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Covered in Dust: Coming of Age in a Gazebo Factory

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Jason A. Ney

June 2014

Advisor: Douglas Hesse

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Title: Covered in Dust: Coming of Age in a Gazebo Factory
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Degree Date: June 2014

ABSTRACT

Covered in Dust: Coming of Age in a Gazebo Factory is a memoir that chronicles the three summers I spent working in the factories at Chestnut Hill Gazebos. The memoir focuses on three narrative strands: the day-to-day life of a factory worker, the struggles within and eventual breakdown of my relationship with my girlfriend, and how my job at Chestnut Hill helped me critique my fundamentalist Christian roots by forcing me into a deeper understanding of my faith and its relationship to the world outside the confines of my upbringing.

The critical afterword uses essays by Leona Toker and other theorists as a framework for understanding how I approached several different problems when writing my memoir, such as how to present incomplete memories of events, whether or not to condense events for the sake of a more streamlined narrative, and whether or not a memoirist should use composite characters. I explain how various practitioners and critics influenced my decisions, and I also compare my approach to the practices of other memoirists.

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Part I

Day 1

We were halfway through our fifteen-minute, mid-morning break on my first day of work, sitting at a picnic table outside the main factory building of Chestnut Hill Gazebos. Everyone was silent, staring blankly off into space. I looked at Steve, a burly guy in his late thirties, arms thick with knotted muscles and damp black hair, and asked him why he had a huge bandage wrapped around his thumb.

“Did you see that chop saw over by the side door?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’d been working on it for a few hours, you know? So I just let my mind drift for a few seconds, and the next thing you know, half my fucking thumb is missing and there’s blood all over the floor.” He stares at it. “I was hoping someone would find it while I was on my way to the hospital, so maybe they could sew whatever was left back on.”

“No one found it?”

“Nope. Guess the saw just fucking pulverized it.”

Tim, a wiry guy who didn’t look much older than me, glanced from Steve’s thumb to his own freckled hands.

“It’ll happen to you, too. Happens to everyone. Check this shit out,” he said.

He held up both of his index fingers. They were identically gnarled, twisted into the same stunted position, and neither one of them could straighten out when he tried to lay his hands flat on the table.

“The shit of it is,” Tim told me, “these were two different accidents, not one.”

Before my scare with Steve, I spent most of my first morning filling out paperwork and talking with Brownie¹, the factory manager, about the various jobs I’d be doing. I had known Brownie on a casual level for years, since I would see him on occasions when, as a kid, I’d go with my dad over to the factory when he wanted to talk shop with Art. A loud, generally happy guy with curly brown hair and a beer gut, he made me feel welcome.

But now, having finished my get-to-know-you talk with Brownie and about to descend into the mill for the first time, I couldn’t stop staring at Steve’s bandaged thumb stump and Tim’s mangled fingers. When my dad had initially told me about the job and how much money I’d be making, it had sounded like a lot. I was excited to bring home a \$10-an-hour paycheck, as I definitely needed to save for college, since the university I was planning to attend wasn’t cheap. But I also liked all of my fingers intact.

At a quarter past ten, a bell rang from inside the mill. I glanced over at Tim and Steve, wondering what it meant. They stared at each other for a few seconds, then slowly got up from the picnic table and started to trudge back toward the mill. I scrambled up and followed Tim, the mill foreman and my first-day tour guide, into the cavernous,

¹ His real name was Bill Brown, but nobody called him that, including Art.

² Including the saw that lopped off most of Steve’s thumb. I unsuccessfully try not to look for blood.

³ It’s a lot less sophisticated than it sounds.

dimly lit, rectangular aluminum building that housed dozens of strange, imposing machines. As we walked into the southern end of the mill, Tim pointed at his ears. “Don’t forget to put your ear plugs in. And always wear your safety glasses. The last we need is you losing a fucking eye. Got it?”

I nodded quickly as we walked into the mill, jamming in my earplugs and slipping on my safety glasses. *Stay alert. Follow orders. Don’t do anything stupid.*

The first thing I felt was the heat. Since all of the walls and the roof were made of metal, walking inside felt like opening the door to a sauna. The second thing was the noise. Even with my earplugs shoved firmly into my ears, it was still loud. Very loud.

We walked all the way to the other end of the mill, where Tim began explaining what I was looking at. “This is the re-saw,” he yelled over the constant whine of the machines, pointing at a tall, dark green, rectangular metal obelisk with a thirty-foot blade belt looping at what looked like several hundred RPMs through an opening in its side. “It’s the first thing we use on those beams to cut them down into smaller strips of wood.” He motioned toward giant stacks of cedar beams that sat just outside the mill. They looked about twenty feet long and two feet thick. “You’ll probably be getting some work in on this fucker by the end of the week.” I nodded quickly, wondering if I could lift, let alone carry, the end of even one of them. *Stay alert. Follow orders. Don’t do anything stupid.*

“That’s Chester the Molester,” he yelled, motioning toward a stocky, mid-thirties guy in a filthy cut-off t-shirt who was picking up one end of a cedar beam and feeding it through the opening of the re-saw. “And that’s Kurt,” he shouted, pointing at another man in another stained, sweat-soaked, cut-off t-shirt at the other end of the beam, a guy

of indeterminate age—could be 28, might be 45—with hair everywhere but on his head and an even bigger beer gut than Brownie’s.

Is anyone who works here not covered in shag carpet? I wondered, comparing their stocky, intimidating physicality to my own slight build—six feet tall, skinny, hairless arms, hairless chest, one hundred fifty pounds on a particularly hefty day. I’d also become very self-conscious about my hair since the moment I showed up this morning, since it was a product of a regrettable late 90’s trend—bleached blonde, gelled and spiked. I knew it was coming—the first time someone called me a fag or a pussy. What was cool in high school didn’t seem like it would play well here.

Chester fed a giant cedar beam through the re-saw, then ran around to the other side, catching the two pieces and stacking them in rows with the other newly cut cedar planks. He glared at me with a look equal parts indifference and menace. With his pug nose and his matted red hair, red face, red neck, and red goatee, he looked exactly like a dog—the kind of nasty mutt that makes you walk much faster past its owner’s house when it’s in the yard. I pictured him with his tongue out, panting.

Kurt tossed a quick wave toward me as Tim and I moved past them. “Hey, new guy. How you fucking doing?” I smile and wave back. He seems relatively friendly, at least compared to Chester.

As we walked down the middle of the factory floor, Tim showed me the molders, the chop saws², the drill presses, and all of the other custom saws, pointing out other workers as we went—like Jenny. It hadn’t even crossed my mind that one or more of the workers

² Including the saw that lopped off most of Steve’s thumb. I unsuccessfully try not to look for blood.

here might be female. A dirty blonde in frayed cut-offs and a grimy tank top, she looked up as we passed and tossed me a half-hearted smile, revealing a mouthful of brown teeth. I smiled back, and a latently judgmental thought crossed my mind: how could someone no older than twenty-five already have so many dental problems? I also wondered if her boobs always hung out so much, as her tank top left little to the imagination. She had at least three tattoos that I could see—a butterfly on her ankle, some sort of sun design that poked out of the top of her shirt on her upper back, and something else on her shoulder that I couldn't quite decipher. There could have been one on her inner thigh, too, but I resisted the urge to let my eyes linger.

After we passed Jenny, I saw an older guy, maybe mid-fifties, with a homegrown winter coat that was practically bursting out of every opening in his shirt, gluing planks together by himself in the dingiest corner of the mill.

“Who's that?” I yelled.

“That? That's Vladimir!” Tim yelled back. “He's from the Ukraine, or one of those tiny countries over there in the middle of fucking nowhere.”

“Does he always work in the corner by himself?”

“Pretty much. We don't talk to him that often, mostly because you can't understand half the shit he says. He doesn't know much English, and his accent is fucking crazy.”

“How long has he worked here?” I was grasping for markers, trying to keep everyone straight.

“Twenty years, probably. He’s been here from the beginning. Back when guys like Chester were dropping acid before work, then trying to run the machines without taking a board to the face.”

He laughed. I studied the floor.

I started to notice other aspects of the mill. The saws at each work station had black plastic tubes connected to them, just above where the saw cuts into the wood—veins that snake their way up to the peak of the ceiling, where, at twenty-five feet above, they connected to the jugular, a massive cylinder that, as Tim explained, took all of the sawdust the tubes could suction up and channeled it into a tall metal container that sat just outside the factory entrance near the re-saw.

“Is that some sort of vacuum?” I pointed at the box down at the other end of the mill, about one hundred and fifty feet away, next to Kurt and Chester.

“Yeah. There’s a big fucking turbine in there.” Tim explained that the turbine blades pulverized any chunks of wood that got into the network of veins, shooting the finely ground sawdust into a tractor-trailer that was parked behind the factory. Once the tractor-trailer filled up, some guy in a truck showed up and hauled the several tons of sawdust away. I wondered where he took it. Who would want it?

As we came to the other end of the mill, Tim steered me into a small room that connected to the southwest corner of the building, a grimy little space with a work bench on one side and metal shelving packed with oily pieces of machinery on the other.

“Hey, Mike!” Tim yelled, trying to get a goateed guy in his late twenties to hear him over the high-pitched scream of the machine he was using to sharpen a saw blade.

“*Mike!*”

Mike turned around, saw us, and shut down the grinder. “Oh, hey! What’s up?”

“This is the new guy, Jason.”

Mike looked me over. “The new guy, huh? What did you do to get this fucking job, lose a bet?” Mike and Tim both laughed like this was really funny. I chuckled nervously. *Seriously, what I am doing here?*

“Well, good luck,” Mike told me. “You’re going to fucking need it.”

Even though I was only eighteen when I started at Chestnut Hill, it was just the latest in a long line of manual labor jobs I’d held throughout various stretches of my teenage years. I grew up in a rural, independent Baptist church and school that placed a great deal of significance on practicing its own unique subset of the Protestant work ethic. In our small church and even smaller school, I constantly heard about how, regardless of the task at hand, I should work as hard as possible—the only way to “do all to the glory of God.” I also heard it at home, my parents continually preaching a gospel of self-reliance and hard work, borne from a necessity of their own making. “If you want it, you pay for it,” they often told me. I started early, getting my first “real” job when I was ten years old. A neighbor a few doors down from us needed a rock wall fixed. A lot of the rocks had fallen onto their driveway, and they needed to be put back onto the wall. The job took all day. My pay: four dollars.

One of my mom's favorite songs was "do it right or do it over." Whenever I was given a chore—washing the kitchen floor, cleaning the bathroom—but slouched my way through it, I guaranteed myself another go-around. "Do it right or do it over." I'd grit my teeth, annoyed and angry, but the job was always done better the second time around. However, my parents' influence could never completely dislodge the part of me that was fundamentally lazy. These two aspects of my personality—the organized, hard-working perfectionist who had to do it right and the slacker who was content to simply coast through life—were constantly at war with each other, and this conflict led to many of the jobs I held during my teens.

Since I had to work for my spending money throughout high school, I was always looking for the next best job: good pay, with only minimal effort required. I once took a job as a grocery bagger only to quit two weeks later because I'd found a job at a sleepy furniture outlet that promised long stretches of doing essentially nothing. I worked all sorts of landscaping jobs during the summers, from cutting grass and watering plants to landscape architecture³, but only because they didn't challenge me in any meaningful way. They were often physically demanding, but if I showed up every day, wasn't hung over, and managed not to screw anything up, I was considered a rising star within whichever company was currently handing me a paycheck every two weeks. And I liked it that way.

Which is why, when I found out that I might be able to get a summer job at Chestnut Hill Gazebos, it seemed like the perfect match for my finely tuned combination of

³ It's a lot less sophisticated than it sounds.

hardworking drive and intrinsic laziness. I was familiar with the factory because my family had ties to Art, the owner. He and mom had gone to high school together, back when he had an unreciprocated crush on her. They both stayed in our particular pocket of rural southeastern Pennsylvania, Art earning his Master's degree in Engineering and deciding that there was a hole in the gazebo market that needed filling, my mom attending West Virginia University, where she met a bushy-haired guy from New Jersey, whom she eventually married. After she and my dad got married, they moved back to Pennsylvania, a few miles away from Art's gazebo factory. As Chestnut Hill grew and became more successful, Art invested in real estate in the small town where the factory was located. He used one of these buildings as office space, and my dad, who by this time was running his own small business, rented some space from him⁴. This led to one of my first practical lessons in leaning on the "it's not what you know, it's who you know" principle when hunting for a job.

Six thirty in the morning to four in the afternoon. With a five-minute break from 7:55 to 8:00, a ten minute break from 10:00 to 10:15, an unpaid half-hour break for lunch, and another fifteen-minute break from 3:00 to 3:15, our total number of paid hours each day from Monday to Thursday totaled nine. We worked a short Friday, from 6:30 to 10:30. Brownie had explained all of this to me. Today, my first day, was nearly halfway over.

⁴ My first experience working for Art actually happened when I was ten. I edged and mulched the flowerbeds around the building where my dad rented office space from him. Art was apparently very impressed with my work. He was also probably very impressed by how little he had to pay someone half a decade away from his first shave.

By hour five of day one, I was already tired and in a bad mood, a negative cloud of dark energy crowding out all other thoughts and driving me to complain to myself about myself. Why didn't I try to find a different job? Why was I here, standing outside the mill of Chestnut Hill Gazebos, trying and failing to wrestle the forks of a pile jack—a hand truck/miniature forklift—into the holes between the top and bottom slats of a skid full of spindles? I was supposed to cut them and then let Tim know when I was done, but I felt the acute embarrassment that came from knowing that if I couldn't even get them into the mill, I was going to look like a fool. As I stared at the pile jack, dumbfounded and frustrated but too afraid to ask for help, Chester walked past me and rapidly realized that I didn't know what I was doing.

“Hey, college boy! I guess they don't teach you everything in college, huh?” he hollered, tongue out. I wanted to point out that I wasn't actually in college yet, but I decided against it, since he genuinely terrified me. I got the impression he wouldn't think twice about sucker punching me for no other reason than that he felt like it. He stood and gloated for a second, then left. I waited until he was gone, then started furiously yanking the handle up and down, accomplishing nothing.

“Having trouble with that?” a deep voice behind me asked.

I turned around to see who was asking and came eye-to-chest with the massive, glossy bulk of a bodybuilder. Unlike almost every other guy who worked in the factory, this man was completely hairless.⁵ He was wearing a barely-there tank top and barely-there Daisy Dukes, a pair of sunglasses, and lots of hair gel. He was Thomas.⁶

⁵ Weirdly enough, the one other exception to the covered-in-body-hair rule was Brownie. His legs and arms

A couple of weeks before I started working at Chestnut Hill, my dad told me about Thomas. “He and his brother Art are both these hard-core, beyond-right-wing libertarians. They and their other brother Gary love that lady Ayn Rand⁷, and they hold these secretive political meetings at night up in the conference room above the showroom.⁸ Art invited me to one of them once, so I figured, what the heck. I’ll go. Once was enough.”

“Is he gay?” I’d seen Thomas and his Daisy Dukes on one or two occasions before, when I’d visited the factory with my dad.

“No, he’s definitely not gay. You remember the Fourth of July party Art invited us to at his house last year?”

“Yeah.” I’d seen him there, too.

“Well, he invited me up to take a look at all of his weight-lifting equipment. He lives in that apartment above Art’s garage. All of the walls were covered in posters of these naked lady bodybuilders. Plus, he told me about this female bodybuilder he was going to be shacking up with when she came over to visit him from London.”

were so hairless and smooth that they looked professionally waxed.

⁶ Not Tom. Not Tommy. Thomas.

⁷ At this point in my life, I was essentially apolitical. I grew up in a conservative household and had inherited most of those political beliefs by default, but as far as Ayn Rand was concerned, I only knew about her because I’d read *The Fountainhead* earlier that year and found it interesting, which is a nice way of saying I didn’t understand 90% of what was going on.

⁸ This was the same conference room where I’d had my meet-and-greet with Brownie. It could hold, at most, eight people.

Now I was staring up into the sunglasses Thomas was wearing. I knew that his intentions were probably good, but he'd soured my mood even more. I didn't want anyone else realizing just how mechanically incompetent I was.

"Here, let me show you how to do it." Thomas quickly maneuvered me out of the way before I had time to say anything. "You just pull this level right here"—he pulled up on a small metal bar located under one of the handles—"and that lets the forks down. Then, if you want to move them back up"—he started pumping the handle up and down after he easily pushed the forks under the skid—"you just do this. Got it? It's really not that hard."

He gave the handle back to me, and I tried it. He was right. It wasn't that hard.

As Thomas let go of the pile jack, Chester walked behind him on his way back into the mill and saw what he is doing. He pointed at me again, his mocking glare taunting me, his sharp bark of a laugh ringing in my ears.

Mike was driving the forklift through the wide, clear path in the middle of the mill when he abruptly stopped next to my station.

"Hey Jason, I need some help with something. Hop on."

Ever since Tim's tour of the mill and its workers ended hours ago, I'd been working on one of the custom saws, taking sets of spindles (1" x 1" x 24" rods) and placing them onto the flat metal surface between two saw blades, which were about three feet apart. When triggered by a pedal at my feet, these blades cut down and in at forty-five degree angles toward my hand, which was holding the spindles in place. The blades sliced off

the ends of each piece of wood, stopping about three inches from either side of my arm. It was not a pleasant experience, and it was demoralizing to know that—as I’d learned shortly after I’d finished cutting my first pallet—as soon as I finished cutting the two thousand spindles to my right, another pallet stacked high with uncut wood would quickly reappear, erasing any sense of accomplishment I might otherwise feel. Even worse, once each cut was complete and the saw blades started to pull up and away from my hand, the force and upward direction of the spinning blades would drag the small, triangular pieces of freshly cut wood up with them. In and of itself, this wouldn’t be a problem, but these sharp-edged pieces, propelled by the force of the blades, had been shooting off in random directions—smashing into my hand, flying over my head, ricocheting off my safety glasses and then soaring another twenty feet before landing. They had hit me square in the face at least three times.

“Sure, no problem,” I said, grateful for the chance to do anything else. “What do you need help with?”

He looked at me and grinned. “You’ll see. I figure this is a great job for the new guy.”⁹

Five minutes later, I was standing with one foot on each of the two loose, shaky forks of Mike’s forklift, staring down at a cement floor at least twenty-five feet below.

“Hey!” Mike yelled up from his very safe position, seated on the forklift. “It’s a good thing those pricks from OSHA¹⁰ aren’t here right now. If they saw you up there like that, they’d shut us down in a fucking second.”

⁹ Great.

How comforting. “What do we need again?” I yelled back.

“Grab the longer pieces, the twelve-footers. We need about twenty. Just bend down and stack them at your feet.”

We were in what Mike called the pole barn—a quiet, spacious building that served as the holding area for all the pieces of cedar that someone had already cut and stacked here for future projects. It was my job to balance myself on the forks while grabbing these pieces off the top of a floor-to-ceiling stack and then, once they were secured, bend down toward the void between my feet and stack them sideways across the forks.

As I was working, Mike yelled up, “This must beat working on that double saw, huh?”

I wanted to drop a board on his head. “Sure does!” I called down, trying to keep my feet glued to the centers of the forks.

After fifteen wobbly minutes, I was almost done. As I reached up for the final plank, I noticed dozens of huge cardboard boxes stacked in a corner, tucked away behind piles of cedar boards.

“Hey. What’s in those boxes?”

He looked up at me and shook his head, like I should quiet down.

“What? What is it?”

He turned around in his seat, shooting a nervous glance back toward the entrance.

¹⁰The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which operates under the Department of Labor. They are, in their own words, “the main federal agency charged with the enforcement of safety and health legislation.” Easier said than done.

“Hang on. Let me bring you down first so I don’t have to yell.” He jerked the up/down lever on the forklift, starting my rickety descent.

When I got to the bottom, he glanced around again. “You never know when the boss or his fucking brother might be around. All right, you want to know what’s in those boxes?”

I nodded.

“Those boxes are filled with black-market scooters. From China.”

As Mike told it, Art had a tendency to start up side businesses while simultaneously running the gazebo factory, all of which had ended in swift and spectacular failure. The scooters were just the latest example of his doomed-from-the-start entrepreneurial misadventures. Mike said that not long ago, while Art was browsing through Ebay, he came across a lot of fifty unmarked scooters that could be bought directly from a seller in China. The price was low. So low that if Art could just place the winning bid, he could have them shipped to the gazebo factory, which he could then use as a distribution hub while he sold them back to local customers. Theoretically, the profit margins would be enormous.

“But here’s the problem,” Mike told me. “They’re only street legal in Connecticut and Arizona.”

“When did Art find this out?”

Mike started laughing. “Not until they got here. Now they’re just sitting there, doing a shit ton of nothing.”

“How many are there?”

“Fifty. He’s lost tens of thousands on those fuckers. Who’s going to buy some scooter made with Chinese fucking parts that you can’t even drive on the road? He’ll never get rid of them.”

“Couldn’t he resell them online?”

“To who?” he spat. “Who’s going to pay whatever price he asks, plus a ton of extra cash for shipping, just to have some piece of shit scooter shipped all the way to fucking Arizona? No one even knows who made them. There’s no brand name on any of them. They were probably stolen to begin with.”

“Yeah, I see what you’re—”

“Oh, and here’s the real kick in Art’s balls. Those scooters got here in pieces. And the assembly instructions that come with them? They’re written in Chinese!”

Once Mike finished the tale of the black-market scooters, he drove up to the top of the hill and into the open bay of the assembly building, which sat at the highest point of the company’s property, behind the pole barn and furthest away from the road. He left in search of several cupolas—which, as he explained, were eight-sided miniature towers that sit at the central peak of a gazebo’s roof—that we needed to take back to the mill for repairs, leaving me alone with the forklift. Mike had also explained on the drive up that this building served as the shipping hub for the gazebo pieces once they were assembled, which was why Thomas worked out of this building, since he was in charge of shipping.

I was thankful for the chance to just sit and relax for a couple of minutes, even if it came at the price of some high altitude terror. I hated (and still hate) heights, but there was no way I was going to beg off a first-day assignment like that. From the moment I stepped foot on this property, I felt like I needed to prove myself. As I waited for Mike, I noticed that the building was well lit and quiet. It didn't take long for me to start wishing I worked in assembly and not down in the mill. I wondered fleetingly if Art would transfer me. But as quickly as this thought came, so did the realization that I'm probably dead last on the waiting list for this type of request.

After a couple of minutes of peace and quiet, Thomas showed up in the shipping bay where Mike had parked the forklift.

"So, you're heading off to college in a few months, right?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"What is your intended major?"

"Pre-med."

"Huh. I was an English major in college."

I was suddenly interested, since I'd been a big reader since childhood. I was actually talking with someone about college, and this person was doing something other than making fun of my academic aspirations. At one point, I had even considered majoring in English, but Pre-med just seemed like it offered better job security. In my mind, Thomas had just confirmed the wisdom of my choice. Had I chosen English, was this where I would end up? As the head of the shipping department for a gazebo factory? No thanks. I just wanted to get my \$10 an hour and get out.

“Well, make sure you put maximum effort into your papers. So many kids today have their identities wrapped up in who knows what nonsense. They’re lazy. Don’t know what it means to earn something, to find value in work.”

I nodded, unsure of how to respond, or whether he would even notice if I do. He didn’t even look at me as he quickly rumbled onward, strenuously extolling the glories of work and its ability to forge the proper type of individualistic identity. I wondered if this was like those political meetings that he and Art hosted in the conference room. He was much, much bigger than me, so I just smiled and nodded. Fortunately, it wasn’t long before Mike came back with the cupolas, and we left before I had to contribute to what was basically a one-sided conversation.

“Is he always like that?” I asked Mike on the way back down the hill.

“Like what?”

“So excitable.”

“Yeah, he’s wound up pretty tight. Don’t get in his way or fuck up something that involves his work, or you’ll be in deep shit.”

After Mike dropped me off and left to deliver the boards I’d grabbed for him, I took a bathroom break. I did not need to go to the bathroom. I did, however, need to sit down and shut out everything related to this factory for a few minutes.

I closed the door behind me and looked into the cracked mirror, experiencing a brief moment of irrational panic as I thought about my future. *Please, God. Anywhere but here.*

I wandered over to the window and sat down on the toilet lid, using the toes on my right foot to push off my left shoe, then repeating the process on the other foot, bringing

my feet to rest on top of my sneakers. I leaned back and tried to relax, counting off five minutes in seconds to make the time seem like it was lasting longer.

I got to three hundred a lot quicker than I'd hoped. As I slid my shoes back on, I saw something carved into the plastic toilet paper holder—FUCK CHESTNUT HELL. Just below that, someone had scrawled BROWNIE LOVES COCK. He'd also drawn a picture that showed exactly what he meant.

“Well, how was your first day at work?” my mom asked as I drug myself through the front door.

“Fantastic. I think I'm really going to love it there. Everyone is super nice.”

“Oh, come on. It can't be that bad.”

I waved her off as I staggered into the bathroom. I closed the door and turned on the bathtub faucet, stripping off my sweat-stained clothes while I waited for the water to warm up. Once the water warmed, I pulled up on the faucet plug and stepped under the showerhead, letting the heat run through my hair and over my aching body. I stood completely still, eyes closed, trying to soak in my first moments away from the grime and noise. But when I opened my eyes and looked down, all I saw were clumps of sawdust, slowly spiraling the drain.

Day 4

As I'd quickly learned earlier in the week when working briefly with Kurt and Chester, I actually could lift my share of the cedar beams. That didn't mean they weren't back-breakingly heavy. I wasn't sure what frightened me more—dropping one of them on my own feet, or dropping one on Kurt or Chester. During the last few days, I'd been fortunate. I was able to work mostly by myself, away from everyone, free to screw up without anyone noticing. But that was no longer the case.

What we were doing was both simple and complicated. Two of us had to pick up the ends of the beam and scurry over to the saw before we dropped it so that Guy #1, who held the end closest to the saw, could set his end on the small platform that housed the opening the blade ran through. Guy #2 continued to hold up his end while Guy #1 ran around to the other side of the saw as quickly as possible, joining Guy #3. Guys #1 and #3 would then wait for Guy #2 to push the beam through the saw, cutting it into two pieces: one thin board and the remaining section of the beam. Guy #1 grabbed the plank and had to stack it in a very precise slot among a stack of other thin boards that were separated, level by level, by sets of spindles laid out perpendicularly to the planks. He must get his job done quickly, because Guys #2 and #3 were running the beam back through the re-saw, winnowing the beam down into another thin board and the rest of the beam. This process continued until we had cut the beam into six boards that measured 14' x 6" x 1.5".

It was not fun work.

Throughout the day, I'd figured out how to rank each of the three jobs, placing them in order from not-great-but-not-horrible (in other words, the best of the three) to what-are-those-shooting-pains-in-my-back (somewhere in the middle) to why-didn't-I-just-get-a-job-at-the-Gap (the worst). Guy #1's job was definitely the worst; he had to carry the beam with Guy #2 as well as scramble around stacking freshly cut planks, making sure he didn't gum up the works by dropping a board or stacking one on the spindles the wrong way. Guy #2's job was the middle option; he had to bear the brunt of the beam's weight, since he was the person who spent the most amount of time holding up one end by himself. However, he didn't have to scramble around like Guy #1. Relatively speaking, Guy #3 has it made. He got to stand around waiting for the beam to be cut, never actually having to deal with its pre-cut weight.¹¹

The fact that I got stuck as Guy #1 shouldn't have come as a surprise. When Tim was handing out jobs that morning, I didn't know any better and wouldn't have been able to do anything about it even if I had. Chester spent most of the day as Guy #3, which left Kurt as Guy #2. I spent all morning in a state of constant stress, trying desperately not to do anything that would make Chester mad. For the most part, I succeeded. The occasional stumble and an improperly spaced board or two on the spindles were the only truly tense spots in an otherwise safe day. I was starting to feel like maybe I would escape this summer without incurring any body-altering injuries.

¹¹ Take one guess as to which guy I was.

As we finished cutting a beam, the bell rang. Sweet relief. Kurt shut down the saw as I stacked the last board. The three of us trudged the length of the mill to the break room, punched our time cards, and made our way to the picnic table outside.

We had the next thirty minutes to eat. By then, even though I was self-conscious enough to know that I was unaccustomed to the interpersonal norms of the mill, in a moment of forgetfulness, I broke my own rule—stay alert, follow orders, and *don't do anything stupid*—by peppering the worker sitting next to me, a pudgy guy dressed inexplicably in a polo shirt and khaki shorts who I hadn't seen anywhere else during the morning shift, with question after question.

“What's your name?”

He stared at me, his round face a complete blank. Everyone else looked up from their food.

“Dave.”

I still hadn't noticed that I was breaking an unwritten lunchtime protocol¹², so I just kept going. Aside from a few brief exchanges throughout the morning with Kurt and Chester, I hadn't spoken to anyone for nearly six hours, so I was desperate to talk to anyone about anything.

“Have you worked here long?”

Again, the blank stare, then a slow response.

“I guess. About five years.”

¹² “Shut the fuck up during lunch.”

“What do you do?”

“I work in sales in the showroom.”

That explained the nicer clothes. The showroom is the first building you see when you drive onto the factory property. Between it and the mill is the shutter building, which I hadn't been inside yet.

“You like it?”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Who is this guy?”

Chester chimed in. “That? That's fuckin' college boy.”

“New blood, huh? Well, we'll see how long you last.”

Dave then started rattling off a litany of reasons why Chestnut Hill was just about the worst place in the world anyone could work. Everyone else just sat around, smoking and occasionally laughing bleakly at some of his more colorful invectives. I finally realized what I'd done. It was stupid to try to make friends. No one else was.

After Dave finished ranting and the table subsided into a sullen silence, I decided to lie down under a tree that was about six feet away. My feet were aching, so maybe if I just took off my shoes and lay down, they would start to feel better. I got up, wandered over to the tree and collapsed into the grass, stretching out and closing my eyes.

It wasn't long until I felt a sharp sting on my forehead. My eyes snapped open, my body jerking up wildly. Everyone at the table burst out laughing. On the ground next to me was a walnut.

“That was a nice fucking shot, wasn't it?” Chester barked.

Feeling my face burning, I sat up and shoved my back against the side of the tree facing away from the table, where I stayed for the rest of my lunch break. Even though, as I realized almost immediately, mostly due to the jeers and catcalls, that this was—once again—exactly the wrong thing to do.

Chester was gone. Tim gave him a different job. So now it was just me and Kurt, toiling away. The upside was that, since it was just the two of us, we got to work with smaller, lighter beams. I also didn't have to put up with Chester's crap, at least for the time being. I could get along with almost anyone, but it took me a remarkably short amount of time to develop a genuine hatred for him. After lunch, as the stinging in my forehead slowly slid into a dull ache, I imagined him dying in all sorts of grisly ways—decapitation from an errant circular saw blade, dismemberment by the re-saw, asphyxiation under a beam that I “accidentally” dropped on him while he was on the ground, fixing an issue with a piece of machinery. I spent much of the afternoon wavering back and forth between these thoughts and feelings of guilt, knowing that my uncontrollable thoughts of violence went against the “love your enemy” ethos of my upbringing. But I just couldn't seem to help it.

Kurt, on the other hand, wasn't so bad. He had the hard edge that everyone else around the factory seemed to have, but he was also quick with a laugh and didn't go out of his way to put me down. In general, he just seemed like one of the nicer guys in the mill.

After an hour or so of working together, we were in the middle of cutting a beam when Kurt abruptly dropped it and starts flailing his arms around, yelling at me.

“Fucking fuck! Shut it down! Shut it the fuck down!”

I ran up to the saw and hit the emergency shutoff button.

“What’s wrong?” I couldn’t see anything; he and I were on opposite sides of the saw when whatever had happened happened. Vladimir glanced up from his gluing work over in the corner, a look of mild curiosity on his face. He and I both watched as Kurt took off toward the bathroom, rubbing his left eye. I wondered why he didn’t wear safety glasses. Tim told me in no uncertain terms that everyone was required at all times to wear them when working or even walking through the mill. Kurt never wore them, though. In my naiveté, I worried that he’d get in trouble.

After Kurt disappeared into the bathroom at the other end of the mill, it quickly dawned on me that I had nothing to do. I couldn’t run the re-saw by myself, and I was scared that I’d get in trouble for not working. Everyone else was doing something, whereas I was just standing around.

I didn’t see Tim anywhere, so I walked outside and looked around, trying to spot him. No luck. I went back to the re-saw.

Another moment went by. And then another. Kurt was still in the bathroom, and I was doing nothing other than standing by a machine that was turned off, wondering how long it would be before someone looked up from their work and saw me loitering.

An idea hit me. I could sweep up. There was always sawdust that needed to be scooped up and dumped into the trash barrels that were scattered throughout the mill. I grabbed a broom and started sweeping.

Within a few minutes, I finished sweeping up my entire area. Still nothing from Kurt. I was starting to worry. I really didn't want to bother him, but maybe I should check to see if he had anything he wanted me to do.

I walked down to the bathroom and knocked on the door.

"Kurt?"

"What!"

"What should I do?"

"I don't give a fuck!"

Okay then.

After our brief exchange through the bathroom door, I went back to the re-saw and just waited for him to be done doing whatever it was he was doing. Jenny snickered at me as I walked past her. After a few more minutes, he re-emerged, and we went back to work.

He was in a noticeably worse mood, and he couldn't stop rubbing his bloodshot eye—which was easy, since he still was not wearing safety glasses. I was making every possible effort to avoid screwing up, since the only guy I'd almost felt comfortable around was now one mistake away from completely losing it. I wanted to just blend into the background—a perfectly average employee who doesn't mess up and whom no one notices.

We ran a board through the saw and then started to stack it. That's when it happened. I started blinking furiously, and each time, it felt like someone was dragging sandpaper across my eyeball. No. Not me, too. Please, not me, too.

I couldn't see out of my right eye. Everything was blurry, a series of indistinct forms and shapes that only made sense when interpreted through the clarity of my left eye. I was wearing safety glasses, but they couldn't catch everything. There was never not a thin cloud of sawdust floating in the air of the mill, so this was bound to happen sooner or later.

I decided I was going to tough this out. I could do it. If I stopped working to rinse my eye out in the bathroom, Kurt might get mad at me again, and having just seen his darker side, I preferred to do everything I could to keep it at bay. I couldn't give anyone here a reason to believe that I was soft. So I would just keep working, doing my best to work with one good eye.

It was miserable.

Board after board. Rip and stack. Rip and stack. It was mindless, repetitive work, but it was taking every ounce of focus I had to not mess up. Every time I blinked, a chunk of sawdust scraped across my eye. I tried rubbing it out without Kurt noticing what was wrong. It felt like forever had come and gone since I'd had two functioning eyes.

At our 3:00 pm break, I decided that I couldn't take it anymore. I found Tim in the break room. Jenny and a couple of other workers were standing around. All eyes were on me.

“Uh, Tim?” I asked in my quietest voice.

“Yeah?”

“I have a problem.”

“What?”

“I have a piece of sawdust in my eye. I tried washing it out”—my last-ditch effort to avoid outing myself, just before I decided to talk to him—“but it’s just stuck there. I’m worried that it might be damaging my eye.”

I felt stupid. I sounded stupid. Everyone probably thought I was stupid. It hadn’t even been a week, and I’d already managed to injure myself.

Tim sighed. Everyone was still staring.

“Okay. Here’s what you do. Are you good enough to drive?”¹³

“Yes.”

“Fine. Go down into town, to Sweeney Medical. You know where that is?”

“No.”

“It’s next to the library.”

“Oh, yeah. Okay. Got it.”

“Go in there and tell them you work for Chestnut Hill. You won’t have to pay anything. We’re covered for this kind of shit.”

“Okay. Should I clock out?”

He thought for a second, then answered slowly. “No. Don’t clock out.”¹⁴

¹³ Absolutely not.

¹⁴ To this day, I have no definitive answer for why he didn’t make me clock out. Generosity? Apathy? A desire to avoid answering to Brownie about why his newest worker’s time card had a significant chunk of

“Okay.”

I left the break room as quickly as possible.

The doctor’s office was dark. Through my left eye, the clock on the wall read 3:10 pm. In my dirty cut-off t-shirt, ratty shorts, and beat-up sneakers (one of which was held together with duct tape), I was easily the worst dressed person there. I wasn’t used to being out in public in those kind of clothes, and it made me uncomfortable. I probably smelled bad, too.

As the minutes ticked by, I started to realize that something was different. Staring at the clock helped me figure it out. The pace of time felt different. Life continued to move outside the factory, and it was moving at a speed that doesn’t feel slower or faster—just altered in some sort of fundamental way that I couldn’t pin down.

Fifteen minutes went by before I got called back to one of the examination rooms. I wanted this doctor’s visit to last for the rest of the afternoon, but it only took him a few minutes to flush my eye. Before I knew it, I was driving my Volvo, which Kurt had nicknamed “the Vulva” at yesterday’s lunch, back to work.

At ten minutes to four, the bell rang, and the best ten minutes of our workday began. Everyone shut down their machines and grabbed either a broom or shovel, buoyed by the fact that the end was near. The sooner we swept up all of the sawdust around our

the afternoon missing from it?

workstations and dumped it into the nearby barrels, the sooner we could sit around the break room, waiting for the final bell to ring.

Kurt and I worked together. I swept the dust onto his shovel; he dumped it into the barrel. Within five minutes, our area was spotless, the evidence of our day's work settling to the bottom of a garbage bin.

We walked down to the opening of the mill, where Tim was using a compressed air hose to blow off the day's grime. I'd discovered the wonder of the air hose a couple of days ago. After sweating for over nine hours straight, there was no better feeling at the end of the workday than a high-powered breeze that cooled me down, dried my sweat and removed whatever dust and grime had settled into my hair. It also made for a much less intensive shower scrub once I got home. It had become my motivation for cleaning up my work area as quickly as possible.

Tim finished up and handed it to me.

"How's the eye?"

"Better."

"Good."

I blasted myself with cool air for a few minutes, then washed my hands in the utility tub with a sandpapery soap called "Agent Orange" that was so coarse, it felt like it was ripping the skin from my hands. In the break room, everyone was standing around, time cards in hand, waiting for the click to hit that magic number.

3:58.

3:59.

4:00.

Done.

Day 23

The weather outside was gloomy, a steady diet of dark clouds and rain. It was also unseasonably cold, to the point where most of the workers put on sweatshirts to keep warm. Through my first few weeks of work, the mill had almost always felt like an oven. But today, the cool air was actually a nice departure from the norm. I didn't mind the fact that my clothes—a cut-off t-shirt and gym shorts—didn't keep me warm. Apparently, everyone other than me knew to bring some warmer clothes in the event of a cold snap. I was fine with shivering my way through the day; it beat soaking in my own sweat by mid-morning.

Unfortunately, I was back on the re-saw with Kurt and Chester and still stuck with the worst of the three jobs, whereas Kurt and Chester had traded places. This meant I was stacking boards with Chester all morning, forced to listen to whatever he wanted to say. So far, the conversation consisted almost entirely of him taking rapid-fire pot shots at any and all aspects of Christianity and then stomping back to the saw before I had a chance to respond. Sample conversation, lasting no longer than the time it took to carry a board to the pile of other boards, stack it, and return to the saw:

“So, you believe in the Bible?”

“I do.”

“Shit, you're a dumb fuck.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s just some fucking shit book. It ain’t nothing special. I could write the fucking thing.”

With a tenth-grade education? I very much doubt that, I thought as I traipsed back over to the saw behind him. But I wouldn’t dare say it out loud. After all, didn’t Jesus say, “Blessed are the persecuted?” I was supposed to consider Chester’s constant sniping as some sort of honor, right?

I felt no sense of honor. I just felt intimidated. Having someone bigger, stronger and meaner than you stand right in your face and tell you that the core elements of your belief system are idiotic can drain the blood from your face and make you feel less than small. It didn’t matter that, simply by graduating from high school, I was already more educated than he was. I had no spine. I’d spent thirteen years in a Christian school that should have prepared me to handle these kinds of situations with grace and intelligence, but instead, I found myself floundering, held captive by a visceral mixture of anger and terror. In these moments, the hundreds of Bible classes and Sunday school lessons were completely useless, a part of my past that held no relevance to my present circumstance. I knew what I believed, but when I pictured defending it to someone who didn’t share my beliefs—a key element, as I’d learned, of any true believer’s walk with God—I had always pictured a calm, rational discussion with someone who was just as willing to listen as I was to talk. In this fairy tale, I would be in control of the setting as well as the direction of the conversation, and I would win over this hypothetical heathen with my dazzling intellect and my sincere concern for his eternal soul.

But none of this was happening. Instead, I was seething in silence.

By noon, the clouds cleared out, which meant that eating lunch outside was a viable option. Everyone had spent the morning break in the cramped break room or lounging around on piles of wood. Feeling an acute need for isolation, I'd elected to lie down on a stack of beams in a secluded corner.

After the lunch bell rang and everyone clocked out, I decided to take up an offer to eat lunch somewhere other than with the mill crowd. For the past few weeks, Mark, a pale redhead in his mid-twenties, would occasionally join us at the picnic table during a break. He worked as Chestnut Hill's lone painter in a building he had all to himself. One or two times a week, he would show up and sit down on the grass next to the table, bringing with him an incessant cheerfulness that was constantly at odds with the surly dispositions of everyone from the mill. During one of his visits, just after the bell had rung and we were all headed back to our individual jobs, he'd invited me to eat with him and a couple of other people in the paint shop. Today's lunch seemed like an ideal time to test the waters and see if I could find a friendlier group of people to spend time with during my breaks.

I walked over to the paint shop to find him and a middle-aged guy sitting on a couple of buckets, eating.

"Jason! Glad to see you."

Mark gestured toward the other worker. "This is Henry. He works up in the assembly building."

"Hey! Nice to meet you."

“Thanks. Same here.”

So far, so good.

“Is it just the three of us?”

“No, Hannah’s coming down from the office, too.”

In addition to Art and Brownie, Hannah was one of the few people I knew prior to starting my job at Chestnut Hill. The main offices of the company were in a kind of tower at the front of the property, and anyone making their way to Art’s office at the very top would have to walk through the workspace of the office staff. When I was younger and my Dad and I would visit Art, Hannah would always greet us with a sunny disposition and a severe German accent.

According to Chester, when she first immigrated to America but before she converted to a particularly intense strain of Pentecostalism, she was quite the party girl. “Fucking wild woman” was his exact phrasing. “Back when this place started,¹⁵ Art used to have this hot tub out behind the offices, and everyone’d go hop in after work, get nekkid and shitfaced. Her, too. She’d whip her top off, show her tits to everybody.” He shook his head. “Not anymore. She’s all about Jesus now. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Praise fucking Jesus!”

I already knew about her faith. It was hard not to. In almost any interaction I’d ever had with her, her conversations tended to be all God, all the time—almost the exact opposite of my default conversational position with the mill workers, which was silence.

¹⁵ No one who worked in the mill could remember exactly when this happened, but their best estimate was some time in the 80s.

Although I can no longer remember how I found this out, by the time I decided to eat with Mark and Henry, I knew they were also Pentecostal Christians. Maybe Hannah told me; I have a hazy memory of her mentioning that they all went to the same church. I also knew that Mark was earnestly nice but sometimes incompetent at his job—hardly an intimidating combination. On one of the occasions when he came out from the paint shop during a break to join us, Jenny had mentioned something about his painting a gazebo the wrong color, which got a pretty big laugh not just from everyone at the table, but also from Mark, who'd nonetheless seemed a bit embarrassed at her mentioning of it. Later that afternoon, I'd approached her at her saw when she was between jobs and asked her what she'd meant.

She'd rolled her eyes and laughed. "That idiot was supposed to paint a gazebo white, but he painted it cream."

"What happened?"

"Art had it shipped to the customer, who called and complained about it. So Art had to send Mark's stupid ass out to the job site and repaint it on site."

"How much did that cost?"

"Twenty thousand."

"Twenty thousand?"

"Yep. It was a huge fucking job. One of our biggest models."

"And he didn't get fired?"

"Naw. Mark thought he was a goner, but Art told him that as long as he'd learned his lesson and didn't mess up again, he still had a job."

So when I met with them for lunch, I couldn't resist asking him about it. About ten minutes into our lunch, before Hannah arrived, I broached the subject with him.

“Did you really make a twenty thousand dollar mistake?”

He laughed softly in a self-admonishing manner. “I did. It happened almost right after I started here, too. Art probably should have fired me, but he kept me on. But now Hannah comes out and double-checks my work and puts orange stickies on any spots that I need to fix. Which is good for me, really.”

I glanced around at the various pieces of gazebos in his shop. They were covered in scores of small orange stickers.

“Blessings, everyone!” Hannah emerged from the doorway of the shutter shop, which was directly across from the open door of the paint shop where we were sitting.

“Praise God for this wonderful weather! We needed the rain.”

That was the other thing about Hannah. Almost every single thing she said somehow involved a “praise God.” It's raining? Praise God. It's sunny? Praise God. Mark painted a gazebo the wrong color and cost the company twenty grand? Praise God.

Once Hannah arrived, the conversation quickly turned to spiritual matters, such as the Holy Spirit's moving in last week's service and Henry's attempts to raise money for a missions trip to Africa. He explained that he wanted to take his family, especially his children, to experience and help with the Christian movement that was exploding on various parts of the continent. But he was thousands of dollars short of the money he needed. Although Art paid a decent wage, none of the line workers at Chestnut Hill were

raking in the type of dough that would fund a family trip to Africa without throwing the rest of their finances into turmoil.

“Do you want to pray about it?” Hannah asked him.

“Do you guys mind? That would be great.”

“Jason, do you want to join us in prayer for Henry’s trip?”

Sure, why not?

“Okay.”

What happened next was something that, until that moment, I had only seen on television.

Hannah inhaled deeply, and when she started to breathe out, she made a clicking noise with her tongue, interspersed with various names for God. *Click, click, click, click*, “Oh Lord, oh God,” *click, click, click...*

Mark started to join her. “Shammulah-hesh, hummalah-hah, holy Lord, hibitilah...”

Henry chimed in. Click, click, click, “hi-bish-aman, Spirit,” click, click, click...

I was caught in a storm of tongues.

Although this didn’t occur to me until later, this situation was a perfect example of how American Christianity has, over the course of its lifespan, splintered into a massive pyramid of not just denominations but sub-denominations. Christ may sit at the top, but the further down the pyramid you go, the more each denomination begins to move further and further from all the others. For instance, the group I was brought up in, the Baptists,

have several iterations¹⁶—the Southern Baptists, the Regular Baptists (or GARB, the General Association of Regular Baptist churches), the Free Will Baptists, the Reformed Baptists, and the smattering of Independent Baptist churches, almost all of which were small in size and existed in rural areas—churches that claimed an arm’s-length alliance with the general tenets of the denomination but operated autonomously due, at least in part, to a desire to remain free from any outside political pressure to alter the ways in which they operated. Independent Baptist churches like the one I grew up in were often known by people both in and outside of them as “Indie Fundies,” or the more pejorative “Fighting Fundies,” due to their obsessive focus on surface-level issues that they saw as nothing less than fundamental to the practice of their faith.

Take, for instance, the issue of women wearing pants.¹⁷ To anyone outside of the Fighting Fundies, this issue was probably resolved decades ago. Not for them, though. For the vast majority of our church’s members, many of who had attended a well-known Fundie university in the South,¹⁸ a woman wearing pants inside the building of the church was tantamount to adultery. And this wasn’t just the men’s opinion. Many of the women were even more vigilant about enforcing this code of conduct. When one woman visited our church for the first time and was wearing pants, she was openly confronted and criticized by several other dress-wearing women. It’s not a surprise that she never came back to another service, but she did meet with to our pastor to express how upsetting her

¹⁶ This probably goes without saying, but I’m certain this list is not exhaustive.

¹⁷ This is about to get weird—or, depending on your perspective, even weirder.

¹⁸ Without naming names, I will say that this school didn’t officially remove their ban on interracial dating until 2000, just two years prior to when I started working at Chestnut Hill.

experience had been and to let him know that she wore pants instead of a dress because she'd had a severe medical procedure on one of her legs, leaving it significantly disfigured. A skirt would expose her leg, so for both her sake and the sake of the people around her, she always wore pants.

Nothing changed. First Baptist remained as pharisaical as ever. Pastor Jeremiah, who had been my only regular exposure to preaching until he retired when I was sixteen, ruled the church with an iron fist and a violent temper. He'd work himself into a lather every Sunday morning, holding up the newspaper and pointing angrily to stories on the front page, loudly decrying the evil he saw all around him—as well as the immaturity of his congregation, who sat silent and stock-still during his rants. He once insulted everyone in the church by calling them “spiritual pygmies.” To my parents, who had grown up in secular environments and hadn't become Christians until shortly before having me, his words were shocking. But for everyone else, his harangues were nothing unusual.

The conclusion of his sermons were especially nerve-wracking, as he often deployed the every-head-bowed, every-eye-closed public invitation to the sinners he saw before him. While the school's high school math teacher played somber chords on the organ, Pastor Jeremiah would rail against our wickedness and demand to see results, right then and there. He would issue a two-fold invitation: one to those who hadn't accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and one to those who had but had backslid into sinfulness and needed to rededicate their lives to the Lord. For Pastor Jeremiah, nothing less than a public declaration of standing up and walking down the center aisle to meet with a deacon and pray to repent would suffice. While these interminable endings went on and

on, I would sit next to my parents, eyes closed, hunched over and shaking uncontrollably, my heart slamming against my chest as I clenched my sweaty fists, desperate for someone else to stand up so that we could finally leave.

Complicating matters was the fact that the church and school were inexorably tied to a nearby company that made children's products. The owner of the company—a multi-millionaire before he sold his holdings in the business for a couple hundred million dollars—as well as the president, other high-level executives and many of the staff, had all attended that same Fundie university in the South, then moved to PA to attend First Baptist and work at a company that was bursting with fellow graduates. They eventually created their own ecosystem, attending church together, working together, sending all of their kids to the same school, even marrying each other. While Pastor Jeremiah might have ruled from the pulpit, the wealthy members of this business/extended family clan controlled the church's purse strings. If they didn't want the church to change its approach on issues like what constituted appropriate clothing for women, then First Baptist didn't change.

So one of the few things I consistently enjoyed about my job at Chestnut Hill was how nobody judged me based on my appearance. The comments about my hair—which I'd quickly dyed back to brown—never materialized, and I could wear whatever I wanted without anyone caring how I looked. For a kid who had spent all but sixth grade¹⁹ in First Baptist Christian School, where the rule book had rules piled on top of rules related to

¹⁹ By fifth grade, I was so anxious about going to school that I developed acid reflux. I frequently woke up at 4:00 AM, vomiting stomach bile and dry heaving for hours. I also might have had ulcers; the doctors couldn't say for sure. By then, my parents decided that enough was enough, and they pulled both my sister and me from First Baptist, opting to homeschool us. That experiment lasted exactly one year.

every aspect of our appearance, all of which were obsessively enforced—two set of rules (solo and with sweaters) about collars (as well as what sizes and shapes constituted a collar), rules about belts (specifically, what was and was not considered an acceptable belt), rules about logos on shirts, rules about the required width of straps on girls’ shirts, rules about the maximum height for girls’ heels,²⁰ rules about the required length of skirts (pants and shorts on girls was a no-no), rules about what did and did not constitute denim (a forbidden fabric for men during school hours), rules about the acceptable length of sideburns,²¹ rules about earrings, rules about rules about rules—for the first time, I felt truly free to dress however I pleased without fear of judgment based on my appearance.

Because of my sheltered church and school upbringing, interdenominational issues like the one I was encountering at lunch had, until now, seemed as distant and foreign as praying toward Mecca five times a day. For as long as I could remember, prayer was always a somber occasion. The Bible classes in my high school didn’t cover issues like, “What do to when a group of people you’re eating lunch with start praying in what sounds like gibberish.” So I resorted to what I knew—praying in English and trying to keep my focus among the clamor.

“Dear Lord—” I began, my head bowed and eyes closed.

Click, click, “shyma-ha-la,” click, click, click—

²⁰ One more than one occasion, one of the bitchier teachers pulled out a ruler and measured the heels on girls’ shoes.

²¹ These rules were so strictly enforced that our high school principal pulled me and three other male students aside during our graduation practice to inform us that if we did not trim our sideburns, which currently ended at the bottom of our ears, to mid-ear length, he would not allow us to graduate. To further contextualize how severely the school administration regarded issues of appearance, one year later, when several students snuck vodka into the senior banquet (we didn’t have proms, because dancing was evil), got drunk and then drove to a strip club, they received the same level of punishment that was threatened against us for our bottom-of-the-ear sideburns.

“Thank you for this day—”

“Gou-bouy-begone, Satan—”

“And thank you for this food—”

Click, click, click—

“I ask that you would provide Henry with—”

“Shy-belie-becoo—”

“The money he needs—”

Click, click, click—

“For-his-trip-to-Africa-Amen.”

And with that, the tongue trilling and clicking, along with the ecstatic utterances,²² gradually but mercifully ceased. Shortly afterwards, the rain began again. All of the

²² This is the term used by Pentecostals (aka charismatic Christians) to describe their own personal prayer languages. To explain why this issue is so important to charismatic Christians, it's essential to understand the birth of the movement.

Pentecostalism was born out of Methodism, which was started by Art Wesley, the famous nineteenth century preacher and evangelist. Wesley believed in a second blessing of the Holy Spirit—a fact that few people, including most Methodists, still do not know. In 1867, the denomination was at a crossroads; this was the year that a group of preachers within it began what they called the “holiness movement.” When the movement began, it was not its own separate denomination. Instead, it was merely an attempt to push back against the more liberal elements that were gaining power within Methodism by recapturing and reimplementing what the movement's founders saw as the denomination's fundamental beliefs, one of which—and this caused quite a bit of consternation among Christians both inside and outside of Methodism—was the idea that there are two tiers of Christians: the benchwarmers (Christians who have merely been saved) and the star players (those who have received a second blessing of sanctification). How did the second blessing manifest? Well, you had a direct encounter with God, and once you did, you got the second blessing. And once you had it, you didn't consciously sin anymore, even though you could still make moral errors. (If you're wondering exactly how Wesley parsed the difference between sin and moral errors, join the club.) By 1894, this idea became divisive enough that the Holiness movement splintered off into its own denomination. No speaking in tongues yet, though. That didn't begin until seven years later, on January 1, 1901, when a small group of people met in a barn in Topeka, KS with the goal of bringing the acts of Pentecost, recorded in the second chapter of Luke's Acts of the Apostles, back into the church. They gathered and waited for hours for the baptism of the Holy Spirit to descend upon them. A woman named Agnes Ozman was the first to experience speaking in a language she did not know. This event birthed the Pentecostal Holiness denomination.

workers ran to their cars to close their windows—or, in a few cases such as mine, their sunroofs. My station wagon’s sunroof had two options: completely open or cracked slightly upward at an angle, allowing a sliver of air to escape. Even though I’d only chosen the latter after the rain initially stopped, I didn’t want to risk exposing the interior to any moisture. As I passed Kurt on the way to our cars, he pointed at my sunroof and yelled,

“Hey, buddy—your Vulva flap’s open!”

As the denomination grew, it split into other factions and denominations such as the Christian Missionary Alliance and the Assemblies of God, yet speaking in tongues remained on the fringes of American Christianity until the latter part of the 20th Century, when the televangelism boom combined with a new element of Pentecostalism—the Prosperity Gospel (aka “health and wealth” Christianity)—to catalyze a massive surge in its popularity. All this to say that, through all of Pentecostalism’s ups and downs, speaking in tongues has remained a potent issue within the denomination, as it has always been the defining trait that delineates the spiritual “haves” from the “have nots.” Today, in many factions under the Pentecostal umbrella, speaking in tongues also signals that, since you are a “have,” you’ll also be blessed by God with great health and plenty of money. Despite the never-ending parade of televangelist scandals, you can find still plenty of TV preachers who espouse this belief, which is often accompanied by a plea for you to send “seed money” to their ministry that God will return to you ten or even one hundred fold—not unlike those Nigerian princes who perpetually occupy your e-mail’s spam folder.

Day 36

When I walked into the factory at 6:40 am, I realized almost instantly that it was not a good day to be ten minutes late. I'd been exhausted when I woke up, hitting the snooze twice—something I rarely did on a work day—and then scrambling my way out of bed and through breakfast, showering and packing my lunch in record time, speeding along the country roads between my house and the gazebo factory and praying that no one would notice my tardiness when I snuck into the break room and punched my time card.

I'd always been a night owl who struggled to get up in the morning, but I actually managed to make it to work on time more often than not. I was so bone-tired after work that I never had any trouble passing out early. But last night had been an exception. I'd spent an hour on the phone with Jon, my closest friend from high school. He'd been pining after the same girl for years, and he was talking as if, now that we'd all graduated, it might actually happen.²³

When I pulled up and parked outside the mill, I saw a couple of people standing outside the break room, which seemed odd. Why weren't they working? By the time I made my way inside, I saw that we were having a company meeting.

I squeezed past Kurt, Chester and Jenny to grab my time card and punch it as quickly and quietly as possible. Brownie, who was leading the meeting, gave me a look before continuing on.

²³ Long story short: it didn't.

“So like I was saying, we’ve got to be more careful. We’d have way too many—”

KA-CHUNK.

Brownie stared at me again, then angrily picked back up mid-sentence. “—too many injuries! The boss is getting upset, okay? He’s wondering what the hell you guys are doing out here. We’ve had, what? Five big-ass accidents, just in the past month?”

He wasn’t exaggerating. It seemed like Steve’s severed thumb had kicked off a trend of gruesome injuries. Steve had since quit, but before he did, Keith had dropped a cedar beam on his own foot, breaking two toes, and Tim had managed to get his hand stuck in a router blade, badly lacerating a couple of his fingers. For me, his injury had been the most frightening. I’d been working in the middle of the mill, about thirty feet away from the machines just inside the main entrance, where Tim had been trying to calibrate a router blade down inside a machine. I’d just finished cutting a board when an animalistic scream punched straight through the combined din of all the saws and routers. I jerked my head up from my station just in time to see him clutching his bloody hand to his chest, Jenny running toward him at a dead sprint, and both of them jumping into her car, rocketing out of the parking lot to the nearest hospital. I’d looked around to see how everyone else reacted, because to me, this had been deadly serious. To everyone else, it looked like it was just another day at the office. They’d all stopped what they were doing to watch Jenny and Tim drive off, but it didn’t take long for everyone to just slouch back to their workstations as if nothing had happened.

That was the moment when I first realized just how callous this job might make me.

“So let’s be more careful, okay?” Brownie concluded. “I know it’s supposed to be damn hot today, so we might be knocking off early.”

This sounded good to me. My paycheck would be forty dollars lighter, but work during the last week had been oppressive. We were mired in the middle of a heat wave that refused to snap, the big, circular thermometer that hung next to the mill’s main clock a constant reminder of just how hot it was. During each of the past five workdays, it had hit 90° by 10:00 am and the high 90s by noon. Today, the weathermen had informed us, we could see temperatures go as high as 105°.

After Brownie dismissed the meeting, most of the workers filed out, but Kurt was still sitting at the small table under the time card machine when Tim slapped him on the back.

“Congratulations, grandpa!”

“Hey, thanks.”

“A baby girl, right?”

“Yep.”

“That’s cool, man.”

Tim left the break room with me hot on his heels. I had to know.

“Hey. How old is Kurt?”

“Twenty-nine.”

Twenty-nine?

I did some quick math, trying to figure out how a guy who hadn’t turned thirty could have a granddaughter. It worked out, but barely: 15 + 14, 16 + 13, 17 + 12. I felt nauseous.

I wandered back toward my workstation, past the “__ DAYS WITHOUT AN INJURY” sign that hadn’t had a number on it since the day I started. I couldn’t get the logistics of Kurt’s situation out of my head. I imagined myself in the similar situation, working as a teenager in a factory with a toddler at home. I’d heard of teen pregnancy, but no one I grew up with had ever gotten pregnant. In fact, most of my friends (and me) were still virgins, trying—often half-heartedly—to stay the course until marriage, as we’d been taught to do by our pastors, parents and teachers. The possibility that not only would a teenager have a child at age fourteen or fifteen, but that that child would go on to have his own child at the same age, had never even entered my mind. Lost in thought, I bumped into Mike.

“Hey, watch it. You heard Brownie,” he scolded me in a mock-serious tone. “No more big-ass accidents! You got it?”

“I got it, Mike. Thanks for the reminder.”

The day’s forecast lived up to its billing. At our 10:00 am break, all of us—with two notable exceptions—shuffled out to the picnic table to sit under the shade of the tree and hope for a breeze to come by, the forest in the distance hidden behind a screen of moisture. Kurt and Jenny headed behind the mill to sit at the edge of the parking lot and talk.

“Uh oh. Trouble in paradise,” Mike snickered.

Everyone else at the table laughed.

“What?” I asked.

“They started dating a couple of weeks ago,” Tim told me. “Looks like it’s going real well.”

I’d had no idea they were dating. Did she know about his granddaughter? And what else did I not know about my co-workers? I still didn’t know how to talk with my co-workers about their personal lives. I wanted to know more about them but couldn’t figure out how to bridge the chasm of our different upbringings. And nothing typified the size of the divide more than the conversation about porn that had somehow started after the guys finished talking about Kurt and Jenny, a conversation quickly narrowed into a debate over which part of the female body was better—tits or ass. Mike made it clear that he was a boob guy.

“I like them big boobies, big enough to get smothered in,” he told us. “Sometimes, my wife will e-mail me pictures of topless girls with these huge fucking honkers, with a little note—‘is this what you like?’” He took a drag on his cigarette and squinted through the smoke. “Yeah, man. My wife’s fucking cool.”

“What about you, college boy?” Chester asked, a wicked grin on his face. “You a tit guy or an ass man?”

I could feel my face flush. “I don’t focus on that kind of thing.”²⁴

“Damn straight,” Tim said, slapping the table. “He’s a Jesus boy, and they don’t look at the ladies like that. Hey, speaking of which, didn’t you go to some sort of religious high school?”

²⁴ I doubt anyone bought that line. I know I didn’t.

Out of all the questions in the world, this is the one I least wanted to answer. I hated the idea that these guys might associate me with First Baptist High School. It was notorious in the community for its holier-than-thou attitude, a reputation that it earned shortly after the church was built in the fifties. The founding pastor and the deacons had gone around to the surrounding neighborhoods to evangelize, which in their case meant not so much lovingly sharing the gospel as much as looking down upturned noses as they threatened the people whose days they'd interrupted with the specter of eternal damnation in a lake of fire. Needless to say, their approach did not go over well, and First Baptist's Church and K-12 School had more or less kept the same reputation ever since—something they actually prided themselves on, as they believed it signified their purity and holiness.

I had no way of dodging the question. They knew I hadn't attended Washington High, the only public high school in our area. That left private schools, and the only private school within at least fifteen miles was First Baptist.

"I did," I answered, tensing up.

"Did you go to First Baptist?"

Crap.

"Yeah."

"Really?" Chester asked. "I been over there once."

Tim scoffed. "What? When?"

“When I was a kid. Third grade. My mom made me go to VBS.²⁵ All’s I remember is pushing some kid that was bothering me, and some bitch yelling at me that I was bad kid and a troublemaker. So I grabbed my fucking Bible and walked home.”

Now Tim seemed even less convinced. “You had a Bible?”

“Yep. Don’t no more. But had one then.”

“When I was in high school, I used to go over there and skateboard,” Tim told me.

“They had this thing on Wednesday nights where some old guy would set up some ramps and shit in the parking lot by the playground and invite guys to come skate. I was cool with that, but once he started trying to get me to listen to his Jesus talk, I was like, ‘no thanks, I’m cool, man,’ and I got the hell out of there.”

I knew exactly what Tim was talking about, and if I wanted to, I could turn this into a perfect opportunity to slam the church and school and distance myself from both. The old guy Tim mentioned was Larry, the school’s janitor, and like any tiny rural school/church combo, his job title didn’t do justice to his many hats. In addition to cleaning the school and the church, he drove one of the school’s buses and also did maintenance and security. He was perceived by many of the well-to-do people in the church as kind of a loose cannon, so when he proposed a skating-oriented outreach program, the powers that be let him do it, but only under certain conditions. The skater kids could come onto the property, but Larry had to keep them out in the parking lot furthest from the church, away from the youth group kids.

²⁵ Vacation Bible School. It’s a mainstay of children’s programs at most churches, just like AWANA. Every summer, the church doing VBS has a weeklong event where kids can come and play games and hear the gospel. In many churches, especially those in fundamentalist and evangelical circles, it’s a key recruitment tool for the faith.

As Tim told me this, I wondered if I'd ever seen him out there without knowing who he was. I remembered being dropped off by my parents at youth group on Wednesday nights and seeing Larry and the skaters in the parking lot furthest from the church, wondering who those guys were, feeling uncomfortable even in their distant presence and wanting to get inside as quickly as possible. But now, freed from that environment, I knew the church leaders had crippled me by not allowing any of us to learn how to build a relationship with someone like Tim—a skill I still lacked.

“Yeah, I know who you're talking about. Larry, right?”

“Yeah. That guy was kind of weird.”

“Yeah.”

As the bell inside the mill rang, signifying the end of our break, we got up and slowly walked back into the mill, passing Kurt and Jenny as they came back from their heart-to-heart. As we crossed paths, I heard Jenny say quietly to Kurt, “Well, I learned something new about you today.”

We were all dragging our feet, moving a bit slower, trying to conserve the energy that seemed to seep out of us in a never-ending stream of perspiration. Even the few women workers like Jenny were coated in a glossy sheen, the ever-present cloud of sawdust no respecter of persons, sticking to male and female bodies alike. We were just trying to hold out long enough for word to come down that we could go home. The minutes dragged by, the wall clock and the thermostat two taunting eyes, each second clinging to us like the shirts on our backs.

11:46.

101°.

11:47.

11:48.

102°.

It had to be coming, right? I could see the expectant looks on everyone's faces. Art, our boss, wouldn't keep us here through the hottest hours of the afternoon, would he?

11:54.

11:55.

103°.

Keith and Joey, two guys who often worked together, were sweating it out on the molder, Joey feeding rough-cut boards into one end, Keith catching the smooth-sided results on the other.

11:56.

11:57.

Even if we weren't leaving early—and at this point, even the most godless among us was surely praying for a reprieve—we would get out of this sweatbox for a half hour.

11:58.

11:59.

Joey got woozy. He lost his balance and passed out from heatstroke, face first into the molder, slicing open his eye socket.

That did it. We were finally sent home.

Day 40

6:30 AM.

Punched time card. Got job from Tim. Cutting spindles.

Crap.

6:32.

Turned on the double saw. Set a spindle on it. Pushed the foot pedal. Cut the spindle.

Stacked it.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Checked the clock. Hoped it was close to five-minute, early-morning break.

7:46. Not long to go.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut—

The bell rang.

7:55.

Shut down the saw. Sat in the break room for five minutes. Talked to no one.

The bell rang.

8:00.

Back to the saw.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Took a chunk of wood to the face.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Feet ached. Turned off the saw and went to the bathroom. Avoided the clock.

Sat on the toilet seat lid. Took off shoes. Counted to three hundred.

Put shoes back on. Shuffled back to the saw.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Took a chunk of wood to the hand.

Took a chunk of wood to the face.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

The bell rang.

10:00.

Sat at the picnic table with the other workers. Talked to no one. Time ticked by too quickly.

The bell rang.

10:15.

Back to the saw.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Finished stacking the pallet. Turned off the saw. Found hand truck; moved it outside, alone. Tim brought new pallet of uncut spindles immediately. Busy day, apparently.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Took a chunk of wood to the forehead. No blood; just a bruise. Silver lining.

Looked at the clock. Couldn't avoid it.

11:01.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Looked again.

11:03.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Looked again.

11:04. *Stop looking.*

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Checked the clock.

11:14.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

The bell rang.

12:00.

Punched time card. Went to the paint shop to eat. No one prayed. Thank God.

Ate. Sat back. Tried to relax. Pictured lying on a raft in a pool, alone.

The bell rang.

12:30.

Back to the saw.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

Finished the pallet. Turned off the saw. Moved the pallet outside. While gone, Tim brought a new one. *Thanks, Tim.*

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

The bell rang.

3:00.

Went outside and lied on the grass. No walnuts to the head this time. Everyone's too tired. Felt the breeze on my sticky skin. Closed my eyes. Embraced the moment.

Then the bell rang.

3:15.

Back to the saw.

Set, pushed, cut, stacked.

The bell rang.

3:50.

Swept up around the saw, alone. Scooped up and dumped the sawdust into a trash barrel, alone. Used the air hose to blow off the grime—thankfully, alone.

The bell rang.

4:00.

Punched out. Went home, alone.

Day 52

Even though I knew it would make me a couple of minutes late, I had to drive back around the complex to the entrance. A handwritten cardboard sign was awkwardly propped next to the official-looking “Chestnut Hill Gazebos” sign, and I needed to make sure I read it right.

That’s what I thought it said. We were apparently running a new promotion:

“BUY A GAZEBO, GET A FREE SCOOTER!!”²⁶

After I clocked in, I went straight to where Tim and Mike were talking to ask Tim for a specific job. This was my first time trying this, as I’d been too intimidated in the past to ask for any kind of treatment that might signal I thought I should be treated differently than anyone else. I was still trying to blend into the background as much as possible, which meant going with the flow and doing whatever job was assigned to me. But I’d just spent the last week and a half on the re-saw with Chester, and just couldn’t deal with another day of his constant put-downs. I needed to work by myself.

“Tim, do you have anything I can do on the drill press?”

“Actually, yeah. We need a bunch of those little guys there drilled.” He pointed at a pallet full of small, eight-inch boards.

²⁶ The fine print, which someone had scrawled in much smaller letters at the bottom: “Only legal in CT and AZ.”

“You want to drill?” Mike asked. “Why? That shit’s boring.”

“Nah, I get it,” Tim said. “Every once in a while, when Brownie was still the foreman, I’d need do something chill, so I’d ask him if there was anything I could drill. It’s real nice and quiet over by the press.” He turned to me. “I’m all yours, man. Let me show you what you need to do.”

I couldn’t believe it had actually worked. I needed to start standing up for myself more often.

After setting up the drill press so that the bit could only go so low, Tim showed me how it worked. Put the board on the drill press. Bring the bit down and drill halfway through the center of the board. Measure periodically with a caliper to make sure that the depth was correct—within 5/1000 of an inch of ½ inch deep.

That last part surprised me. The entire time I’d worked here, I hadn’t thought about the level of precision and nuance required when making certain parts of a gazebo. Because I’d mostly been involved with the brutal grunt work of slicing down rough-cut cedar beams into smaller rough-cut cedar planks, this was the first time I actually needed to use a measurement tool like a caliper to make sure I was doing the job exactly right. It was a bit intimidating, but I liked it.

After Tim finished showing me what to do, he left me on my own. The drill press was right next to the door to the grinding room, so as an added bonus, I could sneak in every once in a while and shoot the breeze with Mike, who was always more than willing to take a break. He and I had actually struck up the tenuous beginning of a friendship. He knew about my religious background but didn’t mock me, even after the break room

debacle of a few days earlier.²⁷ In fact, during one of our impromptu breaks, I'd found out that he grew up in a religious home, as his Dad was a Methodist pastor. He even told me that when he was in high school, he was "really into Youth Group and all that shit." He said that he probably believed some of the same stuff I believed, but that he didn't really live like it at all. From the way he'd talked, it sounded like the remnants of those beliefs were little more than residue left over from his childhood upbringing that were still not completely wiped away.

I wanted to take a break and go hang out with him and not work, but I knew how bailing so quickly would look to anyone who noticed. While it was admittedly a small possibility, given that the drill press was tucked away in a corner and hidden from the viewpoints of most of the workstations, I needed to be responsible. So I drilled.

Mike was right. It was boring. But it was also easy. I found that I could maneuver the pallet so it sat directly in front of the drill press, providing me with a makeshift seat and relieving me from non-stop, all-day standing. Granted, I still had to stand after I'd

²⁷ This, more than any other instance, is the experience that still makes me cringe, so many years later. Due to my embarrassment over it, I've pushed a lot of the details out of my memory, but here's what I do recall: me, Tim, Kurt and Jenny were sitting the break room during our early-morning, five-minute break. Somehow, as often happened during that first summer, something related to God came up. I can't remember who brought it up—it might have been me, but I doubt it—but everyone said whether or not they believed in God. I said yes, Jenny said she believed in a "higher power," Tim said something I can't remember, and Kurt emphatically said no. Somehow, that moment quickly devolved into a yelling match between him and me about young-earth creation vs. secular evolution, with neither one of us willing to admit that there might be a middle ground. "Evolution is constantly being proven wrong!" I shouted. "No, evolution is constantly being proven right!" he yelled. (In-depth arguments were made by both sides.) Other theological/philosophical issues got haphazardly thrown into the mix. My heart was racing and my temperature was rising and I wasn't even sure what I was saying and before I knew it Tim was laughing and Jenny was jumping up out of her chair and running out of the room yelling "I'm out of here" and then the bell rang and I had to go back to work right next to Kurt on the re-saw. The only thing that possibly could have made it worse would have been if Chester had been there, as I can only imagine what contributions he might have made.

worked my way through several layers of boards on the pallet, but any chance to get off my feet was a welcome one.

The other thing that made the time go faster was my new set of wireless headphones. About a week ago, I'd noticed some of the guys in the shutter building wearing them. Then Kurt got a pair, and ever since he got them, he'd been air drumming all day, every day. For fear of getting myself or anyone else in trouble, I didn't want to ask Brownie about whether or not we could "officially" have them. But it didn't seem to be a big deal to anyone in a position of power, so after work one day, I went out and bought a pair.

The way they worked was pretty straightforward. They came with a wireless transmitter, which plugged into the headphone jack of a CD player. The transmitter and the headphones each had a small dial on the back, which allowed the user to tune them to a particular frequency. (This turned out to be a crucial feature once more of the people around the complex started using them, because each of our transmitters needed to occupy a certain amount of space on whatever bandwidth they sent out their signals. At times, finding an empty space on the spectrum became so difficult that it often sounded like several competing radio stations constantly overlapping each other's broadcasts.) I'd found an unused power outlet on the other side of the mill, just under the clock and the thermostat where I'd plugged in the headphone transmitter and my CD player. Once an hour, I'd need to change out the CD, but other than those few minutes every day, my time at work now had a constant soundtrack.

After a few hours of enjoyably dull and relatively quiet drilling, I decided to take a break to see Mike. All day, every day, he sharpened blades by himself, his only company

a boombox that played a loop of heavy metal turned up to maximum volume in order to overpower the sound of actual grinding metal. He often listened to Korn, Metallica or something similarly angry. Today was no exception.

When he saw me come in, he shut down the grinder and turned down the music.

“You ever heard of these guys?” he asked.

“Who are they?”

“Drowning Pool. It’s some sick shit.”

I sat down on a stool.

“What’s up, man?”

“Nothing. I saw the sign on the way in this morning.”

“Oh yeah?” He smirked as he pulled a cigarette out of his mouth, blowing smoke into the air. “Art’s getting fucking desperate, dude. He really wants to move those things.”

“Yeah, but now he’s just giving them away for free. So he’s not even making any money.”

“I know. It’s not like some guy’s going to drive by and think, ‘You know, that scooter is really the reason I’m going to buy that gazebo.’”

“Hey, I don’t think I ever asked you—what does your wife do?”

I knew he had a wife only because he’d mentioned her the day he told us about how she sometimes sent him porn.

“She’s actually in school right now. She’s studying to be a nurse. She’s fucking smart, dude. She has a 4.0. She’s way smarter than me or Tim.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Say what?”

“Why’d you compare her to Tim?”

“Oh, I didn’t know that you didn’t know. She’s Tim’s sister.”

“I had no idea. You have kids?”

“Yeah, a couple of boys. Aidan’s three, and we’ve got a baby, too—Sammy.”

“I bet that’s fun.”

He took another drag and coughed. “Yeah, right.”

I spent the rest of the morning by myself, drilling notches into the boards on the pallet. I didn’t know what purpose the boards served or where they were going after I was done, and to be honest, the thought didn’t even cross my mind. I rarely thought of how my work fit into the grander scheme of the factory. We never saw the end result, anyway, as the gazebos were shipped to the customers in pieces and assembled on site. So I thought only of my work on a moment-to-moment basis, focusing on how I was going to make it through the day. I saw the pieces as fragmented, isolated, and disconnected. I had no understanding of the whole.

When the bell rang for lunch, I punched out and went to the paint shop to eat with Hannah, Mark and Henry. Thankfully, the praying in tongues had only happened once, and I was hopeful I wouldn’t get caught in that situation again, although if I did, I felt more prepared to deal with it. Today was also going to be a bit different, because I was going to give Henry \$5,000.

In the fall of my junior year, I was riding with Dan, a friend of both Jon and me, from Jon's house to another friend's place at night when a woman with no insurance and a suspended license decided to it was a good time to pull out in front of us, despite the fact that we were going 50 mph on a straight road with the car's headlights on. We smashed into her car, I threw my hand in front of my face, and the airbag rammed it straight into my face, displacing my nose to a location just under my left eye. One insurance settlement later, I was \$50,000 richer. Having grown up in a modest, middle-class home, the money didn't seem real to me, especially since from the moment the possibility of a lawsuit was raised, I knew that college tuition was the only thing on which I would spend any money that came of it. Because of my frugal upbringing, I knew that blowing it on an expensive car or some other luxury was out of the question.

However, one outstanding issue had been hanging over my head in the months since we'd settled with the insurance company. Where would my tithe go? For as long as I could remember, my parents had taught me that 10% of all pre-tax income should be given to God, something they practiced without fail. However, I was well past the point where I was comfortable giving to First Baptist, and while my parents understood my position, their lifelong lesson hadn't gone unlearned. I knew I needed to find some sort of God-related ministry to give it to, but I hadn't been able to find it—until Henry mentioned his Africa trip.

I talked to my mom and dad about it, and they were both okay with me giving him the money, but we all knew I had to find a way to do it anonymously. So I hatched a plan

wherein I would get an anonymous cashier's check made out to Henry, give it to Hannah, and she would present it to him at one of our lunches.

In retrospect, I realize that, had I wanted my gift to be truly anonymous, I could have mailed it to him with insurance and signature confirmation, or had Hannah give it to him when I wasn't around. But I deliberately set it up this way—at lunch, in front of me—because I wanted to see his reaction. I wanted to see his expression of amazed gratitude and think to myself, “you did that.” I wanted a reward for my generosity—a self-satisfied feeling, a pat on the back from me and to me.

Lunch started out with just Mark, Henry and me, leaving me wondering where Hannah was. She didn't show up until after we were done eating—something I hadn't known she was going to do. She handed him an envelope with the check in it and told him that it was from someone else who wanted to remain anonymous. He opened the envelope and his eyes widened.

“It's for your trip to Africa.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. It's an anonymous donation. That's all I can say.”

He started to cry.

“This money means we can afford the trip!”

“Well, praise God.”

I hadn't said anything the entire time. I didn't know if I should say something or remain quiet.

“I need to go call my wife. This is an incredible blessing.”

Henry ran to the office, leaving me, Hannah and a smiling Mark.

I knew I should feel something, but I didn't—no joy, no happiness, no satisfaction. I didn't even feel proud or self-satisfied. The clouds hadn't parted to let the sun shine down on my soul. I had believed some sort of emotional groundswell would take place. Instead, I felt nothing. Empty.

I sensed that Hannah could tell something about me was off. As the bell rang and we got up to go back to work, she pulled me aside.

“God will bless you for this. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. Thanks,” I mumbled.

By the time 4:00 rolled around, I was still mulling over what had happened earlier that day. Even the music I'd listened to all afternoon had only provided me with momentary distractions from my worries about what my lack of response to Henry's reaction meant. Had I done something wrong? Maybe I shouldn't have given so much money to someone whose beliefs did differ from mine in at least one key area. Or maybe it was my attitude. “Pride goes before a fall, and a haughty spirit before destruction,” I'd heard quoted from the Bible innumerable times. Maybe God didn't allow me to feel anything because I didn't deserve to feel good. Or maybe—and this was an issue I hadn't been able to shake since I was a small child—I really wasn't a true follower of Jesus. Maybe I was an imposter, someone who knew all the rights things to say but somehow hadn't locked into a real relationship with God.

As I clocked out and walked to my car, these thoughts swirled through my mind, questions without any answers, stirring up the only emotion I'd felt since lunch: anxiety.

Day 75

It was Henry's first day back at work since his return from Africa, and I was wondering what kind of stories he'll have for us at lunch, hoping that despite the conflicting motives behind my act of generosity, the money hadn't gone to waste. The past two weeks hadn't provided me with any more clarity on my situation with him. I'd just been coming to work, putting in my time, going home tired, showering, eating dinner, passing out, then getting up and doing it all over again. Work, eat, sleep. Work, eat, sleep. I'd started to wonder about the wisdom of working four long days and one short day. Yes, I got done with work at 10:30 on Friday mornings, but I was so tired due to the accumulated exhaustion from four straight nine and a half-hour days that I'd been coming home every Friday morning and sleeping until dinner time. Why not just work five eight-hour days like everyone else?

It was another scorcher that day, but as I cut planks on a machine just under the clock, I could see the light at the end of the tunnel. This was my last week of work at Chestnut Hill—at least for this summer, but hopefully forever. I was about to head off to college and leave these people behind. Starting today, I was counting down each hour from forty until the clock hit 10:30 on Friday.

Thirty-six hours to go.

“So how was the trip?” Mark asked Henry shortly after we all convened for lunch.

“Oh, it was great,” Henry gushed. “God really showed himself to my family while we were there, especially to my kids.”

“Praise God,” Hannah said.

“Yes, it was a true blessing. I’m so thankful we were able to go.”

His words failed to penetrate my heart. I felt no gratitude toward God for using me to help Henry, no sense of accomplishment. Nothing.

“Did you see any miracles performed?” Hannah asked.

What?

“No, we didn’t,” Henry sighed. “I was really hoping we would.”

Just like when everyone except me starting speaking in tongues, I was at a complete loss. Miracles? What miracles? I wasn’t sure how to ask, so I just jumped in.

“What are you talking about?”

Hannah answered in a tone that you might take when discussing the weather.²⁸

“Miracles. Like human limbs regenerating or people being raised from the dead. You know that can happen, right?”

I’d read about miracles in the Bible, but in general, God seemed to have kind of an exclusive when it came to their implementation—Jesus turning water to wine or feeding thousands on a hillside. That sort of thing.

She must have seen the look on my face, so she kept explaining in her cheery, staccato German accent.

“You know how God has given us all gifts, yes?”

²⁸ Which is actually about to happen, but not in any kind of way you would possibly expect.

“Yeah.”

“Well, those gifts God gave the early church—prophecy, prayer languages,²⁹ healing—are all still active today. We’ve heard many reports of people’s arms and legs spontaneously regenerating, and even of people coming back from the dead, as a result of the work of some of God’s mighty healers.”

I must have skipped that section in the last church bulletin.

“God speaks to me directly all the time, so I can prophesy,” she continued. “Just the other day, when I was walking to the post office on an errand for Art, God told me that it was going to stop raining by the time I started to return.³⁰ I told the worker at the post office what God had revealed to me, but he didn’t believe. But by the time I went outside”—and at this point, she looked up—“poof! No rain! I stood outside the post office window where he could see me, pointing up to the sun in the heavens.”

This is insane, I thought. Does she really think that God just hangs around, waiting to tell her about changes in the weather?³¹

“Huh,” I grunted.

²⁹ Another euphemism for what they practiced when we’d prayed together.

³⁰ Told you.

³¹ Another key difference between Pentecostalism and nearly every other contemporary Christian denomination is their belief that all of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the New Testament are still active today. The gifts allowed early Christians to demonstrate the power of the Gospel to those who could not read about it in the Scriptures, and Pentecostals believe that they are the direct spiritual descendants of Peter, Paul and the rest of the Apostles, insofar as they continue to practice all of the gifts. Most other denominations believe that the gifts were present for a time and existed out of necessity, due to the fact that all of the Scriptures had not yet been written, let alone compiled and reproduced, but that once the New Testament canon was closed, the gifts ceased to be necessary and therefore ceased to exist. However, according to Pentecostalism, just like the speaking of tongues, the gift of healing, the gift of prophecy, etc. are only bestowed by God upon those who have received the second baptism and become part of the Christian All-Stars.

At work, some days—many days, in fact—passed without anyone bringing up any issues of faith. During breaks, topics of conversation among the mill workers would center on women and alcohol, and lunchtime would go by without our group straying into any theological minefields. But on days like today, no matter how much I might have wanted to, I couldn't seem to get away from confronting both Christianity and my place within it.

Tim and I were standing around, waiting for Joey to emerge from the machine that housed the turbine blades. A few minutes earlier, an alarm I didn't recognize had sounded, and everything seemed to shut down all at once. Tim told me that the sawdust machine was clogged, and it was Joey's job to climb inside it with a stick and poke free whatever had gummed it up. So until Joey fixed it, we had nothing to do but talk.

"You're serious?" Tim asked me as we stood next to a saw I wished I was using. "You've never smoked a cigarette?"

"Nope. Never."

We'd somehow started playing a game of "guess the bad things Jason has done" after Tim had noticed aloud that I'd never sworn at work. Which was true. At this point in my life, I could probably count the number of times I'd cursed on one hand, and none of them had been any variation on taking God's name in vain. Our pastor at First Baptist, my schoolteachers at First Baptist, my friends' parents, my own parents—everyone in our small, stringent subset of rural fundamentalist Christianity decried swearing as the Devil's language and vigilantly avoided it. My earliest memory of curse words involves

my elementary school Principle, who delivered a school-wide lecture on the topic when I was in first grade. He said a few words like “damn” and “hell” and explained that he was only saying them so that we would know exactly which words we should always avoid using in the future. Fast forward a few years, and my fifth-grade teacher was taking time during our afternoon Bible lesson to explain how we should always avoid words like “darn” and “heck” because they were what he called “euphemisms,” a term none of us understood until he explained how it meant a softer way of saying the same exact thing. Christians didn’t use these words, he and every other adult told us. Only non-believers did.

The most hallowed of all words was the Lord’s name. We all knew the commandment by heart—“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” The Elizabethan English in the King James Bible—the only Bible First Baptist allowed us to use—gave the command extra weight, the combination of the command itself and formality of the language used to convey it causing all of us to tremble at the prospect of saying it—or even the euphemism for it—in even the most indirect or unintentional way. As a child, I would lie in bed at night, terrified that I would accidentally think of a time I’d heard someone else say it, that a mere momentary thought of someone else taking God’s name in vain was enough of an offense for the Almighty to immediately mete out a swift and terrible judgment.

The crusade against cursing didn’t stop when I got older, either. When I was still in high school, some of my parents’ church friends gifted us a “Curse Free TV” box. They explained how, by hooking it up to our VCR, we could filter out the cursing in whatever

movie we watched. Unfortunately for its inventors, instead of allowing its users to avoid the swearing in Hollywood's latest offerings, it only ended up highlighting each use of a "dirty" word by muting the sound and displaying an often-nonsensical replacement word or phrase via close captioning. During R-rated films, "Wow you!" popped up a lot.

But somehow, despite my deep-seated resistance to nearly all other things First Baptist, this idea—that there was a set of words written in stone somewhere that should be avoided at all costs—managed to burrow into my psyche and take up a more or less permanent residence. This set me apart from everyone else in the mill, as they all swore constantly. It never bothered me, as I'd quickly numbed to it—with the exception of some of Chester's more vitriolic comments. He was undoubtedly the most prolific and creative curser at Chestnut Hill, weaving together strands of profanity in ways I'd never thought possible. When I'd be working with him and mess something up, he'd unleash a torrent of insults at me—"you fucking motherfucking cocksucking fuck!"—while I scrambled to fix whatever I'd done wrong.

"What about beer?" Tim continued. "You ever had beer?"

"No. No beer." My only experience with alcohol to this point had been a sip of wine my parents had given me at Thanksgiving dinner when I was fifteen. I'd asked them what wine tasted like, and before my dad let me try some of his, he warned me that I wouldn't like it. He was right.

"What about pot? You ever get high?"

"No."

"So no drugs, booze, smokes or swearing. Man, you really are a Jesus freak."

I shrugged out a quiet “I guess so.” I couldn’t wait for this conversation, and this day, to be over. Our conversation had attracted the attention of Jenny and Chester, both of whom were nearby. I could tell my answers were amusing to them.

“So you go to church a lot? Like, every Sunday?” Jenny asked.

“Pretty much.” *Come on, Joey. Wrap it up.*

“Yep, that’s fucking Jesus boy for you,” Chester laughed.

I saw Joey emerging from the small door through which he’d climbed into the machine, coated from head to toe in a thick layer of sawdust. Finally.

The joke’s on you, Chester, I thought. Four more days, and then I never have to see your ugly face again.

Day 79

It seemed only fitting that my last day at work was spent doing the job I worked for much of the summer—lugging rough-cut cedar beams up to the re-saw with Chester and Kurt, then slicing them down and stacking them. But unlike most of the days I'd worked in the mill throughout the summer, I felt at ease today. For me, it was a day of lasts: the last time I would punch my time card, the last time I would work with Chester, the last time I would enter this mill. I didn't care what I did next summer; I just knew I wouldn't be here.

So I worked my four hours with Chester and Kurt, sneaking away during a lull in the action for one final shoot-the-breeze session with Mike.

“So, you're heading off to college and leaving us all behind, huh?” he asked me after I came in and sat down.

“That's the plan,” I said, spinning around on the stool. “I want to make a living with my brain instead of my back.”

“Good luck, man. I wish I could get out of here. Working here fucking sucks.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

At some point during the summer, I'd had an epiphany about why I failed to connect in a meaningful way with nearly everyone in the mill, and today's sense of finality only underscored what I'd come to understand. An invisible but ever-present line separated the

lifers from people like me. I was just passing through, treating the job as nothing more than a temporary means to an end, but for people like Chester, Kurt and Jenny, this was it. They had no plans to leave, no greater ambitions—at least none that they spoke about in front of me—and their shared lot in life bonded them together in a way I could never fully understand. Unless I came on as a lifer, I'd always have to sleep outside the campsite.

When 10:30 came, I clocked out, said goodbye to my Pentecostal friends (despite our differences, I really had developed an affinity for them) and went up to Art's office to thank him for the job. After we finished talking, I went down to my car and looped around the property one last time.

The day was over. The job was over. In three days, I was headed to Ohio, on my way to a new stage of life that would make this place nothing more than a distant memory.

So long, suckers.

Part II

Day 1

And just like that, I was back.

Nine months later, I found myself back in the mill, ripping down beams with Kurt and Chester. I could lie and say that, before coming back, I looked long and hard for a different job. But the truth was that Art offered me a raise to \$11/hour, a figure twice as large as what I would make in any other kind of local summer job. My lack of motivation for pounding the pavement and trying to carve out a better work situation was compounded by the fact that it wasn't easy to look for a temporary job when I was five hundred miles away from home.³² By the time I'd packed up my dorm room and driven home, my job options weren't exactly plentiful. So I grudgingly went back to the familiarity of what I knew—tedious, dangerous factory work.

“You see Art's girls working here?” Chester asked me as we waited for Thomas to use the forklift to wheel in a cart stacked with cedar beams.

“Yeah.”

“Fucking twins,” he whispered, a glint in his eye.

Art's attractive identical twins, just a year or two older than me, were now part of the family business. He had them working in nearly every building but ours—shutters, assembly, paint shop, you name it. It wasn't hard to figure out why Art would want to keep them away from the knuckle draggers in the mill.

³² This was still in the pre-Internet everywhere age.

“They’ve got some fucking European boyfriends that are working here, too.”

I’d wondered who those guys were. Having seen them earlier in the day, something seemed different about them.

Thomas arrived with the beams. Finding out more about the twins would have to wait, and I’d have to be smart about it. Asking around about why not only Art’s girls but their boyfriends were working here was riddled with potential pitfalls. Any time they came up as a topic of conversation with any guy in the mill, they always got a predatory look in their eyes, and I didn’t want them to think I had any perverted motives for asking about them. Plus, it seemed that among the mill workers, it was considered poor form—or, if there even was such a thing in this environment, bad manners—to pry into someone else’s personal affairs.³³ This rule, of course, did not apply to me, as my co-workers often treated me like a zoo animal, peppering me with intrusive and embarrassing questions about my personal life.

Still, I wanted to know what two pretty girls who had attended the Hill School, one of two extremely elite and expensive prep schools in the Philadelphia suburbs, were doing in the workplace equivalent of a dungeon. Their father clearly had the financial means for them to spend their summer in Europe instead of dragging their boyfriends back to work

³³ It wasn’t until I graduated from college and moved away from southeastern PA that I fully grasped the geographical factors that impacted the nature of this privacy. I’ve been told that the county where I grew up contains the most inhabited Colonial-era houses of any county in the United States. This land, and the age of the properties on which these houses sit, does more than contribute to a picturesque landscape; they are physical markers of the area’s deep old-world roots. The reticence and stoicism, the fierce sense of keep-to-yourselfism, that the first German and Dutch settlers brought with them hundreds of years earlier permeated not just the quiet, private societies of the Amish and Mennonite communities who sold us our produce and built us our furniture, but also inhabited the rest of us. Our houses, never in typical neighborhoods, were set off into the woods, accessed only by a crisscrossing network of windy, always-crumbling back roads. To get to anyone else’s home, you had to make a serious effort, and for many of us, it was easier to simply avoid traversing the space and remain home by ourselves. In Pennsylvania Dutch country, one does not ring a doorbell unannounced.

here. Maybe this was some sort of gauntlet Art wanted the girls' significant others to run in order to test their mettle.

“Did you see Art this morning?” Mike asked as we sat around the picnic table during our morning break.

“No. Why?”

“He looks like shit.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s wearing the same fucking clothes he wore yesterday, and his hair’s all matted the hell down. It’s no wonder, though, with his wife and all.”

While I’d been away at college, my dad had occasionally brought up the latest goings-on at Chestnut Hill when we talked, and once or twice, he’d mentioned the problems she was still having. During my first year of work, her alcohol addiction was an open secret. She’d apparently gone to rehab at some recent point, but as Mike and one or two other people grunted about it in their usual stunted manner, it sounded like it was probably too late to save her from an early death. I remembered seeing her gaunt, tired figure at the Art’s last Fourth of July party, a drink in hand, surrounded by people—including Art—who’d had no problem getting wasted in her presence.

Trying to change the subject, I asked about the two new guys.

“Who, the twins’ boyfriends?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re from France—oui, oui!” Kurt did a terrible impression of a French accent.

“The poor fucks,” Mike laughed. “Those girls probably talked up coming to America and working for their dad like it was some great fucking thing, and now they’re stuck here with us.”

“Do they speak English?”

“Not very fucking good.”

Information about what had changed over the past year trickled in from various co-workers throughout the day. The most obvious change was Jenny, who was visibly pregnant. Apparently, she and Kurt were also living together. Tim had left to work for a furniture shop in Coatesville, so now Mike was the mill’s foreman. And, of course, the twins and their French boyfriends were undoubtedly the biggest news item of the day. From what I’d learned, it sounded like one of them—I wasn’t sure which one, as I couldn’t tell them apart—was living on the second floor of the assembly building with her boyfriend. Given my previous experiences at Chestnut Hill, this came as more of a curiosity than a surprise. At some point during my first summer, Tim had told me about a homeless guy that had worked at the factory for a few months and lived in a tiny crawlspace above the break room without anyone’s knowledge. And Hannah lived on company property, in a small apartment next to the showroom and offices. So while I idly wondered where the twin and her boyfriend cooked and showered, it didn’t seem abnormal that they’d shack up on company grounds.

Other than that, it seemed to be a lot of same-old, same-old around the complex. Except for one more change that I'd already known about before I came back: Sara, my 16-year-old sister, was starting a job in the assembly building today.

Oh, and all of the scooters were still piled up in the pole barn. Art had abandoned the "buy a gazebo, get a scooter" fire sale after he'd only managed to get rid of one of them that way.³⁴

While I'd hoped that my newfound status as no-longer-low-man-on-the-totem-pole might afford me a better job, on my first day back, Mike stuck me with Kurt and Chester. As I ripped boards with them and listened to one CD after another, I thought about everything that had transpired during my first year of college. My pre-med choice had quickly sent me into a chaotic tailspin, and I hadn't known the first thing about how to pull out and level off. During freshman orientation, when one science professor after another had stood before us and said that only a small fraction of the students in the room would make it through the first year without dropping out of the program and changing our majors, I'd cheerily ignored them, confident they weren't referring to me.

About four lectures into Intro to Cell Biology, I'd started to question what I was doing. By week six, after I'd received the worst test grade I'd ever seen in my life, I'd started to come to grips with the fact that I hated everything to do with science, especially because I never understood what my professor was talking about.³⁵ It didn't help that Cell Bio had met at 8:00 am in a huge lecture hall with high-backed, movie-theatre-

³⁴ Unconfirmed reports suggested he also might have sold one to a local elderly woman. So at the very least, he was still stuck with four dozen scooters.

³⁵ Taking the textbook out of the shrinkwrap probably would have helped.

comfortable chairs and some sort of giant fan in the ceiling that produced a constant, soothing white noise, causing many of us to nod off and drift away during the lectures we'd managed to drag ourselves out of bed to attend. The first day, the lecture hall had been packed. By week three, it was half full. By week six, about a third of the students remained. I was one of them, but I no longer knew why.

Compounding my problems had been my roommate, a stoner who treated college less like an academic endeavor and more like an endless summer camp—sleeping all day, staying up all night, playing video games until the sun came up, leaving our cramped, stale room in a state of perpetual filth, piles of dirty laundry stacked on everything from the ancient, beat-up furniture to the concrete-hard carpet. Whenever I'd tried to talk to him about how his late-night video game habit conflicted with my ability to get up for my early-morning classes, I'd been met with a bulletproof argument that stopped the conversation cold—"whatever, dude."³⁶

I'd stopped sleeping. I'd also lost my appetite and weight, putting me at a dangerously low 140 lbs. My clothes had started to hang loosely from my frame. I'd stopped going to classes. I'd eat only at weird times of the night, gorging myself on Ramen noodles at 2:00 am but feeling no hunger throughout the day. I didn't understand the root of the problem, but I knew enough to know that something was seriously wrong.

My church upbringing had drilled into my mind that my problem must be spiritual in nature. So when I'd go to bed, instead of sleeping, I'd simply lie there, staring at the

³⁶ Sample conversation:

"Uh, Matt? Do you think that maybe, um, you could pick up your, uh, piles of clothes? It's just kind of hard, you know, to move around..."

"Whatever, dude."

squeaky, metal wires holding up the mattress above, running the same thoughts through my head on an endless loop. *When I prayed the sinner's prayer of salvation, did I say the right words? What if I didn't really mean it? Was Jesus really who he said he was? Who put together the Bible, anyway? How can we trust that they got all the right books in, and didn't put in any of the wrong ones in by accident?* I was being constantly whipsawed back and forth by thoughts and emotions I could not control, reverting further into my troubled mind, spending all my free time in the room, avoiding the outside world. I had zero motivation to do anything.

When I came home for Thanksgiving, my parents had seen my skeletal frame and heard my newest symptom—convulsive crying—through the door of my room. At my mom's urging, I'd visited Jon. At the time, I wasn't sure I liked the idea. I didn't want to leave my room, let alone our house. But she'd eventually wrung from me some measure of apprehensive consent. My initial feelings had been good; as I'd come down his driveway, greeted by his house's tan stucco and broad windows, I'd been reminded of how much this place had been home away from home for my last year in high school.

After a nice dinner, we went up to his attic to spend some time jamming—him on the drums, me on the guitar, our typical setup from our high school days. All around the triangular tunnel of a room were pictures I'd taken of a time that seemed ages ago, of friends I couldn't wait to move on from but whose long-gone sense of comforting familiarity now made me miss them more than ever. Elizabeth and Jon, sitting outside my garage at my graduation party, smiling sheepishly as I snapped a shot of them conferring over their endless dance of will-they, won't-they. Jon and Dan in Jon's backyard, hitting

golf balls into the woods at twilight. Jon and Dan again, mugging it for the camera during our miserable senior trip. Photo after photo of a time forever gone, a time I wished I could go back to and somehow relive. But I realized in that moment that those times could never be recovered, except through the fractured, favoring lens of memory.

I started to feel ill, a nauseating churning in my stomach. Ten minutes later, I found myself downstairs in the bathroom, gripping the ivory sink and staring into the mirror. The pale, sweaty, trembling face that stared back was a stranger, someone whose debilitating weakness made him a hopeless wreck. I came out of the bathroom and told Jon and his mom I was leaving because I felt sick. They agreed that I did not look well. A few moments later, I was doubled over on the side of the road, car door open, heaving up the wonderful dinner his mom had made.

After that night, I'd given in and seen our trusted family doctor, the man who had diagnosed me with ear infections, colds, migraines and acid reflux, given me physicals, and stitched my head up twice. As I waited for him in one of his office's sterile rooms, the thin white paper on top of the vinyl bed crinkling under my every move, I faced a dilemma. The man who had tended to my medical issues since I was a child was now the man I wasn't sure I wanted knowing my secret. After the usual formalities, he began asking pointed questions that quickly broke down any reservations I'd felt about sharing my problem.

"Are you having a hard time getting motivated?" I saw and heard the care underneath his reserved, professional demeanor.

"Yeah."

“Having trouble sleeping?”

“Yeah.”

“Eating habits becoming abnormal?”

“Uh huh.”

“Having the feeling that everything is kind of pointless?”

Yes.

I nodded, biting back the tears I still so frustratingly couldn't control.

I came out into the waiting room after a few moments and told my girlfriend that I had a nine-month prescription for Lexapro, an anti-depressant.

As we ripped down beam after beam, these memories and thoughts of what had immediately followed swirled through my mind, a constant reminder of just how much I'd eventually changed in one year—and how I hoped people here would eventually recognize it.

Day 3

Shortly after I punched in, Mike pulled me aside.

“I have a new job for you.”

“Okay, what?”

“Come with me.”

We walked over to the shutter building, passing Art’s daughters, both of whom were touching up some roofing sections that were leaning against the outside of the paint shop. I tried not to stare at their tanned legs.

“Shutters is getting behind with their shit, so you need to sand down some of their stuff before it can be painted. We need to move this shit out of here and fucking ship it.”

“Not a problem.” I was happy to get away from the re-saw. The two French guys had provided the mill with an influx of labor that I’d hoped would allow me to move somewhere else, and this seemed like a promising start. My only real concern was that as long as I was in the shutter building, my wireless headphones were out of my transmitter’s range. I’d have to either go without them for the time being or tune in to someone else’s broadcast. I’d heard that more than one of the shutter guys had Sirius radio, which hopefully meant a lot more variety than what I was used to in the mill.

After Mike left, I slipped on my headphones and slid the dial through the channels. Howard Stern: gross. Weird prog-rock: no. A comedy station: okay. The only problem

was that when I ran the hand sander, it was impossible to hear anything the comics were saying. Oh well. Back to boredom. At least I had something new to do.

We were fighting. We did that a lot.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying,” I whisper-yelled into the phone. “”What I’m saying is that it’s a fundamental waste of time that rots your brain.” It was our fifteen-minute morning break, and I was sitting next to my car in the parking lot, talking to my girlfriend Kate and trying to convince her that watching television was somehow inherently evil.

“I’m sorry, but I just don’t think a little bit of it is!”

The second half of my first year of college was spent doing two things: working my way out of the emotional and mental breakdown I’d dealt with during the first semester (a process that was significantly aided by finding a new roommate) and trying, without much success, to break free from the mindset that my church and school had attempted to drill into me throughout my childhood and adolescence. At the time, I was cognizant of my progress in the former, but I was oblivious to my battle with the latter. I simply didn’t understand how deeply some of the fringier beliefs from my fundamentalist background had embedded themselves. For years, I’d hated their legalistic approach to faith (and I still did), but during my breakdown, I’d started to question everything, which had led me to unwittingly fall back on the only thing I knew—a handful of the wackier elements of

First Baptist’s dogma. For reasons that almost completely elude me now, TV watching—always an easy target of Fighting Fundie pastors—was one of them.³⁷

“You need to stop.”

“But I’m babysitting, and there’s nothing else to do.”

“Read a book!”

“I did read earlier today, for like an hour! I need to do something else.”

“Well, you know where I stand on this. I’m not changing my mind.”

“Yeah, I know,” she sighed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“It can’t mean nothing. Everything means something.”³⁸

The fight was a microcosm of our relationship’s all-encompassing dysfunction. I’d met Kate about a month into my first semester, shortly before everything started to fall apart. We’d sat next to each other in Intro to Composition, and since I’d found myself physically attracted to her and looking to forget about Emily, a girl I’d met when I first got to college,³⁹ it wasn’t long before I’d asked her out. After only a few dates, we had

³⁷ I think it had something to do with my sudden obsession with constantly maintaining an active mind. Since, at the time, I viewed TV watching as an inherently passive activity, I decided it was anathema to me.

³⁸ I was a real dick.

³⁹ After a few weeks of hanging out with Emily, she decided that we needed to have a DTR (“Defining the Relationship”) talk. While the DTR is a goofy-but-common practice in Christian circles, designed to weed out the serious suitors from the casual daters, she took ours to a level I didn’t know existed by telling me that, if we were to continue getting to know each other, I would need to complete an eight-page dating application, the length and specificity of which (sample question: “Have you ever sniffed glue?”) rivaled what I imagine the background check for a CIA job looks like. She told me she knew a lot of people wouldn’t understand her “emotional constipation” (a gag-inducing analogy) but that the application was a necessary step for anyone who wanted to be anything more than friends with her. I should have just thrown

started to get into serious discussions about our pasts—a huge mistake. One September night, at a park across the street from the college, we were sitting next to each other on the swings, lazily pushing ourselves back and forth. The topic of our sexual histories came up, and it came out that while I was a virgin, she wasn't. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, I reeled away from her, my mind spinning. Despite having several opportunities to rid myself of it, my virginity was something I'd held onto throughout high school, always planning to marry someone who cared about saving sex until marriage as much—or more—than I did. With one statement, Kate had shattered that dream.

“I have to go,” I told her, skidding my feet on the dirt and jumping from the swing. I left her there and walked down into the small town, trying to figure out what to do. How important was this to me? (Very.) Could I deal with this? (No, but I tried to convince myself that I could.) Could I forgive? (See previous answer.)

Later that night, after a lot of prayer and thinking, I called her and asked her to meet me outside her dorm. She came out in her pajamas, and without a word, I hugged her. It was the first time we'd touched, and in that moment, even though I couldn't fully explain it, I was committed.

But I shouldn't have been. Not because of her past, but because—as I would soon find out—we were fundamentally incompatible. We had almost nothing in common, but as my life started to spiral out of control in the coming months, she—not my family, not

in the towel, but I decided to just go ahead and fill out her relationship entrance exam. I'm not sure which questions I got wrong, but I flunked it. She ended up divorced at twenty-three and remarried by twenty-five. So, bullet dodged.

my friends, not God—was what I viewed as my one constant. So I clung to her, and she clung to me, seeing me as a way out of her disaster of a family. I should have known better. She should have known better. But as two immature, eighteen-year-old kids, we did not know better.

My parents, however, did know better. When I brought her home at Thanksgiving, my mom could tell after about two minutes that we weren't right for each other, and she didn't waste much time informing me of her conclusions. Big mistake. I wasn't in the right frame of mind to receive the constructive criticism she was trying to give, so I misconstrued what she was saying—"you two aren't compatible"—into an attack on Kate's character—"she's not good enough for you." The stubborn streak that had possessed me since infancy⁴⁰ reared its ugly head, and I adopted a "me and Kate against the world" mentality. *Who does think she is?* I thought. *I've known Kate for two whole months, and she's known her for two seconds!*

So instead of calling it off before either one of us could do too much damage, we continued to fight throughout the Spring semester about almost every conceivable issue under the sun, sucking the life from each other while paradoxically becoming increasingly co-dependent—to the point that we couldn't spend a single day apart. We'd left our homes without direction and found each other at a time when we both needed a signpost to point us down the right path. However, while we both knew deep down that

⁴⁰ My mom is fond of telling the following story: on an afternoon when I was two years old, she had just finished cooking dinner and had turned off the stove when I climbed up on a chair to see what was going on. I wanted to know what the red burner felt like. "Don't touch the stove," she said as she moved my hand away. As I pushed back and tried again, she grabbed my hand and told me, "Don't touch the stove. It will hurt you." Before I tried the third time, she says I got a look in my eyes that said, "there's nothing you can do to stop me," and I slammed my hand down on the burner, scorching myself. Sixteen years later, my mom was trying to tell me, "don't touch the stove." But sixteen years later, I still hadn't learned my lesson.

the other person wasn't going to provide us with the stability we needed, we didn't know how to look outside ourselves for guidance. We often couldn't stand each other, but we were linked by our mutual fear of being unable to process what might happen to us if we were to go our separate ways. When we were apart, we were suspicious of each other's actions, and when we were together, we couldn't wait to be apart. It was a cycle from which neither one of us knew how to break free. Had I listened to my parents, I might have realized some of these truths. Instead, I clung to the belief that I could fix her by making her into my idea of the perfect girlfriend—an ideal informed by an unlikely combination of fundamentalist theology and countless hours of watching relationships unfold on television.

“I should really get off the phone,” she snapped. “I'm not supposed to talk for a long time.”

“Fine, whatever.”

“Don't be like that!”

“How do you want me to be?”

“Not like you're being right now.”

“Well, that's really helpful.”

“Fine. Bye.”

“Yeah. Bye.”

Early in the afternoon, while I was still sanding down shutters, Hank, one of the shutter guys, stopped by my workstation.

“Hey, Jason.”

I stopped sanding and took out my earplugs.

“What’s up?”

“We need someone make a run on the forklift up to assembly and bring us back some shutters that need fixed. You up for it?”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked him. Driving the forklift was the one job at Chestnut Hill that I imagined doing all the time.

“Nope,” he smiled.

My excitement was quickly tempered by a nervous thought.

“Don’t I need to be trained and certified to drive it?”

He started laughing, as if my question was somehow ridiculous.

“You think you need training? Come here.” He waved me over to the forklift, which was parked just outside where I was working, in between the opening to the shutter building and the door to the paint shop.

“Get on up there.”

I climbed into the bucket seat.

“Turn the key.”

After I started it up, Hank hopped onto the running board and started grabbing the three levers next to the steering wheel. As he yanked each one around, he clipped out a quick note about how they controlled the forks: “left, right” (the left lever), “up, down” (the middle lever), “tilt” (the right lever). “Got it?”

“Sure.”

“I hereby pronounce you trained and certified. Now go get the damn shutters.”

When ripping down beams with Kurt and Chester or working on my own at the double saw, I’d watched with envy as guys like Brownie, Tim and Mike drove the forklift in and out of the mill, jealous of their freedom to move around outside on a manly vehicle instead of being stuck in front of a saw all day. But until this moment, I’d never thought of driving the forklift as *work*. As I waited for Hank to leave—which he wasn’t doing—so that I could have the freedom to accidentally spear something without him seeing, I found myself terrified by the idea that I could drop or plow into a valuable gazebo piece and, like Mark, cost the company thousands of dollars due to my ineptitude.

“What are you waiting for? Get going!”

“Oh, okay—sorry.”

I suddenly realized something.

“How do I back up?”

“Oh, shit. Right. Hang on.”

The forklift had a clutch and a stick shift without any gear labels, so I had no idea how to put it in first vs. reverse. I was, however, newly grateful that the ancient Volvo station wagon I’d inherited from my parents had a manual transmission.

Once Hank showed me which gear was which, I bit my lip and, armed with thirty seconds of training, grabbed the gear knob, jammed the stick into first and took off—past Hank, past the twins and their perfect tans, past the paint shop, the mill and the pole barn, all the way up the hill to the assembly building.

I had no idea where to go once I got there, so I parked it outside and walked in.

“What are you doing here?”

Nice to see you too, Thomas.

“Hank sent me up here for some shutters.”

“Okay. Follow me.”

As I walked behind Thomas through the assembly building, I noticed for the first time how his body looked like it was starting to break down. The massive bulk he carried was probably sharply defined at one point but looked as if it had lost that edge years ago. His muscles, especially his abs, were slowly turning to fat. His pecs were sagging, and the tank tops he wore were no longer doing him any favors. I also noticed how he didn't so much walk as lumber, his tree trunk legs always threatening to split apart the Daisy Dukes he inexplicably wore every single day.

“How is college?”

“Good. I changed my major to English.”

“Huh.”

I thought he'd be more interested, since he'd told me how English had been his major. Maybe he just had a lot of other stuff on his mind.

“Yeah, I like it so far.”

“You know, I always had to work hard on my papers. I would spend days doing all of the necessary research before writing them. And then there was this friend of mine—well, I don't know if he was a *friend* so much as a classmate—who would always wait until the last second to start writing our biggest assignments. I would warn him the week before his papers were due that he needed to start working on them, but he would just

shrug me off and go back to playing pool.” He shook his head, the memory of his friend’s procrastination still clearly bothering him.

“How did he do?”

“Not as well as he could have done.”

The conversation stalled as we picked our way through the back of the building to the shutters. I caught a glimpse of Sara as she used a nail gun to put shingles on a roofing section. We waved to each other.

“Okay, here they are. Have you ever driven the forklift before?”

I had a sense that he already knew the answer.

“No.”

His frustration at this fact was obvious in his body language, although it was unclear whether it was with me or with Hank.

“All right, listen to me closely. Be very careful when you’re loading anything onto the forks. Make sure that all items are secure before you leave. Go down the hill slowly. You will probably have to back down so that items do not fall off the forks. Do you understand?”

I was chafing at his slow tempo when speaking to me. It was as if he was suggesting I was an imbecile. But I already knew it wasn’t worth engaging with him over it.

“Yes, I understand.”

“Good. You can bring the forklift in and get to work.”

“All the way back here?”

“Well, the shutters are not going to get down to the shutter building any other way, are they?”

When Hank sent me up here, he didn't mention that I would need to navigate the forklift through a lengthy, narrow corridor filled with all sorts of gazebo pieces jutting out at stark angles from the shelves on the walls, just begging to be knocked off and run over.

“No.”

“Okay. Then get moving.”

I did as I was told. I went back to the forklift and slowly crept it through the minefield, Thomas staring me down the entire time.

Twenty minutes later, I was back at the shutter building, unscathed. Navigating my way out of the assembly building had been rough but doable. I backed down the entire hill at about a half-mile an hour, but now that I was back with all the shutters intact, it had been worth taking the extra time. I found Hank and told him I had the shutters, he thanked me, and I went back to sanding. I felt good, like I could actually do my job and do it well. Maybe this summer would be different after all.

Day 30

This was the day reinforcements arrived. Isaac, a friend from college, was coming to work at Chestnut Hill for the next month.

Earlier in the summer when we'd talked on the phone, Isaac had asked me if Chestnut Hill had any openings. He was living in a stranger's basement and working in a foundry, a type of work I knew nothing about. The only thing he had told me was how desperate he was to get out of there. *And come here?* I thought. But it meant that I'd have a friend in the trenches, so I bugged Art about it until he said Isaac could work in the mill until the end of July.

We met outside the mill that morning and hugged briefly, then once we both clocked in and I finished showing him around, Mike wasted no time sticking him on the re-saw with Kurt and Chester. I felt bad for him until I realized that his presence, coupled with the French guys, meant I might never have to work with Chester again. His general hatred of me had continued unabated last summer, a constant stream of put-downs and mockery. What he'd say about me didn't even need to be true; he just wanted a reaction, something I'd always had trouble resisting doing from the time I was young. I thought I'd left this type of harassment behind me for good when I graduated from high school, but he and I had locked into the bully/bullied dynamic from day one, and even with a year's worth of time between when I'd started and now, I still had yet to find a way out of it.

Per Mike's orders, I went to the shutter building, where I had a stack of work waiting for me. I'd been splitting time between shutters and the mill, with more of my time spent sanding down shutters than anything else in the past week. My first week back, shutters was four weeks behind on orders. Now, nearly a month later, they were six weeks behind. Either the business was booming or the department was incompetent.⁴¹

About a half hour after lunch, when I'd finished the pile of shutters I'd been working on all morning, I looked for Hank, whom I'd come to view as the de-facto leader of the shutter department. I couldn't find him, so I went to the first-floor offices, passing through the showroom on the way. Air-conditioning, tile floors, ambient lighting, well-dressed salespeople: it had it all. But the reality of who made those gazebos and the image of the finished product for which customers were paying tens of thousands of dollars couldn't be further apart. I wondered if the people who came onto the property to look at what we sold—often arriving in BMWs or Land Rovers—were uncomfortable being so close to the riff raff that made what they were buying, an unpleasant reminder of how the other half lived.

“Hey, Sally.”

“Hi, Jason. What do you need?”

I wasn't sure what Sally did, exactly—something to do with invoices. I actually wasn't sure what anyone in the offices did, besides sit around and gossip. (Other than Hannah, of course, whose perpetually sunny disposition made her a perfect fit for both

⁴¹ The truth, which I didn't discover until years later, was far worse.

phone and showroom sales.) My mom, who had taken a temp office job for a few months at Chestnut Hill in the not-too-distant past, said that she'd never worked in an environment where so many people worked so hard to avoid actually doing their jobs. One girl had planned her wedding for eight hours a day, cutting and pasting pictures from bridal magazines into a huge scrapbook while ignoring the phone. Another guy would simply disappear for long stretches of time, telling no one where he was going or when he would be back. Janet, a homely, middle-aged woman who bordered on morbidly obese, favored skirting her job responsibilities in favor of telling rambling, long-winded stories to the other office ladies about her terrible relationship with her husband, both of whom were active swingers. And then there was Holly, the Wicked Witch of the Office, a woman who had been at Chestnut Hill since its inception and made it her personal mission to get under the skin of everyone else who worked there. From what I'd heard from any mill, office or shutter worker whenever the name "Holly" was mentioned—except for Hannah, as Holly's negativity ricocheted off her like a rubber bullet bouncing off a bulletproof vest—she was Medusa incarnate. My mom had quit as soon as possible.

"Have you seen Hank?"

"He's in a meeting with Art. He should be back down in about ten minutes."

Until Hank showed up to tell me what to do, I had a free, unscheduled break. With nothing to do, I sat down in a chair in her small office, which looked out through a large glass window onto the rest of the shutter building. Sara walked down the stairs from the upper office, on an errand from someone in the assembly building.

"How's life nailing together roofing sections?" I asked.

“I messed one of them up.”

“Badly?”

“I think so. I nailed the wrong shingles onto it.”

“Does Thomas know?”

“No.”

“That’s good.”

We waved goodbye to Sally and started walking toward my workspace in the back of the shutter building, Sara relaying stories of how, despite Thomas’ best efforts to run a tight ship, everything was just as screwed up in the assembly building as it was in the mill and in shutters.

We joked about how messed up the factory was, but the truth was that most people perceived Chestnut Hill just like the showroom presented it: as a top-tier gazebo company. Somehow, Art had built Chestnut Hill into a business with a sterling reputation. I’d heard stories about how Saudi Princes had sent their personal jets to the U.S. to pick up our largest, most opulent gazebos, the price tag on each one equaling the cost of a small house. But the longer I worked here, the more I wondered how that reputation ever managed to exist in the first place—and if the reality at most companies with similarly excellent reputations mirrored what I saw here.

“I’m learning that I shouldn’t be surprised by anything I see,” she concluded.

“That’s the ticket. At least you’re not out in the mill.”

“True. How’s Isaac doing?”

“He said that he’s doing fine with Kurt and Chester, and he hit it off with the Pentecostals at lunch.”

“Really? Did they pray with him and speak in tongues?”

The speaking in tongues and the “we can raise people from the dead” conversation had become quite the hit around the dinner table.

“No, no tongues today. I’d warned him that it might happen, so he was ready if it did.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah. I think he actually likes it here. Do you know what he was doing before this?”

“No. What?”

“He was working in a foundry.”

“What’s that?”

“I didn’t know either, until he told me. He was sledgehammering barnacles off the hulls of old ships for eight hours a day. He said that after each day, he couldn’t completely unclench his hands for at least an hour.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I guess there’s always someone in a worse position than you, right?”

“I guess so.”

We arrived at my workstation, where she left me to walk back up the hill to assembly. I put in my earbuds, slid on my glasses, and started sanding.

Day 37

12:15 PM

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"You still haven't figured out what you're going to do?" I asked Mark.

"Well, I'm just praying about it, hoping the Lord will provide."

"What's your wife doing?"

"She's called me a few times today, telling me that the landlord's been calling all morning. She's panicking. I told her we just need to trust that God will take care of it."

He looked oddly passive about the entire situation, as if it didn't really bother him all that much. He just sat calmly on his bucket, eating his sandwich and drinking from his water bottle. I felt like strangling him.

An announcement came over the PA system:

"Mark, you have a call on line one. Mark, line one."

"That's probably her," he said as he casually sauntered over to the phone inside the paint shop.

Henry and Hannah suggested that we pray about it. But I didn't want to pray. I wanted to slap some sense into Mark, yell at him, at Henry, at Hannah, tell them that God wasn't an ATM machine, that God's grace didn't absolve us from taking responsibility for our own lives. But as I glanced silently at Isaac and shook my head as if to say, "I can't believe this guy," I buried my anger, knowing it would do no good to let it out.

10:00 AM

I was working in the shutter building when the bell rang for our mid-morning break, so I walked over to the paint shop to chat with Mark. He was on the phone, trying to calm someone who, by the content of their conversation, I assumed was his wife. I waited outside until he was finished.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing that God can’t handle.”

“What?”

“Remember that car I told you about, the one we just leased?”

“Yeah. Is something wrong with it?”

We’d been hearing about Mark’s car situation at lunch for the past few weeks. He wasn’t shy about telling everyone else in our lunch circle, which now included Isaac, about how tight money was for him and his family. He had a wife and two small children, and his wife didn’t work, so their only source of income came from Chestnut Hill. Their old car had broken down, and since his wife needed a car, he’d been going back and forth with a sales guy at a Toyota dealer, trying to get a lease worked out that would fit into their budget. According to Mark, the sales guy kept calling him with offers that were steadily dropping but still above what they could afford. “I’m really not bluffing you; I can only afford the price I gave you,” he’d tell him every time. Eventually, the sales guy called him back and said he could match his offer, so they got the car.

“No, but we can’t make the car payment and pay our rent.”

“That’s not good. How far behind are you?”

“If we don’t pay by two o’clock, we’re getting evicted.”

“Are you serious? What you doing about it?”

“For now, just praying. I know God will take care of it.”

10:40 AM

“Have you heard about what’s going on with Mark?” Hank asked me while I stacked some shutters I’d just sanded.

“Yeah, he told me about it at break.”

“What’s he going to do?”

“So far, nothing.”

“Nothing?” Hank rolled his eyes. In spite of my first interaction with him when he’d given me my crash course in forklifting, I’d come to find out he was a genuinely easygoing guy, always quick with a smile and a laugh. I liked working with him, as he rarely got genuinely upset about anything. But this seemed to bother even him.

It didn’t take long for word to spread around the complex that Mark had managed to get his family thrown out of their apartment. While it hadn’t technically happened yet, it seemed inevitable. He was acting like nothing was wrong, just going about his work like it was business as usual—the exact opposite of what he should have been doing. His wife and kids were sitting at home, terrified that in a few hours, they’d be homeless. I started to wonder if he’d thought through the logistics of getting thrown out of his apartment. Where would his family go? I assumed the landlord wouldn’t just let them hang out in the parking lot. What would happen to their belongings? From what Mark had told me, they weren’t even packing anything in advance of the eviction deadline, because “God would

provide.” And most importantly, why wasn’t he frantically calling every family member and friend he knew to ask for a short-term loan that would cover them for the next month while he sorted out their financial problems? Everyone else who worked here, including the mill workers who had families, made do. Why couldn’t he?

While I didn’t have a firm grasp on many financial issues that adults with wives and families faced, having grown up with parents who were always frugal about money, I couldn’t imagine spending so far beyond your means that you got evicted. It just didn’t seem like something responsible people would do. If my parents had ever faced financial difficulties to that degree during my childhood, they had shielded me from it, allowing me to believe that we were fine. Maybe, in his own way, that’s what Mark was trying to do with his wife and kids. But judging by the amount of time he’d been spending on the phone with his wife, it wasn’t working.

1:30 PM

“What’s the latest?” I asked from inside the opening of the shutter building as Mark touched up a few roofing sections that were leaning against the outside of the paint shop.

“My wife just told me that the maintenance guys are coming to change the locks. Once that happens, we’re out.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m just praying about it, man. Just praying.”

Do something! I wanted to scream. Anything! It’s your job to take care of your family! You’re making us all look bad!

While I was angry with him for his passivity and how it had thrown his family into chaos, I was just as upset at how he was presenting his aw-shucks faith to everyone else in the mill. Even though we ate together at lunch, I already didn't like the fact that the mill workers grouped me in with the Pentecostals, and Mark's behavior today wasn't helping their perception of how we collectively practiced our faith. During my first year in college, I'd had time to reflect on how I'd presented myself at Chestnut Hill during my first summer, and I'd found myself lacking in many areas, perhaps the most blatant being my shame about my faith. When I came back, I vowed to show the mill workers that a Christian could be a normal person whose faith didn't cause him to talk and act, at least as perceived by the outside world, like a crazy person. Mark's actions today were putting a serious damper on my efforts, because as much as I like to distance myself from the Charismatics, when it came down to it, while some elements of our beliefs were significantly different, we still worshipped the same God.

My efforts were also hampered by the fact that I was still going to First Baptist. I'd had a year away from both the church and the school at college, a place that had provided me with the beginnings of a new framework for understanding my relationship with God, and the more distance I'd put between myself and First Baptist, the angrier I'd become at how they'd treated me and others who didn't fit their very specific mold for how a Christian should dress, speak and act. As early as Kindergarten, the teachers lumped the students into two groups: the good eggs and the bad apples. Once you were marked with either label, it was impossible to shake. Those who were children of graduates from that same Fighting Fundie University in South Carolina and played along with First Baptist's

rules were doted upon, any indiscretions swept aside with a wink and a nod. Those of us who questioned the status quo, who wanted to know the reasons behind First Baptist's often confusing and contradictory beliefs, were marked as troublemakers and never given the benefit of the doubt whenever a situation with the potential for administrative discipline arose. For us, after-school detentions and in-school suspensions were just part of the package. Teachers were also given almost limitless leeway when going after those deemed unredeemable. In elementary school, the wife of one of my teachers abruptly pulled me from the middle of a class, taking me into an empty room and demanding to know, since her husband didn't believe I acted like it, if I was truly a Christian. Their message, which played on an endless loop, was obvious—"you are not one of us, and you never will be."

My situation hit its lowest point when every day for two years, I had to spend an hour in Miss Holliday's middle school English classes. Just out of college and about to get married, she spent every class period leafing through bridal magazines and lackadaisically assigning us vocabulary exercises to pass the time. Early on, I did something that I can no longer remember that put me on her hit list, so she started intentionally holding me to a different standard than the other students. And every day, she found something about me that she could make fun of in front of the entire class, inviting classmates to join her, too. Every day after lunch, as I walked by myself to her class, I would shake as I wondered what kind of mind games she had planned for me. Some days, she would give me an assignment and then intentionally change its requirements after the fact. Other days, while flipping through her magazines, she would

let the rest of the class work on whatever they wanted, while I had to write random, unexplained assignments I knew she would never read. Even the kids in our class that she favored would tell me after especially brutal class periods that they knew what she was doing wasn't right. But none of this mattered to anyone else in the administration, because I'd already been branded.⁴²

It didn't stop once I graduated, either. My dad had told me that while I was gone, one of my former high school teachers who was currently teaching my sister came up to him after a Sunday morning service and complimented my sister on the work she was doing in his class, quickly following that compliment by telling him, "at least one of your kids turned out okay." I knew I hadn't been a perfect child—far from it. I had frequently displayed a contrarian attitude, but even according to their own rules, I'd never done anything more severe than violate some of the more stringent dress-related policies.

However, my parents had made it clear that as long as Sara, a senior, was still in the high school youth group and the rest of the family was still attending, I would be expected to go with them—a "if we have to suffer, then we'll all suffer together" mentality. Having tasted the freedom that nine months away at college had provided, I wasn't crazy about it, but I didn't know what else to do. Not many other churches were within driving distance of our home. And if I'm being honest, I was still too clueless and immature—mainly due to my emotionally stunted relationship with Kate—to know how

⁴² Nearly twenty years later and three thousand miles from where I grew up, while I was teaching an undergraduate composition class in a small, private university, I was shocked to discover that Miss Holliday's niece was one of my students. When I called Jon and told him about it, the first thing he said was "Are you going to ruin her life like our teacher ruined yours?" Tempting, but I actually ended up liking her, and she was one of my best students, earning an A—a rare accomplishment in my first-year writing classes.

to look for a different church. Based on my experiences with First Baptist, I knew how a local church shouldn't operate, but it would still be quite some time until I would seek out and experience the operations of a functional, healthy body of believers. So just as I'd trudged back to the factory, I'd also trudged back to First Baptist every summer Sunday morning, slouching in an uncomfortable pew among my former teachers and classmates and counting down the minutes until I could go home. A consequence of my inaction was the awkward position my continued attendance put me in with my co-workers. I knew I was supposed to witness to them, but what if one of them ever said to me, "I'm interested in learning more about God. Can I come to church with you?" What to say? "Well, actually, I hate my church, and I don't really know where else you could go. So good luck to you."

2:20 PM

From my spot in the shutter building, I could see him hang up the phone and smile. Hannah was with him.

"Is it all figured out?" I called over to him.

"They're back in the apartment."

"Praise God," Hannah said as she stood next to him, her hands clasped together.

"What happened?"

"Someone in our church heard about Mark's situation," Hannah answered.

"He called me and asked me what I was doing to fix it, so I told him, 'I'm just praying for a miracle.'"

Hannah chipped in. "He was surprised that Mark wasn't doing more."

Join the club, pal.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” Mark said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Well, your prayers were enough,” Hannah smiled. “The man from our church got in contact with Mark’s landlord and arranged to pay his rent.”

“I just got off the phone with my wife, and she and the kids are back in the apartment. So at the end of the day, all that happened was we got a new set of locks.”

“God is good, brother,” Hannah said, a hand on his shoulder. They both smiled.

Ugh.

As I went back to my work, I turned Mark’s situation over in my mind. Had God really answered his prayers, or was the resolution to his problem simply the result of someone else stepping in to clean up his mess? I couldn’t stop wrestling with this question as I sanded down shutters. I didn’t want to believe that God had somehow rewarded Mark’s irresponsible actions with a bailout from his church friend, but because I believed God had a hand in everything, I couldn’t discount that he had somehow helped Mark avoid eviction. Even so, I suspected that, as He worked through Mark’s friend to bail him out of his self-created problem, God was rolling His eyes.

6:30 AM

I clocked in and went to find out from Mike if I was working in the mill or in shutters. Hopefully, it would be just another boring, uneventful day. The last thing any of us needed was more drama.

Day 38

Mid-afternoon. I was cutting spindles on the dual-bladed shop saw in the middle of the mill when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I figured it was Mike, telling me I was needed somewhere else. But when I turned around, a stranger in a dress shirt and tie, holding a small fake aquarium, flashed a fake smile at me and started firing off a barrage of words, none of which I could hear.

I stared at him, dumbfounded, too stunned to know what else to do.

“How would you”—*buzz, whine, clang*—“aquariums?”

“What?” I yelled, turning off the saw and taking off my headphones so I could actually hear what he was saying.

He leaned into my ear and yelled back, “How would you like buy one of these premium aquariums?”

It was then that I noticed the diminutive figure behind him, a thoroughly defeated old man carrying a sack of whatever this guy was hawking.

I looked from the old man to the toothy, well-dressed pitchman in front of me, still perplexed by his presence. I looked around, hoping to somehow communicate to one of my co-workers that, even by Chestnut Hill standards, something truly weird was happening. Did some random salesman really just walk into our mill with an elderly bagman in an attempt to sell us aquariums in the middle of a workday?

“Are those real?” I asked. The one he was holding looked full of both water and fish, but he was tossing it around in his hands like it weighed nothing.

“Oh, they’re real. *Real-ly* cool!” he yelled into my ear. “They have all the advantages of your regular aquarium, but you never have to clean them or worry about your fish dying!”

His bagman looked like he was debating how to most efficiently commit suicide.

“So, how many can I put you down for?”

A wicked thought entered my mind.

“I don’t think I’m interested, but I know someone who I think would really like one,” I told him, pointing at Vladimir.

“All right! Thanks!” he said, charging off toward the back of the mill, bagman in tow. I couldn’t wait to watch their interaction from afar. I only wished I could somehow use my headphones to tune into their conversation to hear Willie Loman trying to sell fake aquariums to a man who spoke almost no English.

Sara, my mom and I were all standing around my parents’ bed, folding and sorting a giant pile of laundry.

“So then what happened?” I asked Sara as I balled up a pair of socks.

“So then Art yelled at Gary”—Gary was a teenager Art had recently hired to help with Chestnut Hill’s computer systems—“and told him that he had to stop running an illegal file sharing service on the company’s servers.”

“Sounds about right. Did I tell you guys about what Mark did the other day?”

“Oh, I heard all about it in the office,” Sara said. After a trial run, Art had permanently moved her from the assembly building into the office to pick up the slack from people like Janet.

“Well, let me tell mom,” I said, recounting Mark’s near-eviction drama.

“It sounds like nothing’s changed from the days when I worked there,” mom said.

“Yeah, well something different happened today,” I told them. “Some traveling salesman walked right into the middle of the mill and tried to sell me an artificial aquarium.”

“He tried to sell it to you while you were working?” Sara asked, incredulous.

“Hey, that guy showed up at our office, today, too,” my mom said.

“He was really bizarre, right? He kept trying to push them on everyone in the mill, until I went and got Mike and he kicked him out. I mean, what made him think that a bunch of factory workers would want his aquariums, or that, even if we did, that we’d have the cash on hand to buy them?”

“Wait!” my sister suddenly jerked her head up from sorting through the clothes, a sudden exasperation on her face. “Why are we talking about Chestnut Hill? We can’t wait to get home every day, but then when we’re here, we can’t stop talking about it! It’s like it has sucked us into some sort of gazebo prison, and we can’t escape it!”

We chuckled at her observation as we finished sorting the laundry. She’d recognized a paradox none of us had verbalized until now—that even though we longed to escape it, the absurdities of life in the gazebo factory had, through our community of shared misery, unexpectedly drawn us together.

Day 49

I was parked underneath the clock and the thermometer, working the chop saw. I'd been here all morning, and I still had an hour to go until lunch. Working in the shutter building and driving the forklift made it that much harder to come back and work in the mill on the days when the shutter department wasn't catastrophically behind. Today was particularly rough, as it was dark and cloudy but still hot and humid. Even a steady diet of music wasn't helping, the lyrics seeming to speak directly to the morning's bleakness: *She woke in the morning/She knew her life had passed her by/She called out a warning/Don't ever let life pass you by.*

I kept trying but failing not to look at the clock. It was as if each second of every minute hung lazily in the air, refusing to move out of the way and let the next one pass. The monotony of the saw—up and down, up and down—was hypnotizing, lulling my eyelids down. Nothing was happening. I was just cutting and stacking, cutting... and... stacking...
cutting...
and...

It happened so fast—all told, probably less than a second—that my reaction was purely instinctual. I'd been holding pieces of wood next to the saw blade as I pressed down on the foot pedal to chop the saw, and in my drowsy, empty-headed state, I'd let my hand get too close to the blade. As it came down, I felt it graze up against my skin,

millimeters away from shearing off my pinky finger. I froze, afraid to pull my hand away, worried the blade would buck the board up into my face. The blade grazed my hand again as it retreated back to its original position. I yanked my foot from the petal and my hand from the board, hyperventilating.

All around me, everyone else went about their work, oblivious.⁴³

I shut down the saw and walked around the corner into the bathroom, shutting the door behind me while ripping off my headphones and trying to control my breathing. *In...out. In...out.* It took five minutes before I could bring myself to put my hand on the saw and start cutting again. In my two summers at Chestnut Hill, that momentary lapse was the closest I'd come to fulfilling Tim's first-day prophecy that I'd suffer the same fate of everyone who worked here—some sort of permanently disfiguring injury. What had just happened seared into my brain the fact that I was always only one cut away from losing a finger or even a hand. I vowed to be more careful, to not allow myself to get complacent, to not become like everyone else—a scarred statistic.

But not even twenty minutes passed before I was right back to where I'd started, dulled by the sameness of my work and life into a state of bored indifference. It was as if my near miss hadn't even happened.

Mike, Jenny and I were sitting around in the break room, waiting for 1:00 pm to click over on the time card clock and the bell to ring. Today hadn't been a good day to eat outside, so everyone scattered to various spots throughout the building for our lunch

⁴³ If a tree falls in the forest...

break. Isaac was actually eating with Chester. *You're a better man than me*, I thought as I saw them sitting together on a pile of boards next to the re-saw.

Mike and Jenny were both smoking, creating a permanent haze that sat in the air, going nowhere. During my first summer, I'd frequently get headaches from all the smoke. I wasn't sure what was worse for me—secondhand smoke or secondhand sawdust. Despite the mask I wore when working, I was inhaling a lot of both every day. But during this summer, something had changed. I still had never smoked, and I didn't exactly enjoy the smell of tobacco and nicotine, but it was comfortably familiar—not unlike the rest of my job, my church, and my relationship with Kate, which was continuing to implode.

“How's your back?” Jenny asked.

“It's feeling better,” Mike told her. “Those painkillers the doc gave me are fucking sweet. I think I'll need to hang on to that prescription for a while. Who knows how long it might keep feeling 'bad'.”

As we laughed, I jokingly warned him, “be careful, Mike. Those painkillers are a gateway drug.”

The bell rang. We got up from our chairs and punched in. Back to work.

Another hour, another pallet of cutting boards under the clock. The afternoon was dragging even worse than the morning. As I dozed through my work, I was prompted by the events of the morning to ask myself a question I'd never thought about before.

What if I cut off part of my finger on purpose?

I couldn't have been the first person to think of this idea. In fact, I started to wonder how many of the "accidents" I'd seen over the last two years were really accidental. What if they were the result of people who, like me, were so miserable, tired and bored they were willing to permanently disfigure themselves for just one afternoon free from work?

As I cut another board, the saw blade started to seduce me, beckoning for a piece of my hand. *Just the tip of a finger*, it whispered. *Just a little bit of your pinkie. You won't even notice it's gone. Don't you want to go home? Don't you want to be free?*

Yes, I thought. *I do. I very much do.*

I moved my hand closer to the saw, the breeze from its smooth, circular motion caressing the back of my hand.

Just do it. Do it, do it, do it do it do it do it do it do it do it—

The weight of what I was considering suddenly came crashing down on me.

I have to get away from this saw.

I hit the kill switch and took a deep breath. I needed some time, even only a few moments, to recover my sanity. So I did what I'd always done when I'd needed a break—I went to the grinding room and talked to Mike. When I came back to work at the beginning of this summer, Mike and I had picked up where we left off. Aside from Isaac, whose presence was temporary, Mike was the closest thing I had to a friend. Outside of our jobs, we didn't have much in common, but that one link was enough to get us through.

"Hey, Mike." I sat down on my favorite stool.

"What's up, dude?"

“Just needed a break.”

“I hear you. You know, it’s funny you coming in here like this, I was just thinking about what you said earlier.”

“About what?”

“About those pills being a gateway drug. I got really convicted about it.” He looked up toward the ceiling and said, “I was thinking, ‘I know you’re trying to tell me something.’”

I didn’t know what to say.

“I’ve been thinking to myself about how addicted I’ve become to them. I fucking take them when I’m watching my kids, and they’re sitting there wanting to play with me, and I’m completely fucking stoned. Completely useless. When you said you what you said, it really got me thinking about how I need to make a change in my life and kick this fucking habit for good.”

Mike’s out-of-the-blue confession started to click some pieces into place. I’d noticed that recently he’d been more out of it than usual. He usually projected a melancholy vibe, but for the past month, he’d been like Eeyore on Xanax. Initially, it didn’t signify much to me, as I’d assumed that working here year after year had worn down his spirits to new lows. I had no idea he was abusing drugs. He claimed he didn’t smoke pot because it made him jittery and paranoid, but I did know that, like many of the mill workers, he could drink a lifelong sailor under the table. Other than that, he’d never mentioned the painkillers until today.

“What are you going to do?”

“Probably talk to my stepdad. He’s done a lot of counseling over the years, what with being a pastor and all.”

During one of our previous unscheduled mid-day breaks, Mike had told me about the difficulties of growing up in a preacher’s home—“like living in a glass fucking house.” However, I knew he had a lot of respect for his stepdad due to the way he’d handled the trials and tribulations that came with leading a congregation that was often difficult, messy, and significantly flawed.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Yeah,” he nodded, his eyes alive for the first time in weeks.

“I’m going to check in on you to make sure you follow up with him, okay?”

“Yeah, that sounds good. But I will.”

“I know. It can’t hurt to have someone checking up on you though, right?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I should get back to work.”

“Me, too.”

I walked back out to my saw, my mind still reeling—in a good way—from what Mike had just shared with me. Throughout the months between my first and second summers at Chestnut Hill, I’d realized that I’d often looked down my nose at the mill workers, subconsciously treating myself as somehow better than them. Even though I knew that, due to the nature of our completely different lifestyles and values, I would never be able to completely bridge the vast divide that separated us, it didn’t mean I couldn’t operate from a place of humility and respect instead of judgment and arrogance. In my first

summer of work, my perspective on my co-workers had sometimes typified the type of abhorrent behavior I'd witnessed in my pastor, my teachers and many members of my church, and I knew in advance of my second summer that I needed to change. Today seemed like a big step in the right direction. That Mike felt comfortable enough to talk with me about his issues with drug addiction seemed to confirm that I was at least starting to act the right way toward the people with whom I spent over forty hours a week.

I started to cut the remaining boards on the pallet next to my workstation, no longer tempted to lop off a fingertip.

The bell rang, signaling the start of my favorite part of the workday. I grabbed a shovel and a broom and started to sweep my area. After a couple of minutes, Jenny joined me, grabbing my shovel so that I had to sweep the sawdust into it while she held it.

For a few minutes, everything was fine, but then she started to pull the shovel away just before I finished sweeping.

"You missed some," she snickered.

I said nothing, just waiting for her to put the shovel back on the ground. I started to sweep the dust onto it, and again, she pulled the same trick.

"Come on, dude. Get it together!"

I kept quiet, but then she did it again, and again. And again.

I snapped.

"Why don't you go mind your own business!" I yelled. "I didn't ask for your help!"

I regretted what I said before the words had even finished coming out of my mouth and her coy smile morphed into a fierce scowl.

“I was just fucking kidding around! Fuck you!”

She stormed off to a different corner of the mill, her back turned defiantly against me.

I knew I was wrong. I knew I should have just played along. But I just hadn't been in the mood. My emotional high from my earlier conversation with Mike had worn off just like my adrenaline spike from my close call with the saw, and by the time cleanup time rolled around, I'd gravitated back to the deadness of my emotional mean.

As I kept cleaning up, I knew I should apologize, but I was having the trouble working up the courage. This wasn't like talking to Mike. He and I were friends, but Jenny and I had never gotten past the “you and I just work here” phase. The “I'm better than these rednecks” attitude was starting to rear its ugly head, and I desperately wanted to keep it down.

God, please help me. I can't do this alone.

I walked over to where she was sweeping up, determined to humble myself and apologize.

“Jenny, I, uh, just wanted to say I'm sorry.”

“Look, I don't got no problems with nobody, okay? I don't got no problems with nobody.”

She stomped into the break room as the final bell rang, clocking out and quickly leaving, avoiding eye contact as she passed me.

I waited until she was gone, then clocked out and slowly walked to my car, deflated.

Two steps forward, one step back.

Day 56

“Did I ever tell you about the conversation I had with one of the guys at the foundry?” Isaac asked as we stood by the re-saw, waiting for Kurt to roll in another cart stacked with uncut beams.

“No. Why?”

“Well, I’ve told you about how tough it was, right?”

“Yeah. It sounded awful.”

“Well, one day, I’m sitting at lunch next to a guy who worked in a different section of the plant. I start talking to him, just basic stuff—what’s your name, what do you do here, stuff like that. We literally talked for maybe two, three minutes. I see him again during our afternoon break, and he tells me, ‘I’ve worked here five years, and our talk earlier was the best conversation I’ve had with anyone here since I started.’”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. Now you see why I don’t think this is so bad.”

I saw his point. For a moment, we simply stood there, the constant hum of the machines buzzing in our ears.

“Oh, right,” he said, breaking our silence. “I’ve been meaning to ask. How was the visit to see the girlfriend?”

“It was good. Really good.”

A complete lie. It had not been anywhere close to good.

Brownie had given me a week's vacation so that I could drive to Columbus, Ohio and see Kate. The visit had been presaged by a disastrous inter-family event. Our parents had met each other in the spring during our college's Parents' Weekend—a complete debacle that included a less-than-cordial meet-and-greet between the parental units and more than one nervous breakdown from Kate, who by this point knew my parents didn't think we were right for each other. The lowest point probably occurred during her public, tear-soaked meltdown in a Panera parking lot, just as our families were about to have dinner together. Her erratic behavior, witnessed by all of our parents as well as random parking lot bystanders, had only further cemented my parents' belief that I should end things before they got any worse. But when they tried to discuss it with me, I only entrenched myself in my defiant defensive position.

By the time I was set to visit, the wounds from that encounter were still torn wide open, so I wasn't sure how it was going to go. The short answer: not well. Kate didn't know I was coming, so I got to her parents' house before she got home and waited in the driveway. When she pulled in and saw me, she hopped out of the car, threw her cellphone in the air and jumped into my arms—a typically overdramatic reaction. No more than ten minutes later, we were fighting over something stupid—probably a shirt she was wearing that I thought was too revealing. Ours was a relationship of high highs and low lows.

We tried to fill our time with “fun” activities, like the Columbus Zoo and a Clippers minor league baseball game. We wandered around the mall, and I seethed as she overspent on the latest extravagantly priced fashions—one of issues we fought about repeatedly—and coaxed me into jewelry stores to browse through engagement rings. Her

birthday fell during the time I'd come to see her, so at some point, I gave her the gift I loathed buying but knew she wanted—a ridiculously expensive Coach purse. She was happy for about two minutes, and then we were back to bickering. My gift typified the type of shallow materialism I was trying to drive out of her, yet there I was, enabling the very practice I found fundamentally incompatible with my frugal,⁴⁴ less-is-more values.

Despite our numerous problems, at times, our relationship was good. We laughed a lot, our accumulated time together having produced a sizable amount of inside jokes. But when it was bad—and more often than not, it was *bad*—I left our shouting matches emotionally and psychologically exhausted. Having grown up in a relatively sedate family environment, I was unprepared in multiple ways for the toll that prolonged, outward expressions of anger took on me. After particularly nasty arguments, I needed days to completely recover.

Kate's parents undoubtedly contributed to both her materialistic obsessions and her "scream first and apologize later" mindset. Her father had the worst temper of anyone I've ever met. A die-hard Yankees fan, he would sit in front of the TV and throw temper tantrums like a toddler—punching pillows, whipping the remote across the room—whenever A-Rod, their newly minted third baseman, would make an error. If they went on a prolonged losing streak, the best strategy was to duck and cover. He would devolve into pure Id, screaming at everyone and everything, including their two dachshunds—in one instance, going so far as to hurl one of them across the room. Her parents were also vain and overly concerned about their possessions, their prized item a black C4

⁴⁴ A less generous characterization might be "stingy."

Corvette⁴⁵ with a license plate that read “KEWLC4.” (According to Kate, another C4 owner had already taken “COOLC4.”) As I learned, Corvette owners have their own unique “look at us in our fancy cars” wave they give each other when passing on the road, a self-aggrandizing habit her parents wholeheartedly embraced. I lived in terror of accidentally scratching the car on my way through their garage, knowing that it would send her dad into an apoplectic rage.

I should have seen the warning signs in her family dynamics. In addition to her parents’ issues, each sibling came with his or her own significant baggage. Kate’s brother, the oldest of the four, managed a McDonalds and was divorced, his ex-wife having cheated on him with one of his restaurant’s greasy French fry makers. Her oldest sister, a pathological liar, was mired in a miserable marriage to a rent-a-cop security guard whom no one could stand. Her other sister was a man-chasing boozehound who had trouble holding down a job. I wanted to marry into a stable, healthy family, and the Masons weren’t it. But again, I excused it away, rationalizing the continuation of our relationship by believing that once Kate and I got married, I would just move us far away from everyone in her family and avoid visiting them at all costs.

She was actually okay with this plan, as her family was a constant source of stress. However, what she wasn’t okay with was the way I criticized the way they lived their lives. “I’m allowed to say bad things about them because they’re my family,” she told me. “You’re not.” When I would pick at them, she’d try to find equivalent weaknesses in

⁴⁵ With an automatic transmission. Lame.

my family members, leading to a type of one-upmanship we'd circle back to during fights about other issues.

Another issue we were constantly battling since the inception of our relationship—and especially during my surprise visit—wasn't a fight with each other but against our own baser instincts. My goal of keeping my virginity intact until marriage was still on track, but it had taken a bit of a beating during various points in our relationship, and this trip was no exception. We were constantly drawing and re-drawing lines over what was and was not acceptable physical contact, adding an additional layer of stress to an already stressful environment. And even a full year after finding out about Kate's sexual history, I still struggled with it on a daily basis, seeing her as somehow less than whole and often treating her accordingly.

By day three of my visit, I was ready to bail, but I stuck it out for the full six days I promised Kate I'd spend with her. I had hoped that the trip would give us a chance to patch up some of our problems, but instead, it only reinforced what everyone else already knew: we were doomed. By the time I drove home, I was completely worn down, vacillating between a desire to escape the relationship for good and a misguided desire to remain loyal to the grave.

“That’s cool,” Isaac said. “Glad to hear you had a good time.”

“Definitely.”

Kurt came back with more beams and we all went back to work, putting a merciful end to my streak of rapidly accumulating lies.

I was stretched out in a hammock near the front of the complex, across from the showroom on the other side of the main drag, trying to tune out Hannah's endless commercial for her newest phase—a toxin cleanse.

“Since I started eating this,” she chirped, “I can now sleep only six hours a night and get the same amount of rest I used to get on nine hours. I am cleansing my body of all toxins. I can feel the difference everywhere.”

She took another bite out of what looked like a turd.

“Does it taste good?” Isaac asked.

“It does! Do you want to try?”

“No, thanks.”

Our lunch group had migrated to this new spot because it was in the shade, featured lots of seating both in and outside of the small gazebo under the trees, and had a hammock. Why we hadn't starting coming out here earlier, I had no idea. I was now relaxing in a hammock for a half-hour every day while Isaac chatted up the Pentecostals.

They'd seemed to take a particular shine to him that I couldn't quite understand. He was more naturally outgoing than me, and he never complained about work, so his cheerful disposition was more in line with their compartments. While not a Pentecostal, he was a Christian, so they had that in common, too. But it went beyond that. I think they saw him as a sort of spiritual partner, something that I never felt in the way they seemed to feel for him.⁴⁶ I felt both a tinge of jealousy and a pushback against it, wondering why

⁴⁶ Of course, it's not like I'd actively encouraged it.

I should feel any envy over his fast-growing friendship with people whom I could not embrace at a distance any closer than arm's length.

While Hannah continued to chatter about her miracle poo, I closed my eyes and crossed my hands over my stomach, dozing off until the bell snapped me back to reality.

After another couple of hours of work, Isaac and I were lying on the grass next to Vladimir under the tree next to the picnic table. Chester, Kurt, Mike and Jenny sat around the table, smoking. Jenny, who was starting to show, apparently had no desire to eliminate or even curb her habit. Even Chester was smoking, which was odd. As I pondered his actions, I realized he'd been much more subdued for the past few days. No cracks directed my way, and he'd even curbed his cursing. A few days ago, when I'd seen him smoking and made a joke about it, asking him if he'd fallen off the wagon (since he'd quit years ago), he only muttered, "it's none of your business." I'd expected him to rip my head off. Something was up, but it seemed wise not to push it. After all, I was being left alone, a welcome and unexpected change.

Isaac was peppering Vladimir with questions about his personal life, and he seemed happy to answer them. Until today, he'd been the Boo Radley of the mill, but Isaac was managing to break through. Now he just seemed like a guy who didn't talk much because speaking in English intimidated him. Because of Isaac, everyone had probably discovered more about him in the last ten minutes than anyone at Chestnut Hill had learned about him in the last ten years. With each passing question, Isaac was steadily revealing that our ignorance about Vladimir, maintained by our collective indifference, was wholly our

own fault. Through his broken English, we found out he was a first-generation immigrant from Romania, he lived in Reading in a community of other Romanian immigrants, he had four children, and he was about to take an extended vacation back to his homeland to visit his family.

“Are you a Christian?” Isaac asked him. I cringed.

“Yes. Pentecostal!”

Come on. Seriously? I thought. What are the odds?

Day 60

I'd found out what was bothering Chester. A few days ago, Mike had filled me in, telling me that Chester's grandfather was dying. "From what I've heard, they were real close," he'd told me. I could tell how much it was bothering him. He wasn't talking at all, and his usual, agitated temperament seemed driven inward, as if he was burrowing deep inside himself to find a place where he could bury the pain.

So for the last three days, I'd tried to do what I knew I should do: give him distance, respect what he was going through, and pray for him. I was actually trying to make a habit of praying for my co-workers, but so far, Chester hadn't factored into those prayers, except for "God, please give me a job tomorrow that keeps me away from Chester." That changed this week. Despite the adversarial nature of our relationship, I thought that if I handled it correctly, this situation might afford us the chance to get past our problems. We'd actually been making some progress before this situation, talking at the picnic table during a recent lunch break about the types of books I liked to read and how he enjoyed Jim Morrison's poetry, opening a sliver of insight into a deeper part of his life. So when I prayed, I prayed for Chester, his family, and for his grandfather. I didn't know the details—Mike's brief mention of it was all I'd heard—so I kept it simple. *God, please comfort Chester and his family. Please help them through this. If his grandfather doesn't know you, please bring him to you before he passes.*

Today, I vowed to take it one step further. I was working in the mill, so I was trying to find a time when the two of us could talk. It didn't happen until the end of the day. He was typically one of the last workers to clock out, so when the final bell rang and everyone filed into the break room to clock out, I held back. Sure enough, Chester was last.

Okay, here we go. I took a deep breath.

"Hey, Chester?"

He looked up from the water cooler, where he was filling a cup.

"Yeah?"

Just say it.

"I wanted to let you know that I heard about your grandfather, and I'm praying for you and him and your family."

I had no idea how he was going to react. For all I knew, he might spit in my face.

But he didn't.

"Thanks, Jason. I appreciate that. I don't believe, but there are people in my family that do."

"Well, I just wanted to let you know. And for you to know that I'll keep praying."

"Thank you."

Day 70

Isaac was gone, and so was Mark, both having left for greener pastures—Isaac returning home to spend time relaxing with his family before heading back to college in a few weeks, and Mark relocating to a painting job at a homebuilding company with better pay and benefits. As Isaac's hire had basically been Art's favor to me, he didn't feel the need to replace him. In eyes of the Pentecostals, Isaac was irreplaceable anyway. They'd all taken to him and spoke about how much they would miss him, Henry even pulling him aside on his last day toward the end of our lunch break and telling the rest of us that he needed to have a "special talk" with him. Afterwards, Isaac showed me a brochure Henry had given him about the "second blessing" of the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues. We laughed about it, but inside, I seethed. *I gave that guy five grand, I thought. He thinks Isaac's mature enough to get the "blessing" of his stupid gibberish talk, but I'm not?* I might not want to be a part of Team Tongues, but that didn't mean I didn't want to be asked to join.

So while Isaac's responsibilities were redistributed to the rest of us without much trouble, Mark was another matter. We needed a paint guy, and soon. Thankfully, Mark had done the right thing and given his two weeks notice, so Art had had ample time to find some a decent replacement.

He did not do this.

What he did was hire a crackhead who knew nothing about painting and promptly started screwing up orders. From the whispers around the complex, Art was struggling mightily with his wife's problems, and it seemed like it was affecting his job in areas like hiring new workers. Mark's replacement might have just stopped showing up; he might have been fired. It wasn't clear. What was clear was that three days after he'd started, the crackhead was gone, and we were without a painter during our busiest time of the year. Orders were pouring in, work was piling up, and all of the gazebos and shutters that were assembled and ready to go were bottlenecking at the vacant paint shop. Art scrambled to come up with someone else to fill his shoes, and everyone who'd seen him said he looked like a real oddball. We'd find out soon enough, as today was his first day. I hadn't seen him yet, but as we sat around the picnic table during our morning break, he came trundling out of the paint shop and up the small hill toward us.

"Hey, buddy," he wheezed at me, one hand on the table propping him up. "Mind if I sit down?"

"No, go ahead." I moved over to make room.

Everyone scowled at him through a cloud of cigarette smoke, skeptically appraising his work abilities based on his admittedly shoddy appearance, even by Chestnut Hill standards. He was short and fat, with a round, fleshy face and three days of stubble. He wore glasses over his puffy, red-rimmed eyes, his head unceremoniously adorned with a floppy painter's cap. His beer gut was enormous, an entity that seemed to exist almost independent from the rest of his body. Its size required him to treat it like an extra

appendage; he'd labored to maneuver it into a position that would allow him to sit down at the table. Mark had been young and energetic, while this guy just looked old and tired.

"What are we talking about?" he asked.

"College boy's first year at school," Chester answered.

"Oh yeah? You in college?"

"Yeah."

"You get any pussy?"

"No."

"Shit, that sucks. Why not?"

"I don't know." I wasn't about to launch into a lengthy explanation of my beliefs about sexual chastity.

"You got to find yourself some pussy."

"Okay."

The conversation quickly died. We sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Well," the painter coughed, "I should be getting back."

"Okay."

Once he was down the hill, Mike dropped his voice into a raspy imitation and said, "Hey, you, uh, get any pussy?"

Everyone laughed. Including me.

By late morning, the new guy had told Art he needed some help moving shutters and gazebo pieces around the shop. I got volunteered for the job.

The new guy's name, I finally learned, was Dave, and while he looked like Santa after a weeklong bender, he quickly showed that he knew his stuff by telling me about his interview with Art.

“So, buddy”—he called me “buddy” at least once every two minutes—“Art’s sitting there, asking me about how I would use this machine”—he pointed at the paint tank/hose/sprayer combination he was dragging around the room—“to get a particular color from a very specific combination of paints.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Well, buddy,” he wheezed, “I knew it was a trick question, because—” and at this point, he launched into a lengthy, detailed, highly technical explanation of why what Art had proposed wouldn’t actually work. I understood next to nothing about the paint sprayer, but I knew enough to know Dave wasn’t just spouting a bunch of BS.

“After that,” he told me, “Art knew I knew how to fucking paint.”

By the time mid-afternoon rolled around, he and I had struck up a rapport. He liked that I could move the heavy pieces he couldn’t, and I liked working in the relative peace and quiet of the paint shop with a guy who was cordial and, more importantly, always willing to close the door and take a few minutes off. It felt less like a boss/employee pairing and more like a partnership. Around 2:30, we were surprised to find ourselves without any work, so he called up to assembly to find out if they had anything else for us.

“What?”

[...]

“Yeah, buddy. We’re all done down here.”

Apparently, everyone was his buddy.

[...]

“How many pieces?”

[...]

“All right, I’ll send my guy up.”

He hung up and turned back to where I was sitting.

“You drive the forklift?”

“Yeah. What’s up?”

“The guy up there—what’s his name?”

“Thomas.”

“Yeah, Thomas. Sounds like a real ball-buster.”

“You have no idea.”

“Well, Thomas says that he’s got a half-dozen roofing sections that need repainted, ASAP. Apparently, the guy before me fucked ‘em up real good.”

I wasn’t sure if he meant Mark or the crackhead. It could have been either one.

“I’ll get them.”

“Sounds good, buddy. I’ll be here.” As I swung open the door and hopped on the forklift, he slowly maneuvered himself and his gut into one of the shop’s chairs.

“What do you have for me, Thomas?”

“Like I told your new painter, Mark”—so it *was* Mark—“practically ruined these roofing sections. He was probably distracted by his shiny new job.”

No point in arguing. Especially since Thomas was probably right.

“I’ve marked the areas that need to be redone. I need them back by tomorrow at the latest.”

“Okay, I’ll tell him.”

After Thomas and I loaded all the roofing sections onto the forks, I started down the hill. Over the past couple of months, I’d developed a system for getting large objects safely down the hill without spilling them all over the pavement. Immediately after leaving the assembly building, I turned the forklift around and backed down the initial, sharper part of the hill, leaning heavily on the brakes at the steepest part. I then spun around in a wider area of the road and drove forward the rest of the way to the paint shop. Today wasn’t any different, except for the fact that this seemed like the largest and heaviest load I’d ever carried.

Unfortunately, the forklift agreed with me. By the time I’d backed halfway down the hill, the horror of my situation had fully dawned on me.

The brakes were completely shot. And I was picking up speed.

I whipped my head around, straining to see if anyone was in my path. Wes, one the assembly workers, was coming back up the hill on another forklift. He saw what was happening and pulled off to the side, out of my way. As I frantically stood up and pulled back on the steering wheel to brace my full weight against the brake, I saw him glare at me, his eyes threatening irrevocable damage to my person if I crashed and caused even more damage to the roofing sections.

The mash-the-pedal-to-the-floor strategy worked just enough to slow me down to a speed at which I could turn around and start driving normally again. After I made my turn, I could feel Wes boring a hole in the back of my skull.

“Hey, buddy. Everything good?” Dave asked, rocking back and forth to vault himself out of his chair.

“Yeah. Got the roofs.”

“Okay. Let’s get to it.”

I felt bad for joining with the rest of the mill workers in mocking Dave earlier that day. But when Mike had said what he said and all of us had laughed, I’d finally felt like part of the group. For once, I was looking from the inside out at someone other than me bearing the brunt of the joke. However, deep down, I knew that going along with everyone else hadn’t made me belong. It had just made me part of a moment of collective cruelty, something I’d been on the receiving end of many times.

I vowed to do everything I could to make Dave feel welcome.

Day 85

Another summer, come and gone.

Today was my last day of work, and I was finishing where I'd started: on the re-saw with Kurt and Chester. For most of my recent work days, I'd been working with Dave in the paint shop, something I came to enjoy more with each passing day—the quiet space, the autonomy, the easy pace. But we'd caught him up on the backlog of orders left by his predecessors, so I was back in the mill for my final day. Thankfully, it was a Friday, so I only had four hours to endure. Take out the breaks, and it was more like three and a half. Outside, the weather was dreary, the rain drizzling, making me yearn for the moment when I could go home, curl up on the couch and take a nice, long nap before I packed up to drive back to Ohio for my sophomore year.

“Hey, college boy, you're not out of here yet,” Chester barked. “Grab that fucking board.”

Since the afternoon when I'd talked with Chester about his grandfather, our relationship had only marginally improved. It wasn't like in the movies, when the two antagonists share meaningful looks and a firm handshake while making amends, the orchestra swelling in the background, signifying their newfound respect and admiration for one another. It was just a moment that came and went. But it did subtly shift the nature of our relationship to a place where he was no longer so quick to jump down my throat over my perceived and/or real shortcomings.

“Sorry. I got it.”

“You fucking better.”

Today seemed like the balance was shifting back toward the way things were before. But it really didn't bother me. I'd finished my final month of anti-depressants one week earlier, cutting my final few pills into halves before taking them, just as my doctor had instructed. Now that I was off of them, I still felt good. I only had a few hours of work to go, and then I was headed home to pack.

“Hey, the rain's getting worse,” Chester yelled over the saw. “Brownie just came by and said we need to get our asses outside and fucking tarp those bundles we finished.”

We only had twenty minutes to go until cleanup time, so it made sense to cover up our stacks of cut planks before the long weekend. No point in letting them get waterlogged.

“I'm gonna head out there and get started. You fucking stay here and get me some boards I can put on those fucking tarps.”

“Fine.”

While Chester scaled the tallest stack of spaced planks—actually, a stack of stacks, about fifteen feet high—I wandered around, looking for some scrap boards he could use to keep the tarps from blowing away. Once I found a few of them, I carried them out into the rain and looked up at where he was wrestling a tarp into submission.

“Don't just fucking stare, dumbass! Toss me the fucking boards already!”

“Okay, okay.”

I threw them up.

“And go get me some water.” He whipped his water bottle at me.

“Seriously?”

“Do I look like I’m fucking joking? Go!”

I went into the breakroom and put his water bottle under the water cooler. That’s when the idea hit me.

At first, I resisted. *It’s your last day*, I thought. *Don’t make waves.*

Then I reconsidered. *It’s your last day, and you’re about to leave, maybe for good.*

What’s he going to do?

The cooler had two spigots: one for cold water, and one for hot. I tested the hot water. It was scalding.

Perfect.

I filled his bottle to the brim, sealed the top, and pressed both palms to the outside, making sure he wouldn’t be able to feel the heat. Then I went outside and tossed it up to him.

“About fucking time,” he grumbled.

I tried to act casual, hoping he wouldn’t wonder why I was lingering. He opened the top, tilted it back and took a huge swig.

I couldn’t help but laugh as he immediately started gagging and spewing all over the place.

“What the fuck?”

“You’re welcome!” I called up.

“Go fucking get me some more!” he spat, throwing the bottle onto the pavement.

“No.”

And for the first time in two years, I saw a look on his face I never thought I’d see: shocked defeat. On what might be my last day ever working here, I’d finally stood up to him, and he had no idea what to do.

Day 88

It was a Monday, four days after Christmas. I was home from college, and since I didn't have much else to do, I'd asked Art if I could pick up a week's worth of work in the paint shop. Forget the mill. Some time in the fall, I'd decided that I was never going back to it—not this break, not next summer, not ever. If Art wanted me to go back to ripping boards with Kurt and Chester, I'd find a new job at a different company. I needed to quit being such a pushover and start standing up for myself, like I'd done with Chester the last day of the summer.

Fortunately, Art said he had a special project for me that would take about a week. He wanted me to paint the paint shop. This seemed like the jobs army grunts were ordered to do to keep them busy between battles—dig a hole, then fill it back up. Dave was always blasting the walls with overspray, changing the composition of overlapping colors, making painting them a pointless task. But I wasn't complaining. You want to pay me to paint the paint shop? Will do.

“Hey buddy! Good to see you,” Dave had greeted me on the Friday morning after Christmas. His genuine happiness at my return was a nice change from the perpetual indifference of the mill workers.

“Hey, Dave. How's it going?”

“It's fucking freezing, that's how it's going. Art won't let me run the electric heaters.”

“Why not?”

“He says it’s too expensive. Okay, Art. Then why’d you put the damn things in here to begin with?”

“So how does he expect it to stay warm?”

He pointed to the corner above the workbench where a large metal box hung.

“He says that gas heater’s enough. See, Art has a Master’s degree in engineering, so he thinks he has this whole fucking thing figured out. He says that the heat from the box will blast across the room and bounce off the other corner, then spread out and keep the rest of the room warm.” He shook his head in irritation. “Well, I don’t feel no fucking bounce.”

After we worked in just-above-freezing temperatures for a few hours, we revisited the “no electric heaters” policy and came up with a plan. To mitigate our risk of getting caught by a surprise visit from Art, we decided to run them for ten minutes every half-hour. We had more than our own comfort in mind, though. If we didn’t run them, the paint shop quickly turned into an icebox, and nothing we’d painted would dry. And since the previous Friday, we’d gotten away with it. Dave and I were in agreement that no one else needed to know, and it didn’t take much to tell his new helper, Tyler, a scrawny nineteen-year-old, to keep his mouth shut.

Dave’s frustration with Tyler was evident from the first day I’d returned. Art seemed to be on a mission to find the least productive workers possible, as evidenced by his hiring of my non-summer replacement. Tyler’s lack of productivity was inversely proportional to the speed at which he talked. He was constantly chattering about inane

subjects and bouncing around the room, acting like he'd just drank a gallon of Mountain Dew. It didn't take long to figure out why Dave couldn't stand working with him. When he wasn't talking instead of working, he was disappearing for long stretches of time without informing Dave or anyone else about his whereabouts. Today was one of those days when he was not here more than here.

"How does he get here?" I asked Dave during our morning break. "I never see him driving."

"That's because he doesn't. He don't have no fucking license."

"So, what—does his mom drop him off?" In among his nonstop chatter, I'd discovered that he lived in a separate apartment on his mom's property.

"No. Chris gave him one of those fucking scooters to drive to work."

"He drives that thing on the road?"

Tyler had told me where he was living, so I knew that the main road from his apartment to Chestnut Hill was a state road with a 50 mph speed limit. Those scooters couldn't go faster than 20 mph.

"I guess. Who gives a shit? Ask him about it. I don't fucking care."

Whenever he got back, I would.

About twenty minutes later, while Dave was in the middle of a job and I was rolling paint over a section of a wall that would be a different color before it dried, Tyler burst back in.

"Hey, where were you?"

“Fucking errand, man. Fucking nothing to fucking worry the fuck about.”⁴⁷

I was leaving again in a few days, so I had no desire to get in the middle of whatever he had going on.

“Did you take that scooter?”

“Fuck yeah.”

“You drive that thing on Route 23 to get here every day?”

“Damn right. It’s fucking scary, dude.”

“You ever get hit?”

“Fuck no. But the fucking cops almost fucking busted my fucking ass last fucking week.”

“What happened?”

“Those bastards fucking tried to fucking pull me the fuck over! So I fucking ripped that fucking scooter off the fucking road and drove that motherfucker straight the fuck into a fucking cornfield.”

“You went off-roading in a corn field to run from the cops?”

“Fuck yeah, dude. I don’t got a fucking license.”

“So then what did you do?”

“I just fucking hid in the fucking woods until it fucking seemed safe, then I went back to the fucking road and drove the fuck here.”

Just listening to him was exhausting.

⁴⁷ Tyler’s ratio of profanity to non-profanity in any given sentence was approximately 1:1.

Thankfully, Tyler always ate by himself, so Dave and I sat by ourselves under the electric heaters during lunch, bundled in sweatshirts and knit caps, feet resting on upturned buckets.

“How was your Christmas?” I asked. It was a loaded question. During the last month of the summer, as Dave and I had become closer, he’d revealed that he was divorced, depressed and lonely. He blamed himself for his wife’s leaving; he’d said that when he starting bringing his work problems home and taking them out on his wife, it ruined his marriage. “Don’t ever do that,” he’d told me. “You have to love your wife every day. Don’t do it like I did.” I figured the holidays, like they are for many people, were especially hard on him.

“Well, to be honest, it was pretty depressing,” he answered. “You know, I was by myself. My mom’s dead, haven’t seen my dad in ages—could be dead, for all I know.

I’d actually meant to find out exactly where he lived and make a surprise appearance on Christmas afternoon, but I’d chickened out. Despite the gains I was making in other areas of my life, I was still finding it incredibly difficult to break out of my ingrained mindset that everyone’s default social position should be to mind his own business and stay out of other’s affairs.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. What are you gonna do, right?”

Well, I could have done *something*. I was trying to figure out how to move beyond the surface levels of the co-worker relationship and live like my beliefs said I was supposed to live—with grace and love toward others, regardless of the inevitable

differences among us. After this week, I didn't know if I'd ever see Dave again, so I looked at this as what might be my last chance to make a meaningful impact in his life.

As he sat in his chair next to me, his small space heater quietly humming at our feet, I considered just how far I had yet to go.

Part III

Day 1

Two years. The few days after Christmas notwithstanding, that's how long it had been since I last worked regularly at Chestnut Hill. So much had happened in the interim that I felt like a completely different person. I *was* a completely different person.

My relationship with Kate had collapsed in spectacular fashion. During the second half of my sophomore year, my mom, having witnessed for months how recalcitrant and anxiety-riddled our relationship had made me, called one day to issue an ultimatum—break up with Kate or risk not receiving their blessing if we married. In our circles, not having your parents' blessing was tantamount to the type of shunning the Amish in our area practiced when one of their own decided to leave the community and live a “secular” life. They wouldn't stop us from marrying, but we would no longer be welcome at home. I freaked out, arguing vigorously for my own freedom and railing against what I perceived as the injustice of their decision. After our conversation ended without any resolution, I got down on my knees, feverishly praying for wisdom.

A few hours later, I decided to end it.

To everyone around me—my friends, my roommate, my teachers—I might have seemed fine, but inside, I was nothing more than a collection of frantic, half-formed thoughts that kept crashing into each other, never allowing my mind the space to completely process them in a manageable order. My parents, knowing the depths of my devastation, drove the five hundred miles to Ohio to see me and talk me through it. They

wanted to sit down with all four of us, an idea that I vehemently vetoed. I knew Kate well enough to know that no good could come from that. I'll never forget the tension I felt as the three of us sat in a lobby outside one of Kate's classrooms as it let out, her walking past us and intentionally avoiding eye contact. Had she locked eyes with mom, fireworks would have erupted.

After my parents left me more or less how I'd felt before they'd arrived, Kate and I decided to try our hand at a platonic friendship, figuring that perhaps we could skirt the boundaries my parents had demanded but not completely sever our ties.

A few days later, as the semester wound to a close, we were back together.

What followed were the last dying breaths of a relationship on life support. We both stayed in town for May term, a three-week extension of the spring semester that allowed students to pick up extra credits at a reduced cost. I lived with one of my English professors, a genteel man of eighty whose wife had passed earlier in the year and was happy for the company around the house. Kate lived with a friend in a small house on the other side of town. Each day, after our classes, we tried to repair the steadily mounting damage. We would fight, cry and make up, fight, cry and make up, our personalities continuing to clash as our values drifted further and further apart, stretching the tether that bound us to the breaking point. But still, we deluded ourselves into somehow believing that we weren't choking the life from each other and ourselves by staying together. But one day toward the end of the May term, after an especially vicious argument, we sat in her ramshackle rental's makeshift laundry room, her on the washing

machine, me on the floor, both of us completely spent, voluntarily speaking the words for the first time.

“Should we break up?” I asked quietly.

“I don’t know.”

“We can’t stop hurting each other. And I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, either.”

She started crying. So did I.

“What do we do?”

We sat in silence and openly considered the possibility. Our tangled roots were so entwined that it would be impossible to simply pull them apart. We’d need to cut ourselves off at the ground level, leaving behind two scarred stumps—a reality neither one of us had the courage to confront. Because despite all the fights, all the problems, all the misery, we had reached a level of familiarity that would take years to achieve with anyone else. We were irrevocably broken but also comfortably broken in. The thought of starting over, the difficult and time-consuming task of finding someone else, of putting ourselves through the day-to-day struggle of building something from scratch, had paralyzed us, pinning us down and holding us back from cutting our losses and moving on.

“I don’t think we should break up,” I choked out. “I can’t do this without you. I think we can still make it work.”

She looked away for a moment, the damage we'd done—her temper, my untrusting, controlling actions, our collective stubbornness and unwillingness to compromise—etched into her face.

“Okay. Let's keep trying.”

So we set up a plan for when she went back to Columbus and I went back to PA to work as a camp counselor at First Baptist Camp. We would work on our own problems apart and only talk for a maximum of two or three times a week, and even then, only for fifteen to twenty minutes. My duties as a counselor dominated my time to the point where I simply didn't have the time or energy to devote much of myself to our relationship. And for a while, that actually seemed to work in our favor. When we would talk on the phone, our conversations were cordial and even warm. We even went a few weeks without fighting. During our one-week break during the Fourth of July holiday, I was set to drive to Ohio to meet up with her and my roommate Bryan, at which point, we would all drive to Michigan to visit Michelle, a friend of Kate's whom Bryan was trying to date. She'd invited him up, which seemed like a good omen. It would be a good chance for Kate and I to debut our new and improved relationship.

By the time we'd made the five-hour drive to Michelle's house, we were at each other's throats but doing our best to hide it from Bryan. I felt something vicious rising up inside me, a searing anger I could barely contain. We were fighting about increasingly stupid issues; we spent an entire afternoon arguing about the meaning of an Alanis Morissette song we'd heard on the car radio.

On the third day, in the middle of yet another fight, the rage inside me boiled over when the two of us were alone in the car, on the way back from running an errand to Michelle's house.

"I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" I screamed, spitting on the windshield and pounding the steering wheel. She laughed bitterly as we pulled into Michelle's driveway.

As we walked into the house, Bryan met us and pulled me aside, looking ashen.

"Pack up your stuff. We're leaving early," he told me quietly, out of earshot from Michelle and her family.

"Why?" We were supposed to stay for another three days.

"Because she said no."

"What?"

"She said she isn't ready to date anyone for at least another two or three years."

"Then what are we doing here?"

"I have no idea. You don't think I didn't ask her that?"

"And what did she say?"

"I didn't get a straight answer. She said she didn't think I was going to ask her to date me."

"Come on. Really?"

"Really."

So Bryan, Kate and I packed the car, said our goodbyes to Michelle's confused parents, and drove back to Columbus, dropping Bryan off at his parents' house, a half-hour away from Kate's. By the time we pulled into her parents' driveway, I'd apologized

and we'd patched things up to the point where I'd agreed to stay for the rest of the week instead of just driving home. But our interaction in the car was the last domino to fall. I'd never said those words to her before—ever—and I could feel the edifice of our relationship crumbling. I felt a level of anxiety I'd never before experienced, a pressure in my chest so crushing that I locked myself in the guest room, unable to move from the bed for hours, spontaneously bursting into tears while violently shaking.

On the second day at Kate's house, I called my mom during one of my stowaway sessions.

"Mom. I think I need to break up with Kate. For good."

I could hear the fatigued relief through the phone.

"We've been praying for you for a long time, Jason. You know we love you and we always want what's best for you."

"I know, I know."

"Do you want me to pray for you right now?"

"Yes."

So she did. And when we finished our conversation, I found Kate outside, sitting on her front steps.

What happened next has been blurred and obscured by the space of intervening years and my desire to remove the exact details from my memory. I remember us sitting cross-legged in her driveway while her mom cooked hot dogs around the corner, crying as we discussed our impending split. Most of what we said, I don't remember—but I do remember bringing up how our relationship had taken precedence over our faith in God,

something we'd both known almost from the beginning but were too afraid to admit and confront, and that it had seriously warped our priorities, a point she did not deny. I think, but I'm not certain, that she argued in favor of staying together. However, I do vividly remember the moment when it ended for good, me standing up and leaving her at our spot in the driveway and walking up the steps of her back porch and her mom asking me how many hot dogs I wanted and me answering "I'm not staying for dinner" and her asking me why and me saying "ask Kate" and then me walking into the house and quickly packing my stuff and calling Bryan and telling him "I'm coming to your house and I'll explain when I get there" and getting in the car and driving away and not looking back.

Bryan met me in his driveway. I could tell that he knew.

"What happened, man?" he asked me as we stood in his driveway.

"Kate and I broke up."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Long story. And I don't feel like telling it. But I obviously couldn't stay there."

"Yeah, no problem. Stay as long as need. But I can't believe this. You guys were a couple I really respected. If Michelle and I had started dating, I would have used you as a model of how to do it."

His statement solidified just how much Kate and I had hid the depths of our dysfunction from nearly everyone around us. With both of us in no mood to do anything

other than sulk, we sat on his family room couch and watched poker on ESPN for hours, taking breaks only to eat and use the bathroom. What was left to say? And where was the energy to say it?

That night, as I lay curled in a ball on a futon in a pitch-black basement, I felt something I didn't know was possible—a debilitating pain, and a peace that existed outside of any rational explanation, coexisting. The emotional fallout of leaving Kate made me so physically nauseous that I threw up after a dinner I had forced myself to eat. *I want to be a man of my word*, I thought. *I told her I loved her. So how could I abandon her?* But at the same time, the burden of the last two years, the hardness I'd developed against God, my family, and anyone else who questioned my decision-making, had dissipated. For too long, I'd fought constant thought wars over the direction of my life, trying to beat back fears about my future by crafting an ever-expanding, step-by-step plan I believed I could control. As my relationship with Kate had overtaken my life, so had my anxiety. For as long as I could remember, I hadn't been able to sit through a class, eat a meal, or go to bed at night without worrying about my future, carrying around an ever-tightening knot in my chest. A part of me wanted to honor God and honor my family, but the self-centered part of me was always right there, fighting back, telling me that my relationship with Kate *was* honoring them—just not in a way anyone else could understand. Jumbled thoughts, parts of ideas, fragmented lines of reasoning—they clawed over each other, swarming, teeming, jockeying for position, never resting, never stopping, never leaving me a moment's peace. I'd get to the point at which I felt like I

was only one or two pieces away from understanding something important, something that would ease my anxiety, only to see the pieces collapse into a jumbled heap.

But now I was no longer a double-minded man, unstable in all my ways. Yes, I felt like I'd just had a limb amputated, but the amputation had been necessary, as it had removed the cancer. I might be crippled for a while, and I'd never be the same again, but over time, I would hopefully learn to compensate.

A year later, as I punched my time card and walked over to the paint shop to report for my first day back, I wondered how much longer it would take for my self-inflicted wounds to heal.

Whoa.

That was my first thought when I pulled open the shop's sliding doors and saw the new painter. I was used to working with fat, hairy guys. Dave's replacement was not any of those things.

"Hi, I'm Annie."

Annie couldn't have been a day over twenty-five. I could only see her from the neck up because of her bulky painter's suit (think hazmat without the helmet), but she was something no one else at Chestnut Hill could claim—she was attractive.

When I'd signed on for one more summer, a three-month stretch I knew would be my last due to my impending graduation, I knew only that Dave had left and Art had replaced him. With who, I'd had no idea. Now I knew.

"You worked here before, right?"

“I did. Is that Tyler kid still around?”

“That fucker? No way. I had Art can his ass. You know what he was doing?”

I could only imagine.

“Was he sneaking out on you?”

“Yeah. That little shit found some hole around back under the building, a little spot where he’d crawl under the shop and take naps. I caught him sleeping back there.”

“Wow.”

“You’re not like that, are you?”

“No way.”

“Okay, good. ‘Cause we’re really fucking busy, and what it is, is that I need some serious help.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“For right now, I need all these shutters I just painted”—she waved her hand at several dozen shutters leaned against the wall—“moved into the back so I can have some more room to paint.”

“Can do.”

I started moving the shutters into the back room, stacking them against one of the walls I’d painted beige two Christmases ago, a color that had long since disappeared under the overspray from countless other projects. Before our first break at 8:00, my back was aching and my shirt was soaked with sweat.

No doubt about it. I was back.

By the end of the morning shift, I'd worked almost exclusively by myself, moving shutters and gazebo pieces from the front room where Annie did most of her painting to the back room where they could dry. She'd also showed me how to wrap the shutters in packing material and ready them for shipment. We didn't talk much, except for lunch, which we ate together in the same spot where Dave and I used to sit and take our breaks next to the workbench and the phone just inside the big sliding doors.

After we punched out for lunch at the shutter building's time clock and grabbed our lunches from their fridge, she filled me in on the latest gossip and goings-on. I'd missed quite a lot.

Art's wife had died, and he had a new girlfriend who was working here and causing some significant rifts within the office staff. According to Annie, she was bossing everyone around, including Holly—a major mistake. Howard, the sales guy I'd met during my first week, had also died of a heart attack, leaving behind a wife and two kids. Jenny had Kurt's baby and left. Tim was back in the mill, but Mike was still the foreman. Speaking of Mike, he'd apparently tried to become a tattoo artist, primarily by experimenting on himself. "You've got to see his new tattoos," Annie told me. "They're so fucked up. He has one on his thigh that's so bad, he won't even show nobody." One of the twins—Annie wasn't sure which one—was still living above the assembly building with her French boyfriend. And Art, having failed to get rid of the scooters, was now allowing the staff to use them like company mopeds to get from building to building.

"So what's your deal?" she asked, after we finished eating and gossiping about all things Chestnut Hill.

“Not much. I’m just back for one more summer to make money to pay for school.”

Art had given me another raise to come back, upping my pay to \$12 an hour, far more than the \$115 a week⁴⁸ I’d made as a camp counselor. I was now making nearly that much per day.

“Where do you go to school?”

I told her the name of the university. “It’s a small Christian college out in Ohio.”

“So you’re religious, huh?”

It was a question I would have answered in a much different way two years ago. After Kate and I broke up, the blinders fell from my eyes, revealing how calloused my soul had become. While I’d escaped the wreckage of the previous two years, my actions still left me wounded, requiring serious time to heal. I believed I had God to thank for breaking me down to the point where I simply could not go on without allowing myself to make some major life changes. One weekend that summer when I had a rare break from camp duties, I met with a relationship counselor who told me that I needed to apologize to my parents and ask for their forgiveness. I knew he was right, so that night at home, I worked up the courage to knock on my parents’ door.

“Come in,” I heard my dad call.

I cracked open the door and saw them sitting next to each other in bed, watching TV.

“I need to tell you something.”

“Okay,” my mom said, muting the TV.

⁴⁸ Yes, week. But as a bonus, I had all-you-can-eat access to our camp’s unsurprisingly lousy food. When I’d worked in the camp kitchen as a teenager, a couple of other church kids and I were tasked with cleaning out the pantry. We found cans of tomato sauce dating back fifteen years. By the time I worked as a counselor, I’d spent enough time in the camp kitchen to know how the sausage got made, making each meal an exercise in perseverance.

I started stammering. “I’m really sorry for not listening to you earlier about Kate. I was wrong, and I need your forgiveness.”

They both smiled.

“It’s okay, Jason. We’re just glad you’re okay now.”

“Thanks. Okay, good night.”

“Good night.”

I closed the door and walked back into my room, lying down on the bed and closing my eyes. My blind spots had healed, and for the first time in years, I saw clearly the path in front of me. The burden of trying to get my own way at any cost was lifted. I’d been thoroughly humbled by my own faults, but I was now willing to listen to others instead of thinking that I alone knew best.

“I don’t think I’d call myself religious,” I told Annie. “Mainly because a lot of people use that term in a negative way—not that that’s what you’re doing. I’m a Christian, though, if that helps.”

“Like Hannah and them?”

“In some ways, yes. In other ways, no. This past year has taught me a lot about my relationships with others and my relationship with God, and I’m still learning about them. What about you?”

What was remarkable to me at the time was how I wasn’t shying away from her questions. In the past, I’d always grimaced and tried to steer the conversation in a different direction if my faith came up at work, as if it was some sort of special topic I needed intense training to discuss on even a rudimentary level. But this time, my words

were marked by a complete absence of fear. It was the first time, perhaps ever, that I was able to discuss my faith openly and without shame with someone I didn't know.

“I went to church growing up, and I'm still Episcopal, I guess.”

“Okay. Cool.”

The bell rang. She went back to painting, and I went back to packing.

Day 5

“Okay...” Annie said into the phone, barely holding it together.

[...]

“So then we’ll have them—”

[...]

“But no way by this morning.”

[...]

“Okay, no. No, it’s no problem. Don’t worry about it.”

[...]

“Thanks. Bye.”

She hung up the phone.

“Fucking bitch,” she muttered.

“What’s up?”

“We’re not getting our packing shit in time.”

“Why not?”

“Well, Janet says that the shipping people called and said the driver got delayed. But from what I heard around the office, it’s because fucking Janet forgot to put the order in. It don’t matter, though. Art probably would have said no to an earlier order anyways.”

“But we need the shipping stuff. How does he expect us to ship our orders on time?”

She dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“See, what it is, is that Art’s been saying that he don’t want to pay for inventory. He’s been telling me not to ask for packing stuff until we need it, so he don’t have to order more than what we need.”

“But it takes days for it to get here.”

“No shit! But he don’t want to spend the money. Things around here are getting really fucking tight.”

This wasn’t the first time I’d noticed the contrast between our freewheeling ways during my first summer and the strict oversight of our operations this year. The shutter department was still going strong, but gazebo orders were way down, as evidenced by the fact that I’d spent about 90% of my time wrapping and boxing shutters and 10% of my time moving gazebo pieces around the shop and picking them up from assembly with the forklift. I’d heard about how, in order to keep the lights on during the busy summer months, Art had had to lay off all of the mill workers and even some of the shutter workers during the past winter due to a lack in demand. We were battening down the hatches, preparing to ride out a storm that had no foreseeable end.

“So what do you want me to do?” Today was a Friday, so it wasn’t long until we were out of here anyway.

“Just clean up the back room, I guess. You want me to see if the mill could use you?”

“No.”

“Oh, you know what? I need some paperwork from Sally. Run over there and grab it.”

“Will do.”

Happy to get out of the shop's stickiness, I walked through the shutter department to Sally's office. She wasn't there, so I walked down a hallway between her office and the showroom and into the bowels of the building where the gazebo and shutter hardware—hinges, knobs, etc.—was kept. Sara was sitting on a stool next to a huge box of rusted hinges, chipping away at one of them with what looked like a wallpaper scraper.

“Hey, what's up?”

“You would not believe what Art has me doing.”

“It looks like you're scraping the rust off a bunch of hinges.”

“Yeah. Guess where these came from?”

“I have no idea.”

“China. At least that what Sally told me.”

“What is it with Art and China? First the scooters, now this.”

“I know,” she sighed, clearly exasperated.

“When did we start buying our hardware from China?”

“Sally said ever since Art decided that we could save money that way.”

“So why are you scraping the rust off them?”

“Because they're cheaply made junk.”

“I get that. But they didn't show up here that way, did they?”

“No. He sent them out on a bunch of shutters, and then they rusted out within a month, so the customers obviously sent them back.”

“But if we're replacing them, why are you doing this?”

“Because Art has me scraping the rust off these and then spray-painting them black so that they look new. We’re just sending them back to the customers and telling them that they’re getting new hinges.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be working in the office?”

“Art has designated this a ‘top priority.’ So here I am.”

I sat down on the floor next to her and her pile of rusted shavings.

“Other than that, how’s office work?”

“Oh my word. I have to tell you about something.” She scooted closer to me. “Art and Jackie’s relationship is really gross.”

“How so?”

“I think they’re taking their lunch breaks to go have sex in his car.”

“What? Come on. How could you know that?”

“Because they leave together, and then when they both get back, Art’s all sweaty and out of breath and his hair is all ruffled and matted.”

“Nasty.”

“Yeah. She’s even driving Hannah crazy.”

We sat for a moment, pondering how bad the office environment must have been to get under the skin of the indefatigably happy Hannah.

“You know what?” I told her. “I think I’m going to head over to see Mike. I’m kind of between jobs right now.”

“Lucky you,” she said, tossing a hinge into a box filled with rusted hardware.

“Hey, man. Good to see you,” Mike sat as I sat down on the stool in his workroom.

“Likewise. Sorry I haven’t been able to make it over here before now. Annie’s been working me like a rented mule.”

“I hear you.” He tapped out a cigarette and lit it.

“So what happened? I heard you took a stab at being a tattoo artist?”

“Yeah, a stab’s fucking right,” he laughed. “I thought it’d be cool and would get me the fuck out of here, you know? It didn’t exactly work out that way.”

“How come?”

“Well,” he said, blowing a steady stream of smoke toward the ceiling, “before you can get hired on in an actual tattoo parlor, you have to complete this apprenticeship with an experienced artist. So that’s what I was doing during the winter layoffs. Because you can’t ink anyone else while you’re still learning, you have to tat up your own body. That’s what this shit is.” He pointed to some ink on one of his upper arms.

“That doesn’t look bad,” I told him. I was telling the truth. It didn’t look bad. It didn’t look great, but it wasn’t terrible. Maybe Annie was exaggerating.

“Thanks, man. The one I really fucked up is on my thigh. It’s fucking awful.”

“Can I see it?”

He sighed, blowing more smoke into the air. “Yeah, I guess.”

He pulled his shorts on his left leg to reveal what only slightly resembled a dragon. Everything was all out of proportion, like seeing a picture reflected in a funhouse mirror. It looked like something a five-year-old with limited motor skills would draw.

“Fucking terrible, right?”

“It could be better.” I was trying to be diplomatic.

“Yeah, I know. Once I put this fucking masterpiece on my leg, I decided to take a break and come back here. I’m thinking about going back to it at some point, but I’ll just have to wait and see. I guess I just can’t get away from this place.”

“Hey, how’s the painkiller issue?” I asked, trying to turn the subject to something else.

“It’s good, man. It’s good. This is what I’m planning to quit next,” he said, waving his cigarette. “I got to stop at some point. I know it’s fucking terrible for me. I want to be around for my kids when they’re older.”

“Good for you.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

I was about to leave, but Tim walked in, and since I hadn’t seen him since I’d been back, I figured, why not spend a few more minutes here? Annie can wait.

“So you’re back,” I said.

“Yeah, so are you.”

“What brought you back?”

“The place up in Coatesville ran out of work for me,” he said. “Plus, I fucking hated that drive. It was so gross. I had to get up there at fucking 5:30 in the morning, and I’d have to drive through the city where all these toothless hookers were sitting on curbs, blowing kisses at me.”

“So are you the mill foreman again?”

“Nope, just another stiff like you.”

“Hey, did you hear about that documentary about this place?” Mike asked me.

“No. Someone actually came in here and made a documentary?”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “Some local cable channel made it last year. Art about blew his load when he heard they wanted to do it.”

“He made us all dress up in khakis and polos while they were shooting,” Mike said, “trying to make us look respectable.”

“And Mike kept trying to get into every single fucking shot,” Tim laughed. Mike nodded proudly. “You can see him in like fifteen different scenes, carrying the same board back and forth.”

“Who would watch a documentary about this place?”

“Who fucking knows.”

“What the hell took you so long?” Annie asked when I finally returned.

“Sally wasn’t there, so I had to wait around for her.”

“Yeah, sure. Just go clean up the back room until this stupid day is over, okay?”

For the next half hour, I puttered around the back room, cleaning and organizing and then cleaning and organizing all over again. As the final bell rang, I walked back to the front room just as Annie was taking off her painter’s suit. Although I’d been here a full week, because I usually left a few minutes before her, I hadn’t seen her in anything other than the bulky, shapeless one-piece painter’s garb she wore when working. As she

pushed it down around her ankles, revealing a filled-out tank top, short shorts and a set of tan, shapely legs, I tried desperately not to stare. I almost succeeded.

Day 18

I stared up at the two forks from my seat on the forklift, watching them sway back and forth. I softly nudged the lever that moved them forward.

Bam!

I looked around to see if Thomas heard or saw what I'd just done. Free and clear. I backed the forks up to try again.

Annie had made it clear that whenever we actually needed to pick up gazebo parts from the assembly building, it was my responsibility to get them. She didn't like driving the forklift, and she didn't like dealing with Thomas. I liked getting out the shop and driving around, and I could handle Thomas. Win-win.

Today's task, however, made me rethink what I was doing. The parts I needed to get were stacked on top of a pallet on the second floor of the building, fifteen feet above where I was sitting. My job was to raise the forks to their level, scoop them off the ledge where Thomas had left them, safely lower them to the first floor, and drive them out of the building without hitting anything. On my first attempt, in an effort to avoid placing the forks too high and spearing the gazebo parts when I moved them forward, I'd instead gone too low, slamming the forks into the concrete ledge.

Since no one was around, I decided a break was in order. I needed to clear my head and calm my nerves before trying again. I went into the bathroom, which, while dirty, was still a lot nicer than the mill's facilities.

It wasn't until after I'd splashed water on my face that I realized the paper towel dispenser was empty. In the hopes that someone had stored some extras in the cabinets under the sink, I pulled open the top drawer.

PLAYBOY.

The name glared at me from the top of the magazine, a nearly naked woman smiling cheerily just beneath it.

I froze, caught completely off-guard by the image in front of me. While this wasn't the first time I'd been confronted by porn in the workplace—a bathroom at a landscaping company I'd worked for during high school had a sizable stack of nudie mags out in the open—I'd worked at Chestnut Hill for so long without encountering any of it that it wasn't even on my radar. The bathroom in the mill had only a sink and a mirror—no cabinets, no countertops—so it had no place for anyone to stash stuff like this. Also, this was only the second or third time I'd ever used the bathroom in this building, and it's not like I'd ever had any other reason to sift through the cabinet drawers.

As I dried my face with my shirt, no longer caring about the paper towels, my mind ping-ponged between two sharply divided camps. I made sure the door was locked and paced furiously back and forth. My baser emotions and my conscience grappled with each other for the upper hand as I glanced at the cover, then away, at the cover, then away. I knew what I should do, but I certainly didn't feel like doing it. I had no idea which side would win out. Ever since my relationship with Kate had ended, I had sworn off pushing the limits of what I thought might be acceptable—or at least not terrible—sexual behavior. I was still a virgin and still planning to stay that way until I got married,

but my newfound desire to get right with God had also manifested itself in redoubled efforts to actively practice chastity, avoiding not just the actual act of sex but anything sexual in nature.

I stopped pacing and stared myself down in the mirror. In a split-second move, I slammed the drawer shut and ran out of the bathroom, promising myself that, if I was ever in the assembly building and had to go, I'd wait until I made it back to paint shop or the mill.

By mid-afternoon, it was almost unbearably hot in the paint shop, the stickiness of the paint fumes that hung in the air only compounding the misery. Annie had been paged to the office a few minutes earlier, leaving me with the job of changing out the vent filters. As she'd explained it, the vent system in our shop, which was designed to catch and remove the fumes from her spray gun, could catch on fire if the filters weren't changed regularly, because it wasn't built correctly (or up to code). So every day or two, I'd go into the inset hole in the middle of the shop and pull from the giant screen a few dozen hot, tacky rectangles that looked like they were coated in tar, replacing them with filters that looked similar to what fit into home furnace systems.

I'd finished the job by the time she got back, steaming from yet another logistical problem that originated from the infighting between Art's girlfriend Jackie and the rest of the office staff. As she complained about the newest issue that would keep us from getting our jobs done, the phone rang.

"Hang on," she said, yanking the receiver off the hook.

“Yeah?”

[...]

“I know, Thomas. I just got out of a fucking meeting about it. They’re fucking everything up in there.”

[...]

“I can’t do nothing about it!”

[...]

“Well, talk to them, because it’s not our fault. We’re just waiting on your shit.”

[...]

“All right. Bye.”

She slammed the receiver down.

“Fucking Thomas is crawling up in my ass over us not getting this shipment out, but what it is, is that we can’t paint it until the office people figure out if the customer changed his fucking mind or not about the color.”

“Gotcha,” I said, not knowing how else to respond.

One of the elements of working at Chestnut Hill that hadn’t bothered me until this summer was the near-universal negativity and backstabbing among the workers. Annie wasn’t the only one to talk one way to co-workers’ faces’ only to turn around and badmouth them the second they walked out of earshot. Everyone did it. My first summer was marked by fear and shame, my second by a calloused heart due my relationship with Kate that felt little other than defensiveness and anger. However, now that I was a year removed from shedding the emotional shell I’d developed during my relationship with

Kate, I ached over the never-ending dissension between everyone that worked here. For the first time, I actually cared for all of them—not just friends like Mike or Dave—on both emotional and spiritual levels I’d never experienced before. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to be a light. But at times like these, I wondered how much of a difference I could really make in a darkness that often felt overwhelming.

Before I could find a way to exit the conversation and go to the back room to work alone, Jackie pulled up to the opening of the paint shop on one of the scooters.

“Hey guys! Thought you might like a cool treat, since it’s so hot out today.”

She had a basket attached to the front of the scooter filled with ice pops.

“Take however many you’d like.”

“This is great,” I told her, grabbing a blue and a red. “Thank you.”

As Annie sifted through the basket, trying to find a purple, Jackie told us, “I told Art, ‘you’ve got to keep these people happy in the heat out there. They need something cool.’ So he let me go buy some of these and take them around to everyone.”

“Thanks,” Annie said, finally finding the one she wanted. “This should be a regular thing.”

“Maybe it will!” Jackie told us. “I gotta go take these to the guys in the mill. Enjoy!” She hopped back on the scooter and motored away. She didn’t seem like the beast that everyone else made her out to be. Then again, I didn’t have to work in the office with her every day. If working here had taught me anything, it was to not trust anyone’s opinion of anyone else until you’d experienced that person for yourself.

As Annie and I sifted through the debris on the workbench, trying to find a pair of scissors to cut off the tops, I said, “You know, that was a really nice thing of her to do.”

Annie grudgingly agreed, her mood markedly improving once we got the pops open and starting sucking down frozen sugar water.

Cheer up, I thought. It's not all bad.

Day 32

Annie and I were standing in a long, narrow closet set into the rear wall of the back room where I'd been spending most of my time.

"So here's what I need you to do," she told me. "These buckets need to be stacked three high along each side of the wall, so that if I need to, I can get to any of them."

"What's in them?"

"Are you shitting me?" she laughed. "Paint, you dumb motherfucker. What did you think was in them, water?"

"Well," I stammered, trying to save face, "I've never been in here before."

She eyed me sideways. "Yeah, okay."

I normally wouldn't say something so boneheaded, but I wasn't thinking straight. The scant space inside the closet forced her so close to me that I could smell the soap she'd used that morning, and despite spending all day in our muggy paint shop, wearing a head-to-toe suit made of plastic, she still smelled nice. Like a single drop of water on the tongue of a man lost for days in the desert, I felt a rush of emotion I hadn't experienced in what seemed like ages.

I'd learned over the past year that a "clean break" at the end of a messy relationship was, at least for me, completely unattainable. I'd cut Kate out of my life completely, but she continued to cast a long shadow over my actions. Shortly after I ended it, I vowed to take as much time as I needed as a single man to figure out my priorities. I knew I might

never completely emotionally heal, but I also knew that I had a long way to go before I could put myself back on the market. So I vowed to spend my entire junior year of college consciously avoiding the opposite sex. And while it didn't completely work out that way—I did strike up a few friendships with girls that I wouldn't have minded seeing progress beyond friendship—a part of me that knew I wasn't yet ready for another go-around in the dating scene consistently overpowered the part of me that longed for female companionship. I met my goal. No dates. No girlfriends. Just me, figuring out who I was and who I wanted to be.

So when I came back to Chestnut Hill as a reformed man, only to find out that my only consistent co-worker could just as easily work as a model instead of a painter, I panicked. I had foresworn the temptations of the flesh, but situations like this one weren't exactly making it easy on me. Not that I would have tried to make a move, as that type of behavior wasn't in my nature. Plus, although I didn't know much about her personal life, I knew she was a married woman with children. But that didn't mean working side by side with a pretty woman day after day couldn't still awaken the pangs of longing I'd felt throughout the past year—not for some sort of base sexual contact, but for a level of companionship with a woman that could combat the loneliness I'd often felt while single.

“You have kids, right?” I asked her as we emerged from the closet.

“Yeah, two boys.”

“How old are they?”

“Allen is five and Cary is two.”

“That's really cool.”

“I love having kids.”

“How do you balance it with work? Does your husband stay home with them?”

“No, he works for a car company. We’ve both always worked.”

I’d only ever caught a glimpse of her husband once, when he showed up one day to take Annie out to lunch in his gigantic truck. He was tall, with a shaved head and an abundance of tattoos on his upper arms. He looked like he’d fit right in here.

“So you do daycare, then?”

“Yeah, and they don’t like it. Allen cries when I drop him off and begs me not to leave him, but I just tell him, ‘Mommy’s got to work.’”

“So do you think it’s worth it, working full-time?”

“I want to make money. I want to be secure. When I was growing up, we didn’t have shit, so I’m going to make sure we have plenty. We already have a house and boat.”

“So even after paying for daycare, you still make enough that it’s worth it?”

“It’s only about \$10,000 per year. Day care’s fucking expensive. But you got to have money to do what you want.”

Ten grand? I thought. *That’s it?* As she walked away from me, put on her breathing mask and returned to painting, I was left to ponder what she’d just revealed. It saddened me to think that she was missing the formative years of her boys’ lives for a job that, after childcare expenses, paid next to nothing.

Another summer, another set of lunch mates. For the past few weeks, Annie and I had been going over to shutters to eat with guys like Hank and Chuck, another one of the

shutter workers. When we first started eating with the guys, I only knew a few things about Chuck—he was built like a tank, he had a penchant for dating strippers, his brother also worked in the shutter department, and he was the centerpiece of one of Art’s more boneheaded ideas about how to improve productivity in their department. For what seemed like ages, shutters was always falling behind, and Art wanted a reason why. Hank claimed problems with the supply chain—specifically, that too many people needed simultaneous access to too few machines, creating a bottleneck not dissimilar to when two of the three lanes on an interstate are shut down due to construction.⁴⁹ Art proposed a solution that the department embraced: the creation of a second shift, during which a select group of shutter workers, overseen by Chuck, would work through the night, performing the prep work for shutters that the day workers would then finish.

In cooking up this idea, Art made a series of egregiously inaccurate assumptions—that everyone on the night shift, despite being completely unsupervised, would work as diligently as the day shift workers; that the night shift workers wouldn’t abuse the wide berth of freedom given to them; that Chuck was a capable leader and not a lazy scumbag. Immediately following its implementation, shutters went from bad to worse. Day shift workers complained that they’d leave one day, come back the next, and no work would be done. Tales began to trickle out of the night shift camp, workers bragging about how they’d drink all night, pounding beer after beer during long breaks that were punctuated by intermittent spurts of drunkenly operating the machinery. Instead of setting an example of responsible leadership, Chuck was treating the department less like a place of

⁴⁹ A problem with which all Pennsylvania drivers, especially those with commutes on the PA Turnpike, are intimately familiar.

business and more like the neighborhood watering hole, frequently inviting his buddies to come in to work and drink with him. Some of them were getting tanked and passing out on top of machines that could take off a limb without breaking a sweat.

Art gave it a few weeks, then nixed the night shift. Everything went back to the way it had been. Amazingly, no one got fired.

Today, our lunch crowd was comprised of Annie, Sara, Hank, Chuck, Chuck's brother Bart, a couple of college guys hired in shutters for the summer, and me. For whatever reason, the two college guys almost always sat on the outskirts of our makeshift circle of chairs, talking among themselves, leaving the rest of us to talk in typical Chestnut Hill fashion—in fits and starts, never moving beyond the surface of any one topic—about whatever someone happened to bring up.

“Hey, did you guys see that celebrity dancing show the other night?” Bart asked us.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Annie laughed.

“I did see some of that,” Hank said. “It was pretty funny. I'd never seen it before. Evander Holyfield was on there, right?”

“Yeah, and he was doing pretty damn good,” Bart answered. “He was cracking me up out there on that dance floor.”

I had no clue about the show they were discussing, as I hadn't watched much TV so far this summer. While I was no longer on my “TV is evil” kick, I'd been spending the summer in a state of constant intellectual and spiritual hunger, which meant I spent most of my time outside of work either studying the New Testament or reading some other challenging work of literature. Even during work hours, since I was finally working in a

quiet building, I'd ditched the music in favor of sermons and lectures, devouring sermons on Reformed Calvinism—the only strand of Christianity that satisfied the intellectual side of my spiritual cravings—for hours on end. Annie laughed at me when she found out what I was listening to all day, but I didn't mind. In contrast to my previous summers of work at Chestnut Hill, my interactions with the other workers were now marked by a near-complete absence of fear. Today during lunch, I was reading a small book devoted entirely to two verses of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans—something I wouldn't have dreamed of bringing in to work during either of my first two summers. I doubted anyone knew what I was reading, and no one cared enough to ask, which was still okay with me. At least I was no longer ashamed of who I was.

I looked up from my book and asked, "What channel was it on?"

Hank looked at Bart. "I don't know. Bart, what channel was it on?"

He thought for a minute. "I don't remember. NBC?"

"No, it wasn't that."

They chewed and thought.

"ABC. It was ABC."

"Yep. That's it."

I nodded and went back to reading. They went back to eating. We all fell back into a relaxed silence, until Chuck started talking about his relationship with his current girlfriend, bragging about how easy it was.

"We don't fight. Ever. If we did, I'd have to smack her around," he smirked. "Women need a little of that every once in a while."

“What the hell?” Annie looked at him sideways, clearly peeved. “Are you serious?”

Chuck, who—despite sitting between two women—must have thought his comments would have been received with laughter and high fives by the men in our lunch circle, started backpedaling.

“Well...not really,” he stammered, babbling on about how he joking, trying to undo what he’d just said as the rest of us shook our heads at his stupidity.

“Could you believe that shit Chuck was saying?” Annie asked me once we were back in the paint shop.

“It was surprising, even coming from him.”

“He’s a fucking dirtbag.”

While I thought what he’d said was disgusting, I didn’t want to get involved in another put-down session, so I bolted for the solitude of the back room, slipping on my headphones, hoping to discern some wisdom from what I was listening to that would help me effectively deal with this type of situation in the future.

Earlier in the month, I’d also made a long-overdue change that was helping me cope with my issues at work: I quit First Baptist for good. During the previous summer, when I’d worked as a camp counselor, a group of male counselors would sit outside our A-frame cabins in the woods after the campers had gone to sleep and talk about almost anything: girls, college, theology, particularly funny or frustrating campers, anything else that happened to cross our minds. During one of our conversations, the head counselor started talking about a new church about twenty minutes away called the Bridge that he’d

visited a few times. “It’s awesome,” he told us. “It’s not anything like First Baptist. The teaching is spot-on, and the music is incredible. It’s a lot of people our age, and it’s just completely full of life. God seems to be doing some amazing stuff there.” As counselors at First Baptist’s camp, we were required to attend services at their church every Sunday morning, a policy most of us didn’t like but grudgingly accepted. The more I’d heard about the Bridge, the more I’d wanted to check it out, and after talking it over with my parents, I finally did.

The difference was evident from the second I walked through the door. Everywhere I looked, guys and girls my age were excited about being a part of what was happening, a concept that was totally foreign to me. For as long as I could remember, “going to church” was a shudder-inducing phrase that evoked feelings of boredom and dread and images of hard-backed pews, solemn music, and red-faced pastors railing against anything and everything. It was nothing more than something to be skipped by faking sick and staying home in bed. But at The Bridge, the pastor, a wiry Italian named Phil who dressed casually (shorts and a t-shirt) and spoke eloquently, was speaking directly to my needs, and as I talked with the people around me that night after the service, I was taken aback—in a good way—by their friendliness. I even saw a few fellow escapees from First Baptist. They had never seemed happier.

Since then, I’d gone every week, my Sunday evenings quickly becoming my favorite part of the week. The services went for hours, but only because no one wanted to leave. The second time I was there, the lead singer of the band told me that he’d met people who were driving from as far as Washington D.C. to be a part of what was happening.

Since I was young, I was warned against these types of churches that didn't fit the Fundie mold; their theology was to be regarded as highly suspect due to their "worldly" ways. But I hadn't heard anything so far that I thought was even remotely off base. In fact, the teaching was truer and more relevant to me than anything I'd heard at First Baptist for years, helping me come to grips with what I needed in my relationship with God as I moved into adulthood. It almost felt too good to be true.

Day 44

I was supposed to be gone on vacation for the entire week. Instead, I was back at work on Thursday, and Annie wanted to know why. I avoided giving her a straight answer. She didn't deserve to know. No one here did.

I'd found out about a trip the Bridge was taking to Ocean City, New Jersey that was open to anyone. The church was fronting the cost to rent the houses, and anyone who wanted to be a part of it was welcome. They planned to collect money to defray the costs through glass jars set up around the rental houses. You put in whatever you could afford, and the Bridge would cover the rest. The week before the trip, Phil told us during one of his talks that the purpose of the trip was twofold: to build relationships with each other and to reach out to those at the shore who didn't know God.

The first few days of the week were great. I'd made enough inroads during the last month and a half to not feel awkward around the people who'd been a part of the church for a year or more (it had only been around for that long), and everyone welcomed me as if I'd been a part of the social fabric of the community since the beginning. We spent our days at the beach and on the boardwalk, laying out, playing volleyball and inviting anyone who wanted to get to know us to come back to where we were staying to hang out. The entire approach The Bridge promoted for sharing our faith was profoundly different from how I'd been raised at First Baptist to evangelize. People at First Baptist witnessed by briefly venturing out from their cocoons, knocking on the doors of strangers

in unfamiliar neighborhoods, handing out poorly written tracts with oversimplified explanations of the Gospel, then scurrying back to the protection of their own entrenched Christian community. Building relationships with non-believers was discouraged, as we were only supposed to keep the company of the righteous. Developing friendships with heathens could lead to succumbing to their corrupting influence and ultimately to backsliding—every Fundie’s worst-case scenario. Therefore, the hit-and-run approach was First Baptist’s approved method for sharing the Gospel, as they believed it kept the flock unsullied by the world’s perverted ideas while still getting the good news to the damned. If by some miracle this actually worked (something I personally never witnessed), they assumed that God would lead that person inside the protective bubble they’d constructed for themselves.

But at the Bridge, this idea was turned on its head. People in leadership positions bought into and promoted the idea that people wouldn’t trust you with ideas as radical as the Gospel unless you first proved to them that you were a trustworthy person who actually cared about them. They preached sharing Christ through action as much as through words, something I’d never before seen practiced in a church setting.

On Tuesday, after we’d been at the shore for three days and I’d established a smaller group of friends, a few of us were lying on towels at the beach in the middle of the afternoon when my dad called me.

“Hey, Jason, I have some news for you.” His tone of voice sounded like he was about to update me on a changing cloud formation above our house.

“You remember Ali?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Ali was a girl I’d met during our senior trip. Our high school, in typical First Baptist fashion, hadn’t let us do anything fun. We petitioned for a trip to the shore, but Principal Stevens, a grumpy, narcoleptic,⁵⁰ senile⁵¹ old man, vetoed the idea, claiming that as long as he was in charge at First Baptist High School, we’d do what every senior class before us had done—go to The Rapids.

The Rapids was a fundamentalist Christian camp run by a despot, a silver-haired evangelist who looked and sounded like the pastors you see on late-night televangelism shows, trolling for donations through their 1-800 numbers. We all knew who he was, as he’d rolled through town on a few different occasions over the years, preaching hellfire and brimstone at First Baptist’s scheduled “revival” meetings and doing double duty by preaching in our school’s morning chapel service, letting us know what rotten kids we all were. His name was George Carroll, but one of my classmates had nicknamed him “Double Barrel Carroll” for his shotgun-to-the-face preaching style. He was fond of stopping abruptly mid-sermon and calling out random teenagers in front of everyone, claiming that they weren’t paying enough attention to him. “You’d best listen up, young man, because I’m right on track tonight!” he’d boom at a red-faced teen who had been doing nothing other than listening in the first place.

⁵⁰ He once fell asleep in the middle of a First Baptist’s varsity girls basketball game. Normally, this wouldn’t be a big deal, as their games were generally lifeless and dull, but he was the coach. He jolted awake on the team bench only once the scorekeeper hit the substitution buzzer.

⁵¹ Every morning, he would get on the school’s intercom to lead the pledge of allegiance (to not only the American Flag, but the Christian Flag and the Bible) and to start the day with a prayer. One morning, in his trademark monotone, he began by droning, “Let’s pray. I pledge allegiance to the flag...”

The Rapids was run like a boot camp. Up at dawn for breakfast, followed by an hour-long verbal thrashing from old Double Barrel, followed by a Bible study and a few hours of actual leisure activity. Then it was back to the lecture hall for what Carroll called his “woodshed sermons,” when he’d work up an extra-strong lather over how sinful we all were and how we needed to rededicate our lives to the Lord. One night, when he couldn’t get enough of us to make public declarations of our newfound zeal for Christ, he told the counselors to let no one leave the room until at least one more of us stood up among our peers as a public act of contrition and repentance. “Lord, make these sinners feel like they’re lying on a bed of nails until they come back to you!” he yelled. He was especially fond of forcing every student who had made a decision for the Lord to throw a stick into a bonfire⁵² during the final night of camp, something that became a running joke between almost everyone in our class throughout the week. “Are you going to throw a stick in the fire and get saved again?” we’d ask each other jokingly just before each one of Carroll’s sermons.⁵³ From the very beginning, we took no aspect of the trip seriously. On the

⁵² To this day, the exact symbolism of this act remains murky to me. Burning our sins away? A fiery baptism? I don’t know, and I suspect no one else did, either. The real purpose behind the act, which we all knew and everyone but the straightest of arrows loathed, was for Carroll to see how many of us he’d “reconverted,” giving him a concrete number to boast about—a weapon of power and control masquerading as spirituality—when convincing parents and churches to continue to send their kids to his camp.

⁵³ I was the unfortunate recipient of many of these jokes, because during the conclusion of the last night’s sermon, while Carroll was admonishing us to get right with God, a college-aged staff member tapped me on the shoulder and motioned for me to follow him. I had no idea what was going on, as, like everyone else, I’d had my head bowed and my eyes closed. He took me outside and, with complete sincerity, asked me if I felt like I needed to confess anything to God.

“No, I’m good,” I told him.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “Because God put it on my heart that I needed to talk with you about some sin in your life.”

“No, really—I’m okay.” More than anything, I was worried that my classmates, many of whom had looked up and seen me when I’d scooted past them on my way out, would think I’d fallen for Carroll’s

thirteen-hour bus ride into the rural deep South where the camp was located—at The Rapids, no one can hear you scream—one of the students shouted, “Hey everyone, we’re not even there yet, but I already got saved again!” Principal Stevens was not amused.

Once we got there, we did our best to find ways to push back against the Orwellian oversight of the camp’s staff. The Rapids had installed speakers in each one of the camp’s dorm rooms so that they could make announcements to the entire camp. However, as we quickly discovered, they also had another purpose—to serve as listening devices to silently monitor our conversations. We didn’t know anything about this until, while inanely joking around one evening, a twangy male voice piped into our room, saying, “Y’all’s talk doesn’t sound very God-honoring, so you best stop.” After the initial shock wore off, we quickly turned against this by nicknaming the guy on the other end of the speaker Beaver⁵⁴ and making outlandish claims about what we were doing—“Hey Beaver, we’re having unprotected sex with prostitutes while doing intravenous drugs; you’d better come down and stop us.” Late into the night, we’d try to goad him into

tactics and was going to get saved again and throw a stick in the fire later that night.

The guy seemed genuinely confused by my response; he was having a hard time reconciling what he thought was a divine missive with my recalcitrant attitude.

After a long pause, during which he was clearly wrestling with how to proceed, he asked me, “well, do you mind if I pray for you?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

He then prayed a lengthy prayer, asking God to keep me pure from worldly influences throughout the summer and once I started college. By the time he finished and I went back into the sermon room, hoping to slip back unnoticed into my seat, my worst fear had instead been realized. Carroll had dismissed each school to their own bonfire for the stick-tossing ceremony, so I was stuck walking down the hill by myself to where my entire class was sitting. For what seemed like forever, I was in full view of everyone as I made my solitary trek down to where they sitting around the fire.

The jokes started while I was halfway down the hill and didn’t let up until we were back in PA.

⁵⁴ As in “Leave it to.”

responding to the ridiculous things we'd say, and each time he did, we cheered it as a moral victory.

Ali was the one silver lining to the whole ordeal. One night in the crowded lecture hall, while students from my class mingled with a few other unfortunate Christian schools' senior classes, I spotted her across the room. Her long, dark, curly hair, bright smile, and Ghostbusters t-shirt⁵⁵ won me over on the spot. I swore I'd find a way to talk to her. And by the evening of the next day, I had. I approached her while she was sitting on the grass at the bottom of a hill next to a sand volleyball court, and it wasn't long before we hit it off. We talked about everything from our common desire to get away from The Rapids to our school and family situations. We got deep, and quick. She told me about how her mom had recently died from cancer and how her dad was struggling to deal with it, how in the aftermath of her death she'd skipped school with a guy in her class to get high. By the following day, we were hanging out as much as possible, and at the end of the week, we promised to keep in contact, exchanging phone numbers and talking about how we'd call each other once we got home.⁵⁶

And we did. We kept up our friendship, mainly through phone calls and AOL instant messaging. She talked about how she wanted me to come visit her, and visions of building a long-lasting romantic relationship danced in my mind. Even though our dads

⁵⁵ She was also wearing a long, denim skirt, because dresses were required apparel for all girls at nearly all times at The Rapids. Compared to Carroll's camp, First Baptist looked like a frat party.

⁵⁶ Here's how insular the world of Christian fundamentalism had become: three years later, when I was working as a counselor at First Baptist Camp, I found out that one of the other male counselors had also been a camper at The Rapids that same week and had also developed a crush on Ali. Without knowing who I was at the time, he told me he'd been pissed at me for monopolizing so much of her time.

He eventually married the daughter of the pastor at First Baptist who had taken over after Pastor Jeremiah retired.

shut down the idea, our spark never completely died. Throughout the two-year duration of my relationship with Kate, she forbade me from virtually any kind of contact with other girls, but once I ended that relationship, Ali and I started talking again. A lot had changed in two years. She caught me up on how she was still struggling with her mother's death and her father's subsequent problems with alcohol, about how she'd started to reject Christianity, opting to leave her dad and her faith behind and move in with a boyfriend who, based on her descriptions, sounded far less than loving. As a consequence, our roles shifted from two people with a mutual crush into a platonic friendship. I'd check up on her to see how she was doing, praying for her and trying to provide her with any help and encouragement I thought she might need. But it had been a while since we last talked, and I wondered why my dad was calling me about her.

“She's dead.”

My world tilted off-axis.

“I'm reading a news report about it that I found online. She went hiking with her sister and went out onto a ledge by a waterfall and slipped and fell about eighty feet before she crashed onto the rocks.”

I can't remember what I said to him or how our conversation ended. As I hung up the phone, a couple of girls I was sitting with looked up at me.

“What's wrong?” one of them asked.

“My friend just died.” I dropped my phone onto my towel and then turned away, stumbling aimlessly down the beach, not waiting for a response.

I didn't know where I should go or what I should do. I'd never had to grieve the loss of someone close to me. I felt the dam of my presence in a public setting holding back the oncoming rush of emotions, but I knew it couldn't stave of my impending emotional break indefinitely. I wandered onto an empty jetty and sat at its edge for a few moments. I got up and shuffled back down the beach, finding my way into the empty house the Bridge was renting, locking myself away in a bathroom. Only then did I collapse onto the floor, where I remained for hours.

At some point in the early evening, when I could hear the first few people returning from the beach, I knew I had to find a more secluded spot in the house. I quietly slipped out of the main floor bathroom and tiptoed upstairs to a recently vacated third-floor bedroom, holding myself together just long enough to again lock myself away from everyone. Despite how welcoming they'd been, I knew none of them well—certainly not well enough to share my grief.

Word must have made its way around, because that night, as I lay pinned to the bed, unable or unwilling to face the people on the other side of the door, someone slipped a card under it. I slowly rolled off the bed to pick it up and read it. "We're so sorry for your loss. Whatever you need, your family is here for you." My family—a concept I'd never associated with a church until now.

I appreciated their desire to help. I really did. They'd showed me that a church could be something other than a building stuffed with stuffy, judgmental hypocrites, that it could consist of people who actually cared about other's souls. But I knew I couldn't stay with them. I kept envisioning her last moment on earth, a moment undoubtedly filled

with terror and fear. And I was struggling too much with the fact that God had taken the life of my friend, someone who'd suffered significant losses and, as a consequence, might not have been right with Him before she died. "God, please let her be with you," I pleaded over and over again.

That she might be burning in hell haunts me to this day.

I'd always been a homebody, someone who, even in the best of circumstances, needed a day or two to emotionally adjust to the rhythms of a new and unfamiliar environment. This was too much to face at a strange beach house with a group of friends I'd only known for a couple of months. I needed to go home. And, as much as I didn't want to admit it, I needed to go back to the gazebo factory, to get back into my normal routine, to find some semblance of stability to counteract the chaos of my loss.

The next day, I called Brownie to ask if I could cut my vacation short, come back to work on Thursday, and use my two remaining vacation days at a later point in the summer.

He paused for a second, probably wondering why on earth I'd want to come back early.

"Yeah, that's fine. We'll figure it out."

"Okay, thanks."

I don't remember packing, saying my goodbyes or making the three-hour drive home. The next thing I do remember is walking into my room and finding printouts of the news stories on my bed, an unexpected and unwelcome reminder of why I was back. I picked one of them up and read a quote from her dad, who talked about how much Ali had loved

the outdoors and how they'd just moved to North Carolina to be close to other family members and to get a fresh start.

I put the article down and pulled out a shoebox from under my bed. In it was a stack of pictures, one of which was taken just before First Baptist's bus left The Rapids at the end of the week. My arm was around her and we were both smiling, clueless about what the future held.

Now, here I was, Thursday morning, and Annie was pestering me about why I'd come back early. I knew I wasn't in a good mood and that she could tell, so I thought that if I just owned up to what was happening, maybe she'd have some sympathy for me and leave me alone.

That didn't happen.

My words clanged off her, falling to the ground and shattering on impact. She somehow managed to turn my situation into a lecture about all the "tough shit" she'd had to deal with in her own life, talking about how I should just get over it and quit sulking.

I started to get angry.

"You know, I've been through my own share of problems—depression, bad relationships, family stuff, the death of a friend..."

She looked me straight in the eye, and with a quiet hardness, flatly stated, "that's nothing."

In that moment, I hated her.

Day 60

“He wants us to do *what?*” I asked Annie.

“Art said to box ‘em up and ship ‘em out. He promised the customer we’d have everything out the door this afternoon.”

“But none of the shutters are dry yet!”

“I fucking know that. But there’s shit we can do about it.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Just wrap the shutters up while they’re still wet?”

“Art said ship ‘em out. If the customer sends some back, we’ll fix the bad spots. Otherwise, we do nothing.”

Our latest battle over how we wanted to do our jobs vs. how Art wanted us to work was representative of a larger struggle at Chestnut Hill. All around us, the company seemed like it was falling apart. A few days earlier at dinner, Sara filled us in on the latest problems in the office. Art had held a meeting/intervention before Jackie and Holly murdered each other. She reported that at one point, Holly wailed, “We used to be like a family. Now all we do is fight!” Sara also said that there were rumblings about how the gazebo portion of the business was hemorrhaging money and that shutters was the only thing keeping us all afloat. But it seemed to me that if we kept cutting corners by pulling stunts like wrapping wet shutters with foam packing materials and stuffing them into boxes before they were ready to ship, we’d be out of business sooner rather than later. I’d heard about the winter layoffs that had taken place for the first time during the past

winter, when Art had been forced to put all of the gazebo workers and most of the shutter guys on unpaid leave from November to April—a stark change from the year before, when I'd been working the week after Christmas as he was handing out cash bonuses. I was starting to wonder if the temporary layoffs might become permanent.

As I walked outside to get some fresh air, I saw Hank pull up in his truck, park, and carry his lunch pail inside the shutter building. I didn't think much of it, but it did seem weird that he would have an off-site errand to run at 9:00 am.

Wrapping and packaging orders was already a tricky proposition without having to deal with shutters coated in wet paint. Normally, if things were running smoothly, Annie would spend most of the day doing nothing other than painting. My job involved setting up the shutters she needed to paint, moving them after she'd painted them from the front room to the back room where there was space for them to dry, wrapping and boxing them, then placing them on a cart and pushing them over to Hank or Chuck, who would label them and ship them out. Because Art was too cheap to build Annie the drying rack she'd been pestering him about, I had to lean each shutter against the wall in such a way that only the smallest possible portion was actually touching the wall. When I had a few dozen of them lined up, they looked like diagonally angled dominos, always teetering on the edge of disaster, the smallest nudge into one threatening to send all of the others crashing into each other and onto the ground.

Today was especially tough because I was trying to figure out how to wrap wet shutters while causing the absolute minimal amount of damage. Each time I gently laid

one down onto the wrapping materials on top of my wrapping table, I cringed as I heard the sucking sound of wet paint adhering to a new surface. I knew the customer would send them back, Annie knew it, and Art knew it, too—but it didn't seem to matter to him, and he was the only one that got a vote. We'd be stuck repainting and reshipping an order of almost fifty shutters, which would not only cost Chestnut Hill a ton of money but would clog up our workflow, pushing other orders onto the back burner and causing a pileup of unfulfilled shipments. Annie and I were both livid but completely powerless to change anything. We were stuck below decks, frantically shoveling coal into the furnace of a steadily sinking ship.

As I worked, waves of grief over Ali's death crested and crashed. I was grateful to be working by myself, where no one could see me.

After a couple of hours, Annie came back to check on me. I was just finishing up the last of them. We exchanged a look that spoke volumes. Without speaking, I pushed the cart past her and over to the shutter building.

Despite the fact that we sometimes got on each other's nerves, we both prided ourselves on doing the best job we could possibly do, a character trait that had served our work together well. But our actions today ran counter to everything we believed about how we should accomplish our work. We'd allowed ourselves to cross a line, and we both knew it. I hoped that, once we went home, we could somehow put it out of our minds.

Day 62

When I walked into the paint shop shortly after 6:30 in the morning, the first and only person in my groggy field of vision was not Annie. Instead, I saw only a short, husky teenage guy with a ponytail.

“Hey, what’s up, bro?”

“Hey. Where’s Annie?” I wanted to find out what was going on as quickly as possible.

“She said she had to go to the office. I’m Trevor.”

“Okay.”

Pause.

“I’m the new guy?”

“I didn’t know we were getting a new guy.”

“Yeah, bro.” He spoke in the slow, trailing cadence of a stoner. “I’m here to help, man. Annie said you guys have been real busy. So it’s Trevor to the rescue!”

Great.

Once Annie came back from the office and clued me in, I found out that she had recently been asking Art for an additional assistant. I was glad she had, because we needed the extra help. Despite the sharp downward trajectory of gazebo orders, we had more shutters to paint and ship than we could handle, especially because of orders we

were seeing returned for touch-up work. (Thankfully, the massive order we'd mailed a couple of days earlier hadn't caused us any problems yet.) And all morning, Trevor had shown that he was a capable worker. He told me he was just happy to be here. "Dude, my last job was at Burger King," he told me as we moved a large roofing section for one of our bigger gazebo models. "I hated that. So this is sweet. I'm making six-fifty an hour, which is awesome."

That news came as a bit of a surprise. Art had always started anyone, regardless of his or her job, at ten dollars an hour due to the difficult and often dangerous nature of our work. But it seemed that our cutbacks had reached the point where new hires would no longer be afforded the same generous opening pay.

"How'd you get this job?" I asked.

"My girlfriend and I are renting an apartment in one of Art's buildings just down the street, so when I paid him this month's rent, he asked me if I wanted a job. A few days later, here I am! Crazy, right?"

He had no idea.

However, he was unknowingly serving a valuable function for me. His laid-back, friendly presence was getting me out of my own headspace, keeping me from retreating too far inside my own mind. I was still struggling with Ali's passing, and on the days at work that I spent almost entirely by myself, it was difficult to refrain from spiraling into an obsessive grief. All of the people with whom I used to interact in the past summers—Tim, Mike, Chester, Kurt, Jenny, Vladimir in the mill; Hannah, Mark and Henry from the Pentecostal crowd; Thomas in assembly—had either left Chestnut Hill or worked in other

buildings where I rarely saw them. My only real interactions with other people came at lunch, and while I hadn't realized it until now, even annoying or frustrating interactions with other people were preferable to no interaction at all. To cope with my isolation and my grief, I tried to swing away from obsessing over Ali and toward obsessing over my work. As I spent day after day in a room by myself, stacking, packaging and boxing shutters, I started to fixate on exactly how efficiently I could work. Could I cross the room in eight steps, or would it be more efficient to lengthen my stride and do it seven? Exactly how much tape should I use when packaging each shutter? Three inches for each area that required a piece of tape, or would two inches do just as well? These thoughts had started to consume me, at times becoming so paralyzing in their intensity that they short-circuited my cognitive functions, grinding the gears of my mind to a halt as I stood frozen in the center of the shop's back room, my desire to parse the exact combination of thoughts and movements needed for maximum efficiency driving me into a panicked mental state in which I could no longer reason my way through even the simplest of tasks. So the very fact of Trevor's continual physical presence was doing wonders for my psychological health. However, as I was rapidly realizing, not only did Trevor help to lighten me up while we were working together away from Annie, his goofball personality was exactly what I needed to counteract her non-stop intensity. He was especially fond of deploying non sequitur riddles at random moments, his first coming out of nowhere earlier in the afternoon.

“Hey, Jason,” he'd said as he'd walked up to me, apropos of absolutely nothing, “what's the difference between a bicycle seat and an orange?”

“I have no idea.”

“A vest, of course. It doesn’t have sleeves.” Then he’d promptly walked away, leaving me scratching my head, laughing at the absurdity of what had just happened, putting me in the type of mood that allowed me to brush off Annie’s latest round of complaints instead of letting them burrow under my skin.

As he and I worked together throughout the afternoon and then finished the day by moving several pieces of a gazebo from where we’d stacked them in the sun to the inside of the shop where they’d be protected overnight, I realized that Trevor, this aw-shucks high-school dropout, might actually be, as he’d put it, coming to my rescue, acting as the one co-worker who could help me close out the summer with my sanity intact.

Day 66

“Hey Jason, I got another riddle for you,” Trevor told me as I walked into the shop. These “riddles” of his were quickly becoming a first-thing-in-the-morning tradition.

“Okay, shoot.”

“What did Batman say to Robin just before they got in the Batmobile?”

“I don’t know. What?”

“Robin, get in the Batmobile.”

This kid was all right.

Later that morning, as Trevor was helping to hold a cart full of shutters steady as we moved them across the bumpy section of pavement between shutters and the paint shop, I asked him about his long-term plans.

“I don’t know, man,” he said, wiping a long strand of hair from his face. “Right now, I’m just focused on my band.”

“Oh yeah? What do you play?”

“Guitar.”

“Hey, me too. What’s your band’s name?”

“One World. A lot of bands these days like to hate, but we’re all about the love, man.”

“You guys play around here?”

“A little bit, man, a little bit. But I think that right now, we’re just trying to focus on getting our sound down. We’re a jam band, so we all need to be in the same groove, you know what I mean?”

“So that’s it for now?”

“Yeah, just chilling with my old lady and jamming. What else is there, you know?”

During a lull in our work, after Trevor had left to help Chuck in shutters and I had been relegated to shutter packing duty in the back room, I popped in a CD of sermons. I was working my way through a series by a well-known Calvinist preacher on Romans. Today’s message dealt with Paul’s statement, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

Salvation. A concept that sometimes felt too powerful to grasp. Yet I clung to the parts of it I understood, embracing its message of redemption and grace, fighting to find a way to integrate its power into all aspects of my life, not just during the few hours I spent at my new church every Sunday evening. I found it easy to publicize my spiritual rebirth with everyone at The Bridge, as we were all of the same general mindset. I’d even decided to be baptized by Phil, the teaching pastor, a man I’d come to admire and respect as someone who worshipped God instead of—as I’d seen time and again growing up—the power his position afforded. At age ten, I’d been baptized at First Baptist—a staid and turgid affair—but given my uncertainty about the genuineness of my faith during my younger years, I thought it appropriate to be baptized again, making a public declaration

of not just the assurance of salvation I had found but also of my newfound respect for ways in which a church like The Bridge nurtured the faith of its people.

The night of my baptism, a few minutes before the service began, Phil asked me to say a few words to the congregation. I hadn't prepared any remarks, so I spoke spontaneously about the debilitating doubts I'd experienced since I was young, how for nearly two decades, I couldn't find the peace I so desperately sought. How despite my many failures and shortcomings, my stubbornness and pride, God had eventually cleared my mind and my heart, revealing how to embrace the simplicity at the heart of the gospel.

After I finished speaking, Phil and I walked up to the tank of water at the head of the stage. We eased ourselves into the warm water, in front of my parents in the front row, my friends scattered throughout the congregation, and hundreds of people I didn't know but to whom I felt bonded by a force no less than supernatural. Phil placed one hand on my chest, one on my back. "I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," he said, easing me back into the water, submerging my body and head before raising me up, just as countless other believers had done over the past two thousand years.

As I came up out of the water, I heard something I hadn't anticipated. Clapping. Cheering. I wiped my eyes clear to a room full of smiling faces, a group of people who knew exactly what I'd just experienced. I'd finally found it—a place where I belonged.

At two in the afternoon, Trevor stormed back into the paint shop. It was the first time I'd seen him in anything other than a completely mellow mood.

“Hey, did you know how much everyone else around here makes?”

Uh oh.

“Why?”

“Well, I was talking to Chuck, and he asked me how much Art was paying me. I told him it was \$6.50, and then, when I asked him if he made about the same amount, he just laughed at me and told me that he makes over twenty bucks an hour! Do you make that much?”

“No.” I didn’t like where this was heading.

“Well, do you make more than me?”

I hesitated. “Yeah.”

“Well, how much more?”

I felt obligated to tell him the truth.

“I make twelve dollars an hour.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, but keep in mind that I’ve worked here for three years.”

“But still! I can’t believe I’m making so much less than everyone else. I was making more money flipping Whoppers!”

I bit back a laugh. I knew I should feel bad for him, but his dim-witted personality and slowly dawning awareness of his fiscal situation made it tough not to find the entire situation funny. I was annoyed at Chuck for spilling the beans, though. It meant that my happy-go-lucky stoner buddy might not be so happy anymore.

I also wasn't sure how his mood would impact my plan to talk to him about The Bridge. I thought he'd like the music and the laid-back atmosphere, and for a while, I'd felt a conviction to talk with him about it. I hadn't done it yet, as I wanted to find the right moment, but I wanted to take advantage of the fact that, for the first time in my life, I was a part of a church I was proud to call home. The people I'd met at the beach continued to check up on me to see how I was doing in the wake of Ali's death. Even though I'd only known them for a few months, they'd already shown me more love than I'd experienced in nearly twenty years at First Baptist. They'd demonstrated a relationship-oriented approach to faith that had saved me from falling into bitterness and cynicism—something I wanted others to experience.

And some of my friends already were. I was starting to see more and more familiar faces popping up on Sunday evenings, classmates from high school who'd hated the idea of church due to First Baptist's treatment of them and had, the second they graduated, dropped any pretense of a serious commitment to God. Yet there they were on Sunday nights, trying to get their faith back on track in an environment filled with people who actually cared about their spiritual progress.

One of them was Nolan, a friend I'd had for years who had lapsed after we graduated, drifting aimlessly into unhealthy habits and dysfunctional relationships. I'd invited him to come check it out, assuring him repeatedly that it was nothing like what we'd endured as teenagers. He didn't sound that crazy about it, but toward the end of one service, while the band was wrapping up, he tapped me on the shoulder, surprising me with his presence. He hadn't told me he was going to show up.

“I just wanted to say thank you for getting me to come out here and check this out,” he said quietly. “This has convicted me about a lot of stuff I have to change. I’m going to take off, but I wanted to say thanks first. This is something I really needed.”

While it was gratifying to see changes in my own life due to the influence of people at The Bridge, I wasn’t completely sure how to broach the subject of faith with Trevor. Whereas my conversations with Annie after my first day that dealt with issues of faith had always fallen flat, he seemed like he’d be receptive to anything initially, so it wasn’t as if he would be a hostile conversation partner on the subject. I just needed to go about it the right way.

Day 82

Sure enough, Trevor was gone. He'd told me the day before that he was going back to Burger King. "This job's really hard," he'd wheezed as we moved yet another heavy gazebo section around the paint shop. "I think I'm going back to my old job."

"Really? You should try to stick it out, at least for the rest of the summer. I like having you around." The last couple of weeks with Trevor had been the best of the summer.

"Thanks, buddy. I feel the love from you. But it's really hot in here, and when I get home, I'm too tired to jam."

Well, we can't have that.

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"Thanks, bro. You've been great, but I think it's time for me to be moseying along."

He gave me a sweat-soaked hug at the end of the day, and that was the last I saw of him—a short-lived, brightly burning light in an otherwise dark summer. He also represented what I viewed as my biggest failure of the summer; I'd chickened out and avoided bringing up the Gospel, my old fears creeping back up and overcoming my desire to share my newfound passion for God. When I came in this morning, I could feel his absence, especially once the negative energy from everyone else started to invade my headspace. As I listened to Annie complain about our newest crisis, my trusty counterbalance having returned to flipping Whoppers, I found solace in the fact that I had

only a week and a half until I would leave both here and home and drive back to Ohio, where I could continue to parse exactly what I believed. Because while my core convictions about Christ were intact, I found myself re-examining many ancillary faith-related issues with a new perspective.

Late that morning, it happened again.

By a miracle of grace, I hadn't suffered a workplace accident since my first week, when the piece of sawdust got stuck in my eye. But now, three summers later, I found myself once again blinking furiously through a steady stream of tears.

How it got stuck in my eye, I don't know. I wasn't even sure what it was, as the paint shop air was filled with paint fumes instead of sawdust. But it was in there, and it was in there good.

"Hey, Annie?" I said, rubbing my left eye as I tapped her on the shoulder, interrupting her painting.

She pulled off her mask.

"What?"

"I've got something stuck in my eye. I tried to flush it, but it's not going away."

"So?"

"So I think I should go to the doctor."

She rolled her eyes.

"Fine, do whatever. Don't be gone long."

"Okay."

I'd found out from Sally that now, whenever a workplace injury occurred, we were supposed to go to the new urgent care facility that was a few hundred feet down the street from the factory. So after making the thirty-second drive and checking in as what looked like their only patient, I found myself in a small room, leaning back in a dentist's-style chair, listening to a Korean doctor who spoke limited English.

“So we use machine here”—he pointed to what looked like a black light bar—“to check eye for particle. Yes?”

“Okay.”

“Yes. We turn light off now.”

The nurse left my side where he was sitting with the machine and turned off the ceiling light, plunging us into total darkness.

I heard him toggle the switch a few times. Nothing was happening.

“Uh oh,” I heard him say. “We need light back on.”

I heard the nurse stumble toward the door and hit the light switch.

“Oh!” he laughed. “Machine not plugged in!”

We all had a nice chuckle as the nurse plugged it in and then turned the ceiling light off again. This time, the machine powered up without any problems.

“Okay, let's see what's in there,” he said, pulling back the lid on my right eye.

“Wrong eye,” I said.

“What?”

“Wrong eye. It’s in the left eye.” Given that my right eye looked completely normal and my left eye was a swollen and bright red, I didn’t think I’d need to distinguish it for him.

“Oh, yes. Yes, okay,” he said, switching eyes.

After a moment, he found it, happily pointing it out to the nurse, who flushed it out.

“To avoid scratch,” he told me as the nurse turned the regular lights back on, “you must wear patch for rest of day.”

Perhaps things were looking up. “Does this mean I shouldn’t go back to work?”

He thought for a moment. “No, no more work today.”

“Will you write me a note that says I can’t work?”

“Yes, I have nurse do it. She patch you up.”

Sweet.

“Okay, thank you.”

“Thank you, yes.”

After he left the room, the nurse put the patch on my eye and gave me some eye drops, along with instructions for how often to use them throughout the day. As I left the examination room, I saw the doctor standing in front of the window, his hands clasped behind his back, quietly staring off into the distance. He looked sad and lonely, like he was questioning the wisdom of his life choices. *I hear you*, I thought, making sure to exchange a smile with him as I left.

I knew the patch would get a rise out of Annie. She didn’t disappoint.

“Oh, what the fuck,” she moaned as I walked into the shop.

“It’s legit!” I protested, trying not to laugh. “I even have a note that says I can’t work anymore today.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Yeah, you want to see it?”

“No,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “Just get the fuck out of here. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As I walked over to the time clock in the shutter building, trying to avoid seeing anyone else, I ran into Chuck, who was fiddling around with the time cards.

“What the hell happened to you?” he asked.

“Got a piece of something lodged in my eye.”

“Hey, anything to get out of work, right?”

“Why not?” I punched the card and went to my car, happy to have the rest of the day off—even if it came at the expense of a patched-up eye.

Day 90

My last day at Chestnut Hill had finally arrived.

For every day of at least the last month, my motivation to get to work on time had slipped further and further out of reach, so I'd been showing up five to ten minutes late, making up my missed time either during lunch or at the end of the day. I'd never been a morning person, so this job had challenged my sleep cycle in new and torturous ways. But the night before, I'd determined to go out on the right note, showing up for my final day not just on time, but early.

I clocked in at 6:28 and walked into the paint shop at exactly 6:30.

"What the fuck?" Annie nearly choked. "Are you on time?"

"Yeah. Thought I'd surprise you by actually getting here when I'm supposed to."

She smiled. "Thanks for saving that until your last day, you little shit."

"No problem. Happy to be of service."

I knew that inside that hardened exterior, Annie had a soft side. It was tough to spot, as she usually kept it well hidden, but every once in a while, if you knew how to look for it, you could catch a fleeting glimpse. This morning's banter was one of those moments.

"So back to college, huh?"

"Soon, yeah."

"When do you go back?"

"I'll pack up this weekend and head back on Tuesday."

“You’re almost done, right?”

“Yeah, this year’s going to be my senior year.”

“Well, listen. Here’s my advice for you. Always make sure you’re protected, money-wise. Get lots of insurance, save what you have, and be smart with the money you make.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“I’m serious. Because what it is, is that you never know when something bad might happen, and you want to make sure you can pay for whatever it is.”

“Okay. I will.”

We’d had our differences over the summer. At times, we’d butted heads over how to accomplish certain tasks, and as the summer had worn on, I’d chafed at the relentless negativity that surrounded me, of which she’d definitely been a part. But on my last day, the shell was cracking. Not much, but just enough to see that Annie actually valued the hard work I’d put in throughout the summer. For the last couple of weeks, I’d had to put in extra work to make up for the loss of Trevor, but we’d pulled through, and it seemed as if Annie was actually going to miss me.

I’d also tried to retain the laid-back positivity that Trevor had brought during his brief tenure at Chestnut Hill, and for the last couple of weeks, I think I’d actually succeeded. Continuing to attend The Bridge after returning from the beach had helped. Every week, I felt like I was learning something new about my faith, lessons I was trying to implement throughout each subsequent work week. I was looking forward to returning to college, but I was not looking forward to leaving my new, extended family. For the first time in

my life, I'd found a group of believers with whom I could truly identify, and given my years at First Baptist, that privilege was not something I took lightly.

“So what am I doing today?” I asked.

“Same as yesterday—packing up shutters. Oh, guess what fucking Thomas decided to do...”

I just smiled and listened. After all, in the grand scheme of things, what was one more day?

It was a Friday, which meant a four-hour workday. It went by quickly, and I even finished everything I needed to do a bit early, giving me time to say goodbye to Mike. He told me that he'd miss having me around. I told him I'd come back to visit.

As I returned to the shop to grab my things, Annie gave me a quick hug.

“You're the best assistant I ever had. So, you know, if the whole learning thing goes to shit and you flunk out, you can always come back,” she laughed.

“Don't count on it,” I smiled. “But I will come back to see you the next time I'm in town.”

“Okay. Remember what I said.”

“I will.”

I left the paint shop and walked up to Art's office. I had one final request.

I found him in the conference room and shook his hand.

“Thanks for keeping me employed all these summers. I really appreciate it,” I told him.

“Not a problem,” he replied. He looked ruffled and tired, but also happier than I’d seen him in a while. Maybe Jackie was doing him some good.

“Hey, I have a question for you.”

“Yes?”

I hesitated for a split second.

“Can I have a scooter?”

He thought about it for a minute. I hoped I hadn’t overstepped my bounds. But really, what was he going to do with them? There were still dozens of them boxed up in the pole barn.

“Yeah, okay. Have Eddie get you one.”

“Thanks.”

“What are you going to do with it? I thought you were going back to school.”

“I am. I’m taking it with me.”

“Oh. Okay.”

A moment of silence.

“Well, thanks again.”

“Sure. Tell your dad to come see me.”

“Will do. Bye.”

Ten minutes later, with a scooter crammed into the back of my station wagon, I made one last loop around the property—past the picnic table, past the mill and the assembly building up on the hill, past the showroom and the sign out front.

This job had functioned as an entity I both hated and needed, a prison and a safety net, an environment teeming with chaos that had somehow also provided me with some warped semblance of stability. I had one year of school remaining, and who knew what might happen after that. I just knew that I was never coming back—to work, at least.

So long, everyone. The factory slid out of my rearview mirror. *Good luck.*

Epilogue

For a long time after my last day of work, I didn't think about Chestnut Hill at all—not through my senior year of college, and not through the summer after. I didn't move back to PA after I graduated, opting instead to stay in Ohio and take a job in the Admissions office at the college that I'd attended. I'd just started dating Erin, a girl who would be a senior that fall, and the job gave me the chance to see if, in my first relationship since Kate, I could be a better partner.

Once or twice during that year, my dad mentioned something over the phone about how Annie wanted me to stop by the next time I was in town. I told him to tell her I would, but in my mind, I was already pushing the idea away. Thinking about stepping foot back on the complex made me tired. I'd come to view my time at Chestnut Hill as a chapter of my life that didn't need revisiting. During a visit home for a few days after graduating from college, while flipping through the channels on my parents' television, I actually caught a bit of the documentary Tim and Mike had joked about. Sure enough, there was Mike in a polo and khakis, carrying a board through the background of a scene that had nothing to do with him. I paused just long enough to see him exit the frame, then continued channel surfing.

About a year after I graduated, I found out that The Bridge had collapsed. Phil had decided to start his own church,⁵⁷ creating a vacuum of leadership that no one ever could quite fill. I'd been witness to this myself on a brief visit home, when I'd attended a service that lacked the punch I'd experienced on a weekly basis two summers earlier. After a year or so of trying to keep it afloat while hemorrhaging members, the church leadership voted to take it out back and put it down rather than let it die a slow and painful death. But despite its demise, its short but brightly burning lifespan had existed during the exact time when I and many other people had needed what they were providing. It had lived up to its name.

After settling into my new life in Ohio, I took what I'd learned from Phil and others at The Bridge about how a church should function and clung to it when searching for new bodies of believers. Still, the more separation I put between myself and First Baptist, the more complicated my relationship with it became. I started to look back at it with a more distanced, nuanced perspective, realizing that some of the people who'd spent many years of their lives as a part of the church and school ministries—such as my former youth pastor, whom I still keep in touch with to this day—were genuinely goodhearted but stuck in an environment that pushed them into roles they weren't completely comfortable inhabiting. The existing power structures were simply too great to push through any kind of meaningful reforms, no matter how sorely they were needed. Then, when my mom faced her second battle against cancer (she beat it the first time when I was in high school), despite the fact that my parents had left First Baptist shortly after my sister

⁵⁷ While I didn't pay much attention to this when attending, The Bridge was technically an offshoot of a larger church body, operating under its oversight while still retaining a sizeable amount of autonomy.

graduated high school, several of the people in the church reached out and helped my dad care for her, making meals for them, driving my mom to her doctor's appointments when my dad had to go out of town on business, spending time with her, and regularly praying for her recovery. When she beat it again, one of the First Baptist moms told her that, when she told her kids that my mom was going to be okay, they all started jumping around and cheering.

However, what The Bridge had taught me was that embracing orthodoxy could be accomplished outside of the ways I'd been taught when I was younger, and this understanding influenced the types of churches I have joined as an adult. Once Erin returned for her senior year and I, along with several other guys, moved into a big farmhouse on the outskirts of the college town, she and I joined a house church, a small part of a growing movement of Christians who believe that "the Church" is not a physical place but a living organism comprised of like-minded people who put their faith into practice by meeting in homes in their communities instead of only at a centralized location. It was there that we found a new family, a home away from home, a place where our faith could continue to grow, free from the negativity and abuse that had characterized my former understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

My memories of First Baptist will never leave me, nor will the scars from some of the more traumatic experiences. But I no longer see it through the simplistic lens through which I viewed not just it but my entire life during my youth. For better and for worse, I will carry its influence, in ways I'm still learning to understand, for the rest of my life.

Two summers after I'd left Chestnut Hill, I drove down the same back roads to the factory. I planned out my moves ahead of time; I'd arrive late in the afternoon, after the 3:00 pm break had ended, so that I could visit with Annie for a few minutes before slipping into Mike's workroom unnoticed—especially by Chester. Although I knew it was irrational, even after being gone for so long, the thought of interacting once again intimidated me. After talking with Mike, I'd slip out before 3:50 pm, when everyone started sweeping up the day's sawdust.

I parked in front of the shutter building and then swung open the hanging doors of the paint shop. Once Annie saw me, she gave me a hug and congratulated me on graduating—"so you're real fucking smart now, huh?"—and quickly launched into all the latest gossip. My timing was apparently impeccable, as I was about to witness Hank and Chuck getting fired. As Annie told it, someone in the office finally figured out how, several years earlier, they had devised and implemented a scheme to scam Art into paying them for thousands of hours they didn't actually work. Basically, they were committing time card fraud. One morning, Hank would punch both his and Chuck's time card, even though Chuck wouldn't actually show up until around 9:00 am, and the next morning, they'd switch. Some days, they also wouldn't punch out at lunch time, collecting extra time that they would bank toward future mornings when they'd simply show up and clock in late, always making sure that their total hours hit exactly forty by the time they punched out on Friday. Everyone knew that no one in the office looked closely at our time cards as long as our hours added up at the end of each week, but it was still remarkable that they were able to pull it off for so long.

“Come here,” Annie motioned me toward the inside the doorway of the paint shop.
“Maybe we’ll see Hank when he walks out of the building.”

We stood by the door for a few minutes, staring down the space between us and Hank’s truck.

“Hey, is Mike still here?” I asked while we waited.

“Yeah.”

“So the tattoo thing never worked out?”

She snorted. “Hell, no. I don’t think he ever even fucking tried to go back to that, especially after he got divorced.”

“What? He’s divorced?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know why?”

“Nope.”

“All right,” I said as we continued to stare out the crack in the door. “I’m going to go over and talk to him for a few.”

“Okay,” she said, not breaking her concentration. “Stop back and say goodbye before you take off.”

I walked over to the grinding room and popped my head in the door.

“Hey, hey!” Mike said as I walked into the room. “Look who it fucking is!”

“Hey, man. How are you?”

“Shit, man—a lot’s happened since you’ve been gone.”

“Yeah, like what?” I didn’t want him to know that I already knew, which turned out to be the best course of action. As we talked, he gradually revealed that his wife had cheated on him.

“And I fucking knew it, too—that was the worst part,” he told me, blowing smoke at the ceiling.

“How’d you know?”

“She’d be out at weird hours of the night and then come home and have some weird fucking excuse. I knew she was lying.”

“Did you know the guy?”

“No. I think that made it a little easier.”

“So what happened with you and the kids?”

“Well, for a while, we agreed that I’d move into the basement and live down there, to make the transition easier on them.”

“And that worked? You were able to do that?”

“Yeah. You know, I don’t really blame her for what she did. I was a shitty husband and a shitty dad.”

“I feel awful for you.”

“Don’t. I know what she did was wrong, but I kind of deserved it, too. We manage to be friends now, which is good for the kids.”

“Hey, did you hear about Hank and Chuck?” I wanted to change the subject to something that might cheer him up, and around here, the comeuppance/misfortune of others was what qualified.

“No. What?”

“They’re getting fired today.”

“Fuck. Seriously? How do you know?”

“Annie just told me. They’ve been scamming the company out of money for years.”

“Oh, we’ve got to tell Tim about this.”

Well, that didn’t take long, I thought. Twenty minutes, and I’m right back in the thick of it.

Mike shut down the grinding tool and we went out onto the main floor, where he told me to repeat what I’d told him to Tim. Almost immediately, we had a stakeout going, scoping out the grounds for any movement out of the office. In the intervening moments, Hank must have left, because his truck was gone. Chuck’s truck, however, was still there.

Eventually, we saw him come out. I’m not sure what we were hoping for—yelling, cursing, destruction of property—but all he did was throw his lunch pail in the back of his truck, get in, and drive off.

Mike and I walked back to the grinding room, where we continued to talk until the final bell rang.

“I hope things get better for you,” I told him as I got up from the stool.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate that. It was good to see you.”

“You, too. I gotta go say goodbye to Annie.”

“All right. Stop back in the next time you’re home.”

“Will do.”

Years went by. I left my job in Admissions. Erin and I got married, and with the entirety of our savings, we put a down payment on a turn-of-the-century fixer-upper in a crumbling part of Dayton, where she worked as a nurse while I attended graduate school and got my feet wet teaching first-year composition. Two years later, despite the housing collapse, we managed to unload it without taking too much of a hit just before moving out West, waving goodbye to Ohio and its miserable, gray winters for good.

But despite the passage of time, my realizations about what Chestnut Hill had meant to me kept me coming back to check up on people like Annie and Mike. We'd never exchanged contact information or got together outside the confines of the factory—when I proposed grabbing lunch off the Chestnut Hill grounds to Mike on one of my later visits, he awkwardly begged off—because we knew that our relationships would never work outside the place that had forced us into each other's lives. However, I eventually realized that those relationships, with all of their dysfunction and back-stabbing, had functioned as a baptism by fire, pushing me out of Fundamentalism's self-imposed isolation and forcing me to learn how to put into practice the core elements of my faith in an often hostile environment. In a roundabout way, even though they hadn't intended to, the people at Chestnut Hill, much more so than the authority figures of First Baptist, had taught me how to live consistently and with integrity, how to see the pieces not as disparate parts but as portions of the whole.

So during subsequent years, whenever I'd go home to visit my family, I'd find some time to make the old familiar drive to the factory. As I'd walk into the grinding room, I'd feel like Ben Affleck's character in *Good Will Hunting* when he tells Will that, for him,

the best part of every morning is when he pulls up to his house and has a moment of hope that, when he honks the horn, Will won't be there to answer. He will have left to fulfill his potential.

But as much as we sometimes wish it were, life isn't a movie. For a few years, every time I'd return, they were all still there—Mike, Annie, Tim, Thomas, Vladimir, Chester, the office staff, everyone. But then I started to notice a change. On each successive visit—especially after the late-2000s economic downturn, since Chestnut Hill produced the very luxury item that was first to get cut from any wealthy person's wish list—the number of employees dwindled. During one visit, Annie told me that the winter layoffs were getting longer and longer. Chester was gone for good. So were Tim and Kurt. Mike was still there, as he was the only person who could sharpen all the machine blades, but sometimes, she was the only person working, painting a few shutters by herself. During phone calls home, my dad occasionally kept me apprised of the situation, telling me about how Art was sinking tens of thousands of his own money into the company, trying to keep it afloat. Shutter and gazebo orders were down, and property taxes—a particularly sharp thorn in the side of every Pennsylvania landowner—were on the rise.

Eight years after my last day at work, shortly before my thirtieth birthday, I showed up on a rainy summer Thursday afternoon to find no one in the mill, the assembly building, or even the office. I did find Annie, working alone in the paint shop. The emptiness pulled at me. In the past, the summers were the one time when Art could be relied upon to drum up at least enough business to keep a handful of workers employed.

But now, it seemed as if the doctors were huddling with exhausted family members, discussing in hushed tones the appropriate time to pull the plug.

After Annie gave me a hug, I sat down in the chair Dave had used for naps ten years ago.

“How’s life?” I ask. “It seems pretty empty around here.”

“No shit. We actually just had a meeting with Art, and it was the first time I’d heard him talk about how he might have to shut things down.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. There’s just a few of us left. Of course, Hannah’s trying to get Art to think more positively—‘Come on, one more year, we can do it’—but that’s because she lives here. If we shut down, where’s she gonna go?”

“I don’t know. She’s been here forever. Hey, did I hear something about Art trying to sell some medical equipment that’s stashed up in the pole barn?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“That’s what my dad told me.” My dad still rented office space from Art, and as he’d relayed, Art had someone unearthed a bunch of 1950s-era medical tools, chairs and operating tables in the building’s basement. He claimed he was going to sell them, and in preparation for finding a buyer, he’d moved the equipment to the factory grounds.

“Let’s walk up there and check it out.”

As we left the paint shop and walked across the parking lot into the mill to get out from under the steady drizzle, she caught me up on some of the other workers. Tim and his girlfriend had split up. Kurt and Jenny had flamed, too, and Jenny had rubbed it in his

face, texting Kurt dick pics of a bunch of guys she claimed to be sleeping with. Mike was remarried, and according to Annie, it was not going well.

“She was real fat before they met,” she told me on the way up the hill, “and Mike was all worried that she’d blow up again if they got married.”

“Did she?”

“Oh yeah. I warned him it would happen, too. She put on like a hundred fucking pounds. And he’s all depressed about it. He comes in to work high half the time, bitching about it, talking like he knew he shouldn’t have done it. I told him he needs to quit getting married and just bang random women; it’s the only time he’s happy.”

As we walked into the pole barn, my hopes for a happy ending for at least some of my co-workers deflated, I changed the subject.

“Where’s all the wood?” It looked nothing like my first day, packed from wall to wall and floor to ceiling with planks, boards and spindles, ready to go. It now looked cavernous, the void represented by the empty space overwhelming in its totality. A few small, lonely stacks of wood sat crookedly against one wall.

“What wood? This is it.”

“This is all you have?”

“And that’s not even cedar.” She put a finger to her lips. “Don’t tell anyone, but we’re paying less for that shit and passing it off like it’s what we usually use.”

So it had come to this. Chestnut Hill had always prided itself on using cedar for every single piece of every single gazebo. It was our calling card. But the final domino had fallen.

“I think I see the crap you were talking about,” she said as we picked our way through some rubble en route to the back wall. “Yeah. There it is.”

As I’d suspected, the equipment was rusty and broken. As we picked it up and talked about how Art would never find a buyer for this junk, I saw something else, piled up haphazardly in a corner.

The scooters. Still in boxes, still unsold.

I had a feeling they would have company for a long, long time.

“So how are you doing?” I asked after we got back to the paint shop.

“Did I tell you about my car accident?”

I’d heard about it from my dad, but I didn’t mind hearing about it from her, too. She told me about how it had put into months of physical therapy, her subsequent surgeries, and so on. We talked about how the advice she’d given me about making sure I was protected financially had paid off for her. Eventually, our conversation segued into a discussion of married life—a topic that, several years earlier, I never thought we’d be able to discuss on the same level. And as we continued to drift away from the general shoptalk that had defined our conversations in the past, personal struggles she was working through unexpectedly started to emerge. After she swore me to secrecy on the details of our conversation, we talked for nearly two hours, her asking questions, me providing answers the best I could. She displayed a vulnerability and an openness I’d never seen before. Instead of speaking to me as someone young and inexperienced, as she had when we had worked together, she spoke to me as a peer. So many years after my

last day of work, what I'd hoped and prayed for during my time at Chestnut Hill—the strength and wisdom to help a co-worker in a meaningful way—was coming true. For the first time, as we opened up about the issues and challenges we faced as adults, it felt like we weren't just a former boss and her employee. We were friends.

I haven't been back to Chestnut Hill since that day. When I've been home visiting my family, the factory hasn't been open. These days, it rarely is. My dad recently told me that when he went over to talk to Art, he was giving a speech to the handful of remaining workers—Annie, Hannah, Mike, Thomas, and a few others—about how he knew that the upcoming year would be a bounce-back time for them. Good things were going to happen, Art claimed. They'd turn the corner and get back on their feet. But my dad said that as Art was speaking, everyone was looking around at each other as if to say, “yeah, right. We're done for.”

I hope they were wrong.

Afterword

In “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” Hayden White attempts to bridge the nonfiction discipline of history and the fictional world of literature by arguing that the narratives of history are “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (1713). While White’s work maintains a clear distinction between factual narratives and fictional inventions, by the end of the twentieth century, increasing skepticism directed at the veracity of nonfiction texts prompted Marie-Laure Ryan (“Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality”)

to examine some of the textual practices and theoretical arguments that have contributed to the destabilization of the borderline between fiction and nonfiction [because] previous work in this area tends to regard the open character of this borderline as evidence that fiction and nonfiction cannot be rigorously distinguished. (165)

Ryan pushes back against those who criticize the idea of clearly defined parameters for nonfiction texts by asserting that “the possibility of hybridization does not necessarily mean that the two categories are inherently indeterminate: the many shades of gray on the spectrum from black to white do not turn black and white into the same color” (165).

White and Ryan are two of the many theorists who, since the 1970s, have attempted to determine where nonfiction ends and fiction begins, as well as how those delineations affect authors’ representations of what they claim as truth in a literary text labeled nonfiction. In what follows, I explore several topics related to this issue—the fallibility

and limitations of memory, the implementation of dialogue, composite characters, compressing/reshuffling events—that I encountered while writing the preceding memoir, explaining how I dealt with each issue as it arose.

The Fallibility of Memory

Perhaps the most vital question that critics of creative nonfiction raise relates to the fallibility of memory, as skeptics of the genre’s veracity question how authors can present their own imperfect recollections of events as truthful. Jocelyn Bartkevicius outlines these critiques in “‘The Person to Whom Things Happened’: Meditations on the Tradition of Memoir” when she writes,

Although historically memoir has studied life from the inside, for the past two years, newspapers have been printing polemics against that very interiority, chastising memoirists for not sticking to what they narrowly define as “the facts.” [...] Critics who favor the visible, verifiable, and rational over perception, memory, and imagination often dub the '90s “the age of memoir” (usually in sneering tones). Their articles tend to share two unexamined, unsubstantiated assumptions [the first of which being that] as nonfiction, memoir must be a form of journalism and therefore devoid of techniques like characterization, story development, and imagination (that “should” be left only to poets and fiction writers). (134)

For some writers, such as journalist Anna Quindlen, the fallibility of memory proves so great an obstacle that they simply choose to avoid memoir altogether. In a 1997 article, Quindlen claims, “I will never write a memoir, even though the form has become the *oeuvre du jour*. I’ve got a lousy memory” (par. 2). She elaborates by explaining how, as a long-time journalist, when she wrote one simple line from memory—“It was very cold the night my mother died”—for “a short essay to introduce a selection of columns” (par. 3), she was so wracked by uncertainty that she “went back to the microfilm for that day in January in 1972, looked up the temperature chart and compared it with the highs and

lows for that day in meteorological history” (par. 3). She sees memoir, due to its reliance on memory, as falling somewhere between fiction and nonfiction, “a terrain too murky to me to read, much less illuminate” (par. 10) and subsequently relegates it to the lesser margins of the literary landscape.

In “The Line Between Fact and Fiction,” Roy Peter Clark draws similar conclusions, claiming that

Scholars have demonstrated the essential fictive nature of all memory. The way we remember things is not necessarily the way they were. This makes memoir, by definition, a problematic form in which reality and imagination blur into what its proponents describe as a ‘fourth genre.’ The problems of memory also infect journalism when reporters – in describing the memories of sources and witnesses – wind up lending authority to a kind of fiction. (5)

In addition to Clark’s claim that all memories are fictional in nature, his terminology—memoir is a “problematic” form, and the issue of memory representation is a “problem” that “infects” the apparently pure form of journalistic nonfiction—makes clear his skepticism of memoir’s status as nonfiction. According to Clark, clear boundaries do still exist that can delineate fact from fiction, thus eliminating the pesky, undefined area that sits between the two. He holds a

conviction that there should be a firm line, not a fuzzy one, between fiction and nonfiction and that all work that purports to be nonfiction should strive to achieve the standards of the most truthful journalism. Labels such as a “nonfiction novel,” “real-life novel,” “creative nonfiction” and “docudrama” may not be useful to that end. (14)

The same year that Quindlen published her essay on the dangers of memoir, Leona Toker published “Toward a Poetics of Documentary Prose,” which she wrote “in order to place documentary genres such as the autobiography and the memoir into a

nonmarginalizing perspective” (187). Her work provides an important roadmap for those seeking to understand as well as write within the genre. She begins by creating three categories for information contained in documentary prose: the public domain, the domain of privileged access, and the private domain.

According to Toker, information in the public domain is common knowledge and can be easily verified by extra-textual sources. As she puts it, “the truthfulness of the public-domain materials in an individual work can be confirmed only by other sources—by historical research or by other works of documentary prose that pertain to the same period and subject” (195). An example in Gulag literature that she provides is “the conditions in the prisons and camps, the fate of individuals, the history of arrests, etc.” (195), since this information is presented and corroborated not only in numerous memoirs by authors such as “Olitskaya (1971), Ginzburg (1985), Buber-Neumann (1950), Gilboa (1968), Parvilahti (1959), Panin (1976), Marchenko (1969)” (195) but also in historical records, such as documents retrieved from camp officials.

The domain of privileged access contains information about external, public events that comes from a privileged, singular source and cannot be verified or disproven by other extra-textual sources. Toker describes the information in this category as “unwitnessed communication, whether with famous or ordinary people, as well as reports about particularly harsh conditions under which no one else may have survived and of specific places from which no one else have returned.” She provides two examples: the opening passage of the Book of Job, when a servant returns to Job and tells him that a group of men killed all of his servants, “and I alone have escaped to tell you” (197), and

Victor Herman's solitary account in his memoir *Coming out of the Ice* (1979) of "the *spetzkorus*, the 'special wing,' of the Gorky detention facilities" (197).

Information in the private domain deals exclusively with a person's inner emotions, psychological state, thoughts, etc. As Toker puts it, "the author is the only authority on his/her unuttered thoughts and emotions" (194). This information is impossible to verify by any kind of extra-textual source and is therefore subject to the most scrutiny/skepticism from the reader, even though "the handling of this material is often precisely what determines the artistic power of the text" (201).

For Toker, when documentary prose such as a memoir relays information in either the domain of privileged access or the private domain, the reliability of the text is called into question, since the author must rely on his or her own memories when reconstructing events. Since, according to Toker, "the success of a work of documentary prose is dependent upon its making us accept its material as the truth" (203), one of the most important steps authors who are relaying information in either the domain of privileged access or the private domain can take is avoiding extended sequences of dialogue if it was not originally recorded, since extended amounts of dialogue undercut the credibility of the narrative due to our inability to recall such dialogue with a high degree of accuracy. She believes that documentary prose should remain in the factographic mode, as factographic narratives have a one-to-one relationship with actual events and people (see 191), and according to her, reconstructing dialogue from memory violates that one-to-one relationship.

Writer Mimi Schwartz takes a much more liberal approach when addressing the question of memory's fallibility in her *Creative Nonfiction* essay, "Memoir? Fiction? Where's the Line?" Schwartz believes that the author's memory, inaccuracies included (and perhaps even embraced), is just as—if not more—important than the facts available in what Toker calls the public domain. She provides an example of a time when, as she puts it, her "mother called me to tell me that an essay I'd sent her about my love affair with horses was wrong. [...] It was her memory against mine with no one else to ask, so I wasn't changing my story" (36). While Schwartz does leave open the door that, had others come forward to contradict her memory, she might have relented, she still operates by the principle that when memory-related conflicts arise, emotional truth is more powerful and important than literal truth. As she writes,

Go for the emotional truth, that's what matters. Yes, gather the facts by all means. Look at old photos, return to old places, ask family members what they remember, look up time-line books for the correct songs and fashion styles, read old newspapers, encyclopedias, whatever—and then use the imagination to fill in the remembered experience. You don't need a tape recording of what your parents said to "remember" what they said that day. (36)

For Schwartz, a memoirist must use "facts, memory and imagination to recreate the complexity of real moments, big and small" while remaining "powerfully true" instead of "hopelessly phony" (38). For her, after all three elements—facts, memory and imagination—are embraced, as long as the resulting text aligns with the emotional truth of past events, then the text passes muster and can rightfully be labeled a memoir.

I dealt with this issue continually when writing, finding myself adapting elements of the perspectives of all the writers mentioned above. While, unlike Quindlen, my memory

allows me to bring up many accurate details about events that happened years ago, including specific lines of dialogue, it is hardly flawless. In one instance, I was in the same position as Schwartz and her mother. The situation involved my sister being forced by Art, Chestnut Hill Gazebos' owner, to scrape the rust off defective shutter hinges that customers had returned to the company and then spray paint them black and mail them back to those same customers, claiming that they were brand new replacements. This is a pivotal scene, as it epitomizes the downward trajectory of the company and the corners we were being forced to cut as a consequence. When I called my sister to verify that I'd remembered the scene correctly, we remembered all of the same details, with one major exception: the year it took place. I worked in the factory in the summers of 2002, 2003 and 2005, and my sister worked at Chestnut Hill in 2003 and 2005. I remembered the scene in the summer of 2003, whereas she remembered it in 2005. Like Schwartz, I initially resisted moving the scene into the third section of the memoir, as I liked how it fit the narrative I had drafted. However, as we continued to discuss the issue, she convinced me that I was wrong by pointing out that she had worked exclusively in the Assembly building during her first summer. The room where she was forced to scrape and repaint the hinges was on the other side of the complex, where she didn't work until her second summer at Chestnut Hill. As it was a scene that primarily involved her actions, and as she had sowed sufficient reasonable doubt in my mind, I deferred to her recollection and moved the scene into the final section of the memoir, aligning it with her memories.

The situation with Sara and the hinges wasn't the only time I fact-checked my memories with a family member. In fact, I tried to augment my memories with those of my family members whenever possible. For instance, my mom remembers the fake fish tank episode (Part II, Day 38) as I remember it, and my sister was able to contribute her memory of Art's mid-day sex romps with his girlfriend—something I hadn't remembered us discussing until she brought it up.

Another instance in which my initial memory-based text changed due to fact-checking took place when, earlier in 2014, I went back to the factory and visited with Annie, the head painter. In part, I wanted to hear her speaking style—which I hadn't heard in years—so that I could accurately reconstruct it when writing her dialogue the third section of the memoir. While I'd remembered most of it correctly, one of her most unique tics—occasionally constructing her sentences with an “is, is” verb setup—had completely slipped my mind (e.g. “what it is, is that I need some serious help” – pg. 159). After I heard her use this construction, I went back and inserted it into several lines of her dialogue to more accurately represent the way she speaks.

Owning Up to Memory's Limitations

When dealing with the limitations of memory, many writers decide that the best approach is being as straightforward and honest as possible, admitting when their memories have failed them. For instance, when writing about his car accident in his essay “On Living,” Stephen King clearly distinguishes between what he does and does not remember;

I was three-quarters of the way up this hill when Bryan Smith, the owner and operator of the light-blue Dodge van, came over the crest. He wasn't

on the road; he was on the shoulder. My shoulder. I had perhaps three-quarters of a second to register this. It was just time enough to think, My God, I'm going to be hit by a school bus. I started to turn to my left. There is a break in my memory here. On the other side of it, I'm on the ground, looking at the back of the van, which is now pulled off the road and tilted to one side. This recollection is very clear and sharp, more like a snapshot than a memory. There is dust around the van's tail-lights. The license plate and the back windows are dirty. [...] There's another little break in my memory here, and then I am very carefully wiping palmfuls of blood out of my eyes with my left hand. (254-255)

Because King is writing about a traumatic, life-changing experience, it is inevitable that he would not remember every single detail, so he decides that the most accurate course of action is to record only the events he remembers and highlight the points when he does not.

Other writers such as Jonathan Lethem have also employed this tactic. In his essay “13, 1977, 21,” which explores how and why he saw *Star Wars* twenty-one times as a thirteen-year-old boy, rather than fill in the gaps in his memory, Lethem openly discusses those gaps. At the outset, he writes,

Problem: it doesn't seem at all likely that I went to the movie alone the first time, but I can't remember who I was with. I've polled a few of my likeliest friends from that period, but they're unable to help. In truth I can't recall a “first time” in any real sense, though I do retain a flash of memory of the moment the prologue first began to crawl in tilted perspective up the screen, an Alice-in-Wonderland doorway to dream. (35)

At another point, he states, “I once took my bother, and he stayed through it twice. We may have done that together more than once—neither of us clearly remembers” (37). And later, when he recalls badgering his grandmother to go with him, only to hear her refuse, he says, “I probably didn't mind” (38). So while he doesn't have a problem extrapolating his likely feelings based on what he does know about his state of mind and

his relationship with his grandmother, he highlights in the text that they are “likely” feelings, adding an openly admitted level of uncertainty to some of the events in question. Both Lethem and King consistently distinguish between events and thoughts they clearly remember, events and thoughts they only somewhat remember and events and thoughts they clearly do not remember. By admitting to their audience the limitations of their memories, they build credibility—especially with skeptics—for the moments when they represent information from the past without any disclaimers, allowing the audience to believe that the events they record with certainty happened the way the authors present them.

When crafting my own memoir, if I only possessed partial memories of an event, I stated as much, such as when I recall the day I broke up with Kate. I distinguish between clear memories, hazy memories, and slices of the event that are completely inaccessible:

What happened next has been blurred and obscured by the space of intervening years and my desire to remove the exact details from my memory. I remember us sitting cross-legged in her driveway while her mom cooked hot dogs around the corner, crying as we discussed our impending split. Most of what we said, I don’t remember—but I do remember bringing up how our relationship had taken precedence over our faith in God, something we’d both known almost from the beginning but were too afraid to admit and confront, and that it had seriously warped our priorities, a point she did not deny. I think, but I’m not certain, that she argued in favor of staying together. However, I do vividly remember the moment when it ended for good, me standing up and leaving her at our spot in the driveway and walking up the steps of her back porch and her mom asking me how many hot dogs I wanted and me answering “I’m not staying for dinner” and her asking me why and me saying “ask Kate” and then me walking into the house and quickly packing my stuff and calling Bryan and telling him “I’m coming to your house and I’ll explain when I get there” and getting in the car and driving away and not looking back. (154-155)

By disclosing the varying reliability of my memories, I hope to establish credibility as an author who openly owns up to his memory's limitations and flaws instead of burying them.

Extended Scenes of Dialogue

While I attempted to fact-check elements of my story, including dialogue, that exist in Toker's public domain, I disagree with her belief that extended scenes of dialogue always damage the overall credibility of the text. After all, I could remember and successfully verify specific lines and conversations—such as Holly's statement, "We used to be like a family. Now all we do is fight!" (189)—with other people who were present. However, when fact-checking dialogue was impossible due to my inability to track down some of the factory's former workers, I was able to fact-check enough portions of our conversations to use those portions as a basis for reconstructing the remainder of their dialogue in a way that remained—to the best of my knowledge—true to what they said and how they said it. This approach reflects the hierarchy of importance regarding different memories that writer Peter Ives discusses in "The Whole Truth." As Ives recalls, when he shared a draft of an essay with his sister about the death of their father, "what caught me off guard was the degree to which her memories of that day—April 5, 1969—conflicted substantially with my own recollections" (147). Ives discovered that, among their differing recollections, "She remembered the day as being sunny. I remembered a light drizzle with low gray clouds. She remembered being with me in the bedroom when I found my father's body. I remembered only my brother Art being there" (148). However,

Ives makes a hierarchical distinction that critics such as Quindlen and Clark fail to recognize;

in the end it didn't matter whether or not it had been sunny or rainy or whether it was the priest or coroner who arrived first, because one thing has always remained certain: our father died that day, and both of us remembered watching the ambulance attendants carry his body out the front door. (148)

For Ives, some memories are more important than others, and informing the reader of this difference—how we approach and represent major events vs. small details in our writing—allows for the genre of creative nonfiction to exist as a genre containing works that tell the truth. Since no one-size-fits-all test exists for determining major vs. minor events, authors must weigh what their audience would perceive as major vs. minor and craft their narratives accordingly.

As Ives puts it, his mind contains many

vivid, honest memories. But I would never swear to them as facts. They are honest and true only in that this is how I remember them, verifying where I can, letting the reader know whenever I step over the line into uncertainty or even imaginative re-creation. (149)

Ives believes that our stories should be told, but that if we do tell them, we should distinguish what could be labeled “hard” facts and “soft” facts—hard facts existing in Toker’s public domain, and soft facts existing in either the domain of privileged access or the private domain. Ives discusses an example of a soft fact that can be reconstructed due to its “basis in reality” (152) when he writes about his dad’s wardrobe, saying,

I don't remember what my father wore under his orange raincoat during my JV football games. But if I wrote about it, I'd tell the reader he wore an open collared, red plaid shirt, with black suspenders fastened to dark green cotton trousers—the kind school janitors used to wear. Oh yes! He'd also have on an old, frayed T-shirt, his thick, dark, chest hair curling over

the neckband. I'd write all this because it was a standard outfit for my father, because his wearing it beneath his raincoat was both probable and possible. (150-1)

Ives' approach to his father's wardrobe is the approach I followed. I didn't write any dialogue that was completely invented, and I did not create scenes that did not happen; instead, I reconstructed dialogue from the template of my memories, and then colored in the details from the memories that did exist, allowing for some artistic license while still remaining true to a one-to-one standard of people and events—meaning that I always matched specific dialogue to the person who said (or most likely said) the words in question. My final author's note explains my position on dialogue. In *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Dave Eggers discusses in the memoir's addendum, "Mistakes We Knew We Were Making," that "this has of course been almost entirely reconstructed. The dialogue, though all essentially true [...] has been written from memory, and reflects both the author's memory limitations and his imagination's nudgings" (ix). According to both Eggers and Ives, as long as the reader knows about the author's approach to details such as dialogue, some limited flexibility is allowed when reconstructing it from memory. However, this transparency does not allow for unlimited leeway. For example, if an author openly admits that particular scenes of dialogue are completely invented, the author cannot still claim nonfiction status for his text as a whole, because he is admitting that portions of the text are fictionalized.

So long as the memoirist openly admits to his limitations, this authorial transparency adequately responds to critics who believe dialogue should not be included in a work labeled nonfiction. As Ben Yagoda puts in *Memoir: A History*, a memoir's dialogue

should be the writer's "best-faith representation of what the people who were present have/would have/might have said (265). I strove to meet this standard at every instance in which dialogue appears.

Composite Characters

In her quest to move documentary prose from the margins to the mainstream, Toker also addresses the issue of composite characters. She argues that for a memoir to remain in the realm of documentary prose, the author must avoid creating composite characters, asserting that "authors of documentary prose refrain from lifting a feature from one remembered person and giving it to another" (202). To combine different people into a single character would violate the one-to-one relationship between people and events in the text and their real-life counterparts. However, many authors are less concerned, including those who mix memoir with New Journalism—such as Jeremy Iversen, who writes in his memoir/expose *High School Confidential* that his work is "a true story, within limits [...] almost every word was spoken exactly as you see it. The events that you're about to witness actually happened" (ix). However, he also readily admits to combining people into composite characters for the sake of a more streamlined narrative. Even though he admits this before the main text begins, the composite characters present a problem to the reader, one that Toker addresses when she states that a work falls out of the factographic mode when it fails the test of deniability. For Toker, in a text that purports to be a work of documentary prose, "Whatever is not effectively denied or disproved is regarded to be true" (194). In the legal world, this is the "innocent until proven guilty" principle. However, in a work such as Iversen's memoir, the existence of

some characters could conceivably be disproven. Since his work functions as New Journalism, he presumably took copious notes and recorded his conversations, since, as he puts it, “almost every word was spoken exactly as you see it.” However, in some instances, someone else—an invented character that does not possess a one-to-one correlation to reality—speaks the words that someone else originally spoke. By creating composite characters, Iversen places the veracity of his entire text into question, since the reader does not know if the dialogue and characteristics of any given character belong to that person or are merely parts of someone else, stripped from that person’s individual identity and grafted onto this new, composite personality. As Toker puts it, if personal details “are symptoms of character traits, ideological positions, affiliations, or knowledgeability” (202), they must remain with the person who originally possessed them and not be displaced onto any other character in the text, because composites create too many potential real-world problems, especially when writing about major events such as Stalin’s Gulags.

Therefore, to preserve the accuracy and believability of my own text, I refrained from creating any composite characters. In one instance, I was tempted to put the words of one person into the mouth of someone else for the same reason Iversen did (to create a more streamlined narrative), but I eventually decided that eliminating the dialogue altogether was more truthful.

Compression of Events

When Art D’Agata and his fact-checker, Jim Fingal, released *The Lifespan of a Fact* in 2012, they also released the latest salvo—at each other—in the debate that continues to

swirl around how facts should be represented in a work labeled nonfiction. One issue they address deals with the compression of events for the sake of a tidier narrative. The opening passage of D'Agata's essay reads,

On the same day in Las Vegas when sixteen-year-old Levi Presley jumped from the observation deck of the 1,149-foot-high tower of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, lap dancing was temporarily banned by the city in thirty-four licensed strip clubs in Vegas, archaeologists unearthed parts of the world's oldest bottle of Tabasco-brand sauce underneath a bar called Buckets of Blood, and a woman from Mississippi beat a chicken named Ginger in a thirty-five-minute-long game of tic-tac-toe. (15-16)

However, as Fingal points out in their back-and-forth e-mail correspondence, which surrounds the centrally located text of D'Agata's essay like sections of commentary surround the passages of rabbinic opinions and laws in the Talmud, several factual problems plague D'Agata's opening. Fingal can only (loosely) confirm that thirty-one strip clubs existed in Las Vegas in 2002. D'Agata explains that "the rhythm of 'thirty-four' works better in that sentence than the rhythm of 'thirty-one,' so I changed it" (15). But more importantly, Fingal discovers that the Tabasco discovery happened fifteen days before Levi Presley killed himself, and the game of tic-tac-toe between Ginger the chicken and the woman from Mississippi took place one month after Levi's death. When Fingal asks D'Agata if he should rewrite the opening passage so that the events are not artificially compressed and therefore "more accurate" (17), D'Agata responds by saying,

No, because being more precise would be less dramatic and would sound a lot clunkier. I don't think readers will care whether the events that I'm discussing happened on the same day, a few days apart, or a few months apart. What most readers will care about, I think, is the meaning that is suggested in the confluence of these events—no matter how far apart they occurred. The facts that are being employed here aren't meant to function baldly as "facts." The work that they're doing is more image-based than informational. (17)

According to D'Agata's way of thinking, in a work that can still be labeled nonfiction, thematic truth takes precedence over objective truth. The facts themselves are subservient to their meanings, and as such, they can be manipulated and massaged without losing their factualness. Therefore, manipulating the sequence of events in service of a more convenient narrative structure presents no ethical problem for D'Agata. This obviously offends Fingal, D'Agata's fact-checker, because his job is to make sure that the factual claims within the narrative adhere to reality.

Again, Toker provides valuable insight into decisions about whether or not to compress events for sake of a smoother narrative. She allows that works of documentary prose such as memoirs are "based on acts of selection and recombination of elements of reality" and that "a degree of displacement [is] unavoidable" (202). She describes this displacement as "triple: it starts with the unavoidable selectivity of perception, continues with unavoidably selective storage (memory), and is completed by further sieving and rearrangement in the process of writing" (202). However, she maintains that the displacements that occur in memoirs must be "limited in scope" (202). She continues, claiming that "such a reshuffling, however, is a question not of license but of permissible inaccuracy" (203). In other words, an author might *inadvertently* displace some minor details, but such a displacement must be no more than incidental. For Toker, D'Agata's essay violates this principle, because "authors of documentary prose are not free to redistribute larger clusters or sequences of actions" (203), which is what D'Agata intentionally does through his significant compression of events for the sake of a tightly compressed narrative. The issue at stake is a question of intent (which I explore below);

does the author willfully mislead the reader, or are the author's compressions unintentional and incidental?

I dealt with the issue of compressing and reshuffling events more frequently than any of the previous issues. Because each chapter takes place during one day, it was tempting to group clusters of events together like D'Agata does. While I would have preferred to group disparate events together to create longer chapters (and days), I believe that such an action would have violated the reality of my situation, so I never willfully did so. However, as Toker points out, some amount of displacement is inevitable, and I faced this inevitability when writing the first two chapters: Day One and Day Four. I can't remember if my lunchtime conversation with Dave and Chester hitting me on the head with a walnut happened on my first day of work or my fourth day of work, so I placed it during the fourth day to create comparable chapter lengths. However, because I only know that it happened some time during my first week at Chestnut Hill, when I submitted "Day One" to a literary journal without the lunchtime scene and the nonfiction editor asked me to add some additional content to it, I saw no ethical problem with inserting the lunchtime scene into it, because a good chance exists that it happened on my first day of work. If someone could prove that it did not take place during my first day, I would remove the scene and place it elsewhere, as I did when my sister was able to correct the timeline of when she was working on "repurposing" hinges in the hardware room. However, since the scene's precise chronology cannot be proven one way or the other, placing it in "Day One" for a standalone essay and in "Day Four" for the memoir serves

the same thematic function and does not violate the scene's thematic truth (a path that Toker admits an author sometimes cannot avoid).

In addition, each chapter is labeled as a particular day (Day One, Day Four, Day Twenty-Three, etc.) without an attached date due to my inability to recall with precision the dates on which specific events occurred. To pair specific events with specific dates would be deliberately misleading, so I opted for general labels—"Day 42" instead of the more specific "July 26, 2002." Each chapter title represents my most educated guesses as to when its events occurred. I am certain that I have inadvertently placed some events and details out of order, but I have taken every reasonable step to ensure that the chronology is accurate. In no instances did I deliberately condense, reshuffle or combine events for the sake of a more streamlined narrative.

Truth, Lies and Consequences

Each one of the issues explored above ties into to the larger debate about the veracity of a genre that labels itself as nonfiction but is reliant on the writer's subjective perspective and fallible memories. As Toker points out, to engage with a memoir, its readers much operate from the "innocent until proven guilty" mindset that allows them to trust that the author is making his or her best effort to tell them the truth. Therefore, when authors like James Frey (*A Million Little Pieces*) release works under the label "nonfiction" but stray outside the parameters outlined by Toker and others by deliberately embellishing or inventing events that did not occur and people that did not exist, they can face an unforgiving and hostile response from an audience that believes it was deliberately misled. Oprah Winfrey publicly eviscerated Frey after the invented people

and events in his book became public knowledge because he violated the implicit pact a memoirist makes with a reader to tell the truth.

At the risk of sounding old-fashioned, I believe that a memoirist has ethical responsibilities to himself, to the other people he portrays in his work, to his audience, and the genre itself. A memoirist must not violate his own conscience. Because many pieces of information in a memoir are memory-based and therefore impossible to verify via additional sources, a memoirist knows when he could invent thoughts, events or even people and get away with it. So to maintain his integrity, he must stick to the facts, even when he could invent elements of his story that no one could disprove.

A memoirist should also act in an ethically responsible manner toward the people he includes in his story by making his best effort to represent them as accurately and fairly as possible. Composite characters violate this principle by mutating real-life counterparts into a conglomeration of elements that bear no actual resemblance to reality. However, avoiding composite characters is not enough. A memoirist should also exercise humility by avoiding presenting himself as better/smarter/more accomplished than everyone else. Scott Douglas crosses this line frequently in *Quiet Please: Dispatches from a Public Librarian*. He frequently puts down his co-workers and friends while presenting himself as a well-rounded person who is well-informed about nearly everything. For instance, when he first introduces himself to a couple of his co-workers, he carries with him a copy of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. When one of his co-workers asks him if he is reading it, he responds by telling her that "Pynchon writes like a dream—his words, his ideas—they're so absurd, yet equally real—symbolic, no doubt, of the pathos of man"

(6). When she reacts indifferently, he thinks, “How could I not have impressed her?” (7), and then, when she refers to Pynchon as “Pingkong” (7), he thinks, “She was messing with me—she had to be messing with me. She had to know who Pynchon was” (7). When discussing another co-worker named Brenda, Douglas adopts a nasty tone, first claiming, “I liked Brenda because she was paranoid; everyone was always out to get her and she complained about everything anyone did” (31) while also characterizing her as “three times the size of a normal woman” (31). He also points out how he is “distracted by the alarming amount of nose hair growing out of Brenda’s nose” (40). After several pages of moralizing about 9/11, which happened during Douglas’ first week of work, he relays a conversation at a pizza shop between himself and a “friend [who] was the patriotic type who also can be pretty blind. The guy literally decides who he will vote for in coming elections based on who has the most convincing television ads” (46). Then, despite not knowing anyone else in the restaurant, he characterizes all of them as uninformed; “I looked around the restaurant and saw so many others just like me friend” (46). He intersperses these put-downs with passages filled with observations meant to present himself as a learned individual who understands what others do not; for instance, immediately following his conversation with his friend, Douglas makes a series of observations that he presents as unknown to the vast majority of the population, such as,

the media have a tendency to make tragic events slightly more tragic and less real because they know that people will become more emotionally attached. The art of manipulation isn’t just a human trait anymore, it’s an actual job; people sit in little rooms and have meetings about the best way to get people sucked into a story. (47)

(An alternative interpretation of Douglas' work could claim that he knows what he is doing and is actually crafting an ironically self-deprecating persona, but every piece of textual evidence implies that he is simply arrogant and judgmental.)

Nathan Rabin discusses this problem in *The Big Rewind: A Memoir Brought to You by Pop Culture*, when, after describing the sexual deviancies of his friend Cornelius, he reflects on his characterization of not just Cornelius but others in his story:

When you're writing a memoir you have a natural if regrettable tendency to reduce people to their most colorful eccentricities. It's impossible to do justice to the complexities of even a single human being in the space of an entire book, let alone in a few paragraphs or just a page and a half. So now might be a good time to point out that Cornelius and many of the other strange characters in my life were, and are, fundamentally good people. (150-1)

Rabin reveals that he knows how he is privileging the more bizarre aspects of other people's lives in the service of a more interesting narrative, and he willingly implicates himself in this action, bringing it into the open by encouraging his readers to view his characters as more complex than his own limited characterizations. Yagoda writes that "the better memoir writers have always been aware of the moral ambiguity of the enterprise, and implicated themselves as much as or more than anyone else" (235). Someone like Douglas fails this test because he clearly does not care about the reputation of anyone but himself, but Rabin passes the test because he recognizes the need to avoid reducing others to cardboard cutouts of flesh-and-blood people.

Two recent conversations—one with my sister, one with my mom—addressed this issue in my own work directly. During a recent phone call with my sister, I brought up a

question I had been meaning to ask her since I'd completed the first draft of my manuscript.

“Do you mind if I use your real name, or do you want me to use a pseudonym?” I asked.

“Why does it matter?”

“Well, I know you've talked about running for political office in the future, and if this gets published, I don't want anyone to go digging through it and using anything against you, like what Art made you do with the hinges.”

“Yeah, but I'm your only sibling, so it's not like it would be hard to figure out who you're talking about.”

“That's true.”

“I really don't mind. You can use my real name.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. It's fine.”

I chose to get her approval because, had I put the story into the public sphere without her consent, I could risk not just the health of our relationship but her standing in the community as well as the viability of a future political career. I didn't know how seriously something like the hinges anecdote could affect her in the future, so I wanted her to know both that it was included in the text and that she had final say over whether or not her real name was attached to it. Fortunately, she didn't think it was a big deal.

The second conversation was trickier. During a Sunday afternoon talk with my mom, she brought up my manuscript.

“It’s a memoir,” she stated.

“Yes.”

“Which is based on true stories.”

“Yes.”

I could hear her hesitate.

“Which can be good...or bad.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, from what you’ve told us, you’re writing about people at First Baptist.”

“I am.”

“Don’t you think that’s dangerous?”

“Why? I don’t talk to anyone there anymore.”

“Yes, but we do.”

I’d thought about this problem before, but her vocalizing these concerns still gave me pause.

“I know.”

“We’re still friends with some people there, and I just don’t want us to be put into a defensive position if it gets published.”

As we continued to discuss the issue, I reconsidered how telling the truth about some people from First Baptist, warts and all, might create conflict in some of my parents’ relationships. Should I avoid including some unfavorable details to avoid offending some of my former acquaintances? How would strife in my parents’ relationships with those people impact my relationship with them? Each writer must address the potential for

relationship fallout in a way that respects the other people involved; for me, I made a conscious choice to present my honest perceptions of the realities at First Baptist, unflattering elements included. Anything less would be a whitewashed version of my account and would be dishonest to my audience. However, I also tried to present myself as far from blameless and full of flaws in an attempt to cancel out any perception that I view myself as somehow better than anyone from First Baptist (and Chestnut Hill, for that matter). I also created a level of anonymity for those involved by changing the names of the church, school, everyone from First Baptist, everyone from Chestnut Hill, and the name of the company to keep the casual reader from tracking down the text's real-life counterparts. In addition, while this strategy might not be feasible for all memoirists, if my memoir is published, I will do my best to shield my parents from any collateral damage by reaching out to those from First Baptist who take offense to my story and encouraging them to engage with me directly rather than taking out their problems with my text on my family.

Navigating the real-life entanglements with people included in a memoir can be challenging, but the memoirist's most complicated ethical responsibilities relate to his audience and his fellow writers. Take *The Lifespan of a Fact*, for instance. W.W. Norton, the book's publisher, claims on its website that

In 2003, an essay by Art D'Agata was rejected by the magazine that commissioned it due to factual inaccuracies. That essay — which eventually became the foundation of D'Agata's critically acclaimed "About a Mountain" — was accepted by another magazine, *The Believer*, but not before they handed it to their own fact-checker, Jim Fingal. What resulted from that assignment was seven years of arguments, negotiations, and revisions as D'Agata and Fingal struggled to navigate the boundaries of literary nonfiction. (Norton par. 3)

This promotional material, in combination with the book's content, leads readers to believe that the text faithfully reproduces seven years of correspondence between D'Agata and Fingal. However, in an interview with Weston Cutter for *The Kenyon Review*, Fingal revealed that this is an inaccurate interpretation. He tells Cutter, "I must clarify that you should consider the 'Jim' and 'Art' of the essay to be characters enacting a parallel process / discussion from the one Art and I actually had during the factchecking process" (Cutter par. 3). D'Agata goes further, stating that

at some point during that process we also decided to do a book about the process, at which point we revisited the basic scaffolding of our discussions and turned the volume up on how we discussed these issues. Why did we do this? Because as fascinating as Jim and I are, we are also pretty mild-mannered guys, and we knew that most readers would probably not be fascinated by two dudes having a sober discussion about the very nerdy issue of veracity in nonfiction. (par. 5)

Therefore, the authors and the publisher deliberately misled their readers by claiming to have faithfully reproduced the authors' original correspondence, when in reality, they fictionalized elements of it to make it more interesting. Only after the book premiered to much controversy and debate did they clarify how they formed the text.

Why does any of this matter, though? It matters because for every time an author who writes under the label of nonfiction but tries to pull self-serving literary tricks on the reading public to boost his own fame and marketability, or who tries to boost his own self-image by needlessly putting down or caricaturizing the other characters in his work, a faction of that public will view not just the author but other authors within the genre as less credible as a result. When authors like Augusten Burroughs, D'Agata and Frey write from a self-serving position, without considering how their work will impact other

writers contributing to the larger discourse within the genre, they damage its collective reputation. They also can damage the reputations of the people in their works, so much so that in the case of Burroughs, he was forced to settle out of court with several of the people he wrote about in *Running with Scissors* after they sued him for damages, alleging severe misrepresentation (see Yagoda 268). While the question of what constitutes “damages” for a subject in a memoir remains open to debate, the further a memoirist drifts from the facts—through composite characters, through artificially compressed events, through invented events—the more he harms the audience’s ability to trust not just him but other writers. The deceptive and selfish actions of just one of these authors provide enough ammunition for critics to open fire against the entire genre, and with each repeat offense, the potential for more damage only grows.

When crafting my own work, I attempted to place my work on the fiction-to-nonfiction spectrum at the opposite end of works from writers such as D’Agata and Frey. I made every effort to present people and events as accurately as possible, avoiding outright invention by only including what could be reconstructed from memory and preferably verified by other participants in those events, and by refusing to compress people into composite characters and events into an artificially streamlined story. In “Writing Literary Memoir: Are We Obligated to Tell the *Real* Truth?” Michael Steinberg says, “ideally when we write memoir, we’re hoping to create an authentic and convincing story” (143), and this ideal remained my goal: to maintain the authenticity of the events and people in my writing, and to craft my memoir in such a way that the authenticity of

the story fosters a meaningful interaction with my readers, contributing to the genre in a positive way instead of detracting from it.

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