

WALDEN

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BIOLOGY

It was a good day if I managed to avoid Toby and his annoying voice until after dinner. It wasn't so much Toby I was trying to steer clear of, though, but rather any kind of human interaction. I latched on to not a single part of the University that I could have called home had I done so — not the French Club, not *Phi Sigma*, not the rowing team, not the *University Herald*. Without any of those things to call home I found home in just one place at the University. Myself. It may not have been much of an identity, and it may have resembled Father more than it did me, but I was determined to hold on to whatever of it was left and to preserve it at all costs. As such, solitude became my home. It was in solitude that I was free of the University. It was in solitude that I was free of Father, though how free can someone really be of his genetic creator? He is always there, like a shadow, wherever you go. The shadow follows you, replaying your mistakes and exaggerating them in distorted images. Until death the shadow follows you. I sometimes wonder what it would be like to lay below six feet of dirt, where both light and shadow follow no more.

Solitude, though. It was in such a state that I sought to be, for it was in such a state that I was myself. Truth be told, then, it wasn't really Toby the person I was trying to escape. It was the person.

Come October of my inaugural year at the University, I pretty much had the method of avoiding Toby down to a science. Not that it required any great cooperation of cerebral cells on my part — the plan was a simple one. When Toby was in the room, I wasn't. When I was in the room, well, hell, you can figure out the rest.

Every morning was a race against the clock to make sure I was out of the room before Toby moseyed on in somewhere around 11:30. Okay, so maybe not everybody would call that morning, and maybe that everybody would cite the fact that at 11:30 you are ordering a #1 Big Mac meal and not a #1 Egg McMuffin meal — and maybe that everybody would be right — but to me it was morning, and damned if I didn't have a hell of a time forcing myself out of bed in time for Toby's obligatory awkward laugh, "Huh, huh, you ever plan on going to class?" Then the disapproving and somewhat sarcastic shaking of the cranium.

"WALDEN, WALDEN."

The struggle became routine, the routine gave way to habit, and eventually the habit metamorphosized into ritual. Toby, awake for several hours now, sought a brief respite in front of the make-believe cave of the television set before returning to the academic cave of the classroom. Me, my respite came in departing the cinderblock room, walking down the dorm hallway, ascending the steps leading to the main floor exit, and walking blindly out into the light. I left Toby and his faithful following of syndicated sitcoms and reality television behind.

The real world that confronted me outside the brick façade of Walden Hall was the immaculately manicured quad and its predictable portrait of Campus Life 101.

Rich Wellington tossed a Wilson football to Tony Scarduzio, throwing the pigskin a bit further with each successive toss so as to lead Tony — per Tony's unspoken instructions — a bit closer to the Tri-Delt girls until inevitably, the perfect toss thrown, Tony was able to penetrate the circle of estrogen. An obligatory apology ensued, followed by overzealous acceptances of that apology and, well, it isn't hard to imagine the *I'm sorry, little shit can't quarter to save his life. That's okay. That's okay. That's okay* for them all and *Done class for the day? I've got a 1:30 but I'm not going and another I'm hanging in studying today so I don't have anything to stress over tonight and can just have fun at the mixer. You going? You going? You going?* And so on until it ended up with a drunk Tony and an even drunker Tri-

Delt fucking on the bottom bunk in Tony's dorm room after the dance while Tony's roommate did the same with another girl just above.

Greg and Gabe sat in the middle of the Quad on their dorm couch, which they had pulled out from Walden Hall to help them philosophize outdoors. Whether it was the nice autumn weather or the public eye that inspired them to drag their couch outdoors, I'm not sure. Roger Waters sang from the CD player that sat on the freshly cut grass in front of Greg and Gabe. The decibel level of the music called attention to them, as if to ensure that passersby noticed these enlightened individuals and their philosophical couch. As I stood there, I could almost read their lips. Pink Floyd could not silence the voices of Greg and Gabe, and then the voices of the quad, both of the present and of the past, kept coming and they wouldn't stop and the voices overlapped with each other and I was hearing history. Or was I? The countless voices, inaudible at times from sheer numbers. The stereo plays "Is There Anybody Out There?" Then the voices and again the song "Is There Anybody Out There?" Still the voices. All the Gregs and Gabes, all the students who passed through the turnstile of the University. Okay, there's the present, that I'm sure of — the song "Is There Anybody Out There?" But then the voices. *Someone just fucking shot Kennedy! Damn, how'd you like to fuck that, Rich? Did you get your tickets for break yet? My flight's at 6:00 in the morning. Yeah, it sucks, but Hey WALDEN, I heard you wrote the new "Alma Mater!" Damn, how'd you like to fuck that, Allison? Thirteen channels. Hey, you're up early, WALDEN. I tried calling you last night. WALDEN, what's wrong? Staring eyes. Fly. WALDEN, come on, what's wrong? Fly to. Yeah, well, it all sort of came to me in an epiphany. Fly to. The hawk was there and the melody just came to me. Fly to. Soaring high . . .*

"WALDEN! WALDEN! You're scaring me. What's wrong?"

"Roots."

"What?"

Greg and Gabe's radio faded away.

“C’mon, let’s get out of here.”

And so Brook and I left the Quad behind, her hand slightly around my arm, gently guiding me elsewhere.

Elsewhere was away from the Quad, and the farther elsewhere we got the better I felt. We walked in the grand parade of University life, yet somehow we were outside it. We passed by them all, and with each step elsewhere the beating of my heart slowed just a bit.

“WALDEN! WALDEN!”

Oh, fucking great.

“WALDEN! WALDEN!”

Dean fucking Finch. The man swooped down on me before I could even pretend I didn’t hear his chirping. Though I kept my head firmly tilted toward the pavement, Finch was relentless in his political pursuit of kissing my royal ass.

“WALDEN! WALDEN! Hello there, son.”

Finch stood in my line of travel, forcing a confrontation. I looked up at his obnoxious red bowtie and gave a half-hearted smile.

“Hello, Dean.”

“WALDEN, what perfect timing! I just got off the phone with your father barely five minutes ago!”

“Oh?” I feigned interest.

“Yes, we were going over the agenda for next week’s trustee meeting. I can’t get over this coincidence. Can’t wait to tell your father — he’ll get a kick out of it.”

“Hmmp.” I feigned again.

“WALDEN, are you not going to introduce me to this lovely acquaintance of yours?”

“Oh, sorry. Dean Finch, Brook. Brook — .”

“Dean Finch.”

He extended his arm for an overly enthusiastic handshake.

“Nice to meet you, Brook. WALDEN here is like the son I never had.”

He put his arm around my shoulder.

“I’ve known this trouble-maker since he started to walk!”

He squeezed my shoulder tightly and laughed.

“His father and I go way back. We were roommates our freshman year over in Walden Hall.”

“Is that right,” Brook asked, seeming to enjoy the fact that this little run-in with Dean Finch was killing me. “WALDEN never mentioned it.”

“Oh, he’s a modest one, Brook. But don’t let that fool you. WALDEN comes from a pretty impressive genetic line. You know, if it weren’t for his family, this University would fall to pieces. Isn’t that right, WALDEN?”

He squeezed my shoulder again and laughed louder.

I. Laughter. Feigned.

“So how are the studies, WALDEN? Staying on top of things?”

“Sure, Dean.”

“Great. No problems with the classes? Everything’s going well?”

“I think so.”

“Wonderful, WALDEN. Can’t wait to get a look at the mid-semester reports next week. I’ll have to pull yours up before the trustee meeting to show your father how well you’re doing.”

My heart sank.

“It’s so great to have you here, WALDEN!”

Another fucking squeeze.

“How’s Molly?”

“Fine.”

“And your cousin Willy?”

“Fine.”

“Great. Tell Willy I was asking for him. I do miss seeing him around campus. Brook, everything going well with you?”

“Yup.”

“Anything I can help you with?”

“Nope. Thanks, though.”

“It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Brook. WALDEN’S father will be happy to hear he’s keeping good company.”

I forced myself to laugh and as I did, became aware of the soreness my cheeks were now feeling from the fake smile I had adopted when Dean Finch first accosted us. Brook simply laughed at my general unease.

“WALDEN, great to see you, son. Soaring high, right?”

“Yeah, we are the hawks.”

“That’s it, WALDEN!”

Finch gave a hyper bone-crushing handshake and then was gone, the coattails of his suit jacket flapping behind him as he flew off into a cloud of chirping students.

“Soaring high?” Brook asked with a smile. “What’s with the ‘Alma Mater?’”

“It’s a routine Finch and Father have. Whenever they’re signing off on the effing phone, one of them starts a line and the other has to finish it.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Wish to God I wasn’t. You should hear them. Father will be on the phone one minute and then out of nowhere he screams out *WE ARE THE HAWKS!*”

Brook laughed. I laughed too for a change. It was pathetic, really. Father and Finch, birds of a fucking feather.

Soon after Finch’s departure, the concrete walkways slowly crumbled to dirt paths, the shadows of the buildings gave way to the shadows of trees, and the voices of the Quad were overpowered by the *purty-purty* of cardinals, the hammering and *whinny* of woodpeckers, and whatever other onomatopoeia the birds could muster between the engines of gas-powered machinery.

Welcome to what we called Baker’s Farm, a huge expanse of land the University happened upon in 1845. As it turns out, it was my great-great-great — hell, it was “Alma Mater” Grandfather who had the greatest influence on the University getting Baker’s Farm.

“Alma Mater” Grandfather, you see, was on the Board of Trustees of the University in 1845, the same year old man Baker died. Well, old Walden, being the responsible trustee that he was, had befriended John Baker many years before. Outliving his wife and two sons — one to tuber-

culosis, the other to water (drowned himself, the story goes) — and certainly quite out of his mind, John Baker willed his entire property to the University. The executor to the will? The hawk himself, Walden the First.

Baker's death in 1845 successfully quadrupled the University's landholdings, which were pretty expansive to begin with. Bordering the entire northwest property line of the University, Baker's Farm added to the campus some four-thousand acres of earth — fields, woods, and ponds included.

For almost a hundred years Baker's Farm continued on as just that — a farm. The University seized the opportunity its new inheritance gave it, started its own school of agriculture, and had hard-working tuition-paying students reap the land for all it was worth. Students earned their degrees in agriculture while at the same time managing to feed the entire student body. The surplus crops turned into an added revenue stream for the University, as squash, wheat, and assorted vegetables made their way throughout the region. Baker's Farm thrived, as did the University, until 1939 when, with Hitler on the loose, the Farm was abandoned.

The University never stopped thriving and turned to the Farm again in the early 60s. Students of agriculture turned into students of horticulture and landscape design, and today the University has the most respected school of horticulture in the nation. The campus shows it.

Baker's Farm is the playground for every student that ever wanted to play God. Every tree is trimmed with the eye of an anal retentive barber, designed and sculpted in accordance with the eye's definition of beauty. Every hedge hugs its respective trail or walkway in perfect harmony with set University guidelines. The edges of the hedges are to provide just enough of a sense of guidance, security, and privacy to make the walk soothing to the mind. Too trimmed and the idyllic beauty suffers. Too overgrown and the passersby feel as though they are on untrodden ground. Uncomfortable with such a notion, they will turn back to the beaten path.

Such are the stipulations set forth by the University's School of Landscape Design. Such are the dictates of the Farm's new curriculum.

Such are the practices of the earnest students, eager to play God but given only a textbook to do so.

The grass should always be two inches high, no more and no less. An impossible task one might think upon witnessing just how expansive the farm is, but damn if the University doesn't do its best to keep its grass from deviating from the two-inch rule. The only real way to accomplish this is to have half a dozen industrial mowers and tractors in constant motion from April through September. The sound of spring and summer at Baker's Farm is the sound of engines. Likewise, the smell of spring and summer at the farm, despite the inundation of immaculately manicured flowers, is gasoline. Renegade blades of grass have no chance at the University. John Deere makes sure of it.

Today Baker's Farm doesn't get used by many people at the University except those in the School of Landscape Design, which is quite a percentage of the student body, and occasionally a rebellious class of biology or environmental science students. Mostly, the student body of the University keeps to the brick and mortar compounds found away from the farm. That may soon change if the University has its way. Apparently some genius in the administration came up with yet another way to cultivate all the green that can possibly be sucked out of Baker's Farm.

If the old windbag has his way, the University's School of Landscape Design will quickly become the School of Golf Architecture. A feasibility study is already in the works and a committee of accountants has been charged with creating a ten-year plan for the proposed SGA. If the numbers they come up with add to the bottom line, as all indications hint that they will, then the farm will assume its new role as campus cash register. Father and Finch, they love the idea.

I can just imagine the surprise of old man Baker if he were given a glimpse of his property after 150 some odd years.

What happened to my fields of squash? What is this lush green carpet? Not a blade of grass higher than the other – how is that possible? I must be in a painting. Yes, that's it, I am in some madman's work of art. But wait, what is that sound? I hear some kind of hum. It's getting louder. And still louder. What could

it be? And – ZOOM – some mechanical cart of sorts almost runs me over. Two men get out and immediately pull metal clubs out of the cart. I want to run, but wait — this is my farm. Where is my rifle? In the painting I am without my rifle and I fear these two men are going to club me to death. For what possible reason? Was I in the way of their little ZOOM machine? But no, the men turn away from me. I am invisible in their painting and, now confident that I am not the object of their weapons, I stand there and watch. But I start to sink. The green paint below me begins to turn to brown and suddenly I find myself trapped in a pool of sand. The sand quickly begins to pull me under. I try to run for the green but my feet only sink further into the pit of sand. I scream for help. The men do not seem to hear me. They are busy alternating looking off into the distance and swinging their weapons at the earth. The sand pulls me further below. Now up to my waist. I scream again. The men swing their weapons toward the earth again. The sand reaches my chest. I scream. Alas, they see me. They are walking toward me. Leisurely, I notice. Quicksand slowly swallows me and these men walk toward me as if they too were walking on quicksand. Their movements are painstakingly slow, and yet painstakingly deliberate. But I am wrong. The men don't come for me at all. They stop by their carts and carefully place their weapons back in the ZOOM machine. The sand is up to my neck. I give one final scream and sand storms into my mouth, choking me. My last image is the men driving away in their ZOOM machine, quickly ascending the freshly painted green landscape where my squash should have been. Darkness.

Today ends up a longer walk than most. Brook and I reach the heart of Baker's Farm in a mile, perhaps two, and continue on a ways until we reach the beginning of the end of campus at Flint's Pond. Baker's Farm itself has a few ponds here and there, some barely ponds and some barely lakes. Flint's Pond falls into the latter category, which is only fitting seeing as it matches the grand stature of its namesake.

You see, Abraham Flint, class of 1959, won the Nobel Prize for Genetics a few years back when he successfully brought to life a genetically engineered pig. I recently read that the poor porker met his non-maker not too long ago. Sure was one hell of an expensive side of bacon. Abraham Flint, though, genetic laureate that he is, claimed his

\$1,000,000 prize for putting bacon on the scientific map and, being the dutiful University alum that he is, turned the winnings over to his dear old *alma mater*. And so it was that Brook and I climbed out onto the branches of a nearly fallen oak tree that reached out over the reflective waters of Flint's Pond, formerly owned by God. Known on campus as the Pisa Tree, the oak lurched out at a forty-five degree angle from the ground, leaning out over the water in precarious yet somehow permanent fashion.

Brook didn't say a word. She hadn't the entire excursion and she refused to do so now. Something was bothering me, but she wouldn't permit me to wallow in my self-indulgent sorrows by patronizing me with a "What's wrong, I'm all ears, put your heart out on your sleeves and ask if the Holocaust survivors really give a damn about my unfair grueling life."

Sometimes I resented Brook for it, but only for a needy little second. Most times, though, she brought me back to some sort of reality, or perhaps it was some sort of illusion. I never was sure at the time, and I guess I'm not entirely sure even now. One reality is certain, though. When Brook spoke and when she didn't speak, when she kissed and when she didn't kiss, it was always the same — the University and the "Alma Mater" disappeared like running water carrying my troubles out to sea.

The branches of the Pisa Tree hung over Flint's Pond some twenty feet out and twenty feet up. I sat on the farthest branch out over the water and waited for Brook to speak. She remained silent, laying her body along the trunk of the leaning oak a few yards next to me. She should have looked uncomfortable, as I'm sure most people would have been, but she wasn't most people and she wasn't uncomfortable. Her magical body intertwined with the oak's trunk as smoothly as an ivy vine. I couldn't imagine it taking but more than one quick look at that body suspended in midair on a leaning tree for any guy to fall in love with Brook on the spot. She certainly had me.

I looked over at Brook one last time before giving up hope that she would break the silence. Then, I found myself gazing down at the water below and, though twenty feet away, could make out a somewhat blurred reflection of myself.

“Why am I here?”

It was a thought that ran through my mind ever since Father dropped me off at the University in September. It was a thought that ran through my mind every time someone at the University spotted me and asked if I was Walden’s son. Or Molly’s brother. Or Willy’s cousin. It was a thought that ran through my mind every time I walked underneath the stone letters chiseled above the entrance to my dorm — WALDEN HALL. It was a thought I woke up with, carried with me every waking minute, and unsuccessfully tried to escape in my sleep. *Why am I here?* I had plagued Brook with so many variations of the question, but until then had never come out and asked it that directly.

“To meet me.”

And it was that simple. I turned to Brook at those three unexpected words and forgot all about the well-rehearsed brooding monologue that was sure to follow. I looked over at her again and, not knowing what to say, said the only words that made any sense at the moment.

“I suppose you’re right.”

And at that moment I really did believe she was right. Looking at her long black hair flow down over the tree and toward the water below, the curves of her body molding with the curves of the oak, the slight rise and fall of her breasts in harmony with her continuous deep breaths of relaxation — an angel suspended in midair — yes, she was right. I was there to find Brook.

“I see a sheep.”

“Everyone sees sheep. You’re not everyone — what do you really see?”

“A sheep. I know it’s bland and its stereotypical and its unoriginal and its fitting with the mold of the universal eye and all that but, WALDEN, I really do see a sheep.”

“Well, let me know when it goes out to pasture. In the meantime, I’ll stick with the creatures from the sea.”

And so there we stayed, Brook dreaming up cloudy visions in the sky and myself wallowing in the reflective waters of the Pond.

“I see another sheep. Different cloud, same sheep.”

“Then you’re seeing what you expect to see. Two clouds cannot be the same sheep.”

“I didn’t know the snowflake rule applied to clouds and their respective dispositions.”

“Of course the snowflake rule applies. A snowflake is the product of its creator. If the creator has the inherent quality of singularity or uniqueness, then the offspring must necessarily house that same quality.”

Brook smiled. “I thought you hated philosophy.”

“The class, not the verb. The predicate is always so much more enjoyable than the subject.”

Brook smiled and shook her head.

“I still see a sheep.”

There were no sheep to be found in the Pond, however. As hard as I tried to make out something in the natural mirror, all my eyes received was a blurry reality. Brook’s sheep were even cloudier clouds. The oak was a rising tree jutting out of the water for eternity. My dangling feet were just that. I looked at the man in the water. The shadows made perception difficult. I arched my back further toward the water to get a better look. Something had to be there.

“Damn, look at that hawk.”

“Finally, you’ve gotten past your fleece fixation.”

“WALDEN, seriously, look at that hawk!”

And I did see something. Something swam in the watery shadows below me. I couldn’t tell what my eyes were trying to perceive.

“Holy shit!”

“What?” I yelled and looked over at Brook. She was turning over on the trunk slowly, her head following the flight of —

“Look out!”

I followed her gaze and my eyes instantly met those of an oncoming hawk. I was frozen in fright. The hawk tilted fifteen degrees like a fighter jet changing its direction and, as the bird tore past me, the oncoming wings were enough to send me flying backwards through twenty feet of air and into the chilly waters of Flint’s Pond.

There were two sounds I remember distinctly as I free fell in seemingly slow motion from the oak tree. Echoing in my ears were the hawk's wings separating the sky as it pumped its way through the air. Somewhere in the background of the hawk's flapping wings was Brook's irresistible laughter.

Through no skill of my own, I did a full backwards flip and, before the momentum could twist me any further, I hit the water feet first. My feet hit the bottom of the lake in short order and I pushed myself back to the surface with an amphibious jump.

"Shit!"

Still not ready to feel sorry for me, Brook only laughed louder.

"Damn, it's cold!"

Laying on the Pisa Tree's trunk, though this time facing the water, Brook flung her head back to get her hair out of her eyes and stared at me with a grin she tried very little to contain.

"Fuck you," I gasped at her with a smile, out of breath from the fall and my own fit of laughter.

"This just in. We are sorry to report that University student WALDEN XVI plummeted to his death this afternoon when a lone hawk, tired of hearing the young man's whining day in and day out, decided to silence the boy forever in Flint's Pond. The young man's lover could not control her distress as a visibly distraught face grinned ear to ear."

I slowly made my way to the water's edge and as my shoes fought with the mucky bottom of the lake, her words hit me. *The young man's lover*, she had said. Brook and I weren't lovers. We were certainly more than friends, but we were certainly not lovers either. *The young man's lover*. My history with the opposite sex is a very short one, and to be honest, I never thought I would ever be anyone's *lover*. Brook and I were not lovers. But that is what she said, isn't it? *The young man's lover*.

Standing in a foot of water, I turned to Brook looking for some kind of confirmation that I was not hearing things that to that point could only be characterized as wishful thinking. When my eyes met Brook's, she already had me in her gaze. Her grin was gone. Her eyes looked right

through me in a look that I had never seen on Brook's face before. It spoke more than words ever could. That was all the confirmation I needed.

I tripped as I stepped from the water and fell on my ass. Mud-covered clothes clung to my body. Brook laughed again and began her descent from the Pisa Tree.

"SOARING HIGH, WE ARE THE HAWKS!"

"Glad you're finding this so funny, Brook."

"CIRCLING THE SKY, WE ARE — ."

I kicked the water in a failed attempt to splash Brook, then looked at toward the branch from whence I came.

"Shit. I got lucky. That could have been pretty bad."

"But it wasn't."

And so she was right, it wasn't bad. Could have been, certainly, but it wasn't. I looked around for the attacking hawk but he was nowhere to be found. My body muddy, sopping wet and chilled to the bone, Brook and I began the long walk back to the red brick façade of campus life.

Halfway into our journey back, just as we were reaching the University's very own Mason-Dixon Line separating Baker's Farm and the original campus property, the sound of a leaf-blower accosted us. God forbid the trees litter the ground with burning hopes of regeneration as they decompose and fertilize the earth for future saplings. As the wind frees the leaves from their maker the leaf-blower sends the poor little creatures into a monstrous pile of decay, where another gas-powered machine will suck the leaves up and carry them away to a landfill, where they will find themselves fertilizing rubber tires, broken appliances, and the ever-growing jet-sam of human life.

The leaf-blower shut off and there was a moment of uncharacteristic silence.

"WALDEN! WALDEN!"

"Brook!"

There he stood. Truman Walker, leaf-blower in hand. If ever there was a man who did not look quite right with a leaf-blower in his hand, it was Truman Walker. Then again, Truman Walker didn't look quite right in

anything he did. But that's just what made him Truman. I'm not sure how much of it was innocence and how much of it was indifference, but Truman went through life according to his own set of rules, which were very few at that.

Brook and I walked toward the now waiting Truman. He stood six-foot-four or six-foot-five, depending on whether or not he decided to comb his hair down that particular morning, his feet were always covered with the dirty canvas of an ancient pair of Chuck Taylors, and his clothes came from the clearance racks of the nearest thrift shop. Whenever he moved he looked nowhere and yet everywhere at once as his bobbing head constantly surveyed his surroundings. The only time his head ceased to rise and fall with the movement of his gangly legs was when he was motionless. Now was one of those rare times. Standing at the edge of the University's topiary garden, Truman waited for us with an attempted air of casualness. Today his hair lengthened his stature to six-foot-five, and seeing that Chuck Taylor-wearing beanstalk try to suavely lean on a three-foot long leaf-blower was like watching the rusty Tin Man lean on his ax.

I met Truman for the first time when he entered our biology class during the first week of classes. Wearing a white tee shirt, his patented Chuck Taylors, and the brightest and most hideous pair of green pants the Salvation Army could part with, Truman walked into the room full of strangers and, indifferent to the whispers and not-so-muffled laughs, proceeded with utmost confidence to the teacher's podium. The whispers and laughs ceased immediately.

"Good afternoon, class. My name is Professor Hannibal Smith. This is Biology 1015, Section 008. If you don't belong here, we will all certainly miss your company. If you are in the right place, however, welcome! I'm here to teach you about life. And believe me, you've got plenty to learn."

It was at that point that two girls sitting next to each other in the front row made a quick and embarrassed getaway from the classroom, comparing their rosters as they fled the room. I never saw either of them again.

“Best of luck to you both,” Truman called after them. “Okay,” he continued, “Let’s see who is here with us today.” Truman fumbled some papers on the podium and began taking role.

“Adam. Adam? Okay, no Adam with us today. Meredith. Meredith Capriotti? No Meredith. Seem to be a bit thin on this first day of class, don’t we? Oh well, it will be more intimate. Joe? Do we have a Joe?”

Two students raised their hands. Truman picked one of them and nodded to him. “Last name?”

“Branson.”

“Great. Thanks for showing up, Joe. I was getting a bit worried there I had the wrong class. Hey, any relation to Dick Branson, Joe?”

“Uh, no.”

“Hmm, don’t have an older brother? Maybe I have the name wrong. Freddie, that was it. Any relation to Freddie Branson?”

“Nope.”

“I could have sworn it was Freddie. Oh well, moving right along then. Mr. Peck? Is Templeton Peck with us today?”

It was at that point that Professor Pipit frantically walked in the door. He struggled with two armfuls of books and papers at his sides and, disheveled and out of breath as he was, made his way all the way to the podium before he even noticed Truman. Standing no more than five-foot-three, Professor Pipit seemed to be only slightly taller than Truman’s green pants. Pipit looked straight at Truman’s waist, fumbled for a second with his books and countless syllabi, and then looked directly up at Truman.

Truman did his best to hold his ground without laughing at the little bald-headed man.

“Excuse me,” Professor Pipit said as if he had said those words over and over again throughout his life, though each time saying them to someone who didn’t quite deserve hearing the words. The bullies in middle school who jumped in front of him in the cafeteria line. The mothers who talked over him at the deli and shouted their orders out when the man behind the counter hollered “NEXT!” The bartenders who ignored his pleas for a pint while they attended to patrons who showed more cleavage than

Pipit would ever have. Now was one such moment for Pipit. The timid “Excuse me” had become habit.

Truman stared at Pipit and took a step back. Professor Hannibal Smith’s entire act was lost on the little scientist.

With stifled laughs from the students, Truman left the podium and sat in the last row of the classroom, right between Brook and myself. It was obvious from the start that Truman didn’t belong at the University. Needless to say, I loved him immediately.

“Raining where you come from, WALDEN?”

“A bird pushed him into Flint’s Pond.”

“A bird pushed you into Flint’s Pond? You see, that’s why I don’t go out there alone. You never know what you’re gonna face out on the Farm. Lions, tigers, bears, flying monkeys. You sure it wasn’t a flying monkey, WALDEN?”

Truman broke out in song, his gangly legs mimicking the dancing Scarecrow as he sang the lines from “If I Only Had a Brain.”

Truman spun around on stray legs and twirled his way to the ground. He looked up and smiled the brainless smile of the Scarecrow. Brook and I screamed with laughter.

“You’re a freak, Truman.”

“But a good-looking one, Brook.” Truman stood up, balancing himself once again on the leaf-blower. “Wasn’t flying monkeys, WALDEN?”

I relayed my encounter with the hawk, embellishments and all, and found no sympathy from Truman either — not that I should have expected any.

“You two need to cut back on your little walkabouts. Our man Pippy asked if anyone knew of your whereabouts yesterday.”

“I didn’t even think he knew our names.”

“Sure does. He asked if anyone knew you guys and said to pass along the message that you’d be wise to show up to the next lab if you’ve got any intentions on passing.”

“Shit. Fucking lab. At least in class I can sit there and sleep.”

“When is it,” Brook asked.

“Next Tuesday — 6:00.”

“Fuck.”

“Damn you, WALDEN XVI.”

“Me? I was on my way to history today when you drug me out here. Now I’m really screwed.”

“And completely fucking drenched. I do believe you had already missed history when I found you and your ‘roots’ this morning.”

“Fuck you.”

“Don’t you wish?”

Truman turned the leaf-blower on, turned it on me like an oversized hairdryer, and then turned it off.

“God, I’m gonna puke. Have you no shame of verbal PDAs?”

“We weren’t flirting,” said Brook.

“And Pipit and his tiny prick got laid last night. It’s like fucking Cupid is dancing around your fucking shoulders shooting arrows at each other’s genitals.”

Thoroughly embarrassed, a split moment of awkward silence slipped in before I could come up with anything to say to change the subject.

“Think Pipit’d really fail us?”

“Just show up. Team up with me and we’ll do what we gotta do and get out of there in forty-five minutes. Then we can grab a few cold beverages and imbibe the night away.”

“Forty-five minutes? You promise?”

“C’mon, WALDEN, how long can it take to open up a dead pigeon and play coroner? Half an hour and we’re done.”

“We’ll be there,” Brook answered. “What are you up to now, Truman? WALDEN here is going to get changed and then we’re hitting lunch. You game?”

“No, I gotta finish up work here and then I got to go wander through the topiary garden for a paper. I actually have to pick one of the sad green figurines and write a five-page essay on both the beauty and the mechanics behind it.”

“Sure would be nice to be a hort major, wouldn’t it, Brook? Maybe I could have gotten credit for falling from an oak tree into Flint’s Pond.”

“You’d get credit for being an ass.”

“On the defensive, Truman — the first sign there was some truth in what I said.”

“Hey, I’m not being defensive. I’ll be the first one to tell you that I’ve got it made, but you’re still an ass.”

The sound of another leaf-blower erupted from the entrance to the topiary garden. A forty-year-old man stood at the entrance and glared at Truman.

“That’s my boss, Smitty, and he’s just about as bitter as they come. Hates me, hates you, hates everyone in this joint. He’s just gonna keep staring. I gotta go. You guys got plans tonight?”

“Not I.”

“Nope.”

“How bout some beers at your crib, WALDEN?”

“I’ll be there.”

“It’s a date then. Just none of that cupid crap — I don’t participate in orgies with people I know personally.”

Thusly provoked, Brook leaned over and planted a kiss on my cheek.

The leaf-blower responded. Truman directed the machine our way and then turned and went back to his rounds of directing renegade leaves to their appointed piles. We left Baker’s Farm behind.

Though not for long.

I wish I could take credit for what happened that night, but embellishment is falsehood and I cannot bring myself to redefine the past no matter how much my egotistical pen urges. No, I must reconcile myself to the sidelines of the events of that night and give credit where it is due. To Brook.

Brook was stretched out in my bottom bunk flipping through the latest copy of Toby’s *Maxim* magazine. It amazed me that Toby had a sub-

scription to *Maxim*, but as his roommate I sure as hell wasn't going to complain. From all that I could gather, Toby was about as plain and predictable as an opening pawn move in chess. I never heard him say *fuck*, neither in anger nor in excitement. He never once threw back a beer with Truman, Brook, or myself — and believe me, the opportunities were frequent. The only music he listened to was from his vast collection of greatest hits, best of's, solid golds, and top of the charts compilations from various years, obviously ordered late at night from an 800 number advertised on TV. He never skipped a class, let alone showed up late. He never turned in a paper late. Never even complained about having to write one. Toby never colored outside the lines, he never ran with scissors in his hands, and he most certainly never showed any interest in girls.

Yet it was Toby's *Maxim* that entertained Brook. It was Toby's posters of Bob Marley, Jimi Hendrix, and a practically naked Pamela Anderson that plastered our walls. It was Toby's *Beers of the World* poster that was taped to the ceiling directly above his pillow. He liked to boast to other guys in the hall that beer was the first thing he saw when he started his day and the last thing he saw when he passed out at the end of the day. I spent half my time annoyed by the kid and half my time feeling sorry for him. He went to all this trouble to fit in with the A crowd and never once realized that it just wasn't for him. If only he had the confidence to be himself, whoever that was and wherever the hell he was hidden.

Toby sat there on the futon, remote control in hand and eyes glued to the small TV we had. He flipped back and forth between three different reality shows, where the prizes varied but the price to the participants never did — humiliation. Channel surfing was bad enough, but reality channel surfing — damn did that drive me crazy. I sat on my desk reading and rereading the directions for an overdue philosophy paper. The instructions were about as long as the paper needed to be and were as cryptic as some of the Hellenic boobs Professor Powell had us studying. I'm sure the beer in my hand didn't help the effort much. Powell wouldn't be back in her office for another fourteen hours, though, so I wasn't much worried about getting to the paper that very minute. Perhaps in a few hours, after

a few beers and after reading the long-winded directions for the umpteenth time, an epiphany would come to me and I'd realize what the professor actually wanted. Then the twelve-hundred words of bullshit would flow like the backside of a constipated and gorged sheep after an emergency enema.

Every now and then Brook would share an especially odd *Maxim* tid-bit or question with Toby and myself. My procrastinating heart welcomed the interruptions.

"Dear Doc. My girlfriend likes it when I talk dirty to her when we're going at it. She says it helps her come. Now she can't have an orgasm unless I talk dirty to her. Is this normal? Hey WALDEN, did you write this?"

"Perhaps."

"And they expect us to believe this shit is real?"

"You'd be surprised, Brook."

"Dear Fucko, your girl is living a fantasy and is using you to fulfill it. She doesn't love you and you'll never make her come. Her lover is the guy in the jeans commercial. Or maybe the guy at the bar. Perhaps the waiter at the restaurant. Or the guy living next door. Hell, maybe even the girl next door. You're a dildo that talks, brother. Don't you notice that every time you open your eyes while you're going at it, her eyes are closed? I mean, every single time. Don't you think you'd catch a glimpse of her eyes at least once during all those mattress sessions? She's fucking a shadow, and you're it."

"That might be a little too heavy for some pages guys are just gonna jerk off to, Brook."

"I guess, but come on now, is this stupid prick for real? I should be answering these boobs. It's about time someone told them the truth."

"Truth doesn't sell magazines, Brook."

"Yeah. Case and point right here." She held out the cover for Toby and myself to see. "Boob-job."

Toby laughed and then turned back to the television, where the screen showed some large breasted teenager flailing her arms at a boyfriend or ex-boyfriend or lover or boyfriend's lover or some such con-

trivance. The audience screamed in delight. Brook turned over on her back and continued reading the magazine. She looked as beautiful and relaxed as she had earlier that day on the Pisa's trunk. Damn was she perfect.

I finished off the last of my beer and thought about what Brook had said out at the farm. "The young man's lover..." I couldn't think straight since she had said those words hours before, and now, with beer thinning my blood and a philosophy paper that increasingly seemed wholly unimportant, I realized that Brook was right about an even greater truth. The philosophy paper still escaped me, but another epiphany arose — I was there to meet Brook. For the first time in my life I thought I was able to answer the question that plagued me since before my first experience of the *Junior Jamboree*. Why?

A rap on the door drew me from my philosophical reverie.

"Truman with more beer, I hope," said Toby. "You just took the last one."

Tis true, I did just take the last one. But I had also finished the one before that and the one before that and so on and so forth. Toby's half-full brick sat on the arm of the futon, the wetness of condensation long since evaporated. Not that it surprised me any, it being the first beer Toby dared crack open with me. I felt bad Toby had to pretend to be someone else in front of me. Even in his own room he felt the need to play the role of the thespian. I pray he doesn't lose himself forever.

As soon as I opened the door I regretted having done so. In entered the Triumvirate of Pricks.

Eric Erickson, Russell Ruskin, and Jason Seaman.

I was a little surprised the three had the impudence to enter the room like we were all old war buddies. They came in, greeted Toby and myself with far too much enthusiasm, and sat themselves down with their brass balls guiding the way. Eric sat on an arm of Toby's futon while Jason sat on the edge of my bed at Brook's feet. Russell inspected the fridge, discovered the beer in my hand was the last in the room, and then joined Jason on my bed. Brook, now sitting up on the bed, was flanked by these two pricks like predatory bookends.

It was no secret that I hated Eric, Russ, and Jason with equal passion. The feeling was quite mutual, I am certain. Toby himself cringed at the sight of the three, and probably hated them more than myself, but as he never took a stand for himself they never knew it. For as much as they walked all over Toby, it never dawned on them that the kid might not actually like them. How else could you explain the courtesy visit they paid us? How quickly their memories must fade. Mine have not, and I am certain the same is true of Toby.

After the initial greetings, Eric, Russ, and Jason proceeded to hone their testosterone-laden divining rods toward Brook. Toby and I might as well have been in another room. I felt the veins in my forehead start to pump as I tried to fathom what was taking place. These three guys had actually entered my space, pretended to let bygones be bygones, and sat here in front of me trying to convince Brook that she'd have a better time if she met up with them for the night.

"You going to the Pike house tonight?" It doesn't really matter which one of them said it. As far as I'm concerned, they're all interchangeable. Different sized condoms, perhaps, but pricks just the same.

They've got eight kegs. Everyone's going. What, you got a paper you gotta write? Let the almighty Waldo there do it for you. C'mon, don't hang in the fucking dorm tonight. It's gonna be dead around here. Live a little. Okay, okay, next time, though, okay? But here, give me one good reason why you can't go? I'll spot ya, if that's what you're worried about. We'll wait for ya to get ready. No, we don't mind at all. If you want, Russ and Eric can shoot on ahead and I'll wait till you're ready. What, you got your period or something? You'll have a good time, Brook, I promise you. Just this once, Brook. If you don't have a good time, I'll never bother you again. You'll never know unless you try. You don't have to drink if you don't want to. Just come and hang out. If it gets too loud or too crowded or you're having a bad time, we'll leave. You say the word and we're outta there. I'll take you back so you don't have to worry about being left alone. You're not really going to hang out with these jerk-offs, are you? They're just gonna sit around here and sing the fucking "Alma Mater" all night, right WALDEN? We are the hawks, isn't that how it goes, WALDEN? Don't like beer? Okay, I'll

pick you up a bottle of whatever you like. You like Absolut? Peach schnapps? You can drink that. I'll tell my brothers and it won't be a problem. Please. C'mon, you'll regret it tomorrow. Seriously, everyone's going. They've got eight kegs. After six of them are kicked they're gonna kick everyone out and just have a small crowd hang out. It'll be chill. You'll get to meet all the brothers. You're gonna rush Kappa Kappa Gamma next semester, right? Well, then you have to go. It's the only way you're going to meet people. I remember when I was a freshman. Once I went to my first Pike party everything changed. I met so many people and had so many more friends. You gotta come, okay? How long will it take you to get ready?

Finally, Brook was able to shut them up.

“Guys, I’m sorry, but I really can’t. WALDEN, Toby and I already have plans. We’re going to have a threesome until their cocks fall off.”

I almost spit out the last of the beer I was downing. Toby laughed uncontrollably. I am certain it was the first time Eric, Russell, or Jason even heard Toby laugh.

“Fuck you,” said Jason as he got up off my bed. “We were just trying to be fucking nice and invite you to a party, bitch.”

I would have been pissed but I was too busy laughing to care. Toby continued to laugh, so much so that I was afraid he might laugh himself into an asthma attack. Not since the day I met Toby did I see him so happy. On that first day his smile was filled with the excitement of the dawn of college life. Countless depressing days had slowly worn the smile away. Now, with Brook’s help, Toby rediscovered his smile — and his laugh — if only for a little bit.

The Triumvirate began to make their way out of the room. Half an hour had passed since they first propositioned Brook, and it finally dawned on their thick heads that Brook never had any intention of joining them. They had wasted their precious time. The eight kegs were surely down to seven by now.

“Have fun with these faggots,” said Eric.

Toby was in uncontrollable fits. I gave the Triumvirate a half-hearted salute with my empty beer, “Cheers, gentlemen.”

“Fuck off.” Like I said, I don’t remember who it was, as pricks are indecipherable to me.

Jason pulled the door in to leave, only to find himself face to chest with Truman. The brown grocery bag Truman held at his chest was eye level with Jason.

“Evening, Jas.”

“Truman.”

“You gentlemen off to Pike?”

The Triumvirate looked stunned and scared. Stunned that Truman knew of the party, scared that he might decide to tag along with them. Finding it the only safe answer, they remained silent. Truman’s body was an unintended barricade at the door.

The silence became too much for Jason as he realized Truman had no intention of moving until some kind of acknowledgment was given.

“You guys having an effing party in here with fucking potato chips and a case of fucking Coke?” Jason mocked interest in the contents of Truman’s groceries. “You going to play Chutes and Ladders while you’re at it?”

“I never was a big fan of Chutes and Ladders,” answered Truman without hesitation. “Never did master the art of flinging the arrow around the number board. My thumb would always get in the way and stop the arrow short of a full rotation. Damn pain in the ass. Tiddlywinks, my friend, now that’s a game of skill. Nothing like the sound of tiddling a wink from the felt pad and into the center circle, where it would spin in delight before falling to a champion’s rest — fifty points.”

As Truman sang the praises of Tiddlywinks and felt pads and other childhood gaming delights — all in an effort of make Jason aware how little he cared for his unwanted opinion — he came into the room and started to unpack his bag of groceries. Truman placed the bag of chips on my desk and proceeded to open one of the twelve-packs of Coke. He reached in and handed me a nice cool can — of beer. He reached in and tossed another beer to Toby. He tossed another to Brook. Then, after he pulled out a beer for himself, we all flicked the cans open in metallic unison.

“Sort of sounds like the flick of a Tiddlywink, doesn’t it, Jas?”

“Fucking brilliant,” said Russell. “You ever get nailed bringing beer in that way?”

“Nope,” I offered. “But the Coke does taste a bit skunked.”

“Got any extra,” asked Eric.

Truman let Eric wait for his answer as he downed the beer in one twelve-ounce guzzle. In his mammoth hands, the beer looked like a Dixie cup of water flowing down Truman’s eternal gullet. He picked another beer from the twelve-pack of Coke, studied it for a moment, then flicked it open.

“Sorry, guys, but we can’t spare any. If we’re gonna have that orgy that Brook promised us, I think we need to save as many Cokes for her as we can. Have fun at Pike. I’d join ya, but Chutes and Ladders calls, if you know what I mean.”

“Fuck off,” said Jason as he left the room.

“That’s the plan, Jason. Have a good one, jerk off.”

Russell forced back a grin as the Triumvirate began to leave a second time. They went in search of our fabricated evening of a drunken orgy. You could read the disbelief on each of the Triumvirate’s faces as they left the room. “Are those fucking losers really going to bang that piece of ass?” They just couldn’t be certain, and that was the beauty of it. Off they went on a crusade for alcohol and some willing or not so willing drunk Kappa Gamma.

A few beers later found the group of us in heavy discourse on the merits of Chutes and Ladders and other childhood board games. With at least two or three beers in him, and with the Triumvirate safely out of the dorm for the evening, Toby let down his guard. Between especially tense moments on one reality television show or another, Toby allowed himself to join the senseless babble.

“I just try to get Boardwalk and Park Place, get a hotel, then I own the bank — and the game.”

“Are you kidding me, Toby? Boardwalk and Park Place? Only the inexperienced play-it-safe accountant goes for the deep blues. It’s the greens and reds, my friend. Pennsy and North Carolina — a neat little housing development and you’re going down.”

“Hey, you play for a pot of money in Free Parking or is it just a safe spot on the board?”

“Never mind that, you play the Boardwalk and Park Place routine and you’re doomed to get assessed. Murphy’s Law triumphs when you follow the stereotypical strategy.”

And on the babble went, with debates over the supposed good luck of the shoe and the supposed curse of the ill-fated ship. Then onto Parcheesi.

“Now there’s a real game.”

“Parcheesi? Come on. There’s no skill in that. It’s just like Sorry or Candy Land for that matter. Oh, I got a pink square so I move to the next pink space. You’re screwed by randomness.”

“Didn’t you hate it when you landed on the tar pit? It just didn’t seem fair. Same thing with Chutes and Ladders. You’re in the lead and then the flick of an arrow dictates your future, sending you back to first fucking grade. It’s bullshit, man. Give me a game where you actually have control — like chess.”

“Have control? Only inasmuch as each of you are handicapped by the same set of predetermined moves. You’re relegated to certain squares and then you die.”

That’s when the phone rang. Truman answered it.

“Toby and WALDEN’s Love Palace, how may I help you?”

Truman’s reaction told me instantly who was on the other end. He tossed me the phone.

“Hello, Father.”

“WALDEN.”

“How are you?”

“Good, WALDEN. Who was that?”

“A classmate. Name’s Truman.”

“Oh, you guys studying tonight?”

“Yeah, biology.”

“Really? Well, that’s good. Don’t want to interrupt. Just wanted to make sure you were on top of things for the midterms. Everything under control?”

“Yes, Father.”

“And biology’s going well?”

“Yeah.”

“Got a call today from Professor Pipit.”

My heart sank.

“Oh?”

“Says you’ve missed quite a few of his classes, WALDEN. Says you’re in serious danger of failing.”

“I go to his class.” Though my voice was emphatic, I knew the lie was useless.

“You’d better start, WALDEN. I’m in town next Tuesday for a board meeting. We’ll talk then. Dean Finch and I are going out to dinner after the meeting. Probably about 6:00. You’ll join us.”

It wasn’t a question.

“I’ll see you then, right, WALDEN?”

It still wasn’t a question.

“Yeah.”

“Good. I’ll call you when I get in town.”

“Okay.”

“Goodbye, WALDEN.”

“Yeah.”

I hung up the phone.

“Jesus Christ! Does my Father have to know fucking everybody?”

“WALDEN, what’s wrong?”

I looked at Brook, trying to fight tears of rage.

“Fucking Pipit called him today and said I wasn’t showing up for class. Asshole.”

“That’s bullshit, WALDEN. He’s got no right to do that.”

“Well, he fucking did, Truman.”

“What an ass.”

Brook stood up and walked toward me. She grabbed the beer out of my hand and shook it. There was minimal splashing inside the can.

“You need another, WALDEN.” Brook went to the fridge and grabbed us another round. She tossed beers to Truman and Toby, then walked back to my bed with the remaining two.

“Sucks, WALDEN,” said Truman. “You’ve got nowhere to hide, brother.”

“WALDEN,” I mumbled to myself. “Son of fucking WALDEN.”

“I know, brother. Sequels suck.”

“But they don’t have to,” said Brook, and that was the end of it. She was right, sequels can be good. In fact, sequels should be good. They’ve got the mistakes of the first go-around from which to learn. Brook saw life as something to enjoy, something pure that could not be contaminated, and she enjoyed every passing breath of it. I had much to learn. I still do.

“WALDEN, you’re empty.” Brook, again lying on my bed, held up the fresh beer she had just gotten me. I walked over and sat down next to her. We flicked open our beers and I began to stare blankly at the TV.

“A toast, gentlemen,” Brook said, raising her beer in the air. “To Pipit!”

We all laughed and repeated the toast.

“To Pipit!”

“To Pipit!”

“To fucking Pipit!”

Laughter was silenced for a moment while we shared our communal tasting of beer. The alcohol washed away the recent past. Pipit was forgotten. Father was forgotten. Only the present remained. Brook had done it again. Resting next to me on the bed, she was an angel. We stared ahead at Toby’s television.

“Hey, Toby, man. Can you flip something else on?” Truman asked. “That reality crap annoys the hell out of me.”

We were all well into quite a buzz at this point and Toby complied.

“STOP!”

Toby did.

“Go back one.”

Toby did.

“No, go back one more.”

Toby did.

“Yeah, that’s it, keep this on.”

Toby did.

We all sat there transfixed by the barren landscape of the Serengeti. There’s nothing quite like watching a wildlife or nature program while inebriated. It’s escapism at its finest, I guess. Alcohol dulls the pain of the civilized world we march through and the animals on the screen let us connect with some distant ancestral genome hidden deep within our bodies. Ironic as it may seem, technology allows the natural world into our homes and we are somehow temporarily released from that very home. A sense of uneasiness emerges as we wonder if perhaps our true home is somewhere up there on the screen with the pride.

Nighttime falls on the African plains and infrared cameras allow us to follow the lions in the darkness. The narrator’s voice lowers, the background music drops out completely, and the natural sounds of the Serengeti at night take over. Something big is about to happen. We drink our beers and watch in anticipation.

The cub tries to suckle his mother. The dominant male roars at the mother’s offspring, sending the cub skittering off into the darkness. Hyenas howl and cackle in the distance. The infrared camera follows the cub. It continues away from the pride, occasionally looking back for a sign of forgiveness. None is given.

Camera shoots back to the male lion. He is pacing back and forth with fury in his step.

Camera back to cub, who is fearful to go any farther and stands a hundred yards away from the pride looking at his mother. There is a slight moan of fear from the cub.

Closer now, the hyenas cackle much louder.

Back to the dominant male. He has stopped pacing, but stands in perfect stillness glaring at the cub.

THUMP! The music comes back on in a fury of Congo drums as the infrared camera lights up the Serengeti and follows the lion as it charges toward the mother's cub. The male looks angry. Something is not quite right and uneasiness takes hold.

"Fucking hyenas are screwed now," Truman said with anxious glee, not quite sure that he believed his own words.

The Congo drums come to a crescendo and when the camera is able to capture both lion and cub in the same shot, no hyenas are to be seen.

Then the natural world collapses around us. The dominant male barrels over the poor cub and when the dust settles the infrared camera shows a limp and lifeless cub draped from the lion's jaws like a rubber chicken.

"What the hell?" It was Truman again.

The narrator tried to explain the rare occurrence. A new male enters the pack and needs to rid the pride of his competition's offspring in order to ensure the next generation of the pride is his own flesh and blood.

"That's messed up." Our silence acknowledged agreement with Toby. While we tried to comprehend the savageness we had just witnessed, I went to the fridge and passed out another round of beer.

"We'll have to ask Pipit about that," said Truman. "See what kind of bullshit he throws us for an answer."

"I can't believe the prick called Father. I mean, he never once let on that he even knew my name."

"Let alone your old man. What bullshit, WALDEN. Wish I could help you out."

"Maybe you can, Truman."

It was Brook. And damn if the words that next came out of her mouth confirmed her sentiments at Flint's Pond, words that echoed in my head all day — I was there to meet Brook.

"How's that, Brook?"

"What did you say we're dissecting at the next lab?"

“*La columba livia*. The rock dove, better known as the wonderful common cooing pigeon. Captured by incognito scientists dressed as vagabonds to lure the unsuspecting creatures from city stoops and park fountains with stale crumbs of poisoned white bread. Thrown into black trash bags and carried to secret laboratories in a rusty grocery cart. Pipit, wearing a gray overcoat, buys them in a shady alleyway, douses them with formaldehyde and *voilà!* — pigeons for our dissecting pleasure!”

“Thank God I’m a finance major,” said Toby, and for one brief moment in time I empathized with his sentiments. The empathy quickly passed.

“What if there are no pigeons to dissect?”

“Brook?”

“Well, what if by some sudden and mysterious event, the pigeons sort of ‘flew the coop,’ so to speak?”

“They’re dead when they get here, Brook.”

“I know that, Scarecrow, but what I’m saying is — what if they decided to revolt like in *Animal Farm*? A liberation, so to speak. What if the pigeons just were no more?”

“Like David Copperfield and the Statue of Liberty. Beautiful, Brook!” It was then that I understood what Brook was getting at, and why she knew Truman would be able to help.

Toby remained silent through the whole conversation, trying his best to be invisible by focusing on the television screen in front of us. With the lions on a commercial break, he flipped back to reality TV, a bizarre nature program in its own right, I suppose.

“What time is it?” Brook asked.

“9:30.”

“All right, if we’re gonna do this, we don’t have much time. Here’s the plan.”

I listened to Brook and, with a smile glued to my face, thought to myself, “So this is what being in love feels like.”

Half an hour later, Truman, Brook, and I walked through the front doors of Brewster Hall. Most night labs finished at 10:30, so we were running a little bit late for our class. Well, that's the story we were going to tell any inquisitive professor or suspicious rent-a-cop. Luckily, we never had to tell the story. We just walked right into Brewster Hall, proceeded up to the second floor, down the east corridor, and, with the help of Truman's passkey, entered the biology lab and closed the door behind us. We went to the back of the classroom and all sat down on the floor with our backs leaning against the wall. We sat there in the darkness and began to wait for the building to empty itself for the night.

The things coincidence and foresight enable you to do. Truman happened upon the passkey two weeks before as he left a meeting with one of his environmental science professors. While leaving his professor's office on the bottom floor of Brewster Hall, Truman almost ran over a frantic Pipit outside the office door.

"Excuse me, professor."

Pipit was flustered like a little white rabbit late for a tea party. "Uh, hello there."

Pipit rushed by Truman but then turned around after a few awkward steps, spilling a handful of papers all over the hallway.

"Uh, excuse me. Are you heading to my class today, son?"

"Heading up right now."

"Good, good. Do me a favor, will you? I've got to run back to my office to make an emergency phone call. My father has just taken a fall and I need to call the nursing home. Would you mind opening up the classroom for me?"

"Sure. I hope your father's okay."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure he's fine. Just need to call to be certain."

Pipit handed Truman an immense set of keys attached to a key chain in the shape of the University's mascot, the hawk.

"Make sure everyone stays, please. I'll only be a few minutes late."

"Will do, Professor."

Truman helped Pipit with the scattered papers and then Pipit was on his way scurrying down the hall. "Hey, you can even take roll again, if you'd like!" Then Pipit let out a shrill laugh that continued as he made his way to his office at the other end of the hall.

"It was almost like a chirping bird having an orgasm," Truman whispered to Brook and I as he recounted the story for us in the dark classroom. "I mean, the dude cracked himself up!" Truman mimicked Pipit's laugh and Brook and I laughed our buzzing asses off. I'm not sure that I'll ever hear a chirping bird have an orgasm, but Truman's impression of Pipit sure as hell sounded on the mark to me.

Not surprisingly, Pipit never saw that lab door key after it was in Truman's hands. The countless keys and the hawk key chain were returned, minus the key that let us enter the lab that night. Pipit never did say anything to Truman about the key, but I can't say I'm surprised. After all, Pipit did have other things on his mind. Like Brook and I, he never showed up for class that day. His father had died.

Time seemed to drag on as we waited for labs to finish, feet to shuffle, lights to darken, and doors to slam. The beers were starting to furiously make their presence known to my bladder, but I didn't want to risk leaving the room to head back up the hallway to the bathroom. I would just have to wait.

The idea of being nervous hadn't occurred to me until we began to hear the muffled voices of students escaping into the night. Fairly quickly the voices disappeared and doors began to slam shut. We waited fifteen minutes after the last voices faded away to make sure we had the building to ourselves. I went to the hallway with a racing heart and looked for signs of life. There were none to be found.

I returned to the lab and we carefully navigated our way across the classroom by the faint light of the moon shining through the windows. Brook and I followed Truman's lead as he opened the door to the room adjoining the lab with Pipit's key. When the door opened, we found the room completely dark.

“Wait here,” Truman whispered to us, then slowly he entered the darkness.

I was itching to get the hell out of there. Adrenaline had my entire body on edge and my urethra was having a hell of a time damming back the river of beer that threatened to explode at any minute.

“Ooh, do I have to take a piss,” I moaned.

Brook responded by grabbing my crotch and giving my prick a quick squeeze in the darkness, sending both my heart and my cock skyward. The erection only heightened my need to piss and I couldn’t keep myself from letting out another little moan.

Brook laughed.

“Hurry up, Truman. I’m dying here.”

FUMP!

“SHIT! FUCK!” Truman’s shin had thumped against something pretty good. “I can’t see a fucking thing.”

Brook and I squatted down to let what little moonlight there was shine through the doorway. There was silence as Truman tried to regain his whereabouts.

“Got it!” The suction sound of a door opening was quickly followed by blindness as light from the freezer poured into the room, sending our eyes into a squinting frenzy.

“BINGO!”

When our eyes finally adjusted to the light, all three of us immediately set to work opening the Styrofoam containers that filled the freezer. Truman pulled off the first lid only to find a box full of frogs, each individually wrapped like a store-bought pork loin. I opened the next box, finding more of the same.

“Hell, we can free some of them too while we’re here, can’t we?” said Brook, grabbing a couple of the frogs and throwing them into my backpack.

Brook then struck gold with the container she pulled out of the freezer. She lifted off the lid and the freezer’s glow lit up the lifeless creatures.

“*Aye columba!*” said Truman.

The three of us stood there in silence as our eyes fixated on the box of neatly packaged pigeons. Their lifeless dark eyes glared back at us in an unnatural and almost despondent manner. I remember thinking aloud, "What are we to learn from the dead?"

"That the study of life revolves around the dead," Brook answered, breaking my dreary and drunken reverie. "Ironic, isn't it? Come on now, sweethearts, time to fly the coop."

Brook reached into the box like a little girl diving into a surprisingly large box on Christmas morning to find the treasure hidden within. Like the frogs, the pigeons were individually wrapped in plastic, and one by one Brook pulled pigeons from the Styrofoam box and hurriedly put them in my backpack. It seemed absurd at the time, such a break-in. If the story were to follow tradition, then I would have been holding a moneybag, Truman would have stood by as lookout, and Brook would busy herself with filling the sack with bundles of hundred-dollar bills. But tradition was broken that night, I guess, and what a fucking sight it was.

My backpack reached its capacity after the eighth or ninth pigeon. I quickly jumped aside and let Brook fill Truman's brown grocery bag with the birds.

"Trick or treat!"

"Fucking yes!"

"Better not be any razor blades in those birds, Missus."

"No, just some formaldehyde-laden treats. Special bonus buy at Acme, so take as many as you can fit in your bag there."

Truman's brown paper bag was filled to the top just as the Styrofoam box was nearly empty. Brook reached down and picked up the last pigeon.

"This one's mine," she said. I could barely make out the giddy smile on her face as she removed the pocketbook strapped to her back, stuffed the pigeon into it, and hooked the stuffed pocketbook back over her shoulders.

"Ready boys?" The light of the freezer cast shadows up and down Brook's body, and looking at her standing there with her well-worn jeans and white tee shirt, I felt my erection quickly returning. Until then, I had not realized it had faded away. Nothing like packing dead pigeons into a

backpack to deaden your own bird. With the erection came a pounding reminder of my immediate need to piss.

“Let’s get the hell out of here. I’m about to piss myself.”

We quickly put the lids back on the Styrofoam coolers and placed them back in the freezer as near as we could remember them being. Truman shut the freezer door and we carefully but quickly made our way back into the adjoining room.

As nervous as I was, as were Truman and Brook I am sure, I did not hesitate at the classroom door and rushed out into the dark hallway in search of the nearest bathroom. Guided by nothing more than the dim light of the EXIT sign down the hall, we made it to the men’s bathroom halfway down the hall before any of us wet ourselves. The bathroom itself was lit only by the faint light of the moonlight shining through a few narrow windows high on the wall. Combine the darkness with our flooded bladders, not to mention the male member’s natural lack of direction, and I am sure Truman and I made quite a mess that night, even with a urinal staring us down just inches away. We both stood there at our respective urinals for what could very well have been two solid minutes. After what was certainly a minute we both started laughing with incredulity that our bladders had the ability to retain such immense quantities of liquid. Being bored and being men, and immature ones at that, a contest ensued to see who would finish first.

Truman began to taper off and then his urinal was silent, but just for a second. Then the river of beer came pouring again.

“Gotcha! You’re going down, WALDEN!”

Thirty or so seconds later I did go down, with Truman still merrily pissing away. In gloating glee he began to whistle as he continued emptying himself into the urinal long after I had officially conceded victory with the zippering of my jeans.

“Piss off,” I said.

When Truman finally finished, his whistling came to an immediate stop. The gushing sound of water turned his smile into an expression of disbelief. The sound came from the stall behind us, where Brook was putting us both to shame.

“Both of you can piss off!”

“Jesus, Brook, don’t overflow the damn thing!”

The flowing water came to an abrupt halt and Brook walked out of the stall, still buttoning her jeans. “Oh, I fucking give up. I couldn’t squat there any longer — my legs were beginning to cramp up.”

With our bladders emptied, the complete silence in the building quickly became unnerving. The tension in the bathroom suddenly became tangible, and as quietly as we could we gathered up our newly acquired taxidermy collection and slowly made our way into the hallway.

We crept down the hallway like ill-practiced thieves, the thrill of the hunt long since faded.

“Ribbet!”

“Ribbet, ribbet,” croaked Truman, trying to break the tension in the air.

I hardly had time to laugh in response when a door slammed down the hallway behind us.

“BANG!”

Our shadowy movement came to a complete halt. My heart raced as it never had before and I had to concentrate to hear above its hammering. Looking back down the hall, I could make out two shadows slowly coming toward us. They were talking casually and their muffled voices traveled down the hall to us. They obviously didn’t see us.

But then they stopped. There was a moment or two of whispering, as if the one shadow wasn’t sure if his eyes were playing tricks on him or not, then a muffled confirmation came from the other shadow and the two were off — running down the hall away from us.

Without questioning whom these shadows belonged to and what they were doing, the three of us sprinted down the hall in the direction we were headed, both to the exit and away from the shadows. Within seconds we were at the second floor stairwell, quickly turning the corner and leaping down the dark staircase steps at a time. It’s a wonder none of us broke a damn leg that night.

Just as we reached the first floor landing an alarm sounded.

“FUCK!”

Our fellow trespassers obviously made it to an exit door first and whether in haste or in darkness, their flight from the building must have gone through an emergency exit door.

The alarm ringing in our ears, we rushed down the first floor hallway until we reached the very doors we had passed through just an hour earlier. Brook bounded through the main entrance without hesitation and Truman and I followed suit. We kept running as we ourselves became shadows in the cool dark night.

When we finally stopped running, our shadows joined the countless shadows cast by the trees that dotted Baker’s Farm. Every pace distanced us from the brick façade of the campus, and our adrenaline slowly gave way to exhilaration as the dark expanse of the farm called us home. We walked for miles in the darkness, none of us leading the way but all of us following the same wooded path. The harvest moon above us bled a crimson light on the farm, lighting our way. An occasional breeze set the trees in motion, freeing countless dancing leaves in the autumn darkness. The morning would find the farm littered with decay, and Truman and his horticultural troops would be charged with tidying up the earth. I wonder how long down the ancestral line of Adam and Eve it was before the rake was invented. Was it God’s answer to their tasting of the forbidden fruit? You want to play God? Okay, here’s a fucking rake — have at it.

Baker’s Farm was unusually peaceful at night. I guess it was the contrast to the engines and motors that dominated the daylight hours that made the dark farm so surprisingly calm. As the three of us made our way across the carefully trimmed grass, the only sound accompanying the swaying branches and soaring leaves was our own laughter. Our previously racing nerves were replaced with drunken glee. Each laugh provoked an even greater laugh, and soon the three of us stood at the edge of Flint’s Pond like thirsty hyenas refueling after the kill.

While I was still trying to control my laughter, Brook stood behind me and began to open my backpack. The backpack was overloaded with lifeless birds and the zipper flew down its course, splitting the backpack open like a slice of carved ham and sending the birds flying to the ground. Brook and I jumped away from the birds at our feet and in doing so she landed right on top of one. The feel of the bird beneath her foot sent Brook jumping again, but this time she tripped on liftoff and fell into the shallow bank of the pond.

Brook sat up in the shallow water and looked at the laughing silhouettes doubled-over before her. She said nothing and simply joined in the laughter as she made her way out of the muddy pond. Still laughing, Brook walked very deliberately to where the birds were scattered, picked one up, and threw it as far and as high as she could out over Flint's Pond.

"SOARING HIGH!" she sang.

"WE ARE THE HAWKS!" I continued, picking up my own bird and tossing it into the water.

"CIRCLING THE SKY!" Brook let another bird fly.

"WE ARE THE HAWKS!" Truman continued the chorus, heaving a bird like a seasoned quarterback. We all fell silent for a moment as we lost sight of Truman's pigeon. We looked out over the moon-reflected water waiting for the eagle to land, so to speak. A few seconds passed.

SPLASH!

We whooped and hollered like children watching fireworks on the Fourth of July, then all joined in chorus with renewed patriotism.

"HIGHER AND HIGHER WE SHALL SOAR."

SPLASH!

"GREATER AND GREATER OUR LOVE ADORE."

SPLASH!

"OUR ALMA MATER, ALMA MATER DEAR."

SPLASH! SPLASH!

"OUR ALMA MATER, ALMA MATER DEAR."

Between splashes there was laughter and between laughter there were splashes. When all the birds and the occasional frog discarded from my

backpack made their way to their watery graves, we set off on Truman's brown bag of expired groceries. We threw, heaved, and tossed the little plastic body bags every which way we could. Brook hurled a pigeon with an extended arm as if she was quickly getting rid of a pinless grenade. I tried a sidearm toss in an attempt to skip a pigeon across the pond, a little drunken ducks and drakes.

"Three skips!"

More hollers from the shadowy figures.

"Pull!" Truman directed, and I let another bird fly. He tried to follow the arc of the soaring shadow and tossed another bird in its direction. Miraculously, the two pigeons collided midair and dropped to the water below in quick succession.

PLOP. PLOP.

"Holy shit," I shouted.

"Incredible," Truman marveled to himself. "Skeet shooting with pigeons. Should be an Olympic sport." He was dumbfounded at his own dumb luck. "The question remains, though, winter or summer?"

"Oh, shut up," said Brook, and freed another bird.

"SOARING HIGH!"

"WE ARE THE HAWKS!"

And so we went through another chorus until all the birds were liberated in the pond. If Flint's Pond was the watery grave where old John Baker's son drowned, then he sure had company now.

We stood at the edge of the lake, smiles glued to our faces, gazing out over the crimson water. Brook reached her hand out to mine in the darkness and I took it.

"Good work, boys."

"Yes, indeed. I just love it when a plan comes together," said Truman. "You two up for more adventures? I know of a certain topiary garden that needs a goodish amount of remodeling."

"How about next time, Truman?" Brook answered, strengthening her grip on my hand.

Her words were not lost on Truman, and I am certain he felt like the classic third wheel at that moment. He was drunk, though, and he was Truman, so he set off on the topiary adventure alone.

“Suit yourselves, pansies, but I have a few animal bushes in serious need of a haircut.”

“It’s been a pleasure.”

“Indeed, Waldo. Next week we’ll liberate the cats.”

“Screw the cats. That’s a lab I’d actually show up for!”

Brook punched me in the side.

“Good work, Truman.”

“I’m just getting started. Until next time, Brook.” Truman bowed to exit. “Waldo.” He bowed again.

Truman’s elongated shadow led the way and his body followed, off toward the topiary garden. His drunken voice sang into the night as he left Brook and me behind.

*“SOARING HIGH, WE ARE THE HAWKS
CIRCLING THE SKY, WE ARE THE HAWKS
HIGHER AND HIGHER WE SHALL SOAR
GREATER AND GREATER OUR LOVE ADORE
OUR ALMA MATER, ALMA MATER DEAR,
OUR ALMA MATER, ALMA MATER DEAR.”*

The voice faded though I am certain Truman continued in song. Brook suddenly gave my hand a quick tug.

“Come here.”

Brook pulled me along the water’s edge as we made our way around Flint’s Pond. With each step we took the density of the trees grew. I held onto Brook’s hand as she raced between trees, around roots, over rocks, and dodged slippery embankments. She came to a sudden halt when we were halfway around the pond and released my hand. Brook stood a foot or so in front of me, but in the midst of countless oak trees, I could barely see her shadowy silhouette.

My heart jumped when Brook touched my hand in the darkness and slowly pulled me to her. Our lips met, our mouths parted, and my arms

found themselves embracing an already naked back. Within seconds Brook had my shirt off as well, and we stood there in each other's arms with the cool night air sending shivers through my entire body. Brook's body was cool and wet in my arms, her damp hair dancing across my skin.

Then Brook pulled her mouth away from mine. "Still not sure why you're here, WALDEN?"

I didn't get a chance to respond for Brook's lips quickly silenced any answer I might have given. Nature followed its passionate course and before long we were both naked in the night. The image comes back to me again and again. There is Brook on top of me, her head arched back to the stars, the shadows of her breasts illuminated by the faint crimson light of the moon shining through the near leafless canopy above.

"WALDEN, WALDEN."

The image is there every time I shut my eyes. But so is the question — why am I here? I am haunted by the answer, so I close my eyes to escape the question. It is then that Brook appears.

I am cursed with sight. How I envy the blind and their life of shadows.

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