering my mind interrupted the previous one. Static confusion dominated the space between my ears and it's a fucking miracle that somewhere in the midst of my panic-induced state, I saw the headlights of a truck that had pulled up on the opposite side of the two-lane road. I rolled down my driver's side window and stuck out my head into the freezing nighttime air. Metaphorically speaking, I probably looked like a dog enjoying a car ride. Literally, I must have looked like a maniacal freak who'd been stranded in his car with nothing but methamphetamines for two days.

The vehicle stopped approximately thirty yards away and turned off its headlights. The truck sat motionless for a full sixty seconds, then turned its lights back on. I most definitely wasn't high, but instead of feeling relief because other humans were around to save me, I began to feel paranoid like I was stoned. For some reason I assumed the outline of a man approaching me through the headlights, walking slowly amidst the snow, was the shadow of a person who was going to kill me. I rolled up my window, jumped back into the driver's seat, locked the doors and kept looking forward, making sure to watch this guy from my rearview mirror just in case he had a weapon. As I stared, I saw a second figure emerge from the truck. Instead of thinking I was about to be saved, my paranoia had completely taken over and all I heard was the song from "Deliverance." I just knew I was going to become a murder victim, which might have been an easier escape route than dealing with my car.

Fortunately, I was wrong about the homicide. The shadows turned out to be two blonde teenagers who approached my driver's side window to ask if I was ok. I was telling them that, all things considered, I was fine when a man well into his senior citizen discounts at movie theaters pulled up behind my Corolla and offered help. After I said yes, he moved his truck in front of my car, a move I didn't understand at the time.

Minutes prior, and for longer than I could count, I had been alone in what I thought was the middle of Nowhere, Nevada, and now there were three strangers hanging out at my car as if it was Studio 54 circa '79.

Level Five decreased to a manageable Three.

"There's a shovel and chains in the back if you pull 'em out," the old man said, but before I could get out of my car and into the bed of his truck, one of the teenagers jumped in and grabbed the tools. I explained to everyone that I was from L.A. and was completely useless when it came to all things snow. No one seemed shocked at my revelation.

The blonde kid got on all fours next to my front right tire and, looking for a spot to hook the old man's chains to, began to scoop snow with his hands like there was a million dollars hidden somewhere underneath. I talked to the other kid and the old man because I didn't want to come off as ungrateful or rude, but I was only half listening because the hard-working teenager was something to watch. He was tossing snow like a dog burying a bone and each time a piece of snow flew through the air, all I could about was how I was minutes away from this nightmare being over. No thanks to me, of course.

The blonde was still digging when another guy in a truck rolled up and I wondered if a vehicle in distress was some sort of magnet for good-natured citizens in these parts. Whatever the case, I was glad to see him. And the old man. And the teenagers. For the first time in at least a half hour, I was surrounded by people. Even better, my vision had returned, the sweat stopped dripping and my brain was moving at its usual, moderately frantic pace.

This new fellow was rocking a cowboy hat, scarf, thick moustache and even thicker Western accent. Right away he introduced himself to me using his first and last name as we shook hands. He took one look at the teenager I was speaking to and said hi as if he knew the guy. Because he did. Something about knowing the kid's parents. I had crashed in fucking Mayberry.

The cowboy asked the teenager about his mother while the old man and I stood quietly and listened. The fact that these three didn't seem worried for me or my automobile was a welcomed sign of relief because if the locals thought I wasn't going to die, then just maybe I wasn't going to die.

Within a matter of minutes, I told myself with an exhaled tone, I'll be back on the road.

The locals' casual attitude towards my predicament helped calm me. However, once I stopped shaking because of anxiety, I began to shake from the weather. I lasted maybe two minutes outside after I regained my composure, two minutes that were filled with me wondering how much of a self-centered Los Angeles jackass I would look like if

I went back in my car to warm myself while everyone else was outside in the snow where they were, you know, saving me and my car.

I really wanted to stand there with them like a trooper, but I'm not nor have I ever been a trooper. I'm a weakling, and at that moment, I was a weakling staring frostbite in the face if I didn't get warm immediately. My toes had started to go numb and my face felt like it was being poked with millions of tiny needles. At this point, worrying about how useless I looked wasn't a concern. Besides, I always felt useless.

From behind my steering wheel, I watched as the teenager stood from underneath my car. I assumed he was done and I was free to continue to Las Vegas where maybe there'd still be time to elope with B. But that didn't happen. Instead, the blonde asked for help. The three men stopped their conversation so the other teenager and the cowboy could get in the doggystyle position to feverishly dig snow while the old man watched. Eventually, they hooked the chain somewhere beneath the front of my hood. Had it been me, I wouldn't have known where to attach the damn thing, but not knowing where to place a hook underneath a car was just one of a bazillion things I didn't know how to do.

Still, with three people below my car, I felt confident I'd soon be rolling down the highway without the assistance of a tow truck. The anxiety that only recently dominated my mind and my body was nearly gone.

Once the chain was attached, I got out so I wouldn't seem like a jerk, but I made sure not to come off like the white-collar supervisor who praises his blue-collar employees for a job well done.

“Can I help?” I asked. But I got no reply. At this stage, they knew I was good for nothing. All I could do was hope they appreciated the offer.

“It’s on,” the cowboy said as he wiped snow from his gloves. “Gas it.”

The old man got in his truck and hit the accelerator. I watched as my car rocked back and forth before finally popping out of the pile of white snow. I ran back to my car, put the keys in the ignition and felt a forward movement. Other than losing my virginity, it was the best feeling I had ever experienced.

“Thank you so much,” I said to the cowboy, the old man and the teenagers, tiny drops of snow entering my car through the open window.

“Where ya headed?” the cowboy asked.

“Vegas,” I replied.

“You might wanna head back into town and take another route. This one’s not gettin’ any better in this direction.”

The other three agreed with the cowboy, so back to Ely it was.

On the way into town, not only did it stop snowing, but two plow trucks came marching down the hill. For a brief moment I thought about flipping a U-turn to follow them, but I had already battled this road and lost. I wasn’t in the mood for round two.

So what did I end up getting?

Round two. And three.

I felt like a different person on the drive back to Ely. I wasn't the accelerator-heavy driver I'd been for nearly half my life. Instead, I was overly cautious and afraid that everything – the mountain, the snow, the road, my car, other cars, the rain – was a potential hazard waiting to kill me. I reminded myself I was going uphill and was closer to the side of the mountain than the random massive drop offs, but my internal dialogue did no good. Once again, behind the wheel of my car, I started to freak the fuck out.

Level Five had returned.

My thumping heartbeat and sweaty palms slowly decreased when I saw two gas stations across the highway from one another. I chose the one on the right partially because I didn't want to cross the road if I didn't have to and partially because this location had a restaurant called Taco Time. Food had always been my security blanket and nothing said "pacifier" to my inner child more than a burrito.

Sitting in the parking lot with my car engine off, I felt the sort of relief akin to Maury Povich telling you the baby isn't yours. Other than an icy windshield, my car was fine and my body was in one piece. I was in an area with lights and people and the Copper Queen hotel/casino was a few yards away, which, I decided, was where I was going to stay.

I tried to see B, but I failed. And that was fine. My entire life was a "fail" long before teenagers on the Internet started using that word. Seeing the Italian beauty would have been great, but maybe we would have had sex, which in the long term would have been terrible. Or maybe I wouldn't have made it to Vegas at all. Either way, things were

far from perfect with Claire, but they were still better than risking my life for the off chance that some potential European mistress wanted me for anything more than a green card.

Feeling relieved because I knew my ordeal in the snow was finished, I exited my vehicle and walked the wet, muddy sidewalk towards the gas station's entrance. After wiping the moisture from my face (half sweat and half rain), I entered the building, where two men and a woman, each with skin more leathery than the next, sat at a table adjacent to the front door. One guy – the loudest one – had long graying greasy slicked back hair and was dropping F-bombs every fifth word. But I didn't care because the come-down from the anxiety-laced adrenaline left me so mentally exhausted that Elvis and Jim Morrison could have walked into Taco Time and all I could have mustered up would have been a shoulder-shrugged "eh." And I fucking love Elvis.

I walked to the counter and ordered a veggie burrito before sitting a few booths away from the trio. Their conversation was so loud that the entire station was forced to listen to the gray-haired dude's full-voiced rant about wanting to fight the other guy. A minute earlier, these three wastoids were laughing about the sort of shit only spaced out weirdoes can understand, and the next they were ready to throw blows inside a gas station Taco Time. And there I was, ten feet away, waiting on crunchy rice and dried beans, hoping they didn't turn their backwoods rage toward me.

Any other time and this potential altercation would have made me scared for my life. But this wasn't any other time. This was a moment when I was glad to be alive and,

goddammit, I hadn't had many of those. Everyone in the joint looked like a train wreck, but because of my haphazard choice of winter apparel, I knew I looked the craziest compared to the moustaches and flannel that dominated Ely's fashion scene. But I didn't care. I had a burrito coming and that's all that mattered.

The burrito sucked, but considering the stress I was under, the shitty salsa and cold tortilla might have been the best meal of my life. Feeling good thanks to a full stomach, I walked past the threesome on my way to the parking lot with a swagger I hadn't felt since I left Long Beach a week earlier. None of the wastoids seemed to notice me. My luck was starting to pick up.

Back inside my Corolla, I turned on the heat full blast and the back defroster before calling Claire to tell her what had happened. I felt like I needed to talk about the incident to someone, which is ironic seeing as how I never talked to her about anything that wasn't cats, weed or "Law & Order."

"I'm fine," were the first words out of my mouth. When you're with someone for nearly nine years, that's all it takes to know something's up.

"What happened?" she replied with a sigh that sounded more, "How much is your bail?" and less, "Are you going to die?"

"I crashed into a pile of snow. I was stuck for a few minutes on the side of a mountain, but I'm fine. Some people came to help me and now I'm about to get a room."

"Where are you?"

“Someplace called Ely. It’s in Nevada.”

“And you’re ok?” she said, now sounding very concerned. I explained that I was a bit shaken up mentally, but physically I was still a total weakling with a slight beer-and-pot-munchies gut.

“Don’t worry. There’s a casino across the street. I’ll get a room there and come home tomorrow.”

Hearing Claire’s voice provided a sense of security, one that told me to ditch B and get my stupid ass home to a girl who loved me. To celebrate my newfound sense of clarity, I planned on getting some drinks at the Copper Queen, going to sleep and driving straight to Long Beach the next day.

Then a knock came through my foggy driver’s side window that changed all that.

Still paranoid from the crash, I jumped in my seat, then gathered myself for a moment before rolling down my window. I opened the door and there stood the cowboy.

“I saw you pull into the station,” he said. “I’m headed down the other highway. You should follow me.”

“You think that’s a good idea?” I replied. “I mean, I just crashed my car into a pile of snow.”

“There’s one summit to go,” he said, “and once you get past there, the weather will be different.”

Like an idiot who always felt more comfortable following than leading, I believed him. And because I believed him, I said yes without even considering how terrible of an idea it was. Instead of listening to common sense, instead of remembering the major stress I had only recently put myself through, instead of reminding myself that I told Claire I'd get a room, I decided to listen to the cowboy and head towards Vegas.

Before we left, the cowboy said he lived somewhere down a pitch black road otherwise known as the US-6 and knew exactly where he was headed. In fact, his exact words were, "I could do this blind."

"Just stay right behind me and I'll guide you," he said. This guy was the epitome of a man's man. His cowboy hat wasn't a Hollywood prop and his moustache had zero ounce of hipster irony. He was the real deal and if I wanted to get to Vegas, I was going to have to put my faith in this man. So I did.

Unlike my previous solitary venture down the 93-south, traffic on this highway was comprised of a slow-moving caravan of about ten cars, of which the cowboy and I were somewhere in the middle of the pack. Having other vehicles around did nothing to calm my nervous because less than three minutes in, I recognized that this road was worse than the one I crashed on. It had not been plowed in hours, which meant I was riding my chain-less tires on nothing but snow. My wipers hadn't worked properly for at least two hours and were clearing only a tiny section at the bottom of my windshield. And because it was snowing heavily, I hunched over and drove with two hands on the wheel like my ninety-year-old grandma. The defrost was on full blast, but all that did was

create an unnerving buzzing noise throughout my car. To compensate, I put sports talk show host Scott Ferrall on as loud as I could. Normally I love Ferrall and his gravelly voice, but on this night, not even Scotty could help me.

If the anxiety level of the crash was an eleven, the first five minutes of the drive down this highway were a fourteen. Obviously, driving is better than crashing, but I quickly discovered that once you hit a certain level of anxiety, there's no coming down off that high. All those moments earlier when helped had arrived and my anxiety decreased was bullshit. There is no decrease. There might be brief interruptions of anxiety, but everything builds upon everything, making each situation worse than the previous.

Anxiety and paranoia were telling me to pull over, but it was so dark I couldn't tell where that would be safe. I literally could not see anything beyond three feet in front of my headlights and had no idea if I was on flatland or a mountain. Stopping could have meant a reprieve from the constant barrage of panic. It also could have meant skidding off the side of a mountain and dying. So I kept driving.

Besides, the headlights behind me were a reminder that I couldn't pull over because that meant the potential for a massive accident if I couldn't brake properly. Without the ability to see through the rear windshield, I had no idea just how far the car behind was trailing me, but it appeared to be closer than I wanted. If I stopped, I ran the risk of skidding and maybe even drifting back into the lane, or worse, the lane of oncoming traffic.

Ten minutes into our caravan down the road, the cowboy decided to pass a slow-moving mini-van. This drive was the single most dangerous moment of my entire twenty-nine years of existence and my new friend was passing on the left with zero regard for oncoming traffic that he couldn't see until it was too late. I tried to take his move as complete assurance that he knew exactly what he was doing. He had to know what he was doing because he was my hero, the guy I put all of my faith into. But common sense suggested otherwise. Instead of looking like a rugged manly man, the cowboy's passing looked more like a sign that he was fucking nuts. And this was the guy I was following.

If I was telling this story orally, right about now is when I would snap my fingers to indicate just how quickly the cowboy disappeared once he made his pass. I mean, he vanished into the darkness and with him went not only my hopes of getting out of the thirty-mile summit and on my way to Vegas, but also the dream that I would make it out of Nevada alive.

Panic level – twenty.

With the cowboy gone, I threw on my brights for more visibility, but all that did was show me the snow, not the road. A second later, I turned them back off. The freak-out got worse when I realized I had not seen a gas station since I left Ely.

Even if I make it out of this weather, I told myself, there's no guarantee I make it off this highway.

Panic level – twenty-two.

Eventually the highway – and by proxy, the caravan – made a left onto NV-318. There was no stop sign to help vehicles transition from one road to the next, so I slowed to ten miles an hour in hopes that I wouldn't miss the NV-318 and continue down the US-6. Even at that pace, my tires had no traction, which caused a sloppy wide turn onto the new road. Once I was on the NV-318, to my right was an area where a few truckers had pulled over to sleep, but I didn't stop because I was afraid that if I did, I would lose control of my Corolla and crash into a parked big rig. Here is where I learned a valuable lesson I will share with anyone reading this: If truckers – professional drivers – aren't willing to carry on in apocalyptic-esque weather, neither should you.

Twenty minutes after we made the left, a mini-van with bicycles on top decided it didn't want to be first in the caravan anymore, so the driver pulled over, leaving me with no one to follow. Still hunched over like a grandma, the fear of being first in line caused me to talk to myself out loud and ask why I didn't get a room in Ely. As if I needed more ammunition to raise my anxiety, each time a car passed in the opposite direction, a large splash of snow, water and dirt covered my windshield, meaning what little visibility I had was gone for about three seconds. And when I say "gone," I mean fucking gone. Like, I could see absolutely nothing until my frozen windshield wipers flicked off enough ice to actually start clearing the windshield.

For all the money in the world, I could not give an honest answer about how long I was ahead of the pack of cars. My gut tells me it was about a half hour, but I really

don't know. All I remember from that period of the drive was a complete sense of detachment from my surroundings.

I was watching a film.

This wasn't happening to me.

The cars passing weren't really there.

No other vehicles were trailing me.

Scott Ferrall's voice wasn't in my car.

The windshield wipers didn't squeak.

Eventually I would wake up in my bed in Long Beach, California, where it was sunny even in January.

I know the term "peaceful bout of anxiety" doesn't make any sense, but it's the only way I could describe how I felt once I had given myself over to the fact that I would die in Nevada. I wanted to live, but it was just as likely that an out of control eighteen-wheeler would come into my lane and kill me.

Letting go of the anxiety was nirvana, a slice of heaven amidst a suffocating hell. And like finding your car keys after you've decided they're gone for good, this blissful mood occurred moments before I saw lights to my left a few hundred yards down the road. Whatever it was, those lights were where I was stopping so I could sleep in my car. Yes, it was beyond cold outside, but freezing inside my vehicle until the sun came up

gave me at least a decent chance of survival. Continuing to drive in this weather was a damn near guarantee that something really bad would happen. So sleeping in my Corolla it was.

All I would have had to do was cross the oncoming lane and hope another vehicle wouldn't crash into my passenger side door – a risk I was willing to take.

The closer I got to the lights, I saw they were a gas station and a motel. In literally the middle of nowhere, a ray of sunshine beamed through the darkest, most overcast day of my life.

My problems, my anxiety, the snow – it was all minutes away from being over. An orgasmic sense of relief engulfed my body. Soon, I would be free.

The lights approached, so I slowed my car from the twenty-five miles an hour I was driving in hopes of making the left turn into the parking lot. But without chains, that wasn't happening. My tires slogged and skidded as I decreased my speed and I knew I'd never make the turn. Not stopping was the equivalent of driving the rest of the three-plus hours to Vegas and there was no fucking way I was doing that. Instead, a wave of testosterone took over my body as I hooked a left into a football field -sized patch of snow to the right of the motel driveway. It was brash and maybe a bit stupid, but I was tired of my situation, tired of feeling like I was not in control, tired of being shit on by Ely, Nevada. This maneuver was my way of fighting back and it felt amazing.

However, my masculinity shrank to Double XX status almost instantly. I wasn't thinking this at the time, but once I got stuck it became clear what sort of mistake I made. There was a separate entrance for the gas station about ten yards ahead that I could have driven into, but I had to intentionally drive into a patch of snow. Like it or not, Nevada was skunking me in this game of one-on-one.

Like earlier, my car was immobile, but did I learn anything from that experience? Of course not. Thinking this patch of snow would somehow be different, I gunned my engine, hoping to move to the driveway. No dice. For the second time in approximately two hours, my vehicle was stuck. This time was intentional, but that didn't help my emotional state. All I wanted was to scream. Not an angry scream. More like a "when is this night going to end because if it doesn't I'm about to cry?" sort of scream.

At least I'm off the road, I rationalized. That, coupled with the motel being two hundred yards away, prevented an outburst that would have scared Mother Nature back into whatever hole she crawled out of.

I didn't like the idea of leaving my vehicle in an area where it could be stolen, but it wasn't like anybody was going to drive that thing away. So I decided to leave my car where it was and hoof it to the motel entrance, where I would pay for what was sure to be the best room of my life.

Walking through two feet of snow made my feet numb within a matter of seconds. Still, I pressed forward. The colder my feet got, the less my body shook from anxiety, which was a trade-off I was certainly willing to make. By the time I got to the

motel counter, where I met a seventy-year-old woman wearing a grey shirt with a USA flag on it, my anxiety had become manageable. In its place was a sense of relief that dwarfed the good vibes I got back at the Taco Time parking lot because this time, I was one-hundred percent certain that my brush with death was officially over.

“Oh, are you the guy who just drove into the snow?” the clerk asked as I handed her my driver’s license. “I watched you do that and wondered what you were doing.”

Yes, I thought to myself. *I am that idiot.* I nodded yes but said nothing because there was nothing to say.

As I signed the receipt, the woman called the gas station to inquire about whether or not they could help with my car. They couldn’t. Out of nowhere, she told me how she thought the gas station shouldn’t have women working at night, totally unaware of the hypocrisy dribbling from her brain. She searched the phone book, but each tow driver listed came with a “Nope, he ain’t gonna help you.” I appreciated her effort and maybe earlier I would have focused more on getting my car to move, but at this point, it didn’t matter one bit whether or not my car stayed or moved. I assumed the snow would be gone by the time the sun came up, meaning I could drive off in the morning and be home for some Valentine’s Day sex by the evening. And with sex on the brain, a little thing like your car sitting in snow doesn’t seem all that important. Neither does a sixty-dollar room in the middle of nowhere that might get a nudie movie on HBO if you’re lucky.

Room key in hand, I turned to face the door, ready to walk to my car for my luggage, when a man entered to inquire about room rates. His eyes were bloodshot and

his plain white t-shirt was wrinkly. As a veteran of the long-distance drive, I knew this meant he had been behind the wheel for a long time. The woman asked how many in his party and he said six, but for some reason he was quoted the same rate that I – a single traveler – was.

The man paused for a moment, then turned around to walk out the door as if paying three Thomas Jeffersons was too much to ask for his family's safety. *This guy's fucking nuts*, my inner voice said. After the anxiety-ridden drive I had just gone through, this place could have been five hundred dollars a night and I was going to pony up.

The man exited without getting a room, and like the uber-dependent person I am, I ran after him.

“You mind helping me get my car moving again?” I asked. The man looked back at his vehicle and saw his wife tending to one of their kids in the middle seat of their mini-van. Looking back at me, I could tell he wanted to say no, but he had no valid reason not to help. Besides, as a guy in a long-term relationship, I knew what it meant to travel with a female. I had no doubt that he wanted to keep driving, but there was no way she was interested in that. What he wanted didn't matter and regardless of how passive aggressively he suggested they keep moving, they were getting a room. And getting a room meant helping me.

“Ok,” he said, his face saying no but his mouth saying yes. “Let me change my shoes and grab a coat.”

A minute later, as we walked towards my car, I took it upon myself to return his favor with one of my own.

“Where you going?” I asked. His reply was some town I’d never heard of. “Is that up the 93?”

“Yeah. What are the conditions like?”

In no uncertain terms, I told him driving was not a good idea. But all he could talk about was how he’d done that drive before and how it couldn’t be that bad. I know what it’s like to have a destination in mind and how desperate a man behind a wheel can get when he feels like he’s *almost* there, so I didn’t bother to persuade him otherwise. Instead, I took a mental note not to pick up a morning paper for fear of the headline “Man Who Wouldn’t Fork Over \$60 for a Motel Room Accidentally Kills Family.”

The man and I got to my Corolla and we both stared like we knew the two of us weren’t budging that ton of metal. I was just about to relieve him of his duties when, like the twist we all see coming in a bad Hollywood flick, a truck pulled into the snow. The door opened and out stepped the cowboy. The fucking cowboy!

“I saw whatcha did back there,” he said. How he saw that, I didn’t bother to ask. All I knew was with him at my side, my car was getting out of that goddamn pile of snow. I also knew I would not be following him anywhere, even if he promised virgin Latina whores lying on sun-drenched Hawaiian beaches *just* past the next summit.

I got behind the wheel and hit reverse while the two men pushed. Nada. We (“they”) tried again. Still nada. As with my previous accident, another truck pulled up to help and a man got out. He didn’t have a shovel, but he did have a large stick that he used to scoop out the snow from under my tires. These three men picked up my car from the hood and tried pushing. They succeeded for about a second, but once my car moved three feet, the cowboy face -planted into the snow. I might have laughed if I had the energy to do so.

The men tried once more and this time was successful for both the cowboy’s face and my automobile. I saw the cold night air kick up from my tires and I quickly put my car into reverse.

I flipped half of a slow U-turn and drove into the parking lot, but not before I rolled down my window and thanked the three men. I told the cowboy I would never forget him and I meant it. I don’t remember his name, but if he ever reads this, I owe you big time my friend.

As I drove across the snow-covered parking lot, I felt like the star of a Western flick whose horse goes on its back legs while the character removes his ten-gallon hat and waves it in the air before the credits scroll down the screen.

The weather had erased the lines in the parking lot, so I left my car where I thought a space might exist, grabbed my luggage from the trunk and walked the stairs to my second floor room.

Once inside, I undressed as quickly as possible to get out of my soaked clothes, which left major chunks of snow on the floor. Standing naked a foot beyond the door, I thought about cleaning up the mess I had made, but I was too tired to care about a few puddles that were sure to be gone by the time I woke up. Instead, I washed my hands and face, watched “Jeopardy” on the Game Show Network for five minutes, flipped off the TV and went to bed.

The mattress was hard, the sheets were tucked in too tight, the hot water was lukewarm at best, the heater didn’t work and I wasn’t rendezvousing with a sexy Italian in Las Vegas. But I didn’t care because an uncomfortable night’s sleep was a small price to pay for not dying in the middle of Nevada.

Through the reflection of the still-glowing television set, I saw a major grin on my face, one that suggested a weight of epic proportion had been lifted from my psyche.

I was alive.

My car was in one piece.

I didn’t cheat on my girlfriend.

And I was out of the snow.

The next morning I woke up without a trace of anxiety, as if the previous night was nothing but a nightmare that didn’t really happen. Feeling good, I called B from my hotel to explain what had happened the night before. She sounded legitimately worried and suggested we meet for coffee later that day. I agreed, but something about losing my

mind in the middle of Nevada changed my attitude towards her and made me re-assess the doubts I had about Claire. Instead of anticipating a make-out session or a romp in B's bedroom, all I wanted from her was a cup of coffee and maybe a friendly hug.

Three hours later I called B from the Starbucks she suggested we meet at. She didn't answer. Twenty minutes later, she called back.

"I'm late. Can we meet in an hour?" That was a long time to sit around for a female who I wasn't sleeping with, especially considering I still had six hours to drive to get to a female who I definitely would be sleeping with. But I'm a guy and we're suckers for pretty girls, so I agreed.

Two hours later, B walked through the Starbucks door. I stood to greet her and was hit with that unexplainable shock that happens when someone you think you could spend the rest of your life with enters a room.

"Hey Ryan," she said with no expression on her face. "I can't stay. I just got an offer to go off-roading for the weekend."

I said I understood, but inside I was furious. I could have been a third of the way home, but instead I spent two fucking hours driving around Vegas, which is slightly less irritating than crashing your car into snow twice in one night. We hugged, then went outside.

“Wow,” B said, “your car is dirty.” She said this as if I had made up the entire thing about crashing. Like maybe she was pissed I didn’t show up the night before and making me wait only to bail was her way of saying “fuck you.”

I could have explained, but it didn’t matter. Standing in that parking lot under the February sun, I experienced a moment of clarity unlike any other. B was a nice girl, sexy as hell and that accent was to die for. But Claire was the one. The one for me. The one to go home to. Not B.

We hugged before we entered our vehicles, which turned out to be the last time I ever saw or heard from B. As I drove to Spring Mountain Road to buy a dozen vegan donuts for Claire as a Valentine’s gift, I knew my Italian friend was out of my life forever, not because she dissed me (although she did), but because I wanted her gone. For good. Thinking about her wasn’t making my deteriorating relationship with Claire any stronger, so I made a pact with myself. Once I got home, I was going to ship up. Things were to be as good as they once were, hopefully even better. We had been together for nine years and it was time to grow up. No more chasing Italian woman around the globe. No more late night drinking sessions with my friends that ended with me stumbling into bed after two only to drunkenly try to wake Claire for sex. No more incessant pot smoking. No more avoiding writing, the only thing I’d ever had a modicum of talent for. No more old Ryan. Old Ryan was dead. Long live old Ryan.

With plenty of time to contemplate my new outlook, I drove home feeling revitalized. It sounds totally cliché, but for the first time in my twenty-nine years, I

understood what it meant to have a second chance at life. Maybe my drive wasn't quite the near-death experience of a heroin overdose or a plane crash, but it was as near death as I'd ever come.

Hours later, I walked through my apartment door to a mini-celebration. Our four cats came from their respective hiding places to greet me while Claire came charging out of her sewing room to give me a hug and plant a big kiss on my lips. I was home and it felt fucking great.

Watching the smile on Claire's face as she devoured a jelly donut, I knew that becoming a mature adult with goals and aspirations was not only the right decision for me. It was the right decision for us and as someone who'd always placed "us" before "me," my life seemed to have improved literally overnight.

For the remainder of that day, I had not a trace of anxiety and assumed I never would again.

I was wrong.

Nine days later, I discovered that once the anxiety seed is planted, it grows like wildflower.

Marijuana Kills

I was playing a bluesy E to A to B riff on my green vintage couch when an infomercial for Johnny Cash's album "American IV: The Man Comes Around" caught my attention. The opening grainy scene of a young Cash riding a train looking all cool and shit with his pompadour and drug-addled skinny face made me stop strumming and start watching. The imagery then flash forwarded to a scene from the singer's most recent video, a cover of the Nine Inch Nails' song "Hurt." The outlaw gunslinger from the previous shot had been replaced by a great-grandpa with droopy cheeks and white hair who is so knocking on death's door that his hand trembles as he raises a chalice towards the camera.

The footage was a moving contrast that got me thinking: Johnny Cash was going to die and there was nothing I could do but buy his new album.

So I did.

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have purchased the record because I would have known that infomercials are for women over the age of forty. However, these weren't normal circumstances: It was Saturday, late morning, and I was high.

And because I was high, I started to think about the many ways in which Johnny Cash meant something to me. He was the last great country singer and was next to Hank Williams in terms of best country singer ever. The fact that Cash was able (albeit barely)

to release new music was enough for me to care because his life was a ticking clock soon to get stuck at midnight.

Cash was a rebel, the man in black. While this is important to those people who prefer style over substance, Cash's anti-authoritarian attitude wasn't why I was a fan. Sure, I hate the pigs as much as anyone else, but Cash's bad-assery wasn't what drew me to him. For me, it was that voice.

Oh, that voice. It's a tired cliché, but you could have told me Johnny Cash was reading the phone book and I would have been interested in hearing the album. Not saying I would have bought it, but you would have at least got my attention. Whether it's the subtle playfulness on the live version of "25 Minutes to Go," the longing for a loved one in "Give My Love to Rose," the excitement of being a heathen in "Jackson" or the rock 'n' roll crooning in "Get Rhythm," Cash was (pardon the pun) king because he wasn't just one type of vocalist. The boom-chicka-boom rhythms of his songs often sounded identical to one another, yet his bass-baritone makes each track a completely new thought, a feeling totally unique from the others on his records.

This world is full of people who can sing – some even make careers out of their voices. But few have what Cash has. And what Cash has is "it," that unquantifiable *thing* that makes for top-notch art. We can't explain "it," nor should we try. Instead, just sit back and enjoy, for Cash's voice is truly beyond words.

From the first time I heard him, Cash's music reminded me of my grandfather Jim Hall, but I'll never know why. He died when I was in the eleventh grade and I barely

knew the man. Conversely, he barely knew me, often calling me “Bryan” for the first few years of my life, a fact I think we’d all like to attribute to his drinking. I have no memories of Pop listening to Johnny Cash nor do I have any snapshots in my mind of him being a music fan. Yet, my brain equates the singer with the blue-collar, Midwestern values that define my grandfather. Born in Kansas, Jim Hall came to California and worked as a longshoreman. He drove a truck, smoked cigarettes and drank beer. He raised eight kids (two that weren’t his) and he died.

I can’t make a connection between Cash and Pop because there isn’t one. Except there is. For me, anyway. Luther Perkins’ twangy guitar licks combined with the push-pull rhythm of bassist Marshall Grant and drummer W. S. Holland set the perfect backdrop for Cash’s 1950s, every-man persona. And when these pieces come together, I hear the soundtrack to my grandfather’s life because I assume Jim Hall was a 1950s blue collar every man, even though I have no idea what sort of life he actually lived. It’s as if Cash exemplifies who I think my grandfather was, and through this music I can form a bond with a man whose physical presence used to scare me when I was a child.

Johnny Cash also reminds me of being young, of a time in my life when I was most free. I was eighteen years old, taking classes at Los Angeles Harbor College, working as a mail order guy for a record company in Santa Monica, where I found one of his greatest hits CDs near the stereo. As someone who didn’t know anything about country music or the singer, there was no reason for me to want to listen to this disc. Yet,

I put in the CD, pushed play and right away was attracted to this massive voice leaping out of a fifty-dollar boom box.

A year or so passed until I finally bought one of Cash's greatest hits albums for my own. But that's not to say I didn't hear him regularly. During that time, I listened to the work CD as I stuffed envelopes and later borrowed a three-disc set from a girl named Claire, who I had recently started dating. Claire and I met on Halloween 1999 and were inseparable from the start. During our third date, we shared a moment that made me realize our two brains were acting as one.

"Whenever I think of brown," she said, "I think of the number twelve."

Without hesitation, I replied, "Yeah, because of 'Sesame Street.'"

Minutes later, she told me she loved me and I told her the same.

Claire went out of state for Christmas and said to call her roommate Martha so I could pick up my gifts. During my brief conversation with Martha, I let it slip that I had just bought some CDs. Martha, not wanting to spoil my surprise, proceeded with caution.

"You didn't buy a Johnny Cash CD, did you?" she asked.

"Yeah! I did!" I said. Martha went quiet. Right then, I knew what she was saying even though she wasn't actually saying anything.

My Cash disc was already opened, so I returned Claire's and never told her what had happened because I didn't want to ruin our first Christmas together.

Cash reminds me of the day before Claire's trip. I was sick, but I made the twenty-minute drive to her apartment because I wanted to see her before she left to see family in another state. I wore her oversized, bright yellow "Nevermind the Bollocks" Sex Pistols t-shirt to dinner at Mama Mia's Pizza because she wanted my scent to remind her of me while she was away. My head was congested and I couldn't focus on anything for very long. But I knew I was there with her – both physically and emotionally. We ate cheese pizza in a cloud of my own sick haze – me trying to stay awake and her taking care of me. At that moment, we were a modern day Sid and Nancy, two people who needed each other, who the cosmos brought together for reasons we'd never understand.

Never in my life have I ever felt a moment like this one. Everything surrounding us was still. Time, it felt, had literally stopped. The world existed in acute tunnel vision. There was Claire. There was me. And there was nothing and no one else.

Ever since that botched holiday gift, Cash's voice brings me back to those first few months together, a time when he was the soundtrack to a budding relationship that eventually lasted eleven years, just like I assume he was the soundtrack to a period in my grandfather's life.

Johnny Cash didn't know me and he didn't know Claire. But we knew him – he was in our cars, our living rooms, our bedrooms. So, when that infomercial came on and I was left to my altered thoughts without my girlfriend to talk me out of making a bad decision, I realized it wasn't a matter of wanting the album – I *needed* it because Johnny Cash's eventual death meant I'd lose that bond with Pop. It would also mean that the

halcyon days of my relationship with Claire were officially over. And once those were over, I feared I would be a full-fledged adult.

Had it been a thirty-second commercial, the high would have made it impossible for me to remember the phone number. But this was an infomercial, the kind that lasts for what seems like an eternity. My fingers fumbled across the touchtone pad at least three times and right when I would have given up in other, non-stoned circumstances, the number kept reappearing on the screen. This, I justified, was a sign that this album would save me from becoming old and lame because Johnny Cash wouldn't let that happen to me.

The phone rang at least ten times before the operator picked up. Had I been sober, I would have recognized this delayed answer as another sign from above telling me to hang up and save my money. I had less than five hundred dollars combined in my savings and checking accounts and the last thing I needed was another CD to add to the two hundred albums Claire and I already owned.

Luckily, I wasn't sober.

"Yeah, uh, I want that Johnny Cash CD," I told the operator.

"Ok! Great! If I can just get your credit card number..."

The credit card number. Right. I totally forgot about that. Because I was high and because I was anxious to get this record as soon as possible to prolong my descent into adulthood, I didn't even think about how I'd pay for the album. I'd ordered things

through the phone before (mostly Chinese food from Chen's), but nothing as urgent as this disc. Or maybe that was the paranoia and the constant "Order now!" flashing on the screen. In my stoned state, I assumed I would call, the infomercial people would know it was me and then they'd send the CD.

"I don't have a credit card," I replied.

"Ohhhhhhhh..." the voice said. "Ummm...how old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"Ohhhhhh..." the voice repeated. "Do you have a checking account?"

"Yeah." The high was at its peak and I couldn't get out more than two syllables at a time.

"So do you have a debit card?"

"Yeah."

"Ok. Let's go ahead and use that one then. What's the number?"

My card was in my wallet, which was in the back right pocket of my gray Dickies pants. I went into the bedroom, climbed over the mountain of clothes at the edge of our bed and began to dig. Because it was Saturday, the pile was, like me, high. After sifting through scrubs that smelled like animal piss (Claire was a veterinary technician) and socks with smiley-faced cats on them (Claire was both an animal lover and a silly-sock lover), I found my trousers and pulled out my card.

“5...4...7...2...” I recited the numbers so slowly that Johnny Cash would have had a new record out by the time I finished the twelve-digit code.

Not once throughout the conversation with the operator did I think I was making a bad choice because that’s what happens when you get stoned – you make bad choices that seem fucking awesome as you’re making them. Luckily, weed is harmless and the decisions stoners make are usually on the level of buying CDs from infomercials and not pushing the red button to destroy the world.

After I was told I would be the proud parent of “American IV: The Man Comes Around” in four to six weeks, I felt glad that I called the 800 number and spent \$19.99 – plus \$4.99 shipping and handling – on a disc I could have got at Tower Records immediately for half that price. And why not? The on-screen voice told me to “Order now!” so that’s exactly what I did – I ordered now! Within a matter of weeks, Claire and I could sit in our living room, smoke some weed and listen to a new Johnny Cash record. Sure, we’d totally be avoiding the fact that we were lazy, broke stoners with no ambition and that Claire’s penchant for hoarding meant I had no room for any of my stuff, but who cares? We had weed. We had Johnny Cash. And we had each other. I might not have worn tie-dye or listened to the Grateful Dead, but the inner hippie inside me was content with music, nuggs and love.

I hung up the phone, put my debit card back into my pants and went into the bathroom – where Claire was showering away the funk that comes from living with me – because I was too excited to wait until she got out. My purchase was a post card from a

trip we once took, a love letter from me to her ghostwritten by The Man in Black. I just knew she'd be as thrilled as I was because she was getting a new album and a reminder that she had an amazing, thoughtful, loving boyfriend who always put her ahead of himself.

“Guess what I just did?” I asked as she was getting out of the shower.

“Huh?” she replied, surprised I was in the bathroom.

“I just bought something off the TV,” I announced as she leaned forward, drying her dyed red hair with a towel. There was an elegance in my tone, a sense of royalty as if Sir Highness himself had just procured an item available only to the most esteemed regal members of the family crest.

“Are you stoned?” she replied, rubbing the towel against her back, exposing her nude front side to me. The fact that she could just tell I was high was one reason why I loved her so much.

“Maybe,” I giggled like a pothead.

“So what'd you buy?” She said this not in an angry way. More like a this-is-gonna-be-good way.

“Johnny Cash's new album. There was a commercial for it and the CD comes with the 'Hurt' video.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Because I’m stoned?” I announced with my tail between my legs. I wasn’t offended when she wasn’t as excited as I’d hoped she would be, but I was looking for more jubilation and less humiliation. Now, feeling like I had made a stupid stoner mistake, I knew I couldn’t tell her I made the purchase so we could revisit the early days, back when the real world couldn’t come between us. That was way too serious of a conversation for me to have, particularly when I was high and even more so considering Claire was naked in the bathroom.

Like promised, the record came six to eight weeks later. And a year after its arrival, I heard of this thing called Youtube, where videos could be watched for free twenty-four/seven. During those twelve months, I listened to “American IV: The Man Comes Around” maybe three times, watched the video even less and took nightly virtual-vacations to Amsterdam. Claire and I also often ran across an infomercial for the Magic Bullet, a blender that came with seventeen pieces able to slice, dice, shred and mix damn near anything. At least that’s what the infomercial led us to believe.

The thirty-minute scene starts with a middle-aged white couple – the guy has some sort of Australian accent or something – making a “hair of the dog” for a bald man with a loose necktie who, we assume, had too much fun the night before. Then two other middle-aged white couples sit around the kitchen bar and within two minutes, they are drinking smoothies, grinding coffee beans and frying an omelet.

Without coming out and saying as much, the Magic Bullet was speaking to me, to Claire and to all other stoners who sat on their sofas with nothing to keep them company

but their bongs Sparky and their cats (ironically, also named Sparky), wishing we were at that party where the Magic Bullet turns nondescript white people into guacamole-eating, margarita-drinking, salsa-dipping party animals.

Needless to say, we bought the Magic Bullet.

This time, however, we went to Target.

Cocaine Blues

“Follow me,” Craig said as I sat at a table with a Corona in my hand. Because I was drunk, I did.

Ten steps later, I realized we were at the bathroom door.

“There are plenty of girls here who are more than willing to accommodate you,” I told my friend once I realized we were going inside the bathroom, referring to the fact that Adelita—a whorehouse in La Zona Norte in Tijuana, Mexico – had an on-site hotel where, for the right price, patrons could fuck the dancers. But that wasn’t it. “It” was cocaine.

Before I saw the bag of white powder in Craig’s hand, I assumed he pulled me into the bathroom to explain how we were going to ditch Bob, a creepy white dude we met at the border. He was in his late 50s, head full of white hair, collared shirt tucked into his Levi’s. He knew the girls by name and made sure everyone knew how much money he had. Basically, he was my dad if my dad was loud, aggressive, abrasive and treated women like toys.

The decent male inside of me thought Bob was a pig, the sort of man who gives the rest of us men a bad name. I hold doors open for women. I pull out chairs for my dates and wait for them to be seated. I offer to pay for meals, movies and dancing. I get shy when going in for a good-night kiss and often go for the cheek instead of the lips.

Bob, on the other hand, gave Mexican teenagers sixty dollars to call him “papi.”

That said, hanging out with Bob hadn't been all bad. He paid for our drinks and unless his last name is Hitler *and* he has one of those funny mustaches, I'll let dudes buy me drinks. I'll never ask, but I'll never say no.

Also, Bob's money attracted a steady stream of females around our table. We sat three feet from the stage, just close enough so the girls could see the twenties spread across our drinks. Once they finished their dance routines, they came to us.

I wasn't going to fuck these girls – hell, I wasn't even going to make out with these girls – but I had no qualms about them sitting on my lap, running their fingers through my hair and playing with my glasses.

Before I could ask Craig why we weren't going to tell Bob we were leaving, mi amigo pulled out the bag of nose nachos to show it to the bathroom attendant. The man nodded as if we were the sixth group of white boy Americans that hour to use the stall for something other than peeing.

Craig closed the stall door and went silent as he focused on cutting the lines. I desperately wanted him to say something. Talk about the Lakers, about buying a new car or what he was getting his stepdad for Christmas. Anything to break the fear and anxiety that comes from doing an illicit substance for the first time.

Staring at the bathroom wall, I realized I was no longer drunk – I was scared and wanted out before I ever got in. I had never done coke before. It was a streak I wanted to keep intact. It was a streak I feared was ending.

Craig took a card from his pocket to cut the lines on a shelf above the toilet. I would have been mortified that he hadn't cleaned the surface before chopping lines, but I was way too afraid of how the drug would affect me to worry about putting my nose, eyes and mouth near a surface littered with piss and shit.

“Dude,” I said, “I don't want to do coke. I've never done it before and...”

“Shut up,” he replied. So I did. Being quiet wasn't my way of saying yes. I just didn't know what else to do.

Each of the three times I'd done any drugs harder than weed was with Craig. These were amazing experiences that later scared me so much I swore I'd never cheat on my bong again.

The first time was about five years before our trip to Tijuana. Craig and I were in his living room when he brought out his nitrous tank. I'd seen him inhale plenty of times and he still held a full-time job, so I went for it, assuming nitrous wasn't a deterrent to having a normal, productive life. I took a few puffs and soon my head got light, like someone had turned off the electricity inside my brain. It was fun, I think. But that gnarly head-rush caused a migraine the next day, which wasn't nearly as bad as feeling like white trash when I thought of us huffing shit from a Ralphs shopping bag.

The second time was in San Diego, approximately one year after the nitrous incident. We were walking down Kettner Boulevard towards the Casbah, a nightclub where we were going to see a group called the Sultans. We'd had a margarita in Old

Town with dinner before driving to the club. Craig parked his beige truck off Kettner, then took out something he called “elixir” and doctors called hycodan. The liquid was red and came in the sort of bottle I got from pharmacies when I was legitimately sick. Craig was legitimately sick, except his was an illness that needed a psychiatrist to fix. My friend drank enough to make a gunshot wound feel like a Thai massage, but I was cautious and had one cap-full. To catch up with Craig, I smoked part of a joint walking down Kettner and later finished it in the outdoor smoking section at the club. I got a beer inside the Casbah and the combination of weed, booze and hycodan made standing in front of the stage, smashed between two hundred people, seem like a good idea. I felt nothing as I bopped my head from side to side, sweat from stinky men dripping onto my white shirt and Dickies. Dudes bumped into me hard and I smiled. I threw my arms in the air as the crowd swayed from side to side while the big sound of the Sultans became an aural mush. But I didn’t care, so long as I was screaming along when singer John Reis sang, “I don’t wanna live my life on a bed of roses/Cuz I don’t wanna leave my razorblades.”

I drank only one beer because I was a good boy and knew I would need to be sober by the time I got to Craig’s rented house in Orange County. And I was. On the forty-minute drive to Lomita, there was no blackout, no reckless careening of lanes, no excessive speeding/slowing.

However, the next day, when I woke up at three in the afternoon and had to walk down the hallway of my parents’ house with my hand on the wall because my

equilibrium was off, I knew the red stuff was not for me. My body was sore, as if I played linebacker for the Raiders without a helmet and pads. The bumps, cuts and bruises were from standing in front of the stage, from being hit by a bunch of other mad Sultans fans. Had I been sober, I would not have been in that sea of people because I hate crowds. So, perhaps, the hycodan had worked and I hadn't noticed.

The unbalanced feeling that caused me to stumble down the hallway lasted until the following morning. This might sound silly in hindsight, but I spent the rest of that day in bed, legitimately afraid that my balance would never return. I swore I'd never take hycodan again.

The next time I took hycodan was a year later, in the back of a van going to Las Vegas. Craig and I were in a band scheduled to play the Double Down Saloon on a Friday night. We hit weekend traffic and it took four hours to go a distance that should have taken one, so I couldn't refuse when he offered more drugs to take away the misery of being stuck in traffic.

"Elixir?" Craig asked as he showed me his bottle.

There's absolutely nothing I hate more than traffic, so naturally I said yes.

I also said yes when Craig offered more about two hours later.

We arrived a few hours late to the Double Down, but it was Vegas and nothing gets started before midnight. Still, there were other bands that wanted to play before the sun rose, which meant we needed to rush, so I dragged my refrigerator-sized amp through

the crowd without saying “excuse me” and tuned my bass as quickly as possible. The other three members of my band weren’t as fast as I was. I looked across the stage and saw that they were still loading gear, so I decided to use my free time to get even more fucked up.

“I’m in the band. What do I get?” I asked the bartender.

“Whatever you want. Just come see me when you need something.”

And I did.

I had a few beers at the bar, then headed towards the stage.

“Can I have the keys?” I asked Sal, our guitarist. He didn’t need to ask why. My gear was ready, which meant only two valid reasons to need the van – a blowjob or drugs.

I smoked a joint in the bench seat behind the driver’s chair. Sal parked away from street lights, but I could still see my reflection in the rearview mirror. It showed a twenty-five -year-old kid with a greasy pompadour, a stoner grin on his face and a smile that stretched from Sin City to the City of Angels.

That grin remained on my face for the duration of our thirty-minute performance. My bass lines on “Not My Problem” flowed easier than ever while I’d never pounded harder to the staccato rhythms of “Panic Girl.” I screamed my back-up vocals on “Down With the Man” like I was a dreadlocked hippie at an anti-police protest and my hand

didn't cramp for the down-strummed notes of "The Prospect." As long as we were playing, I was riding a high because I was high.

But once we finished, I realized just how fucked up I was. My joint was rolled with a nice strain, but the fact that I was seeing in tunnel vision after the show was definitely the combination of the Coronas, the hycodan and the exhaustion from playing to a packed room of sweaty punkers. I might have got my stuff on stage quickly, but once we finished set-closer "The President's Dead," I was unable to move my body, let alone an Ampeg 8X10 bass cabinet.

Like always, Craig and I held a private meeting afterwards to discuss how we thought we did. We stood in the parking lot, away from patrons and our band mates, and based on the excitement in his voice and his bouncy demeanor, I assumed we killed it.

"And what about that guy breaking his leg?" he asked.

"What?" I replied.

"You didn't see that guy break his leg?" I hadn't. At that point, it wasn't a matter of how I played. Craig could have convinced me that I *didn't* play and I wouldn't have known the difference. During the show, I was able to focus on the music, rendering me a soft six on the scale of wastedness. But once the music stopped, my mind had nothing else to focus on except the intoxicants in my system. My scale rose to a very solid eight.

With the help of my band mates, I loaded my gear into the van and wanted more beer.

Sal drove us across the street to the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, where we crashed on the floor with Joey, one of Craig's motorcycle buddies. Before getting to the room, I bought a six pack of Corona and drank most if it myself before smoking more weed. I don't remember how we got to Crazy Horse Too, but I do remember literally falling out of the van and realizing I was too inebriated to be in public.

"I'm gonna sleep in the bushes," I told Craig in the parking lot. I was joking, but not really.

Our party of five was escorted to a private section of the club where drinks kept showing up and money never left my pockets. It didn't take long before the walls were spinning, the thumping bass was causing a headache and a stripper was giving me a lap dance. She was a gorgeous redhead whose boobs were pressed against my eyes. I should have enjoyed this, but I didn't. The dancer slowly worked her tits down towards my chest and the movement of her body so close to my unfocused eyes made me dizzy. Instinct kicked in and I pushed this woman aside because I was going to puke – all over her if she didn't move quickly enough.

Luckily, I caught the vomit in my throat, but even in my inebriated state, I could sense that this was a sign to end the party. No more dances. No more booze. No more Vegas.

"You gotta stop," I told the dancer. She looked up at me as if no one had ever told her that before. My guess is, no one ever did.

“You ok, hun?” she asked.

“I’m coo. You juss gottastop,” I slurred, trying to sound like I had it together.

Rather than laughing at me, the dancer stood, put on her top, grabbed me by the arm and escorted me back to my seat.

“Watch this guy,” she half-jokingly told Craig.

The stripper knew I needed to pass out, which didn’t happen until hours later at our hotel, where I fell asleep in my clothes underneath the window. But first, I had to stare at the walls for a few more hours while my friends – who were nowhere near as fucked up as I was – enjoyed themselves at the club.

Somehow we got back to the room, where, in the middle of the night, I was lying face down on the floor when Joey – a redhead with lots of tattoos – stood over me to offer a blanket. He said something, but thanks to a terrible case of the spins, his words sounded like Charlie Brown’s teacher.

“Blah. Blahblahblah,” Joey said.

I was almost positive I was asleep, but his words felt real, as if I was stuck in a sleep purgatory where just maybe I was awake. Joey kept talking, forcing me to pick up my head to look at him in hopes that he would leave me the hell alone.

But I didn’t have enough strength – or balance – to move my head, so I tried sitting upright to see what was going on. I rolled over onto the left side of my body,

moved my head up and squinted. Through the darkness, the booze, the hycodan, the weed and the loss of equilibrium I saw him.

It was the devil.

Seeing Satan stand above my useless body was frightening. I rolled back onto the floor, shoved my face into the coarse carpet and curled into the fetal position.

The next morning, I awoke with a massive headache – and a blanket. I sat upright and went to the bathroom, where I ran into Joey.

“That was you?” I said as he explained how weird I acted when he offered a blanket. “I thought you were the devil. You scared the shit out of me.”

Once you’ve seen the devil, you’re pretty much at a point where you don’t need to do drugs anymore. Other than weed, I didn’t. Until Adelita.

If any one moment could summarize a human being’s entire existence, being inside that bathroom stall was it. I didn’t want to do coke. What I wanted was to be able to say I had done coke, to have a good story to tell, to have a memory to look back on. But I couldn’t get any of those things if I didn’t snort the damn line in front of me.

I watched in fear as Craig bent over and shoved the George Washington up his nose. The club was filled with electronic dance remixes of American top forty songs, but all I heard was the sound of him snorting.

Craig sniffed three or four lines, and after his final one, he stood upright and shook his head like a freshly-bathed dog drying itself. With one line remaining on the shelf, my friend said, “Go for it.”

I froze because I was mortified and wanted nothing to do with cocaine or Tijuana or strippers or anything. I wanted to go home to my girlfriend and get in bed so we could smoke a bowl and make snarky comments about Benson and Stabler’s sexual tension on *Law & Order: SVU*. And if that wasn’t possible, I wanted to drink more tequila and stare at Mexican mammeries. Hell, I wanted *anything* that wasn’t what I knew I was about to do.

Not to sound like the ending of a “Scooby-Doo” episode, but I would have gotten away without snorting coke if it wasn’t for the fucking bathroom attendant. To me, my hesitation was a matter of seconds. To him, we were taking too long. He began pounding on the door because, obviously, we were holding up the line of drunken white dudes who did cocaine in Tijuana whorehouse bathrooms.

“Come on,” Craig said. And that’s all it took. I said fuck it, grabbed the rolled up dollar bill, bent over and sniffed an amount so tiny I could have taken a drug test before exiting the stall and I would have passed. I didn’t finish the line because I was deathly afraid of dying in the shitter at a Mexican whorehouse. While this might sound like the most awesome thing ever to put on a tombstone if your name is Axl Rose, I’m not awesome. Nor is my stage name an anagram for “oral sex.” I’m boring and when I’m

finally lucky enough to die, my tombstone should reflect the milquetoast life that I've lived. Maybe something like, "Here lies Ryan Ritchie. Period. The end."

I exited the stall and caught a glimpse of myself in the bathroom mirror. Looking back at me was the worried face of a guy who didn't know if he could handle the drug. At most, my body could manage two cups of half-caff in the morning. A third cup and my heart and mind raced until the following morning.

I reached for the door to re-enter the club. My body tightened and I wanted to leave this party before it even began.

Instead of feeling like a bad ass, I felt like I'd let down myself, my mom and my girlfriend. Of course, they'd never find out, but that didn't diminish the regret I was experiencing.

Thankfully, I was trashed on booze, so the regret didn't last longer than five seconds. Or maybe that was how long it took before I claimed a front row seat for the on-stage action, where two Mexican women were performing 69 on each other.

"Let's go," Craig said as I took a seat.

"Huh?" I replied.

"They know we're high. Let's get out of here."

Maybe he was paranoid. Maybe he wasn't. Either way, he was right: We needed to leave because we were two drunk and high-on-cocaine white dudes in the front row at

a sketchy whorehouse in a foreign country. The staff knew we were high, which created targets on our backs. Nothing good could have come from the situation. At best, we blew all our money on hookers, more drinks and more drugs. And when that's that your best case scenario, it's time to bail.

“We're leaving,” Craig told Bob.

“Ok. Let me finish my drink and we'll go,” Bob said, the exact opposite of what I wanted to hear.

Minutes later we entered a much less extravagant whorehouse across the street named Tropical Bar. Whereas Adelita felt like a traditional strip club with stages, girls in lingerie roaming the aisles, private areas for the patrons and loud American music blasting from the speakers, Tropical Bar looked like, well, a bar. But definitely not a tropical one.

My eyes needed twenty seconds to adjust to the dark room. Once I could open them without squinting, I saw a wooden dance floor with no one on it and a bar with a handful of empty stools. It was the middle of the afternoon and Adelita was as crowded as a Friday night in Los Angeles. Tropical Bar, however, looked like the Tuesday noon shift in a ghost town.

Nearly everyone at Adelita spoke English and those who weren't fluent could speak enough to ask customers for drinks and/or sex. Tropical Bar was the exact

opposite. Craig, Bob and I sat on the stools while Bob asked the bartender for three Coronas. The bartender replied, “tres?”

The girls at Adelita appeared to be in their early 20s and each was at least fuckable, but the women at Tropical Bar were not. These were females who life had forgotten about. Single moms with three kids at home. Unattractive, slobbish women who preferred talking amongst themselves in booths near the bathrooms to turning tricks. Adelita’s working girls were light-skinned, Americanized beauties with fashionable hairstyles. Tropical Bar’s hookers wore decade-old lingerie and no makeup.

Something about Tropical Bar didn’t feel right. Even when the Adelita staff knew Craig and I were on coke, I still felt an air of protection, as if this club’s reputation would be forever damaged if anything had happened to us. Adelita was a party, one that made someone a lot of money, and even in Tijuana, there was no way Adelita’s management was stupid enough to mess with success. But the seedy atmosphere at Tropical Bar was where the miserable folks went, where you had your last drink and your last fuck before killing yourself in the Mexican desert – if someone didn’t kill you first.

Maybe it was the cocaine, but the desolation and the fact that we didn’t speak the language made me paranoid because if anyone wanted to fuck with three drunken gabachos, this would be the place to do it. Once again, I got scared. I wanted to be home, to outrun this intoxicated feeling. But I couldn’t. The coke and the beers had me pinned to the floor. I was trapped.

So, I kept drinking.

A few girls got from their seats in the corner to dance to their favorite Spanish songs, which made Bob turn his chair away from the bar. He became mesmerized, staring at the scantily-clad hookers like the creepy old man that he was. I watched him and became disgusted, telling myself I'd cut off my dick before I got to be like him.

Ten minutes later, Bob stood from his seat, walked to the dance floor, talked to a hooker, left with her and never came back. Along with Bob's physical presence, his leaving to fuck a prostitute also meant no more free drinks for me and Craig. Without a sugar daddy, I hoped my friend and I could sober up and head home soon. I was wrong.

Craig, knowing I wasn't interested in sex, roamed the premises, leaving me with a Corona Bob had bought me before exiting with his girl.

Alone on a barstool, I thought about how this day trip was supposed to be about crossing the border so I could work on my Spanish and maybe do some sight-seeing in the meantime. But the sun would soon be down and Craig was on the prowl, which meant I'd never see the Tijuana I wanted to see.

Once again, it was all Craig's fault.

Ten steps into Mexico, my friend had taken off running. I assumed he saw some sort of ambush coming our way (I'd never been to Tijuana, but I've heard the stories), yet instead he raced towards Bob. Once I caught up with them, I was told we would be sharing a taxi into town, which was fine by me because less money on a cab meant more money to spend on knick knacks at the museum gift shop.

“So where are you guys headed?” Bob asked from the front seat. Craig, the extrovert, answered before I, the introvert, could.

“No plans. He’s never been here before and I haven’t been in about ten years. What do you suggest?”

Without explaining exactly where we were headed, Bob told us to stick with him and we’d have a blast. Considering his age and his dad-like appearance, I figured we’d be in front of some Diego Rivera paintings within the hour.

Needless to say, there were no Diego Rivera paintings in our future.

I knew Tijuana had a red light district. When you are from Los Angeles, this is pretty much all you know about TJ. However, thanks to Google, I was surprised to discover that Tijuana also had legitimate hotels, cafes, museums, retail stores...you know, like a real city. I was also aware that these classier joints weren’t in the parts of town where I’d find the farmacias and teenage girls in plaid short skirts.

My aspirations of partaking in an authentic Mexican day vanished once I realized the only art Bob wanted to see was the natural beauty otherwise known as naked women. I’m never one to pass up the chance to see naked Mexican chicas, but I wasn’t so thrilled about this proposition because in order to see these chicas, we’d have to go to whorehouses and I’m the sort of guy who washes his hands with hot water and soap after every pee.

Knowing where we were headed made me anxious, like I had made a mistake in asking Craig if he wanted to go to Tijuana. But it was too late to tell the driver to turn around. I was in the backseat of a cab, feeling claustrophobic as our driver zigged and zagged his way around potholes, trying not to hit pedestrians and the myriad wild dogs running the streets. We passed plenty of farmacias and I wondered if any had Xanax, but unfortunately discovered that we didn't need to stop for pills because if you're white and you're in Tijuana, drugs are everywhere.

I knew my day was fucked once the cab dropped us off on Avenue Coahuila because that's when I realized Craig knew exactly what he'd been doing from the second we left his house in Orange County. He had zero interest in seeing any of the lame shit I wanted to do and once he saw a middle-aged American doofus walking by himself, he knew he'd found his partner in crime for the day.

So there I was, alone at a grimy whorehouse, drunker than drunk, high on cocaine and depressed that my vices had once again gotten in the way of creativity and – God forbid – some adult fun that didn't involve alcohol, strip clubs and drugs. I almost cried because I couldn't stop thinking about how I wanted to get away from parties, to grow up, to experience life sober, to make friends who shared these desires. Rather than drinking buddies, I longed for writers workshops, field trips to LACMA, hikes along the Palos Verdes coast, volunteering at the old folks' home around the corner from my apartment.

I wanted more.

I needed more.

Unfortunately, I didn't know how to get what I was looking for, so I continued my party lifestyle and hoped my life would magically change.

And, just like all those nights in Long Beach when I was pounding two-dollar Coors Lights and singing "Bust a Move" and "Gin & Juice" at karaoke bars, there was no one to blame except me. I could have said no to those beers. I didn't have to snort coke in the bathroom. I could have taken a cab to another part of town and told Craig I'd meet up with him later. But I didn't do any of that. Instead, I got wasted.

In theory, I was in charge of my decision making and in control of my destiny. It was up to me to ditch Old Ryan and find out what path New Ryan would take. But Old Ryan, that drinking, pot-smoking bastard, wouldn't go away.

To make my feelings of isolation worse, I had left my phone in Craig's car on the American side of the border because I was afraid I would get mugged, which meant I couldn't text anyone to take my mind off my surroundings. And there was no way I could talk to Craig about how I was feeling because we didn't have that sort of touchy-feeling relationship. Besides, he was wandering the premises looking for women he wouldn't have to pay to sleep with.

The fact that I was drinking alone at the bar in a whorehouse is exactly why a dancer approached me while I was nursing my Corona. But why she stayed, I'd like to think, was for something more than just a twenty-dollar hand job.

“Que dijiste?” I said after she asked me something in English that I couldn’t understand over the oom-pah music playing over the loudspeakers. She tried again when the song ended.

“What’s your name?” she asked in English that was much worse than my Spanish.

“Me llamo Ryan. Como te llamas?” I replied.

“Oooooohhhh...hablas espanol?”

“Un pocito, pero estoy borracho y cuando estoy borracho, puedo hablar mejor que cuando no estoy borracho.”

The woman allowed me to practice my high school Spanish for ten minutes. Other than struggling to decipher her words through the loud music, I understood her vernacular and she was kind enough to pretend to understand mine. Finally, I had found a slice of authentic Mexican culture. And the best part was that this hooker never asked me to fuck her, never conned me into buying her a drink or even to dance to ranchero songs that she so blissfully was singing along with.

During our talk, I wondered about whether or not I was feeling the effects of the cocaine. I was pretty sure I wasn’t thanks to the small amount I ingested, but then I’d have these moments when I’d be uber-focused on this woman’s speech and I’d realize it must have been the drug. With the amount of alcohol in me, I should have passed out an hour prior. The fact that I could sit on a stool without falling over was a miracle – the fact

that my Spanish continued to improve the more fucked up I got must have been the drugs.

Unfortunately for me and my rolling “R,” a white guy sat next to mi amiga nueva and offered to buy her a drink. She obliged because I’m pretty sure that’s the rule. Since I wasn’t looking to sleep with her, I understood when she turned her seat to face forward. She could have – and should have – swung her body to give all him her full attention, but she didn’t. By facing forward, she could talk to both of us, but this fellow was more interested in a conjugal than conjugating verbs. Speaking to a drunken gabacho in Spanish might have been more fun for the girl, but she needed to get paid. And in her case, getting paid meant having sex with a strange American man.

With me, the Tijuana hooker had been upbeat. She smiled and whenever she laughed out loud, she’d touch me on the shoulder in a playful way, as if to say, “Oh, you.” But with this guy, she was emotionless. She also touched his shoulder, but it was a game, a put-on to get his money. When she touched him, she made sure to keep her fingers on his arm, running her pointer and middle fingers up and down. Soon, he put his arm around her and she reciprocated because she had to.

Their conversation lasted less than three a few minutes. I was about to leave the lovebirds alone when she leaned over to tell me she had to go. She smiled at me as she walked away with his arm around hers.

“Entiendo. Que te vaya bien,” I said.

With my new friend hard at work, I left the bar and took a seat at a table in the middle of the room so I could stare at the television. The Lakers were playing the Phoenix Suns and regardless of my mental state, I don't miss Lakers games.

A guy in a suit approached me two minutes after I sat down.

"Your friend told me that you don't want any girls. Is this true?" he asked in perfect English. *Fucking Craig*, I thought.

"He said that?" I wasn't mad because I didn't want to pay a hooker, but it sure would have been nice not to announce that to the place because these females weren't interested in talking to guys who weren't giving up the cash.

"No. The woman you were talking to at the bar," he replied. "She said you just want to talk and drink Coronas, yes?"

I said that was true and kept staring at the game. A few minutes later, the man checked on me again to make sure I still didn't want any women. I still said yes.

Craig appeared just before halftime and told me he wanted to leave. I would have preferred finishing the first half, but he was hungry and I knew the game was being recorded on my DVR at home.

"There's a taco stand outside. Let's go," he said. I hadn't thought about food all day, so I ordered a bean taco, but not before I asked the guy, "Cocinas con manteca?"

After street tacos, Craig hailed a cab and asked the driver to take us “where the girls are.” We ended up at another whorehouse on Revolucion called Amnesia, where I drank Coronas until my head hit the table. Whorehouse or not, I needed sleep.

Craig woke me and with him was a female who grabbed me by the arm and took me to the area where they gave private dances. The dancer kept telling me how she’d jerk me off for an additional forty dollars, but I declined.

“Go ask him for more money,” she replied in perfect English.

Again I said no, which lead her to give me a standard lap dance that included no special perks.

After the dance, I made the first smart decision of the day when I told my friend it was time for us to go home. He agreed. Outside the club was a line of cabs waiting to take dudes to one of two places – the border or other whorehouses.

Craig sat in the backseat, removed the remaining coke from his pocket and snorted off his pointer finger. When the driver saw this, he took out his bag and told us to sample some because it was “the good shit.” Craig indulged but I did not. My friend agreed that it was indeed “the good shit,” then asked the driver if we could pay for our ride in Craig’s left-over drugs.

Why was I surprised when the driver said yes?

In hindsight, I don’t feel bad about my one-time cocaine “spree” because if you’re going to do cocaine, it might as well be in the bathroom of a Tijuana whorehouse. In fact,

I'm starting to wonder if maybe I am way more bad-ass than I've given myself credit for. Perhaps the reason I've done coke only once is because I need to be in locations such as Adelita in order to snort lines, which means the rest of the drug-sniffing world has low standards and will do that shit wherever and whenever. But I ain't Shakira. I'm a cocaine enthusiast, a man who puts fingers up his nose on a daily basis but snorts blow only when there are on-site hotel rooms with hourly room rates.

Brooklyn Bridge

I've never written about a picture of myself, probably because I hate them, but this shot of me on the Brooklyn Bridge on a gorgeous March 2012 afternoon is different. For some reason, I like this one.

To begin, I'm not standing like a goddamn telephone pole, which is how I look in hundreds of photos of me taken by my mother. There are twenty-nine people on my mom's side of the family (and if there aren't exactly twenty-nine, I'm sure to hear about my miscalculation soon) and whenever any configuration of them gets together for a birthday, graduation, baptism or just stopping by the house to return a borrowed copy of *Kindergarten Cop* on DVD, she needs to commemorate the occasion by taking out her point-and-click. This drives me batshit crazy because not one of the photographs is an action shot. Rather than snapping away while my eleven-year-old cousin Madison is opening her Christmas present, my mom waits until the excitement is over. Then she lines up everyone – usually in front of something, doesn't matter what, as long as it's *something* – and transforms into Momsel Adams.

However, this picture of me on the Brooklyn Bridge is different not only because it was taken by my aunt Mary but because, for once, I don't look like a mannequin. I'm not necessarily leaning in this picture, but there's a slight angle to my body that gives the shot movement. My back is arched *just* slightly to the right, as if I'm not totally settled in my position. Maybe I'm nitpicking, but if you look closely, my left foot is not where it should be based on my back. Both feet are pointed towards the camera, which gives a

subtle twist to my body. My upper half is going in one direction while my bottom half is planted firmly on the wooden walkway. It's a completely awkward position, one that I must have held for no longer than it took to take this picture. A real action shot.

Next, my hands are nestled comfortably into the front pockets of my blue Air Jordan coat. It's too big for me, but not so big that I look like an idiot. I mean, I look like an idiot, but it's not MJ's fault. The lower half of the jacket is stretched just a tad because my hands have found a place they like and they ain't moving. You can also see the shape of my hands inside the pockets, which I like. I don't know why I like this, but if you have any theories, feel free to email me.

My brown Dickies pants and eighteen-dollar wino shoes have nothing to do with why I like this picture, so let's move on.

Anyone (except the blind, of course) can look at this picture and see my awkward posture, my hands in my pockets, my goofy grin and my pushed-forward haircut. These same people can also see the Brooklyn Bridge, the numerous skyscrapers peering above my head, the pedestrians walking towards the camera or the American flag waving in the bright blue sky. Add all of these physical attributes together and you've got yourself a decent shot – at least I'd like to think so. However, there's more to this photograph than a silly-looking white kid standing on a bridge. That “more” is why I don't just like this picture – I *love* this goddamn picture.

You can't see my eyes thanks to the Von Zipper Papa G sunglasses, but trust me, behind those shades are hazels belonging to a guy who is genuinely happy, an emotion I hadn't felt for a long, long time. Maybe ever.

Because I was a fat kid, I have serious body issues. I exercise daily, I weigh myself after every meal and I'm always looking in mirrors and/or glass windows to see how I look – not because I'm egotistical but because I want to make sure I don't look like a fucking moron. Furthermore, my entire life has been a nonstop comparison between my body and the bodies of every other male I encounter. Needless to say, in my head, I always lose these battles. But the version of me I see in this picture is, to use a played out Charlie Sheen term, winning. I weigh a lean, mean one-hundred-and-forty-five pounds, which even I know is underweight for a thirty-two-year-old male. And I don't care. A girl I dated called me “manorexic.” I think it was her way of jokingly saying that maybe I had an eating disorder. I took it as a compliment.

I love the fact that the blue jacket used to fit perfectly and now it's too big. Losing weight sucks for your wallet because you are constantly buying new clothes, but there is no better feeling in life – not losing your virginity, winning the Lotto, hitting a game-winning shot – than being a former fat kid who, as an adult, peruses small t-shirts and wonders if they'll be too big.

I didn't just lose nearly thirty pounds – I worked hard for that shit. Probably too hard. Only I can see the two-hour daily elliptical runs that got me to this weight. I hear Eric B. & Rakim's classic *Paid in Full* just like I heard it so many times on my iPod at

the gym. I smell the guy next to me who needs to cut out the spices from his diet. I feel my hands get moist as I grip tightly on the elliptical's handlebars. I notice the pile of sweat on the floor that dropped from my elbows and forearms. I remember the stiff back and leg cramps and how I'd bring a bottle of water but never once drank it while running because doing so was a sign of weakness. I sense the stomach pains that came from starving myself on a raw vegan diet consisting of cashews, Clif bars, salads without dressing and water.

My exercise/diet routine is most visible in my face, where that extra ten pounds that always haunted my cheeks is gone. I focus on this area whenever I see photographs of me. I hate my face and everything about it, but mostly because I think I look fat. Finally, in this picture, I don't think I look fat.

I like not looking fat.

Like many people who lose thirty pounds that they didn't necessarily need to lose, my eventual drop to one-hundred-and-forty pounds didn't stem from any physical reasons. I wasn't diagnosed with high blood pressure and no doctor told me I was going to die if I didn't change my eating habits. Nope. Mine was all about mental health.

Salads became a staple in my diet during the tenth and eleventh years of my relationship with a girl named Claire, but once we broke up, I took my otherwise healthy vegan diet and became a dude whose depression manifested itself in an eating disorder.

Actually, “eating disorder” isn’t the proper term. More like “lack-of-eating disorder.”

Not that it was Claire’s fault, but I let her dominate every aspect of my life. We had pink walls in our shared office because she wanted them. The same walls had shelves with approximately forty ceramic cats that I dusted every few months during those times when I absolutely could not work because I felt the girly walls closing in on me. As if forty ceramic cats weren’t enough, I allowed her to have five real felines. I love cats – always have and always will – but two broke-ass stoners don’t need any more mouths to feed. Yet, because I was a pushover who avoided confrontation, we had five cats.

The key word there is “had.” The second key word is “we.” When this picture was taken, Claire and I had been broken up for thirteen months. I’m smiling, love my life and the endless possibilities because as I’m standing on the Brooklyn Bridge, I’m realizing that, cliché as it sounds, my entire life is ahead of me while she is home in Long Beach with five cats, not me. A year has passed since I’ve been her therapist, the guy who deals with the mood swings and the sudden outbursts of tears. My home no longer smells like weed and litter boxes. My floors aren’t overrun with dust bunnies. My couches aren’t used as scratching posts. There aren’t boxes of crap in my living room that were promised to be moved into the garage months prior. The dishes aren’t backed up. I don’t feel litter when I jump into bed. I don’t have an office full of fabric for a clothing line that will never happen. There’s no seven-foot cat tree in my kitchen. My living room is not the noontime hang-out spot for roller derby girls to drink beer. I’m in grad school

and getting my life together. For once, I'm an adult and I've got only myself to think about. And it feels fucking amazing.

For eight or nine years, I assumed my relationship with Claire would last forever. But the final two-to-three years were different. I began to change, which she resented. I wanted more than cats and medicinal marijuana cards. I couldn't live my life with her dad bailing her out of her debt, buying her a stackable washing machine/dryer, a refrigerator, a car, a sewing machine and a laptop because these gifts meant she'd never have to grow up and take responsibility for her financial situation. The more I stopped wearing the vintage clothes she wanted me to wear, the more I put down the bong, the more I ate healthier and went to the gym instead of the bar, the more we drifted. Once the drift began, it was impossible to fix.

I stuck around for those final years because I was afraid she'd fall apart. So I did what any insecure male does when he wants to leave a girl but doesn't want to be the bad guy: I sabotaged my relationship so she would dump me. And it worked.

Super Bowl Sunday, 2011. Claire knocked on my office door and asked if we could talk. We gathered in the living room, her on the ratty green vintage couch and me on the ratty green ottoman.

"We don't make each other happy," she said. "I think we should break up."

"I agree," I replied. "Can I get back to work?"

My response was cold, but at that moment, I didn't care. I wanted to be gone, to be single, to be me.

I slept on the couch for a week until finally moving to my dead grandparents' home in Torrance. Living a half-hour away from Claire, I thought I'd feel free to do whatever I wanted. And what I wanted was to sleep with lots of women without fear that she'd ever find out. Instead, I drank alone at a shitty bar named Texas Loosey's and asked myself, "What did I just do?"

I questioned my desire to leave Claire because we spent a long time together when things were very good and for the first six months after the break up, I dreamed about her almost every night. The dreams would alternate.

One night we'd be back together, in bed or on the couch, but always physically touching each other. These dreams gave me a sense of relief, like, "thank fucking God we got through that and now we're perfect again."

When I awoke from the second dream, I always felt like I had spent the entire night crying. In my head, we were together in a room talking. Getting along, yes, but not back together. This was very reminiscent of the final week we spent living in the same apartment, when I slept on the couch and we'd talk for hours. We'd laugh and we'd cry, but we never touched. Not even a hug. Not even when I asked for one. In real life, just like these dreams, there was a sense of finality, as if the ribbon had been placed atop the gift and someone just finished tying the bow.

The final type of dream was ugly. Full-on shouting. Hysterical crying. Me yelling at her, saying those nasty things that come out when people break up. Stuff like how I hadn't been in love with her for at least two years, how I already had a younger girl waiting to fuck me, how no man was ever going to want her and her five cats, how her bad breath and moustache made me feel like I was kissing a dirty carpet. In real life, I shouldered much of the blame for our break-up because I didn't have the backbone to stand up for myself and tell her exactly where I thought she – not *we* – went wrong. But once I was asleep and my mind was free to roam, my anger came barreling out. Without my consciousness to prevent this type of thinking, my brain transformed into a rifle, cocked, loaded and ready to shoot anything in its path.

Luckily, that angry asshole is not who I see in this picture because that angry asshole is gone. What I see is the months that have passed since I've had any of those dreams and a guy who recognizes the tears and the pain and the suffering, but is not knee-deep in misery any more.

That smile you see, the one displaying my embarrassingly large English teeth, is one hundred percent real. There are no pictures that I know of where I am not faking a smile. Except this one.

Phony smiles stemmed from my depression. I had been faking everything for years and here, finally, I'm not faking shit. I'm standing on the Brooklyn Bridge with my uncle's wife, finally able to say that I love life and actually mean it. This real smile is the acknowledgement that the bridge symbolizes more than just a connection between

Manhattan and Brooklyn. For me, it's a do-over. A chance to start anew without looking back. By the time our walk reaches its destination in Manhattan, I'll be whoever I want to be. The possibilities are endless. Cliché? Perhaps. But also completely true. I'm not drowning myself in my ex-girlfriend's life. I don't have five cats, pink office walls, boxes of junk all over the apartment or a debt to Target. I have nothing and in that moment, nothing felt fanfuckingtastic.

No Harm, No Foul

The seven people ahead of me in line at the Redondo Beach post office looked like they were serving life sentences in a Syberian prison. I figured their demeanor was due to the overcast day, but after standing for a minute without moving an inch, I understood that their doom and gloom had nothing to do with the weather.

A minute can feel like an eternity when you are as impatient as I am, so in less than sixty seconds, I went from being a guy who was moderately peeved he had to waste part of his afternoon at the post office to feeling like an anorexic inmate who spent eighteen hours a day shoveling snow in his underwear.

I didn't know the people ahead of me, but I felt kinship, a sort of "us vs. them" mentality. I'm no eavesdropper, but this bond allowed me to listen as the six-foot –tall, Hawaiian-shirt –wearing Stoner Bro in front of me talked to two desperate (to kill the boredom) housewives about living in some Italian beach community no one's ever heard of, the place where three-bedroom apartments went for a cool mil' in the early '80s. Had I not been wearing sunglasses indoors, they would have seen the red, anger-filled laser beams shooting from my eyes.

I wasn't mad at them, of course. More the situation. Not that I was in a rush or anything, but I don't like waiting in lines. No one does. Banks know this. So do grocery stores. At the supermarket, all anyone has to do is fold his or her arms and stare, which tells the cashiers, "Hey buddy, call the produce guy, tell him to put down the Fuji apples and bring him and his dirty smock to the front of the store because I've got melting butter

pecan ice cream and two kids who are going to lose their shit if we aren't home in time for the start of 'Dora the Explorer.'”

But post offices are not grocery stores and they certainly don't have produce departments to fall back on when lines get long. Perhaps there are other employees at the post office who could, in theory, work a cash register in a pinch. And maybe there aren't. All us regular folk know is the employees we can see are never rushing to shorten the line. That's our federal government hard at work for you.

Thanks to Stoner Bro's "everything's cool, maaaaan" vibe, the women were in good spirits as they handed their packages to the postal workers. But that positivity turned to negativity as the employees – a Korean man with a nearly impossible accent to decipher and a white man in his mid-50s so generic looking with his short white hair, well-trimmed moustache and LensCrafters frames that he could be your neighbor or a complete stranger and you couldn't know the difference – were, to be blunt, rude as hell.

“Hi,” the first woman said to the Korean man. No reply. “I need help filling out this form.” For about three seconds, the employee gave a blank stare into some nether region where postal workers have to go in order not to shoot up the place.

“You need help? Go over there,” he responded, motioning with his left index finger toward the section of the building where the P.O. boxes were.

The lady, obviously confused, asked him to repeat his instructions. He reached across the counter, grabbed her overseas form and stabbed a pen into her piece of paper. “Fill out here, here, here. Come back when done.”

To shoo her away, the employee once again pointed his finger to the area with the P.O. boxes, a spot where there wasn't a single person who could help her.

The woman stared at the man and looked as if she was going to say something. But what do you say to a guy who acts like there are three things in life every person should know: his or her name, the fact that the sky is blue and how to fill out an overseas form for the United States Postal Service?

Nothing. That's what.

The woman grabbed her package, weighing less than five pounds, and her piece of paper, and went to the area where the man told her to go to. I stared at her through my sunglasses as she looked for help that wasn't there, moving her head back and forth like Stevie Wonder singing “Superstition.” But she could have pulled a Linda Blair and still not gotten any help from an employee.

The other woman's luck wasn't much better with Average White Man.

“It's going to be about forty dollars,” he said when she asked if he could give her an estimate of how much her package would cost to ship.

“What? Forty bucks?” she replied a bit louder than she needed to. Just like the Korean guy, Average White Man said nothing. He just stared into the abyss, as if blank,

robotic facial expressions were part of the USPS handbook and these two rule-abiding jerks had been the previous employees of the year.

It wasn't his fault her twenty-five pound package was so expensive, but it was his fault when he offered no sympathy, no alternatives, no other suggestions. Nothing. No one wants to pay that amount, and yes, she could have been a little quieter in her response, but Average White Man was so disembodied from the transaction you would have thought he was watching it on television.

The woman placed her elbows on the counter, leaning forward in a manner that said, "Hey, we ain't going anywhere until this shit gets figured out."

Still, he said nothing.

She swayed back and forth, picking up papers and shoveling them around on the counter. She asked questions, but interrupted herself before she could complete them.

She's freaking the fuck out, I told myself, and this guy doesn't care at all.

Maybe there weren't alternatives and perhaps our government had set up the postal service in a manner in which Plan B does not exist. Still, the guy could have at least pretended to understand her frustration. Instead, he stood there with his arms at his side and head cocked to the left, kind of like C-3PO, only more robotic.

It didn't take long for the woman to let out an exhaled "fiiiiiiiiiiiiine" before paying the forty bucks. As she was leaving, she pivoted her right heel away from the counter with such force I thought her shoe and the linoleum might start a fire. She was definitely

pissed, but at least her package was in the process of being sent. The other woman was now behind me in line, hoping she didn't get the Korean man again.

Stoner Bro approached Average White Man once the angry woman left.

“I can't find the right sized box,” he said. It was a simple question with (what I thought was) an easy answer. But all Average White Man could do was repeat what Stoner Bro had already said. He didn't bother checking the back of the office or coming out from behind his station because those must not be written in the employee handbook.

“Oh, well. Ok. Um, alright,” Stoner Bro said, sounding as if maybe, for the first time in his fifty years, he almost got mad. He turned his dirty blonde head to the side and walked toward the exit without a box in hand while I thanked God all I needed was a stamp for an envelope.

Had I required actual help from Average White Man, I surely would have blown up at his lack of empathy because I wanted to punch a wall before I got to the post office. Needless to say, any sort of verbal altercation with a postal employee would have been cheaper than repairing a wall – and a broken hand.

Minutes before I so impatiently waited in line at the post office, I wrote a check for two-hundred-and-fifty dollars to the Siskiyou County Superior Court for a ticket I was contesting. I knew I'd lose because, in all honesty, I was speeding. However, I was not driving (much) faster than the few cars on the road. It was around five p.m. on a Sunday evening and the sleepy town of Weed, California, appeared to be (pardon the pun) stoned.

With another seven hours until my destination of Portland, Oregon, I had to hustle or else I'd have to drive through the windy Northern California mountains once the sun went down, something I did not want to do because doing so always gave me anxiety. Which is why I was speeding.

Now, months later, I was in line, bored and unproductive, once again feeling anxious partially because I couldn't afford the ticket and partially because the ticket was a blemish on my record. Not my driving record, mind you, my personal record. The infraction was proof that I had fucked up, that I wasn't perfect and all I've ever wanted in life is to be perfect.

Having to pay two-hundred-and-fifty dollars that I could have easily avoided triggered my imperfect thoughts, which soon brought up all the ways in which I am not comfortable with myself: I am skinny but I see myself as fat; I have been somehow fortunate enough to date a few very attractive women yet I find my face repulsive; my words have been published more times than I can count yet I think am a terrible writer with nothing to say; I have no money and I never will.

These thoughts are how the words "anxiety" and "panic attack" entered my vocabulary.

My therapist told me to distract myself whenever I felt a panic attack emerging, which is why I focused on the terrible customer service at the post office. But even with the shitty employees being mildly entertaining, my mind couldn't stop drifting and it

wasn't long before I went back to beating myself up over the ticket. Doing so, I reminded myself, would have saved me money and an aggravating trip to the post office.

As another way to distract myself, I used the ticket and all of my imperfections to remind me of the late, great basketball announcer Chick Hearn.

During his four-decade tenure, Lakers fans (myself included) were treated to "Chickisms," these slabs of descriptive phrases that fell easily from his mouth. There isn't a basketball fan on this planet who doesn't owe Chick a beer in heaven because he was the man who coined the term "slam dunk." He's also responsible for "airball," "bunny hop in the pea patch," "dribble drive," "finger roll," "garbage time," "give and go," "triple double" and, to me, the most important of all, "no harm, no foul."

In layman's terms, "no harm, no foul" means there was physical contact between at least two players but a referee chose not to make the call. Essentially, Chick was admitting that basketball was a physical sport and that contact was an inevitable part of the game. He was also recognizing that a foul could be called on nearly every possession, so it was up to the referees to determine what constituted blowing the whistle and what fell into the "that's just physical play" category. Chick's subtle jab was his way of acknowledging that a given possession might have gone against the rules, but compared to other plays, this one caused "no harm," ie did not alter the course of the possession, and therefore no foul would be called.

For better or worse (usually the latter), I've pretty much lived my entire life by the "no harm, no foul" mantra. Unfortunately, I was sending a check to some Podunk

Northern California town (albeit with a cool name) and wasting my dreary afternoon at the post office because not everyone lives their lives according to things deceased basketball announcers used to say.

Least of all, Officer Leightner, the man who wrote me the ticket in Weed.

Yeah, I was speeding, but so was everyone else. Like hand-checking or hitting an opponent's wrist as he drives to the bucket for a layup, I figured speed limits were *technically* rules, the sort I didn't have to follow so long as I didn't cause any harm.

Officer Leightner must have disagreed. If he didn't, he wouldn't have pulled me over and approached my red '99 Toyota Corolla from the passenger window.

"How ya doin' today?" he asked with a smile, as if he actually cared how I was doing.

"Fine, officer. How are you?" I might hate the pigs more than I hate anything else, but I ain't dumb. When you interact with the police, you call them "officer" and "sir" (or "ma'am"), you don't make jokes and you sure as hell don't put up a fight.

"I got you going eighty-five. Do you know what the speed limit is?"

"Seventy-five?" I replied, knowing damn well it was seventy. In some parts of the country, speeds increase to seventy-five when drivers are in the middle of nowhere. That law doesn't apply to Weed, California, but I hoped my pretend-ignorance might get me off with a warning. Nevermind the fact that seventy-five would have put me ten miles

over the limit. I was desperate and looking for any way out of this situation that wasn't a ticket.

"Nope. It's seventy," he said with that same smile, the bottom of his top front teeth barely visible through his bushy moustache.

"Oh. I didn't know that," I said. Officer Leightner then asked for my license and registration before walking back to his vehicle. When they walk back to their vehicles, you're getting a ticket.

"I wrote you for seventy-nine," he explained when he reappeared at my passenger side window, "because anything over ten miles over the limit will cost you a lot more."

The cop was so incredibly friendly I didn't have time to get upset or to call him a "dirty fucking pig" under my breath, which is what I do whenever I see a police officer. Sometimes, when I'm in a rush, I shorten it to "fucking pig," but you get the idea.

It wasn't until I reached my friend's living room in Portland later that night when I thought about my ticket and how I caused literally no harm to anyone. I wasn't weaving in and out of traffic. The few cars on the road were in the right lane and I was in the left. It took a while for me to pass, so they must have been going close to eighty. I hit no animals, didn't blow a tire nor did I litter while I was driving. So where's the harm in driving eighty-five if driving eighty-five does not alter the course of history one bit?

I've asked myself that question many times since receiving the ticket two months ago and the only answer I can come up with is "bureaucracy." Good ol' rules and

regulations – that’s why I was standing in line at a post office handing over two-hundred-and-fifty dollars that I couldn’t afford for a “crime” with no victims. It’s also why I’m contesting this ticket. Everyone I’ve talked to thinks I’m crazy for driving ten hours to fight a speeding ticket when all I have to do is pay the fine and go to traffic school (more money and time I don’t have), but I say fuck that. And you know why I say fuck that? No harm, no foul, that’s why.

Had I killed somebody, taken out a road sign, caused a crash or even narrowly avoided a collision, sure, ticket me. Harm = foul, right? But, if that’s the case, then, just like Chick taught me, no harm should equal no foul.

Unfortunately, at the post office, Average White Guy wasn’t going to care about “no harm, no foul.” In fact, he didn’t give a shit about anything, which is why I kept our interaction as short as possible.

“I need postage,” I said, claustrophobia coursing through my veins at a much quicker speed than eighty-five miles an hour. He said nothing, grabbed my envelope, placed a stamp in the upper right corner and took my money.

It was the by far the easiest transaction I witnessed that day.

The ease of dealing with Average White Guy put me in a better mood. Or maybe it was because my agoraphobia was starting to retreat once I exited the post office. Whatever the case, I knew I shouldn’t have driven past the Redondo Beach city hall on my way home. But I did. And I regretted it.

Three weeks earlier, I tried paying for a parking ticket at city hall, a place where the idea of “no harm, no foul” made the incident in Weed seem like the most serious offense this side of 9/11.

About a month prior to my visit to city hall, I parked on the west side of Ocean Boulevard, which should come as no surprise, overlooks the Pacific Ocean. After a mile-long walk at nine p.m., I returned to my car and found a parking ticket for forty-five dollars. Unbeknownst to me, the city of Redondo Beach had deemed parking on this side of the street a criminal offense for no reason other than they felt like it. Oh wait, there’s also that whole, “We’re in a recession and our city needs to make money” thing.

I was on a date with a girl and coming back to a ticket could have ruined the mood. Luckily, we went back to my place and had really good sex – which I attribute to the moonlit walk because every girl loves a moonlit walk along the beach. So, in reality, I have nothing to complain about because forty-five dollars for really good sex sounds like a steal to me.

But that’s not reality because I didn’t pay the girl for sex; I had to pay the city of Redondo Beach for letting me park my car somewhere for an hour in order to get said girl in the mood to have sex with me (I’m too ethical to feed a girl shots of booze, but I am most certainly not above late-night walks at the beach to convince the opposite sex that coitus with me wouldn’t be all that bad). Had I paid the girl (which I am *way* too ethical and clean to do), at least it would have been a traditional transaction. I’m too afraid of everything that comes along with prostitution to ever partake, but I’m not opposed to

those who pay for sex. What I am opposed to is some bureaucratic nonsense that costs me money to park my car at the freakin' beach at night.

Opponents of my “no harm, no foul” ideology are bound to have plenty of solid points regarding my speeding ticket in Weed. I might not agree with any of them (and by “might not,” I mean one-hundred percent don't), but I am smart enough and level-headed enough to understand when I have been check-mated. Speeding is dangerous, it can cause serious harm to me and innocent bystanders, etc., etc. I get it. But parking my car at the beach and walking for an hour? Someone please tell me where the harm is in that.

Luckily, I found that someone. Or so I thought. I walked into building E at the Redondo Beach city hall and was “greeted” by four employees. The man to my left looked at me, then walked away; the woman at eleven o'clock looked at me, looked down, looked at me again, looked down again, then went back to typing; the woman directly in front of me – the one sitting behind a sign that read “Parking Enforcement” – was on the phone telling some poor sap about how she picks up her children from school; the man to my immediate right was also on the phone, but at least had enough common sense to keep his volume low so we wouldn't know what sorts of inane things he was talking about on company, er – tax payers' – dimes.

I stood at the front desk with my arms folded, knowing that the look means one of three things: Either you are cold, you are pissed or you need a new check stand opened pronto. I was indoors and not at Ralphs, which meant I was pissed.

And who wouldn't be? For starters, the fact that I received a ticket was nothing more than an overreaching city government screwing people for enjoying their beaches – which, I might add, are not really “theirs.” Second, it took twenty seconds for one of four employees (the woman who looked up and down) to greet me, even though I was no more than ten feet from all of these people whose paychecks come directly out of my wallet.

What a surprise! The woman blabbing on the phone was the one I needed to speak to. Did she hang up and take care of my needs? Of course she didn't. That's what people who work in the private sector have to do, not government employees. Instead, she finished her conversation and a minute later came to meet me at the front desk.

The stern-faced woman approached with folded arms, as if I had interrupted her conversation.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Yeah, I'd like to pay my parking ticket,” I replied.

“You can't do that here. Either send it in the mail or go online,” she said before attempting a quick return to her seat.

“What?” I said, totally confused.

“Online or through the mail. We don't handle payment here.”

I was baffled. Here I was, in the flesh, cash in hand, wanting to give the city money and she was telling me I couldn't do that.

"Why not?" I replied. "This is easier for me."

"We don't do it that way," she said.

I've never been one of those people who thinks the good ol' days were actually the good ol' days, but at that moment, I longed for a time when I could walk into a city building and pay a goddamned parking ticket without having to jump through e-hoops to do so.

Knowing she was a mere pawn in the larger scheme of city hall's inner workings, I recognized there was nothing I could say or do to win this battle. So, I did what I always do when I'm losing an un-winnable war – I get my money's worth.

"Can you tell me the logic behind not parking on Ocean?" I asked with a pinch of smart-ass to my tone. "Because I see no explanation other than a complete and total cash grab on the city's part."

"You can't park on the west side of the street after nine p.m.," she replied, totally dodging my question like a good city employee does.

"I know. That's not what I asked. *Why* can't I park there? What's the logic behind that?"

"Logic? I don't know. I didn't make the rule," she said.

I wanted to tell her A. I didn't ask who made the rule and B. I knew she didn't make the rule because if she was important enough to determine Redondo Beach's parking regulations, she sure as fuck wouldn't be working in some shit office with KOST 103 FM playing in the background.

Instead, I replied with, "It doesn't make any sense. I didn't do anything wrong."

"That's the rule," she said abruptly, as if she had said these same words ten times a day for the past seven years.

"Gotta love government, don't you?" I said as the Ben Franklin in my wallet and I walked out the door. She didn't answer, but she knew I was right. We all know I'm right. Why? Because there is no reason why I couldn't park my car on the west side of Ocean Boulevard between the hours of nine p.m. and six a.m. for any other reason other than someone said so, just like there was no reason I couldn't drive eighty-five miles an hour in Weed, California.

That's why.

Call me crazy, but "someone said so" has never been a satisfactory answer to me. I want specifics of why every law, rule and regulation is in the books and I want a justification for why I have to spend my money when there was no harm and obviously no foul. Instead, what I get is a lighter bank account and another reminder that no matter what I do, the pigs always win.

I'm Old

Descendents singer Milo Aukerman was not even halfway through the first verse of his band's classic song "Hope" when I was shoved from behind by a person I never saw coming. Like a slow motion scene in a bad horror flick (I'm thinking "Friday the 13th," when Jason Voorhees' mom gets her head cut off and it goes flying through the air at what appears to be a bazillionth of a millisecond per frame), I saw my black Ray-Bans leap from my head, but there was nothing I could do to save them.

I flailed my right arm across my body in hopes of catching my glasses.

No dice.

Next, I raised my right shoulder, which lowered the left portion of my body. With a bent left knee, I pictured my man-boob as a catcher's mitt and hoped my frames would land on my black cardigan sweater and stay there long enough for my T-Rex arms to grab them.

Needless to say, the catch didn't happen.

The Ray-Bans bounced off my chest and onto the ground, where they were lost for good.

"My glasses!" I screamed as I hunched forward to look for them. But the attempt to recover my frames was futile due to the number of rambunctious teenagers pogoing to the caffeinated rhythms of Descendents drummer Bill Stevenson. Sure, I might have been able to find them had I lowered my head somewhere near the ass of the guy standing

literally two inches away from me, but the thousand or so people in the crowd were swaying like the Mohawk Sea. The night was already a disaster and the last thing I needed was to have my face shoved so violently into the backside nether regions of some one-hundred-and-ten -pound dude in skinny jeans that I broke my neck. It was going to be hard enough explaining why I didn't have my glasses at work the following Monday – being carted onto the community college campus I work at and telling my boss, “I was the old guy at a punk show and I thought I could hang one last time in the pit. So my glasses got pushed off me and in my idiotic attempt at recovery, my face was plowed into another man's buttohole. The force broke my neck and now here I am, fractured bones and can't see a damn thing” was not exactly a conversation I wanted to have with my boss. She went to Berkeley during the '60s and is a poet, which means she's pretty much cool with anything. Anything, that is, except having an employee with a massive injury caused by a mosh pit gone wrong.

As the kids say, it was a fail.

And why shouldn't it have been? Everything about this godforsaken night was a fail, a term by the way, I absolutely despise because I am older than seventeen. In fact, I didn't even want or need to be in the general admission area. I had fucking VIP passes that got me on the goddamn stage for chrissakes, but I just had to listen to my twenty-year-old brother Sean and his twenty-one -year-old friend Junior when they said they'd prefer to watch the show from the pit. For them, the stage was boring. I wanted to explain

how being on stage was a privilege that not many people were afforded, but I obliged their pit request so as not to appear weak and old, two things I very much am.

In one of the more memorable scenes in director Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film "Pulp Fiction" (a flick made up of almost nothing but memorable scenes), gangster Marcellus Wallace – played by Ving Rhames – tells boxer Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis) how to fix his upcoming fight. Wallace advises Butch not to have a prideful, last-minute change of heart because "pride only hurts. It never helps. You fight through that shit." Well, maybe I should have had a bit more Wallace in me and a lot less Butch and fought through the pride I was feeling when Sean and Junior pleaded to get me to get as close to the stage as possible.

Perhaps I should explain.

I'm the oldest of three boys. Five years and five months separates each son (or ten years and ten months between me and Sean if you want to count it that way), which means all three of us had enough room to explore our interests without competing with our siblings.

My younger brother Kevin was the superstar basketball player who won all sorts of awards at the high school and the community college levels, which pleased our father, who was also some sort of high school basketball demigod. He's also six-foot-three and weighs two-hundred pounds. He hasn't played competitively for about four years, but he is still the best player on the court when we play pick-up games at the park and he can dunk like most people can tie their shoes. You'd think I'd be proud of his

accomplishments, particularly the dunking thing. But I'm not. I'm a miserable, jealous prick who never wanted anything more out of life than dunking a basketball on a ten-foot rim. I got close during the summer before tenth grade. That year, I threw down a softball because I couldn't get a full sized basketball over the rim. Other than that, nothing. Kevin laughs when I try to touch the rim now (a sad, sad display of athletic despair), which might explain why I don't try to touch the rim now.

Sean, on the other hand, weighs considerably less than Kevin (about one-hundred-and-sixty-five), but he's about six-foot-one and is better than most other basketball players even though he never played in high school. He's also a video game genius and regularly beats me at every Nintendo game I own, which is somewhat of an embarrassment considering I've had a Nintendo for longer than he's been alive. He's been dating a twenty-four -year-old for more than a year and she's tall, thin, tan and is getting her master's degree in business whereas my previous relationship was with a woman who spent what little money she had on tattoos, cat toys and weed.

Then there's me. I played basketball in ninth grade, didn't get in the games much and quit soon thereafter. My love for the sport never faded, but my talent did. I can still hit an open jump shot, but now I have to wear knee braces and somehow I am the slowest person on the court even though I weigh only one-hundred-and-forty-five pounds. I'm thirty-one years old and don't have health insurance, so I'm deathly afraid of losing a tooth or having some two-hundred-and-fifty -pound guy drop an elbow on my head as he's coming down for a rebound.

You want me to guard you on defense because I play two steps off (giving shooters all the room they need to hoist up jumpers) and if you try to dribble around me, you succeed in dribbling around me because I'm overly cautious when it comes to getting hit. I never go for steals because I tried that once and busted my right pointer finger so badly that I still feel the damage two years later. Basically, I just stand there.

The void left in my life from quitting basketball was filled with music. I began going to shows at least once a week and eventually I felt like I was in dingy, illegal art spaces in East L.A. and the Port of Los Angeles more often than I was at home. This newfound passion for what the hipsters called "the scene" led me to pick up an instrument and go from audience member to band member. Realizing I would never be the starting shooting guard for the Los Angeles Lakers was a bummer, but the allure of traveling in a van with my friends more than made up for the Nike contract I was never getting. I bought a guitar in eleventh grade and a bass two years later. I played in all sorts of bands, released vinyl and CD that no one ever bought, went on tours to play shows in other states that no one went to and met a lot of really cool, interesting people along the way.

Somewhere in all that musical cacophony I began writing about the bands and people I met. I was interviewing musicians, getting free tickets to shows, being given free records to review and loving every second of it. But, eventually, I got sick of being out until two a.m. listening to bands that sounded just like the same bands I'd heard as a teenager. It's a long story, one I'll summarize with this: By the time Sean, Junior and I

stepped onto the grounds at Los Angeles State Historic Park to see the Descendents at the FYF Festival, it had been close to a decade since I had been to one of these all-day shows where water costs eight dollars and dudes with one eye and three teeth try to sell bongos to teenagers for seventy-five bucks.

My brothers, as best I can tell, raised themselves on a steady diet of Tupac and Jay-Z (which ain't half bad) and knew nothing about the musical world from where I came. But the Descendents – and more specifically, punk – was *my* thing, the thing I was knew, the thing I was good at. When I compare myself with my brothers and that incredibly irritating optimism in their eyes that stems from that even more irritating youth they possess, I realize I no longer have “a thing.” To them, I’m old and lame, the guy who can’t jump or get to level twenty-nine in “Tetris.” What sucks is, it’s the truth. I can’t jump like I used to and my “Tetris” skills are damn near nonexistent.

With no clear manner in which to reverse my descent into adulthood, I am stuck between knowing that I am getting old and not having any way to stop it. Within the past year, I’ve sold my record collection, thrown away six bags of clothes, let my ex-girlfriend keep all my DVDs and videos and began having a solid relationship with my otherwise distant mother. I prefer sit-down symphony concerts to general admission punk thrash-a-thons, I exercise every day instead of drinking beer and if the Lakers aren’t on, I almost never turn on the television because I have a book or magazine in my hand. Parties don’t interest me, but poetry readings do.

In the past, I probably would have said these things, then asked whomever I was speaking with to “please kill me,” but the crazy thing is, I actually *like* this guy I’m turning into.

Seriously, someone please kill me.

So there I was, being challenged by two young people to stand near the front of the stage, something I had done countless times in my life. *This*, I told myself, *is my version of dunking and/or playing Tetris. It’s time for me to shine.*

Besides, if Sean wanted to get a taste of what it meant to cram himself into strangers at a festival show, then I was going to be the one to introduce him to that world, my world. I would have said no if the group setting up on stage wasn’t the Descendents, but then again, I wouldn’t have been at the show if the Descendents weren’t playing. Along with Black Flag, the South Bay pop-punkers were one of my two favorite bands as a kid and one I could still listen to without hurling my iPod out of my car window after three songs.

Twenty minutes before the Descendents went on, the three of us were backstage, standing ten feet away from Aukerman when I pointed him out as the singer, the guy whose caricature has been on no less than three t-shirts I’ve owned in my life. Junior and Sean said I should introduce myself, but I declined. I was given the aforementioned backstage passes because I interviewed Aukerman over the phone for two publications before this show, so, in theory, we had some sort of relationship. But in actuality, I had no right to get in his personal space just minutes before he was to sing in front of

thousands of people. Speaking to someone on the phone for work-related purposes is one thing; walking up to a stranger and introducing myself as the music journalist is another. It's pretty much the reason why I've stopped writing about music because the last thing I want or need is to be known as some sort of hanger-on, a dude whose goal is to hang in the dressing room and become best friends with musicians. These days, I want backstage passes so I don't have to deal with crowds, not because I want to get invited to a rock star's third wedding.

After five minutes of them convincing me to talk to Aukerman, I switched the subject to whether or not we were going to stand on stage or in the crowd. It's obvious which side won, and because I am the oldest and most experienced, it was decided that pushing through the audience to get us as close to the band as possible was my job. As me and my Ray-Bans, black Macy's cardigan, white U.S. Polo Association V-neck (yes, I know, it's hardly a Ralph Lauren, but still much nicer than a Hanes undershirt) and grey gingham pants from Urban Outfitters bumped into teens and twenty-somethings discussing their modes of attack once the Descendents hit the stage, I realized I had no business being in the general admission crowd. The fact that I know what gingham is should say everything about just how unprepared I was for such an event. But there I was, saying "excuse me" to people who paid sixty dollars to have other people who paid sixty dollars drip sweat all over them while a band almost old enough to be their grandfathers played songs written while their parents were in middle school.

I got us about twenty feet from the stage and could have gone farther north, but decided to stop once a cute blonde girl busted out a joint. *I used to smoke pot*, my inner voice told me, and the next thing I know, I'm Snoop Dogg in the 1998 film "Half Baked." The D-O-DOUBLE G plays what Thurgood Jenkins (Dave Chappelle) calls a "scavenger," the type of person who never has weed but magically shows up when others are smoking. Back when I was a forty-hour-a-week professional stoner, I never A. would have gone to a concert without at least three joints, B. had the nerve to ask a stranger to hit their weed and C. only taken two hits and been stoned, but there I was completing the trifecta of a dude who doesn't have any weed.

My buzz got me excited when the band came on, particularly when Aukerman became noticeable from where I was standing. If you were on a game show and the host asked you to draw a picture of what the lead singer of a headlining band at an all-day festival in a major city such as Los Angeles looked like, you would never – and I mean *never* – even consider drawing anything that even moderately resembles Aukerman. This guy sported salt-and-pepper hair and was clad in a grey collared shirt, above-the-knee shorts and black framed glasses similar to mine. Apparently, he never read the rock 'n' roll lead singer handbook because he has no visible tattoos or piercings, his haircut looks just like your dad's and his glasses are thicker than a windshield. His nerdy appearance is part of why people like him so much – he simply doesn't give a shit what he looks like. But, his paternal appearance also stems from the fact that being the lead singer of a headlining band isn't even what this guy does, really. Aukerman is a research scientist for DuPont who came out a decade-long retirement in 2010 to play a few shows such as

these. Like me, he has other, more adult things going on his life, which is probably another reason why I can still relate to his band.

Everything was fine as the group opened with the song “Descendents.” Into the microphone, Aukerman half-sang and half-screamed the words that defined my teenage years: “We’re the proud, the few/Descendents rocking alone tonight/We’re the proud, the few/Descendents picking our butts tonight.” These words reminded me of all those nights my best friend Aaron and I drove around the South Bay with nothing to do because in the South Bay, there is nothing to do. We were loner losers who enjoyed punk rock and driving to LA to get chili burgers at Tommy’s. We were so lame that the thought of trying to get laid never even crossed our minds, which in hindsight probably saved us a lot of aggravation because there weren’t any girls who would have said yes to whatever sorry pick-up lines we could have come up with. To this day, I still have no idea what Desi Bond was thinking as she took my virginity around Cinco de Mayo 1997, a mere month before high school graduation. This girl was – and, according to her Facebook pictures, still is – a knockout who obviously had mental issues serious enough that she thought getting naked with me was a good idea. Wherever you are Desi Bond, I thank you and hope you got that mental condition under control.

“Descendents” went so well I began feeling like Kirk Gibson hobbling around the bases after hitting a pinch-hit home run for the Dodgers in the 1988 World Series. The band took barely three seconds between songs before diving into “Hope” and the down-strumming power chord progression of F sharp to C sharp to D to A got me and everyone

in the crowd to lose our shit because “Hope” is the Descendents’ biggest hit. I was now fully immersed in all the best elements of my childhood. I was singing along to “Why can’t you see how you torture me/You’re already thinking about someone else/When he comes home you’ll be in his arms and I’ll be gone/But I know/My day will come/I know someday/I’ll be the only one,” pushing motherfuckers with my T-Rex arms just because they were pushing me, bouncing and bopping in place to my favorite song by my favorite band.

Then the second verse hit and with it came the asshole from behind who I’m going to assume didn’t mean to push my glasses into oblivion. More than likely, he was a teenager and his only thought was how fucking awesome it was to hear “Hope” played live because the Descendents hadn’t performed in Los Angeles since 1997, a time when he was in diapers – if he was alive at all.

That still doesn’t mean I don’t want to send him a six-hundred –dollar bill for my frames and an extra thousand for the compensation of having to live my life without glasses for two weeks. This mentality, I’ve tried telling myself since that fateful summer night, is exactly why I am officially too old for this shit. Even today, as I type with new black Ray-Ban frames, I still wish I had that money in my bank account. Plus, I bonded with those glasses. They were my first and it sure would have been nice to keep them around just a bit longer. I mean, we never even got to say goodbye. This might sound over the top, but I’m a sentimental guy and I have an unhealthy attachment to possessions. So, yeah, I was bummed. I still toss and turn at night thinking about how

something that was so vital to my life for so long was broken and smashed into pieces only to be swept up by some dude on parole whose job it was to clean the grounds the following morning.

In hindsight, I blame all this misery not on the weed (because even though I am a reformed smoker, I still abide by the rule that weed is never the cause of any of my problems, even when it's painfully obvious that weed is more than likely the absolute cause of all my problems) but on the three warm Miller High Lifes Sean, Junior and I each chugged in my car (Oh, did I fail to mention that I drove? Well, I did. When you're in your thirties and you hang out with twenty-year-olds, you always drive) before we entered the dirt field where the show was taking place. I hadn't crushed beers like that in a while (another example of my age showing) and the buzz was strong enough for me to agree to such a stupid idea such as standing in front of the stage.

The irony in all of this is that Sean bailed on the pit after the first two songs in favor of standing off to the side of the stage. After the show, when I was feeling bluer than I had since one of my cats died six years prior, I ran into him near the festival's exit.

"I almost lost my shoe so I moved," he said as I struggled to see three steps in front of me. It wasn't his fault, but I could have punched him for telling me that.

Of course you almost lost his shoe, I wanted to tell him. That's what happens at shows like these.

The only reason I stood up front was to prove how cool I was, how I could handle a simple thing like crowd surfing, moshing and pogoing and his lame ass couldn't hang for ten minutes. I'm not mathematician, but I think that comes out to sixty dollars a minute for my new glasses.

Down with those Ray-Bans went not only my vision for fourteen days but also the last bastion of my youth. Wait. That's not technically true: I was old long before Aukerman sang, "You don't know what you want/It's gonna take you years to find out." I was closer to thirty-two than I was thirty-one when I lost my glasses to the punk rock gods and this idea that I was no longer a spry twenty-two -year-old who never got hangovers had been kicking around inside my pea-brain since about twenty-seven (ironically, the first year I got a hangover). The difference was, this time I was forced to realize that I was, in fact, too old to be standing anywhere near a mosh pit, and more importantly, just plain old in general.

So nevermind the fact that I have gray hair. Forget about the aches and pains that come the day after I play basketball or how I complain to no one in particular about how fast the cars drive down my twenty-five-mile-per-hour residential street. The instant those Ray-Bans went flying off my head and into the oblivion was the exact moment when the final inkling of my childhood officially ended. From then on out, I was old.

I'm still not sure how I feel about it.