

## Introduction

I've owned this notebook for about three months now. It was given to me on my birthday in May, and before now, I hadn't written a thing in it. Usually I'll at least mark a notebook with my name or the title of some story on the first page, but at the time it seemed wasteful to desecrate this one with the beginnings of something I'd never finish only to scribble or tear it out once I've come to my senses. I know it wouldn't matter to most people, but it drives me nuts! I like to see the blank page as a canvas, and to scratch or tear out the first page isn't far off to me from scribbling over a work of art with a Sharpie or removing it from its installation altogether. I treat this subtle brand of defacement no differently than authorities do micro-terrorism.

So, what makes this time any different? Absolutely nothing. As much as I hate to admit it, I haven't gone through one significant change in the summer since receiving this notebook. Try as I might have, I couldn't force myself into any mental growth spurt. The development of my maturity had been stunted, and there wasn't a darn thing I could do about it. You're probably wondering why I felt it so necessary to make such a leap forward. Well, to answer your question, I read *Moby-Dick* this summer. I'd be proud to say that I understood more than half of it, but I honestly don't think that would be accurate. What I took from it, though, was that I need to find my whale to chase. My entire life outside of school has been wasted, and before reading that book, I was perfectly complacent to such an existence.

I should clarify right away that I don't plan on writing in this journal as a means to vent. I've always lived a happy life and there are no signs of that changing. I live within biking distance of my high school with both of my parents, who, extraordinarily enough, are still married. Lately, things have been kinda tense around the house, as they've been avoiding each other by day and competing in screaming matches at night in the privacy of their bedroom,

which I can hear in my room next door. It's no problem for me; I just turn the volume of my iPod up and drift off to sleep. I'm not very worried about my parents. They've been together since they were in high school and have been fighting ever since. Couples have their spats. We're a family and we all love each other. So, as you can see, I live a happy, functional life. Even if I wanted to, there isn't enough stress in it to write about. Some people may love to create problems for themselves and then complain about them, but that's not me. I see this journal as a method to chart my progress into becoming my own, rather.

I've put a lot of thought into my skills and how I could use them to begin making a life for myself, which led to the realization that I kind of suck at everything. (That's alright, though. I'd be surprised if most people don't.) And in the end, I found my way right back to where I began: reading. Maybe I can't actively create anything of value, but that doesn't mean I don't know something's worth when I see it. Why try cramming myself into a position I can't hold if I could dedicate my life to appreciating all of the great things other people have contributed to the world? That's when it hit me: *I could start a book club*. No, no. This wasn't a possibility; it was fate. It's something that I have to do, free of my own will. *I need to start a book club*.

School's already been in place for a few weeks now, long enough for us all to have broken all our latest Monday's best in. Now that things are settling down, I can start raising awareness for my little project. I've already brought it up to a few friends over the summer, and invited everyone on my Facebook to a Group concerning it, but I need to see about posting flyers around the school, or putting an announcement over the Intercom. Most importantly, I need to find somewhere to hold meetings in, if not the school.

In 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, I came up with this pseudonym, so that if I ever finish a book, I'd have a name other than my own for readers to curse once they've finished it. That name was Aaron

Texter. I never thought highly of people who publish under false names. To me, it's always been either an indicator of insecurity or irresponsibility towards one's own work. It's just that this name rolls off the tongue so freely, like it's just waiting to be said, whereas mine given at birth is clunky and awkward. What I'm doing here may not be the same as publishing a story, but I'm sticking to my gun on this one. After all, if this is the first day of my new life, then why shouldn't I have a fancy new name to come with it? I just wanted to point this out so that anyone who may find this notebook won't think I'm Schizo for signing it in a name other than my own. On that note, I'll write my real contact information below, if this notebook happens to be lost and found:

Well, study hall's about over, so I'd best leave my introduction at that! I'll try and update this soon as any development in my project occurs.

-Aaron

With unwavering faith in the American education system, I knocked on the door of every English teacher employed at Pox High, and like a humble beggar, I requested the approval and supervision of their academic lordship necessary to embark upon my quest for enlightenment. And much like the doomed poverty of yore, I was rejected at every turn, without break. All my candidates were already tied down to other extracurricular responsibilities. Because the librarian heads home soon as the day's final dismissal bell is rung, locking the school's treasury behind her, it was essential for me to find a teacher willing to supervise our meetings thus, lending us his/her classroom to hold court in.

Already deflated, I related my uphill struggle to Robert over lunch. He was diagnosed with ADD at six, but had already dropped his meds cold-turkey by the time he reached twelve because he didn't like the way Ritalin made him feel. He invests this vitality in banging violently on his father's drum set after school, but during school hours, he seems to go through withdrawals from hyperactivity. So, it wasn't uncommon at all for him to be tapping out the beat of a drum line in a song I've probably never heard, when he said:

"Why don't you see if you can do it in Neverending Stories?"

"I dunno," I replied, between swigs of lukewarm milk. "Would they let me do that?"

"Can't see why not! There's a mini-lounge set up in the back with couches and stuff. My brother goes there on Fridays for those pretentious poetry readings they do."

I decided to withhold the confession that I've considered going to their readings for months, soon as I learn how to write a half-decent poem, in favor of expressing my excitement for this newly-discovered opportunity. I nearly called him a genius, and would have followed through, hadn't I remembered that he's never actually set foot in a bookstore without being led by a dragging hand.

So once I had counted down the remaining minutes to serve in my academic penitentiary, I hopped on my bike and pedaled with renewed enthusiasm to Main Street, where Neverending Stories was enjambed between a bakery and a pharmacy.

"Hey, dude," said the girl with a pierced nose behind the counter.

"Oh, hi."

"You lookin' for somethin'?" she said, smacking her gum.

“Uhh, yeah. I was wondering where your owner is.”

“Well, like most people, I don’t have an owner. Unless you mean my parents. In which case, I’d assume on the couch.”

“Sorry. I meant the store’s owner.”

“I was just joshin’ ya; I knew that. You need somethin’?”

“Yeah, actually. I was wondering if it would be alright if I—”

“C’mon, spit it out. You can do it,” she teased.

I paused a moment to streamline all my disjointed thoughts into one tangible statement.

“I wanted to start a book club, and I was hoping to hold meetings in your back room.”

“A book club?”

Sheepishly, I nodded.

“What kinda books do you plan on reading?”

“Not YA.”

“Not YA? So, no *Harry Potter*, no *Hunger Games*, or anything?”

“Naw. I guess they’re O.K., if you’re into those types of books—”

“Everybody’s into those types of books.”

“Exactly! I want this to be a learning experience, a chance for us all to read authors we may have never even heard of before. Hopefully, we can stick to the classics,” I added. “The important stuff.”

“Cool,” she said. “I think that’s really cool.” (*It was the first thing she’d said with any trace of earnestness beyond the “chill” persona she seemed so desperate to convey.*) I was about to thank her, but she followed it up with “However, that’s a question for my ‘owner.’ He’s next door, getting mochas, but feel free to browse around in the meantime.” I turned around to skim the bookshelf behind me. “That’s our YA section,” she informed me. “You probably wouldn’t be interested.”

I spun back around to flash a humbled grin and excused myself as I shuffled into the back room. All four of its walls were lined with literature for all intents and purposes: entertainment, information, display. As promised, there was a small, furnished area to flip through one’s adopted book before taking it home. Long, narrow boxes of paperbacks littered the floor, as if the shelves were overflowing with them and they needed to be contained. There was a slight musk hanging in the air, but not an entirely unpleasant one. It complimented the archaic atmosphere, and gave it a timeless quality. A single volume was spread facedown on the coffee table in its center, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Seduced by its magnetism, I sauntered over to the couch, where I could pick up from wherever its previous holder had left off. I fell headfirst into its words, never to surface...at least not until heavy footfalls, marching this direction, broke its trance over me. I looked up to catch a man in a leather jacket, approaching his thirties, walk through the doorway between the front room and the back. Short straw-blond hair poked out from beneath the baseball cap. There was something about the way he carried himself, despite his inherently boyish looks that implied a leisurely confidence, as if he owned the place. It was probably because he did.

“You didn’t lose my place, did you!?” There was more humor in his delivery than concern.

I scrambled to find a half-decent excuse. Finally, I blurted out “No! Well, yes-I can find your page again.”

“It’s not a problem. I’ve probably memorized the book by now, anyways,” he said, taking a seat in the recliner across from me. He set his mocha on the coffee table from which I stole his book. “This your first time reading Sallinger?”

“No, but this is all that I’ve read of him.”

“If you liked it, you should check out his shorter works sometime. I think we’ve got an anthology of them around here somewhere...” He began to lift himself off the recliner.

“It’s O.K.,” I stopped him. “I thought the book was alright, but Holden was too whiny. He’s supposed to be this idol to the youth, but he’s so self-centered through most of it that he only hurts everyone in his life. He’s kind of a terrible person. It’s still a decent book, though.” I only tagged that last part on there to avoid coming across as overly-critical or condescending.

“And I think it’s a wonderful book for all of those reasons,” he calmly countered. “It’s a slice-of-life story about youth, and all kids are self-centered. I don’t know if people love Holden Caulfield because they want to be like him; I think they can relate to him because at one point in their own lives, they *were* him. And when he visits his sister near the end, he learns to grow as a person.”

He had me there, except “What about the ending? It’s implied that he doesn’t actually change at all.”

“That one’s had me stumped since I was your age. My fiancée thinks he has a mental disorder, but I don’t know how well I can see that, not unless adolescence passes off as a

disorder.” He stopped himself in his tracks. “So, Ione says you’re interested in starting a young adult book club?”

“Actually, no. Well, I guess young adults would be there, but not to talk about Young Adult books.”

He pointed across the table, at me. “Yeah, that’s what I meant.”

“Oh.”

“Do you know how many people will be in it?”

I hadn’t much thought of that. Gosh. I’d been so caught up in getting this darn thing started that I didn’t get the chance to round up an ensemble. I told him that.

“Alright, I can probably get a few regulars to come. You talk to some friends and we’ll see what we come up with.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that. Do you have any idea when might work best for you?”

“For people to come?”

Affirmative.

“Whatever suits you, kid. I’m here seven days a week, 11-7.”

“Well, when are those poetry readings you have here?”

“Good point. 6 on Wednesdays. So, not then. How about this: You find some friends who can make it, work it out amongst yourselves when works best for you, and we’ll base it off” a that?”

“Makes sense to me.”



He leaned forward to shake my hand. It crumbled in his firm grip.

“Alright—”

“—Aaron,” I lied.

“Alright, Aaron. I’m Danny, by the way. It was nice meeting you. Come in once you find some friends and we can talk more. If you give me a time and a week to prepare, I can find some readers for you. A lot of good, smart kids come through here; I’m sure most of them would be interested.”

And, so I left. Ione smiled and peaced me out as I walked to the door. I don’t know why I lied to Danny about my name. It was a stupid thing to do, but it was the first thing to come out of my mouth. Once it was out, though, it felt so right that I had to let it be. He’ll have to find out eventually, but for now I’ll enjoy my alias.

-Aaron

What a mistake. I finally decide to do something for myself and it backfired on me. Darn. I’m sorry. That’s not the kind of attitude I can allow myself to promote. I’m a role model, if to no one else, then to myself. I need to practice a positive mentality. All pessimism aside, the night wasn’t a complete botch.

I biked over to Neverending Stories the moment the generous school bell released me. The day dragged on an hour a minute. By lunch, I was about ready to make myself sick in the

bathroom (with our cafeteria's menu, that wouldn't require much effort), if only to wait the day out somewhere less suffocating.

It wasn't until the moment I burst into the bookstore as if I was running late for a job interview that I realized I still had another four hours to go. So, I invested my time in browsing around the shop, which kept me busy nearly an entire quarter-hour. After that, I was ordered to report next door at the bakery, under the dictation of my stomach. I would normally ride home and grab a bite, but my folks have this marriage counselling thing they were at, and it's not like I can make something for myself. I'm 16, I don't need that kind of stress in my life; I have girls and grades to worry about.

I got myself a six dollar bagel and some hot drink that I probably couldn't spell. I guess they were O.K., but they were kind of a disappointment because the bagel only took a few minutes to pick down to crumbs and my coffee was cooled and drunk in about 10 minutes. Only 3 hours to go. Fortunately for me, the bakery serves free Wi-Fi, so I sucked the last hour out of my phone's battery before it died battling my boredom on the front line. If I'd remembered my notebook, you'd have another 20 pages' worth of reading ahead of you. Since I didn't, I walked the rest of my time off, trying to forget the day at hand and dream of tomorrow.

Upon my return, I was informed by Dan that I had a guest waiting in the back room. I crept in, both anxious and excited, to find running back Caleb Peterson, tracing the engraved spines of hardbacks with his finger, adorned with his senior class ring. Despite the humidity, he still wore his letterman jacket like a suit of armor. His short, dark hair was glistening with sweat, probably from football practice which should have let out...just five minutes before this run-in. He turned to greet me casually, as if we were the best of friends.

“Oh, hey,” I sputtered half-shocked that I was, in fact, the one being spoken to. Then I introduced myself.

“I know,” he chuckled. “We have American History together.” He concentrated on me, studying my features.

“Well, yeah. I just didn’t think you’d know me. I don’t talk to many upperclassmen.”

“Now you do.” He concentrated on me, studying my features. “Although, are you sure you’re Aaron? Last I remember, you were—”

“I usually go by Aaron,” I said, feeling deeper in my hole.

“So, you’re running this book club?”

I nodded.

“That’s really cool. I’ve always dug reading. There are so many things I read that are just so great that I need to share it with somebody, but there’s nobody that wants to listen. I mean, half my team looks at me like I’m an alien when I take a book to the locker room. When I heard about this, I thought, ‘That should do me good.’ Maybe it’ll save some innocent victims from my infamous book tangents.”

“I know what you mean,” I muttered weakly.

“Anyways, you got any idea who we can expect tonight?”

We didn’t find out for another hour, when Chloe peered meekly into the doorway. I have a few classes with her, but she’s a year older than me. Well, technically, she’s two years older than me. She flunked the ninth grade, was homeschooled for a year, and came back a tenth-grader. She’s been leaving school in the morning to go to a vocational program every day since.

She still had her scrubs on from her nursing classes. Her hair was dark and greasy, with purple rings curled up beneath her eyes. I always thought that she could be cute, if she put the time into cleaning herself up. “Is this the book club?” Caleb confirmed this. “Stellar. What time are you starting?” Seven. “Dammit, early again...It’s my curse,” she explained. “I’m at least an hour early to everything. If you need me, I’ll be catching a smoke in the alley. Back in 10.”

By the time she was, Robert caught the door behind her before it could shut. He rode into town from his home (planted between the outskirts of town/in the boonies) with his older brother, Trevor, who’s in my grade. They were bickering on their way in, and presumably along the whole ride down. Naturally, they sat as far away from each other as possible.

“This it?” Chloe interjected, for all to hear. “Because if it’s not, I’m gonna take another smoke break.” She had been tapping her fingers anxiously on her lap for the past five minutes.

“Well, it’s almost quarter after,” Caleb replied.

“Yeah, I guess we’d better get started,” I agreed. Although I had been rehearsing for this all day, I was suddenly flustered now that the spotlight was on me. “How I wanted to begin this was by going around the circle and each of us saying what reading means to us, just as a way to get to know each other better.”

“So, who starts?”

“I was thinking we’d just go clockwise, starting with you, Caleb...If that’s alright?”

“I don’t mind at all,” he said. “To me, reading is a way to connect with the world, to understand how all these different people in the world live their lives, and why they do, even. My

dad used to read to me every night before bed, and I think that a lot of the reason I turned out the way I am is because of that. I'm not perfect, but I always try to see things from other people's perspective, and reading helps me do that."

Up next was Chloe. "Reading's more of an escape for me. There's so much stress and negativity in the world, but when I'm reading a good book, it's like I'm not even there. It helps me forget about my mother, or the fact that I have to work every weekend. Reading is just entertainment. I can be a rich flapper married to the man of my dreams and sleeping with his brother, or I can see what those worse off than me are going through, like their abused servant-girl. Honestly, I don't know which makes me feel worse about myself." She coughed up a laugh at this resolution.

"It's like walking around an art gallery," Ione began. "Except it's not in a museum, but in your imagination. Or seeing a private screening of a movie in your head. It's a form of art, and not enough people understand that. It's all about expressing yourself, through what you read and what you write."

"For me, books are sleeping pills," said none other than Robert.

"Then why'd you come?" his brother scolded. That shut him up. (I saw something in Robert that I had never noticed before, a vulnerability he'd never shown. For the first time, he wasn't acting off of impulse, but his actions were coming from a loneliness within him, a yearning for acceptance. Despite my first impression, Robert hadn't come to support me at all, but rather to impress his brother in the only way that he knows how to; I was only his excuse to show up. Or I could be projecting.)

“It’s all about the poetry,” Trevor contrasted. “It’s about the lyrics of your soul. What I love about reading is that it breaks the world down into Fun-Sized pieces that you can digest. By reading, you can come to terms with the world, and learn to accept it. And once that’s figured out, it’s a lot easier to find your own place in it.”

“Did reading help you realize that you were meant to be a Burger King fry cook?” Robert chimed in, back for the attack.

“Please, shut up!” his brother groaned. (*And so the sibling rivalry continued...*)

And then, it was my turn. I cleared my throat to begin. Before I found the words within myself, Dan plopped himself down in the recliner to my left. If it hadn’t been for his goofy eagerness, he may have resembled Lincoln enthroned at his memorial. His knees jutted far out, bending at acute angles to touch the ground.

“Oh, do you want to join in?” I asked.

“Is that O.K.?” There was a hint of sarcasm in his tone, as if his initiation was merely for the purpose of entertainment, either to himself or us kids.

“Yeah, that’s fine! Of course!”

“So,” he said, massaging his hands. “What were we up to?”

“Well, we were going around, saying what reading means to each of us.”

“Reading is how we pass down knowledge from generation to generation. It’s entertainment and it’s education—I’m sorry,” he paused. “Should I wait my turn?”

“No, you’re O.K.”

“Everything we know is written down. It’s a lot of what separates us from the animals, the ability to pass down our history. It’s like what Orwell wrote about in *1984*; if there’s no recorded facts, then what do we know?”

“O.K., so, what do we want to do now?” I asked, once he’d finished.

“Wait up, you haven’t gone yet,” said Caleb.

“Yeah, if you’re gonna make the rest of us suffer, then it’s only fair!” Robert agreed.

“Umm...O.K.,” I began. Not the best start, I confess. I half-planned not to speak after Dan joined in, and had already shelved my thoughts on the matter. It’s no big deal, and they had a good point. I just wasn’t prepared. “Well, honestly, I think you all summed it up so well that I can’t think of anything to add.” It was a cop-out, and I could tell from the dismayed expressions on all of their faces that they knew it.

“Wow,” Robert announced. “We’re a book club with a leader who doesn’t know how to talk about books. This is off to a good start.”

“C’mon, man,” Dan coaxed. (It was apparent that he was trying not to leave Robert’s comment hanging over my head long enough to make a lasting impression.) “We’ve talked Lit. before and I know you’ve got some interesting opinions on the subject. You’ve gotta have something brilliant to add that you’re holding back on us.”

*Did I actually blush when he said that?* Dear God, I hope not. Jesus Christ, I think I did. They probably all think I’ve got some awkward man crush on him...which I *don’t*. I just can’t take compliments very well.

“Thanks, I muttered, glancing down so that the others wouldn’t see the burning in my cheeks. “I just think that reading is an important part of education, and I wanted to motivate myself-and other people-to read more classic books.” I shrugged. “That’s all.” Nothing profound, but they seemed more passive with this answer.

“Umm...” Chloe said, before nervously biting her lower lip. “How often are we meeting?” She asked me; I looked to Dan for an answer.

“Doesn’t matter to me! I enjoy the company. I should probably check with my boss first, though.” He nodded at Ione.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she joshed. “I might get sick of you guys.”

“It doesn’t make a difference to me. I mean, I could meet here every day. Does this time work weekly for you guys?”

There were nods and assenting grunts all around.

“O.K., cool. Umm...I guess before we go, we should all try to think of books to read. We can each choose at least one, that way nobody’s left out. You don’t have to name any now, but if you could bring some ideas in Wednesday, that’d be great.”

“Should we read anything for next week?” Caleb inquired.

“Oh, right! I actually did have a book in mind, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I haven’t read it yet, myself, but it’s my dad’s favorite book. When I was a kid, we had a dog that he named Atticus, after one of its characters. I’ve always wanted to read the book because of that. Anyways, there is a copy of it in the school library. There’s only one, so we may have to Battle



Royale to find out who gets it. I haven't checked the public library, but there are a few copies lying around in here."

"Any specific point you want us to read to?"

"Would it be too much to ask you to finish it? I know that a week isn't much time."

"Yeah, it is," Chloe interjected. "Some of us have jobs. I mean, I can read on break, but I've only got 15 minutes."

"What if we break it up into 2 weeks? We'll read to the halfway point for next Wednesday and have it done with the Wednesday after to give our closing thoughts."

"Yeah, I think I can work around that."

"Anybody else?"

"Naw, man. Just because we work here all day doesn't mean that we can't read in the dead hours," Ione said.

Dan followed it up with "What she means to say is that unless this town starts booming, then we've got all the time in the world."

"Alright, any other questions?"

"It's not a question, but I have one more thing to add," Dan said. "Feel free to invite your friends. We've got plenty of room here for them!"

"Thanks, I'm glad you brought that up. Nothing else? O.K., then, I guess we're good to go. Before we do, though, I just want to thank you all for actually showing up. I know things

aren't very organized yet, but I'm still trying to figure out how to do this. Plus, as those of you I have class with know, I'm not the most outgoing person."

As we were standing up to leave, Dan gave me a pat on the back. "You did fine. It takes a lot of courage to do what you're doing and leaders aren't born overnight."

"Thanks," I repeated, probably making me sound like a record player stuttering over a note of gratitude.

"Nice choice, by the way," he said as I was on my way out the door. "When you get home, be sure to tell your dad he's got good taste."

I promised that I would and bade him farewell.

There was a silver lining to the night that helped cushion my profound embarrassment. As I was collecting my bike, parked outside by the bench it was chained to, Caleb approached me.

"Which way you headed?" he asked.

"19<sup>th</sup> Street," I replied.

"I'm on 21<sup>st</sup>, the house with the inflatable football player...I think it looks tacky, especially in the front yard like that, but my dad likes it."

I bobbed my head to convey understanding.

"So, care to walk and talk?"

"Oh, sure! I can do that." I removed the lock from the bike's wheel and began walking, guiding the bike along by its handle.

“Well, you’ve got your bike. What was I thinking? If you’d rather ride off alone, don’t worry about it. I could even run along beside you.” I couldn’t tell if he was kidding or not.

“I don’t mind. I’m about sick of riding this thing anyways.”

“No license, I take it?”

“Naw, I don’t want to bother my parents about it right now. They’ve been really busy.”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t mind. Most parents seem to enjoy that kinda thing. I know that I look forward to teaching my kids how to drive someday.”

“Oh, how old are they?” I said, trying to mask my shock with interest.

“I don’t have any yet, dummy. For now, I can do without.”

Duh. Why would I interpret his sentence that way? What kind of a schmuck am I? These and an entire barrage of more explicit insults buzzed around my head. I was afraid to speak in case anything even more idiotic could fly out of my mouth, if such a statement could exist. And so we remained silent until turning around the block.

Caleb was the one to finally break the silence. “I just gotta say that I think you’ve got a really good thing going on. I’m really excited to get started reading these books and talking about them with you guys. I’m even gonna talk to a few guys and try to convince them to come.” It was sort of blurted out, as if he’d been waiting to say it this whole time.

“That’d be great. How do you feel about tonight?” I could see the wind of my breath, I remember. It was odd, because it’s so early in the year yet. Summer seems hardly over.

“What about it?”

“Just, how it went. It wasn’t too bad, was it?”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. It’s only the first meeting, and it went pretty well. Just wait until next Wednesday, and when we’re all there, you’ll know that it worked out.”

“Thanks. I really don’t want to waste everybody’s time.”

“Reading’s never a waste of time, unless it’s *50 Shades of Grey* or something.”

I laughed. “Don’t even get me started!”

“You ever shop in there before?” I must have looked confused, because he then clarified, “Neverending Stories.”

“No, actually. I always kind of overlooked the place.”

“I know what you mean. It’s so easy to, when it comes to those hole-in-the-wall shops. They’re usually worth checking out, though; some of them are real goldmines. I’ve known about Neverending Stories my whole life, though. My mom used to take me in to buy *The Chronicles of Narnia* when I was younger. Dan’s a heck of a guy. He and his fiancée go to my church.”

“What’s she like?” A car flew pas us, its headlights shooting through the dark like eyes of a predator.

“She’s quiet, but really nice. They’re the kind of couple that just—*makes sense*.”

“Huh. I find it hard to picture Dan with a quiet woman.”

“I think she keeps him in line; and I think that he brings out her fun side.”

“Well, this is my street.”

Caleb squinted his eyes to read the street sign. “So it is. I must have gotten too caught up in my own words, because this walk flew right by.”

“Maybe you should be a writer, then.”

“What?”

“If you get so caught up in your own words.”

“Oh, haha, maybe I will! Hey, you have a good night, man!”

“Thanks, you too!”

I was greeted at the door by the sound of my parents fighting. Dad was yelling; Mom was crying. I walked straight to my room, trying my darndest not to eavesdrop. My iPod died in my sleep last night, and I forgot to put it on its charging dock before school this morning. Oh well. I may not have written all this down tonight otherwise.

-Aaron

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## **To Kill a Mockingbird**

### Part 1

Today we met at 7 to discuss the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Although nobody new showed up, everybody from our previous meeting did return. Well, except for Ione, who had an appointment for her braces. Funny. I didn't even notice that she wore braces.

“Alright,” I began. “How far along is everyone?”

We found a median at the point where Jem began taking care of Mrs. Dubose. Some of us had read beyond that point, but aside from Robert, who couldn't be bothered to pick it up, we had at least gotten that far.

"I just want to say that I don't mind the book. It's well-written, but it doesn't have much of a story," Chloe said. "It's just a bunch of people in this town and the things they do."

"It all comes together," Dan promised. "I know that I have an advantage over you younger people, having read it in college, so I'll try to avoid spoilers. I don't think you're looking at the story the *wrong* way, but maybe you should try to see it from another perspective. It's all from Scout's point of view, looking back on her childhood and all the people who made it up. One of its biggest strengths is how Lee connects each story so subtly, and how naturally that it all comes together by the end. I'm not kidding you guys when I say this is one of the greatest books of all time, and it's masterfully crafted." He looked around the room. "O.K., I'll can it now."

"Have they killed the mockingbird yet?" Robert interposed.

"Maybe if you read the book, you'd know how idiotic that sounds," his brother retorted.

He shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Since *I* read the book, I'll say that I really enjoy the character Atticus. Just the way that he's such a good person and is trying to raise his kids properly in this crazy town, it's so inspirational."

"That's the genius of the story, to me," Caleb contributed. "It's about these children looking up to their father, but told with an adult's wisdom to see how he really was. I think

there's a lot of tragedy to Atticus Finch. He lost his wife, is trying to raise two kids, and more than anything always tries to do the right thing-even when he knows that he won't succeed. It seems like there's a lot of darkness in his life, but he never lets that define him. Like a good lawyer, he always maintains his composure."

"Was anybody else totally creeped out by Boo?" Chloe said. "Like, how he watches these kids and leaves them presents? It's like a Stephen King book or something."

"I actually think King took a lot from this book," Dan agreed. "And Boo Radley was definitely one of them. Before I forget, Aaron, did Atticus Finch live up to his name for you?"

"Aaron!?" Robert exclaimed. "Who's Aaron!?"

I raised my hand and lied that "It's my middle name. And yeah, I do like him. I like how he's very quiet, but assertive, especially in the scene outside the jailhouse."

"That's such a powerful moment. If you ever get the chance, watch the film. Gregory Peck plays Atticus, and delivers one of the best speeches in all of cinema history. It's right up there with Chaplin's in *The Great Dictator*, and it was all done in one take."

Later, as we were filing out the door, Robert pulled me aside.

"Hey, I'm really sorry that I didn't get my reading done. It's just so hard for me to focus on it; I get distracted so easily. The book sounds really interesting, though, and I'm gonna try to read it."

"Don't worry about it. Just remember, this isn't a comedy club; we're here to discuss books. What's the point of coming if you don't read them? You won't know what's going on and

you won't have anything to say. Instead of sleeping in Study Hall every day, why don't you borrow my copy and—”

But he was already on his way out the door, about to hound his brother over the next Topic of the Hour. Write what I may about the guy, he's no liar.

I turned to face Chloe, who at one point was behind me. She must have slipped by while I was lecturing Robert. Dammit. I really wanted to try talking to her. Homecoming's in a month and I don't know who else I could ask. She may be a little rough around the edges, but I think she's a good girl. I could ask her in class tomorrow, but that would be so awkward. I don't want to embarrass her in front of everyone. Oh well, there's always next week. I rode home alone.

## Part 2

Robert must have taken my words to heart, because the first thing that came out of his mouth today was “Guys, I'm only halfway through the book and you'd better not spoil it for me!”

There were two new members initiated tonight. The first was a senior named Wes. To him, “Reading's a good way to find out about yourself. Every character you relate to, or line you plagiarized in notes passed to your girlfriend define who you are as a person.”

“How did you find out about this? I'm trying to figure out the best way to connect with more people.”

“Oh, I knew about it since you made that Facebook group last summer. I've just had a falling-out with some friends recently, so, I thought I'd give this a shot, now that my schedule's freed up.”



“Umm, I’m sorry to hear that? We’re glad to have you, though! Today we’re talking about Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*; have you ever read it?”

“Kinda. I skimmed it for Terman’s class in 8<sup>th</sup> Grade.”

“Well, we can work with that.”

“You were probably already able to tell, but we don’t exactly have high standards here,” Robert said, back to his old ways.

“Speak for yourself,” Ione replied. She was awarded for this by Trevor with a high-five.

But, oh, how true those words felt only moments before, when Chloe walked in with a shaggy-looking dude in cargo shorts that she introduced as Codey. His face was overgrown with goat fuzz; his teeth stuck out like jaggedy rocks at the bottom of a movie cliff, and he looked at least 20. You know the worst part about it all? He seems like a rad guy. Do you think I cared about his thoughts on literature in the slightest? I’d rather have held a small book burning than listen in on that, but I have to admit, once he started dropping names like Yeats and Lovecraft, my interest was piqued. I felt like a real idiot for not talking to her last week, but now I think the only difference it could have made would be the embarrassment of rejection. It seems to me like they’ve known each other for some time now. It just stinks that college kids get first dibs on all the high school girls. I don’t see how that’s fair at all. So, naturally I didn’t care if he’d read *To Kill a Mockingbird* or not.

Trevor’s analysis on the book: “The ending of the story is so true to life: how Tom Robinson is convicted guilty, and then killed while trying to escape; how Boo Radley saves the children; it’s all brilliant.”

“Thanks, bro,” Robert interjected. “Glad I didn’t plan on finishing this one, anyways.”

“It’s such a great way to show the nature of Atticus Finch,” he continued, ignoring him. “By setting himself up for such a huge failure. He knows the whole time he’s fighting a losing battle, but he does anyways because he knows it’s the right thing to do.”

“I always had this theory that the book was written soon after Atticus’ death, and that’s what caused Scout to reflect on all these events as an adult. I may have projected this, because there isn’t much evidence in the text to support it, and I did read the book shortly after losing my own grandfather.” It was me who said that.

“That makes sense, because so much of the book is centered around him. A lot of the book is about growing up, looking back and realizing how great your parents really are,” Caleb added.

“That may not always be the case,” Chloe said. Her beau smiled at that.

Wes’ face seemed to bloom as he listened to this diatribe, as if the story finally clicked with him. He might not be able to contribute much regarding this book, but I think he could very well become a regular here.

Before we parted for the night, I asked everybody for their reading selections. After all, they had 2 whole weeks to figure it out. We offered forth our tributes in the following rotation:

Dan: *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. It’s a Dystopian novel, like *1984*, but it’s much more relevant to today’s society. There’s a lot of sex and drugs, so I think you kids will like it.

Ione: I know it's a typical "girly" book, but *Pride and Prejudice*. It's been my favorite since I was a kid.

Trevor: I really want to get you guys into some Beat Generation stuff. I think you'll get a kick out of *Naked Lunch*, which is probably my favorite book.

Caleb: My dad always used to read *Robinson Crusoe* to me when I was a kid, so I thought that would be a good choice for us.

Chloe: Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. It's very sexual.

Codey: Hey, you all had 2 weeks to find books. You can't put me on the spot after 2 minutes!

Wes: I'm having a hard time coming up with anything right now, but it would be really fun if we could read *Watchmen*.

"Well, sure," I said.

"Really!?! Cool. It's probably my favorite comic."

"Yeah, of course. Why couldn't we?"

"Uhh, just being a comic, I didn't know if that was O.K."

"Definitely, I like that idea."

"I'd rather read a good comic than a bad novel any day," Dan said.

Robert: I'm sorry. I couldn't find anything. Does the *Handgun Shooter's Bible* count?

"Sorry, Robert. I can do comics, but no magazines." I stood up, ready to disperse, when I noticed Dan's hand shooting up. "Uhh, yeah?"

“What are we to read for our next conclave?”

“And when will that be?” Robert added.

“Huh. I hadn’t really considered either of those,” I said dumbly. “I guess that’d be kind of important to know before we leave... Since we’re coming up on October, *Dracula* would be a fitting choice. We could start on the first week of. What do you think?”

“Makes sense to me,” Caleb said.

“I’m not gonna argue with that,” Chloe chimed in.

“Great, umm, how does this time in two weeks sound to you all? That should give us enough to buy ourselves copies and get a decent start on it. Plus, I know that people are setting up for Homecoming after school and some of us have big tests coming up. Would it be unreasonable to aim to finish half the book by then?”

“Yes.”

“Robert, I don’t think you of all people get to have a say in this,” his brother quipped. The rest of the group assented. With this final issue resolved, we parted for the night. Dan stuck around to close the shop (but not without advertising that it is home to not one, but two paperbacks of our next feature). Trevor gave Robert a ride home. Chloe and Codey (were) headed back to his place. Caleb drove up in his parents’ car, and offered me a lift, but I biked up, anyways. It’s starting to get cold already.

Aside

According to the paper banner in the cafeteria, it’s “A Night to Dream For,” and I’m locked up in my bedroom, half-listening to my parents’ conversation with the television in the

living room. (*From the sounds of it, they must have some kind of movie on. Judging by their uproarious laughing, it must be good company.*) They've both come in to "check up" on me; Mom asked if I wanted to go somewhere to eat. I told her that I was in the mood for her spaghetti; but really, I'd feel like a geek being the only guy in sweats and a jacket with his parents in a restaurant full of suits on dates. They—my parents, that is—must think I'm depressed that I couldn't find a date to the Homecoming, but I see it as a greater opportunity than a loss. Sure, I could lay in the coffin of my bed, mourning the death of my night's plans, but it's allowed me to finish reading *Dracula*. I made sure to take a lot of notes (just questions and comments for the group), and I also developed a new strategy for reading. Rather than skimming over words or passages I don't understand, I've begun writing them down to define and research. I also marked my book up more than I have since scribbling in the pages of my baby book when I was Eight. I've always been averse to that kind of literary graffiti in the past, but if I want to better myself as a reader, then I can't be afraid of underlining some words or venturing out to forge my own footnotes.

I wonder how everybody else is doing. Not as in right now, literally, but with the reading (although I do hope they're having the night of their dreams). It worries me sometimes that this may all be nothing more than a vanity project. I really hope they're enjoying the book and look forward to the next meeting. Personally, I think we're a fine group of kids, and we've got the potential for something real here. Some kids graduate and reminisce on winning the Big Game that earned them a full ride to a degree, or feel the thunderous applause concluding the opening night for the play they starred in still ringing in their ears; I want us to look back on Aaron Texter's Book Club that way.

## Dracula

It may have been a bit forward of me to have jumped right into our Halloween special. The year has yet to slough off its summer dressings; the days remain long and the trees are green. September has just ended, but it looks like we're back at the start of it. That's alright. In fact, it puts us at a great advantage. When the leaves turn, we'll be ready; and while everyone else will be scrounging for last-minute costumes, we'll have had it on our minds for a month. I've always enjoyed the holiday, but in a very altruistic sense. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy munching on candy corn and watching black-and-white monster movies, but what I really love about the holiday is its innocence. It's the holiday for the young at heart. What it's all about is being the person you want to be, and exorcising your fears by living them out. It's a celebration of creativity. My dad always says that holidays are just reminders for important qualities we should always value (*It shouldn't take Mother's Day to respect one's mother; we should feel thankful all year round, etc.*). If I could be just one holiday, I think I'd choose Halloween.

So, it wasn't a dark and dreary night that we met under, but rather a chilled sunny evening. All members were able to make the occasion (*save for Codey, who was not likely snatched away by any bloodsuckers*). I was at a small loss for structure, as I forgot my notes on the book at home. Although I'm no candidate to join the SNL crew, I think I managed to stumble and improvise my way well enough without.

"It's nothing like the movies," Robert announced, as if he'd been waiting to let it out for days.

*"Wait, did he actually read the book?"* Ione whispered to Trevor.

“He’s been wearing its cover like a mask for the past week,” he replied. “I almost forgot what he looks like...I shouldn’t have expected such luck.”

“It’s weird, to read a book when you’ve already seen so many different versions of its story.” His voice was shaking unfaithfully. Does Robert of all people have a fear of public speaking? Or was he just afraid one of us would shoot his opinion down? “Trevor showed me a Dracula movie last week, Noserat or something—”

“*Nosferatu*,” his brother clarified.

“Yeah, whatever it was, I guess it was O.K., but it wasn’t half as scary as the book. The acting was bad, and it just looked funny—”

“Man, it was directed by Herzog; you’re crazy.”

“But in your head, it’s scarier, because it lets you scare yourself.” He was speaking more erratically under the pressure of his brother’s stifling. “It doesn’t look fake, and you know more about the story!”

“I think Robert’s right,” Caleb piped in. He had arrived with a bandage pasted beneath his left eye, covering a scar earned in a gridiron battle this past weekend. “Movies can be scary, but most rely on loud noises or blood; a book goes for a more psychological response. It has to unlock those fears that hidden within yourself, if it wants to keep you up at night. I like movies, but they’re so phony. I can never see a character past the actor playing them. You can watch a movie, and enjoy it, but you get to put yourself in a book. Inside the book, its story is real.”

“I can see that,” Trevor said. “All that I’m getting at is that we need to be open to different interpretations. Isn’t it closed-minded to claim an entire artistic medium superior to another; you may as well say *Twilight* is better than *Fright Night* just because you can read it.”

“I think you’re both right here,” I cut in. “Listen, I don’t want to moderate our discussions; I’d much rather have organic conversation, but academic debate and elitism is more fatal to open-mindedness than censorship. Really, it’s the same thing.” I stopped to glance around the room, anxious to find myself swamped in a mob I’ve angered. Their faces did look a little shocked, but probably more that I had spoken out in such a tone than of offense. “Guys, you can’t just tell Trevor that one thing is better than another. This is art; it’s all subjective. But you can’t go stir up an argument, just because you disagree, Trevor. It’s cool to have another opinion, but the point of this club is to understand each other, not to pound everyone into one submissive opinion. That’s stupid, and honestly a little bit fascist.” I stopped to catch my breath. “I’m sorry. I don’t like having to use so many big words and act like some kind of a judge, but we can’t just fight with each other. If that’s what we want to do, we may as well just go join an Internet forum.”

“Thank you,” Chloe said.

“Well said, Aaron,” Dan added.

Ione clapped sardonically. (*Gosh, even her gestures are seasoned with a hint of sarcasm...for some reason, I find it adorable.*)

Wes looked around the room coyishly. At the moment, I couldn’t tell if he felt out of place or hadn’t read the book at all.



I try my best to be modest, but I'll bet I was blushing. "Umm, is there anything we can all discuss in a civil manner?" I wanted to open the forum back up before alienating anyone I may have slighted. For a beat, the room was silent.

Wes raised his hand. It was an awkward motion, as if he was unused to making it. I told him to speak freely, no need to raise hands. "Did I read something wrong or does Dracula have a mustache?"

"That's a funny point to bring up after the talk we just had," Dan said. "The media, or pop culture gives us a very specific idea of how to see classic characters. When Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, I doubt that she intended him to be green with bolts sticking out of his neck, but we think of him that way, because directors and other artists have taken liberties with that character and that idea of Frankenstein became popular. Unless you've read *Moby Dick*," (*Oh, that book again.*) "You probably only know the most popular parts of the story other creative people have borrowed from. *Dracula's* no different." I wonder if Dan had ever considered becoming a teacher; I think he would make for a good one. He knows how to communicate to us youth, and he certainly knows a fair amount about things. I wonder what he went to school for...*if* he went to school. It's all very curious, but I'd imagine that it would be rude to ask.

"I agree, but it was actually Frankenstein's *monster* that became green. Frankenstein was the scientist."

Dan raised his hands in surrender. "You've got me there."

"And I, for one, enjoy Dracula's mustache. It was a different time, and I don't think any of you guys have experienced it, but it's stimulating to feel a man's facial hair while he kisses

you. Think about that mustache prickling your neck as he leans in to suck your blood. It's all very sexual." I couldn't tell if she was kidding or not.

"Yeah, if you're into Freddie Mercury," Wes responded. She cracked a smile. Maybe she was.

"Aaron, how'd you feel about the book?" Dan asked.

"Yes, leader, what did you think of it?" Trevor echoed. I felt tense, uncertain that there was no venom in his tone.

"Well, I liked it. It was well-written, and I really like the use of journals and letters to tell the story. It made the book much scarier, and gave insight into the characters' minds, so you can fear for them more. Surprisingly, I like all of the characters. I was worried at first, because I can't relate to characters in some of these old books, but I really sympathized with these guys. Also, I really appreciate the fact that it was actually scary. I haven't read any books that made me afraid to turn the light off since my *Goosebumps* phase in elementary school." I tried not to ramble, but by that point it became obvious (to me, as well as surely everyone else) I was fighting a losing battle, so I stopped myself there.

"Bram Stoker knew what he was doing," Dan said. "It's a classic tale of good and evil. Dracula is one of the best antagonists of all time, and you can really feel the comradery of those who banded together to stop him. It's a story of human survival, also, there's just one perfect Horror setpiece after another. Johnathan Harker in Dracula's castle, on the ship, when they watch Lucy lure a child into the graveyard: they're all very clever. I like some of the movies they've made from it, but none of them have captured that feeling of dread that Stoker harbored. It's just a classic, and rightfully so."

“I’ve been enjoying this conversation and all, but it’s almost 9:30 already, and I should really head home soon if I want to finish my homework tonight,” Caleb said.

“Oh, yeahh...” Chloe said, as if something had clicked inside her mind. “I still need to start my Spanish!”

“Hey, that’s what I’m working on!”

“You want to meet up at the diner and finish it over coffee?”

“Sure, I could use the caffeine. Anyone else in? C’mon, Robert—” he goaded. “Don’t try and convince me that you’re the most responsible student of us all.”

Robert looked to his brother.

“Sorry, Robert, but we’re too far out of the way; once I go home for the night, I’m staying in,” Trevor replied.

“Don’t worry about it. I gotcha, bud,” Caleb said.

“Really!?” Robert said incredulously. “Are you sure?” (It’s worth noting that Robert’s social life has been incredibly limited-half due to his seclusion from neighboring children, and also surely because of his overwhelming demeanor. My point is, although this may seem like an ordinary social invite to most, to him it was an extraordinary opportunity, a kind of golden ticket.)

“Yeah, so long as you don’t drive here from Pakistan every morning, it’s no big.”

I would have liked to join them, but I took French over Spanish. *Ma chance.*

“Well, Ione, I’d say it’s about time we head home, too,” Dan said.

“Definitely. I wouldn’t want to miss the new *Sherlock*,” she replied, hopping out of her seat. She got a haircut between meets. It’s shorter now (*Well, duh.*), but suits her facial structure better.

We cleared out for them to close shop. Everyone but Trevor and myself headed diner-wise on foot. He approached me while I was unchaining my bike from a rack.

“Hey, Aaron.”

“Hi, what’s up?”

“Not much, just wondered if you’d need a ride home. Looks like you’re covered, though. If you want, there’s room in the back to toss your bike. I could use the company, since Robert ditched me.”

“No, I’m fine, really.” I mounted the bike. “I could use the exercise.”

“C’mon, don’t play hard to get with me.” I now saw that it wasn’t merely a friendly deed he was interested in. “Don’t look at me *that* way, it was a joke. Seriously, though, I’d like to chat on the way back.”

“Oh, yeah.” I dismounted the bike, trying to suppress my uneasy thoughts. “I can do that.”

Trevor had parked on the far side of Main Street; I practically could have been home by the time we reached his (*parent’s?*) van. I say his parents, because I doubt he’s one for palm tree car fresheners and Marvin Gaye CDs, but I’ve made false assumptions before. As Trevor pulled out, I became immediately aware of just how careful a driver he was. My mother can’t make a trip around the block without hitting a curb, and I swear to God my father fancies himself a

NASCAR driver when he's behind the wheel. (*I don't know who I feel safer riding with, but I'll add that conflict to their queue.*) So, it was a foreign experience to see Trevor so in control of the vehicle. With no offense to the dude, I felt more like I was riding passenger to a grandparent than a young driver.

"I just want to apologize for making a little scene tonight. I don't usually act that way, and I already feel embarrassed about the whole thing." He puffed out his cheeks, and then exhaled. Up until this point, we had only made small talk. "I suppose our sibling rivalry got the better of me."

"I understand." (I didn't, like, at all, but I'm sure that if I had a brother, then I would.) "I know that Robert can be a lot to handle (*Turn left here.*), but I think he's a lot smarter than some people give him credit for. I've talked to him for a few years, now, and when he focuses on something, he can really excel at it. I think he just acts up to get attention."

"Oh, I know that. Ever since he was a kid, he pulled that crap. When he was younger, he used to break all my video games. I could have wrung his neck for it back then, but our mom would always tell me that he was just jealous of them. Thinking about it now, I'm sure she was right. Robert's one smart kid." He stopped at a stop sign. "Do you know what kind of grades he got in middle school?"

"He never told me."

"4.0. I wasn't a bad student, but he was a prodigy. He devoured information. It's like he wanted to learn all there was to know about the world. Then, right around the time he moved up to high school, something changed. Something seemed to have broken his concentration, and he just couldn't get back in his groove. His grades dropped, fast. He went from straight As to below

C-level. We had him tested and they gave him ADHD pills. That worked for about a year, well, kind of. He seemed zoned-out all the time, like he could never get enough sleep, but he did manage to pick his grades up—”

“Trevor...”

“After a while, he decided to stop playing dead and dropped his pills cold turkey. Can’t say I blame him, but it’s like he’s got too much energy with no outlet. Dad wants him back on the meds, but they can’t force him to take them. They’ve tried, but he just spits them back out. I’ve seen him do it—”

“Trevor...”

“We had good parents. They’re both there for us when we need them and put food on the table. When I played T-Ball, they made sure to practice with me every night. They’re just—they put a lot of value on hard work and education, maybe more so than on human emotion. Our folks are nearly 60, now, and have been working since they were Robert’s age. After Mom had me, she went to school to become a nurse. They do care about us, but they tend to focus on financial support more than emotional, that’s all. They love him, but sometimes I feel like I’m the only one who understands Robert—”

“Umm... Trevor?”

“He’s still incredibly smart, where he wants to be. He read that whole damn book in a night, and then again every day this week. When it comes to drummers, he’s a historian. If you get him behind a set, though, he may as well be banging on pots and drums. I swear, he knows what to do; he could probably teach a class on it, in theory. He just can’t figure out how to make

it work for himself. It's like there's a missing link in his mind between knowledge and application—”

“*Trevor!*”

“Yeah?” he seemed shocked by my outburst, as if to him it had come unprecedented by more modest interjections.

“You passed my road a few miles back.”

“Oh, sorry.”

He turned the car around, and proceeded to give a lifelong account of his brother.

Aside

It's officially letterman jacket season, and you can hardly take a step without your footfall being pronounced with the crunch of a brown leaf. The air is alive, tossing them (*the leaves*) in its waves and teasing them free of their branches. I went to a home game last week. Caleb didn't make any touchdowns, but he did make some yardage. I sat with my father in the bleachers, right next to the building where the announcers report from. Ever since before I was in school, I can remember coming here with my parents. I don't recall ever having much investment in the game itself. Don't get me wrong, it's a healthy interest to have. I know there's strategy involved, and that there's more to it than two gangs of Neanderthals pummeling each other over an arbitrary leather yarn. I think I can understand the appeal; I'm just incapable of experiencing it firsthand. What I do get out of these nights is the culture of football. It's the chill of the wind grazing the bleachers. It's the familiar faces you see every year, from the women running the concession booths to teenagers debating while nursing Styrofoam cups of hot

chocolate. It's Roman, but more importantly, it's part of *us*. I've attended these gigs since I was a kid, and something about watching the game next to my father just feels *right*. And I won't lie, eating a plate of nachos and cheese can add to any experience.

It was this very dish which was to blame for my run-in that night with Ione. Caleb had just run the ball halfway across the field before being pulled down by an opponent who dove to catch him by the ankles. The next play began at the thirty yard line. I was dosing off, and the next thing I know, my father shoots his arms into the air, catching his left hand on my nacho tray. Tostitos chips and globs of hot yellow cheese flew through the air, evoking gasps (and one *Dracula*-worthy shriek) from those caught beneath this hail. A big Rorschachian shape had been printed upon my jacket in cheese; it looked like I had sneezed it all over my own chest. Although, I take this as a good omen for our boys.

"Oh, sh-oot!" I exclaimed, very nearly evoking a word forbidden in the presence of parents. I could tell my father was much more embarrassed than I was, as he had already begun apologizing profusely to everyone within our vicinity. By the time he noticed my new decoration, he was wearing his chagrin like a mask. He machine gunned sorries, patting my torso down with the napkins. "Dad-Dad-it's O.K.! I'll just wash it off in the bathroom!" I began to excuse myself, and cracked a smile. We laughed the whole thing off. The nuisance was now a folly. I was still giggling as I maneuvered the crowd. In my preoccupation, I nearly collided with a member of the band, missing her by a second. Now was my turn for apologies.

"Hey!" she said, turning around to reveal herself as Ione. (*Ione's in band?* I thought to myself.) It was surreal to see her in uniform; she was at once a familiar face and a face in the crowd. Somehow, she looked younger, as if this classification served me as a reminder of her age. Her hair was drawn back into a pony tail; her eye-shadow was in accordance to our school



colors. She had found herself a role within these functions; I was but an extra in the footage of the event. She clicked her tongue and pointed my way.

“Hey, how’s your night going?”

She scanned me up and down, focusing on the splatter across my chest. “Probably not much better than yours. Trust me, no matter what anyone tells you, say no to band.” She looked to me both worn-down and full of life at once.

A tall, strawberry blonde in red lipstick grabbed her by the arm. Her nails were painted blue and gray. Ione squeed in astonishment, and subsided to her dismissal once recognizing her kidnapper.

“Don’t give in to peer pressure, Aaron!” she called back to me, passing between an elderly couple. “Don’t be like me!” She was gone from sight.

No longer distracted from my task, I continued to the bathroom (or more like the line snaking from the bathroom door like a tongue from a mouth). By the time I made my way in, it was futile. The cheese had encrusted itself upon me. Oh well. It was an old jacket anyway. I resigned to the bench, once more beside my father, where I remained until the game’s shocking conclusion. 30-6. Our time hadn’t scored a point since the showstopper that claimed my jacket. Dad took me out for pizza afterwards. Grease on top of melted cheese is absolutely disgusting, but delicious. I feel so strange, now that I can eat more slices than him. They say I’m just a growing boy, a budding adult, but I fear I’m growing in all the *wrong* ways. When I pinch my stomach, it feels gelatinous. I’m not overweight by any scale, but I’d better start watching my diet if I want to keep it that way.

All in all, it was a good night but something shook me about my encounter with Ione. It was like seeing a teacher grocery shopping with the wife, but closer to home. (*What's she doing in band, anyhow? She doesn't go to our school...Does she?*) Honestly, it provoked an anxiety that I had never before suffered. What do these people think of me? Am I just that geek who runs the book club to them? Is there anything at all about me that attracts them or that they can relate to? I don't think I was aware of it when I started the club, but it's shown me just how desperately I'm in need of a crew. We may not be tight as *The Little Rascals*, but I really like these kids. I just hope they like me back. I'm trying not to lose my shape over it, but I feel unhinged. There's a draft in my chest, and doubt floats upon its wind like motes of dust.

No matter, I'd better tuck myself in for the night. There's sure to be chores in the morning, and they won't wait around for my convenience.

-Part 2-

I made sure to check and double-check my backpack for the notes on *Dracula* before heading schoolward this morning. While this is an asset I did not possess for my last turn at leadership, it'll be a paltry addition to our discussion tonight. Finding my concepts either too dull or having already been to some degree addressed, I scratched over half of them out with my pen.

It's so lonely here in the cafeteria without Robert's energy. He must be out sick; I wonder if he'll show tonight. For the past week, he's been begging to know what we'll read next. In the time between meets, he could have downed a novel of his own interest. I can't entirely blame him, though. It's not like I've binge-read *Narnia* or anything of the sort, myself. I'd love to point him in one direction or another. But the truth is that I don't know where we'll be headed next,

myself! I figure, this is a democracy, so I'll let the people choose. It may have been my idea, but it's their club.

Well, that's another meet down. My fingers are stiff from biking home, so I'll probably pace this entry out. I enjoy our meetings and all, but it's unbelievable how nervous I still get about it. I suppose my meekness makes me more of a founder than a leader-type to the club. I have no issue with that; I just can't shake this feeling that I could be doing *better*.

Ione broke the ice tonight, cursing whoever's wicked idea it was to have read this book, for "[I've] had nightmares about being locked up in Dracula's castle for the last week! Every time, I'm sent there as a housemaid. He shows me around the castle, and warns me not to go in the basement. Then, he excuses himself to do some kind of work. I get started, dusting away cobwebs and sweeping the floors. It's spooky and all, but just kinda boring, like I'm doing chores in real life. Until I step on a crooked nail, and my foot begins to bleed. (*I don't know why I would be cleaning a gothic castle in a French maid outfit, barefoot, but it's dream logic.*) I start heading toward the bathroom, to find a Band-Aid and some antiseptic, but when I pass the door to the cellar, it is now open. I stop, and watch as the witches enter. They lead me down to the cellar by the hand. I know that I should struggle or resist, but I'm hypnotized or something. They lay me down in this coffin filled with dirt; it conforms to my shape as I settle into it. (*I have a memory foam mattress, which might have something to do with that detail.*) They close the coffin lid overtop of me. I can't see anything at all. I'm freaking the hell out, because of my claustrophobia. All I can hear is their cackling. Suddenly, the coffin lid opens, and Dracula's looking down at me. He leans in to bite me, but I know that if he does, I'll become one of his witches. Then, I wake up, all tangled in my sheets."

“I don’t know what’s scarier,” Robert remarked. “Seeing you in a French maid costume, or as a witch.”

“You’d have a greater chance at seeing me as a witch, so I wouldn’t worry about it,” she retorted.

“Maybe I’m just a crappy reader, but did Dracula, like, turn into a dog?” Wes said.

“Once again, Wes, you’re fine,” Dan concluded. “Bram Stoker’s original vision for Dracula had plenty of qualities we don’t consider today. We all know he turns into a bat, but in the book, he’s a much more prolific shape shifter. When Johnathan Harker sees him in the streets, he also looks younger, remember?”

“I’ve been looking stuff about the book up online and found a short story Bram Stoker wrote called ‘Dracula’s Guest.’ It was about this guy travelling to Dracula’s castle, but gets attacked by wolves.”

Dan blinked for a moment, as if jostled out of autopilot by Robert’s uncharacteristic extracurricular studies. “Yeah, I haven’t read that one, but there are tons of classic gothic tropes in Stoker’s writings. If you’re interested in those kinds of things, Robert, you should read *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole.”

“Does anyone have a pen?” Caleb retrieved one from his pocket. Robert uncapped it, beginning to write it on his palm. “How do you spell Otranto?”

“O-T-R-A-N-T-O.”

“Thanks.”

“Robert, my fiancée has a copy at home. I can bring it in for you, if you’d like.”

“That’d be great, thanks!”

“Did anyone else see a parallel between Dracula and Elizabeth Bathory?”

“Yeah, like how they used innocent blood to keep young!?” Chloe shot up. “It’s so sexual. It’s all *lustmord*; I love it.” She sank back into whatever perverse daydream the thought had inspired.

“I saw more in common with Vlad the Impaler than anyone,” Caleb said, flipping through his hardback for evidence. “It even refers to him, *somewhere* in here...”

“While he’s on that,” I commandeered the spotlight. “How did everybody *feel* about the book? All this academic stuff is cool, but reading *can* be for pleasure, too.”

“I thought it was great,” Robert said. “It wasn’t like a lot of books, where the writer’s just trying to show off how smart he is; it had a real story.”

Caleb dropped his book, forfeiting the pursuit. “I really appreciated the book, and I’m glad I got to read it, because I probably wouldn’t have on my own. I liked all the historic details in it, and how influential it was, yet it still felt fresh.”

Chloe was next. “I recommended the book, so of course I like it. It was one of the first adult books I read, and it’s definitely stuck with me since. I think I liked it more this time than when I was younger; I could understand more of it now.”

After her, Wes. “I really dug the book up until the last act. It built up all this momentum and just begins to meander. I like the concept of travelling across the world to destroy Dracula’s caskets, but I felt like it could have been shortened by about fifty pages. And the ending with the

gypsies is just weird. I still like everything up to that point, but those last hundred pages do hurt my opinion of it.”

All eyes were on me. I guess that meant it was my turn.

“Do I have no say in this!?” Dan exclaimed, in one of his histrionic (*Yes, that is a vocab word for English. Half of my fifty dollar terms in this notebook are. It helps me to memorize them, if I can use them in a sentence.*) outbursts. I went along with him, granting my permission to speak. He shrugged. “Eh, I like it, but it’s pretty much a classic. Aaron? Our turn, now. Didn’t mean to steal your thunder. Now, go on! Impress us!”

“It’s, um, I really liked it. It has great atmosphere and I think Van Helsing is one of the best characters ever. He’s like Captain Ahab. I like when he refers to losing his daughter, because I think Stoker meant to imply she was bitten by a vampire. I don’t know, but it would make for a good movie. I get what you mean, Ione, but I liked how abrupt the ending was. The last half builds you up for this huge payoff, and then it’s all over in a page. It was neat.”

“Huh, that’s a good point,” Wes said.

“So, what do we want to read next?” *Cricket*s. “Well, Wes, you’re the one who suffered through the last hundred pages. What’s your pick?”

“Hey! Ione whined. “I had to suffer through my nightmares!”

“I’m still for *Watchmen*,” Wes said. “If that’s alright with you, Ione. I don’t think it’ll give you any nightmares.”

“Yeah, that works for me!”

“Alright, I concluded. *Watchmen*, it is!”

We all rose, collecting our belongings. “Before you all go,” Dan announced. “Ione and I will be decorating the shop for Halloween this week. If any of you are free this Friday, we’ll be having a small celebration here. Nothing fancy, just candy, costumes, and some black-and-white movies.” All our schedules were open, save for Caleb, who had a game that night. “Robert, is Trevor coming back to get you? Or will you need a ride home?”

“Yeah, he’s just at the rec center. Some of his friends are playing in a band there. I can walk down and catch up with him, there.”

“You sure you don’t need a ride over?” Dan pressed. “It’s hardly out of the way for me at all.”

“Naw, I’m good,” Robert said, resolutely (*which is not a vocab word, I swear*).

“I’ll walk my bike down with you,” I said. “I’m headed that way, anyhow. I just live a block from the school.”

Robert seemed happy about the prospect of a walk-and-talk.

On my way out, I stopped Ione and asked how she was in our band program if she didn’t go to our school.

“I’m homeschooled,” she said. “But I live in the district, so they let me.”

Huh.

\*

**Halloween**

According to my calendar, the date reads October 31<sup>st</sup>. If one was to judge by the weather alone, it may as well be December 25<sup>th</sup>. That didn't lower my hopes for the festivities planned for tonight; I just had to plan around them. Mainly, I wanted to secure a ride from my parents. With that in the bag, I was set for a Halloween adventure...once school had finished. (Why do they make us go on a holiday prevalent as Halloween? I get St. Patty's Day or something, but jeeze...And if we must go, couldn't we at least be allowed to throw a mask on?) The clock hand ticked on, agile as a zombie. By the dismissal bell, I could sympathize with the narrator of "Tell-Tale Heart." Although it was pushed off in the distance, I never lost sight of hope.

Once home (*The party did not begin until 8:00.*), I busied myself with relevant movies and short stories. I watched *Halloween 3*—which didn't actually have Michael Myers in it, but was still a lot of fun—and *Creepshow*, a childhood favorite of mine. At this point, I had consumed enough candy to fill a Jack-O-Lantern and hurled my frustrated body into bed. For a while, I thought I may die. (*What a fitting demise, considering the date. I can read the headline now: Glutton Overdoses on Candy. That's the stuff of legend.*) When I realized that God had lent me his mercy to live and binge another day, I hopped on the Internet to find scary stories. I'd read "The Raven" a hundred times, but another time didn't hurt. I've never read H.P. Lovecraft before, but I did enjoy his story, "The Rats in the Walls," despite its racist overtones. My eyes drifted towards the time of the bottom of the screen as I read some Ray Bradbury story.

7:30. It was time.

Actually, it was about 15 minutes after the time I originally intended to depart, but (*I was pretty sure*) they wouldn't start without me. (That was sarcasm.) I threw my costume on hastily, like when I used to be running late to catch the bus. It was a Van Helsing mock-up, complete with my own crucifix tucked inside my breast pocket like a corsage. (I couldn't actually find a



Van Helsing costume, so I went Good Will hunting with my mother. We found the hat, but I couldn't tell what he wears, so a beige trench coat would have to make due.)

The windows to the shop were plastered with decals of yellow crime scene ribbon and wooden planks to imply the place was boarded up. The door was held open by a wooden wedge with a thin, black curtain obscuring the interior. I brushed it out of my way, stepping ankle-deep into the fog. Rather than bells above the door to declare my entrance, a motion-sensing witch doll cackled, its flashbulb eyes shining red. Faux cobwebs were spread across the books and in the corners of the room. A skeleton was hanged from a thin noose hooked to the ceiling. Someone had pinned a bowtie to the rope above its neck. Beakers filled with glow-in-the dark liquid lined the counter. The normal lighting had been replaced with a green lightbulb that granted the place otherworldliness. It looked just like I had really stumbled into a real shop of horrors (*not that I would have any clue what one might look like, if they were real*). And just like in a scary movie, I was (to the naked eye) alone.

More frightening yet: My social anxiety returned to me, like an old talent remastered. (*Like any great maestro, I could play every note of it with ease.*) Horrifying memories of school dances flashed before my eyes, old scars upon my psyche burning afresh. All those hours spent beside the punch bowl, weighing the potential outcomes of asking “that” girl to dance. All the innocent feet I've trampled in my incompetence! (*Why can't girls keep their shoes on, when occupying the dance floor? Oh, how they laugh in the face of safety, until my idiot armored feet have bruised and broken all their naked toes! Their laughter torments me, as well as their cries of frustration and pain!*) Perhaps it was best that I be left alone a while, if for nothing else, to give myself a quick pep talk.

That finished, I took a brave step into the abyss, like a valiant knight (if I may say so, myself). As if triggered by the weight of me stepping into its domain, a bewildered Jack-in-the-Box sprung out from behind the counter, shrieking like a teenaged girl. Sure, I screamed, but who wouldn't? I'm sure the real Van Helsing wouldn't have been above it. As my heart rate settled and my vision regained its clarity, the demented figure resolved into the shape of Ione, caught in a rare moment of joy.

She wiped a tear from her eye. "I know, I'm a French maid witch. It's supposed to be a joke, so don't even mention it." I inspected her green face paint and the contrasting outfit. Then I noticed the broom propped up against the wall behind her, capped with an archetypal witch hat. "What are you supposed to be? John Cusack? A perverted priest?"

"Uh, I wanted to be Van Helsing," I stammered.

"Well, then, Doctor, for tonight you are." She snagged the hat from its broom, placed it upon her own head, and tipped it my way in salutation.

"Is anybody here yet?"

Dan, but he's not to be disturbed. His transformation in and out of the back room is not yet complete." A thicker black curtain hid the hind quarters of the shop. Trails of neon spiders climbed up it.

"Did you see his costume yet?"

She nodded coquettishly. "What he's got so far. 'Tis a secret, one that I swore upon my soul to protect. (*But it's Frankenstein.*)" She whispered the final revelation. Huh, she was wearing lipstick. Red.

“You mean *Frankenstein’s Monster*?”

She shushed me with a finger, pressing her middle digit to her lips and blowing a forked gust of breath past it. “And *shut up*,” she said. “I knew that.” She wiped the finger, smudged by her lips in red, on the black of her costume.

A wave broke out across the curtain beyond us. A hand emerged from it, and began to withdraw the sheet. Not Dan’s, too feminine. The nails were painted black. A purple ribbon was tattooed near the webbing of its thumb. The curtain folded, revealing a tall, thin woman emerging from the mist. Her hair was hidden beneath a tall, black wig stacked into a beehive fashion. If the trademark shock of white wasn’t running down it, I’d take her for a Goth Marge Simpson. Her dress was a weathered green shade, cut just above the knees. Black knitted leggings wound down into her shoes. Her soft face was caked in pallid make-up.

“Can I help you?” she asked, her voice both gentle and confident.

“It’s just Aaron,” Ione answered. “He’s here for the party.”

“Oh! Dan’s told me so much about you!” the woman said, excitedly. She took two steps forward, extending a hand. As I shook it, she introduced herself as “Elizabeth, Dan’s fiancée.” I should have expected from the visual cue, yet this announcement surprised me.

“I’m Aaron,” I echoed, dimwittedly.

“It’s so nice to meet you! How is the book club going? It’s so cool that you’re doing it, especially in today’s world. I didn’t even know kids were still taught how to read!”

*How* is the book club going? Why hadn't I ever considered that before? Sure, there had been highlights and disappointments, but I never thought to judge it as a whole. "It's going really well," I said, and I felt confident in that estimation.

"Dan loves having you kids around." She leaned in close and whispered, "I think he enjoys the attention." She continued to ask all of the stock questions from there. Do you go to school here? What year are you? How do you find that? I did my best to answer them without as much enthusiasm as I could muster. For such a stranger, it was incredible how personable she was. I don't think I've ever seen an adult look so *alive*. You could tell that she was here, wholly invested in the moment. Her attention was undivided from the conversation, and her character poured flavor into these stale questions. Our back and forth lasted only a few minutes before FrankenDan peered his green head out from behind the curtain.

"It's O.K., Liz, you can go on telling everyone how lucky you are to have me," he said.

"Don't get me started on that, dear," she called to him over her shoulder. "We'd have to keep them here all night just to cover the basics." She said this in a tone that was both sarcastic and genuine at the same time. Miraculously, I didn't find their flirtatious bantering sickening.

"Oh well." He stepped out from behind the curtain. "Once you get your Masters, you'll just have to teach a course on it over at the college." He wore a ragged, tan coat over a screen-printed black shirt. (*There was a torch printed on it in red, underlined with the text, The Modern Prometheus.*) Knots protruded from his neck, and a latex scar adhered to his green face. His hair, sprayed black, was slicked back. "How are you, Aaron?"

"I'm fine, you?"

“A little dead on my feet, but I’ll be back to my old self in the morning. I’ve got a present for you, a little Halloween treat.” He lifted the curtain, inviting me to his netherworld.

Following him into his lair, it was hard not to succumb to a coughing fit. The smoke machine had apparently given him some trouble; the place was like a smoker’s lounge. More cobwebs had been thrown over the couch and recliners. Sealed on the couch was a senior from my school (one of the only colored students attending Pox), dressed as...himself? Red beams of light stabbed through the darkness, glowing eyes of various Halloween ornaments. An Ouija board was lying beside a bowl of candy corn on the coffee table, its planchette pointing (*accusingly*) my way. Moody music was playing lightly, some piano sonata, probably off one of those cheap “Sounds of Halloween” CDs. It was interrupted by the howling of a werewolf, and then the *Ghostbusters* theme began to play.

Puzzled, I asked what the present was.

He extended his arm, pointing theatrically at the bag. “My gift to you,” he said in a Dracula-esque voice. “This is Aaron, David. He’s the man I was telling you about.”

David looked up from his phone. “Hey.”

“David was interested in joining the club,” Dan filled me in.

“Yeah, I come in here to buy cards and Dan told me about it. Seemed pretty cool, so I was curious.”

“Oh, definitely,” I replied. “That’d be great.”

The cackling from the doorway rang out.

“How sweet, fresh meat,” Dan cooed, withdrawing behind the curtain. “I’ll leave you two at it, then.”

I seated myself on the coach beside him. “So, what are you into?”

“Check this out.” I leaned in and he scrolled through an archive of book titles on his phone. Tolkien, James R.R. Martin, and a catalogue of other names I couldn’t place or remember.

“So, you like Fantasy?”

“Oh, yeah,” he nodded. “I’ve read *The Wheel of Time* series twice, this year.” (Should I have acted impressed?) He glanced down at the Ouija board. “Wanna give it a spin?”

“I really shouldn’t.” I felt genuinely uncomfortable looking at the thing, let alone touching it. It may as well have been a wild animal, staring back at us. “I’m Catholic,” I elucidated (*vocab word*).

“All the more reason to,” he grinned. “C’mon, it’s *Sawwan*.”

“What?”

“Halloween: It’s the Pagan term.”

“Oh.” He had me there. Thank God I’ve never been offered drugs, because I can’t deal with peer pressure.

We placed our hands on the planchette. I could feel myself shaking, but the planchette was unmoved. A beat passed and I realized I had been holding my breath. I drew fresh air into my lungs and looked over to see David staring at me to gauge my reaction. I could feel the planchette moving, but my eyes hardly noticed. I couldn’t tell if it was my nerves or another

force acting upon it. Suddenly, it shot across the board towards the corner reading *Hello*. I shot backwards into the cushion of the sofa, my hands as far away from the board as I could get them.

“Did-did that just—” David was interrupted by his own hysterics. I joined him.

I wiped a tear from my eye. “What’s the point of these things?”

“Just to make a quick buck off kids who wanna spook their friends. It’s total bologna. They’re made by Hasbro.” He chuckled some more, and then took a moment to sober up. “So, what’s your costume? Some kinda religious pedophile?”

“No,” I began to hiccup. (*Ugh, I hate when this happens.*) “Van Helsing. You?”

“A serial killer,” he replied coldly.

“How?”

He shrugged. “It’s the ones you least expect.” Another explosion of laughter ensued.

The rest of the night went down smoothly, like some alcoholic drink that I’m too young to have tasted. Various strangers came and went throughout, as well as members of the club. I did my best to advertise the club best I could, but Dan had outsold me by far. Most of the fresh faces did seem interested, but only time will tell how genuine their attention was. Chloe was the first to come in, dressed as an evil nurse. She said it was from some game called *Silent Hill*. I don’t play much, but the name did ring familiar. Robert and Trevor made their appearance shortly after, decked out as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I’m sure you can guess who was who. But the most impressive arrival of all was Caleb’s. He came limping in on a pair of crutches, his eye sunken into a bruising saucer, the size of a baseball. Blood smeared across his face, and an arm of his polo shirt had been ripped from the torso. For a moment, I genuinely believed he had been

lynched or something. Like the jock that he is, he just had to show the rest of us up. Not only did he outdo the rest of us, but he outdid himself as well. And it was *awesome*.

Most of the night was spent casually, just bullcrapping and lounging around. Later on, Robert prompted a candy corn war, which he sorely lost after everyone else (but Dan, who fell defending his honor) formed by a truce to work against him. Around 10:00, we watched *Nosferatu* (not the one Robert had seen, but a silent black and white film). We could have just sat around talking all night, though, for all I cared. For the first time, I felt a part of something. I'd never seen a group of people our age treat each other so respectfully and actually enjoy each other's company. (*Is this common? Or are we all just freaks of social nature? Either way, I'm happy with it.*) Elizabeth placed herself effortlessly at the head of the family as Mother Hen. It may sound weird, but I still find it hard to believe she and Dan aren't Ione's parents by the way they interact. We all accepted David as one of our own. Sure, his smarter-than-thou demeanor is a little off-putting, but underneath it, he seems an honest, funny guy. He and Chloe hit it off famously. Before the last of us left, around midnight, we pitched in to clean the place up. After all, we did owe Dan for all the candy corn that we wasted. I was sad to go, but I'm happy enough to have been able to have such a night that I can't expect it to last forever.

On the ride home, my parents hardly spoke at all. Now I felt like I was in a silent film, and not a particularly happy one. Memories of a good night tucked me in for bed.

\*

### **Who Reads the Watchmen?**



“So, not that it matters, because money does grow on trees and all, but a fair warning that this book costs thirty dollars would have been appreciated!” Chloe whined, storming into the group. We had begun about ten minutes ago.

“I’m sorry,” Wes said. “I don’t own a copy, myself; I just downloaded a PDF.”

“Was it money well-spent?” Dan chimed in.

Chloe smacked her lips. “Well, yeah. I just wasn’t expecting to drop that kind of cash right now.”

“If you ever want a book ordered online, I can have one sent in for you, free of shipping.”

“Thanks. It’s probably my own fault for not checking the Internet.”

Dan turned back towards the group as Ione seated herself. “I have to say, Wes, I’m really impressed with your decision. The most comics I’ve ever read were political cartoons or the Sunday funnies, but I had no idea that one could have such a complex narrative. I’m only halfway through the book, now, but I feel like I’m reading one of the great works of literature. I can’t wait to see where these characters end up.”

“Yeah, Alan Moore and Grant Morrison really changed the way comics were written,” Wes added.

Caleb’s face lit up. “I think it’s awesome. I’ve been excited about it since the opening with The Comedian. My only complaint is that it’s keeping me from my school work. It’s just so fun. I wish we would have read it before Halloween so I could have went as Rorschach.”

“Is anyone else skipping past the written parts?” Chloe rejoined the conversation.

“What!?” David spat. “That’s some of the most important stuff!”

“I haven’t finished the book yet, so I don’t know how everything ties in,” I interjected. “But I think the written parts are to make the book feel more like an epic work of literature. It reminds me of *Moby Dick*, how it distracts from the main plot in order to fill the readers in.”

“You’ve read *Moby Dick*?” Dan said incredulously.

“Well, yeah. Why?”

“That’s just surprising to hear from someone your age.”

“I started *Moby Dick* last summer,” Ione drove further from our topic. “I ended putting it down a hundred pages in. It was just too much for me to understand at the time.”

“Just ‘cause I read it doesn’t mean that I ‘got’ it,” I replied modestly (not to imply reading *Moby Dick* is any feat worthy of pride). “Since this is our first book with illustrations, how does everyone feel about the visuals in this?”

“I really like them,” Chloe added. “I don’t really think this story would work without it. I don’t know how seriously I could take this book if I was just reading its words. It could come off campy, but I can believe in this world with the way its drawn.”

“The character designs are great,” Caleb said. “I love how Night Owl is clearly a parody of Batman, and Dr. Manhattan and Rorschach are so original. It could be weird, with him being this naked blue guy in a room full of people, but Dr. Manhattan feels like a Greek god. It’s incredible!”

“What really drew me to the artwork, when I first read *Watchmen*, was the coloring. It seems like a lot of comics-especially the long-running serials-have this stock aesthetic they abide to. It seems very workman-like, or impersonal. *Watchmen*, on the other hand, feels so vivid, and

for me a lot of that has to do with the colors. Somehow, like the story, it manages to be both eccentric and gritty at the same time. The only other time I've seen it was in a movie called *Suspiria*."

I glanced at my watch. It was almost 5:00; the discussion had been going on for a few hours now. "It's time I should be headed out." I slung my backpack over a shoulder as I stood. "I'm going out with family tonight. Would it work to meet at the same time two weeks from today? I know we don't usually meet right after school."

All in attendance agreed that yes, it would.

Robert raised his hand.

"Uh, yeah, Robert," I called on him, confused by this formality.

"Can the rest of us stay and keep talking?"

"Of course you can. Why couldn't you?"

"I just thought that 'cause you're the leader, the meeting might be officially done since you're leaving."

"Well, I'm not really the leader. I just came up with the idea. None of you need to answer to me. I'd rather you all talk on your own time—these meetings are just time set aside to. Plus, Dan owns the place; he's more team coach than I am."

"But I am just a mascot," Dan said in a cockney accent. "A humble servant at your disposal."

"So, your answer is..."

“Yes, Robert. That’s fine.”

“Don’t worry, Aaron. We’ll behave ourselves,” Ione said. “If you hear otherwise, we’ll give you twenty push-ups.”

“Collectively? Or will each of us give twenty?” Wes added.

“I think it’d be more appropriate for you to give me twenty *poems*,” I called back, shoving the door open.

I biked home, predicting the meal to come in my head. The grandparents (maternal) would be meeting us. I wondered how they would look now. It has been, after all, a few months since I’ve seen them. I feared they might appear jarringly older, like sagging bags of flesh just waiting to slouch off their skeletal hangers. I worry about that a lot—especially after grandma’s scare from a few years ago. Almost as important, where will we dine? Something exotic, like faux-Mexican or imitation “organic” sushi? Oh, who am I kidding? The grandfolks will choose Pizza Palace, as always. The Texters are not an adventurous clan. I propped my bike against the fence to the right of our driveway. I was innocent to the trap I was walking into.

When a victim walks into their home, only to be killed by an intruder, do they sense their fate? Is that nagging feeling of a threat instinct to us all? Or am I supernaturally gifted? Stepping into the threshold (*vocab word*), I could practically smell the wick of my parents’ patience burning. My Texter Senses were throbbing for me to turn back and run to comfort from home. I walked into the kitchen, where my mother was reaching into a sink full of dishes. For all I knew, she could have been searching for a steak knife to end me with.

“I need you to take a look at something for me,” she said. There was no maternal tenderness in her tone, only the mechanical irritation programmed into mothers somewhere in the developmental years (*whether these years are those of my development or hers is up for debate*).

“Sure, Mom.” The possibilities were racing through my mind, a portfolio of all my fears. Will she take me to the crime scene of chores left undone? Or to the corpse of my father strung up in a tree?

“Tell me what’s hanging on the fridge.”

“My report card.” Oh, no. I was in for it now.

“What does it say on the report card?”

Time to use the old diversion tactics.

“I got an A in English.”

“And?”

“B’s in history and art...” I was running out of acceptable grades, and fast.

“What else?”

“I sighed. I was already caught in her web; struggling would only make it harder on myself. “I’m failing chemistry.”

“Are you proud of that? Are you happy with what you see?” She walked toward me. She was already dressed up to go, in a striped dress with a black shawl over her shoulders. She had dyed her hair blonde. She had been trying to evade grays from showing for years, now, like weeds she couldn’t rid from the garden of her scalp.

“I-I like your new hair,” I stammered. No gratitude was shown.

“How do you expect to get into a college with report cards like this?”

“I dunno. Einstein failed math.”

“That’s a myth.” One downside of having a teacher as a parent: They’re smarter than you, at everything. Thank God she teaches at another district. “This is your life, you need to put some effort into it.” The humanity in her voice was returning. Soon we could be friends again. “Fs don’t indicate trying. They show failure.” Nevermind. Judge Mom was back in office.

“You have to try in order to fail.” One cold look set me straight. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I should really put more effort into my school work.”

“Do you get why I’m upset with you?” My face probably told my lack of solution, so she continued. “You’re too smart a kid to be getting these kinds of grades. You didn’t skip a grade just to get out early; you’re ahead of your age and your teachers knew it. You should be the head of your class-not just because your strict parents expect that of you-because that’s what you *can* do. It’s a sin to do anything less than your best, no better than lying. You’re only doing yourself and the world a disservice by accepting less than you’re capable of.” *Is this how she coaches students who have fallen behind in her class?*

“O.K.,” I nodded. “I’ll try harder, now.”

“Do you want me to call the school and see about getting you a tutor?”

Gosh, no. Wouldn’t that be embarrassing? *Hello, my son needs “special” attention. He’s just not smart enough to follow in class.* I know it wasn’t *meant* to come off that way, but that’s certainly how it felt.

“I know you’re trying, and your father and I are both very proud of you. This past year has been a lot of stress for all of us as a family, but we all have to do our best to support each other. Your father and I work to support you. Your end of the bargain is to get through school. Does that sound fair to you?” I bobbed my head up and down. “We’re a team. If you’re ever struggling, we’re here to help you. We *want* to. You know that right?”

“I know.”

Now, I honestly do agree with my mother. In fact, I think she’s one hundred percent right. School is important and honestly, I have been slacking. I really do want to do well in chemistry, just not enough to buckle down and do it. It’d be great to have an A+ in chem, but to me, it isn’t worth the effort. The time donated to such a cause would add up to more than the grade is worth, in my book. The subject’s just too irrelevant to my own life and values. I’m sure it’s very important to science that we can study and identify literally thousands of microscopic organisms. But to me? Psh. When job applications start asking for Lewis Structures, I’ll eat my words. Until then, it’s just a mandatory distraction from interests of higher relevance to me, like the book club. A whole year of chemistry isn’t half as rewarding to me as *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Watchmen*. Maybe to some it’s better, but they can have it. I’m just holding the class back. No use in complaining about it, though. I’ll just have to stop cramming on nights before the tests and start following as we go.

-Part 2-

Our next meeting was not so enthusiastic. For one, *Watchmen* cheer captain Caleb was surprisingly not in attendance. Really, his absence shouldn’t have been too great a shock,

considering the fact that he had been out of school all week. For the first time, I saw that Caleb wasn't invincible, because it'd take a coma to prevent him from sharing his love of *Watchmen*.

Another noticeable change was the bond formed between David and Chloe. They were leaned in over his phone, discussing his music library, when I come into the shop. She couldn't keep her hands out of her hair, as if she was hard at work unknitting a series of unbreakable knots. They greeted me, passively acknowledging my entrance before returning immediately to themselves. They seemed a little irritated by the distraction, so I walked back to the front of the shop to talk with Dan and Ione until the others arrived.

There were many opinions on *Watchmen's* conclusion, but none were put so eloquently as Chloe's "It just sucks."

"I don't know if it sucked, but it was definitely weird," Chloe rebutted. "It reminded me of sleepovers back in elementary school that would start out really fun, but then you find out your friend's really weird and the rest of the night is awkward."

"Why aliens?" Ione pleaded.

"This is on you, Wes," Dan said. "You should have warned us!"

"I'm sorry!" Wes said, half-seriously. "I agree that the ending's a bit odd, but I still like it. I thought you guys may see something in it!"

"No, don't apologize," Dan said, a relaxed, commanding tenor now apparent in his voice. "This was a really interesting choice and I'm glad we read it. Even though the story got a little wacky, I think the writing and illustrations are consistent throughout."



“My biggest problem with the book—and I have this with a lot of Moore’s works—is that he kills off his best characters. He’s really anti-commercialist, but creates these iconic characters,” Wes elucidated (*vocab*). “It seems like there was this constant struggle between Moore the Artist and Moore the Entertainer, and these characters are the casualties.”

“I really liked ‘Tales of the Black Freighter,’” Robert chimed in.

“Yeah,” Dan leaned forward, his interest piqued. “That was a very interesting narrative decision. After hearing Aaron’s *Moby Dick* comparison, that’s all I could think of through this part. It was just such epic literature.”

“I thought it was fun, especially as it went on,” Chloe said. “But it bothered me being taken so far out of the plot.”

“I think I have an explanation for that,” Dan announced. “Have any of you ever heard of Bertolt Brecht?”

Trevor raised his hand.

“Do you want to explain his theory on epic drama? Or would you rather that I steal your glory?”

“It doesn’t matter. You can, if you want.”

“Well, you’ve been quiet all day. I’m sure everyone else is tired of hearing my voice by now,” (*This was met with an “Amen,” courtesy of Ione.*) “So if you know it, I’m sure they would all appreciate the break.”

“Basically, Brecht saw there being two forms of theater: dramatic theater and epic theater. The first was meant to work on the crowd’s emotions. Epic theater, as Brecht put it, was

to engage the audience's intellect. In order to do this, he put diversions into his stories to keep the audience from getting too involved. Like, before each act someone would describe what would happen. The goal was to get audiences to think more about the Why than the What."

"Thanks, Trevor. I couldn't have put it any better, myself." Sunken into the couch, I observed the conversation. I studied the way Dan could commandeer it, directing it in whatever direction he wanted. I did so, so that one day I might be able to coax such responses. He was the true showrunner. That much is obvious. I have no qualms with the fact; I don't demand the spotlight. I'm just a little confused, namely as to why he spends his days here, rather than in some classroom. It's clear that he belongs behind a desk, cultivating the minds of thirty students at a time.

Once our conclave ended, Chloe invited David back to her place. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but she made no effort to conceal it. David accepted.

"As she'll say tomorrow, their night will be *very sexual*," Ione whispered into my ear.

The cafeteria, where I spend third period study hall, always smells like school food at this time in the morning (*Read: It smells like the inside of a dumpster.*) The reason for this is because the lunch ladies are beginning to prepare the day's meal, right about then. If I had any brains, I would invest in nose plugs to put in before submerging myself into the smellatorium.

I used to dedicate this class to reading books for the club and preparing notes, but after the mind-to-mind Mom and I had last week, I've since forfeit this time to chemical studies. I never realized how noisy this room was before, with all the hushed chatter and friction. Shoes slapping the floor, papers crumpling, the scratching of lead against paper: I swear to God, if you stop for a minute to notice, it'll drive you insane. And chemistry is the only subject I understand

less, the more I study it. Each question I pursue leads to another three, branching out into even more, until I find myself tangled in a convoluted network of equations, laws, and properties. I was about ready to let off steam, when Caleb greeted me.

“I can’t believe I had to miss our meeting,” he groaned, sliding into the booth across from me. “I was so ready to keep the conversation going, and then, I had a heart attack...”

“What!?” I was in disbelief.

“It was only a small one, but it wasn’t fun.”

“I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

“Not too many people know; I’m kind of embarrassed about the whole thing. Plus, I’m fine now, so what’s it matter? I got some tests done, and we’ll figure it out, no need to bother anyone over it. The only thing that scares me is how it can affect my playing this season.”

I didn’t know what to say; the shock of this news nearly put *me* into cardiac arrest.

“So,” he paired his hands together, grinning like an addict ready for a fix. “What’d I miss?”

“Not much,” I said, trying to seem cool. “Chloe and David hooked up, but you may have heard that already.”

“That’s awkward—” he looked disappointed.

“Yeah, a little.”

“Chloe’s a smart girl. I like her a lot, but she’s got issues.” My ears pricked. “I almost considered asking her out, before we went to the coffee shop. She’s really cute, even if a little

rough around the edges. She just acted so crazy that night. She was all over me—she had her arm over my shoulder all night and kept complimenting me. Then, once the others left, she told me her whole life story. We went back to her place after that. I feel bad, because I know I shouldn't have. She's obviously crazy."

"Did you—"

"No, but she pretty much begged me to. We made out for a bit, and started to fool around, but it just wasn't right. I felt like I was taking advantage of her."

"Oh, wow." Once again, he had rendered me speechless.

"Did they like the ending?" he said, with renewed energy. He clearly had more interest in this topic than the other.

"No, they thought it was too weird."

"What!?" he spat. "They're crazy! It was great!" He looked heartbroken.

"I know," I nodded, despite my own conflicted thoughts on the matter.

He noticed my loose papers on the table. "Oh, I'm not keeping you from anything, am I? No homework due later today?"

"You are, but it's not that. I'm just going over my chem, but it's no use anyways."

"Farrell?" Affirmative. "I have him first period, that class is cake."

"Don't you have any class this period?"

"Yes and no. I should be in gym right now, but because of my little accident, I'm out until we find out what's up."

“Then, would you mind helping me catch up? It probably sounds stupid, but I failed it last nine weeks.”

“No problem,” he said. “I’m boss at this stuff.”

*Score.*

\*

### **A Christmas Carol**

Feeling “in the spirit,” Dan substituted his previous choice in favor of a tale more reflective of the time (of year). He was in a particularly lofty mood today. It began snowing this morning. Although to the rest of us, this was little more than a nuisance, to him it was our Setting.

We all arrived in layers, sporting jackets both fresh off the shelves and out of hibernation. Gloves and beanies were littered all across the furniture. Due to the length of this book, we were all expected to have finished it by this gathering.

“I’m really excited to be discussing this book right now,” Dan announced. No shock there. “Charlie Dickens’ one of my favorite authors and this might be my favorite story he’s done. I’d say it’s definitely his most influential work. There are hundreds of tributes, largely because the structure is so immaculate.”

“I’m happy to have it, too,” Caleb responded. “When I was a kid, my dad read to me every night. We read this one every year. Having read it again, I’m pretty sure he used an abridged copy, because there’s no way I could have understood it all.”

“I had the opposite reaction,” Ione said. She was wearing a knitted green sweater with the image of a penguin stitched across the torso. “I read *A Tale of Two Cities* for school a few years ago, so I expected this to be a lot drier.”

“*A Tale of Two Cities* is a wonderful book,” Dan returned to the conversation. “But *A Christmas Carol* is much more quintessential Dickens to me. I love the story in *Cities*, and the prose is very eloquent, but it almost feels like it was written by another person. When I think of Charles Dickens, I think of the divide between classes, very warm, personable narration and universal stories anybody can enjoy.”

“I appreciated that he used ‘Staves’ instead of chapters, since it’s called *A Christmas Carol*,” Trevor added. He must have been wearing three scarves around the collar of his pea coat. “I found that clever.”

“My favorite parts were with the ghosts,” said Robert.

“Yeah!” Chloe exclaimed. “It actually got a little creepy.” Wrapped up snug in David’s arm, she had shed her winter coat.

“It was alright,” David said. “It’s no *Bleak House*.”

The room was silent for a beat. A book falling off its shelf would have resounded like the crack of a thunderbolt.

“That’s not fair,” Trevor said, with venom in his inflection. “They’re two completely different stories that happen to have been written by the same author. That doesn’t mean they need to be compared.”

Dan spoke between them, like a good Samaritan trying to break up a street fight. “They *are* two incredibly popular stories by one of the greatest authors of all time. The connection isn’t exactly arbitrary; they’re just two very different, very important books.”

“That doesn’t put them in competition with each other. All I’m saying is that we’re talking about one book and not the other.”

“Then can we go back to talking about that book?” Chloe stabbed. “*Thanks.*” David looked aggravated, between Trevor’s comments and hers.

“What I really liked was the progression of Scrooge as a character,” I said. “I enjoyed his arc from a terrible person to a charitable person, and going into his past and future.”

“Ebenezer isn’t a conventional protagonist at all,” Dan agreed. “And he gets one of the best transformations in storytelling history. My favorite part of the book is the ending, when he wakes up and celebrates Christmas with the Cratchits. It never fails to put me in the season.”

“It put me in the mood to watch *Scrooged*,” Robert chimed in.

“That’s a great idea, Robert!” Robert looked like he’d been struck, untrained for such encouragement. “How about we all meet here sometime closer to Christmas, and have a little soiree?”

“And watch *Scrooged*?”

“Why not!? Unless you’d prefer *A Christmas Story*.” Over half the room expressed their preference toward the latter. “Sorry, Robert, but majority rules. We can try to make time for both.”

“I don’t care. I like them both.” I couldn’t decipher that as genuine or spiteful.

“Oh!” Chloe hopped on the couch. David grimaced as her weight crushed his arm. “Can we do a Secret Santa?”

“I think that’s a great idea!” I said. “Is everyone else O.K. with that?” Yes, they were.

“We’ll need hot chocolate!” Ione said.

“I usually leave town to see family for the holidays,” Caleb said. “Do you have any idea when this’ll go down?”

“I think it’s safe to say that we’ll all be tied up for the days surrounding Christmas, so how’s the 29<sup>th</sup> sound?” Dan asked. “Things should be settling down by then.” We all agreed that it should be. “There is a catch, though.” Dan warned in a grave tone. “I’m probably going to have to bring my fiancée. I’ll try to keep her home, but if I can’t hold her back, I’ll at least see about bringing some cookies along.”

“Have her bring the cookies and leave you at home!” Ione teased.

“If you wish, but would it be much of a party without me?”

“He’s got you there,” David punctuated.

“When will we choose who we’re buying for?” Wes asked.

“Well, since we’re all here and have a few weeks to find something, now’s as good a time as any. Does anybody have a pen and paper?” Caleb pulled a notebook from my backpack and tore it into eight strips, passing them around the room for all to sign. We then placed our ballots into Chloe’s knitted skull cap.

Wes was first to draw. “What happens if we draw our own names?”



“Then you’d have to redraw,” Ione answered.

“Damn!” He traded his original drawing for another; Ione tsk tsked him.

“Hey, if you kept your own name, then nobody’d get you anything!”

“True...”

Caleb unfolded a note and then held it for us all to read. It was marked as *The Batman*:).

“Who is this?”

“That’s Bruce Wayne!” Robert exploded, forcedly giggling. His audience was unshaken.

“Oh, c’mon! That’s funny!”

“That solves that,” David said.

Caleb swapped it for another, now that his Santa services were no longer secret. The rest of the drawings went without turbulence. Our meeting concluded shortly after. It was far too cold to bike home, but fortunately Trevor was kind enough to offer me a ride. It wasn’t comfy sharing the back seat with a mountain bike, but infinitely superior to the winter’s breath.

-Part 2-

It’s been quite a while since I last wrote in this journal, possibly the longest I’ve gone since I began. With Christmas approaching and midterms over the horizon, we decided to take a hiatus until life slowed back down. Tonight was the first many of us had seen of each other since winter break.

It was an odd Christmas, for sure, not that it was that different from any other year. We still got up, exchanged presents, and lounged around in our pajamas until dinner. Dad’s parents still stopped by, as they do every year. On the surface, it would have appeared to be one of our

better holidays. Neither of the parents had to work, I didn't get sick and puke at the table again, and there were no fights. Christmas was the most peaceful day our home's seen in a year. Something about it just didn't feel right. It felt hollow, rehearsed even. Sure, it was nice to get a new bike; and I was plenty excited to put my book shelf together. That doesn't replace the warmth of togetherness, though.

In the days passed since, things have been more or less the same as they had been before. I've grown so lazy over vacation that I hardly leave the couch, so there's one change.

I didn't know what to expect from tonight. To be honest, I was a little frightened to go; it took me back to the first meeting. It's been so long since I'd been around anyone my age that I'd forgotten how to behave around them.

Chloe and David's public make out session against the shop window wasn't the most promising beginning to the night.

"Someone needs to tell them that isn't a bushel of mistletoes," Dan said, between drags on his cigarette, indicating the reef hanging from a light pole above them. It wasn't that funny, but I feigned a laugh as I hopped out of our van. I didn't know he smoked.

In the time since I'd last been inside Neverending Stories, it had been completely taken over with Christmas ornamentations. Multi-color lights snaked across the rooms, illuminating it with a warm glow. A life size Santa was given life each time someone crossed as it went through the same Elvis-esque motions. It had earned more screams than any Halloween decoration...one of which came from my own mouth.

My outburst set off another, beside me, one much higher-pitched, like a squeal. Ione jumped up, losing her balance, she staggered into me. We both tumbled to the ground, and the

present in my hand went airborne. “Don’t worry, pal,” she said, patting my shoulder. “Santa gets everyone, but if anyone asks, this never happened.”

“So, how’ve you been?” I said, patting myself down. Glitter shed from my body like dander. I offered a hand to help her up; she helped herself.

“So-lala,” she said, shrugging. I guess that means O.K. “Und du?”

“Pretty much the same. The time off’s nice.” I wasn’t sure what to do next. It had been so long. It felt like we should hug or something, at least shake hands. I doubted that she would want either of those things. “You notice the shop’s become a make out point?”

“*Aaron*, what exactly are you asking me?”

My cheeks flushed. “Look outside and see for yourself.”

She cracked the door open for a moment, peering outside. A chilling draft invited itself in. “Oh my *Gawd!* That’s disgusting!” She backed away from the door. “They’re practically licking each other’s faces! Their lips are gonna freeze together!”

“Ione!” A voice called from the back room. “You haven’t taken your hat off, have you!?”

“No, of course not!” She scurried behind the counter, searching frantically. “You haven’t seen a hat anywhere, have you?”

“I don’t think. What’s it look like?” I swept the room over with my eyes.

“It looks *stupid!*”

Dan walked in with the grin of one who had come out of a bet with embarrassing stakes victorious. He was in a thick, green sweater. Atop his head was a Santa hat. He held his hands

behind him. “Is this the hat you’re looking for!?” He presented his hands to reveal a green hat with elf ears.

Ione bit her lip. “Umm, no. I don’t think so!”

“Are you sure?” he coaxed.

She nodded enthusiastically. “Yup, I’m pretty sure! Aaron may like it, though.”

“Oh, Aaron will get his soon enough.” He threw the hat in question to Ione; it sopped midair and drifted to the floor. He claimed it from the ground and placed it by hand upon the counter. “Merry Christmas, ya filthy animal.” He turned my way, snapping out of character to shake my hand. “How ya been, Aaron?”

“I’m alright, how are you?”

“I’m doing great, buddy. We’re gonna have a good time tonight! I’m still setting the surround sound up now, but soon we’ll be in good shape for *Home Alone*.”

“I thought we were watching *A Christmas Story*?”

“Oh, shoot!” He smacked his head with the midsection of wrist and palm.

“Told’ja so!” Ione sang.

“You were right,” he sighed. “You may remove your hat.”

“Yes!”

“Wait! I wasn’t finished! You can take your hat off once everybody’s here.”

“So, I won’t wear it in the picture?”

“Well, yeah, it needs to be in the picture. That’s too good to pass up.”

Ione’s face showed defeat as Dan returned to his task.

“I thought he was outside,” I said.

“There is a back door, you know,” she replied.

“Oh.”

“What’s with the hat?” I rested my arm upon the counter.

“Dan says it’s to keep everyone in the Christmas spirit, but I think it’s because he secretly hates me.” She tore it from her head.

“And the picture?”

“He wants a photo of us all tonight, so that we can all have an awkward keepsake.”

“Oh, God. I thought I’d be done with Christmas photos by now.”

Chloe and David were the first to come in. Their faces had turned nearly purple from the cold, but I was surprised they weren’t frozen in a block of ice. Elizabeth came next. She was in an elegant red dress and pleaded with Dan to let Ione take the hat off before someone reports him for child abuse. He finally budged, but only under the condition that she put it back on for the picture. *(She was a Neverending Stories employee, darnit, and they wear hats for Christmas!)* She gave us all hugs before going back to her vehicle for the treats she had baked for the occasion. The rest filled the back room shortly after, and the tree collected a nice skirt of presents. Caleb brought a tray of his mother’s homemade brownie-cookie hybrids. *(They’re like the Frankenstein’s Monster in the Pillsbury Doughboy’s universe.)* While my swollen belly protested it’s had enough baked dough to last the winter, my conscious scolded me for not

having thought to do so myself. He wore what would be described as “an ugly Christmas sweater” if it was being modeled by anyone but him. We arrived shortly after, making Trevor and Robert rotten eggs. Everyone made at least *some* effort to look photo-ready, except for Robert, who was decked in a Chuck Norris t-shirt and sweats. (*To give some credit, he probably saw himself as overdressed for the occasion.*)

Altogether, now, we got the inglorious Christmas photos out of the way immediately. Dan claimed it was for our own benefit, but I’d bet a golden dollar it was so that we wouldn’t have a chance to mess our hair up beforehand. Being the “founder” of the book club, I was democratically elected to be the centerpiece, with Dan and Elizabeth to my left and right, one hand planted awkwardly on each shoulder. Ione pulled an Indiana Jones before the camera flashed and swapped her elf hat with Trevor’s beanie. His hat looked better on her, but I’m not sure I could say the same of his share in the trade. Aside from my forced grimace, I think the pictures turned out alright.

With that event pushed to the corner of our collective memory for the spiders to dress, we continued our festivities in a more favorable direction: the present exchange. The flamboyant packages were distributed by Dan, in order to protect the anonymity of us Santas. A thick box with a ribbon on top landed in my lap. Being the official unofficial (or vice-versa, depending on which of us you ask) leader of the club, I was to unwrap first. (What’s the point of being boss if you don’t get any perks?) *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, in an obtuse hardback! I’m in the 11<sup>th</sup> Grade, so I’ve read some Shakespeare, but I’m a little embarrassed to admit I’ve never owned anything until now. As a reader, this must be some kinda rite of passage. All eyes were on me, so I flipped through it and thanked whoever, naturally as I could. Trevor received a deodorant/cologne gift set. “You don’t have to out yourself, but should I take this as a hint?” He

seemed genuinely happy with it, though. I shifted awkwardly in my seat as Robert unwrapped a pair of drumsticks that arrived on my doorstep two weeks ago. Ione got a knitted hat of her own; she squealed in delight. Wes found a Kindle in his hands to everyone's amazement. "Before you say anything, don't sweat it. I got it for Christmas last year and never opened the darn thing; figured you might put it to better use than I could," Caleb announced. Dan received a handcrafted OPEN/CLOSED door sign, where the OPEN is scrawled across the pages of a spread book. CLOSED was printed on the face of the cover, literally closed, on the other end. Elizabeth got, more than likely by lack of inspiration, a set of cooking utensils. She accepted them with grace. Chloe was gifted a large volume titled *House of Leaves* and David an Amazon gift card. Caleb unboxed a graphic novel, *V for Vendetta*.

To cap the night off, we put the movie in and lounged around the T.V. Either nobody noticed or minded the *Home Alone* substitution. Afterwards, we just hung out and talked, about our holidays, solo readings, just whatever. It was kinda like a meeting, but looser. It was nice not to be limited by a topic of the week. Although, Dan did bring up the subject of our eventual comeback.

"At first, I wanted to do *Infinite Jest*, but honestly it's just too long for us," Trevor answered. I wondered if he meant for us, or for the rest of you, but I'm not even familiar with the book in question. "I've been circling the idea of *Naked Lunch* and I think that could be interesting."

"Interesting, yes, but I don't know if that's the best idea for this book club," Dan replied.

"Why not? It could be fun, and if not, a healthy challenge!" I countered. At the time of this writing, I literally do not know what *Naked Lunch* is.

The night was, like many of the greatest, at once ideal and underwhelming. I wouldn't have changed a thing about it, looking back. It's cliché, but for the first time in my life, I feel like a part of something, a group of people I'm actually excited to see. (*I feel like I've written those words before, now that I'm looking at them.*) It's comforting...not to say that I come with *all* my guards down. I just hope they like me as I do them, but for once, I think I've got a fighting chance. Guess I'll just take things one meet at a time, and for this one, I'm calling it a night.

*PS: Naked Lunch, huh? Can't wait to see how this one'll turn out!*

\*

### **Naked Lunch**

Nevermind.

\*

### **Songs of Innocence & Experience**

Needless to say, The *Naked Lunch* incident did not turn out, literally. Aside from Trevor and myself, Robert was the only non-employee occupying Neverending Stories, and he admitted himself to quitting the book twenty pages in. Even if they hate your book, they'll still show up to support you: that's what brothers are for. As for the rest, sorely absent, well, we got the hint.

"I think you scared them off, bro," Robert finally said, ending our twenty-minute waiting period. Brothers are good for that, too, insulting you when everyone else is too polite to.

"Well, we can always start a new book next week." Dan was more optimistic about the situation, but cautiously so. "We should probably let everyone know, unless we want this to be a more intimate affair from now on."



“I can make a post at the club’s Facebook group.” I mentioned making one of those, right? “But it’d help if we all just talked to everyone in person, if we get the chance.” Everyone agreed to. “What do you think, Trevor?”

“Man, I dunno.” He thought long and theatrically, with his left hand tugging lightly on the peach fuzz on the ball of his chin.

“Please, something that doesn’t require a degree to understand,” Robert added. “The goal is to get people reading, not to kick everyone off the island.”

Trevor let out two bloated cheeks of air, resolving to suggest “*Songs of Innocence and Experience* by William Blake?”

Dan’s face lit up. “That’s the best idea you’ve had since coming here!” He turned towards me. “What do you think, Aaron?”

“I’m up for it! I’ve always wanted to read *Paradise Lost*, so this will be a good primer for me.”

He looked confused. His brow tensed into a serious look and I remembered that I was speaking to an adult. My insecurity in the statement therefore doubled. “Do you mean as an introduction to Christian revisionist literature?”

“As an introduction to William Blake...” Each word was another step into oblivion. *Why didn’t I just say yes?*

“I think you’re thinking of John Milton,” Trevor butted in.

John Milton? Stupid, stupid. Yes, I meant that. *Of course* I meant that! I agreed and apologized.

“No, I’m sorry,” Dan said. “I was just confused; I didn’t mean to put you on the spot.” On my way out, he pulled me aside and apologized again, saying that he didn’t intend to embarrass me, if he did. I lied, and said he didn’t. Back in the present, he clapped his hands together, once. “So, I think it’s safe to say we’ve accomplished all there is to do here, today, unless there are any Steely Dan fans who feel betrayed by the origin of their favorite band’s name and need guidance.”

“I think we can do without,” Robert said, unseating himself.

“For real, though, I would have played Steely Dan if we had a real meeting today.”

Ione, who was situated behind the sales desk, probably in silent protest of the reading selection, told me “That was classic Aaron.”

“What was?”

“William Blake’s *Paradise Lost*.” Apparently she had been eavesdropping.

“Oh, yeah.” I forced a smile. “Have a good night.”

“You, too, captain.” She gave me a salute as I departed. Good to know where her allegiances lie, for what good that is.

I don’t get it. What’s so damn funny about mixing William Blake up with John ~~Keates~~ Milton? It’s a simple mistake anyone could have made. Anyways, our follow-up is tomorrow, so let’s hope for some more promise next time around.

## Part 2

Somehow, we managed to earn ourselves another chance at this whole book club thing. I guess a week’s worth of damage control paid off. All regulars were in attendance today, aside

from Wes, who didn't seem against returning when I messaged him Wednesday. Oh well, can't win 'em all.

I made sure to thank everyone individually for coming. I felt like a salesman or a priest, but last week's loss was personal as it was business. Everyone seemed cool, but when the time came for the session to begin cotton filled my mouth. It felt like I had something to prove and nothing to show for it.

"So, I take it you guys like William Blake more than Burroughs?" I said, meekly.

"My mom saw *Naked Lunch* on the table when I was getting ready for work and didn't find it 'appropriate for a young girl.' It took a lot of convincing for her to let me come back," Chloe responded. "Finally, I convinced her this book was Christian literature and she backed off."

"Does your mother often dictate what you read?" Dan asked.

"She likes to flip through what I'm reading and look for sexy things so she can take it away from me. I try not to let it show, but I'm a very sheltered kid."

"It caught me off-guard," David interjected. His hand was in her lap.

"I know it isn't my business; I was raised being able to do whatever I could get my hands on, so I've never experienced it."

"Honestly, that really bothers me," said I. "I understand having a curfew, like I do, or not staying over at boys' houses, but books are educational. It's like condemning a part of the mind a kid should be developing."

“Don’t say that to my mom. She does her best to protect us from fantasy so we can live life as young, miserable cynics. I didn’t start reading until I got a job of my own and needed something to do in the break room.”

I didn’t know where to go from there, so I asked how everyone liked the first half of the book, which we read for today. Of course, Chloe jumped right back into the conversation.

“It was really nice to read. Like, most poetry I’ve read is so dark and depressing. This felt like reading a children’s book, but more mature.”

“You all know this by now, but the book is split into two parts, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*,” Trevor said. “One of the reasons I wanted to read this book was because of the way it shows both sides. I think ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ poems are really depressing even though they’re about childhood, but ‘The Divine Image’ is so optimistic. I also appreciate his paintings.”

“There were pictures!?” Robert exclaimed.

“Yeah, Blake invented his own printing style and did etchings for every poem in this collection,” Dan said. “He was pretty much what indie authors today *wish* they could be. He was a decent artist, too. If we had some kind of a projector, I’d show you.”

“I can pull some up on my phone,” Caleb offered.

“That’d be great, thanks!” Dan said. “Sometimes I forget we live in the future.”

He found an extensive gallery and passed the phone around.

“I don’t want to imply it was a mistake, but even though a lot of the imagery is religious, I found a lot of concepts in the book to be blasphemous,” Ione said.

“You have to keep in mind the time this was published,” Dan said. “Adjusting for inflation, what seems a little off now was utterly outrageous back in the day. Granted, this was around The Enlightenment, but I’m not smart enough to make-believe I’m a history teacher. What you need to know is that it was a revolutionary period of time when everything was in question. More importantly for you guys, is that he believed in Poetic Genius, which means that old knowledge cannot beget new knowledge. In order to find something new, one must look toward the Poetic Genius.”

“How do you know all this?” Robert asked.

“Yeah, do you just spend the whole week at the library?” Caleb added.

“He already told you,” Ione said. “Poetic Genius.”

Dan chuckled. This was clearly breathing air into his ego, and he was struggling to keep it deflated. “If Poetic Genius exists, I’m not connected to it, not unless you’d call Poetic Genius the Internet. *(That’s kind of a scary thought!)* I just look this stuff up, man. Sure, I’m ten years older than you kids, so I’ve picked some things up along the way, but the ball’s in your court. I grew up on Gerber’s, you were raised on Google. You’ve got all the information in the world in your pockets and you’re recycling the same petty distractions. Imagine if Harry Potter never learned to cast a spell; who cares what want you’ve paid for when you can’t use it? I know I sound like my dad used to, ten years ago, but you kids have no concept of your own power.”

“Maybe this isn’t the best time, but next Tuesday the Peach Pit is having an open mic. I thought it could tie in well with our reading if any of you guys wanted to show. If you don’t want to read your own work, you could do something from William Blake-or any poem. Or you could just hang out, whatever.”

“Uh-oh,” Robert said. “We’ve all been invited to the Three Scarf Society.” As per usual, this taunt gathered no profit, but I’ve gotta hand it to him: it was a good one.

“If it gets us outta hearing another of Grandpa’s lectures, I’ll come read the whole book!” Ione said, motioning towards Dan.

“Hey, now,” Dan said, sternly. “I could always show up and embarrass you all with a poetic thesis on the problems with youth today.”

“I thought there were poetry readings here, on Fridays?” I said, recalling Robert’s reference point for me to set the club up here. Everyone stared at me, and then Dan said there was never a poetry club here, unless I planned on making one. Come on, Robert. “What if we all meet up Tuesday rather than having another talk here?” Robert looked betrayed by my suggestion. “It could be nice to do something different.”

And so we shall.

### Part 3

As I entered the Peach Pit, my stomach was forcing its way up my throat. I was silent walking to my posse, in fear of it bursting out and creating a pulsing mess on the brightly-lit wooden floor, should I speak. Robert wasn’t kidding about the scarf fetish on display therein. It was at least seventy degrees, I don’t see how everyone’s neck could be *that* chilly. Honestly, though, they all seemed polite enough, in retrospect. I think my social anxiety was exaggerated because I somehow expected to flourish in such a setting. I can never decide if foolish optimism is my best friend or worst enemy.

Umm...I should back this up and give this story a setting before getting *too* far ahead of myself. The Peach Pit is wedged between an “olde” furniture shop and a bootery on Main Street; parallel to Neverending Stories and three lots closer to the light. My dad offered to run me up, and usually I’d decline, but the rain outside was more persistent than I am. Plus, I think he wanted to give me the ride, was waiting for it. Mom’s on a warpath to assimilate all untidiness in the house, and we both know better than to get in her way-or even near it. To be honest, I think he wanted an excuse to get out there. I’ve spent lifetimes staring out the backseat window, lately. Family time has been a blockage in the day’s artery, and I dreaded such turbulence en route to this mini-vacation. Instead, my dad put both his hands on the wheel and sighed as we remained stationary in the garage.

“You know, bud, not all married couples stay together,” he began. I groaned on the inside. Not this *this talk* again. Couldn’t he see I had plans? So why hold me up for some damage control on some hypothetical situation that just won’t happen? A plane could drop out of the air and crash land on our house, but that kinda thing doesn’t happen, so why plan on it? It’s a waste of time. “It’s not that they don’t still care about each other, they could even still love each other, but things don’t always work out the way you plan for them to.”

“Yeah, I get it, Dad.”

“I just don’t want you to blame yourself for anything that might come between your mother and I. We both love you very much and are very proud of you. I know things aren’t always easy around here, but we’re working to make them better for us all. It’s just that the best way for us to fix things might be to just begin again.”

And then I said some things I'm ashamed to reproduce. I acted my age, but not in a good way. We spent the rest of our trip in silence and I planned to walk home, be it in the calm moonlight or against the pull of a tornado.

Back to the Peach Pit, sorry. Looks like I fell behind myself this time. The place has got an interesting design. The place is furnished with couches (*the lounge kind, not the type you'd find in a waiting room or at the end of someone's yard next to garbage cans*) as well as traditional seating. One wall is covered in faux-moss bejeweled with roped lights, another is decorated with local paintings. A wooden stage juts from the wall to my left; it is occupied by various guitars and a drum kit. There's a bar toward the far wall, where teenaged baristas take orders and collect tips. The air was haunted by coffee beans. Kids chased each other from one end of the floor to the other as parents nursed steaming mugs. Teens courted and competed for attention and affection indiscriminately.

My crew, sans Wes, were standing near the small stage, socializing with some other tenants. In particular, they were exchanging anecdotes about Mr. Kurtz, the Algebra II teacher at our school with a dude named Blake. He, like most others, hid his neck under a knitted scarf and wore a charcoal pea coat over black skinny jeans. I gotta say, if growing facial hair was a school-sponsored sport, the dude could be team captain, judging from his mean scruff. He extended a warm hand and introduced himself with a firm grasp.

"Hey, man. How ya doin'?" he asked.

"I'm O.K. How are you?" I responded.

"Never been better. These guys were telling me you started a book club across the street?"



“Yeah, we’ve been meeting down there since school began. I was worried it wouldn’t pan out, but these guys keep it afloat.”

“Sounds great. You’ll have to let me in on that sometime. I think Dan told me about it way back, now that I think of it.”

“You know Dan?”

“Of course! His fiancée is a youth leader at my church; they’re nice people.”

“You two gonna flirt all night or do you plan on reading?” Ione butted in.

“Must we choose?” I said.

“Really,” Blake agreed. “I planned on reading a new piece, ‘An Ode to Aaron Texter.’”

Although Blake was an unofficial member of our clique for the night. I hardly interacted with him after we invited ourselves into the group chat. When we arranged ourselves around a few small tables joined as one super table, he sat nearest to Caleb and Travis. He seemed too invested in the performances to socialize, anyhow. I, on the other hand, sat beside Robert and Chloe. She and David seemed to be having some issue, so they weren’t as Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum as usual. Every now and again, she’d lean over and whisper some catty comment about a presenter, but mostly she kept to herself. When she teared-up and her voice cracked mid-reading, I wondered if anyone she had previously mocked would now heckle her. As she returned to her seat, they were clapping as enthusiastically as any of us. Aside from her respect (or lack thereof) as a listener, she deserved the praise as a reader. I couldn’t really understand what her poem was about, but I can say that she put her entire heart and body into its delivery. I don’t know how someone could put themselves out there like that, forfeit themselves to their art.

I asked Robert if he was going to read; he just shook his head. He'd been shifty all night, totally out of his element. His clothes didn't even seem to fit him right, the formal jacket looked stiff on his thin frame. After drumming twin cruises on his thighs, he did loosen up a bit. He made some Robertian quips and I played along to help build him back up. At one point, he was laughing so hard at a joke I made about one guy's baritone voice I anticipated him to shoot a snot rocket across the room. Thank God he wasn't drinking any coffee to regurgitate. Looking back on it, I already regret joking at these people's expense, but I only wanted to cheer the guy up. I hope people made fun of me when I presented, not only because it'd only be fair, but also because I'd be proud to have made someone laugh that hard.

The event was wearing thin. Most of the regulars had already performed their routines. Caleb read a short nonfiction story about his father; Ione recited a poem for her favorite sweater. Blake did a sort-of stand-up comedy act about famous authors. It was witty and I even remembered the point of it, but it'd take too long to write out. It was Trevor who asked if I was going to read.

"I didn't really plan to—" He looked disappointed; if I knew he actually expected me to, I might have prepared *something*, but—who am I kidding?

"C'mon, Aaron!" Caleb exclaimed from across the table. "Just read someone else's if you don't have a poem of your own!"

"I dunno about that. I'd feel like a douche, going up there and reading someone else's work."

"It's not like anything read tonight was wholly original, anyways. If it wasn't written by a famous person, it was probably stolen from them," Blake said.

“Speak for yourself,” I heard Chloe murmur.

“Dude, just read something from *Songs of Experience*,” David suggested, and I gave in. I asked for a Smartphone to read off of and noticed Robert looking at me as if to say “Et tu, Aaron?” If you ever read this, Robert (*Please, God, don't let this happen*), sorry, bud. You can't be an observer forever; eventually you're gonna have to get in on the action before your spine's permanently curved for the chair you've sat in the comfort of while life's passed you by.

With that said, I have to admit my optimism was intimidated by the crowd before me. Believe it or not, I've never had a big issue with public speaking. This, on the other hand, felt like the big league. Even though nearly half the faces in the audience were familiar, they seemed distant and critical from this perspective. But with this great anxiety came the great illusion of power. All of a sudden, the words on the smart screen before me were illegible. I forced the anxiety clogging my throat down to my stomach and opened my mouth, praying for words to find their way out.

“This isn't actually my poem; it's called ‘The Human Extract’ from William Blake's *Songs of Experience*,” I began. My eyes fed the rest of my words to my lips. At the beginning, I felt a few paces off. My voice was a lone dancer with a poor sense of rhythm. As I scaled down the wall of text, one line at a time, it grew in confidence. Only in the final stanza did I feel secure in my intonations. If only I had prepared a second poem, I could nail it. This was just a warm-up. Give me another chance and I'd deliver! Oh well, there's always next time. I thanked the crowd as I retired to their ranks. The gang seemed content enough with my performance. Chloe said I read with real emotion, which I was not aware of. Ione said “Good job, bud,” which I suppose is the most one could hope to expect from her.

“Why don’t you write your own poems, Aaron?” Blake asked.

“It’s not really a choice; I just don’t,” I answered.

“You should give it a shot. I think you’d enjoy it.”

Soon after, we made our separate ways home. I grabbed a cup of espresso for the road and climbed into Trevor’s ride. I thanked him for inviting us, and promised to come again, if welcome. It really was a good night. I think the change of scenery was good for the club, and (ungrateful as it sounds) it was good to meet outside of Dan’s adult supervision. Tonight, we were just a group of kids hanging out. For me, that’s kind of a first.

Aside

My dad’s gone. I don’t know what to do. I’ve been crying since my mother told me. Right now, she’s in the bathroom. She’s locked herself in there and is sobbing so hard she’s heaving. He’s taken his things, well, some of them, the rest is here for us to deal with, and left. I don’t even know where he is. He could be at his parents’ house or a coworker’s. How am I gonna deal with Mom? She’s lost it; I’ve never seen an adult so powerless over herself.

I’m such an idiot. All the signs were there and I chose to avoid them. Someday I’m gonna die young because I was too stubborn to take myself to the hospital. I should have listened to Dad, maybe I could have made this easier for them. I could call him, but I’m afraid to and I know I’ll cry if I do. I think I’ll go clean up the broken stuff and then make dinner. I think we could both use some food.

*PS: Before going to bed, I should note that I was able to snap Mom out of her catatonic state.*

*She started crying again and said I’m such a good boy. Normally I’d be embarrassed, but I let it*

*pass, under the circumstances. Dad also texted. He said he loves me and to watch out for my mother. I still don't think this is a good idea. We're a family; we've always been a family. What's splitting up going to solve?*

\*

### **Pride & Prejudice**

I suppose I have some following up to do before getting into the book or the club meeting. My parents are getting a divorce. I don't know what that means for me, as an in-between child. The logical option seems to be joint custody, where I'd visit Dad on the weekends, wherever he'll be. Right now, he's with my grandparents in Pittsburgh. None of this feels right to me. After all these years, is this the conclusion to our family? Will they start seeing other people? I can't deal with having stepparents. That's just illogical.

Some positives have come of this, somehow. Although I've never spent this long apart from my father, I don't think I've ever felt this close to my mother. In her vulnerability, she's allowed herself to act more candidly than ever before. I've grown so used to her being "Mom" that I've forgotten she's also a complex human being. My last entry in this journal was written Thursday, after I came home from school and heard of the separation. I was allowed to skip Friday and spent the weekend home with Mom. *We ordered pizza and rearranged the living room Saturday.* I personally thought the setup was fine as it was, but whatever eases her mind. She apologized for everything between herself and Dad, and for not providing for me like I deserve. I don't think I deserve much, but I never felt lacking in my life until now. Maybe I thought issues in the past were serious, but the rest of all my former losses are pocket change

compared to this emptiness. She also said things are going to be easier from now on. I don't know about that, but my mother's never lied to me before.

I felt bad leaving her tonight, but life goes on and so do its responsibilities. Between returning to school and spending the night out, I feel neglectful. What's Mom gonna do at home *alone*? What she did before, I guess. It's not like Dad never pulled a late night at work before. I guess I'm still adjusting.

Apparently, my folks aren't the only couple in town having trouble. David and Chloe were having a heated discussion outside the shop. I didn't realize until I greeted them only to be stared at with tearful eyes. Nevermind. If it's that bad, why not stay home and sort it out there? Haven't these people ever heard of Panic! At the Disco?

"You see they're filming Springer outside?" Ione said. She was wearing a dress. What the heck?

"Huh?"

"The world's happiest couple."

"Oh, yeah."

Her color changed from condescending to chipper like a mood ring from one finger to the next. "How'd you like the book?"

The book? Oh, no. I'd gotten so caught up in the soap opera at home to read. I think I made it a chapter in. Why didn't I think to SparkNote this before leaving home?

She studied my face. "Are you O.K.? You look ill."

"I, uhh, my parents are getting a divorce."

“Oh, Aaron!” She pulled me in for an embrace. “I’m so sorry.” I was uncertain how to react, so I tried returning the hug. She was warm, and smelled like shampoo, but I was too numb to appreciate the gesture. I just wanted her to feel like she helped. And looking back on it, I guess she did.

“I don’t know what to do,” I said in her ear.

“Just hang in there, I think.”

“Everything alright? Or should I go back in the other room?” It was Dan, in the doorway to the back end of the store.

“Aaron’s parents are getting a divorce,” Ione explained, releasing me. I wasn’t exactly ready to make this news public, but O.K. Her eyes were red in their puffy sockets. Was she really this affected by the information? (*Then again, this is allergy season...*) On one hand, that’s incredibly generous of her. On the other, I felt guilty for inspiring this sadness. Gosh, if one more of us shows up crying, we may as well start calling this The Breakfast Club.

Dan, too, looked unsettled by this. “I’m sorry, Aaron. You sure you don’t want to stay home?”

“No, I’m all good,” I said, with feigned confidence. Tragically, I’m an awful pretender.

“You sure, man? We can always reschedule.”

“Really, getting out will be good for me. Sitting in my room all night won’t make anything better.”

“True. Well, we’re glad to see you.”

As always, Dan was eager to begin. Tonight, he was wringing his hands with excitement. I, on the other hand, was withdrawn into the slouch of my chair, praying I wasn't the only one who hadn't read. The others seemed unphased. To all but me, this was starting off as a normal meeting. Things did not look good for me.

"Alright, gang, we've got a lot of ground to cover here. We could start with Jane Austin's life (*She wrote anonymously, so only her close family knew her as an author at the time. There's an anecdote about how she wrote behind a squeaky door so she'd know to hide her manuscripts when someone entered.*), or we could talk about the politics of the time. Austin was born just a year after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Or, if you want, the novel is rich enough to harbor discussion on its own merit. What say y'all?"

Without the static of awkward fidgeting in our seats, it would be dead silence. Finally, Robert said "You weren't kidding when you said you do your homework."

"Google is the world's library." He paused, surely hoping for this tiny spark to ignite the discussion. No luck. "Aww, c'mon! You guys aren't hyped for this? We're talking about one of the most prominent female writers of history, some of the most iconic characters; this isn't Big Mac Lit., guys! We've got a gourmet meal, so let's dig in!"

"I'm sorry, Dan. Ione, I didn't mean to disrespect your choice, but I didn't read this book," I announced.

"Don't worry about it, Aaron," he said, his voice dipping down from an aggressive high to a sympathetic low with the precision of an eagle.

"How come he gets off the hook?" Robert whined.



“Aaron and I already talked about this; what’s your excuse?”

“Hey, I *did* read the book. I just thought it sucked, but I wasn’t gonna say anything.”

“That’s what I want to hear!” Robert looked surprised by this response. I know I was.

“What sucked about it?”

“It was just boring. All they ever talked about was getting married to some guy with money. I felt like I was reading a soap opera.”

“I don’t disagree with Robert,” Caleb piped up. “But I do think it’s more than a soap opera. My interpretation of the book was that it used these themes as a satire, like Dan said. It is mundane and shallow, but it’s about how women were viewed at the time. They were as good as who they married. On one hand, the upper class is superficial and fake, but so is the lower class.” He looked to Dan. “Am I on to anything here? Or is this totally off-base?”

“No, you’re both doing great. Keep it going.”

“That was all.”

“Robert, what do you have to say about that?”

“Oh, jeeze. I’m in couple’s therapy at Fifteen,” Robert said. The laugh track was still broken. *One of these days, you’ll get ‘em. Maybe just not for a long, long while.* “I mean, I think he’s right. He’s smarter than me and he put a lot more thought into it. I just think a book should be enjoyable to read without knowing the message. I dunno.”

“But can you say you’ve really read a book if you don’t understand half of it?” Trevor jumped in, taking this opportunity to continue the war of brothers.

“There you go, Ione,” Dan said. “Is this more like what you wanted to hear when you chose this book?”

“Umm, yeah, thanks,” she said. (*I think I heard her add “I just didn’t think people would get this wound up over Jane Austin” under her breath.*) “This book’s one of the only girly things I let myself enjoy. I always had a crush on Mr. Darcy.”

“No need to be ashamed over having a little tomgirl in you. I’ve seen *Sixteen Candles* more than any girl could dream of. Plus, I think this book should be considered a Feminist heavyweight for all the reasons Caleb’s already covered. Heck, it brings out the girl in me! Not least of all for Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

“Now that you put it that way, he doesn’t sound so hot. I can change my last name when I get married, but that first name’s gotta go. No way I’ll be calling Fitzwilliam out at night.”

“Maybe it’s just me, but I always sided with Darcy,” David said. “So what if he didn’t want to dance? Big deal. I know he was right in the end, but I never once doubted him.”

“Well, exactly,” Trevor said. “But times were different. Men were viewed differently too, and Darcy outstepped the boundaries of his gender role.”

“Wickham also accused him of royally screwing him over, and I think he spent the first half of the book acting like a stuck-up jerk,” Caleb added. “The book’s called *Pride & Prejudice*, and Darcy embodied pride.”

“Yeah,” Chloe scowled. “Maybe it *is* just you.”

“But that’s only to ignore prejudice! If Elizabeth and the lower class weren’t so quick to judge him, it’d have saved a lot of trouble,” David retorted.

“Darcy’s smart enough to know what he’s doing. Society has expectations, whether he likes them or not! By acting like a douche, he’s inviting them to judge him.”

“Playing into society’s expectations only enables them. Why should Darcy accept a social role over his own personal values?”

“Maybe if he did, Elizabeth would have accepted his proposal when he first asked, and, you know, *saved a lot of trouble.*”

“Thank God we aren’t reading *Wuthering Heights*,” Trevor commented. “This place’d be a bloodbath.” All us spectators of this verbal brawl appreciated this comic relief. Even David cracked his straight face to join in on the laugh. If Robert knew what was good for him, he’d have taken notes.

“Jane Austin, everyone,” Dan announced. “Never let it be said that she couldn’t start a good fight.”

“I think that’s as good of a cap on the book as any,” I said, rising from my cushioned loveseat. “I’d saw we can call it a day.”

“What are you talking about? We’ve only been here twenty minutes!” Trevor exclaimed.

“It’s been a long day. You guys can stick around, but I’m heading home.”

“I’m with him,” David said, heading for the door. I chased him in following my lead, leaving the others to decide for themselves. I hardly made it across the street before Caleb tagged me with a slap to the shoulder. He swerved his bike into a horizontal stop, sealed with a foot planted firmly on the ground.

“Hey, man, don’t ignore me!” I’ve never seen him look so frustrated.

“What are you talking about!? I didn’t ignore you!” I could feel my cheeks inflame and I knew my body was shaking. How embarrassing. Unlike some, I can’t handle conflict.

“I’ve been calling for you and you didn’t even turn around.”

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“What’s wrong with you? I’ve never seen you act like this before.”

“It’s just family trouble. The scene in there hit too close to home.”

“Well, I’m sorry.” He pivoted on his seat to put both hands on my shoulders. He looked me in the eyes. His gaze was too strong for me to match, so my attention darted from one corner of my vision to another, and then returning his stare. I blinked like I was looking into the sun.

“But we’re here for you. You’re doing a good thing, here. Don’t turn your back on us. You’re not that person back there. Are you? Hello? Is Aaron in there?”

“Yeah, I mean, no.” I had to stop myself and take a deep breath before turning into even more of a blubbering idiot. “What I’m trying to say, is that you’re right.”

“I know I am,” he said without a fleck of humor. “What I need is for you to see that.”

“I do.”

“Good. Now I just need two more things before I let you go home and sob one out to The Smiths.”

“Yeah?”

“First, I need a date and time for our next meeting.”

“O.K., 6:00, 2 weeks from today. What else?”

“I need you to bring your A-Game to that meeting. This book is no *Naked Lunch*. Get it read and form some thoughts, no SparkNotes bullshit. I’m gonna go back and tell the team our game plan, unless you want it to be a date.”

“Don’t take it too hard, but I’ll pass.”

“Thought so.” He kicked his bike into gear and sped off like a street vigilante, The Night Coach, defender of the deflated. “Stay golden, Ponyboy!” he shouted behind him.

I’m not sure how I took this pep talk. It left my ego sore, but then again it gave me something to work towards. First off, who are *The Smiths*?

## Part 2

As it turns out, Caleb’s speech was a direct shot of Red Bull into my bloodstream. Once its effects set in, I became restless. I don’t know if it was an effort to preserve my reputation or mend my ego, but I was determined to prove him right. That night, I tucked myself into bed and read *Pride & Prejudice*. Like, all of it. I conquered that baby whale. The true Dick, though, was the whale of myself. I came into the next meet like a wrecking ba—like a dude who knows his stuff. No more sitting out and letting things play out, not for me.

This meet went down much smoother than its predecessor. Probably due in no small part to Chloe’s absence. Of the two, I was shocked to find David as the one to stick around. Hopefully this isn’t a permanent adjustment to our roster. It’s bad enough Wes has been a no-show for weeks, now. I never really knew Chloe, she’s kind of an enigma, but I always appreciated her input. So, in honor of her, I spoke enough for two mouths. There’s a thrill to speaking out confidently, a rush to the head with every joke landed or point made. Not to say I had a perfect success rate, but there’s an art to recovery. Yeah, your chest sinks when a room full

of dubious eyes are punishing you for a missed mark, but you gotta ignore the voice in your head calling you a dope and fill yourself back up with hope for better luck next time. I think I freaked some people out with my hyperactivity, but as we were leaving, Caleb patted me on the shoulder and said “Glad to have you back.”

“With a vengeance,” Dan remarked in passing.

Outside of these deviations, the night followed the formula we’ve established. Nothing too special, no insights too revealing. Not until we were gearing up to go, that is. Caleb and the brothers had already booked out and Dan and Ione were closing shop when David approached me.

“Hey, Aaron, you mind going outside for a talk?” He’d been off all night, for the most part kept quiet. No snide comments or fighting words. Seeing him up close, it was clear he was in a state of distress. His eyelids were swollen, as if he’d just finished a cry. His voice tapered without the self-assurance he usually projected.

“Sure thing,” I said, without considering this as a potential setup for my murder until we were already in the night air. Instead, he offered a seat on the bench. It was scaly with beads of water from this morning’s rain, but I voiced no complaint. The air tasted of spring.

“What’s up?” I asked, bracing myself for a shank between my ribs.

“It’s Chloe,” he exhaled, as though even saying her name was laborious. “I was hoping to talk to her after the meeting, but she didn’t show—*obviously*.”

“I noticed. Why is that?” Quickly following it up with “If I may ask.”

“She just has these expectations of what a boyfriend should be, and when I don’t match her perfect model, she sees it as something to hold against me.”

So, the real question was “What’d you do?”

“It’s more a matter of what I *didn’t* do.” There’s the David I know, the one who craves the last word. Always. “Turns out she wanted to go to Prom.”

“What’s the issue there?”

“I brought it up in the past, really just to test her. I’d say ‘I don’t care if I go to Prom,’ and she’d agree. So, assuming she really didn’t care, I never asked. I now see that was my bad. To make things worse, when she tried asking me, I pretty much said no.”

“Is that all?”

“No. I also kinda suggested she go with a guy friend. What I *meant* was that she’d have a better time going with someone who actually wanted to be there. Guess she didn’t see it that way.”

“I’ve made a lot of stupid mistakes around girls, but I gotta admit, you’ve got me beat with that one.” Read: *I’ve never had a real girlfriend, but even I know that’s suicidal.*

“That bad, huh?”

I nodded. “What’s so bad about the Prom, anyways? Some of us (Read: *I*) would love to go, but can’t find a date. There’s a girl practically begging you to go, so why not make her happy?”

“It’s just all so *fake*. You rent a suit and go somewhere with a bunch of people you already can’t stand seeing on a daily basis to dance to a bunch of songs you don’t even like. I’d feel like such a jerk.”

I can see why he doesn’t picture himself the liveliest date. “Yeah, but why not go for her?”

“For starters, I can’t dance.”

*So that’s what this is all about.* “No one can dance. You think everyone else on the dance floor knows what they’re doing? No way! They’re just making it up as they go along.”

“You think I should try asking her to go?”

“Definitely, yes, before Tom from the football team beats you to it.”

He shuddered at the thought of it. “That’d be a lot easier if she was answering her phone.”

“Use that to your advantage! Show up outside her window with a radio, or on the doorstep with a bouquet.” Immediately after this suggestion, I prayed I hadn’t just enabled a stalker.

“That sounds kinda dated and corny.”

“Yeah, but girls like that crap! It shows chivalry.” Read: *I think girls like that. I dunno.*

“Thanks, Aaron,” he said. “She means too much to me for a stupid thing like this to get in the way. I know I’m not the guy father’s wish to show up and whisk their daughters away, but I really do try. Chloe’s tough, but I also worry about her.”



“She seems like a smart girl. I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“I just don’t want her to end up like her mother.” He shook his head. “She’s such a bitch. Did you know she takes Chloe’s paychecks?”

“To help with the bills?”

“Morphine. When Chloe was 10, their car got hit by a bunch of drunk teens in front of the school. The dad was dead on the spot. Her mother was thrown from the car, and Chloe was trapped in the car with her father’s dead body until help arrived with the Jaws of Life to set her free. Of course, the preps who caused this accident were unscratched. Chloe was in the hospital for a week before she was released to her grandparents. Her mother was in the hospital for months before she was put through enough physical therapy. At some point, they hooked her up to—”

“Morphine!” I blurted out.

“You guessed it. She was off it for some time before the craving kicked back in. She spent all her money on the stuff, until her job at the supermarket caught onto her habits and cut her loose. She let some guy, her dealer, basically, move in to pay the bills. Sometimes, when he was really fucked up, he’d go into her room and, you know. It wasn’t until the abortion that her mother took notice. She kicked him out and the State became the new family provider.”

“Is he still around?”

“If the cemetery counts. Idiot overdosed on his own product.”

“Wow, I don’t know what to say. I mean, it’s awful. I didn’t even know things like that happen around here.”

“Yup. I’m sorry to unload all that on you. It’s just a heavy burden to carry around sometimes. I don’t see her any differently for it; I admire her for surviving it all. I just worry. She still lives with that woman.”

“That is a lot. Don’t worry, though. I’m not the telling type.”

“Thanks again. I owe you, big time.” He stood up and stretched his back. “Well, I’d better be on my way if I’m gonna beat Tom. History’s on my side, but that guy can run!”

“Heck, for all we know, he could be the best dancer in town!”

“Whose side are you on, here?”

“Chloe’s, that’s why I’m Team David.”

He thanked me again, before leaving me to sit there for a long while, watching the traffic light cycle and pondering the news I’d just received.

Aside

Sweaty palms, a kindling sensation in my cheeks, an inability to decide on what to wear: I was victim to all the clichés. This wasn’t my idea, but my mother thought it would be healthy for me, and I wanted to distract her mind from divorce guilt. I was kicking myself for that dedication to her right about then. It’s *my* high school experience; why should I be living out my mother’s fantasies? Ahh, well. It’s an experience gained.

Getting back to my angst and insecurities, I hadn’t been this nervous to enter the shop since the first club meeting, if ever. I pushed the door open to find Ione reorganizing books. Fate was on my side. The less people I had to embarrass myself in front of, the easier it’d be to get on with.

“Hey, Ione,” I said meekly.

“Yo,” she mumbled, too invested in her work for me. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail.

“How’s your day going?”

“Peachy. Yours?”

“Fine, thanks—”

“Aaron, please. Do you need something? I’m really not in the mood right now.”

“I’m sorry.” What do I say to that? Oh, man. What did I walk into? “I was just wondering if you’d like to go to the Prom with me. Like, it’s no big deal, I just—”

“Oh, Aaron.” She stood up from her task. “That’s really sweet of you. I’d—” She leaned in to inspect my face. “Are you O.K.?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Soon as the words escaped my lips I felt a hot flash pass through my body. “I’m just not used to this heat yet.”

“Jesus, come over here.” She rushed behind the counter and handed me a warm bottle of water from somewhere beyond my sight. “Take this.”

“Thanks.” I uncapped the bottle and took a swig.

“But, yeah...” She just looked at me for a beat. There was a new cadence in her voice. It didn’t sound so defensively hip; it was inviting. “I think that’d be fun. There is a catch, though.”

What? She'd said yes? Of all the drafts in my head of how this event would play out, not one had anticipated this. I was so prepared for rejection that I felt less comfortable with this positive outcome.

"Sure, what is it?"

She glanced down at her shoes and then back up at me. Her teeth pulled nervously on her lip. "I'll have to see if it's alright by my boyfriend."

"Oh." I sank through the floor. "Well, of course!"

"Don't worry, he's chill about things. Asking's more of a formality."

"Cool, yeah. Just keep me updated!"

"You got it, bud."

I took a deep breath. "Well, I'll leave you to your work. I can tell you're busy."

"Just a little," she said coyly. "Take it easy."

I scurried off with a "See ya!" While not disastrous, it was a rocky encounter. If I had any idea she was even remotely interested, I'd have put a little more effort into the presentation. Granted, it could have been worse. At least I didn't ask via text message. Then again, if I knew she had a boyfriend, I wouldn't have bothered at all. That was probably out of my boundaries, like, far out. If only she had Facebook like a real person, this confusion could have been avoided.

\*

**(Personal Aside)**

**Last Ones on the Dance Floor**

She said yes.

Is that a good thing? I don't know. I can't pretend this whole boyfriend thing doesn't freak me out. That of course rules out any credibility the night would have as a "date." And I think that might be for the best. Consider this: For a lot of guys, Prom is the one great chance to impress a girl. That's gotta be a stressful experience, regardless of outcome. Going as "buds," as she calls it, does away with that issue entirely. Who cares if I can't dance? It's not a moment ruined, but a silly memory made. All I'm saying is that we could have a better time without having to drag those romantic undertones around with us.

But seriously, who is this guy? I've never met him—I *think*. He couldn't be one of the guys from the club, but maybe a patron of Neverending Stories. What if I go to school with him? No, if that's the case, why wouldn't he just take her, himself? I feel like such a player, taking someone else's girl to the Prom.

My mom's excited, so there's a silver lining to be found. I didn't tell her about the issue at hand; no reason to dampen her feelings on it. I'm just gonna let her take all the awkward pictures she craves as a parent to validate her fantasy of my functional youth. My dad's taking me to get a tux tomorrow. Is it rational that I'm scared to see him?

## Part 2

When I first climbed into the car, I didn't know what to say. He engaged me in the usual formalities (*He even asked how Mom is doing.*), and my topics were exhausted. It felt like meeting someone for the first time, only I've known him my whole life. Rather than talking, I studied his features as if it was the last time I'd see him. I looked at him in awe, as one would a painting. I was made in his image. In many ways, I am him, yet we're so different. He still

looked the same man, but a little rougher around the edges. His goatee had spread into a full beard. A cigarette dangled from his hand, which he held out the open window to his left. *Dad doesn't smoke*, I thought, but wouldn't insult him by asking of it.

He cracked the ice back open with a story about something he saw on television. I could care less about his sitcoms, but it was good to hear his voice. We had some back-and-forth about nothing important before he asked about "this girl (I'm) going with." I told him the truth. He can handle it, plus he's distant enough that it shouldn't affect him directly. I asked if he thought it was weird; he laughed and said yes. I agreed.

The search for the perfect tuxedo was a different experience than I pictured. First of all, we did not go to a store full of tuxes, but a shoe store of all places. (*A bootery, to be exact.*) The clerk, who I think is also the owner showed us a magazine with all breeds of tuxes for rent. Some white with vests, others were the classic Bond look. I never put thought to how many different kinds there were, not until this catalogue of evidence was before me. I was overwhelmed not only by the number of options I had, but also by the prices they were asking for. I chose one my dad seemed to like. After all, it's coming out of his wallet. I didn't need fancy shoes to compliment my temp tux, but he insisted upon it. He wanted me to get nicer ones, "the kind you polish." We stopped by a retail store afterwards to shop for a tie that matches with the swath Ione texted to me. I was embarrassed by the amount of money I allowed him to spend on me. Someday, I'm gonna have to start applying for jobs.

With that out of the way, we went out to Sunny Days. It's a bar and grill characterized by local sports and its teams. They've got the best wings around, even if the bar patrons can get too loud for comfort in the midst of a game. Talking with a mouth full of food is an awful habit, but its one I inherited from Dad's side. We spoke freely from the moment we were seated until we

were out the door, a conversation broken only by the interruption of the waiter's untimely check-ins.

The nearing of our separation weighed heavily on my mind as he drove the familiar path to the home we once shared. I don't think he knew what to say either, because he made no effort to break my silence. The two of us sat in thought as he pulled into the driveway, like we've done a million times before.

"Well, keep up the good work, bud. Hopefully we can meet up soon." He twisted over and reached out to hug me. I returned the embrace, and felt his body pulsing. He began to whimper. I didn't know what to do. I'd never seen a grown man weep before. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice broken.

"It's O.K." I wished to cry, for his comfort. I just couldn't. We released each other and said our goodbyes. I went straight to bed, where the image of my father driving away in tears haunted me.

### Part 3

The day of Prom started out with great promise: All attending were dismissed from school early. I biked straight over to Sally's, a floral shop on Main Street, to pick up the carnations Mom ordered. Before then, I'd never set foot in the place, although I've probably passed it by every day of my life. It's funny, the same could be said of so many things in life. It was a pleasant place, and if I ever had another reason to buy flowers, I'd probably go back. Unfortunately, Sally was not there; I know because I mistakenly called the employee by her boss' name as I handed her the cash Mom gave me for this purpose. I'm no expert on flowers,

but they looked good to me. There was one for Ione's wrist and one to pin on my tux. I thought the girl was supposed to get the flower for the guy, but what do I know?

A grim realization dawned on me as I eyed the blossoms up. The clouds parted and my guardian angel tossed a rock down at my head below. On this rock was a warning; it read *Prepare to meet her parents, you dunce*. How had I not considered this danger already? I'd been so preoccupied with my parents sharing a space long enough to snap some photos and embarrass us with compliments that her own parental needs hadn't crossed my mind. *What if they hate me?* What kind of question is that? Of course they will; I'm taking their daughter to the prom. The only greater insult I can imagine would be to literally break into their house and steal the T.V. I texted my dad, asking how to approach the situation. I checked my phone soon as I ditched my bike in the front yard: no answer. Come on, Dad! I know you're working, but this is important!

I still had two hours before Ione and her parents(!) were to arrive. In the meantime, I had nothing goin' on, so I spent it researching the next book on our reading list, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll. All I have to say is that Dan'll have a heyday on this one. I knew the cartoon was weird, but man, this guy was a character, to say the least.

At 4:00, Mom knocked on my door, advising me that I should get myself ready before everyone is here. I think the rush was in her interest to see me all made-up as it was for the benefit of anyone else. I hopped in the shower, not because I was dirtied from the day, but because I was relying on the chilled shower water to massage the nerves flaring all across my body. I last myself in therapy, and before I knew it, Mom was pounding on the door for my butt to get out and towel off. I slithered into my new skin, that of a confident, respectable young man who wears a tuxedo and a tie to match your daughter's dress, before my body could fully dry.



Shortly after, we heard the concrete sighing beneath the weight of a car pulling into our driveway. Mom wouldn't let me answer the door until the carnation (*She called it a boutonniere.*) was pierced to my lapel. This simple task felt like going under the scalpel fully conscious under the pressure. When I was finally liberated to put an end to the door's beating, I found Dad on the porch step. At first, I couldn't comprehend why he'd bother to knock.

"Am I still welcome inside?" he said with a smile, crossing the threshold before I could respond. He turned back to face me. "You excited?"

"Nervous," I said. "You get my text?"

"No." He scratched the brittle field of hairs lain across his chin. "I lost my phone at a friend's. Wasn't anything important, was it?"

"I hope not. I just don't know how to meet her parents."

"Oh, don't worry about that." He smiled in that way adults do when faced with minor nuisances and kid problems. "Shake her father's hand, call them Sir and Ma'am to show respect, and just be yourself." He leaned in, and whispered this to me: "Truth is, us parents are just as afraid of you kids as you are of us."

Huh.

"You're gonna have a good time," he rustled my hair. I smiled, but I didn't comb that thing down with sniper's precision for him to come and throw it all out of whack. Who'd he think he is: *the wind*? "Your mother around?" His tone sank to a deeper level of seriousness.

"Yeah, she should be around here somewhere. I'll go get her." She had abandoned her post in the kitchen, and wasn't answering my call. I became worried, irked with the childhood

fear of being lost at the supermarket, parentless and afraid. I knocked on her bedroom door, but was unacknowledged. I turned the door on its arthritic hinges, careful so not to walk in on her changing (again). She was there, alright, but in a different position of nakedness than I feared. She was standing in the corner, like a punished child, sobbing silently to herself. I was unprepared for this discovery, and had no bank of comfort foods to feed her. Instead, I told her sympathetically that “Dad is here.”

“I know,” she said. Her voice broke out like a gasp of air from a chokehold.

“Are you O.K.?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Thank you. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Sure enough, she soon joined us, collected but clearly in the aftermath of a devastation. I was surprised to see Dad offer a friendly embrace. He looked to her with affection. “How’ve you been, Carrie?”

“Jesus, Chip, you smell like cigarettes.” She stepped out of his reach. I didn’t understand why she was acting so reserved, but there are a lot of things I don’t know.

Ione and her family arrived nearly 10 minutes after the designated time: 5:00. In this time, the quicksand of my mind thickened to molasses. They pulled up in a white Sedan piloted by a short, bald man. His wife, a blonde woman whose face seemed a little too thin, rode passenger. Ione was in the back seat. Sitting next to each other, her parents looked like a couple in a funhouse mirror. I rushed over to greet them as they abandoned their vehicle.

“Hi, I’m Aaron! Nice to meet you.” I extended a hand toward the man rolling out of the car. “Sir.”

He accepted the gesture with a jolly chuckle, using my hand as leverage to pull himself to his feet. “Sir is for old men.” With his features and demeanor, I could tell he’d make one boss mall Santa. “You can call me Jeff. How’re you?”

“I’m doing well, thanks!” I ran off to meet the mother, who I caught halfway around the car. It was embarrassing to run like a performer monkey in front of my parents, but first impressions are everything.

“It’s nice to meet you, Aaron!” she exclaimed. I presented my hand for the shaking, but she declined in favor of a hug. In her welcoming arms, I thought, *Hey, these guys aren’t so tough*, especially not compared to the militant, cigar-chewing figures I was expecting.

Then Ione stepped out. She was wearing a shiny plum dress. It wrapped tight across her body, defining its angles in ways I hadn’t noticed before. Her brown hair was tucked into some complex bun I’ll never understand. Two earrings that looked like metallic dreamcatchers dangled above her shoulders. Maybe it was my imagination, but I think she even swapped her nose ring with a fancier replacement. I said my hello, and leaned in close to her so that I could whisper “You look beautiful.”

Her face glowed. She bent forward, herself, and said “You, too.”

I grinned and rolled my eyes.

What followed was an impromptu photo-shoot, with each one of our parents snapping shots of us in an arbitrary sequence of uncomfortable poses with cameras and phones alike. Thank God nobody had their flash turned on, or we’d have really felt like Brad and Angelina. This part of the deal was especially hard on me. No matter how hard I pull and flex the muscles in my face, I can’t make a decent smile. It always comes out strained and painful, like I’m

struggling to pass gas. Fortunately, our directors had mercy and kept things brief. Afterwards, Ione's parents promised to pick us up from the Prom at 11:00 and we packed up into my mom's car. Mom went easy on her with the interrogation, limiting questions to those regarding home schooling and her parents.

I'd tell you about the walk itself, but the whole event was a blur. If I felt like an amateur model before, this was the red carpet. I remember the swarm of my classmates and walking out on the stage, too blinded by the light to pick a single face out of the audience. Of course, I'd been dreading it, but I don't remember the experience being bad at all. It was a quick, painless shot: necessary and over before I knew it.

We met up with our families once more to receive more praise, before being ushered back into Mom's car to beat the rush. She dropped us off with more promise of a good night. On the inside of the large, fancy building which was the stage for the night's choreography, white cloths were lain over tables. It was a high ceiling-sort of establishment, with a chandelier that probably cost more than my house. We spotted Caleb with his date, a black girl I'd crossed paths with before on my way to class, but never got a chance to speak. (*I later found out her name is Grace.*) We sat together at a table near the far corner, along with other couples I hardly recognized. Caleb claimed to have spotted David and Chloe, but if they were there, I hadn't seen them. We were served some meal that looked prettier on its plate than it rested well in the pit of my stomach, but it was neat to try a "classier" dish, if nothing else. We ate like the uncivilized youth we are beneath all the misleading layers, and then conversed just like at the lunch table. Our chairs were arranged in a circle around the dance floor as if this was a single-story coliseum being prepared for its audience.

Ione and I spent a majority of our time in the safety of these chairs, away from critical eyes such as our own. (*Ione, particularly has an eagle's eye for poor dancing. I was just glad to see people enjoying themselves.*) Caleb and Grace ditched our lameness almost immediately to join the writhing throngs. My eyes kept drifting down her dress to her legs, where the disco lights danced. I kept building myself up to ask her to dance and punking out last second.

“If they dance any closer, they’re gonna need protection,” she said, breaking my line of thought.

I nodded in acknowledgment. “So, what’s your boyfriend like?” I traded one risk for another.

“Depends,” she replied in that coy tone of hers. Someday she’ll have to copyright it. “What do you want to know?”

“I dunno. What’s he *like*? What do you guys do?”

“Well, he lives in Canada, so we mostly talk online.”

“He lives in *Canada*? How’d you meet?”

“On the Internet...” as if that was the lamest question in the world.

“So, have you two met? Like, in person?”

“Yeah, once. My parents drove me up to see him last summer; I’ve been saving up to visit him again this year.”

“Oh, that’s cool.”

“You think it’s weird.”

I blurted out a laugh. “No!”

“You don’t lie very often, do you, Aaron?”

“Never. Why?”

“Because you suck at it.”

I opened my mouth for defense, but did not pursue the subject. She was right.

“It’s no biggie. Sometimes, I think it’s a little weird, too, but when we’re talking it’s the most natural thing I know. I used to have a lot of—*issues*—and he’s helped me keep it together for two years now. You know, when I was twelve, I used to go over to my neighbor’s to play with their kids. While their parents were working, we’d sneak into the alcohol cabinet and get buzzed. Either their parents didn’t notice or they didn’t care. Once I started talking to Bradley, he steered me away from that crowd before my parents knew to. Those kids are in rehab now, and they’re only Twenty-One. It’s scary; that could have been me. I’m usually shy, but we can talk all night, about anything. He’s the only person I feel safe to be myself in front of. A lot of people talk about how technology hurts communication, but I feel more comfortable IM’ing than talking in-person. There’s a lot of bad people out there, sure, but to cut ourselves off from the rest of the world is to leave a lot of good people waiting at the door.”

“Wow, that’s really something I’ve never put much thought to. I see your point, though.”

This was clearly an impassioned topic for her, something I had no perspective on. No matter what I could say, it wouldn’t be enough.

“Sorry to unload on you. It’s not exactly public knowledge, so I don’t get to talk about it often.”

“That’s fine. I don’t get to hear about this kinda thing ever, so it’s interesting.” An obligatory slow dance track eased into the room like a dismissal bell for our conversation. “Well,” I said, taking my stand before the moment could pass. “Wanna go get made fun of?”

“Sure,” she said, joining me on the rim of the dance floor. We found a niche for ourselves, where I could place my hands on her hips and she could hang hers over my shoulders. We held each other at arms’ length as we made slow steps in a circle. It was hard not to look directly into each others’ eyes, but I feel guilty each time we made a connection. Ah, well, if Mr. Bradley ever comes to town and I’m going steady, he can have my girl for a dance. (*Chances are, he’ll have to settle for a dance with me, unless my luck turns around soon.*)

“Thank you, Aaron.”

“Yeah, of course. Thanks for coming.”

“Not just for this, for everything. You’re really providing a community service for some of these kids with your little club.”

“I hope. I think I need it as much as they do.”

“I’ll put it this way, I don’t think anyone would put up with Robert under any other circumstances.”

I laughed. “He’s not so bad. He’s just a kid off his meds. Sometimes I envy him for not caring what people think, but I also think he’s more sensitive than he lets on.”

“I like him.” This was a small revelation to me. “I just wish he’d get back on the meds. I think he looks up to you, in case you haven’t noticed.”

I shrugged, and couldn't restrain a smile. I loathe to admit it, but I was probably blushing, too.

“You're a good kid, Aaron. I look forward to our little talks.” She smiled back at me, but her eyes began to leak tears and that smile crumpled into the bubble of a sob held back only by the teeth stapling her lips together. I pulled her forward and she pressed her face against my chest. I wrapped my arms around her, pressing my palms flat on the skin of her back; I could feel her trembling against me. I caught a glance of David and Chloe across the crowd. I shot a smile their way into the void.

As all songs must, ours soon ended. Ione peeled her face from my breast and wiped the tears away with balled fists. She apologized, but there was no need to. We made our way back to our seats as the standard radio-friendly club beats renewed their lease over the crowd, where we spent the remainder of our night. On the car ride home, she rested her head on my shoulder and dosed off. I gauged my mental scale while managing her parents' questions (all lighthearted in nature) to see if it truly weighed ten pounds. It was the weight of a feather. When they pulled into my driveway, I softly nudged her to consciousness with the shoulder she'd borrowed. I said goodnight; she smiled and ruffled my hair.

I laid in bed, restless that night. On one hand, it was the perfect night we'd been advertised. On the other, I was melancholy to sink back into the reality of life, with my divorcing parents and complacent boredom. I rolled over towards the wall and promised myself to carry snapshots of the night with me always in my mind's wallet.

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**Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**



&amp;

**Through the Looking Glass**

When Charles Dodson was a child, an illness left him deaf in one ear. It's rumored that he would stutter around adults, but could speak flawlessly to children. In addition to working as a professor of math at Christ Church, he was a writer, inventor and photographer. He focused his talents as a photographer on youth. He befriended Henry Lidell, the Dean of Christ Church and his family. He would watch over their three daughters, and was known to take them rowing. To entertain them, he would make up stories which included their names. This next part is mostly speculation, O.K.? Judging from surviving photographs, Dodson favored young girls, in a manner that *could be* described as fetishistic. There's one photograph of a nude child that has been linked to one of Dodson's young models. Keep in mind, I'm no expert and this isn't proven, but later on the Lidells and Dodson had a falling-out. The story goes, Dodson asked the Lidells for permission to marry their eleven year-old daughter, Alice.

Dodson published a story he invented for Alice on one of their rowing trips. Of course, he submitted the book as one "Lewis Carroll," and this book was titled *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. As I'd predicted, Dan spelled this out for us in excruciating detail. I think it's safe to say we were all less than comfortable with the subject matter. Chloe looked like she was about ready to blow chunks. What a way to begin a conversation.

"That's now how Disney wants you to remember it," Ione said.

"Disney doesn't want us to see a lot of things the way they were. They take history and sanitize it. How can you learn if you don't want to get your hands dirty?" Dan replied.

“I feel like I’m looking back on my childhood and seeing that things were never as innocent as I remember them being,” Caleb said, looking shell-shocked from the bomb dropped on us.

“Just wait ‘till you get to *Through the Looking Glass*.”

“I don’t know how to feel about it,” Chloe began, her voice wavering in cadence. “I really liked this book, but now that I know what it’s about, I feel like I shouldn’t.”

“Keep in mind. There’s no hard evidence that Charles Dodson was a pedophile. One theory is that he identified more as a child than an adult man, and his obsession was innocuous, if a little unorthodox. I don’t think it’s as simple as good or bad; he was clearly a troubled man. He probably suffered from a mental disease.”

“If it is true—and I hope it isn’t—it’s just disgusting and it makes the book hard for me to read.”

“I don’t think he could have written the book without his obsession,” I chimed in.

“What do you mean by that?” Dan probed, leaning forward.

“A major theme of the book is childhood and an escape from the adult world. If he didn’t come up with it to entertain Alice, would he have written it? I think it’s fair to say these are unique books, and a lot of that is due to Carroll’s unique perspective.”

“That’s a good point, and traces back to one of the oldest debates in criticism: Do you have to be a good person to produce good art?”

“I don’t think the two are related,” David said. “John Lennon beat women, Charles Manson was a decent musician, and Hitler wasn’t a bad painter. There are also a ton of decent

people who are terrible at what they do. Just because you show up for work every day doesn't mean you're not a bastard. The only way it affects the work itself is the impression the audience walks in with. It's a lot like Derrida and the *Death of the Author*."

I don't remember enough of the conversation to recreate it here. Lewis Carroll's dark side wasn't the only bomb shell dropped tonight. As we were wrapping up for the night, Dan asked if I'd mind staying while he and Ione closed shop. He took me to the back room once the building was vacated and Ione emptied the day's fortune from the register. I sat back down in my usual loveseat and he sat across from me in that anxious leaned-forward position he does. I felt like I was in the principal's office. Nothing good could come of this.

He massaged his brow with pointer and middle fingers. "There's no easy way to say this, Aaron. We've been in business for six years, since 2009, and it's been an uphill battle from the start. We've lived since Day One knowing every month could be our last. It sucks, but that's indie business. The people who technically own Main Street-rich folks who live in North Carolina-have raised the cost of rent to the point no one can afford to stay open. That's why so many lots have opened up these past five years and are still empty. If you ask me, the economy's turning around in the city and leaving small towns like this in the dust. Basically, and I'm sure you already know where I'm going with this, Neverending Stories will be out of business by the end of the month. The rent's paid until then, and it gives us plenty of time to empty the place out, have a fire sale with some Bradbury pun on the poster.

"You know we have no problem with you kids coming down here to hang out. Some of you have actually helped us out a lot with your business and spreading the word. I'm a member of Aaron Texter's book club for life, but in a few weeks, you'll have to find another place to meet."

I was silent until this point. My entire body was numb; I felt as if I'd just been told of a family member's passing. My family was being evicted. "I don't know if we could. So much of the club *is* Neverending Stories. You're more the leader of this thing than I am; it won't be the same without you." My voice quivered. If I wasn't so stunted, I'd have been mortified by its weakness.

"It probably won't be," he agreed. "And that's not always a bad thing. The times they are a changing. We don't live in a world of hole-in-the-wall shops run by moms and pops; today it's all big business and international chains. But you guys have proven a big point. Whoever says there's no hope for the youth must be senile, because from what I've seen from you and kids your age is enough evidence of the opposite to hold up in court. Guys like me are going out of business, but you've all proven to me that there's still a market for it. The interest is still there.

"When I was a kid, knowledge was never valued like it is today, nor was creativity. It's incredible. Your generation has grown up in a depression and you aren't afraid to dream. You're flowers growing in the moonlight. I'm aging toward oblivion, my time to rise has come and gone. This building emptied will be a tomb for those years. What can ya do? The Jedi Council is long gone and Ben Kenobi's been struck down, but now it's Luke's time to lead the Rebellion. I struck out, man, but you're up to the plate."

"What are you going to do after Neverending Stories?"

"Find a real job, probably in some factory, become a card-carrying adult. Honestly, I'm looking forward to it. Keeping this place running has broken me, these past two years. I used to open at 8:00 in the morning and close by 6:00; now, I'm lucky to get out before 9:00. You just need to be open for that night business. I've tried every gimmick in the books, from comics to

trading cards. I'm exhausted. I miss my family. It's been a long time since I've felt like a real person, or at least myself. As much as I hate admitting it, I need to kill this place in order to survive."

And that's all. Neverending Stories is closing and for all I know, the book club is soon to follow. I thanked him, for everything, and embarked homeward. I just don't know. If Dan's unhappy here, then I'm glad he's getting out of that lifestyle, but I've only gotten a taste of it and I'm hungry for more. We're breaking the news to the others after our next meeting. I can only hope I'm not the only one who feels this way.

"I felt this enormous weight reading the book," Trevor was blabbering on. "The first half was really charming, but this was more melancholy than witty. It had a real sense of loss: loss of innocence, of youth, I don't really know. Maybe I'm projecting, because of the backstory we had last time, but I felt like the final poem is a direct message to Alice."

"I don't know, man." Dan relaxed further into his chair. "We could all be projecting this whole Alice Lidell theory. Charles Dodson was also a mathematician, remember, and there's a popular theory that the book's about the transition from traditional math to contemporary practices."

"I give up!" Chloe announced. "I don't even think there's a meaning behind it all. What if the guy was just crazy and wrote these books people put too much thought into?"

"Then I'd say Barthes has been proven right," David said.

"Maybe in this isolated case..." Dan said, more to himself than to any of us.

“What?” Chloe said, now as an observer to her own argument.

“It’s really not important, not unless you want to get into the importance of authorial intent.”

“It’s a can of worms,” David agreed.

I disagreed, but entertained the idea that “No matter what Lewis Carroll did or intended with the book, we can’t disregard its importance or even the fact that he wrote stories people still enjoy today. I mean, did anyone here dislike the book?” If so, that person chose to hold their peace. “Shouldn’t that speak for the book? Half of reading is what the author puts into it, sure, but if an idiot reads Shakespeare, is their reading just as valuable as the scholars’? I think we’re too happy to forfeit any responsibility we have in this relationship as the reader. If he was a pervert, and we all enjoyed his work, does that make us accomplices to pedophilia?”

“Can’t we all agree everything about the book is just weird and confusing?” Robert said, winning himself the consensus.

“So, how many of you plan on reading these books to your children one day?” Dan asked. No hands. Chloe said she won’t *let* her kids read them.

Trevor stood up, grabbing his backpack off the ground by his feet and slinging it over his shoulder. “I take it we’re done for the night?”

“Not quite,” I murmured.

“Aaron and I have some announcements regarding the store, and indirectly, the club,” Dan said, prompting Trevor to sit back down and fuzzy attentions to tune back in. “I know you guys have your own things to do, so I’ll keep this short.”

“Yeah, what’s up?” Trevor had a grave expression fixed on his face. In fact, everyone did.

“Well, basically, Neverending Stories will no longer be here by the month’s end.”

“What!?” Chloe spat. “How long have you been planning this?”

“I’ve known since the last of last month,” Ione said. I recalled that as the day I asked her to the Prom.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Caleb asked.

“There’s nothing *to* do, but pack up what we’re keeping and sell the rest,” Dan replied.

“So there’s *nothing*? Neverending Stories is just over?”

“It’d take a miracle, Caleb. Thank you for your concern. The reason I decided to tell you all now is because this place will be a lot emptier by the time we’d have our next meeting. I’m handing all questions about the future of the club, including when—and *where*—it’ll take place over to Aaron.”

And of course, there were questions. I answered them all the same: *I don’t know*.

“Can we at least help you pack?” Robert asked. I resented him for giving in so easily to defeatism.

“Yeah, of course,” Dan said. “I won’t ask any of you to, but Liz and I will be here packing for the next few weeks. If any of you would like to help, it’d be appreciated. Heck, if you’d all come and just take some books off our hands, that’d be awesome. Maybe one day, we can have one last get-together, a little party like we did for the holidays.”

It was agreed upon.

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### **Funeral for a Book Store**

Dan said it'd take a miracle to save Neverending Stories. Little did he know, I'd been packing one under my sleeve since the night he broke the news to me. My devices are limited, but I believe potential lies not in resources, but efforts. If I know anything about economies, it's the choreography of supply and demand. Therein have I found the structure of my endeavor. Why does a business go under? Because not enough people are buying from that business. It takes a child to recognize that a peak in business could rescue the establishment in question.

I must confess, this new determination has rekindled my spirits. On a very selfish level, I'm thankful for a sense of purpose. Plotting out this task places the weight of divine mechanics on my shoulders, but it's also the first time in my life to feel Herculean. For once, I can see an end to my means. I could (finally) be *that guy*, the one who actually did something. No longer will I only be the one who reads but also the one read about. This is my hubris. (*I think that one means success; we've been having Greek terms for vocab lately and I'm struggling to get them all down.*) This is something I can stand for, something in my life I can protect. I can feel the shell of my seed fracturing; a cracking of the egg sheltering me from life I caused with talons of my own.

Just like *Ocean's Eleven*, I won't be able to do this on my own. I need a team of amateur experts to back me up. First, I enlisted my own mother as coordinator of media. Her duty includes photo-copying the handwritten posters and driving me around town to plaster them near anything noticeable in town. Although, lately, I've noticed someone has been removing my signs



from their positions. This has proven to be equally frustrating and confusing. It isn't illegal to tape paper to telephone poles, is it? At first, she had reservations about our campaign, but I was able to persuade her into lending her talents as a driver and a cash-payer to the cause. Once she was on board, I recruited everyone within earshot. Teachers, kids, cashiers at the supermarket, I told so many people you'd think I have no shame. For the week, I've been a door-to-door salesman.

Shameless or not, Neverending Stories is a staple of our community and as citizens, it is our duty to preserve it. Whether we shop there or not, it's a piece of our local identity. This isn't just a book store, it's a literary center, a treasure chest hidden in Main Street, and its booty belongs to us all. Why should we stand aside and let that all wash away in the tide? Sadly, not everyone sees it that way.

Carl and I have always been on good terms. I don't bother him and in return he doesn't openly mock me; it's the ideal relationship when it comes to the rich kids. I crossed that line this morning in home room to inform him of my cause. He listened respectfully as I asked him to stop by and buy a few books, if he could. I worded it politely, and explained that I don't expect everyone to help, especially with how hard the economy has been on our parents. (*After all, that's pretty much what's caused this mess.*) When I resolved my humble plea, he casually replied "Bro, just get a Kindle."

I'm not exactly the loudest voice in the morning choir before Ms. Dean takes attendance, but by the time I was done berating his pedestrian attitude, everyone (teacher included) was staring at me, silenced. Ms. Dean asked if we needed to speak with the principal. I apologized and retired to my seat across the room. I wasn't sorry. Such passivity is criminal, and I won't watch as it claims another victim. Maybe the others heard my impassioned rebuttal and were

moved toward the cause. I asked a friend I share Home Room with, and he said it wasn't likely. Apparently, it was the first time many of them had ever heard my voice. After class I tried explaining to Ms. Dean, hoping to convince her to issue brief announcements regarding the issue before her classes, but she impatiently told me to get to class. So much for promoting education. Whatever. I'm gonna see about getting on the school news for a PSA on it next week.

## Part 2

I counted out my cumulative allowances left over from the last two months (*Two ten dollar bills, six ones, three quarters, and thirteen pennies*) and headed out to make my own deposit toward the Neverending Stories trust fund. I'd be nothing more than a hypocrite if I wasn't willing to donate to my own charity. I could tell just from what was once on display in the window and now absent that time was short.

Inside, things only looked bleaker. Boxes littered the floor, filled mostly with books. Where shelves once stood behind the counter were now unrepressed walls. Elizabeth stood behind the counter, stuffing a large box full of the knick-knacks on its surface. Her face was caked in sweat, her hair pulled into an efficient ponytail. Dust bunnies clung to her white tank top.

"Hey, hon," she said, without allowing herself to be distracted from the task before her. "Dan's in the other room; I think you should go talk to him."

I followed this advice, stepping into the back room which, while holding much more of its color than the front, was considerably barer than its former state. All the furniture remained intact; on the table was a copy of my poster. Dan was untacking a poster from the wall as I entered. He was wearing a trucker's cap and a sleeveless shirt.

“Aaron!” he turned around, walking straight towards me. “I’m glad to see you!” Even in eviction, he seemed in good spirits.

“Hey!” I said, infected with his enthusiasm. “What’s up!?”

He swiped the paper from its position on the table and held it up for me to see. The headline read in bold font, ***Don’t let Neverending Stories End!!*** “I was wondering if you could help me understand where all these flyers are coming.”

“Well yeah,” I stammered. “I made those. I thought I could get interest in the place and maybe if there was enough, it wouldn’t have to close.”

He took a deep breath. “We’re going to have to take these down. Thank you, but we can’t have these littered all over town.”

I jumped immediately into a defensive state. “But I can do it! I’ve already talked to everyone at school; I’m gonna get on the news!”

“Aaron, nobody’s come, and if anyone does, we’ll turn them away. We’ve decided to pack up now and sell the books on Amazon. Right now, we just want to clear the place out. For my sake, Aaron, please stop. We need to move on.”

I tried to maintain my composure but my face was wax as I drifted toward the sun. I broke down, right in front of Dan. I was powerless to do anything else. In that moment I learned life is a pickpocket, a thief in your home who knows exactly where to find all your most precious belongings.

“I’m sorry; I’m not trying to upset you,” Dan said. “This is just the way things need to be.”

“I can’t do anything,” I whimpered.

“What?”

“My dad’s gone, the shop’s closing, everything is being taken away from me and I can’t do anything to stop it.”

“You’ve already done more than most people. You started something here. You’ve done the impossible and got teens to talk about books!” This managed to win him a smile through the tears. “Life’s all about change, man. No one can help that. Last spring, my mother died. She was only 57. I wasn’t prepared for that. Some nights, I wake up and call her old cell phone just to make sure she’s really gone. Change isn’t always bad, though. You’ve conquered this place. There’s no reason for you to waste your time here. It’s a dead-end, trust me. You’re ready for the next frontier. If you want to help, let’s give these memories a proper burial.”

I took an empty box from the floor.

### Part 3

“I should’ve worn a suit,” Caleb said. “This feels too much like a funeral.”

“Just like at a funeral, let’s try and make this a celebration of a life lived rather than a reminder of what’s been lost,” Dan replied.

“It’s too bad, real funerals don’t have pizza,” Robert said, before navigating the tail of a triangular slice into his mouth.

Here we were, gathered for the final book club meeting. Even the long-absent Wes managed to show for the last hurrah. Aside from the furniture we occupied, the place was stripped of all its former regal. I was at least partially to blame. Since my little meltdown, I spent

every day emptying shelves and carrying boxes. Dan offered to pay me, and despite my protests, he wouldn't let me go home none the richer. We spent a lot of time together one-on-one, that week, giving a whole new collage of good times to remember. I can say with confidence that Neverending Stories died with dignity: I was there to ensure it.

“What are you gonna do, once the shop's officially gone?” I asked Ione next to me.

“I've been putting applications out,” she replied. “You may have to come find me at Dairy Queen, come Prom next year.”

I grew silent, flustered with guilt as the others continued their idle chatter.

“Before we go, I have a confession to make,” I finally announced. All eyes were on me. I know the point of saying that is always to draw attention to oneself, but why did I have to draw *so much* attention to myself? “I don't have a middle name.” Looks of curiosity shifted to those of confusion.

“I don't have one, either,” Chloe said.

“My middle name's Wilhelm, but I don't like it, so I just pretend I don't have one,” Robert said. I know this statement as true, because his mother has addressed him as such.

“Sometimes it's better to have no middle name at all than a bad one.”

They weren't catching on. Oh, God. I'd have to explain myself. Is anything more embarrassing? “My name isn't Aaron Texter. Aaron's not my middle name. My real name is *(Did you really think I'd tell?)*”

“Oh?” Dan said.

“Well, yeah,” Caleb said. “We already knew that.”

“What?” I was shocked.

“We’re not stupid, man. We all go to the same school, it’s not like none of us have year books. We’ve been talking about it since the first meeting. It’s pretty weird, but if you want us to call you Aaron, that’s cool.”

“I think we can handle that,” Dan said. “If that’s the only revelation you’re sharing tonight. As long as you’re not some kind of illegal immigrant posing as a student or a Pitbull fan, it doesn’t bother me any.”

“Well, *Aaron*, where are we going to meet from now on?”

“I really don’t know, Robert,” said I.

“The Peach Pits always an option,” Trevor suggested in earnest, prompting an eye-roll from his brother.

“Right now, I think I’m done with the club, at least for a while.” It was true. I’m open to change, but I’ve been considering my place in the club as up for a change itself for a few days, now.

“Done!?” Wes exclaimed. “How can you be done? This club isn’t even a year old; it’s hardly begun!”

“So sayeth the kettle,” David taunted, his arm slung around Chloe.

That shut him up.

“Guys, it’s nothing personal. I just need a break for a bit. Maybe by the end of summer I’ll be ready to jump back into it. For now, I’d like to pretend I’m a normal kid, not the leader of

some nerdy club. This has been one of the best experiences of my life and I hope we can all keep in touch, but I'm still feeling black and blue. I need to sit a round out."

Dan adjusted an invisible pair of glasses on the bridge of his nose and recited in a nasally tone: "O Captain! My Captain!"

"Dan and I would love to have you over to our home, but we do live almost forty minutes away," Elizabeth said. "If any of you could make it out, we'd be delighted to have you."

"I just wanna say," Chloe began. "I love you guys. You're like my other family. Dan and Liz are like parents to me; I'm gonna miss you two."

"Don't miss us too much," Dan said. "We'll be around." He kissed the grease and garlic pizza residue from his fingertips.

We spent the rest of the evening just enjoying each other's company. Sometimes we discussed books, but mostly we didn't. If anyone brought up future meetings, I dodged the question. If this was to be our last meeting, then I was content with that. Why force an old trend? Maybe the time had come for this, too, to end. Maybe not. We'll just have to wait and see what feels true.

At the end of the night, Dan said he had one final gift for each of us. He compared it to the Wizard of Oz's gifts at the end of the movie. I always liked the Scarecrow best, but I sure could use the courage. As we departed, they sent us off with a hug and a book they found suitable for our individual tastes. It felt oddly like a graduation of sorts. My book was *Ulysses* by James Joyce. He said that it's considered to be the greatest book ever written, and dense enough to make *Moby Dick* look like a featherweight by comparison. Oh, boy.

Released into the night, we each said our goodnights and went our own ways. I chose to walk around town rather than resigning to the solitude of my room. My mother picked me up at 4:00; apparently, she woke up and drove all over town looking for me once she realized I wasn't yet home.

### **Epilogue**

The gang came by our new house outside of town today. The ghost of my father finally drove us out, to a modest house on the edge of Farmville. No more bike rides to school for me; I am officially a slave to the school transportation system. When we do drive into town, we make a point to give our old place a drive-by. I always look through the empty windows where great works of literature once modeled for passersby. Last I saw, the For Rent sign on the door was no longer advertising the lot.

Until recently, I had no interest in keeping on with the club. A light inside me burnt out that day I finally accepted our future. A new insecurity replaced the comfort I once had, forming a wound I feared too much to close. It's August 18<sup>th</sup>, and I hadn't checked my social media since school let out. In fact, I hadn't seen or talked to anyone. When I finally did tap back into social media, I found my pages swamped with questions about the book club and when it would be resurrected. Finally, Chloe started a group discussion which was to take the place of our conventional gatherings. Enough was enough. The demand was there, how could I supply them? It's simple economics.

Fortunately, I scheduled our first meeting just before Caleb and Trevor are heading off for college and the army, respectively. Mom was eager to cater the event with cookies and brownies. She even joined us in the basement for a bit. She said later that she didn't want to



bother us. When I told her how positive everyone was about her (*the treats probably helped*), she asked to borrow my book, so she can read up for next time. Looks like we've got a new member!

Funny enough, the notebook's down to its final pages. This may be a new beginning, but I can't shake this feeling of resolution. Caleb and Trevor aren't long for this town. Chloe and David split up at the end of the academic year, but seem to be friendly enough. Robert's spent the summer producing a wiry mane of peach fuzz across his face. Ione's taken up employment at a summer camp and will be attending our school this year. She sent me a long message this summer, mostly about how dear a friend she considers me. She and her Internet lover have also ended their affair, opening room for some guys at the summer camp to try their hand at love, judging from the pictures she's shared. Ah, well, maybe it's for the best. What matters is that we're all here, sharing the narratives of our lives once more, even if only for one more chapter. It just feels good to feel on the same page. This is no ending, just one more course of changes in life. No matter how hard we try to identify and imitate art, it's just not the same. There are no tropes to depend on or genres to follow; we're all just stretching and dancing to suit our lives' demands, until our bodies can stretch and dance no more. We'll never get to ride off into the sunset, because beyond one horizon lies a new frontier, and here we are, looking the world in the eyes once again. As much as I try to convince myself otherwise, and as much sense as it might make of the world when I bend reality just right, life isn't a book. I think I'm beginning to understand that.