

**THERE'S A ROAD TO EVERYWHERE EXCEPT WHERE YOU
CAME FROM**

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WHERE YOU CAME FROM**

A MEMOIR BY
BRYAN CHARLES



OPEN CITY BOOKS

New York

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For

Paul Bayer

Trish Chappell

Karla Wozniak

Author's Note

This book begins on 10/1/98 and ends on 1/14/02. It was written with the aid of contemporaneous personal journals. Many names have been changed. Dialogue was written as closely as I could remember it and in some cases consists of composite conversations. Chronology was rendered as close to the actual sequence of events as I could recall.

*something
is working toward you
right now, and
I mean you
and nobody but
you.*

—Charles Bukowski

The Condition

I arrived in New York after a twenty-five-hour train ride carrying two bags of clothes and a banker's box full of papers. Erin met me at Penn Station and led me through the crush of people and out to the street. We got in a cab and headed uptown. The cab cut through traffic going what felt like eighty miles an hour. Blocks blurred by. Neighborhoods changed. She lived in a sublet on the Upper West Side. We pulled off on a pretty street lined with trees and old brownstones. Inside I called my parents and told them I'd arrived safely. I cleaned myself up a bit and Erin took me to get dinner—two slices at Famous Original Ray's.

Back at the apartment we watched TV. I'd barely slept on the train and faded quickly. We got into bed. For a moment I was on one side and Erin was on the other. Then we slid over into each other's arms. She ran a hand up my back and gripped the back of my neck.

—We're gonna kiss now, she said.

The next day we met Craig at a diner in Midtown for lunch. He and Erin caught up a bit. They talked about city life.

We finished eating and walked to Craig's office, a minimalist space with bare concrete walls and desks out in the open on a bare concrete floor with a few offices to the side. Everyone wore street clothes and worked on Macs. They sat low in their seats staring blankly at big monitors, clicking at boxes and shapes on the screen. Craig started writing out directions to the place. I tried to follow what he was saying but grew confused. I admitted I was scared to take the subway alone. It was decided I'd come back after he got out of work and we'd go into Brooklyn together.

I returned that evening around six and stood on a corner in Times Square loaded down with my bags, clutching the banker's box. Hundreds of people streamed past me and their faces all blurred. I began to feel dizzy. I was relieved to see Craig. He grabbed one of my bags. We went into the subway.

It was a railroad apartment in Greenpoint consisting of a large kitchen, a living room, and two open back rooms with no wall or even a sheet between them. The floors of the living room and middle room were covered with worn brown carpet. The floor in the back room was covered with old salmon-colored carpet and there was a pink sponged paint pattern on a jutting section of the wall. In the living room was a futon couch, a small blue chair, and a large closet with plastic doors on runners. Inside the closet a TV sat on two Huber Bock beer boxes, clothes hanging on either side of it. Paul had rigged an antennae and pinned it up with one of his old Kmart nametags. On the wall was an inflatable bull's eye with velcro strips, three or four balls stuck to the velcro. On the floor under the bull's eye was a plastic cactus in a plastic pot with fake scrub brush. The lower half of the kitchen walls were wood-paneled. Over the sink were copper-colored tiles with images of mushrooms stamped on them. Paul had made a counter from a piece of wood and a large cardboard box. He'd glued the wood to the top of the box and covered the whole thing with an old blue sheet. On the counter next to a coffee maker was a magazine photo of a croissant, steaming coffee, fruit, and juice. The photo had been placed in a gold plastic frame. There was no sink in the tiny bathroom.

Craig slept in the middle room on a twin mattress on the floor. Also in the room were his stereo, some records, his desk and computer. Ten feet away on the floor under one of two windows was a full size mattress. It belonged to Paul but he was away till November working a temp-labor gig at a nuclear power plant and so it was temporarily mine. I fell asleep fully clothed that first night under a

open window, listening to cars pass on the street three floors below.

Rent was nine hundred dollars split three ways. I wrote Craig a check for October's rent, which left me with roughly twelve hundred bucks. I figured this would carry me a while. I decided to get to know the city rather than look for a job right away. Every day I'd take the train to Manhattan and walk for hours. Often I'd stop and see Erin at work. She worked at a comedy club in the west twenties. She sat at a desk in a basement office, reading newspapers, smoking, and answering the phone. The club was on its last legs. The phone didn't ring much. We'd sit for a long time shooting the breeze. There was a *New York Post* editorial cartoon on the wall—a deranged Bill Clinton on St. Patrick's Day saying *Where is this Erin with no bra?*

I'd tell her what I'd seen and done that day. Erin would recommend things to add to my list. I went to Harlem, Times Square, Central Park. I went to a taping of the Ricki Lake show. I went to an appearance by Jennifer Love Hewitt at an HMV store in Midtown. I had a thing for JLH, dug *I Know What You Did Last Summer*.

I went to the top of the Empire State building and looked out at the city. It was a clear day and I could see to the end of the island. This may have been the first time I saw the World Trade Center in person. I went down there a few days later. I stood on the plaza between the two towers, tilted my head, and looked straight up. A feeling of vertigo came over me. I almost fell down.

A similar sensation began to afflict me on my city walks generally, an odd dislocation, as if my head were a balloon floating twenty feet in the air, connected to my body by a thin string. This balloon head had camera eyes that would record the action and play it back to me. I seemed not to be experiencing events firsthand. This feeling could last an hour or more. I told Paul about it one night over the phone. He said he knew the feeling and described a few times it had happened to him. We gave it a name: the Condition.

Erin took me to a comedy show at the Roseland Ballroom. One of the people on the bill was her ex-boyfriend Stephen. I'd heard a lot about Stephen over the last couple years. Erin had moved to New York with him in the late summer of '96, just a few months after she and I split up. She always said she thought Stephen and I would get along. I didn't doubt her exactly but felt threatened by Stephen, by their history together and now his success. Others had told me how great he was—talented, funny, destined to hit it big. I was prepared to dislike him on principle.

We watched his set and had a beer with him later. It was clear within seconds I couldn't hate him, he truly was a good guy. We rapped about Kalamazoo and some of our mutual friends. We rapped about the Yankees and Chuck Knoblauch's boneheaded move in the ALCS a couple weeks ago, arguing with the umpire while the ball was still in play as Indians base runners advanced and a run scored. Stephen had been at the game.

After the show we stood on Fifty-second Street saying goodbye. I got an odd feeling as we walked away from him. I almost felt sort of sad.

I turned to Erin on the subway.

—Do you think Stephen still likes you?

—Me? She almost laughed. —No I'm pretty sure he's moved on.

A few weeks later I began looking for jobs. My resume was weak. I had no real work experience and

only two publication credits, two poems and an essay, both in obscure quarterlies. I even fudged it a little—the essay was forthcoming. Nevertheless I applied for every writing and editorial job in the want ads of the major papers. I received no calls in response. Some jobs I applied for week after week some every day. There was one—editorial assistant at *Guitar World* magazine—I applied for probably a dozen times. No one wanted me. My bankroll dwindled.

My uncle Art's wife—he'd married a much younger woman, close to my age, I could never bring myself to call her my aunt—had a childhood friend who worked in publishing. Her name was Elizabeth and she was an editor at a small children's imprint. Deb put me in touch with her. A lunch was arranged. I met Elizabeth at her office on Astor Place. We walked to a diner called Around the Clock. Elizabeth was tall and blonde, stylish and put-together. She lacked the extra fifteen or so pounds of even the foxiest Michigan babes. As we ate we talked about being new to the city, what the publishing scene was like, what I could do to break in.

—Your mom seems really sweet, she said.

—My mom?

—Yeah. She e-mailed me.

—What?

—Yeah. I assume she got my e-mail from Deb.

—Uh-huh. And what'd she ... what did she want?

—Oh she just said anything I could do to help you would really be great and if I had any questions or any thoughts I could get in touch with her.

—Questions or thoughts?

—Yeah.

—I see. Well. I guess as long as she's not calling you.

Elizabeth smiled.

—What?

—She called me too.

—Is that ... did she. And that was what, the same sorta stuff?

—Yeah. Please help my son. I guess she thought I was in a position to hire you or something? I don't know.

I smiled. —Me either.

—You're not mad are you?

—Mad? No. That's not quite the word.

—Good. Because she told me not to tell you. I just figured ...

She looked at me. —Aw it's not that bad. She's just worried is all. She's looking out for you. It's sweet.

—It's something.

Ninety minutes later I was on the phone with my mother.

—Mom why do you do this?

—What?

—You called that girl, Deb's friend Elizabeth? You sent her e-mails?

—I may have sent her one e-mail. Why?

—*Why?* Are you crazy? Put yourself in my position, then ask yourself why.

—Gee I don't know if I appreciate this hostility—

—You know what I don't appreciate? You always calling around behind my back, meddling in my affairs, trying to arrange things for me.

—I don't always call around—

—How do you think it feels to be talking to someone in New York—a *publishing* person—and suddenly she's telling me my mom's calling her saying—

—Bryan—

—Saying please help my son get a job?

—Bryan I think you need to get a grip here—

—Get a grip? Mom—

—I was just trying to help and you act like it's some terrible thing.

—No. It's not terrible. The Nazis were terrible. This is just ... I don't even know what this is.

—So now you're comparing me to the Nazis.

—No you're missing the point.

She asked if I'd at least had a good lunch with Elizabeth, if she had any advice or had given me the names any good contacts. I said stop, you're not listening to me, why won't you listen. She said I am listening and asked what was my point. I told her again and again but knew she wouldn't relent and she didn't. We talked in circles a while longer. Then we hung up.

The following week there was a message from Elizabeth asking if I wanted to go to lunch again. I didn't call back. She called one other time. I didn't return that call either. That was the last I heard from her.

One day my dad called. He said he was coming up soon. He was dating a woman in New York. Her name was Marsha. She lived on the Upper West Side.

—It'd be great to see you, he said.

—Yeah.

—I know Marsha'd really like to meet you. I've been telling her about you.

—Is that right?

—Yup-yup. But don't worry. Only the good things.

—Ha. Well that's ... yeah that sounds good.

—How about next Sunday?

I wanted to say I was busy, make up some excuse.

—Sunday ... Sunday. No I don't think I have any plans.

I agreed to meet them at Marsha's for brunch. Sunday arrived, bright and windy and cold. I went into the city and found Marsha's building. I stood in the vestibule for a moment, collecting my thoughts. I pressed the buzzer and went in.

I heard my dad before I saw him.

—*Helloooo.*

I climbed the stairs. He greeted me in the hallway. We hugged with hard back slaps. He stepped back, grinning.

—This is Marsha, he said.

She stood in the doorway. She was tallish and thin with incredibly curly shoulder-length black hair. Her apartment was small. There was a table with three chairs and places set. Beyond that was a tiny living room, to the left a tiny kitchen.

—Do you want anything? she asked. —Some coffee or juice?

—I'll have some coffee, I said.

She went into the kitchen. My dad was still grinning, checking me out.

—Look at you. Mr. Big City Guy.

He chuckled, snorted, shook his head. Marsha returned with the coffee. I stirred in some milk. She and my dad stood there grinning. Now they both checked me out.

Marsha asked about my move from Michigan. I rehashed a few new-to-the-city impressions. She smiled along like *oh that's so true.*

—Anyway, she said. —I'll get started on breakfast. Everything's ready, I just have to make the pancakes. You two sit and catch up. I'll be in the kitchen. It should just take a minute.

My dad sat on the little couch. I sat across from him in a chair. Marsha moved around in the kitchen. I heard batter sizzling. My dad and I eased into empty chitchat. We kept it rolling, old pros but now. He chuckled, grinned, shook his head. Marsha reappeared holding a plate of pancakes. She set them on the table and smiled.

—All right, let's eat.

After breakfast we sat in the living room. My dad put his arm around Marsha. They snuggled on the loveseat and talked about how they met—on the Internet, in a chat room for Jewish singles. Marsha said she had their whole relationship documented. She'd saved their e-mails from when they were courting.

—Do you ever go into any chat rooms? she said.

—No.

—No? You've never been?

—No.

—Well. I don't know what your situation is but it's a great way to meet people.

Ten more minutes, I thought, ten more minutes and I'm gone. We exchanged further bullshit. Chitchat lagged. A weird silence fell, broken by Marsha.

—Shoot, she said. —I almost forgot. I have to run to Duane Reade, I'm, I have to get this prescription filled.

She got up quickly, put her coat on, grabbed her purse from the table by the front door. —You guys'll be okay here, right?

—Sure, said my dad.

—Yeah stay and talk. I'm sure you have a lot to talk about so ... yeah. Who knows how long I'll be you never know with Duane Reade, they're often, they can be very slow. She smiled. —I'll be back.

Suddenly my dad and I were alone. Big alarm bells rang. I felt a sharp pain in my gut and went into the tiny bathroom. I sat on the toilet but nothing came out. I took deep breaths and splashed water on my face. Back in the living room my dad was still there. He looked at me and smiled.

—What's up? I said.

—No it's just, it's good to see you.

—Good to see you too.

—We oughtta do this more often.

—Yeah.

—But let's not just say it. Let's make it happen this time. Let's really see each other more often.

—All right.

—We really will. We won't let so much time pass.

—All right.

—So what do you think of Marsha?

—What do I think of her? She's ... yeah. She seems nice.

—Good. Because we're getting married.

We looked at each other.

—Congratulations, I said.

—Thanks, thank you.

He smiled vaguely. His smile faded somewhat.

—Well there's ... there's something else too.

I knew what it was but waited to hear it.

—We're having a baby.

In the silence that followed I assessed my father. He was fifty-four, maybe fifty-five years old. All our interactions had been like this. They'd never been any other way.

—Wow, I said. —Interesting.

Marsha came in carrying a Duane Reade bag. She hung up her coat, sat on the couch, and smiled. She looked at my dad and then at me.

—So?

I grinned, feigned happiness. You could see relief on their faces. *Everything's fun, this is great,*

we're pals. Then the mood shifted. Marsha waxed contemplative. She revealed her age—forty-five—and admitted straight-up this wasn't a planned deal. Birth defects were a worry. She was moving to DC next month, it was crazy, she never thought she'd leave New York. She knew it was sudden, she knew it must be a shock but I was going to be a big brother and she hoped they'd see more of me, I was part of the family. My dad chimed in. He cosigned the family shit. We sat there gabbing and fake laughing into the mid-afternoon. They said let's grab an early dinner, there's a good Indian place. I tapped unknown reservoirs of strength and said sure. We all got up. Marsha went to the bathroom. My dad came over. He stood close to me and put a hand on my shoulder.

—I know I'm coming at you with a lot here. But I want you to know you're still my son. You're still my number-one guy.

After dinner we stood on the sidewalk. My dad suggested we go for ice cream. I said it was a long ride to Brooklyn and I should probably get back. Marsha said it was great meeting me and gave me a hug.

—We'd love to see you again soon.

My dad stepped up. He flashed the old grin and hugged me with back slaps.

—All right, he said. —Love you.

—Love you too, I said.

I walked two blocks east into Central Park and sat on a bench in the cold. My chest and eyes burned. I rubbed my face. I got up from the bench, walked to Erin's, pressed the buzzer. No answer. I pressed it again. No answer.

I needed to talk to her. She would know how I felt.

Erin's dad left when she was young. Throughout her childhood they were rarely in touch. He had a new family now. He lived in Detroit with his wife and their two middle-school-age sons. Erin loved her brothers but hated her stepmother. She was ambivalent about her dad. The subject could still bring her to fury or tears.

I needed to talk to her. I wanted her to hold me. I wanted to order food with her and watch a movie and not think. I hung around on the stoop and looked up at her window. It was dark. I knew she wasn't home. I lingered another few minutes then walked to the subway.

The train was nearly empty. I sat in the corner and stared into space, feeling at once exhausted and hyper-alert. Tears leaked from my eyes. I couldn't contain them. I put my face in my hands and quietly cried. Why am I so sad? I thought.

The answer was obvious. My dad hadn't wanted me. He never was there for me. Years would pass when he barely called. Now, in his mid-fifties, he's had an awakening. He'll be there for this new kid he'll stick around. It's not like I wish he'd raised me or anything. No—there's no question I was better off with Ed. Imagine if my dad raised me, what a pussy I'd be. He's a smart guy, sure, knows his Civil War history. But what about the personal history of his own son? Next time maybe. Good luck, old sport. By the way, ever hear of using a condom? Pulling out? Expelling your wad on your Internet girlfriend's stomach instead? As usual the guy's got impeccable timing. Six weeks after I move to New York looking to strike out on my own—certainly the hardest thing I've ever done—along comes my dad again, zapping me back through time, making me feel young and confused and unloved again.

I hated myself for crying over this shit.

Wanted: Marketing Writer

Paul returned to New York in November. He brought another mattress, a thin foam thing from a castoff sofa bed. It was only slightly more comfortable than sleeping on the bare floor. We agreed to switch off—every other night one of us got the good mattress. We placed a single tier of an old brown plastic bookshelf between the two mattresses and loaded it with books and knickknacks. In theory we did this to achieve a modicum of privacy. But it was more a dark comment on our lack of privacy than anything else. Occasionally I'd wake before Paul, look over and stare at him, maybe move around slightly, waiting for him to open his eyes and see me there staring. When he finally did we'd always crack up.

Our last apartment, in Kalamazoo, was on the second floor of a large house. It had a big front porch and expansive views. Even living with Trish—Paul's longtime girlfriend—and a dog and a cat, we had more space than we knew what to do with. One room contained little more than a couch and a phone.

Now we had to brush our teeth in the kitchen sink. We had to walk through Craig's room to get to our room. Neither of the rooms were really rooms.

Craig spent his leisure time lounging on the futon wearing only black boxer briefs. The brand name, printed on the elastic waist, was Winners. He referred to the Winners often and only by this name, as in: the Winners are comfortable, time to wash the Winners etc. Craig stayed up late messing around on the computer. The monitor was the size of the large TV and lit the whole back room, no matter how much he dimmed the brightness. If I was having trouble sleeping Craig's mouse clicks would resonate like hits on a snare drum. The low light of the monitor was like a nuclear blast.

Paul and Craig had moved to the city in the spring, Craig to take a job as a web designer at his college professor's son-in-law's firm. Paul, I'd been told, had vague plans to try acting. Paul hadn't told me this, Trish had. She swore me to secrecy, said he didn't want anyone to know. I wasn't surprised. For all of Paul's bonhomie he was actually quite guarded. His many pals tended to love him hugely without really knowing too much about him. But he and I were close, about as close to each other as we allowed other people to get. We met in 1988 at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp. Paul went for visual art. I went for creative writing.

I always wanted to be a writer, never anything else. In my banker's box were folders full of poems, short stories, essays, plays. I'd even started writing a screenplay last summer, based partly on my experiences as a substitute teacher. My present goal was modest: publication in a small literary journal. Fame would come later. Maybe not fortune but enough to make a decent living, I was sure of it.

All of this was easier to talk about in Michigan, where I'd had a few compadres who knew the score. My friend Greg and I made a popular local magazine, *Rocket Fuel*. Twice a year we spent hours at Kinko's putting the thing together—copying, collating, stapling. As we went along we'd read our new work aloud, usually poems and funny essays. We continued to make *Rocket Fuel* after Greg moved to Chicago in '95. We made the final issue just before I left for New York.

I understood Paul's reluctance to discuss his ambitions. To reveal even the slightest goal or foggiest plan in a city teeming with actors and writers on all rungs of the ladder seemed at best pretentious, at worst an invitation to bad luck. Here our desires went unexpressed.

And the truth, in a way, was I'd moved to New York not to heed any profound calling but for lack of any better ideas. Most of my friends were leaving Kalamazoo or had already left. When Paul said

he was leaving too—that he and Trish were moving out, she was going back to Petoskey to go to nursing school, maybe they'd break up, who could say for sure, he was joining Craig in New York, Craig had found a pad—that was it, the final nail in the coffin. But say the dice had landed differently—say Paul had said hey let's go to Chicago. Most likely I'd be gearing up for another midwestern winter, planning my next move in an apartment in Pilsen or Ukrainian Village.

Paul was flush with dough from his power-plant gig and since technically he'd been laid off he applied for and was granted unemployment. He was in no hurry to find work again and with my job hunt at a dead end we spent many days goofing off in the city. We'd hit the East Village record stores two or three times a week. We'd eat cheap lunches at Dojo on St. Marks Place or at one of the Indian restaurants strung with plastic chili-pepper lights on First Avenue. I'd go to the Strand and leave with at least one half-price paperback each time. I've always needed a lot of books around and mine were all still in boxes in Michigan.

After a few weeks of this my already meager finances were shot. Paul comforted me with tales of his own poverty in the city, which had reached a low point last summer, just before he landed the power-plant job.

—I was living on salads. I tried making pad Thai with a packet of Ramen noodles, crushed peanut and soy sauce.

—How was that?

—Horrible. Trish came out in August, I think just to make sure I ate at least a few decent meals.

Paul's grandmother was on government assistance. She sent him a couple big boxes of rations. In our cupboard was a large can with a white label and a silhouette of a chicken. *WHOLE CHICKEN*, it said. There was also a box of government-issue powdered milk. Paul had eaten the other items before leaving for Jersey.

At the Met Food on Driggs Avenue I loaded my basket with hot dogs and Weaver frozen chicken products—drumstick-shaped nuggets and patties, called *rondelets*. Nearly all of my meals featured a dipping sauce. Often they came with a side of Herr's barbecue potato chips. I was a gifted maker of beanie-weenies.

I hadn't followed any sort of writing schedule in Michigan. It was more like whenever something came to me I'd sit at the desk. Once I had something down I was content to rewrite endlessly. Revision was my favorite part of the act. Lacking even a desultory work schedule in New York I began to feel useless. So one day when Craig was at work and Paul was out I pulled the large floor speaker Craig used as a chair up to his desk and using his computer wrote for two or three hours. It felt good to be writing. I lost myself in the work. I finished a five-page story about an encounter I'd had many years ago on a hot summer day with a weird girl with scars on her arms who was reading *Naked Lunch* and told me it was her bible. I called the story "Scars," put it through a few rounds of revisions, printed multiple copies, checked my list of addresses, and started sending it out to the little magazines.

On the phone my mom asked if I was able to keep body and soul together—one of her favorite expressions.

—Oh yeah. I'm fine.

—Because I can write a check for a few hundred bucks and drop it in the mail first thing tomorrow.

—No no. That's not necessary. I'm good.

—You sure?

—Yeah. I've got a bunch of resumes out. Something's bound to come up.

—All right. Well. Like I say, we're here if you need us.

I'm fine. I'm good. It wasn't true. I was sinking. Faxing resumes daily was a hot ticket to nowhere. December was coming up. Rent and bills would be due. I made an appointment at a temp agency and spent a morning doing their battery of tests. They asked what I was looking for. Anything, I said.

Erin and I rented *Austin Powers* and Chris Rock's *Bring the Pain*. We watched them at her place lounging in bed. Afterward with the lights out we kissed and we took off our clothes. Neither of us had planned on this happening—or that's what we told each other anyway—but now that it had we couldn't seem to stop. Every time we'd pause and say this should really be the last time ... but there was never a last time and it wasn't like before, it was better, we were a few years older and there was an ease to it now. Still, the implications scared me. How far could we take this? What did she want from me? What did I want from her? I ignored these questions and brushed aside my doubts. I put my hands everywhere and buried my face in her neck. The past was alive in the shape of her body and dead gods spoke to me through her tongue and her mouth.

I got a temp job with long-term potential. I worked at a law firm at 120 Broadway entering lawyers' timesheets into a database for twelve bucks an hour. I worked with four women in a tiny office called the Information Center. I sat at a computer and keyed in numbers all day, moving only three fingers of my right hand. On my lunch hour I'd snarf peanut butter and jelly sandwiches from home then wander the tangled grid of streets east of Broadway. If I was feeling rich I'd spring for greasy Chinese food at Win Won, a little place with seating upstairs in an alley off Liberty Street. Most of the time I'd end up at the Strand's Fulton Street Annex or at a place on Nassau Street called SoHo Books that sold overstock and remainders. Sometimes I'd walk to the World Trade Center and read magazines at Borders and walk around the mall. Being in the mall comforted me. It was like being at the Crossroads Mall back in Michigan. It had a lot of the same stores and all the same smells: new clothes, pungent perfumes and lotions, fast food. The weather was weirdly warm that December. A couple times I got coffee and sat on the plaza watching people and looking up at the towers. There was a holiday display set up between the two buildings, three huge words: PEACE ON EARTH.

Two weeks after I started the other temp quit to pursue acting more seriously. She was replaced the following Monday by a guy named John.

—What'd you do before this? I asked.

—I taught fiction writing.

—Really? Where?

—Arizona State. I was an adjunct. I got my MFA there.

—So you moved here recently?

—A few months ago, yeah.

We started to talk about writing and books. It turned out we dug a lot of the same people. Denis Johnson, Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff. I felt a surge of affection for John. At the same time I felt territorial, vaguely jealous, not of his achievements necessarily—aside from his MFA we were roughly equal in that regard—but of his mere presence. There were only so many crumbs at this particular table. If John snagged a few there'd be fewer left for me.

One of the lawyers came in with more timesheets. We divided them up and got back to work.

I'd worked deadening jobs in the past. I worked a summer in the press room at Checker Motors where I stood pressing a button all day, punching out car parts. I worked two summers at the paper mill. I was swing shift there, working sixth hand mostly, which meant being present to help clean and rethread the paper machine when it went down. But when the machine was running well it meant long hours of nothing to do or hours of doing busy work like emptying broke-boxes or wandering the basement spraying down floors and cleaning out rooms that hadn't been entered much less cleaned in years, or simply finding a far-off spot to hole up in and wait for the day or the night to pass. Briefly I worked as a sitter at a hospital, which meant just that—sitting in a room with a sick or injured person if they or their family requested it. I sat in a room with a wide-eyed man in a full body cast and a halo drilled in his skull. He'd been in a car wreck and his mother was there and together we watched a show on cable about the End of Days. The screen showed a series of horrific things but the man and his mother agreed the reality would be far worse than anything we could imagine when the Lord finally came. I sat with a blind amputee who was in a kind of coma, sat horrified and staring at the man's leg stumps and was helpless to stop him when he shoved his hand down his throat and began gagging himself. I'd been told how to stop him if this happened but I was scared and yelled out and the nurses ran in. I watched them work feeling impotent and embarrassed and quit that very night. Long before any of that I washed dishes at the Gull Lake Country Club, the Bayview Gardens, the Gull Lake Cafe, washed dishes and scrubbed toilets at the Gull Lake View golf course.

The Information Center was worse than all of those things.

My supervisor's name was Gina Vasquez.

—Hey Gina.

—Yeah Bryan, what's up?

—I was wondering what the deal was for Christmas.

—In terms of ... ?

—Well my friend is driving back to Michigan, where I'm from, and I was thinking it'd be good to go with him, maybe take that week off.

—The week of Christmas?

—Right.

—Hmm. That's a bad week, that's our busy time. We're gonna have a bunch of people rushing to get timesheets in before the end of the year.

—So that's ... I mean ...

—You think there's any way you could stick around?

—I don't know. I mean I hadn't planned on it.

—Because, you know, you're doing good here and most likely they're gonna create a permanent data position in the IC. Probably you'd be first on the list. Honestly? You take that week off, I have to get someone else to fill in ... who knows?

Erin stayed too. We spent Christmas Eve together. I was happy to be with her but succumbed to a malaise. I'd never spent a Christmas away from home. I missed the Michigan winter landscapes, the lake-effect snowstorms, the bitter cold air.

On Christmas morning we had egg sandwiches and coffee from the deli. I bought a Drake's honey bun as a holiday treat for myself. I almost cried talking to my mom and Ed on the phone. Late in the day we went into the city. We looked at the tree at Rockefeller Center but it was too crowded and we didn't linger. We went to see *The Thin Red Line* at the Ziegfeld. A man behind us was crinkling a peanut bag. Erin asked him politely to stop. The man lunged forward and cursed at her. She left the theater for several minutes and returned still upset.

Meanwhile the movie had affected me strangely. It was a war movie, Terrence Malick's first film in twenty years. The dreamy pace, the voiceovers, the stunning nature shots juxtaposed with battle scenes—it all triggered a stark existential terror.

In this world a man himself is nothing, Sean Penn's character says, and there ain't no world but this one.

I went to the bathroom. My vision receded. I leaned into the sink to keep from fainting. After the movie Erin and I walked down through Times Square. We stopped at a food court for a snack. Two men next to us started screaming at each other. They got in each other's faces and looked ready to take swings. Erin ran out. When I caught up to her she was standing on Broadway with tears in her eyes.

A week later Paul and I were somewhere in Queens. It was my third time in the borough. The first two were related to a job I'd applied for, a staff writing position at the *Western Queens Gazette*. The editor gave me a test assignment covering a community board meeting. The meeting seemed to take decades. I took pages of notes. I wrote the piece that night and faxed it in the next morning. I never heard back.

We walked along on a main road and then arrived at a party. It was a mellow scene. Paul knew some of the people there, I only knew his friend Charles. I spent most of the night wandering back and forth between the living room and the kitchen, phasing in and out of various conversations. I got high on beer and briefly tried making time with a bespectacled girl who wrote porn for a living. But she was more into Paul and I watched with amusement as she made a play for him, knowing he was forever committed to Trish.

Shortly before midnight we gathered around the TV and counted down from ten as the ball dropped in Times Square. Everyone cheered. Paul and I hugged. I'd shed my Christmas malaise and now felt strangely optimistic, not my usual state.

There's something inside me, I know it.

I want my life to be different.

I want to achieve extraordinary things.

Paul and I took a car service home, arriving around one a.m. A short time later Erin arrived. We shot the shit for a while and hit the sack. Erin and I waited till Paul was asleep. Then we slipped into the living room and made out on the futon.

On the Thursday after New Year's Gina came to my desk.

—How would you feel about a little overtime?

—When?

—Tonight. I need you. Just for an hour or two. You see all these timesheets here and they just keep coming in.

I looked at the timesheets and then at the clock. It was almost five.

—You know I can't tonight. I already have plans.

Gina held my gaze for a moment before turning to John.

—What about you?

—Actually I can't stay tonight either.

—Great. Thanks guys.

She shook her head and left the room.

When I got home there was a message from a woman at the temp agency saying my assignment had ended, no need to go in tomorrow. She was still at the office when I called her back.

—What does that mean, my assignment has ended?

—It means your assignment's over.

—Yeah but why? I thought this was supposed to be a long-term thing.

—Apparently what, there was some overtime issue?

—Issue? No. I told her I didn't want to do it.

—Okay. Well. Could that have been the issue?

—I thought it was optional. She said how would you feel about overtime? *How would you feel?*

Does that sound dire to you?

—Look all I know is I got a call from Gina saying don't send him back. It happens all the time. It's not a big deal.

—Not a big deal? How am I supposed to live?

—We'll get you something else.

—Okay. Today? Can you get me something today?

—Let me see what I have. I'll give you a call back tomorrow.

The next morning I called the Information Center.

—Gina it's Bryan. Please. Give me another chance.

—Bryan I'm sorry but I need someone in here I can count on. I mean you and that other guy, I had to get rid of him too.

—But I skipped Christmas. I stayed in New York for this job.

Silence.

—Gina listen to me. I have three hundred dollars.

She hung up. I stood there seething. Paul came in and suggested we go get breakfast. We walked to the Luncheonette Fountain and ate large platters of eggs and tasteless potatoes for a buck-fifty each.

When we returned the red light on the answering machine was blinking. It was a message for me from the head of the temp agency, a man with whom I'd had no prior dealings. He relayed to me in a borderline shout that I was way out of line calling his clients and I had no right to go telling tales out of school and the agency wouldn't be working with me anymore. I played the message again.

—That is amazing, said Paul.

He brought his four-track recorder into the kitchen. He put a mic up to the answering machine and recorded the man's rant.

Erin's uptown sublet ended. She moved into a loft on Newel Street not far from my pad. Her room was okay but the people she lived with were struggling-musician creeps. The guy next door to her would hole up for hours playing the same idiotic funk bass line over and over again. I'd never known a musician of any kind who could work the same two-second riff so tirelessly. It was maddening.

One night I was lying on her bed contemplating all the things that were going wrong for me. I had no money, no job, no prospects. I'd finished another story and had sent it out but like "Scars" no one wanted it and the rejection slips were coming in.

—I know what'll make you feel better, she said.

—What?

—Put on your shoes, get your coat.

—Where are we going?

—Trust me, she said.

We turned left out of her building and walked to the end of the block. Across the street was a grocery store, a parking lot, and a little cluster of fluorescent-lit shops. Erin led me through the parking lot into a Taco Bell Express. She ordered six regular hardshell tacos and paid for them. We ate them sitting on the floor of her room. She put on a CD to block out the dude's bass. It had been a long time since I'd had Taco Bell and the tacos were good.

—See don't you feel better? she said.

—I really do.

I crunched another taco. She looked at me and laughed.

I called my mom but couldn't come out with it right away. Late in the conversation she brought it up and asked how I was doing money-wise. I said I'd lost my temp job and things were bad. She offered to send me a check. I said I didn't want to put them out. She said you won't be putting us out, no we're in good shape, Ed got his big check and he has his pension coming in.

Ed had worked at the paper mill for thirty years. He pushed himself so hard his back eventually gave out. He spent much of the nineties alternating between workers' comp and restricted duty. Management had long been unsure of what to do with him and recently he'd been, in effect, fired. Ed negotiated his own forced-retirement deal. He got to keep his pension and was issued a workers' com

settlement—something like a hundred and fifty grand. I knew this money was the foundation of my parents' retirement and had to last them the rest of their lives. I felt ashamed and guilty asking for any of it. My mom insisted it wasn't a big deal. She express-mailed a check for six hundred bucks. This brought me back up to eight hundred or so. I kept sending out resumes, ten or twelve at a time, barely keeping track of where I sent them anymore.

One Sunday there was an ad in the *Times* classifieds. *Wanted: Marketing Writer* was all it said. I faxed in my resume and cover letter. The next day a man named Tim called and said he wanted to meet with me. Tim's office was on John Street, not far from the law firm. I sat in a folding chair while he studied my resume. His mustache made bristling sounds as he stroked it.

—So Kalamazoo, Michigan, huh? That's really a place?

—Yes it is.

—Funny. I thought it was just that old song.

—No. It's real.

Tim grinned. —Long way from home, huh?

—Yeah I guess so.

—All right so lemme tell you a little bit about my client okay and then we'll talk and we'll see. They're a financial company, they're down here on Wall Street. And they're looking for someone with exactly these ... qualifications.

The phone rang. Tim answered it, spoke briefly, hung up.

—Sorry about that. So. Like I was saying, my client is a firm, a small mutual fund firm, they're over on Wall Street ...

He paused and searched my blank face.

—You uh. You know what a mutual fund is, don't you?

—I have to be honest with you, I don't.

Tim sat back. He brushed at his mustache. He studied my resume.

—You know what? That's not a problem at all.

I took the train in early and stood on the corner of Water and Wall Street staring up at a nondescript building. *Black* was about the only thing you could say about it. I was wearing a suit I'd last worn at age fifteen. My mom had overnighted it to me for the sole purpose of this interview. Wall Street, she said, you're gonna wanna look sharp. But the suit was long out of fashion, if it had ever been fashionable in the first place—a big if. The jacket had weird useless buttons on it and now fit tightly everywhere. The sleeves stopped short of my wrists. The pants were too tight and the cuffs rose nearly to my shins when I sat. Over the suit I wore the battered maroon Carhartt I'd been rocking since '93. Frayed threads dangled from the sleeves and waist. On my feet were scuffed black Clarks and white tube socks. I crossed the street and went into the lobby. I took the elevator to the twenty-third floor.

The company was called First Investors. A woman named Clara met me in reception and led me back to her office. She studied my resume. She looked at me and smiled.

—So tell me about yourself.

—Well uh. Let's see. I'm a writer. Um. I just moved here a few months ago—

—That's your main interest, your passion? Writing?

—My passion? Yeah I suppose it is.

She leaned back in her chair.

—I assume you know what we do here.

—Well sure. Yes. I mean I have an idea.

—An idea.

—Yes.

—You know what a mutual fund is?

—I ... vaguely. But it's like I explained to T—

—And you, let's see.

She looked at my resume.

—You were a substitute teacher in ... Portage? Teaching ... sociology?

—Sociology, yes.

—And you have no previous marketing experience, correct?

—That's correct.

I felt my face burning. I was uncomfortable in my suit.

At the end of the interview she thanked me for coming and said they'd be in touch. I walked out of the building feeling shrunken and small.

I'd written the whole thing off by the time I got home but Tim called later and said Clara liked me. They wanted to see me again.

The following week I went back and sat in a large conference room taking an hour-long proofreading test. I turned it in with no hope or despair, figuring now I'd put First Investors out of my mind for good. It had been an interesting diversion but Wall Street wasn't my scene, that was clear. Surely there were other people in the running for the job who actually understood what the job entailed, people with business or marketing degrees. They'd weed me out now, they had to. Good thing I'd been honest with Clara and told her I didn't know shit. I could've gotten in over my head. Things could've gotten out of hand.

Tim called and told me I was really on a roll, I really nailed that test.

—I did?

—Apparently. They want you to come in again.

—They do?

—Yeah. Writing test this time.

—Huh. All right.

—You don't sound too thrilled.

—No I'm thrilled. But ... another test?

—Yeah but this one's the big one. The writing test. See? You're applying for a job as a financial writer.

—No I know, I get it. It's just, things are getting a little tight here. I don't have a ton of time to play around with, financially speaking.

—Look. Hang in there okay. This looks promising. All you gotta do now is wow em with your writing skills. And that's easy, right?

I laughed. —I guess so.

—Hey. You made it this far.

I went back on a Friday late in the day. I'd been told Clara was out and that I'd be meeting a woman named Samantha. I sat in the waiting area and flipped through a magazine. The receptionist had left and the office seemed still and quiet from out there. She came around the corner. She looked about my age. She had black hair and wore a black suit and was smiling and had a beautiful smile. I stood and shook her outstretched hand. Silently I cursed my suit.

—Hi. I'm Samantha.

She led me down a hall and into a large office. She gestured to a vacant desk in the corner. Next to the computer monitor was a yellow pad, a pen, and a sheet of paper with a single block of text printed on it.

—There's the assignment, she said.

I glanced at the paper and then back at her.

—You can use the computer there. You know how to turn it on?

I looked at it quickly. —Yeah. No problem.

—Anything else you need? Water or anything?

—No I think this should do it.

—Okay. Good luck.

She smiled and turned to leave. She paused and looked at her watch.

—I'm heading out right at five, I have to be somewhere. You can just leave your test on the front desk on your way out.

—The front desk. Got it.

I watched her walk out. The room buzzed with her presence. I could still smell her perfume. I glanced at the test. I was having trouble concentrating. This windowless dead zone had taken on a sexual vibe.

What are you doing here? And where do you have to be?

Two hours later I was sitting on the high barber-style chair next to the so-called counter. Paul was at the stove frying burgers.

—I'm telling you it was jarring. One minute I'm staring at *Financial Planner Weekly* or some shit the next minute this beautiful girl appears.

—That's how it is in New York. Think of all the beautiful women you see on the street. They all have to work somewhere.

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