

Resurrecting the Absurd:
Contemporary applications of the mechanics of style in Albert Camus's
L'étranger

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Serge Anthony Larocque, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

This thesis considers the communication and appropriation of Albert Camus's philosophy of the Absurd through works of literary fiction, and addresses two questions: What elements of style did Camus use in *L'étranger* to facilitate the understanding and appropriation of his absurdist ideas, and how can these elements be applied or modified to suit a contemporary audience?

This thesis argues that this literary mode transcends historical boundaries, and that the philosophical ideas which are at the forefront of absurdist fiction can help readers navigate the turmoil of their lives. This thesis also argues the importance of following a particular literary style when writing in this genre, which champions the use of a stream of consciousness-style narration, short and simple prose, and establishing a lack of emotion throughout the text. Lastly, this critical piece argues for the use of a specific type of main character, who embodies or represents the philosophical notion of Camus's revolt through his behaviour and beliefs, as well as through his physical and psychological profile. To exemplify my contentions, I have produced a work of absurdist fiction which adheres to the arguments and ideas presented in this thesis. *Smoke Rings*, my novel of absurdist fiction, stands as an example of contemporary absurdist fiction. Its aim is to entice readers to appropriate Camus's absurdist notions, and ultimately to evaluate their lives in accordance with Camus's absurdist maxims.

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Introduction

Albert Camus published *L'étranger* in 1942. I read it for the first time in 2004, in 9th grade French class in Ottawa, and I have been rereading it on a regular basis ever since. This short novel explores the philosophical concept of absurdism by following a portion of the main character's life from a first-person perspective. But what exactly is absurdism, and what makes it stand out vis-à-vis other philosophical movements?

Broadly speaking, 'the Absurd' is the dichotomy between seeking meaning in one's life in a world which does not offer any. It is a belief premised on the position that existence is chaotic and indifferent towards us, an existential state of affairs in which absurdist philosophy presents itself as a way for people to understand and navigate their otherwise meaningless lives. In *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (published in the same year as *L'étranger*), Camus outlines the problem and argues that once a person becomes aware of their absurd condition it is very difficult to disregard it. So, Camus offers us three options to deal with the Absurd. The first is to commit suicide. However, in doing so one is simply removing themselves from the equation, and the Absurd triumphs. The second is to attribute the entirety of inexplicable or upsetting thought or emotion associated with the Absurd to a concept, to make you feel better about it.¹ Camus calls this "Philosophical Suicide", and it disregards the issue of the Absurd altogether. The third option, and Camus's working solution to the problem, is to revolt against the Absurd.² This

¹ For example, someone attributing all negative elements associated with the Absurd to the realm of God or religion. Camus sees this as a way of avoiding the responsibilities associated with living an authentic life in the face of the Absurd.

² Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*. (Paris, Gallimard 1942). Rpt (Mesnil-sur-l'Estrée, Folio Essais 2008), 187. For general discussions of absurdism and literature, see Johanna Gavins, *Reading the Absurd*. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press 2013) 220, and Michael Y. Bennett (ed), *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2015) 173. For a more specific discussion of

concept, which will be explored at greater length throughout this critical commentary, argues for an individual to defiantly take charge of their life and extract as much meaning from existence as possible. “Si l’absurde annihile toutes mes chances de liberté éternelle, il me rend et exalte au contraire ma liberté d’action. Cette privation d’espoir et d’avenir signifie un accroissement dans la disponibilité de l’homme.”³

Existentialism, especially Sartrean Existentialism, posits a similar idea to Camus’s revolt. I go on to explore some of Sartre’s existential ideas in the pages to follow, but one key difference between absurdism and existentialism is that Sartre argues that once one becomes aware of their meaningless existence and complete freedom, one is required to act upon it for the greater good of mankind. Sartre was in several senses a more politically-engaged thinker than Camus, and his strategy for finding meaning in an otherwise meaningless world was to take political action. Camus’s philosophy, on the other hand, is more personal and promotes self-fulfillment above all else. Finding meaning in life is different for everyone, he argues, and can’t always be attained through political and social movements.

How does this relate to literature? The more I read Camus’s literary works alongside his philosophical essays, the more I noticed his ability to embody his philosophy through his characters and settings. Sartre’s *La nausée* reads more like an essay than a novel, and when it came to me engaging in my own creative praxis I found the philosophical messages of his novel less germane than was the case with the works of Camus; especially *L’étranger*. Every time I

Camus and Sartre on absurdism and existentialism see John Foley, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt*. (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press 2008), 239, and Arthur Paul Schlipp (ed), *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle – Illinois, Open Court 1991) 751.

³ Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, 82. “By annihilating my chances to eternal freedom, the Absurd gives me complete freedom of action. This privation of hope and of future signifies an increase in the availability of man [to take action and find meaning].” Personal translation.

reread this powerful short novel, I enter into a deeper appreciation of those aspects of Camusian style which not only help me understand absurdism, but also help me reflect the character's thoughts and attitudes towards existence onto myself. A dozen rereads of *L'étranger* later, I was convinced that Camus's style of writing played a role in establishing the conditions for the appropriation of absurdist truths in fiction. This idea forms the basis of this critical commentary, and the short novel submitted alongside this thesis. The two questions I seek to answer in this thesis are: What elements of style did Camus use to facilitate the understanding and appropriation of absurdist ideas in *L'étranger*, and how can they be applied or modified to suit a contemporary audience?

The existing critical literature on the subject proved to be thinner on the ground than I had expected. Few sources since the 1940s directly address my two aforementioned questions—after detailed research I only found three academics who discuss specific elements relevant to my thesis questions. Armand Renaud wrote about Camus's literary style in the late 1950s, and his work was helpful in developing a section of this commentary's second chapter. Richard Lehan, writing in 1960, and Sylvie Servoise, writing in 2013, were the only two academics to discuss Camus's use of first-person narrative (which we will explore at length later in this commentary). As the research progressed, I noticed a pattern in scholarly articles and books concerning Albert Camus and *L'étranger*. In the 1940s, 50s and 60s, much of the literature surrounding my research topic was philosophically focused. Academics such as Victor Brombert, Thomas Hanna and Jacques Maritain⁴ wrote primarily on the absurdist messages of Camus's works of fiction, and didn't dwell on style. More contemporary sources tend to study

⁴ See: Victor Brombert, "Camus and the Novel of the 'Absurd'", *Yale French Studies*, 1 (1948), 119-123; Thomas Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus*. (Chicago, Gateway Edition 1966), 264; and Jacques Maritain, "From Existential Existentialism to Academic Existentialism", *The Sewanee Review*, 56:2 (1948), 210-229.

Camus and read *L'étranger* from a political perspective. Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) and David R. Ellison's *Le dernier Camus et la Méditerranée* in *Albert Camus, contemporain* (2009) are testaments to this trend in Camusian studies. Other contemporary writings concerning Camus's *L'étranger* are in the form of newspaper publications⁵, which praise Camus's short novel and argue for its contemporary relevance. If journalists such as Sarah Bakewell can publish a hefty tome entitled *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being and Apricot Cocktails* (2016) arguing the importance and relevance of Camus, absurdism and the existentialists today, why then is no one considering Camus's stylistic expression of absurdism in fiction?

Due to the lack of sources addressing my specific thesis questions, I began my investigation by returning to the philosophy which shapes *L'étranger*. Camus's works were my starting point, but it was philosophers such as Robert C. Solomon (who recorded a series of lectures on Camus from The University of Texas at Austin, and published a useful book on Camus and Sartre) who provided me with concepts on the reception of Camus's fiction. As well as exploring the philosophy behind Camus's short novel, Solomon discusses the impact that *L'étranger* has had on his students over the thirty years he's taught the book. Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* was also very useful (despite him not directly addressing my research questions) because I was able to adapt his theories to justify my contentions when arguing for the importance of having a secular absurdist hero. My next step was to consider literary theorists such as John Graham and Geoffrey Harpham, who although they do not specifically address Camus or his literary genre, do provide a conceptual and theoretical armature which I

⁵ See: Jerry Delaney, "Happy Birthday, Stranger" *The American Scholar* 6 Nov. 2013 Web. 10 Feb. 2018; Charlotte Runcie, "Camus: the great writer of the absurd" *The Telegraph* 7 Nov. 2013. Web. 11 Jan. 2018; Jennie Rothenberg Gritz, "Transcending God: Christopher Hitchens on his beef with religion, his faith in mankind, and his new bestselling book, *God Is Not Great*" *The Atlantic* July 2007. Web. 20 Jan. 2018; and Jennifer Schuessler, "Albert Camus, Stranger in a Strange Land: New York" *The New York Times* 24 Mar. 2016. Web. 25 Jul. 2017.

could tailor to suit the needs of my thesis. Ultimately, the best approach to building my arguments was to rely on the primary sources, especially *L'étranger*, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, *La peste*, *La nausée*, *L'être et le néant*, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, as well as on Kierkegaard (who Camus had read and who influenced him greatly).

This thesis does not dwell on the political categories and interpretations which now dominate readings of *L'étranger* or Camus in general (as seen in Said's *Culture and Imperialism*), but rather focusses exclusively on the mechanics of Albert Camus's style. This critical commentary aims to find techniques, methods and approaches to communicate the key tenets of Camus's absurdist philosophy through works of fiction. The novel submitted alongside this thesis, *Smoke Rings*, stands as an example of how the theories to be explored throughout this thesis can be applied to create a work of contemporary absurdist fiction, and this thesis helps situate my creative praxis within the genre of contemporary philosophical fiction.

This critical commentary is divided into two chapters. The first explores the construction of the absurdist character. This chapter identifies, analyses and justifies behavioral, ideological, physical and psychological traits that are required of an absurdist hero, and compares Camus's Meursault to my novel's André. The second chapter explores the building blocks of creating, or rather representing, the absurd world in fiction. This portion of the thesis lends itself to Camus's textual strategies in *L'étranger*, and explains how I tried to implement the same techniques used by Camus to create the feeling and rhythm of the Absurd in my novel. I also discuss the literary structure of the Absurd, and how the framework of the text can help readers appropriate absurdist ideas.

The Absurdist Character

The character of André was based to a large extent on Meursault, and many comparisons can be drawn between Camus's absurdist hero and my novel's main character. This chapter examines similarities and differences between the two, and explores elements which I've taken from Camus to construct André. For the purpose of this exercise, I've chosen to isolate and analyse one behavioural, ideological, physical and psychological trait common to mine and Camus's protagonist, as I feel it will provide a good overall analysis of these characters. The aim of this chapter is to identify and theorise key characteristics and traits common to these two characters, in order to place André alongside Meursault within the ranks of absurdist fictional characters.

Theories concerning Meursault's possible homosexuality, or his oedipal tendencies towards his 'maman' indicate the lengths that academics have gone to in their quest to understand this character.⁶ For the sake of this critical commentary, I've decided to focus on André and Meursault's smoking and the significance of their tobacco addiction, the secular nature of these two characters, the importance of their physical ambiguity, and the emotional state of these absurdist protagonists throughout their respective novels.

The first point of comparison between André Roquebrune and Meursault is their affinity for tobacco. Both characters are heavy smokers. Camus makes this clear from the first chapter of *L'étranger*. "J'ai eu alors envie de fumer. Mais j'ai hésité parce que je ne savais pas

⁶ Robert R. Brock, "Meursault the Straw Man", *Studies in the Novel*, 25:1 (1993), 92, 93; and Leonard W. Sugden, "Meursault, an Oriental Sage", *The French Review, Special Issue*, 47:6 (1974), 197 for examples of various interpretations of Meursault.

si je pouvais le faire devant maman. J'ai réfléchi, cela n'avait aucune importance. J'ai offert une cigarette au concierge et nous avons fumé."⁷ For my own part, I make it explicitly clear that André is addicted to nicotine as he smokes at a steady pace throughout the novel. While this might not seem like an important detail, the act of smoking is deeply associated with absurdist, nihilistic and existential attitudes. Long gone are the days of Camus and Meursault, where everyone smoked anywhere they pleased. Today fewer and fewer people smoke because we are now aware of the negative health effects of tobacco consumption, and smokers are often shunned and segregated for their habit. Being a smoker in the twenty-first century, I respect these societal norms and go about satisfying my addiction with respect for the non-smoking community. In *Smoke Rings*, however, André smokes to extremes and without regard for others (for example, by smoking indoors in the company of non-smokers). This character trait is a manifestation of Camusian revolt. In *L'homme révolté* Camus writes "le mouvement de révolte s'appuie, en même temps, sur le refus catégorique d'une intrusion jugée intolérable et sur la certitude confuse d'un bon droit, plus exactement l'impression, chez le révolté, qu'il est 'en droit de...'"⁸ Adhering to this maxim, André, smoking heavily and where he pleases, rebels against the societal norms of the western world, and challenges the widely supported anti-smoking attitude of contemporary society. Furthermore, his act of smoking is a representation of his inalienable right to take charge of his life and create his existence (which is arguably the philosophical cornerstone of existentialism, and the maxim of many works of absurdist

⁷ Albert Camus, *L'étranger*, (Paris, Gallimard 1942). Rpt (Saint-Amand, Folio 2008), pp. 17. "I then felt like smoking, but I hesitated because I couldn't do it in front of Mother. I thought about it and realised that it didn't matter. I offered the janitor a cigarette and we smoked." Personal translation.

⁸ Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté*. (Paris, Gallimard 1951). Rpt (Saint-Amand, Folio/Essais 2009), pp. 27. "the act of revolt is supported both by the refusal of an intolerable imposition and on the certainty of an inalienable right. More specifically, the revolting individual feels that he has the 'right to...'" Personal translation.

fiction).⁹ Since taking consciousness of his life in the first chapter of the novel, and becoming the incontestable author of his fate, every cigarette which André puts to his lips defiantly affirms his place in the world. Even though smoking is bad for your health, unpleasant for others and looked upon negatively by contemporary western society, André makes it a point to exercise his right to smoke because this action is an objective philosophical representation of his complete and absolute freedom.

Nihilist philosophy argues that nothing truly exists or has meaning, therefore making existence absurd. Camus offers a working response to this school of thought in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), which adopts an absurdist stance to a nihilistic existence, by both accepting the lack of meaning in the universe, as well as rebelling against it by defiantly continuing to search for meaning and making the most of what this meaningless existence has to offer. When one comes to realise the absurdity of life (and comes into consciousness), every action one takes should be motivated by the awareness of the Absurd. Every aspect of existence should be scrutinised, and everything weighed against the Absurd. More specifically, this Camusian rebellion is exercised when one is presented with a phenomenon¹⁰ and asks “Does this give

⁹ In philosophy, ‘consciousness’ is the awareness of existence. The central tenet to Sartre’s existential philosophy is that once an individual comes to the realisation of his existence (i.e.: comes into consciousness), he also comes to realise his complete freedom (that he is the incontestable author of his fate, and gives meaning to his life through his actions and decisions). This action of taking charge of one’s life is precisely what makes existentialism a philosophy of action. Throughout this thesis, the term ‘taking/being in consciousness’ will refer to this awareness of existence and ensuing realisation of freedom. It is important to note that Sartre was an existentialist and also a contemporary of Camus. Since we are focussing on reviving Camusian absurdism in literature, we cannot overlook the importance of existentialist philosophy which dominated the western world in the 1940-50s, and which would have greatly influenced Camus in writing *L’étranger*. For further reading see Sartre, Jean-Paul, *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*. Présentation de conférence, 29 Octobre 1945 (Paris, Gallimard, 1996). Rpt (Saint-Amand, Folio/Essais 2009), 109.

¹⁰ In this instance, “Phenomenon” should be understood as what human senses or cognition can recognise or perceive, and how these things are received by the subject. It is a link of experience between the object and the subject. For further reading see Edmund Husserl, *Méditations cartésiennes. Introduction à la phénoménologie*. (Paris, Armand Colin 1931). Rpt (Mayenne, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin 2008), 256. Traduit de l’allemand par Gabrielle Peiffer et Emmanuel Levinas.

meaning of my life? Probably not, but how can I make the most of it and extract the most pleasure from it?”¹¹ This is what André does with his act of smoking. Not only is he asserting his freedom in a world which lacks meaning, but he is also rebelling against it by taking in the pleasures of the tobacco leaf.

A further consideration on the importance of smoking in absurdist philosophy (which I believe, along with nihilism, falls within the spectrum of existentialism) comes from Sartre. In *L'être et le néant* (1943), he writes that the consumption of tobacco is a symbol of appropriation, since it is destroyed in the action of smoking and ingesting it.¹² Klein illuminates Sartre's position by explaining that for Sartre, the cigarette:

allows us, in a symbolic act, to take into ourselves the world around us, the whole landscape that smoking a cigarette accompanies. When we light up at a performance or a dinner, or at the sight of any new or unfamiliar experience, we perform an act of projection/identification/interiorisation whose movement corresponds to the physical process of lighting up, drawing deeply, exhaling slowly into the space around.¹³

By Sartre's logic smoking a cigarette is an act of appropriation that comes to represent the appropriation of the whole world. He bases this idea on Stendhal's theory of crystallisation, and writes “Chaque objet possédé, qui s'enlève sur fond de monde, manifeste le monde tout entier... S'approprier cet objet, c'est donc s'approprier le monde symboliquement.”¹⁴ If we take Sartre's notion of smoking and combine it to Camus's notion of revolt, we come to

¹¹ For a thorough understanding of Camus's rebellion, see chapter entitled *La liberté absurde* in Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942.

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, (Paris, Gallimard 1943). Rpt (Mesnil-sur-l'Estrée, Gallimard 2009), pp. 642-643.

¹³ Richard Klein, *Cigarettes Are Sublime*. (Durham and London, Duke University Press 1993), pp. 38.

¹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 642. “Every possessed object, which peels and separates itself from the rest of the world, manifests the world in its entirety... To appropriate this object is to symbolically appropriate the world.” Personal Translation

understand that smoking not only allows one to experience the world but rebel against it at the same time. This, I believe, is the ultimate absurdist activity, which is represented every time André smokes in the novel. André's understanding of the world through appropriation (via smoking) is in itself an act of personal rebellion, which cements his existence in the world. Once this idea is understood and accepted, the subject will be free to give meaning to his life by being its incontestable author, much like a painter presented with a blank canvas, a writer with a bare sheet of paper, or André with a fresh packet of cigarettes. It is for this reason that the first working title of my novel was *The Art of Smoking* (although an alternative title could have been 'The Art of Existing').

Meursault does not believe in God, and admits to it plainly while in prison in the second part of *L'étranger* when a chaplain comes to visit him in his cell. “‘Pourquoi, m'a-t-il dit, refusez-vous mes visites?’ J'ai répondu que je ne croyais pas en Dieu.”¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard was a very religious man whose philosophy reflected his beliefs. However, future existentialists (who arguably popularised this philosophical school of thought) have taken the atheistic route in their belief systems and philosophical ideas. Nietzsche and Sartre wrote extensively about atheism, and Camus continued in this tradition with his own writings. In the first chapter of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he makes the argument that disbelief in God or in a higher power is necessary to acknowledge and react to the Absurd, and Meursault embodies this notion in *L'étranger*.

Camus wasn't the only person to argue for the necessity of atheism in absurdist and existential philosophy. Jean-Paul Sartre, in a conference-paper he gave in Paris in 1945, explains the existentialist stance on God. He argues that if God were to exist and create man,

¹⁵ Albert Camus, *L'étranger*, 174. “‘Why,’ he said, ‘do you refuse my visits?’ I answered that I did not believe in God.” Personal translation.

he would create him with a certain preconceived concept (much like an artisan sets out to create an object, already knowing what it will be used for). This means that man's essence would already be predisposed for him by God, before he comes into existence. However, if God does not exist there is nothing to give man a predisposed essence, or purpose in life. Therefore, if there is no God when man comes into existence, man is free to take complete control of his life and give it meaning. Man's existence, therefore, precedes his essence. Without God, man is free to define himself and take charge of his life; he then becomes the incontestable author of his existence.¹⁶ Sartre takes a firm stance on the importance of disbelief in God in existential and, by proxy, absurdist philosophy. Jacques Maritain, a religious philosopher and believer, writes about atheism in an article published a few years after Sartre gave his famous talk in Paris. He supports a very similar idea to Sartre's, and writes that atheism "starts as a claim of man to become the only master of his own destiny, totally freed from any alienation and heteronomy, made totally and decisively independent of any ultimate end and any eternal law such as imposed upon him by any transcendent God."¹⁷ Again, in discussing atheism we see the recurring existential theme of freeing oneself from exterior influences and taking complete control of one's life. In *L'Étranger*, Camus's hero revolts against religion at the end of the book when he rages at the chaplain. I believe that writing Meursault as an atheist makes him the personification of this existential tenet, and allows the reader to see this abstract notion manifested in an individual (albeit a fictional one). This helps establish an absurd atmosphere to the story, something which will be explored at length in the next chapter.

What does this all mean in André's case; what role does religion play in contemporary western society, and how can we relate absurdist fiction to it? Frank J. Lechner argues that contemporary western society has become deeply secularised by a process of rationalisation,

¹⁶ Summarised from Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, 26-30.

¹⁷ Jacques Maritain, "On the Meaning of Contemporary Atheism", *The Review of Politics*, 11:3 (1949), pp. 270.

which he defines as “the process in which various social spheres come to operate accordingly to their own standards...”¹⁸ Lechner further supports this point by stating that “where religious institutions and elites maintained clear standards of transcendent belief relevant to all spheres of cultural activity, these institutions have lost their hold on the definition of the societal situation, and science, art, and morality no longer require any religious grounding.”¹⁹ André’s story is set in locations that are ripe with religious imagery and connotation, but he simply goes about his life and pays no attention to these symbols. Based on Lechner’s views, one could make the argument that André is neither pious nor is he an atheist, he simply ignores any religious issues whatsoever because religion was never a priority in his life since it lost its foothold in the “spheres of cultural activity”. However, this doesn’t explain how the denial, or in André’s case the absence, of religion makes him an absurdist character. Lechner, in another article entitled “*Secularization Revisited*”, proposes that “in periods of secularizing change the declining social and cultural significance of religion will be widely experienced as producing a void; new symbols will emerge to fill that void...”²⁰ Nietzsche in effect proposes that this void be filled by the conscious self.²¹ In keeping with the theme of religion, one might argue that placing the self in this void could be understood as an alternative form of religious idolatry. From an existential perspective, this critique is flawed and cannot stand because existentialism, and absurdism, does not preoccupy itself with worship (whether of the self or of anything else), but rather with rebellion, action, and responsibility. This is what makes absurdism a philosophy of action. Camus beautifully presents this idea in *L’homme révolté*, when he writes “Le trône de Dieu renversé, le rebelle reconnaîtra que cette justice, cet ordre, cette unité qu’il cherchait

¹⁸ Frank J. Lechner, “The Case against Secularization: A Rebuttal”, *Social Forces* 69:4 (1991), pp. 1104.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 1104.

²⁰ Frank J. Lechner, “Secularization Revisited”, *Social Forces* 71:1 (1992), pp. 227.

²¹ For further reading see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A book for everyone and no one.* (Chemnitz, Ernst Schmeitzner 1883). Rpt (London, Penguin Classics 2003), 343. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale.

en vain dans sa condition, il lui revient maintenant de les créer de ses propres mains et, par là, de justifier la déchéance divine.”²² Taking these words into consideration, Meursault’s atheism can be understood an act of rebellion against a set of theistic morals and maxims, which lead to his taking consciousness of himself. André is not presented an atheist, nor does he take a stance on religion. Yet he follows in Meursault’s footsteps by ignoring religion altogether, which symbolises his rebellion against dated ideological institutions. This rebellion, as stated earlier in this chapter, is a representation of his taking consciousness of himself and defining his existence by striving to find meaning in his absurd world. Although Meursault is an atheist and André is secularised, these similar character traits allow them to manifest the existential exercise of being in consciousness and taking charge of their lives.

The statements and arguments made in the previous paragraph barely skim the surface of the question of religion in absurdist philosophy. Lechner’s arguments, while interesting, do not truly justify the necessity of disbelief in a higher power when creating the absurdist hero. To fully explore and understand the importance of secularism in an absurdist context, we must turn our attention to the widely acclaimed contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor, whose *A Secular Age* (2007) meticulously explores the evolution of contemporary western secularism and its outcomes.²³ Taylor presents the notion that criticism and refutation of religion through philosophical reasoning arose from a change in culture brought about by deism. This school of thought is what steered the transformation of western society from a medieval (and highly religious) culture to a contemporary secular one. The deistic belief that God does not directly interact with humankind provided conditions for the reinterpretation of Christianity, as well as

²² Albert Camus, *L’homme révolté*, 43-44. “With the throne of God overthrown, the rebel will recognize his duty to create the justice, order and unity that he had searched for in vain in his previous condition, and therefore justify the fall of God.” Personal translation.

²³ In his analysis (and in the context of my own research), the term ‘religion’ primarily refers to Christianity, which has historically been the strongest and most influential belief system in the occident for the past two thousand years.

a platform to further its critique, which eventually led to the current state of disenchantment in contemporary western society. Taylor provides us with the example of David Hume, writing in the 18th century, who “distinguishes the genuine virtues (which are qualities useful to others and to oneself) from the ‘monkish virtues’ (‘celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude’), which contribute nothing to, even detract from human welfare.”²⁴ Through philosophers like Hume, who openly critiqued Christianity and ecclesiastical doctrine as exemplified above, Taylor explains that thinkers, philosophers and “men of sense” rejected religious virtues and doctrines “because they serve no manner of purpose; neither advance one’s fortune, nor render one more valuable to society, neither entertain others nor bring self-enjoyment.”²⁵ With this, Taylor argues that “one could end up rejecting Christianity, because in calling for something more than human flourishing, it was the implacable enemy of the human good; and at the same time a denial of the dignity of the self-sufficient buffered identity.”²⁶

The ‘buffered self’, or to be a ‘buffered subject’ (as Taylor explains), means to have closed the “porous” boundary between the abstract (thought) and the concrete (the physical world), as a result of living in a disenchanted world.²⁷ Taylor writes that the cosmos of spirits and forces was replaced by a mechanistic universe, and that these changes were “intensified by subjective changes, shifts in identity, like the rise of disengaged reason, and the transformations wrought by disciplined self-remaking...”²⁸ This buffering, he argues, gives us a sense of power and invulnerability because it permits us to govern ourselves. “This sense of self-possession,

²⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge MA and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2007), pp. 263.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 263.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 264.

²⁷ *Ibid*. pp. 300.

²⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 300.

of a secure inner mental realm, is all the stronger, if in addition to disenchanting the world, we have also taken the anthropocentric turn, and no longer even draw on the power of God.”²⁹

I interpret Taylor’s idea of the buffered-self and of self-possession as existential consciousness. By buffering ourselves and choosing not to believe in a higher power, we allow ourselves to take complete and autonomous charge of our lives (without concern for the fears and anxieties which live in the realm of theism, and which would perpetually hang over our heads if we were believers). The driving argument in *A Secular Age* is that where belief used to be a given, and almost a necessity in life in the western world, today it is just one of many options made available to people for finding meaning in life. This concept is what Taylor understands as contemporary secularism. However, the evidence presented above indicates that the option of belief cannot adhere to absurdist philosophy and its stance on existence. Our existence in this chaotic universe is meaningless, and adopting religion would simply mask the Absurd by imposing on it a created and unfounded meaning, which avoids the problem of the futility of life altogether. Taylor explores the Absurd and defines Camusian revolt as the action of “fighting the battles we can fight, for the limited, provisional happiness we can achieve, whenever this is to be found, and whoever will be the beneficiaries, without exclusion.”³⁰ This definition brings up a very important point in Camus’s argument against religion, in that the revolt is an act of human solidarity. We saw earlier how religion avoids the issue of the Absurd and belittles happiness, but the final point to consider is that religion “denies the fulfilments of whatever meaning we believe in to those who refuse to accept our creed.”³¹ Not everyone is welcome to eternal bliss, but everyone is welcome to the revolt against absurdity and to the provisional happiness and pleasures that come with it.

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 301.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 585.

³¹ *Ibid*, pp. 585.

It is obvious now why Camus wrote Meursault as an atheist. However, for the sake of making André more contemporary, I have written him as being ambiguous and apathetic towards religion, or according to Taylor's theory, as a character who chose the secular option out of the many available to give meaning to his life. This absence of belief, rather than aggressive disbelief (as we see Meursault), allowed me to make André adhere to Camus's absurdist philosophy, while making him relevant to contemporary readers by conforming to Taylor's contemporary secularism.

L'étranger makes no mention of Meursault's first name and age, nor does Camus provide us with a physical description of his hero. The notion of having a blank fictional character is by no means exclusive to absurdist fiction or to twentieth century literature. John Graham, in an article entitled "*Character Description and Meaning in the Romantic Novel*", explores the lack of physiognomic description in Romanticism. He posits that "The face was a kind of Lockean *tabula rasa* that experience wrote upon for all to read."³² Camus doesn't provide us with a physical description of Meursault, and in my novel André Roquebrune is named and we know his age, but he isn't physically described much. In fact, the only physical description which I've included in my novel is that he has "slicked brown hair"³³ The other characters in both my novel and in *L'étranger*, however, are described in greater detail. For example, Camus elaborates on the physical description of Meursault's neighbour Salamano, explaining him as resembling his sick and mangy dog.³⁴ He also describes Meursault's other neighbour, Raymond Sintès, as being a small and well-dressed man with broad shoulders and a boxer's nose.³⁵ These physical descriptions, although simple, provide enough information for

³² John Graham, "Character Description and Meaning in the Romantic Novel", *Studies in Romanticism*, 5:4 (1966), pp. 210.

³³ Serge Larocque, *Smoke Rings*. (Completed manuscript)

³⁴ Albert Camus, *L'étranger*, 43.

³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 45.

readers to visualise these characters. In *Smoke Rings*, I provide physical descriptions for most of my secondary and tertiary characters, but like Meursault, André's appearance (aside from his hair) is not mentioned.

I believe physical ambiguity, and more precisely not describing the physical attributes of fictional characters, is necessary to construct contemporary absurdist heroes. These omissions help make André and Meursault blank figures. The lack of visual imagery of a character allows the reader to attribute their own image to the character, and provides readers with the option to imagine themselves as the main character. This can encourage readers to bring their own experiences, ideas and emotions to the story, and can help them experience and appropriate the absurdist messages and themes of the story with more intimacy than if a character's profile was complete. Alternatively, a physical and psychological description of a character would allow the reader to not only understand the thoughts and feelings of a character, but also visualise the character's reaction to events and incidents on the basis of these cognitive and emotional traits. Absurdism as a philosophy insists on revolting against the Absurd and fighting the battles you can, in order to relish in the little victories and pleasures that life has to offer; and absurdist fiction aims to represent this by showing the journey of the revolt and the development of meaning through the aforementioned small pleasures of the world. Everyone's revolt and search for meaning is different, and character disassociation through an omission of physical imagery can help readers relate to the process of absurdist rebellion in a more authentic way by reflecting their own experiences to the situations in the story. Consequently, this can help the reader invest in the themes of the story, rather than merely be a spectator to the narrative.

Another explanation as to the importance of not describing the appearance of absurdist heroes comes to us from Gerald Mead's article "*The Representation of Fictional Character*". In its opening paragraphs he discusses Camus's Meursault, and how this character's identity is

presented primarily through his personality.³⁶ I agree, and believe that absurdist authors should focus more on constructing main characters' psychological identities over their physical ones. The driving factor behind both *L'Étranger* and *Smoke Rings* is absurdist philosophy, so it makes sense to emphasize the psychological traits of a main character in order to explore abstract thought. Meursault and André don't need an exterior shell which can be visualised; their stories are introverted.

Mead further explains that a lack of description is a significant technique for character representation, and that "much modern fiction seems to favor deviations from traditional conventions of fiction."³⁷ This is certainly true of other contemporary novels which fall within the broad genre of existential fiction. To give an example, let us turn our attention to Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), (which I argue in the following chapter to be a work of contemporary absurdist fiction). It is written in the first person, and the narrator is unnamed and not physically described (aside from the few times he mentions the fighting wounds on his face or body). This lack of appearance allows for him to become an everyman. My depiction of André in *Gauche* serves the same purpose. In this sense, André's character is a modification of the character of Meursault, who although is not physically described, is not an everyman. His general lack of sentiment throughout most of *L'Étranger* is not a common human trait, and I felt the need to humanise André to my readers by giving him emotion (this too will be explored at length in the following chapter on Camusian style).³⁸

³⁶ Gerald Mead, 'The Representation of Fictional Character', *Style*, 24:3 (1990), pp. 440.

³⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 451.

³⁸ Throughout most of *L'Étranger* Meursault has no emotion, and feels neither for himself nor others. We see this throughout the novel, from his unemotional state at his mother's funeral to his interactions with his girlfriend, or his indifference towards Salamano and Raymond's respective abusive natures. I believe that a persistent total lack of emotion in such extreme circumstances and situations is not a human trait. André, on the other hand, reacts emotionally to situations and people in his environment when he's drinking. He laughs when it's time to laugh at the pub, he shows contempt or worth for the grotesqueness or sanctity of the environments in which he finds himself, he feels sadness when confronted with a loss and happiness when he's with those he loves, etc.

So far, we have explored some of Meursault and André's behavioural, ideological and physical characteristics, but how can nicotine addiction, secular nature, and exclusion of physical appearance in the narrative shed light on their behaviour in their respective novels? In keeping with the concepts presented in the previous paragraph, let's break down and compare these two characters' psychological profiles. What kind of characters are Meursault and André? In a series of video lectures entitled *No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life*, Robert C. Solomon provides us with a very useful and comprehensible breakdown of Meursault's psychological being. First, he argues that Meursault does not think. He states that the few thoughts he does have throughout *L'étranger* are very trivial, and irrelevant to the story. Next, Solomon affirms that Meursault does not feel emotions. On this he directs us to Meursault's lack of sadness, distress, or any other emotion expected of a son at his mother's funeral, and to the answers Meursault gives his girlfriend Marie when she asks if he loves her or if he wants to marry her. Solomon then tells us that Meursault has no morals, stating that "morality requires a kind of consciousness, a kind of perspective on the world, that Meursault can't muster."³⁹ This is exemplified in *L'étranger* when Meursault does nothing upon witnessing his neighbour beating his girlfriend, nor does he express any sort of moral repulsion to the event. Lastly, we learn that Meursault has no ambition. This trait is portrayed when he lethargically turns down a promotion in Paris.⁴⁰

Solomon's psychological analysis of Meursault provides us with a good, comprehensive mental profile of this character. His absence of thought, emotion, morals and ambition embodies the turbulent nature of an absurd world, and therefore epitomise him as the

³⁹ Robert C. Solomon, "Lecture Two. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, Part I". *No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life*, University of Texas at Austin, produced by James Blandford, 1999

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, "Lecture Two. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, Part I".

absurdist hero. But what of André Roquebrune's psychological profile? He too is an absurdist hero, but he is the mental antithesis of Meursault. For one, André is a thinker. As his story unfolds, his thoughts evolve from mere observations to developed contemplations. His thinking is the key point which psychologically differentiates him from Meursault, because it stimulates his emotional outbursts and moral judgements of other characters and environments. André is a very emotional character and feels deeply about those around him and his surroundings. For example, he is in awe when he first enters the pub with Ray, and goes on to describe the beauty of the space along with the warmth he feels for its patrons. An example of André's morals (although selfish in nature) can be seen when he denies himself the pleasure of pursuing women or turns down their advances, as he is morally dedicated to wanting to stay in London by remaining in his relationship with Patty. The one psychological trait which he does share with Meursault, to a certain extent, is his lack of ambition. I am not arguing that André is an entirely unambitious character like Meursault; after all the novel begins with him taking charge of his life by moving to Europe and starting his graduate studies. What I do posit, however, is that once in Europe he makes no effort to *ensure* his happiness or wellbeing for the future, because he knows he is destined to return to Canada. Instead he passively rebels and extracts pleasures from his life when he can. The novel tells us that André does not want to live in Canada nor in Italy, but wishes to remain in the UK. We also know that he is not happy in his relationship with Patty, and is sexually and emotionally frustrated. And lastly, he does not feel like he completely belongs with the people he calls his friends because despite their acceptance of him he is not indigenous to their culture. But throughout the novel André does nothing to change his situation. Rather, he passively extracts pleasure from his life when an opportunity presents itself, and this gives his life temporary meaning (a concept which we will further explore in the following chapter). This lack of proactivity is what truly connects André to Meursault, and stands as the key point of this section. These two characters experience many things throughout

their respective novels, but they are nevertheless passive about their existence. They are reactive characters, and as such react to the people and events around them. They are not instigators, nor are they advocates or champions of a cause or idea. They simply go through life and respond to the world around them, and André's idleness in *Smoke Rings* embodies the apathy one might feel in reaction to the absurd and chaotic nature of existence.⁴¹

The passive and reactive natures of Meursault and André justifies the fact that they do not develop as characters throughout their respective novels. "Sartre was the first one to note that the book [*L'étranger*] is not really a novel since there is no development in the character of Meursault. (He does come to a certain self-knowledge in prison, but that he has changed is very debatable.) He comes to us pretty much a full-blown figure such as we would find in a story by Voltaire."⁴² This is also true of André in *Smoke Rings*. André's only real development happens at the beginning of the novel, when he decides to change the course of his life by moving to Europe, but even so this scene is very short and mainly serves to justify the setting of the novel. One can make the argument that he evolves as a result of his relationship with Patty, but his doubts and frustration about her and their relationship are presented shortly after she makes her first appearance in the second chapter of the novel, and again André does not react towards this worsening relationship.⁴³ Every effort was made to keep André as static as possible, much like Meursault, in order to maintain flattened affect throughout the story (as we'll explore in greater detail in the following chapter), and also to make André predictable. In being predictable, the reader will know what to expect from him in any given situation and

⁴¹ For a fuller discussion of this see Jordan Peterson's Personality Lecture 11 entitled "Existentialism: Victor Frankl" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zooE5GE81TU> In it, Peterson calls upon Nietzsche who says "[...] it doesn't matter what you say, it matters what you do. If I want to figure out what you believe in I don't ask you, I watch how you act. Your true beliefs are what direct your actions." 52:30. André believes in the absurdity of existence and his idleness is a manifestation of this idea which governs his life.

⁴² Robert R. Brock, "Meursault the Straw Man", 97.

⁴³ Serge Larocque, *Smoke Rings*. (Completed manuscript)

will therefore focus on the themes of the story rather than on the character. To quote Bruce Lee, “It is like a finger pointing away to the moon. Don’t concentrate on the finger or you will miss all that heavenly glory.”⁴⁴ André is the finger, and the moon is absurdist philosophy. The point is not to follow André’s life, as one would David Copperfield, the point of *Smoke Rings* is to explore absurdist thought.

In this chapter, I have examined similarities and differences between Camus’s Meursault and my novel’s André Roquebrune, in order to identify and theorise character attributes and characteristics necessary in the construction of the absurdist hero. As previously stated, André was largely based on Meursault, but modified slightly to make him more relatable to contemporary readers. This chapter has presented four key characteristics which I believe must be incorporated into a main character when writing a work of absurdist fiction, as these facilitate the understanding of the philosophical messages central to this literary genre.

The first of these characteristics is that the absurdist hero should have a recurring pattern of behaviour that reflects an element of absurdist philosophy. In André and Meursault’s cases, this was represented through the action of smoking which suggests rebellion against the absurdity of existence. More importantly, the act of smoking becomes something that readers can trace throughout the novel, which represents a form of provisional happiness and active revolt against the meaninglessness and chaos of existence. The next characteristic explored between Meursault and André was their secular nature. Absurdist philosophy (as well as most other branches of existentialism) is deeply rooted in atheistic thought and attitudes, and religious disbelief and lack of spirituality in characters indicates a complete self-control of their lives. The third important characteristic presented in this chapter is for the absurdist hero to be an everyman. When writing André, I followed Camus’s example and didn’t physically describe

⁴⁴ *Enter the Dragon*, dir. by Robert Clouse (Warner Brothers, 1973).

my main character. This removed one of the elements with which readers can identify and visualise the hero, and helps cultivate a flattened affect in the story which urges readers to fall back on their own experiences to approach and understand the events in the story. Lastly, we explored the importance of passivity as a character trait. Lack of ambition and proactivity in an absurdist protagonist is a personification of the apathetic “in the end it doesn’t matter, so why even bother” attitude that one might feel when one falls prey to the absurdity of life. This is found in Meursault throughout most of Part 1 of *L’étranger*, and I’ve given André the same attitude in *Smoke Rings*. This makes him more of a spectator to the world, rather than an active participant.

These characteristics are important to consider when studying Meursault and André, but even more so when creating a contemporary absurdist hero, because they show human reactions to the Absurd and allow readers to experience these reactions for themselves. However, the most important point to note about all these absurdist attributes is that they all relate to Camus’s notion of revolt. Once one realises the absurdity of life, the next step is to dedicate oneself to the act of personal rebellion. Meursault spectates life as an empty shell, then at the end of the novel takes consciousness of himself and revolts in the only way he can.⁴⁵ My novel starts with André taking consciousness of himself, and presents a fictionalised account of how Camusian revolt can manifest itself. I wanted to explore how an individual might feel when reacting to the Absurd by means of the revolt, and how happiness brought about by revolt can be fleeting and lose value. The pleasures that André experiences throughout the novel are provisional, and these pleasures are not immediately replaced by new ones. He enjoys them when he can because they temporarily satiate his desire for meaning and happiness, but

⁴⁵ Once he realises that he cannot avoid his execution, he finds meaning by opening himself to the indifference of the world, which he has reflected throughout his own life. Hoping to be received with hatred by the crowd at his execution would be a final act of rebellion against the absurdity of the world, because it would arouse a committed and emotional response from an otherwise indifferent world.

eventually they pass and he returns to a state of despair. Camus tells us to indulge in pleasures when we can, but that the struggle, the scornful revolt against the Absurd, is what brings meaning to life. My novel's intention is to present all of these ideas to the contemporary public, in order to entice them to examine their lives from an absurdist perspective.

Smoke Rings is merely a starting point from which many other questions can be asked. What if the meaning we achieve through the creative act of revolt is also fleeting? Can a perpetual and ongoing revolt lead to a rebellion against the revolt itself? What if Camus didn't provide us with a complete and working response to the Absurd, and Kierkegaard's question in *Fear and Trembling* was never answered?

If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential; if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what would life be but despair?⁴⁶

My novel does not answer these questions, but only dances around them. The aim of this chapter is to justify André as a contemporary absurdist hero, and the traits and characteristics outlined throughout this chapter are building blocks which I've used to construct a main character who can support and represent these types of philosophical ideas in literature. The question now is how do we create an absurd world for a main character to embody these philosophical ideas.

⁴⁶ Søren Kierkegaard (writing as Johannes De Silentio), *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric*, 1843. Rpt (London, Penguin Great Ideas 2005), pp. 14. Translated by Alastair Hannay.

The Mechanics of Style

Any exploration of style in *L'étranger* needs to begin with some examination of the particular textual strategies Camus used to give his novel its particular feel and rhythm. This chapter focuses on the three I've tried to apply in my novel: his use of first-person narration; his stylistic *simplicité*—that is, the avoidance of ornateness in his writing, his carefully restricted vocabulary, straightforward syntax and preference for shorter, declarative sentences; and his approach to structure. His first-person narration not only provides a window into the narrator's consciousness, it also embodies the personal struggle which *L'étranger* represents, and which my novel attempts to emulate. Questions of the way Camus has structured his great novella, and comparisons with the structural choices I made in my own creative work, will be held over to the last section of this chapter, where I deconstruct notions of 'lack of narrative', fragmentary chapters, undefined storylines and the importance of having works of absurdist fiction come full circle in their conclusions.

One main effect of *L'étranger*'s use of a first-person narrator is “to secure a sense of immediate contact with experience.”⁴⁷ This is what I set out to achieve with my novel: to give my novel and its main character the same effect Meursault has on those who read his story. As discussed above, absurdism, rooted in existentialism, is necessarily built on the individual's experience of existence, because it examines the individual's encounter with the absurdity of existence and the universe. It might seem glib to suggest that the best way to communicate the

⁴⁷ Richard Lehan, “Camus and Hemingway”, *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 1:2 (1960), 41.

key themes of this individualist philosophy is by using a first-person narration, but it's worth making the case nonetheless.

It's true that not all works of existential fiction have been written in the first-person. Hermann Hesse *Steppenwolf* (1927) includes multiple narrative perspectives and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) is written in the third-person. Nonetheless, these works are both centred on the individual and explore existential themes—*existential* being the key word. It makes sense to treat Kafka's *Metamorphosis* as a work of existential fiction, but less a work of absurdism because Gregor shows no indications of revolt against his condition, aside perhaps from the little amusement he gets when he learns to climb the walls and ceiling of his bedroom (which is comparable to Sisyphus enjoying himself in the face of his meaningless existence). This amusement, however, is but a small portion of the story and the main focus of the text is Gregor's state of melancholy and alienation. So deep does Gregor wallow in desperation, indeed, that his death becomes almost an act of altruism: to die so his family can resume its normal life. Gregor capitulates to the Absurd, rather than fight it. His sense of alienation *is* existential of course, but the fact that he doesn't act upon it and affirm his place in the world excludes the novella from the ranks of absurdist fiction. Indeed, Geoffrey Harpham goes so far to treat *Metamorphosis* as a work of grotesque fiction, and not existentialism, arguing that the grotesque is a structure of estrangement, and that Kafka's novella beautifully conveys a structure of instant alienation.⁴⁸

Themes of alienation are, of course, common in absurdist fiction, but what differentiates Kafka's work from Camus's is that Gregor's transformation causes him to be afraid of the world, whereas Meursault's emotional and psychological transformation makes him rebel against it. This is what Harpham understands by the Absurd: "when the absurd happens, it must

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Harpham, "The Grotesque: First Principles", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 34:4, (1976), 462.

subvert rather than confirm our expectations.”⁴⁹ It is surely likely that if someone were to wake up one morning to find they’ve been transformed into an “ungezeifer”, that individual would feel unable to live in the world as we know it. The grotesque, and Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, simply take the reader along this experience and towards the ultimate end—death. In absurdist fiction, an absurdist awakening (or coming of consciousness) illustrates ways in which an individual (represented by the main character) encounters the nature of his existence. Using a third-person narration would take away from this visceral experience because it adds a clearly defined linguistic barrier between the reader and the main character. “First-person focus, with the author behind the scenes ... establishes an immediate identity between reader and fictive character. [It] enables the reader to move with [the narrator] without obtrusive comment by the author.”⁵⁰

By following Camus’s example and using first-person narration in my novel, I’ve tried to secure a sense of contact between the reader and André’s experiences. Whilst it was my intention to write a work of fiction that illustrated certain philosophical and absurdist ideas, of course an author cannot force his readers to take on his interpretation for themselves. To do so would be to write an essay and not a work of fiction.⁵¹ The challenge, then, was to write in a way that provides a reader with the *possibility* to interpret the text as a work of absurdist fiction, while maintaining enough distance that the reader is not being browbeaten or hectored into accepting this interpretation. “Since it is very easy for a reader of any text to construe meanings that are different from the author’s, there is nothing in the nature of the text itself which required the reader to set up the author’s meaning as his normative idea. Any normative concept in

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 462.

⁵⁰ Richard Lehan, “Camus and Hemingway”, 41.

⁵¹ Paul Hernadi, *Beyond Genre. New Directions in Literary Classification*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1972), 46.

interpretation implies a choice that is required not by the nature of written texts but rather by the goal that the interpreter sets himself.”⁵² The onus ultimately remains on the reader.

Keeping this in mind, one of the methods used to suggest a philosophical reading of my novel was to pepper André’s voice and stream of consciousness with absurdist ideas and themes. For example, André often finds himself thinking about his life and behaviour and repeatedly reminds himself that none of his thoughts or actions matter in any fundamental way, since the world is indifferent towards him and his efforts to give his life meaning are repeatedly trumped by the Absurd. This voiced sense of self is a key element which differentiates him from Meursault (as discussed in the previous chapter). Camus’s hero sees, experiences and feels the world around him, but rarely shares his opinions. On the other hand, André’s voice is threaded with philosophical and absurdist undertones which help suggest (rather than impose) such an interpretation the story.

Wallace Martin argues that since any interpretation of a text is unique to the reader, authors wishing to make their ideas accessible to all audiences must focus their efforts on expressing universal truths, or rather, ideas which can be understood and agreed upon by all.⁵³ The Absurd is subjective, and at its core lies common feelings of alienation, meaninglessness and helplessness. These emotions are experienced by all individuals at some point in their lives, so the question now is how does one effectively communicate absurdist ideas (if the emotional manifestation of the absurd transcends socio-cultural boundaries, as they can be applied in every social, political or geographical setting due to their subjective nature) in a work of fiction? If readers are free to interpret the text as they please, and if all interpretation is aggregated by an individual’s set of cultural mores, how can an author maximise the chances

⁵² E. D. Hirsh, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*. (New Haven, Yale University Press 1967), 24. 287

⁵³ Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative*. (Ithaca, Cornell University Press 1986), 158. 242

of a reader cross-culturally appropriating philosophical meaning?⁵⁴ Camus uses Kierkegaard's notion of indirect communication to suggest his absurdist themes and present Meursault's revolt in *L'étranger*. Kierkegaard, who has been called the father of existentialism⁵⁵ claims that "the secret of all communication consists precisely in emancipating the recipient, and that for this reason he [the author] must not communicate himself directly."⁵⁶ Kierkegaard writes that direct communication, or objective thinking, is that which plainly presents itself to an audience and is justified when others accept it.⁵⁷ At the same time, by stating that *truth is inwardness*, Kierkegaard stresses the importance that truth arises from personal appropriation. "The matter of prime importance was, of course that he [the author] should be understood; the inwardness of the understanding would consist precisely in each individual coming to understand it by himself."⁵⁸ The reception of works of fiction remains unique to the interpreter, but indirect communication allows the author to at least try and communicate his message in a way that can be interpreted as he intended. Arguably, Camus achieves this by having readers live out Meursault's life and struggle through first-person narration.

Of course, Absurdism in general, and absurdist fiction in particular, are not attempting to offer *truths* about existence. Rather, absurdist fiction is meant to offer a method by which to navigate one's being-in-the-world, and first-person narration is a powerful tool to help the reader appropriate absurdist ideas.

⁵⁴ E. D. Hirsh, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation*. (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1976), 46. 177

⁵⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell 1993), 202.

⁵⁶ Søren Kierkegaard (writing as Johannes Climacus), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, 1846. Rpt (London, Oxford University Press 1945), 69. Translated by David F. Swenson.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 70-71.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 71.

Ordinary communication, like objective thinking in general, has no secrets; only a doubly reflected subjective thinking has them. That is to say, the entire essential content of subjective thought is essentially secret, because it cannot be directly communicated. ... The fact that the knowledge in question does not lend itself to direct utterance, because its essential feature consists of the appropriation, makes it a secret for everyone who is not in the same way doubly reflected within himself. And the fact that this is the essential form of such truth, makes it impossible to express it in any other manner.⁵⁹

By maintaining a first-person style of narration and peppering the text with absurdist undertones, readers can experience for themselves, rather than spectate, Meursault's and André's thoughts, emotions and reactions to the Absurd, because this style of narration provides an automatic sense of *rapprochement* between the reader and the absurdist hero. The experience of a character's life enables readers to reflect the hero's absurdist struggle onto themselves, and the use of first-person narration as a mode of indirect communication increases the likelihood of readers appropriating the absurdist concepts of the story in their own manner. To quote Sartre himself: "On the one hand, the literary object has no substance but the reader's subjectivity... But on the other hand, the words are there like traps to arouse our feelings and reflect them toward us... Thus, the writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work."⁶⁰

Sylvie Servoise is one of the few contemporary scholars to tackle the notion of voice in Camus's texts. Rather than simply praising this style of narration, like Lehan, she compares its use to other works of absurdist fiction by Camus which are not written in the first-person. Her argument is that *L'étranger's* first-person style renders the narrative difficult to pin down. Readers have a tricky time determining when Meursault is talking or thinking, and this begs

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 73.

⁶⁰ Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative*, 158.

the question of *L'étranger* being a journal or an introspective story.⁶¹ Both those modes lend themselves to the use of the first-person, of course, but in Meursault's case Servoise argues that Meursault's 'I' is more akin to a 'he', not only creating distance between the narrator and the reader, but also cementing his alienation throughout the novel.⁶² The 'I' then becomes a tool for establishing flattened affect, as well as a means of indirect communication. "If *The Stranger* were written from a third-person standpoint, Meursault would certainly not seem 'strange'. ... It is from the first-person standpoint that Camus allows the Kantian or Husserlian ego to reveal the utter blandness of Meursault's prereflective consciousness as it matter-of-factly describes his world. ... What is 'true' for him would appear to be the flat, uninterpreted reporting of prereflective Meursault's experience, without addition or comment."⁶³ Servoise also makes the claim that this distant 'I' serves a second purpose: "les personnages incarnent autant une manière d'entrer dans la lutte que de raconter celle-ci."⁶⁴ The use of a distant first-person voice allows the narrator to take part in his struggle as well as tell us about it. This is important to note when comparing other works in Camus's canon not written in the first-person. Consider, for example, *La peste*, written with third-person anonymity (till Dr. Rieux reveals himself as the narrator at the end of the novel), and filtered via multiple narratorial perspectives—a formal feature which manifests precisely a *collective* struggle against the Absurd. *L'étranger* by contrast is written in the first-person to show one man's struggle against the Absurd. By appropriating one person's struggle, the reader can reflect it upon himself and experience his own. This activity is the first step in tackling bigger social issues. This is also

⁶¹ Sylvie Servoise, "Langage et vérité chez Camus. Les voix du roman", *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 113:4, 2013, 880.

⁶² *Ibid*, pp. 882.

⁶³ Robert C. Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts. Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre*. (New York, Oxford University Press 2006), 18.

⁶⁴ Sylvie Servoise, "Langage et vérité chez Camus. Les voix du roman", 885.

why, before reading *La peste*, you must work your way through Camus's cycle of the Absurd to fully grasp its significance as a social struggle against the indifference of existence.

Works of literature which explore social struggles are necessarily political in nature, or at the very least carry throughout them a subordinate political narrative. Such elements are obvious enough in *La peste* but Edward Said argues that political undertones also govern *L'étranger*. *Culture and Imperialism* reads *L'étranger* as deeply rooted in notions of French colonialism, and Said insists we must read Camus (especially *L'étranger*) through the lenses of imperialism. More specifically, we must consider Algeria's resistance to France's colonial interests in North Africa. We must "read the text(s) to include what was once forcibly excluded—in *L'étranger*, for example, the whole previous history of France's colonialism and its destruction of the Algerian state, and the later emergence of an independent Algeria (which Camus opposed)."⁶⁵ Certainly, Camus' short novel is peppered with xenophobia, racism and tacit articulations of French political dominance, particularly in the second part of the story where Meursault is tried under French Civil Law for the murder of the Arab. The court seems to care more about Meursault's failure to express sadness at his mother's funeral, than his act of murder.

In contextualising *L'étranger* via its political and historical perspectives, Said expresses his preference for a more politically engaged style of writing, comparing Camus's style to Orwell's in this regard:

Like Orwell's work and status in England, Camus's plain style and unadorned reporting of social situations conceal rivetingly complex contradictions, contradictions unresolvable by rendering, as critics have

⁶⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. (New York, Knopf 1993). Rpt (New York, Vintage Books 1994), pp. 66-67.

done, his feelings of loyalty to French Algeria as a parable of the human condition.⁶⁶

The contradictions to which Said refers in this passage must be understood as complex *political* contradictions. He is not the only critic to have associated simplistic writing styles and narratives with a political agenda. Alex Woloch, in his recent book *Or Orwell: Writing and Democratic Socialism* (2016) aligns Orwell's political orientation directly with his plain prose style, designed as it was to promote accessibility, transparency and ordinariness.

If the plain style connotes political values that we might align with Orwell's democratic socialism, one crucial motive for such plain style is, conversely, the sheer desire (both palpable and unfulfilled) to express his political orientation, directly and without distortion, in writing. The plain style is political, in other words, not merely because of how Orwell communicates (familiarily and this democratically) but also because *what* Orwell aspires to communicate is explicitly a politics, a 'political position'. This would be different from other writers of the period who gravitated toward a simple or demotic style—writers such as Hemingway, Christopher Isherwood, or William Carlos Williams. All of these figures are concerned with the problem of plain style, and in each case, a set of political values, certainly, might be argued for or *inferred through* the plain style. But they do not use their writing as insistently as Orwell does, to make their politics explicit.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 184-185.

⁶⁷ Alex Woloch, *Or Orwell: Writing and Democratic Socialism* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016) pp. 9.

Orwell upheld simple and plain literary values throughout his career and even outlined them in his essay *Politics and the English Language* (1946). Four out of his six literary maxims address the importance of short and simple writing.⁶⁸

Style, be it complex or an Orwellian and Camusian *simplicité*, is a political matter. Party-political slogans, advertising and press releases simplify difficult concepts into plain speech, to reach voters. But short and simple writing is not always a vehicle for political doctrine, as Woloch explains. Furthermore, Said's reading of *L'étranger* not only foregrounds the colonialising discourse of Camus's novel, but also posits that Meursault "is a moral man in an immoral situation. And what Camus focusses on is the individual in a social setting. ... He prizes self-recognition, disillusioned maturity, and moral steadfastness in the midst of a bad situation."⁶⁹ This immoral situation, and Meursault's position within it, can be understood not only as a political struggle but also a personal one. The *immoral situation* which Said refers to also represents the amorality of the Absurd. That of an individual's need to find order and meaning in an otherwise chaotic and meaningless universe. Meursault's alienation (which according to Said is initially assumed through the political and historical context of the time Camus's novel was written) gave Camus a platform from which to explore the absurdity of existence, as this character's estrangement is reflected through his search for meaning in a world which does not care about him. From this perspective, politics are merely a starting point for the primary (absurd) conflict to occur.

⁶⁸ George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", *Horizon*, 13:76, 252-265. Consulted on 25/02/2018 from http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit/

- i. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- ii. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- iii. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- iv. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

⁶⁹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 174.

There is no denying the political themes in Camus's novel, nor the colonial undertones of mine. After all, André is a Canadian who answers *John Bull's* call and returns to his motherland. He is also a white, western male who moves throughout the western world with ease—not something a Syrian refugee (for example) can do nowadays. A Saidist reading of my novel would understand it as a story of western privilege (when considering current global modes of migration and ensuing socio-cultural clashes in the Occident). However, my novel is primarily intended to be a study of social and cultural alienation caused by an absurdist coming of consciousness, and an examination of the application of Camusian revolt in the face of this alienation. While there is a strong Marxist and post-Marxist tradition of considering alienation as a primarily political category, I am treating it here as a predominantly existential state. I did not write my novel with a specific political agenda in mind, and whilst I understand that it is not possible to write an entirely apolitical text, I am choosing here to focus on alienation from a purely absurdist perspective. Solely considering the political implications of absurdist or existential fiction would need an entire doctoral thesis's worth of analysis and deliberation. That is not the point of this critical commentary.

Camus was involved in politics, and fought in the French Resistance, but his novel is a very personal story which doesn't consider the world outside of Meursault's head. "Meursault is the reader's only point of access to the world of *The Outsider* and, despite accumulating evidence of the possible undependability of his version of events, the reader, in effect, remains stuck with his perspective."⁷⁰ There is no direct mention of either the Second World War or the Algerian War in the novel, nor is there any event or attitude which alludes to the text being a response or commentary on post-war Europe. Meursault's conflict is with himself. Tensions between characters are interpersonal in nature or caused by external manifestations of existential angst. The conflict between Meursault and the Arab at the end of the first part of the

⁷⁰ Johanna Gavins, *Reading the Absurd*, 38.

novel arises from the fact that Raymond beat the victim's sister, Meursault's indifference towards Marie is a result of his physical reactions to the Absurd, and Meursault's outburst at the priest comes from his rebellion against the indifference of life. Even Meursault's execution at the hands of his nation's own judicial system suggests a distancing from political themes. One would think that had Camus written *L'étranger* as a study of colonial politics the court would have spared Meursault's life despite his feeble defense: "l'accusation la plus répandue contre Camus, selon la critique postcoloniale, c'est qu'il négligeait la particularité ethnique et raciale au profit d'un humanisme vague, général, problématique dans sa transparence et sa simplicité."⁷¹ My point is that *L'étranger* does not directly refer to the political climate of its time. We cannot even be sure in what year the story takes place. We may of course choose to focus on the period in which it was written and the author's socio-cultural background as a *Pied noir* in France by way of politically contextualizing Meursault's relationship to the Arab, but this is to import material from outside the text. On the other hand, Sartre's *La nausée* is not only highly politicized, it contains specific historical and periodising references to the early-1930s and the rising authoritarian regimes in Europe. Another example would be Sartre's many references to the jazz song *Some of these Days* by Sophie Tucker. Sartre, in contrast, believed jazz embodied an attitude of rebellion and championed its use as an act of resistance against Nazi oppressors. Camus introduced a "[...] counter-narrative to the historical reality of his time and its totalitarian mind-frame. Rather than history, which seems to offer a catalogue of long-term struggles and wars, he focusses on the day, the season, the place."⁷² To understand his novel otherwise would mean reading *L'étranger* from a Marxist and post-Marxist perspective.

⁷¹ David R. Ellison, *Le dernier Camus et la Méditerranée* in *Albert Camus, contemporain* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion 2009) 17. 218

⁷² Barbara Lekatsas et al., "La pensée de midi: Mediterranean Cosmopolitanism in the work of Camus, Cavafy and Chahine" *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 34 (2014), 131.

Camus's novel designedly reproduces one's subjective experience of the world as transcending politics and era. Significantly enough, Camus published his highly subjective philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in September of 1942, only a few months after the publication of *L'Étranger*. In the words of Victor Brombert, "the Mythe de Sisyphe states the notion of the Absurd, whereas the Stranger gives us the feeling of it."⁷³ Camus's philosophical essay is the critical component that supports his novel, and theoretically outlines his absurdist philosophy applied and embodied in *L'Étranger*. It might even be called a user's guide to understand *L'Étranger* and Meursault's subjective struggle with the Absurd. By removing, or at least not dwelling on, political discourse, geography and history in the narrative, Camus tells a more generalised story of a character who reacts to, and wrestles with, the fundamental meaninglessness of life.

At the foundation of every social, political or cultural circle lies the Absurd. Regardless of one's political ideology, existence will still be meaningless and the onus still falls on the individual to revolt against the Absurd. This is what makes *L'Étranger* appealing to readers throughout the world, regardless of their politics. To summarise: the carefully controlled and modulated stylistic *simplicité* of Camus's writing (which I've tried to emulate in my novel) is not a political indicator so much as it is a way of establishing a feeling of alienation and absurdity throughout the novel.

The feelings of estrangement and alienation felt by Meursault and André in their respective stories are complemented by an unemotional narrative tone. In his study of emotion in literature, Hogan makes the case that "emotion is a crucial factor in the generation and organization of stories."⁷⁴ However, absurdist narratives in the Camusian style, while ripe with

⁷³ Victor Brombert, "Camus and the Novel of the 'Absurd'", 119.

⁷⁴ Patrick Colm Hogan, "Affect Studies and Literary Criticism." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Pp. 22. Consulted on 12/03/2018 from

emotive situations, and secondary and tertiary characters, are governed by an overarching flatness or absence of affect. Meursault displays no emotions (the implications of which we've explored in detail in the previous chapter) and as such is not self-conscious. Robert Solomon argues that "Emotions—'Feelings' in the grander sense—are reflections of a self-conscious subject on his or her position in the world. Accordingly, Meursault, who is not self-conscious, can have no such feelings, no emotions, and no reflections on his emotions."⁷⁵ André, like Meursault, is a character reacting to the Absurd and as such I've attempted to dial-down his emotional responses as the narrator of my novel to reproduce what Solomon defines as "flat and uninterpreted reporting" of André's experience.⁷⁶

André does experience emotion, of course, at least to a certain extent; but for the most part his feelings creep to the surface of his character when he's in states of intoxication. When sober, André remains affectless and dull to the outside world. This is something we see in Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) where Patrick Bateman shows no emotion towards the world except when he is indulging in, or fantasizing about, violent behavior. We also see this in Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), where the narrator moves through life devoid of outward emotion but comes alive when fighting. This is an important point to note because although I tried to model André on Meursault, I also made use of the way in which Ellis and Palahniuk presented their characters to the world.⁷⁷ Both Ellis and Palahniuk use their characters'

<http://literature.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-105>

⁷⁵ Robert C. Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts. Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre*, 21.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 18.

⁷⁷ I believe *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* to be the two most recent pieces of Western Literature best described as contemporary absurdist fiction. Ellis's novel is widely received as a critique of capitalism in the Reagan Era, but the story is absurd, in the sense I'm arguing for in this chapter, because it shows the absurd society which has come to govern the West. Patrick Bateman isn't an absurd character in the way Meursault is, he doesn't rebel against his absurd state. Rather, he embodies the individual who is consumed by the Absurd and reacts towards it by adhering to it. Palahniuk's novel is often understood as an affirmation of

reactions to the world as tools to create a sense of alienation throughout their novels. Wolny argues that “*American Psycho* demonstrates a postmodern, post-industrial and consumerist [world] void of positive emotions towards people, animal and physical objects in the world. Such a detachment makes an individual suffer from mental and emotional isolation and stimulates a feeling of self-alienation.”⁷⁸ This feeling of self-alienation, brought about by an emotionless or indifferent world, contributes to the overall flatness of the text, and the first-person narrative can’t help but reflect the main character’s sense of estrangement and detachment from reality. Here we see a return to Servoise’s argument that Meursault’s ‘*I*’ is more akin to a ‘*he*’, which distances him from the reader and contributes to a flatness in narrative⁷⁹; an argument which is also supported by Wolny.⁸⁰ But this atmosphere of flatness and dullness of narrative is quickly trumped in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* when these novels’ protagonists find themselves in altered states of being. These states of being are represented through the highs which these novels’ main characters experience when committing acts of violence. André finds a similar high, and shows his emotions, when he’s drinking. The physical alteration involved in moving from sobriety to inebriation is reflected in the text itself. I’ve tried to imitate Ellis and Palahniuk’s technique here, such that the text moves from plain and unadorned writing when André is sober, to a prose rich with unbridled enthusiasm when he’s drunk. This is something my novel does not share with *L’étranger*, because I tried to humanize André by allowing him to react in a seemingly normal way when experiencing altered states of being. He finds pleasure in going to the pub with Ray, he gets

manhood, but this novel is absurd because its protagonist rebels against the absurdity of his existence by affirming his manhood through violence and mischief.

⁷⁸ Ryszard W. Wolny, “Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991): A Study in Consumerist Void of Emotions” In Teresa Brus and Marcin Tereszzewski’s *Production of Emotions. Perspectives and Functions* Silesian Studies in Anglophone Cultures and Literatures 6. (Frankfurt, Peter Lang Edition 2016), 43.

⁷⁹ Sylvie Servoise, “Langage et vérité chez Camus. Les voix du roman”, 882.

⁸⁰ Ryszard W. Wolny, “Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*”, 45.

angry when a curmudgeon confronts him about his sense of entitlement, and he allows himself to express his thoughts when he and Pink are passing judgement on their colleagues while drinking. André can only be honest and show his feelings when he disconnects himself from the world through the consumption of alcohol. I chose to write André with these elements of character, which I borrowed from Ellis and Palahniuk, to make him as human as possible. (No individual who drinks an unhealthy amount of alcohol in one sitting will remain Apollonian in demeanor.) I've also written André as a casually abusive drinker, to try and infuse my novel with these fragments of emotion. This decision was mostly for aesthetic purposes, and the overarching feeling I tried to maintain throughout my novel is nevertheless one of flatness, to mirror the absurdity, indifference, and meaninglessness of the world.

Coming to understand that the world is indifferent towards you and that you come into existence without purpose or meaning is a hard truth to accept when understanding the Absurd. Jordan Peterson, one of the few contemporary academics who focusses his talks and lectures on the appropriation of meaning in one's life (albeit through psychological channels rather than philosophical ones), eloquently writes: "pain and anxiety are an integral part of human existence. We must have something to set against the suffering that is intrinsic to Being. We must have the meaning inherent in a profound system of value or the horror of existence rapidly becomes paramount. Then, nihilism beckons, with its hopelessness and despair."⁸¹ This nihilistic, and rather depressed, state of existence is one in which André finds himself throughout my novel. My creative work tries to strengthen these modes of being (the sensations of hopelessness and despair experienced by André in his moments of sobriety) through a general suppression of emotion in the narrative. It is interesting to note, however, that Camus's flattened affect in *L'étranger* is indicative of Meursault's inability to feel, because his inability

⁸¹ Peterson understands 'Being' from a Heideggerian perspective, as the "totality of human experience" Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. (Toronto, Random House Canada 2018) xxxi.

to reflect on existence “truncates and impoverishes emotion.”⁸² The flatness in my creative work not only mirrors André’s sobering despair in the face of his absurd existence, but also his futile attempts to permanently fit into British life. He has no culture. He doesn’t fit in or feel good about his life in Canada, nor does he fit in with the Italian way of life. He falls in love with his life in the United Kingdom and despite his best attempts to cement a place in this culture, he knows he can never truly be British. He is condemned to return to Canada and back to a life which for him has no meaning, but he forces himself to keep trying. This is his *Sisyphian* task. André pushes his boulder up the mountain by trying to be accepted by a society which, although is welcoming, he can never truly call his own. The boulder rolls back down the mountain when he realizes he must return to Canada. But as Camus imagines Sisyphus happy in his struggle, so to must we imagine André. He chooses to leave his home town once again at the end of the novel, to try and rid himself of the constant state of meaninglessness and despair he feels when in Ottawa. He chooses to continue his struggle and rebel against the Absurd by not conceding to it and accepting his fate.

The flatness and lack of emotion in much of my novel is also actualised by my deploying a deliberately Camusian literary cadence. Renaud (one of the few scholars to delve deeply into Camus’s mechanics of writing) elaborates on Camus’s use of punctuation, and argues that *L’étranger*’s short sentences which are often cut by a studied punctuation mark gives the text a natural rhythm which maintains an absurd ambiance throughout the story. Camus’s short sentences are seesaws that pivot on their commas, and the back-and-forth rhythm they create mirrors the monotony and indifference of existence.⁸³ This method of writing adds to the overall feeling of the Absurd by giving the text a slow and repetitive tone,

⁸² Robert C. Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts. Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre*, 21.

⁸² *Ibid*, pp. 17.

⁸³ Armand Renaud, ‘Quelques remarques sur le style de L’étranger’, *The French Review* 30:4 (1957), pp. 290.

and I tried to emulate this in my novel to achieve a similar rhythm to that of *L'étranger*. An interesting point to note is that this cadence is present in the original, French, version of Camus's novel, but is often lost in English translations of the text. For example: "dans la petite morgue, il m'a appris qu'il était entré à l'asile comme indigent."⁸⁴ translates to "in the little mortuary he told me that he'd come to the home because he was destitute."⁸⁵ Camus could have reworked this sentence to avoid using that comma, but this would have taken away from the pause it created, which makes the reader remember that Meursault is in a morgue when speaking with the caretaker. The pause created by the comma not only secures a cadenced reading of the sentence in its original French version, but also emphasizes the sullen and gloomy nature of the Absurd by reminding us of death when the conversation in the novel shifts from Meursault's mother's funeral to the caretaker's life. In another example, Laredo's translation presents a passage as: "I told her she was beautiful and she laughed with delight."⁸⁶ Whereas Camus's original version is: "Je lui ai dit qu'elle était belle, elle a ri de plaisir."⁸⁷ Laredo's omission of the comma makes the sentence just that touch blander than it was in the original. Had he written it as Camus did in French, as "I told her she was beautiful; she laughed with delight", he would have given the sentence a distanced, rhythmic, monotonous and morose feeling to reflect Meursault's absurd state of being. I tried to incorporate this French, Camusian style of punctuation in my creative work to help secure a feeling of the Absurd throughout my narrative.

One thing worth noting about *L'étranger* is the extent to which it refuses a conventional narrative arc. In fact, the novel has arguably no linear narrative structure at all. A general

⁸⁴ Albert Camus, *L'étranger*. 16.

⁸⁵ Albert Camus, *The Outsider*. (London, Penguin 1982). Translated from French by Joseph Laredo, pp. 13.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 49.

⁸⁷ Albert Camus, *L'étranger*, 75.

definition of narrative according to Holloway is that “narrative consists of a set of ‘runs’ of events; considers certain preliminary ways in which the narrative interrelates the ‘runs’; argues that some operation or operations may be seen as defining the passage from one event in a run to another.”⁸⁸ In *L’étranger*, however, we are presented with clips, or unrelated moments, in the life of Meursault. Theorists such as Hogan put a great deal of effort in analyzing and interpreting literary structures, but it is rather difficult to find literary theorists who study the lack of literary structure in works of fiction. Renaud, in his consideration of Camusian structure, argues that this fractured narrative style goes hand-in-hand with Camus’s use of short sentences.

Pourquoi Camus tient-il à ces phrases courtes? D’abord, elles reflètent la vie de Meursault en rappelant de petits faits qui se suivent sans grande logique, ou qui brusquement se détachent, au lieu de couler les uns dans les autres ... Ce style haché se justifie aussi sur le plan de la vraisemblance. Peut-être le lecteur ne le comprend-il pas tout de suite, mais bientôt il s’aperçoit que le narrateur est en train de retracer une période de sa vie. En effet Meursault repasse les événements qui l’ont conduit où il est.⁸⁹

Renaud brings up two very good points in this passage. The first is that short sentences mirror the little events in Meursault’s life which make up the chapters of *L’étranger*. The second is that the fragmented structure of the text lends itself to a journal style of narration where Meursault is telling us about his life. The style creates a feeling of intimacy between the narrator and the reader, as the reader is privy to the narrator’s inner thoughts and emotions.

⁸⁸ John Holloway, *Narrative and structure: exploratory essays*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1979), pp. 74.

⁸⁹ Armand Renaud, ‘Quelques remarques sur le style de *L’étranger*’, 295. “Why does Camus insist on short sentences? First, they represent the little facts of Meursault’s life which follow each other without logic, or that are abruptly disconnected from one another. The broken and intermittent style also gives the novel believability, as the reader comes to realize that the narrator is retracing moments of his life.” Personal translation.

This relates back to our discussion on the importance of first-person narration, and Lehan's argument that first-person narration creates an immediate sense of contact with the narrator's experiences.⁹⁰ My attempt to apply Camus's short, simple and fragmented style is not only meant to emulate the chaotic, random or indifferent state of the universe in my literary structure, but also to give my novel some verisimilitude. Short sentences and chapters, written in the first-person, support the notion that André is a seemingly average person who writes about his life. My aim is to help readers relate to André so that they can appropriate the elements of absurdity in his life, and I believe this would be difficult if I wrote my novel using lengthy, punctuation-heavy academic sentences in the style of *Le mythe de Sisyphe*.

Servoise discusses Camus's style and further pushes Renaud's argument of brevity and broken narrative. She writes:

Camus a cherché à transmettre au lecteur le sentiment de l'absurde, qui est, précisément, un sentiment de divorce, de décalage, de dépaysement entre le sujet et le monde. Pour cela il a eu recours à une technique inédite, qui consiste à donner à voir le monde au lecteur à travers la conscience de Meursault décrite comme une 'vitre transparente aux choses, opaque aux significations'. [Il] a recours à une succession de présents discontinus, de sensations isolées.⁹¹

Meursault's detachment from the world is portrayed in Camus's literary technique through what Servoise calls *disconnected presents* and *isolated sensations*.⁹² Each of *L'étranger*'s

⁹⁰ Richard Lehan, "Camus and Hemingway", 41.

⁹¹ Sylvie Servoise, "Langage et vérité chez Camus. Les voix du roman". 882. "Camus tries to convey to the reader the feeling of the Absurd, which is a feeling of divorce, of discrepancy and of disorientation between the subject and the world. To do this, he uses a hitherto unseen technique which consists of showing the reader the world through Meursault's conscience. His view of the world can be described as seen through a pane of glass which blurs any notion of significance in the world." Personal translation.

⁹² *Ibid*, pp. 882.

chapters are stories in themselves and don't particularly flow into one another, especially in the first part of the story. Camus successfully 'brackets' each chapter from the rest of his novel, which establishes the atmosphere of confusion and disarray of the Absurd. This atmosphere is precisely what I tried to achieve with my novel. André moves through life aware of the absurd condition of existence, and my avoidance of narrative flow is an attempt to 'bracket' or isolate, as Camus did, every one of André's experiences as reactionary moments to the Absurd. These moments don't make much sense if they're strung together. But separately, they each represent or embody in one way or another André's chaotic and meaningless existence. For example, one of the chapters of my novel sees my main character relaxing at home while his flat mate has a row with his girlfriend, and the following one describes a visit to a local museum. Another chapter sees André drinking with strangers at a bar then accompanies them home, and is followed by a chapter in which he mercilessly beats a passer-by in the street. There is no structure to the narrative and my novel has a chaotic storyline, but each of these chapters delve into the Absurd by exploring André's experiences and reactions to the moments of his indifferent existence. My aim, in using a fragmented style of narration, is to convey to the reader that André's experiences, although they are seemingly interesting moments in his life, don't matter. André struggles against the Absurd in each chapter, and is ultimately condemned to his absurd existence by returning to Canada.

One stylistic element in *L'étranger* which I've also implemented in my own fiction, is the novel's cyclical structure. A story coming full-circle is a formal feature by no means *only* found in absurdist fiction, of course. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) begins and ends with Jem breaking his arm. Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) begins and ends in the 'Korova Milkbar'. The gun in the opening lines of Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is seen again at the end of the story. The end of Ellis's *American Psycho* sees Bateman and his colleagues engaging

in pointless conversation as they did in the first chapter, as though nothing has occurred throughout the near-400 pages of the novel. What makes *L'étranger's* cyclical nature distinctive is the way it embodies the spirit of the revolt. Meursault's story begins with his mother's death and ends in the moments before his. However, he rebels against his execution and refuses to approach it with remorse and fear. The ending brings us back to the beginning of the story, and to Meursault's mother's death. In the moments before his execution, Camus writes:

Il m'a semblé que je comprenais pourquoi à la fin d'une vie elle avait pris un 'fiancé', pourquoi elle avait joué à recommencer. Là-bas aussi, autour de cet asile où des vies s'éteignaient, le soir était comme une trêve mélancolique. Si près de la mort, maman devait s'y sentir libérée et prête à tout revivre. Personne, personne n'avait le droit de pleurer sur elle. Et moi aussi, je me suis senti prêt à tout revivre.⁹³

Meursault's revolt at the end of *L'étranger* mirrors his mother's revolt at the end of her life; he approaches death in his own manner and according to his own rules. In the moments before his execution he realizes that he is happy, and he will continue to revolt against his absurd condition and indifferent existence until his death. In my novel, André begins his story in Ottawa and revolts against his absurd existence by finding a way to move out of Canada. At the end of the novel, he chooses not to reconcile himself to the absurdity of his existence and admits to his family that he will not stay in Ottawa despite his failed attempt to make his life abroad. The key point of mine and Camus's cyclical narratives is that they're both driven by an act of revolt. The key tenet of absurdism is that one must continuously revolt against the Absurd, despite knowing that death is imminent. Just as Meursault revolts in the face of death,

⁹³ Albert Camus, *L'étranger*, 183. "I seemed to understand why at the end of her life she took a 'fiancé', why she played at starting over. At night, in the home where lives faded away, there seemed to be a melancholic truce. Nearing death, Mother must have felt liberated and ready to relive everything. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry for her. And I too felt ready to relive everything." Personal translation.

André revolts in the face of his despair, and this embodies the nature of Camus's absurdist rebellion. It shows the necessity of a continued struggle against the meaninglessness of existence. "Il s'agit de mourir irréconcilié et non pas de plein gré."⁹⁴ The revolt is ongoing, even in the face of death and hopelessness, which is why the final sentence of *L'étranger* looks to the future. For the first time in the novel, Camus makes Meursault foreshadow an event. "Pour que tout soit consommé, pour que je me sente moins seul, il me restait à souhaiter qu'il y ait beaucoup de spectateurs le jour de mon exécution et qu'ils m'accueillent avec des cris de haine."⁹⁵ This is a stylistic element that I've also incorporated in my novel, when André tells his family that he will not stay in Ottawa. These last lines show André's continued act of revolt and bring us back to the beginning of the story.

This chapter has explored some of the features of Camus's mechanics of style. It looked at the importance of first-person narrative and the way it established a distinctive rapport between the narrator and the reader. In my novel, the closeness between the two not only helps readers appropriate André's absurdist struggle and revolt, but also helps them consider their own meaningless existence by comparing their lives to André's. The chapter also explores simplistic writing, not as a political category, but as a means to reinforce André's alienation throughout the narrative and mirror his absurd existence. Simple writing in absurdist fiction also lends itself to creating a feeling of emptiness in the text, as we've explored through our examination of the importance of flattened affect. A lack of emotion in the narrative of absurd texts support the main character's feelings of despair in the face of the Absurd, and illustrates

⁹⁴ Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, 80. "One must not die willingly but irreconcilably." Personal translation.

⁹⁵ Albert Camus, *L'étranger*, 184. "For the final consummation and for me to feel less lonely, my last wish was that there should be a crowd of spectators at my execution and that they should greet me with cries of hatred." From Albert Camus, *The Outsider*. Translated from French by Joseph Laredo, pp. 117.

André's feelings towards the meaningless of existence in my novel. This absence of emotion is also established through my use of Camus's cadence. Short sentences and fragmented chapters create a feeling and rhythm which mirrors the monotony and indifference of the world, and strengthen André's storyline as he tries to break himself from the grip that everyday life has on him (notably through his alcohol consumption).

The one thing which all these elements have in common is that they all serve to create an atmosphere of absurdity and indifference. The distant 'I' in using first-person narration, the sense of alienation which supports André's absurd struggle, and the overall lack of emotion supported by a cadenced and repetitive rhythm all serve to create what Brombert and Servoise call the '*feeling of the absurd*'.⁹⁶ This is the key point to take away from this consideration of Camus's mechanics of style: every element of style discussed in this chapter helps create a feeling of meaninglessness in the text, that supports the character's absurdist revolt against the indifference of existence. Giving an absurdist text the feeling of the Absurd is just as important as exploring it in the narrative, and this is what I attempted to achieve in my novel by emulating Camus's, Ellis's and Palahniuk's techniques.

⁹⁶ Victor Brombert, "Camus and the Novel of the 'Absurd'", 119; and Sylvie Servoise, "Langage et vérité chez Camus. Les voix du roman", 882.

Conclusion

This critical commentary examines the textual strategies entailed by the construction of an absurdist hero and building an absurd world in literary fiction. Albert Camus was my starting point, since Meursault and his world in *L'étranger* embody key elements of the Absurd. The methods I discuss, although heavily inspired by Camus's, are slightly modified for the sake of contemporary relevance. Not that Camus's works are irrelevant today; they are, after all, still widely read and taught. But successful contemporary absurdist writers such as Palahniuk demonstrate a modern application of absurdist techniques in literature, which I believe helps make these stories accessible to contemporary readers. While I tried to maintain as much of Camus's mechanics of style as I could in developing my ideas, I found it very useful to consider current theories in philosophy and literature to inform my application of Camus's literary methods and techniques in works of contemporary absurdist fiction. While primary sources (in the form of absurdist works of philosophy and literature) are at the bedrock of this research project and were essential in developing my arguments, I believe that a consideration of contemporary techniques and theories is useful in disseminating absurdist philosophy in the twenty-first century.

This study began with an exploration of Camus's absurdist style via the absurdist character. This chapter examined behavioural, ideological, physical and psychological traits common to Camus's Meursault and my novel's André, and discussed why each of these traits were essential to creating the ideal absurdist hero. As a behavioural trait, I discussed both mine and Camus's heroes' affinity for smoking. Both main characters smoke to excess throughout their respective stories, and I argued that this recurring pattern of behaviour reflects a key

element of absurdist philosophy. Smoking provides temporary happiness and respite from the Absurd, while also representing an act of revolt against it. The behavioural trait itself does not need to be smoking or nicotine addiction, but can be anything that embodies the spirit of the revolt through repetitive behaviour in the story. As an ideological trait, I explored the use of having a secular absurdist hero, as this trait represents a character who does not let himself be controlled by a higher power, and who takes complete onus of his actions. This section called upon Charles Taylor to help contemporise André as a secular character, which somewhat differentiates him from Meursault who is an atheist. Absurdist philosophy, and existentialism in general, is deeply rooted in religious disbelief. However, Taylor makes the argument that the contemporary western world is now in an era of secularization brought about by deism, and not in an era of atheism.⁹⁷ This is something I considered when creating André: rather than write him as committed in any sense to atheism, religion is simply not part of his life (not necessarily for philosophical beliefs, but rather the theme of religion was left out of the narrative altogether) thus modifying Camus's philosophical arguments against religion in building a character, to provide a relevant and contemporary character who can still embody the philosophy of the absurdist revolt. The psychological character trait I chose to focus on was an omission of physicality in creating my main character. Here, I applied Camus's lack of physical description of Meursault to André in an attempt to remove elements with which readers can visualise and identify the absurdist hero. This, I argue, can help readers reflect themselves onto the absurdist hero and consequently relate their own experiences to the character's absurdist revolt. The last character trait I emphasised was psychological in nature, and explored the importance of having a lethargic, apathetic and overall passive character. The point of writing an absurdist hero as a passive, rather than active character, is to have the character embody the attitude which one might feel when one falls prey to the absurdity of life.

⁹⁷ For further reading see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2007.

The point of these four character traits is that they help build a character which embody human reactions to the Absurd, and of Camus's revolt. Furthermore, these attributes all play a part in providing the conditions to allow the reader to place themselves within the story, by removing character traits which might complete a character's profile and subsequently creating a barrier between the reader and character.

The second part of the critical commentary closely examined elements of Camus's style to help build the world in which an absurdist character could exist. First, I argued for the use of first-person narration throughout the story, as a means of establishing a closer relationship between the reader and narrator. This, I argued, can help readers appropriate the absurdist struggle and revolt of the narrator by comparing their lives to the hero's, through the rapport implicit in stream of consciousness-style narration. Next, I discussed the importance of simplistic writing. Short and fragmented writing (not addressed in my critical commentary as a political category, but rather as an absurdist state), represents the notions of absurdist alienation in the narrative. The short and disunited chapters and passages in mine and Camus's novels emulate the chaotic nature of the absurd world, and short rhythmic sentences help give the text a feeling of emptiness which represents the indifference of the world. Lastly, I made the case that works of absurdist fiction should be cyclical. To have a story end where it began is a powerful tool which can be used to represent a continued act of revolt against the Absurd. This is a method used by many writers and in many genres. But in the context of absurdist fiction, stories coming full-circle is a good way to showcase the ongoing struggle of revolting against the Absurd.

This study has taken into account major elements of Camus's style which he used to convey his absurdist ideas in *L'étranger*, and has found ways to adapt them for contemporary readers. My novel, *Smoke Rings*, stands as a testament to the application of the theories posited

in this critical commentary. I believe that these techniques are essential for the dissemination of such philosophical ideas, and I also believe that Camus's ideas and philosophy are more relevant than ever in the twenty-first century. Existence remains absurd, just as it was at the time of the Second World War when Camus wrote *L'étranger*, and many of his other great works. Each of his novels and essays illuminates an element of the Absurd, and gives us insight into how to navigate one's absurd existence. The point of my desire to modify his style is to keep these philosophical ideas relevant and accessible to our contemporary western culture, whose world is just as absurd today as it was seventy-five years ago. There are wars in the Middle East, there is violent crime in Western cities, we are governed by materialistic ideals, and the culture of immediate gratification we live in makes us postpone the sacrifices that are necessary for maturation more and more, only to be walloped by the Absurd when life eventually hits us.⁹⁸ We need absurdist fiction and Camus's philosophy to help us steer our way through this chaotic universe. Ed Vulliamy praises Camus's writing, and also argues for the necessity of Camus's messages today. He writes:

Nowadays, I think, *La peste* can tell the story of a different kind of plague: that of a destructive, hyper-materialist, turbo-capitalism; and can do so as well as any applied contemporary commentary. In fact especially so, for this reason: the Absurd. Our society is absurd, and Camus' novel examines – among many other things, and for all its moralising – our relationship to the absurdity of modern existence. It can describe very well the plague in a society which blares its phantasmagoria across the poor world so that millions come, aboard tomb ships or across murderous deserts, in search of its empty promises; and which even destroys the constant against which Camus measured human mortality: nature.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Jordan Peterson, 2017 Maps of Meaning 6 entitled “Story and Metastory (Part 2)” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsZ8XqHPjI4>

⁹⁹ Ed Vulliamy, “Albert Camus’ The Plague: a story for our, and all, times” *The Guardian* 5 Jan, 2015. Web. 29 Jul. 2018.

My novel tries to articulate in fictional form the relationship about which Vulliamy speaks: that between an individual and the absurdity of modern existence. As we've seen throughout this thesis and throughout my novel, the apprehension of the Absurd – the awareness of the fundamental disparity of this relationship – can manifest itself at any time. It is experienced differently for everyone, but has no regard for time and circumstance. In my novel, André mostly experiences the Absurd at insignificant times in his life: while sitting at a café with the sun beating down on him, while walking home with a girl's phone number in his pocket, or when someone asks him for a cigarette. All these iterations of the Absurd in my novel are meant to highlight the fact that life can be a mundane and banal experience, and the Absurd lurks in the corners of existence, ready to strike at any time.

André is aware of the nature of the Absurd, and revolts against it to the (limited) extent of which he is capable, but this too eventually becomes repetitive and banal. This doesn't stop him from rebelling against his condition, but it also brings up questions of the mundaneness of the Absurd. As expressed throughout this thesis: existence is indifferent towards us, and one needs to revolt against the Absurd to keep it at bay. Yes, André realises that he is happy in his revolt, but he also knows that he will need to constantly put himself through the motions of rebellion so that his despair does not get the better of him. This feeling is akin to running into a brick wall at every turn. But André is happy to do it, because it emancipates him and gives him purpose and meaning. The lack of character development shows the repetitive nature of the struggle against the Absurd; the little acts of rebellion, such as André's constant smoking, show the banality with which the Absurd can strike and with which it can be rebelled against it; and the narrative structure and lack of character development in *Smoke Rings* represents the chaotic nature of the condition of the Absurd.

I hope that the thoughts, theories, and methods outlined in this commentary can be used by future absurdist writers to promote the genre, and to promote the philosophy of the Absurd. For my own part, the *Camus canon* has helped me navigate the absurd circumstances of my life, as a half French-Canadian, half Lebanese man, who does not feel particularly at home in his own country, nor feel completely welcomed anywhere else. As a writer, the modifications I brought to Camus's literary techniques have helped me shape and define my own literary style. They've helped me find my literary voice, and these techniques now govern every bit of creative writing I produce.

One thing is certain, no matter my age or circumstance, once the Absurd hits me I can always turn to Camus's works to help me rebel, and momentarily give meaning to my life. It's my hope that this genre of literature can be as popular today as it was in Camus's time, so that this philosophy can reach and help others as it does me.

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Smoke Rings

S. A. Larocque

Life Decisions

“What are you talking about?”

Fuck! Here we go. Stephen had timed his question perfectly, and released it at a natural lull in the conversation. It was around two in the afternoon and the only shade was cast by J-M's body, as he stood to orate his answer. J-M never missed an opportunity to shine.

“OK, first...” Jean-Marc spoke with his hands; well, with one of them because the other was always in his pocket. He waved his cigarette with his right hand when he argued, and used it to point at people with exaggerated movements. I only smoked with my left, and I knew I wouldn't get a chance to speak while J-M was ranting. So I did what I normally did in those recurring situations and zoned-out for the hour-long answer. It was too hot to ask those kinds of questions anyway.

I looked around the courtyard and watched people dodging rickshaws and tripping over cobblestones, coffees in hand. I hated those rickshaws. Tourists thought that us locals used them to get to work in the morning; the same could be said of skates in the winter. Anyway, I assumed that people came to Ottawa because it had some significance, but it was mostly hot and boring in the summer and cold and boring in the winter. It was our nation's capital, but everything here could be seen and done in about a week.

“Furdermore, de reezin why I'm...” J-M loved talking politics and showing off, and Stephen liked winning arguments and was trying to find something in Jean-Marc's speech to disprove. I kept looking for things to distract myself with, and occasionally glanced at the two of them and nodded. Of all my buddies, those two would be the ones to argue loudly about politics in a public place. Jean-Marc worked part-time for the provincial government, Stephen was a rich kid who never had a job, and I would have gladly hopped on a rickshaw to get the

fuck out of there. I was genuinely embarrassed to be sitting at their table. Those around us were there to enjoy themselves, not to listen to a bunch of assholes compare the length of their intellectual boners.

To make things worse, Stephen found a gap in J-M's rhetoric and had moved in for the kill. I couldn't leave, because I was hoping to intercept Joe here on his way back from the restaurant. This place was our usual hang-out, and we'd grown accustomed to showing up unannounced and running into one another. There would always be someone at the coffee shop in the cobbled courtyard to sit with, until it got dark enough to graduate from caffeine to alcohol.

Stephen and Jean-Marc were now in a full-fledged debate and their yelling, along with the heat, was turning my stomach. I had to do something to make them stop. The courtyard was spinning, and I felt like throwing up. I mumbled first thing that came to my mind:

“Guys, you ever notice that no one really dies from old age anymore?” They both stopped and stared at me blankly. I drooped and they continued to argue.

The afternoon progressed and the ashtray filled up. A few of our friends showed up, and J-M and Stephen found ways to rope them into their conversation. Of course, none of them hung around for longer than a smoke.

The sun was setting and Joe still hadn't come around. He was probably with that new girl he told me about, so I couldn't blame him for not answering his phone when I eventually called him. I later found out that he had turned the corner of the courtyard and saw me sitting with the two others, then immediately doubled back and went home. He apparently had a very bad day in the kitchen, and didn't have the fortitude to tough through a long political debate. I couldn't blame him, neither did I.

It was dark out, and the imitation gas-lamps were lit. Neither Stephen nor Jean-Marc had won the debate, so they were settling their differences over a game of chess. J-M had a thermos full of wine, and the two of them passed it back and forth. They offered me some but it was too humid, and I had smoked too many cigarettes, to be able to stomach the rotgut wine that J-M had shoplifted from a Dep north of the river (it was easy to rob corner stores in Quebec). I watched them brood over the small portable chess set, the kind you get at the Dollar Store or the Buck-or-Two. No one spoke. The rickshaws were gone, and I realized that I had done nothing all day. At least in university I could keep myself busy every day. Now I have a degree in history and philosophy, but there are no jobs to be had or money to be made. Believe me, I've tried. I've been steadily looking for work for almost a year now. It's funny how on the first day that I let myself take a break from writing cover letters and prepping for interviews, I feel like shit for not being productive.

I invented an excuse and left the courtyard, but I doubt that my friends noticed my absence. I then crossed the street and went into the big shopping centre that stood as the nucleus of the downtown area. The mall was nearly deserted. I passed a hobo near the public toilets, and a herd of fifteen-year-old girls that came crashing through the cavernous hallways. I noticed one of them wasn't wearing panties as she bent over to pick up a bottle of vodka that had fallen from her bag. Another one with puke all over herself called out to me, then lifted her shirt and revealed her tits. She shouted to get my attention. When I turned around she asked me if I wanted to fuck her.

I gnashed my teeth and felt my jaw flex in front of my ears, then quickened my pace.

The other girls, rather than help their friend who was clearly battle-ready for a night out in Hull, followed suit and exposed themselves to me as well.

I finally reached the bus stop at the opposite end of the shopping centre. It was on a bridge that ran through a sea of concrete, and connected the Sandy Hill downtown area to the Financial District (if you can call it that). I crossed the bridge widthwise, to catch an eastbound bus. Do I have time for a smoke, I thought? I lit one anyways and stood at a distance from the others waiting at the stop. I was enjoying my cigarette, and the feeling of the wind whisking my hair, when I heard a muffled cry. I made my way up the bridge, where it crossed over the Rideau Canal, to see where it was coming from.

When I looked over the edge I saw a group of young men beating up a student on the bicycle path by the water. One of them went through the guy's backpack and took out his laptop. He got the rest of his friends to pin the student down while he slammed the portable computer over his head. Then one of the aggressors grabbed the student's hair and pulled his head up, to watch as the rest of them smashed the laptop on the concrete and threw it in the canal. The thought of calling the police didn't cross my mind, until I heard the sirens approaching.

I turned around and saw the 106 Elmvale pull up to the bus stop, and jogged down the bridge to catch it. As the bus drove on, I thought about everything I had seen that night. It was nothing new. We passed the university and then went deeper into an awkward jungle of cement and greenery (years ago the National Capital Commission tried to liven the area by planting climbing vines on its grey buildings, but it did nothing to relieve the city of its blandness). Not that it mattered... I eventually got off at the stop nearest my parents' house, and as I walked the empty street it was clear to me that I needed to get out of this city.

Kickoff

The red-eye from Ottawa to Frankfurt was awful. The old man sitting next to me kept farting. I hadn't slept, and when we landed in Germany I had six hours to wait for my connection. I could never sleep in airports, they're hunting grounds for thieves and pickpockets. I'd been to Europe before, and I knew how these things went down. I wandered the terminals because I didn't feel like taking a shuttle into town, and when the message boards announced the terminal for my connecting flight to Zurich, I made my way there and sat patiently.

I was going to Italy. I got what I wanted, but at what price? I had to sign up to do a master's degree to leave Ottawa. I was thrilled to go back to Europe for a year, but the realization that I might be too busy to enjoy myself started to hit me. Last year I was complaining of having nothing to do and no money to do it with; it's funny how your decisions come back to haunt you. But it didn't really matter...

When I got to the airport in Zurich I had another two hours to kill before my flight to Florence. I didn't mind because the airports in Switzerland are pristine. Everything was clean, quiet, modern, and they even had those fancy indoor smoking salons. I chose the *Kent* salon because they had nice couches, and sat down to smoke and think.

In August of 2012 I found a minimum-wage, customer service job in a museum in Ottawa. It wasn't the greatest job in the world, but I needed the money. After a few miserable weeks of ripping admission tickets, I figured that if I couldn't find a job I liked, I might as well learn more about the things that interest me. Doing a master's degree was an excuse to get out of town, and I think that's what really sold me on it.

Every night after work I searched the web to find an interesting program. I was sick of seeing cemented and stuccoed buildings, I wanted to be surrounded by brick, stone, wood and tiles; I wanted to go back to the old world. Most programs across the Atlantic were either in the UK or France. Both those places would suit me, but I would never be able to afford an international student's tuition fees in the UK, and my grades weren't high enough to be accepted into a French university. Not even the fact that I was French Canadian, and that French was my mother tongue, could influence my chances. Eventually, I found an English language master's program in museum studies in Italy and sent in my application. Although it took a few months to hear back from them, I got accepted.

From that point on, everything I did was focused on my upcoming year abroad. I didn't really care about the education, I just wanted to get away from Ottawa. So, I took all the extra shifts I could at the museum to raise money for Europe, I read up on the program, on Florence, on Italy, on the neighbourhood I was to live in when I got there, and even dug up some old photos of my first trip to Italy when I was sixteen. Looking back on it all while in the smoking salon in Zurich, I realized I was happy in the months leading up to my departure because I was doing something good for myself. I had something real to look forward to and work towards. That's also when I met Patricia.

All the guys at the museum were in love with Patty. I had never spoken to her but I definitely noticed her. She was small, with long dirty-blond hair in a pony tail that rested over her right shoulder, and amazing legs. Her small brown eyes weren't anything spectacular to look at, but they were proportioned to her face which gave her a natural symmetry, and her tits weren't the biggest either, but every time she walked past me my eyes were nevertheless drawn to their gentle bounce. The only other defining physical feature which I initially took note of were her perfectly manicured hands and painted fingernails. Her legs were what really got me hooked, and her laugh. It wasn't particularly lyrical, but I could hear it resonate through the

exhibitions when she was on shift. That was my cue to patrol the galleries in the hopes of running into her. One day I saw an opportunity, and confidently walked up to her and introduced myself. We spent two hours talking and walking through the exhibitions, instead of tending to the visitors. I could tell she liked me because after that first encounter she'd sit next to me during our morning briefings, and find ways to spend time with me at work. It wasn't long before we started dating. Our relationship quickly became serious, but there was always a bit of tension when I'd bring up my upcoming move to Europe.

One evening, in the early summer of 2013, she called me to say that she was inspired by my efforts to move abroad for a higher education and had just been admitted to a master's program in London. She hadn't told anyone that she'd applied, and waited to receive an answer from the university before going public with the news. I was happy for her. We were in love, I guess.

Although we wouldn't be in the same country, it would still be easy to visit each other between semesters and on breaks; it was a way to keep our relationship alive. Besides, she loved the idea of vacationing in Italy, and I couldn't wait to go back to London. I had been once before when I was fifteen years old and fell in love with its chaos. The only problem with London was that it was expensive, and I had no idea how she'd be able to afford it. Shit, if I could afford it I'd go there over Florence in a heartbeat! We decided that we would visit each other on our respective mid-semester breaks, but that I would also spend my winter break and summer in London.

Things were getting progressively better in the months leading to my departure. We were both happy and excited, and couldn't wait for the adventure. Then, a few months before our respective departures Patty had a severe panic attack. I'm not sure what caused it. I did what was expected of a good boyfriend, and helped her through her hardship. Although her outburst wasn't aimed at me, it was vexing nonetheless.

The rest of the summer went well. I took care of the necessary paperwork to move to Italy, and spent more time than usual with my friends and family to make up for my imminent absence. Patty was also doing well, and was excited for our adventure abroad.

One day I gave my notice, and was promised my job back if I wanted it. No way, I thought. You couldn't pay me enough to stand still for eight hours, and listen to those exhibition audio tracks on repeat all day.

I had smoked an entire pack of cigarettes by the time I sat up to head to my terminal. The flight from Zurich to the Amerigo Vespucci Airport was quick. When we landed in Florence, we walked from the runway to the baggage claim, then straight out to the parking lot. I thought it was odd that there were no customs officers or border guards to question us, or even to stamp our passports. I didn't really care. By then I was running on empty and all I wanted to do was get to my hotel, take a shit, and go to bed. I got into a taxi armed with an address, and through the power of charades I explained to the driver to take me straight to my hotel without stopping to see the sights.

Navigating

I was given a map of the city by the concierge and set off to find the headquarters of my new school. When I checked out of the hotel I was required to pay a 4 Euro *city tax* to the front desk. I tried to explain that I wasn't a tourist, and that I was going to live in Florence for a long time, but he protested saying it was the law.

I fought my way through crowds, dragging my massive suitcase over the broken pavement, and felt embarrassed at the thought of looking like a tourist. No matter where I went, I always tried to blend in with the locals; I never liked being noticed. I hobbled into a cafe to hide myself from the world, but my luggage was too big to squeeze through the door. I gestured to the old man behind the counter to get his attention, and told him I was going to sit outside and wanted a double espresso.

“Dopio,” I said to him, as I took out a pack of non-filtered Gitanes. Upon seeing the cigarettes, he slid an ashtray across the marble counter. I grabbed it, picked a table in the corner of the patio, placed my suitcase on its back under my chair, and lit a smoke. When I was settled, I took everything out of my pockets and laid my stuff on the table. I crumpled my receipts and plane ticket stubs and threw them in the ashtray. My phone, cash, wallet and passport I neatly organized in my front pockets, for the same reason I kept a tight grip on my suitcase with my feet. It wasn't my first trip to Florence, but I couldn't help but feel vulnerable to the city.

The elderly barista came out with my coffee and asked me where in the United States I came from. He placed my cup on the table and smiled patiently.

“I'm not American,” I replied. “I'm Canadian.” He made an inquisitive sound. “Canada!” I said with impatience.

“Ah yes, is nice country...” he said, as he backed away and left.

I lit another cigarette as he walked away and studied my map. I was between Via dei Calzaiuoli and Via Roma, and I needed to head to Via del Giglio. The branch campus headquarters was open all day, so I took my time with the map. I was taught how to navigate when I was in the army, and my training quickly helped me find an alternative route to the school. One that would hopefully avoid the tourists, Gypsies, and Indian or African street vendors that harassed you until you bought something from them (or had your pockets picked by their accomplices while they distracted you).

I folded the map and pulled out another smoke from the dark blue pack. I missed Gitanes, I thought. I only smoked them in Europe, because for whatever reason European cigarettes weren't sold in Canada. I took a drag and the harsh, unfiltered, peppercorn-tasting smoke filled my lungs and rolled up my cheek. Obese T-shirted tourists with butt packs walked past me, all of them looking up at the buildings and sculptures around them. That's how you can tell who's a tourist and who's a local. Tourists always look up, and locals always look down. I smirked when I saw one of them step in dog shit and continue on his trek, none the wiser.

I missed Patty, and thought about what she might be doing at that very moment back in Ottawa. I missed having coffee with Joe in the courtyard and shooting pool with my cousin. I missed sitting with Jim and Adam in the garage, with a case of beer and a pack of smokes. And despite the frequent arguments I had with my parents, I missed them too. I exhaled the smoke from my lungs and combed my fingers through my hair, as I leaned back in my tarnished aluminum chair. I couldn't let the thought bother me. The same sun that was now beating down on me would be beating down on them in a few hours. In the end, I got what I wanted so what's the difference?

The earth had rotated on its axis, and the yellow awning that was protecting me from the heat wasn't doing its job anymore. I threw a few coins in the ashtray, picked up my suitcase

and set off on the alternative route to the school (that I had memorized to avoid taking out my map again).

When I got to the branch campus office, I was greeted by an army of staff members wearing university T-shirts. They were the kind of people you'd imagine yelling "WE SAY SCHOOL, YOU SAY SPIRIT!" at pep rallies. I was lucky to be helped by a younger woman who seemed more down to earth than her colleagues. She gave me a welcome packet with a similar shirt to the ones I was surrounded by, a tote bag with the school emblem on it, a schedule of my orientation week and the key to my apartment. (Since I couldn't speak Italian, I asked the university to sort out my living quarters with a Florentine realtor.) She called me a taxi and I left to discover my new home.

The taxi zoomed passed the San Lorenzo market and basilica, with its unfinished facade, then turned left onto Via De Ginori. The narrow and cobbled street ran northeast towards Piazza della Libertà, then changed its name to Via San Gallo once passed Via Guelfa. Of all the places I'd seen since being here, this street looked the most Italian. It seemed like a quiet area with families, and as far as I could tell from the cab ride, there were no tourists. I knew I was fortunate to be living on San Gallo for the next two semesters.

We stopped in front of an unassuming stone building and the driver told me that he had to drop me off there, because if he drove me to my front door it would be a major detour for him to get back. He told me to walk until I reached a building with three Italian flags hanging from its roof. Once again, and much to my dismay, I was back on the street with my massive suitcase.

When I got to my destination I saw a skinny middle-aged man waiting for me on the sidewalk. He waved and asked me my name.

“Hello,” I said with a smile. “Yes, I'm André Roquebrune.”

He quickly shook my hand and introduced himself. “I am Leonardo, the landlord. Welcome to San Gallo.” He took my suitcase and led me across the street, to a building with heavy wooden doors riddled with cast-iron studs.

The lobby was vast and dark. To the right stood an impressive stone staircase with an ornate but neglected handrail, and overhead was a big skylight that looked like it hadn't been cleaned in a century. As Leonardo led me up the stairs I counted half a dozen marble statues in the lobby, all of which were draped in cobwebs.

We stopped on the first level and Leonardo led me to my unit. He unlocked the front door and extended his arm to invite me in. The place seemed nice enough. There was a main area with a loveseat and small coffee table, an old buffet along the far wall, and next to a massive window was a big octagonal glass dinner table. Where's the kitchen, I thought? I walked further into the room and noticed a small area that was closed off from the rest of the apartment. It looked like a long closet but it only had one sliding door. I opened it and stepped inside, then ran into the stove. The kitchen was about ten feet long by five feet wide. I could barely fit between the line of appliances and the wall. To the far right was the sink and drying rack, then stuck against its left was the stove and oven. Adjacent to the oven was the washing machine (the top of which doubled as counter space), and squeezed between the washer and the left wall closing off the space was a fridge. Of course, I thought. Fucking Italy, eh?

As I stepped out of the kitchen, I thought there was no way the oven door could be opened without hitting the wall. I tried it and to my surprise it folded all the way down, but only because it stuck out of the entryway of the narrow space.

Leonardo had placed my suitcase by the front door and waited patiently, like a bell-boy expecting a tip. All the while, I inspected the rest of the apartment. I noticed a wooden staircase running up the wall, that led to a loft area. I climbed up (each step creaked louder than the last)

and saw a dresser, a closet, two single beds separated by two night tables, and what seemed to be the door to the bathroom. From the loft, I heard Leonardo say something about the apartment being open.

“Spatial?” I asked.

“It’s big, no?”

“Spacious,” I corrected. “Can I push the beds together?”

“Afraid not, young man,” he replied. “Your roommate too needs a place to sleep.”

“Roommate?” I replied with tension in my voice. “I thought I was going to be alone in here.”

“The university told me there was another... He will be here soon.”

I exhaled loudly. “OK. Thank you Leonardo.”

I tried both beds and picked the one that felt the most comfortable. If I have a roommate and I'm the first one here, then I should get first dibs on the best bed, I thought. Leonardo left his business card on the dining table and stepped out, shutting the front door behind him. By then I had to take a piss, so I walked towards the bathroom and inevitably sighed when I saw the state of it.

The bathroom's floor, walls and ceiling were covered in small brown tiles. To the left of the door was a toilet with a thick brown ring of crap residue inside of it, next to it was a bidet with a cigarette butt in it, hanging above them was a small hot-water tank, and stuck on the wall was a piece of paper with the words “PLEASE DO NOT FLUSH TAMPONS DOWN THE TOILET” written in permanent marker. To the right of the door was a little sink and mirror, and a small stand-up shower. I quickly drew the shower curtain and the brown, watery liquid stuck between its folds splashed my jeans. The smell of mold quickly filled the air and I scrambled to open the window as fast as I could to aerate the room. The curtain was too long for the shower. It was white and clean at the top, and the further down it went the darker it got.

There was about a foot's worth of fabric lying on the floor of the shower. I lightly squished it with my shoe and felt the swampy mass expel dark water and quickly reabsorb it when I stepped off. "Jesus..." I muttered.

I still had to pee so I turned to the toilet and studied it before making my move. I didn't want to risk splashing up any of the brown sludge inside of it with my stream. Maybe if I flushed, the flow of water could get rid of some of the grunge, I thought. I pushed the lever down with my foot and heard a loud bang in the wall next to me, then I saw a big bubble burst out of the toilet, expelling some of the gunk onto the seat and floor. "Fuck this", I heard myself say out loud. I went to the sink and turned on the tap, unzipped my pants, and watched my dark, dehydrated urine mix with the brown water as it was swallowed by the drain.

When I was finished I let the water run for a few minutes, and guided it with my hands to rinse the sides of the sink. After a while it ran clear and transparent; a wave of relief came over me. At least something sort of worked in this place, I thought. Turning the tap off, I took a moment to look at myself in the mirror, and studied my tired face. I thought about Patty and felt like messaging her. A noise downstairs broke my contemplation so I stepped out of the bathroom and looked down into the apartment, resting my forearms on the loft's fragile railing. A tall and muscular man, wearing black sweatpants and a Philadelphia Phillies t-shirt, had walked into the apartment with two big suitcases. He looked around and I heard him mumble "OK..." before he grabbed his bags and set up the rickety stairs to the loft. He was halfway up when he noticed me, and he gave me a nod to acknowledge my presence. He got to the very last step and the tip of his shoe clipped the tiny wooden lip that ran along the edge of the loft. The man lost his balance and fell over one of his suitcases; he lost his grip on the other and it slid down the stairs.

"Need a hand?" I asked, not having moved since I heard him enter.

“Nah, I got this,” he replied as he stood up and observed the damage done to his luggage. “Are you here for the museum program?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “I’m André Roquebrune.”

“Ryan Pinkney. I’m in the program too.” He came towards me and shook my hand.

“Let me give you a hand.” I went down the stairs to grab his fallen suitcase when I heard him going into the bathroom. “The bathroom is fucked! We’re gonna have to figure something out,” I said hurriedly. There was no reply, but I heard the water flowing in the sink as I clambered up with his luggage.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I just took a piss in the sink. That bathroom is fucked!” he said as he wiped his hands on his sweatpants. It dawned on me that we still didn’t have any hand soap.

“It’s all good, I did the same.”

He quietly looked around the loft and seemed a little worried. “We’re gonna have to do something about this room,” he said. “The beds are close enough that we can hold hands in our sleep.”

“For sure! You seem like a nice guy and all, but…”

“Say no more, Man…” he interrupted. “I have an idea.”

We pushed the beds as far apart as they could go. Ryan pushed his all the way into the corner, by the far wall, and I slid mine as close to the bathroom as it could go. Then we took the two night tables and the dresser, and placed them between the beds. We both knew that we weren’t going to get any privacy in this apartment, no matter what we did. But at least our faces would now be hidden by the dresser when we slept.

Once we were done redecorating we divided-up the dresser drawers and claimed our sides of the closet, then unpacked our things and studied our orientation packets. We had a meeting with the program administrators, professors and fellow classmates that evening in an

old church on Via Faenza. There were still two hours to kill before our meeting so we set out to explore the neighbourhood on our way to the church.

We walked down Via San Gallo and turned right at the San Lorenzo Market. “OK, so if this is the Medici Chapel,” Ryan said as he pointed to an old stone building on our left, “then that street has to be Faenza.” He raised a map in front of his face and squinted to read the fine print. As soon as he took out the map I threw myself onto the Chapel and lit a smoke. I wanted nothing to do with a person holding a map in a place like this, so I leaned up against a historical building and pretended to be a loitering local. It was a good thing I did, because in a matter of seconds Ryan was swarmed by beggars and street venders. I watched him evade them and dart into a cafe, and a few moments later I casually walked in and sat beside to him.

“Where the fuck were you?!” he cried.

“Haven’t you been to Europe before, Bud?” I asked.

“Yeah, a few times...”

“Then you should fucking know better,” I said with a laugh.

We ordered coffee and took a moment to look at our map, now that we were protected from the chaos of the street. We were close, but Ryan felt the need to ask the barista for directions in broken Italian.

“I didn't know you speak the language,” I said.

“Yeah, a little. My mom's Italian but we never get to speak it where I'm from.”

“Where's home?”

“A little place called Allentown, Pennsylvania,” he replied. “What about you, where are you from?”

“Ottawa, Ontario,” I said.

“Never heard of it...”

“It's in Canada.” There was a long silence, as though he was processing the fact that I was not American. I wasn't insulted that he didn't know about Ottawa. Most people outside of Canada didn't know anything about my country, so I've gotten used to explaining myself. I once met an American who thought that Montreal was in the state of Vermont.

I watched Ryan think, then go back to studying his map. “We should go find this place,” I said, to break the silence. He nodded and we paid for our coffees, then continued our search.

The sun was setting on Via Faenza, but was still up in other parts of the city. The tall buildings on the narrow street hid the light, and the creeping darkness brought with it the humid, mosquito-laden Tuscan evening. We walked north till we reached an old crumbling stone building; it was the church of San Jacopo in Campo Corbolini, built about eight hundred years ago, and the location of our meeting. The school used it for various purposes and owned the adjacent building, which mostly served as offices for its professors.

“K, well now we know where it is. Do you feel like sitting in there for an hour before our meeting?” I asked.

“No point, Man. Let's just keep exploring and make our way back to it,” Ryan replied.

“I saw a bar down the road,” I said. “Feel like grabbing a quick drink before we meet the rest of our class?” I figured that if I was going to live with this stranger for an entire school year, I should probably get to know him first. He agreed to a drink and we walked back up the road, stopping at the Dublin Pub.

We were the only ones in the place when we showed up. It was dark, and half the stools were still perched upside down on their respective tables. I ordered a lager and waited for Ryan to get a drink. When he got his pint, he reached into his pocket and produced a twenty euro note, but I was quicker and gave my money to the bartender before he could. I made an overt *'your money's no good here'* gesture, and he quietly accepted my generosity. We drank in silence, but each of us tried to make small talk from time to time. I kept looking towards the

street, hinting that I wanted to go for a smoke. Ryan got the message and he asked the barkeep if we could stand outside with our pints, to which he agreed as long as we didn't head to the bar next door with our glasses. The smoke was a short-lived excursion. Soon we were back at the bar, and this time Ryan was paying for our pints.

On the fourth drink we had no issues making conversation. We were both loud and rambunctious, and made jokes about what to expect from the master's program. Ryan was finishing up his pint as I was taking out a fresh Gitanes and moistening its filterless tip by rolling it on my lower lip. He was drinking straight foam from the bottom of his glass, but I didn't want to kill his moment so I let him force it down his gullet with a painful expression, while I pretended to be distracted by my phone. I drank the last quarter of my pint in one long gulp and we stepped outside for me to smoke, now acting like old war buddies and slapping each other on the back.

"Man, I'm glad I got paired with you for this thing!" he said. "I was afraid that you were going to turn out to be some sort of Minkus, but you're alright, André."

"What the fuck's a Minkus?!" I said with a laugh.

"You know, the nerd from *Boy Meet's World*? I was worried that you'd be the kind of guy to say 'You're having another beer?!', when we're out drinking on a Friday night."

"Nah, that's not me." I laughed as I said it, and my breath extinguished the flame that I held close to my face to light my cigarette. When he saw me struggling with my lighter, Ryan took out a book of matches and lit my smoke for me. "Cheers," I said. "I think this is going to be a good year, Ryan."

"Call me Pink, Man. All my friends back home do," he said.

"Pink? Where's that come from?" I asked.

"It's my last name, Pinkney. But just shortened."

“Well alright *Pink*,” I said exaggeratedly. “I think we're gonna get along.” The beer did what it was supposed to. Mission accomplished, I thought. I took a couple of drags from my smoke and realized it was getting darker by the minute. “What time is it, by the way?” I asked.

“Fuck! We have three minutes till the meeting starts!” Pink shouted.

We ran up the street and saw a few students standing around the entrance of the church. The program director was ushering them inside with a smile, but then Pink and I showed up. We were sweaty and stank of beer. My smoke was hanging from the corner of my lips and my shirt was covered in ashes, and Pink was still carrying his empty pint glass and had foam on his chin. The director's expression changed from cheerful to scared. She probably thought we were a couple of bums who were just trying to stir some shit. I couldn't blame her, we looked and smelled the part. Nevertheless, we produced our ID's and she let us in.

The first room inside the church was a small, dark vestibule. Pink placed his glass on the table next to the liturgical booklets, and I furiously puffed on my soggy cigarette butt to ingest in as much nicotine as I could before our meeting. We walked through the vestibule and into the church, and our voices suddenly echoed. Everyone inside heard me say “Let us pray!” The room went quiet and everyone turned towards us. We hurried to sit down and found two seats off to the side of the group; our future classmates and professors silently judging us as we settled in.

The church itself was a little underwhelming, as far as churches in Florence go. The walls were mostly whitewashed, but you could see a few frescoes creeping out behind the crumbling plaster. A few medieval tombs were peppered across the floor of the apse, and I recall one of my professors sitting over the remains of what seemed to be a very important person from the fifteenth century. I thought about Patty.

The program director started to speak, and welcomed us all to the Master of Arts in Museum Studies program. She promised that this year would be extremely demanding and

challenging, and that we would have a very heavy workload. “This program condenses a two-year master’s program into one, with ten seminars, a two hundred and fifty-hour internship, a full thesis and *viva voce* defence...” I zoned in and out as she spoke and the church was spinning a little, but not to the point of danger. I felt like I was on holiday, and it must have looked like I was because the director kept looking at me funny. I really shouldn't have drunk so much, or at all for that matter. This was the ice-breaker; this first get-together would define me for the rest of the year.

The time came for all of us to introduce ourselves. Everyone took a turn, stating their name and where they came from, then explaining their particular interests in museology. Pink and I were the only guys in our cohort, the rest were women from all over North America. When my turn came to speak I tried not to slur my words, but I tried so hard that I over enunciated every syllable. I wrapped-up my little speech very quickly, and felt like my classmates and professors (whose names I had already forgotten) thought I was an idiot. Nevertheless, I leaned back in my seat with forced contempt. Pink was the last to speak, but his interaction was even worse than mine.

“Hi, my name is Ryan Pinkn...” He had barely started his sentence when a loud burp escaped his stomach and echoed throughout the church. The air smelled of beer, and he waved his hand over his mouth as he excused himself before completing his introduction. When he had finished speaking, he sat upright and looked at the group with a smile.

As Pink was the last to speak, the program director concluded the session by welcoming us all again to the master’s program, and then invited us all to a school-wide *aperitivo* at the Bargello later that evening. Thank God, I thought, they’re gonna feed us!

The Head Gardener

I woke up in my bed at six o'clock that morning, still drunk. My pants were on, but for some reason I wasn't wearing any underwear. I swore I remembered having them on last night. I heard Pink scrambling about in the kitchen, and I had to take a moment to come to terms with my hangover. After a low rumbling burp, I was able to stop my eyes from rolling in the back of my head long enough to look down at myself. Shit, I thought, I'm covered in mosquito bites. The bumps on my skin only started to itch when I noticed them, and I took a few minutes to scratch myself.

I reached for my phone to send Patty a 'good-morning' message, but my arm was too heavy to make it past the edge of my bed. I quickly gave up and focused on getting some food in me, to soak up last night's alcohol that was still in my stomach. The first step was to get out of bed. The mental preparation for this took another five minutes, as I had to psych myself into contracting my abdominal muscles to sit upright. I tensed my pot-bellied gut and another burp came out, only this one carried a bit of vomit up my esophagus. I moaned in pain at the burning sensation in my throat and chest, and Pink took notice.

"Good morning, Man," he said in a chipper tone.

"Ughhh, yeah..."

"Get up Yo, we got a breakfast thing at the Palazzo Strozzi." Not hearing any movement from the loft, he pressed on and said "I made us some coffee..."

Whatever he made it didn't smell like coffee. But seeing as he went through the trouble, I tried again to get myself out of bed. Alright, I thought, here we go. One, two, three! Nothing. Come on André, I told myself, you're a big boy. Time to get up and have breakfast with the church-goers from yesterday. With a painful groan, I managed to drop my right leg over the

side of the bed, and the rest of my body followed suit. I fell to the ground then sat up, with both legs outstretched on the floor and my shoulders against the side of the mattress. The sunlight was coming in from the big kitchen window and I noticed that Pink had already made his bed and tidied his side of the room. I wondered if Patty ever had mornings like this. I felt myself smirk but didn't make a sound, and quickly focused on the task at hand.

I leaned over to my right side, opened the bottom dresser drawer and took out a fresh pair of underwear and socks. I guess that's it for the pair I had on yesterday, I thought. I wiggled my pants off, making sure that I was out of Pink's line of sight, and pulled my underwear on. By now I had managed to sit up on my bed, and finished dressing myself. A few burps later I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth and combing my hair.

When I sat down at the kitchen table my initial reaction was to light a smoke, but Pink was quicker and took my pack away, and placed a cup of coffee in front of me instead. I looked at the drink that had clumps of coffee grinds floating on its surface, then at Pink who was smiling encouragingly. "Mmmmm... This coffee tastes like shit," I said with a smile.

"Yeah, I know, man. We don't have a coffee maker so I just boiled some water in a pot and threw a bunch of coffee grinds in there for a few minutes."

"I didn't know it was possible to fuck up a cup of coffee."

"Shut up and drink it," replied Pink. "We gotta get going."

"How am I doing for smokes?"

"You got two left."

"K, I'll need to get more on the way to Strozzi."

I drank as much of the coffee as I could, then dumped the rest in the kitchen sink when Pink was upstairs in the bathroom. I'm OK; I'll be fine, I thought. I just wanted to make it through breakfast. Pink came down, then we traveled south on the empty streets of Florence towards the Palazzo Strozzi.

We came to a small corner store by the San Lorenzo Market and I noticed that I only had a few Euros in my pockets, not enough for a pack of Gitanes. The old man behind the counter looked at me over his newspaper and greeted me with a jovial “Salve!”. I asked him if he spoke English and he indicated that he understood enough to get by, by pinching his fingers and squinting.

“What’s the cheapest tobacco you have?” I asked.

The man looked at the selection behind him and then back at me, rubbing his index and thumb together. I showed him how much money I had and he nodded, then reached for a pack of Lucky Strike tobacco and a small pack of OCB rolling papers. I hadn’t rolled a cigarette since the army, but if this was the cheapest option then I might as well get used to it. “OK,” I said as I handed him the money, “grazie mille.”

Pink was waiting for me outside, arguing with an African vender peddling Florence guide books and Rasta bracelets. “Let’s go,” he said as he saw me walk out of the convenience store.

“Hang on, just let me try rolling a smoke.”

“Fuck that! I’m being harassed over here, you can roll and walk.”

I had wasted a lot of tobacco trying to get my rolling back up to snuff, but eventually I managed to make myself a decent cigarette. I lit it and took a drag.

The Palazzo Strozzi was just beyond Piazza della Repubblica, and looked like any other nobleman’s house from renaissance Florence. It was cubic and three stories high, with a central open-air courtyard. People used to live there. For hundreds of years they used to eat, sleep, fuck and shit in this house. Now it was one of Florence’s only contemporary art exhibition

spaces. I smirked when I realized that today the only shit and semen in this building were on the canvasses on display in its halls.

Pink and I walked inside the Palazzo, through a massive stone archway and into the central courtyard. Off to one side was the café where we were to meet our colleagues and staff for breakfast. It had an outside patio that was partially covered by the floor of the second story, which made it an ideal place to enjoy a cigarette and a beverage.

We stepped inside the café and were halted by a barista who asked to see our student ID cards. When he was satisfied that we were allowed to be there, he moved aside and we noticed a spread of croissants and pastries, along with various juices and coffees, neatly placed on a long table by the back wall. We headed towards our breakfast, and we noticed our colleagues from the previous night's church fiasco sitting at various tables near the buffet. A few of them laughed when we walked in. I ignored them and went straight for the food, piling as much as I could on my little plate.

I sat across from Pink, who had picked the farthest table from the group, and admired my pyramid of baked goods. I grabbed a pastry and stuffed it in my mouth, and used my fingers to push its corners into the empty spaces of my cheeks. I felt a sudden rush of nausea come over me when I realized that the croissant was covered in sweet syrup. I turned towards the wall and spat out the half-masticated pastry into a napkin; the sight of which did little to appease my stomach. I tried again with a different one, only to discover that it too was covered in sweet glaze. Nothing was going right this morning. Pink, who hadn't said a word since we sat down, was devouring the contents of his plate so fast that I wondered if he could taste what he was shoving in his mouth. I resigned myself to getting a small glass of orange juice and sipped it slowly with my eyes closed. My phone buzzed in my pocket and I saw that Patty had messaged me to wish me luck. I slowly put the phone back in my pocket, as one of my female classmates

asked me if I was OK. She was sitting at the table next to ours. I couldn't remember her name, but I explained that I wasn't expecting all Italian breakfast foods to be sweet.

"I don't do sugar very well," I said, "especially when it's this early in the morning, and after a night of hard drinking." She nodded and went back to her meal.

The program director stood up and softly repeated the words 'good morning' until we all settled down. Everyone but Pink and I had turned their chairs to look at her. I was listening to what she was saying, but my eyes were fixed on my orange juice.

"Good morning everyone. I want to welcome you all to this year's..." I forced myself to acknowledge her presence, and when I turned to look at her my head began to throb. I noticed she had a habit of intertwining her fingers in weird ways when she got excited about something. "...and I have the great pleasure of introducing to you the director of the Palazzo Strozzi, and one of your professors for this year, Dr. Oswald Whitfield." The cohort gave a low clap, and the program director backed away slowly to make room for the man in question.

A tall man in his mid-50s briskly walked into the café and stopped square in front of us with his arms outstretched, like a showman preparing to take a bow. He wore a colourful waistcoat to complete his three-piece suit, and small circular glasses that pinched the bridge of his nose. Physically he was an imposing man with big hands and feet, had a sharp part in his hair (a mesh of which always flopped down over his ear because of his aggressive widow's peak), and carried a gut that pushed the fringes of his waistcoat a few inches forward of his belt. I watched his entrance with one eyebrow raised, and noticed that Pink was looking at him the same way.

"Thank you Doctor, for that lovely introduction. Although a simple 'Hey there' would have been fine," said Whitfield. The program director was the only one to laugh. Whitfield lowered his hands and continued his speech. "So, as you all know, my name is Dr. Whitfield and I am the head gardener at the Palazzo Strozzi. You'll all soon learn that running a museum

is not a one-man operation, and if you trust your staff and let them do what you hired them to do, then it'll be a piece of cake. And one day when you are all museum directors, all you'll need to worry about is making sure the flower arrangements in your café are being looked after." Half of our group chuckled and the other half nodded slowly in discomfort. This man was an alpha, and did not mind being the centre of attention. He pressed on: "So that's why I say that I'm the head gardener, because my staff is so competent that I can let them do what they need to do, and all I need to worry about are the little things – like the flower centerpieces on your tables – which all play a big role in enhancing the *visitor experience*." He placed his right hand in his pocket and the back of his left wrist against his hip, then leaned his weight back on his left leg. "We are in the business of creating meaning. Everything you see in a museum is artificial. Every wall, every bench, the wattage of the lights, the levels of humidity, the colours of the fire extinguishers, absolutely everything is controlled and decided upon to ensure that visitors leave having gained a meaningful experience. But there will be plenty of time to talk about that in the upcoming academic year. For now, I want you all to enjoy yourselves and please," he leaned in as if he wanted to tell us a secret, "please, pig out! You're all poor students, so eat as much as you can because I'm not paying for it and neither are you! Ha!" He quickly thanked us for our time then walked out of the café with a big "Arrivederci", which he carried in his voice until he was at the opposite end of the courtyard.

Pink turned and faced me with both eyebrows raised. "OK then," he said.

I asked him what he thought of the man and he mumbled something about a 'fucking show-off'. I thought he seemed alright.

"Nah Man, he's a loud mouth. I'm sure he's earned his stripes, and I'll learn what I can from him in class, but his demeanor rubbed me the wrong way just now."

“Fair enough,” I said, as I stood to get a coffee and grabbed an ashtray. “You wanna sit on the couches outside with me while I smoke?” I didn’t feel like being near my classmates, especially not after I spat up that croissant. Pink obliged me and we walked out.

We talked about the previous night and I asked him what had happened. I couldn’t remember much.

“You said it was your birthday, so I bought you loads of shots...”

“Shit, it is my birthday eh?” I lit a smoke and smiled with my head down.

“What, it’s today?” Pink asked.

“Yeah. I’m twenty-three today.”

“Well happy fucking birthday, Man!” said Pink as he slapped my shoulder. “I thought you were born yesterday, but now we have a reason to get fucked up again tonight!”

I hesitated to answer, but told him that I wasn’t going to drink today because I couldn’t find my underwear when I woke up that morning.

“Yeah you were going pretty hard yesterday. I don’t know where they went, but I remember you going around asking everyone if they’d seen them.”

I rubbed my index and thumb against my eyes and took a deep breath. “Why did you feed me so many shots, Pink?”

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s your birthday and I know you’d do the same for me.”

Would I, I thought? It didn’t matter at this point. I nodded and sent Patty a plain and overdue ‘good-morning’ message, then went back to my Americano coffee.

I began to roll another cigarette when Pink gave out a low chuckle. The rest of our classmates were leaving the café, and laughed when they saw me struggle with my tobacco. As they walked past, Cynthia (a girl roughly my age, from Upstate New York) yelled “Did you

find your underwear yet, André?” They all laughed again, and I gulped my coffee to try and hide my face with the cup.

“It’s alright man,” said Pink as he laughed with them. “You’re gonna have to take a little abuse for a while. Then one of them will find a way to embarrass themselves and we’ll forget all about your underwear.”

“Lovely...” I muttered as I lit my smoke.

Leaky Pipes

The cobblestones were wet when I left the university's branch campus, where I had been studying all evening. It was already midnight and I still hadn't had dinner, but I was too exhausted to care. I planned on a cigarette and a cup of coffee for supper. The air was sticky and smelled of dog shit, and my slicked brown hair that the wind had dishevelled fell over my face. All the shops were closed, the market stalls were gone, and there wasn't a human in sight. Florence was bare.

I heard some signs of life as I walked up Via San Gallo to my apartment. The remnants of a great party, no doubt. Still, there weren't any people around, and the voices seemed to emanate from an open window on the top floor of a dilapidated building. I continued to my apartment, and crossed over to the other side of the street only once to avoid stepping in a big pile of dog crap spread over the entire width of the narrow sidewalk.

When I got home I noticed Pink was already asleep in the loft, so I turned on a few lamps downstairs to avoid waking him up with the main lights. I went into the kitchen and took out the necessary tools for my meager dinner, doing everything I could not to bang or clink any of the pots in the process. The saucepan took ages to boil, but Pink and I had perfected the art of stovetop coffee making. It still tasted like crap, but at least it was coffee. When my cup was ready, I rolled a smoke and opened the window. I leaned against the sill and puffed away in silence. Halfway through my smoke I read the messages Patty had sent me throughout the day, and responded accordingly. A series of *Ouh's*, *Ah's* and *That sounds like fun*. I was too tired to engage in a lively conversation over text, so I ended my messaging with a *Have a nice day tomorrow and message me when you can. I love you and goodnight*. I flicked my cigarette butt out the window then turned the lamps off, and returned to the kitchen. I threw out the rest of

my coffee in the sink, rinsed my cup and poured a bit of Pink's vodka in it. The cup was still wet in my hands, and I knocked the booze back before washing it and placing it on the dishrack. I stood in silence in the dark kitchen and took a few deep breaths. The burp eventually came, and when it did I locked the windows shut before going upstairs.

I stripped down to my underwear in the dark, organized my things then went into the bathroom. Staring at myself in the mirror as I brushed my teeth, I noticed the bags under my eyes. They had become permanent. I spat the diluted toothpaste from my mouth, rinsed my toothbrush, and gargled as silently as I could. I tried to be quiet with my movements as I stepped into the shower, but Pink would have to live with the sound of the water. It had been a long day and I took a few extra minutes to stand under the hot water with my eyes closed. It would have been a relaxing affair if I didn't have to keep readjusting the moldy shower curtain to prevent it from obstructing the drain. The water was at an uncomfortably high level, and I stood on my toes in the corner of the stall to minimise my contact with the grungy curtain.

After fifteen minutes, I turned the water off and stood in my spot while I waited for the water levels on the floor of the shower to drop. The soapy liquid wasn't disappearing as it should, but I assumed it would be gone by morning, in time for Pink's wake-up routine. When I drew the curtain to step out and grab my towel I noticed the water had overflowed from the shower onto the floor of the bathroom. It had also made its way out from under the bathroom door, and into the loft where our beds were.

I quickly dried myself and wrapped the towel around my waist, then tiptoed out of the bathroom to examine the damage. The bags that were stashed under my bed were soaked through, and Pink's shoes at the end of the room suffered the same fate. A soothing emptiness came over me, and I considered leaving the floors as they were and going to sleep. Nevertheless, I threw on a t-shirt and sweatpants, then got my bags from under the bed and tried to dry them off with paper towels. I made my way to Pink's side of the room and grabbed

his shoes, which I took downstairs and placed by the front door on the welcome-mat to dry. The mop and bucket were in the communal janitorial closet in the hallway outside my apartment, and by then I didn't care about the creaking steps as I walked back up to the loft with the cleaning tools.

I tried to mop up the spill with only the bathroom light on, but quickly realized that I was getting nowhere fast, and turned on the main light. Pink, who was facing the far wall with his back to me, woke up and asked me what time it was.

“It's two in the fucking morning, Bud!” Anger brought out my Canadian accent.

He turned towards me to see what was wrong. “Oh good, you're cleaning...”

“The fucking shower overflowed again, only this time it's really bad!”

“Ugh... Well now I'm awake and I have to piss...”

I told him to go in the kitchen sink and continued my chore.

Moments later Pink came back upstairs, now fully awake, and with the rest of his vodka. He walked into the bathroom to observe the damage. “Alright, let's knock this cocksucker out right now. I think I saw a bottle of *Drano* near the radiator downstairs,” he said as he took a swig and passed me the clear plastic bottle of supermarket-brand booze. He grabbed the cleaning product and we both set to work mopping up the water. Next, we negotiated the shower curtain, which we simply tore down and threw away. We told each other that we'd just get a new one the following day. Then, we turned to the shower's drain cover and noticed that it was held in place by a tiny screw at its centre. We didn't have a screwdriver, so I ran downstairs to get a butter knife from the kitchen, and I worked away at the rusty screw. I eventually succeeded in removing the cover, and Pink poured the entire bottle of *Drano* down the hole in the shower's floor.

We had to let the chemical work its way through the pipes for half an hour before flushing the chemicals with hot water, so Pink sat down on the toilet for the wait, wearing only

his basketball shorts and a sleeveless undershirt. I leaned against the sink and we listened to the gurgling in the drain, as we passed the bottle back and forth. Our silence soon turned to laughter when Pink farted and said “I might as well be taking a shit right now, Man.”

“Well you’re not doing that in the kitchen sink!” It felt good to laugh. I rolled us each a cigarette and we smoked in silence, as we emptied the contents of the bottle.

Twenty minutes later, and sick of waiting, I turned on the hot water and aimed the showerhead into the drain. “Let’s give it ten minutes.” I rolled myself another smoke and asked Pink about his evening. He told me he ate his chicken breast and broccoli, then watched a crappy movie in bed.

“Sounds like a good night...” I said.

“What about you?”

I explained that I had tried to study at the branch campus, but the girls wouldn’t stop talking. “At least they didn’t mention the church thing from last week.”

“I told you it’d run its course eventually...”

The sound of the flowing showerhead was relaxing, and the steam from the hot water was making me feel sleepy. The water levels weren’t rising in the shower anymore, and I started to relax.

Pink, still slouched on the toilet, suddenly sat upright. “Do you hear that?” he asked. I leaned towards the bathroom door and heard dripping, so I turned off the shower and we listened in horror at the loud splash coming from downstairs. I ran to the wooden railing in the loft and looked over. “FUCK!” Pink sauntered out of the bathroom and saw the flooded main floor for himself. He began to laugh.

When we got downstairs we noticed water pouring from a light fixture that was on the ceiling directly beneath the shower. Pink stood with his hands in his pockets and looked up at the drip. “Yeah, that’s our problem, right there...” he said with a matter-of-fact tone.

“Shut up, Man,” I said as I squatted beside him with my elbows on my knees, and rubbed my eyes with my palms. I breathed deeply once or twice, then got up and turned on the lamps. Pink clicked the breaker and disengaged the circuit to the flooded light fixture, then dragged a wicker chair from the sitting area to the scene. I got the mop and bucket out again, and Pink stood on the chair to remove the glass dome covering the light. He steadied himself a few times because the cover was full of water, and I flicked on my lighter and held it above my head to help him to see the clasps better. When he had unbuckled the dome from the ceiling, I held the bucket up and he poured its contents into it, splashing me in the process.

“Oh shit, sorry Bro...”

“Ugh, fuck it,” I said, then let out a desperate-sounding exhale.

“Oh, don’t be like that!” he said, sarcastically. “These are the moments you’ll remember for the rest of your life!”

I shook my head and smirked. I half expected the floor to cave in or the upstairs neighbours to come crashing through the ceiling.

I mopped up the spill while Pink stood on the chair with the bucket over his head, to capture as much of the remaining water as possible. When we were both satisfied that we had done everything we could, we left the bucket under the light fixture and went back upstairs to look at the shower. Upon closer inspection, we realized that the rusty screw that held the drain cover in place, also held the drain pipe in place. “Shit! Pink, remember that little screw? When we took off the cover we also disconnected the drain pipe from the base of the shower!”

It took a moment for Pink to process the fact that we had poured an entire bottle of *Drano* through the floor of the bathroom, and washed it down for ages through insulation, flooring and drywall. I relished the expressions on his face, as they changed from confusion, to merriment, to horror. He pinched the webbing of his right palm with his opposite hand’s thumb and index finger, and regained his composure.

“OK, here’s what we do. It’s almost three in the morning and we’re not gonna fix this tonight. So, let’s just put the drain cover back in the shower and call Lorenzo tomorrow morning. We’ll just say that the shower is fucked so we need him to come fix it.”

“Are you insane!?” I yelled. “We can’t have him see the apartment in the state that it’s in!”

“Don’t worry about it, Man. It’s his job to fix things for us if they break.”

“Yeah but he’ll know that we fucked up his shower, light and whatever other materials were between the two!” I said. Pink disagreed with me. “He’s Italian! He knows about construction and shit! We’ll never get our deposits back!”

“OK, OK, don’t get excited,” he said. “Let’s just put the cover back on, wait a few days for the light fixture to dry out, and see how bad the ceiling looks around it. Then, if it’s all good, we’ll give Boss-Man Lorenzo a shout and ask him to fix the shower. We’ll tell him it overflowed because you have long hair and it got caught in the pipes or something.”

I retorted with a snarky remark about how the drain was probably clogged because of him jerking off in the shower every day. We both laughed and concluded that all we’d tell the landlord was that the shower was clogged and we didn’t know why, so we’d like him to fix it. Pink also convinced me to keep my mouth shut about the light.

“If he asks, we say we never noticed it wasn’t working because we only use the lamps. OK?” said Pink.

I was very nervous at the thought of being discovered by Lorenzo, but I could barely stand up by that point. Maybe Pink was right. Lorenzo probably dealt with a bunch of stupid young students, and he’d probably had bigger issues than a clogged shower.

We tidied up the bathroom and placed the cover back on the drain of the shower. “I’ll get us a new shower curtain from the ‘99 Centesimi’ store tomorrow on my way home, and the bathroom’ll look like nothing happened,” said Pink.

I thanked him, then walked to my bed and plopped myself onto it. It was too hot to sleep under the covers and I was too exhausted to move, so I resigned myself to sleeping where I laid. “Goodnight Pink, thanks for your help.”

“No worries, Man. Night.”

Seconds later, I felt my arms and legs get heavy, and my breathing slowed down. Fuck me, what a day. A wave of relaxation came over me and I slipped into a deep state of suspended consciousness. An instant before I crossed the line from napping to hibernation, I was resuscitated by the sound of a mosquito buzzing around my face. That jolt back to reality was painful in so many ways.

Alight Here for London Overground and National Rail Services

The shortest leg of my journey was the flight from Pisa to Stansted. I woke up at four o'clock that morning and double-checked the contents of my backpack. Pink, for once, slept heavily since he had gone drinking with our classmates the night before. I hadn't joined them because I was busy preparing for my nine-day visit with Patty in London.

Once I was satisfied with my packing job, I went downstairs and made a stove-top cup of coffee. I sat at the dining table to smoke and looked out the window. Florence was slowly waking up.

I tried taking a shit before leaving the apartment, because I didn't want to get stuck having to go on the plane. Patty had also told me that it was a long trek from the airport to South East London, so I didn't want to risk it. I sat on the toilet and looked at the new shower curtain Pink had bought the day after the flood. It was short and couldn't reach the floor of the shower, so we hung it with long twist-ties, instead of the rings it came with, to lower it a bit. Still sitting, I took out my phone and scrolled through the last day's messages between Patty and me. We were excited to be reunited, and went over every aspect of my journey and of our schedule in detail. She knew my flight number, my itinerary, my bus times, and I had her address, the location where we would meet, and a list of landmarks with which to orient myself if I got lost or sidetracked. As I read our messages, I noticed that every second one went something like "I love you so much, I can't wait for tomorrow!" I felt I was, for the first time in months, truly happy. The only upsetting part of that morning was that despite my best efforts, I couldn't make myself go to the bathroom. If I got to the airport in Pisa early enough I might have time to try again, I thought. I stood up and washed my hands, then splashed my face a few

times. My heart was racing and I felt like a child on Christmas morning, but my reflection in the mirror showed me as tired and emotionless.

Seeing Patty was my priority, but leaving Florence was a treat. My honeymoon with that small city was short-lived. It was bursting with tourists, gypsies, vendors and panhandlers, and I had already seen everything there was to see. Florence reminded me of Ottawa because I could walk anywhere with my eyes closed. And the food wasn't that great either. All the good produce went straight to the restaurants, and whatever the restaurants didn't want was sold in the supermarkets. The open-air markets weren't any better because they only ran for a few hours a day, and I never had the opportunity to shop there. So, I survived on a steady diet of old bread, carrots and chicken. But for nine days, I could escape my life.

I went back downstairs and grabbed my bag. Then I checked my pockets and made sure my passport, boarding pass, phone and cash were neatly organized. I sent Patty a message and told her I was leaving my apartment and couldn't wait to see her, then took one last look around the room before I walked out.

I walked to the Santa Maria Novella station with my head down. Once there, I asked for directions to the airport shuttle. The member of staff I spoke to pointed towards the opposite end of the station, and told me to hurry because the bus would be leaving soon. I rolled a smoke as I jogged, and lit it in the station. The driver was smoking by the front of the vehicle, waiting for the engine to warm up, as I arrived. I asked if this was the shuttle to Pisa, he nodded but told me it was full. I produced my ticket and showed him I had reserved my seat on that shuttle. He rested his back on the front of the bus and told me I had to wait for the next one. I looked at him, leaned-up against one of the headlights with his legs crossed, and studied his demeanor. The bus wasn't full, that much I knew. I reached into my pocket and produced a 5 Euro note

that I casually folded up in the palm of my hand. I asked him for a lighter because my smoke was extinguished, and as he handed it to me I passed him the money.

“Is the bus still full?”

“I think I can fit one more person,” he said, as he slipped the note in his pocket.

I thanked him and took my time finishing my cigarette. I didn’t mind slipping him a bit of money, as the ticket only cost me two Euros. If it could get me to the airport quicker, and onto London sooner, then all the better, I thought.

I climbed inside the bus as two young blonde women with big rucksacks (most likely American backpackers), approached the driver. I sat by the front and eavesdropped on their interaction through the open bus door. He gave them the same routine he gave me, and they cried because they were going to miss their flights if he didn’t let them on the bus. The driver gave them enough time to pay up, but the thought hadn’t crossed their minds. I tried to feel bad for them, but all I could think of was ‘You’re not in Kansas anymore, Girls.’

“Excuse me young ladies, I have to get these people to Pisa,” said the driver as he flicked his cigarette butt over one of their shoulders. We drove away and the girls sat on their packs and cried in each other’s arms. I watched them (stone-faced, as I had been all morning) as we drove away, and felt a great sense of accomplishment. I liked that I knew what to do to get on that bus, even though I had never bribed someone before and had only ever seen it done in movies. It made me feel like I could fend for myself; I felt I understood Italy a bit better than others.

The Galileo Galilei Airport was just south of Pisa; I think. I couldn’t see the leaning tower or the cathedral when we took off. The airport itself was drab and uninteresting. There was a counter where you could buy coffee and stale sandwiches for exorbitant prices, and a few vending machines scattered about. There were no fancy smoking salons like at the airport

in Zurich, and all the toilets were disgusting. My flight was at 19:20 and I still had four hours to kill. I couldn't smoke in there, so I wandered the terminal and hoped to find a seat. I walked and studied the crowd, and identified three categories of people who were on their way to London: Brits who were returning home from holidays with their families, Italians who were going on holiday to London, and the typical North-American backpackers who smelled like feet and had greasy hair. Which category did I fall into?

There was nowhere to sit so I paid five Euros for a small espresso, and stood at the coffee bar with my heavy backpack. Patty had messaged me, and I sipped my coffee as I replied to her messages. The coffee did what it was supposed to, and I felt my stomach bloat and grumble. I went to the toilet and sat there till I was completely relieved. It's a good thing I did because the flight would have been very uncomfortable. I saw a man with shit-stained khakis do the walk of shame to the lavatory as we flew over the Mont Blanc. "He's wearing caca-kis now," I muttered to myself as he walked past me with his head down.

We landed at Stansted at around 21:30 and I was among the first of my flight to get through customs and security. I was relieved to be in the UK, and jogged to the EasyBus stop that was destined for Central London. I couldn't see much of The City when we landed, but I was too tired to care. I queued to board the shuttle, and had a few smokes in the time it normally took me to have one.

I saw Patty's silhouette from a distance as we pulled up to Baker Street. Although I hadn't seen her in almost two months, I instantly recognized her posture. I grabbed my backpack and jumped off the bus, then chucked it on the sidewalk to wrap my arms around her. I started with a long and tender hug, then pressed my mouth against hers. It was a sloppy kiss but she didn't seem to mind. She tasted nice.

"I missed you so much!" I said, still kissing her.

“I missed you too, Baby!” She pulled her head away and looked at my face. Smiling as she did. “How was your flight, are you tired?”

I flung my backpack over my shoulder and we walked arm in arm towards the station, while I briefed her on my journey. Patty was hugging me as we stood on the escalator that took us to the Southbound Jubilee platform. She was standing one step below mine and her head was pressed against my chest; the smell of her hair was familiar and comforting.

We took the Jubilee line down to London Bridge station, then a Southeastern National Rail service from there to New Cross station. While on the train, Patty told me about her studies and her friends. She asked me about Florence and my classmates, but I didn’t want to talk about my life so I told her that everything and everyone was fine. She could tell I was tired from my journey, so she didn’t press her inquisition. I wanted to talk, but I couldn’t think of anything to say. So much for being a good boyfriend, I thought. I was just happy to be with her, so we held hands and smiled at each other in silence for the rest of our journey. The intercom on the train clicked and a soothing voice said “The next station is New Cross. Alight here for London Overground and National Rail services.”

“I thought it was called the London Underground?” I said.

“There’s an Overground too. That’s usually the one I use to get around.”

We left the station and walked to her flat. The streets were dimly lit, but there were lots of cars on the road and people on the sidewalk. We walked deeper into Deptford and I was amazed by how many barber shops we passed.

“Is this an African part of town?” I asked.

She explained that there was a big African and Jamaican presence in Deptford. She spoke about the high-street and the Deptford Market for a while, then mentioned how nice the neighbourhood smelled when the food stalls were out. I tried to act lively and continue the

conversation by saying something about the food kiosks, but she smiled and empathetically squeezed my arm.

“Why am I stepping on so many chicken bones?” I asked, after a few more minutes of walking in silence.

Patty laughed with a lot of emphasis. She did this when she was excited, and her reaction reassured me that my presence wasn't a nuisance. “You'll see when we go out drinking,” she said, and we kept walking.

We turned up a dark alleyway, then she led me up a winding street in a sketchy-looking residential area. Without asking her, she explained that the neighbourhood was a bit ‘dodgy’ (a word I'd never heard her use before). “...you just have to know how to behave,” she continued, “and be careful of where you go and what you say. My flatmate bought us all rape-whistle keychains, in case we get into trouble.”

“Well that's reassuring... I hope you never have to use it,” I said. “I'm just so happy to see you.” I stretched my lips and forced a tired smile, but my eyebrows and ears didn't prick-up. I didn't know if she noticed. I squeezed her arm with the crook of my elbow and brought her in close, for a kiss.

“Me too, Babe. I missed you so much! And I have so many fun things planned for us! And my flatmates can't wait to meet you!” she exclaimed in a single breath.

We walked towards a big block of apartments half way up the street, and every window and balcony was draped with drying clothes. She lived on the top floor, and apologized because the building didn't have an elevator. As I climbed the seventy-odd steps I noticed that the stairwell smelled like weed, and I saw spit and piss everywhere. I also heard a constant flow of sobs and arguments as we progressed from one level to the next.

There was a long balcony at the top of the stairwell that ran all the way to Patty's front door, and was littered with garbage bags and junk. We got in at around 23:30 and all the lights

were off. Patty's flatmates were all working late so we had the apartment to ourselves. She unlocked the door to invite me in, and offered me a cup of tea. I politely declined, and told her I wanted to smoke before settling in. Before I lit my smoke, she told me where the bathroom and her bedroom were. She smiled, took my backpack and closed the door. I turned towards the skyline and ignited my cigarette.

I saw a few skyscrapers from one end of the balcony, and from the other I saw the tops of the small housing projects of the London Borough of Lewisham. It felt like home. I made it halfway through my cigarette then went inside. The toilet was in a closet separate from the bathroom, so I took a piss, then walked into the next room to wash my hands and clean myself up a bit.

Patty was waiting for me, sitting on her bed and looking at her phone. When I walked in she smiled and put it away, then stood up to hug and kiss me once again. "My André," she said with a smile.

"What's the rest of the apartment look like? Everything seems to be closed off from the main hallway."

"I'll show you tomorrow. I bet you're exhausted. Come and lie down and I'll turn on some lamps and turn off the main light."

She arranged the lamps to create some mood-lighting, then jumped on top of me as I laid on the bed. I ran my hands over her back and under her shirt. She sat herself up and smiled shyly. "You wanna take your pants off?"

The sun was out when I woke up the next morning. I rolled over and saw Patty sleeping next to me, and I smiled. My elation quickly left me when I felt a sudden sharp spasm in my back. My yelp woke her up and she turned to hug me.

"Good morning, Beautiful... Why are there springs poking out of your bed?"

She laughed and said “good morning”, then explained that her bed was very old and that she had to get used to sleeping between the springs. I fought through the pain in my back and told her that I didn’t care, as long as I got to wake up next to her.

She kissed me and got up to make us some tea. I took my time sitting up, and studied her bedroom. It was small but organized, and had everything an average person needed to live. A double bed, a dresser, a closet and a desk. I put on my pyjamas and some socks, and joined her in the tiny kitchen.

“I’m making us a full English breakfast!” she exclaimed with a smile. “I know you like sausages so I got some extra ones for you.” She seemed proud to be caring for me. I asked if I could help but she put a cup of tea in my hand and shooed me into the living room. “You can smoke in there; all my flatmates do. I don’t have anything specific planned for today, so if you want, you can use my laptop and look online for something that might interest you to do.”

“Where’s the living room?”

“It’s the first door on the left” she said with a half turn, as she prepped the frying pan.

The space was big, and there was a tall window at the far end of the room. A small table stood in one corner, cleaning products and tools in the opposite corner. An old charcoal fireplace and chimney were stretched against one of the walls. By the big window was a couch with a big coffee table in front of it, covered with bits of tobacco and rolling papers. I cracked the window open and sat down on the couch. As I rolled my cigarette and sipped my tea, I noticed the room was buzzing with fruit flies. I readjusted my position and sat cross-legged, but when I brought my feet up I saw bits of food and biscuit crumbs stuck to the bottom of my socks. I looked around the room as I puffed away and it was clear to me that Patty lived with a very messy roommate. I felt a little uncomfortable sitting there, in my neat pyjamas.

I knew this wasn’t Patty’s doing. She was just as clean and neat as me. I heard her working away in the kitchen, and it started to smell good. I checked the internet for fun things

to do in London while I waited, and came up with a few ideas that I wanted to run by Patty. “This is going to be a fantastic week,” I made myself say out loud.

“It’ll be the best! I’m so glad you’re here!” she replied from the kitchen.

I smiled and lurched forward to grab my mug of tea, but when I moved the couch creaked and I felt something touch my leg. It was an old rolled-up sock, and I pinched it between the tips of my thumb and index finger and threw it across the room next to a pile of broken electronics. I didn’t mention it to Patty, and quietly got up and washed my hands.

When I returned to the living room, she was sitting down on the couch in front of two steaming plates on the coffee table. She had prepared eggs, bacon, sausages, potatoes, fried tomatoes and mushrooms, and Heinz Beans. She sat cross-legged, like I was moments ago, and smiled at me. I smiled back and tackled her, then pinned her on the couch and began to kiss her.

“Babe, the food will get cold!”

“Let it, just think of how tastier it’ll be after this!” I said, as I held her hands down above her head. “Besides, I can be quick hahaha.”

She pushed her neck up and kissed me back, and we wriggled our pyjama bottoms down to our ankles. “You’re lucky no one else is in the flat,” she said through her teeth as she bit my lower lip.

The couch squeaked rhythmically, and our movements made all sorts of things creep up from its crevices. There were old Halloween candy wrappers, used tissues, plastic cutlery, fast-food menus, you name it. They surfaced on their own, like dead fish floating up from the depths of a dark northern lake, and bobbed peacefully on the surface of the cushions.

“What is all this stuff?” I asked with a laugh.

“I don’t know. The couch was here when we moved in. I think it’s a sofa-bed but we’ve never opened it.” Then she grabbed my head and pulled me in for another kiss, and the world was right again.

Only Stouts and Bitters!

Patty was speaking with her flatmate Melissa. Not being a morning person I pulled the duvet over my head and wrapped myself in it, then prayed for them to stop giggling in the hallway so that I could fall back asleep.

“Hey you!” said Patty with a smile, as she burst into the bedroom and found me wrapped in her bedsheets like a falafel. “We’re cooking dinner for Melissa and her boyfriend Ray tonight. Get up, we’re going to Tesco.” I asked her what she meant, and what Tesco was. She told me she volunteered us to cook them dinner and spend the evening with them. “It’ll be fun!” She yanked the duvet and unwrapped me.

I laid on the bed for a moment, face down with my head in my hands. Patty slapped my left butt cheek and said “Let’s go, Babe!”

We got to work as soon as we came back from the shop. Patty told them we’d make chicken shawarma for dinner. The thought of cooking for others was a bit unsettling. I barely cooked for myself in Florence because the kitchen was so small, but there was a time back in Canada when I enjoyed it. It was strangely satisfying to slice and marinate the chicken that day. Patty kept asking me if I was OK as I worked. I felt fine; just a bit tired maybe.

When everything was prepped and the chicken was marinating in the fridge, Patty went to the bakery to buy a small Victoria Sponge to serve for dessert. She told me they didn’t know what we had planned for dessert, and that she wanted to surprise Melissa and Ray with the cake. While Patty was out I whipped us a bit of lunch and set out for the living room with our plates. A tall, skinny man with brown hair and glasses intercepted me in the hallway. He smiled and spread his legs so that his heels met either side of the narrow corridor, then leaned forward

and placed his hands on his knees and propped his elbows against the walls. My way was barred and my hands were full.

“You must be André,” he said.

“Hi, are you Ray?”

He repositioned himself with a swift movement, so that he was vertically outstretched against one of the walls of the hallway, with his arms above his head and touching the ceiling. “Yep! You can pass now.” I smirked and went into the living room without a word, and set the plates on the coffee table. Ray soon followed me in. He thanked me for offering to cook for him and his girlfriend. I told him it was our pleasure, but that I had only found out about the event a few hours earlier.

“Yeah that tends to happen when you have a girlfriend,” he said with an honest laugh.

“What’s for dinner?”

“We’re making chicken shawarma. The protein’s in the fridge now, marinating. Wanna smell?”

“Oh sorry, I’m a vegan...” he said austerely.

My cheeks suddenly felt warm and my back straightened. Why didn’t Patty say anything, I thought? Ray’s face changed back to a smile. “Nah I’m just kidding, Mate. Let’s see what delicious potion you’ve plunged your chicken into!”

He spent a good forty-five seconds with his nose in the bowl. His look of ecstasy seemed a little exaggerated, but I didn’t say anything and let him enjoy his moment. Following an interrogation of three minutes to obtain my recipe, he placed the foil back over the bowl and stuffed it back in the fridge.

“What’s for dessert then?” he asked.

“Uhhh...”

“Is it supposed to be a surprise?”

“I don’t know... I don’t get to make those kinds of decisions anymore, haha.”

Ray laughed and retired to Melissa’s bedroom. I sauntered into the living room to smoke, and waited for Patty.

Patty returned with the cake, then we ate and cleaned the living room. Later that afternoon we started cooking. Melissa and Ray regularly popped in and out of the kitchen to see us at work. Melissa proudly paraded a bottle of wine for us to share with dinner, and commented on how it would complement the meal. We ate and enjoyed ourselves, and I spoke with Ray for much of the evening. Melissa was very nice and welcoming, and she and Patty spent much of the meal laughing about things in their past. I learned a bit about Ray and his background. He was in a minor leadership position at a chain of fancy grocery stores. We were also very close in age, myself being only six months older than him.

I relaxed as the evening progressed. We quickly finished the bottle of wine, so Patty scavenged through her cupboards for something else to serve with the meal. We were now drinking a vodka and energy-drink concoction, and I was smiling and laughing.

“What’s that place across the way that I can see from Patty’s bedroom?” I asked.

“That’s the George, Mate. The best pub in London. Do you like beer?”

“No, sorry Bro, I’m a vegan...”

We both laughed and then Ray suggested we all go for a ‘cheeky one’ after dinner. The girls preferred to stay in, but they encouraged Ray and I to go. They even offered to clear the table and do the dishes. Patty was happy that Ray and I were getting along, and gave me a heartfelt smile. It made me happy, and in that moment I was convinced that I loved her.

When the meal was over, I grabbed my pack of tobacco and started to roll a cigarette.

“Hold off on that Mate, I’ll have one with you before we go into the pub.”

The walk from the flat to the front door of the pub took all but thirty seconds. It was on the corner of a block of flats, at the intersection of our road and Thronville Street, and had probably stood there longer than any of the buildings attached to it. Its name was engraved on a swinging plaque above its entrance. The outside of the building was covered in ornate red wood paneling, and framed the pub's tall windows and swinging double-doored entrance. We smoked and chatted, as I tried to peer through the tinted windows to get a glimpse inside. I noticed the room was small when I entered, with an ornate wooden bar in its center, in the shape of a horse-shoe. To the right were some tables and a dart board, to the left of the bar were some more tables with a wood fireplace in the corner. The room and atmosphere grabbed me, and I felt an immediate sense of comfort. I looked up and gazed at the red embossed ceiling, and saw beautiful Victorian floral patterns amidst cherubs. Ray stood in the doorway smiling, he knew exactly what was going on in my head. He stepped in and closed the door behind him, then leaned on the wainscoted ledge of the wall and waited for me to soak everything in.

“Welcome to London, André.”

I looked at the space around me in awe and managed to mouth out the words, “I’ll get the first round, Buddy...”

Some of the regulars were eying me since I entered, but I didn’t care. It took a moment for the barmaid to nod and smile at me. The lady finally leaned over the bar and touched my arm; it snapped me back to reality. What seemed like an eternity of awe and wonder was probably just an awkward ten seconds at best.

“What can I get you, Love?” she asked.

“Two lagers please, Ma’am.”

“You’re not local, I can tell,” she said as she poured our beers.

I explained that I was Canadian, but that I was now living in Italy and visiting my girlfriend in London for a few days.

“That’s nice, Darling. Six forty, please.”

She waited with a smile as I fumbled with the change in my pocket. The locals, who all sat at the bar and not at the tables nearby, looked at me and snickered. Ray picked a table next to the fire and waited patiently. He leaned back in his seat with his legs outstretched, his hands clasped over his stomach and his elbows on his armrests. He hadn’t broken his smile since we entered.

“How old is this place,” I asked as I placed our pints on the table.

“Older than Canada, Mate.”

“It’s amazing! There’s no TV or music...”

“That’s because this is a real pub, Dude. People come here to drink and talk to their neighbours. You see that big bloke there?” he pointed. “That’s Rich. He lives in our building. He comes in here every night with his dog, and sits on the same stool and drinks the same thing. Apparently, he’s a murderer, but don’t worry we’re safe here.” I looked at Rich telling a story to some locals, with a soggy cigarette stuck to the corner of his mouth and a pint in one hand. He looked as though he was getting ready to leave, but in a flash of brilliance remembered a funny anecdote that he had to share with the others at the bar. I barely made out what he was saying because his cockney was very dense. By the end of his story, he pulled one of his pant legs up to his knee and yelled “...BEST LEGS IN LONDON!” The room erupted with laughter.

I turned to Ray, who was also laughing, and he said to make sure I told Patty to keep her bedroom curtains closed at night. I turned around and looked towards the flat. I could see into her bedroom from where I was sitting. I made a note of it and took a sip of my fizzy blonde beer. Ray grimaced a little every time he took a sip, and I felt as though I had fucked up by ordering lagers. I barely knew him, but he seemed like a good guy and I didn’t want to get off on the wrong foot. I also didn’t want to appear like I didn’t know what I was doing in such a place, so I kept my mouth shut and agreed with everything he said. I rolled us each a cigarette

when he stepped to the bar to get the second round. He turned halfway as he was ordering and asked, “Do you like pork scratchings?”

“What’s that?” I replied as I drank the rest of my lager in one painful gulp.

He snickered, and ordered some along with our drinks. Soon after, he came back to the table with two beers that were pitch black and had a thick creamy head on them. He unclenched his jaw and a bag of scratchings dropped from between his teeth.

“What the hell is that!?” I asked, looking at my pint.

“It’s a stout, Mate. From now on you only drink stouts and bitters! We need to get your palate used to real beer. And these,” he said as he opened the small packet and spread out its sides to create a plate, “are pork scratchings.”

“What’s it made of?”

“Pork skin and fat, deep fried and salted.”

It didn’t sound very appealing, especially since the first piece I grabbed had singed hair on it.

He ate a piece and raised his pint. I clinked his glass and took a deep gulp of the black nectar. I almost threw up. Ray couldn’t contain his laughter, and told me to wash it down with a scratching. I didn’t expect skin and fat to be that crunchy, but it tasted wonderful. “Let’s have a fag and it’ll help you get the rest of that stout down,” he said.

We spoke of beer and British culture over the course of our cigarette, and I told him that I loved old pubs and everything that went with the experience. When we came back inside Ray went to the bar and spoke with the barkeep, then returned with some chalk and a cracked plastic tray. “Fancy some darts while we’re here?” I hadn’t played for years. My first throw didn’t make it to the board, and I was a little embarrassed. “Don’t worry,” Ray said, “the more you drink the better you get. It’s your round, by the way.” I had barely skimmed the surface of

my pint, the scratchings hadn't helped but at least they were delicious. I watched him drink the dregs of his beer I plugged my nose and chugged the rest of mine.

“Same again, Lads?”

“Please, two of the Samuel Smith's Extra Stout.”

“Everything in here is Sam Smith's, Mate. How long have you been in this country?”

he laughed, and was promptly joined by the remaining locals sitting at the bar.

“I got here a few days ago, but I've never been to Deptford. I've only been to the touristy areas when I came here years ago.”

“You'll do well to knock about with him, then,” he pointed to Ray who was focused on picking crumbs from the empty packet of scratchings with his index finger.

“Can I get another pack of pork rinds as well, please?”

“Scratchings, Mate, scratchings...” he said as he threw a pack on the counter.

“Cheers.” I paid and maneuvered myself back to the oche. Ray and I cheered and kept playing. He was right, my game got better the more I drank.

We had been in the pub for a few hours, and I managed to drink ten pints. Ray and I were laughing and joking, as well as strangers could when they got drunk together. By the end of the night it had gotten easier for me to stomach the dark and heavy beers that Ray insisted I drank from now on. We left at eleven and made our way back to the flat. The girls were asleep when we came home so we tried to be as quiet as possible, having our ceremonial 'lad' hug outside the flat to avoid making a ruckus.

“You're good, Mate,” he said as he held himself up with an arm around my shoulder.

“Let's do this more often.”

“Yeah Bud, it was great! Do you play chess? I saw a set on the shelf in the pub. We should go head-to-head someday.”

“Absolutely, but only after I beat you at darts again! Are you free next week?”

I told him I was going back to Florence that Sunday, but that I’d be back for my winter break. He asked if we could go to the pub again while I was in London, and I told him I could try setting some time aside for another ‘George night’ before returning to Florence.

“Alright, Mate. I’m going to turn in. Goodnight and try not to slam the door too hard when you finish your cigarette.”

“There’s no ashtray here, what do I do with this?” I waved my cigarette butt in the air for him to see.

“Just flick it off the side of the railing.”

I thanked him for the nice evening and said good night.

Ray was already in Melissa’s room when I came in. The flat was dark and quiet, and I felt my way to Patty’s bedroom by touching the wall till I found her door frame. I tried opening the door as quietly as I could but it creaked, and Patty woke up.

“Sorry, Babe. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“How was it?” she said half asleep.

“Oh, it was tremendous! We drank dark beers, and ate some crunchy pork things, and played darts... What a great night!”

“How much did you drink?”

I hesitated. “I don’t know, but probably a lot. I’m going straight to bed. I hope we don’t have anything planned early for tomorrow?”

“You can sleep in, don’t worry.”

I laid in bed next to her, and unbuttoned my shirt and wriggled my pants down to my ankles. I was exhausted and sleep came almost instantly.

I didn't know what time it was when I woke up, but it was still dark. Patty was asleep next to me, and by the time I got my bearings I felt my stomach contract. I knew what was happening so I leapt out of bed, but fell flat on my face because my pants were still bunched around my ankles. I pulled them up as fast as I could with one hand and lifted myself off the ground with the other, then ran to the toilet. I jiggled the door aggressively but it was locked, and terror began to take over me and govern my senses. I started sweating, my throat tightened, my forehead was freezing and my ears were burning. I felt myself heave and heard a similar sound coming from the toilet.

Fuck! It was imminent, I was going to vomit. There was no stopping it, and I didn't want to throw up in the bathtub or miniature sink in the washroom next door. I stumbled into the kitchen, flicked the light on, threw the dishes out of the sink, and puked gallons of black foamy beer. Shit, no one can find out about this. I don't know how quiet I was being, but I turned on the tap to drown out the sound of me being sick.

“André?” The voice came from behind me, it was Ray.

“Yeah, Bud!” I said with my back still turned.

“You alright, Mate?”

I had put my head and neck under the running water to make it seem like I was hunched over the sink for reasons other than not holding my drink. “Yeah sure thing, Buddy. I'm just really warm so I'm trying to cool myself down and have a drink of water...” I said, in what I could imagine was a desperate and broken tone.

“Well, OK...” He paused. “We won't tell the girls that we were both sick at the same time then?”

“That sounds like a fantastic plan, Ray.” I puked a bit more.

“You sure you're alright?”

“Yeah, yeah, Bud. I'm... Ugh... I'm an old pro!”

“OK, Mate. Goodnight then...”

I raised my head from the running water when Ray left, and observed the damage. There wasn't much heft to it, it was mostly beer. Using my hand, I rinsed the sides of the sink and drained the vomit away. Then I took a fresh sponge and some cleaning liquid and disinfected the area.

I crawled up next to Patty as quietly and softly as I could, and heard her mumble something. I smelled like beer and mouthwash, and held my breath as I observed her to make sure she was asleep. When I was satisfied, I turned over and sighed, only to be hit with the smell of beer, vomit and mint. I was sober now, but still not feeling well.

It's a shame that all the joy and happiness from that evening went down the drain. When the world stopped spinning, I laid in dejection at the cold and fetid reality of the moment, and life resumed its course.

Scar Tissue

Patty was already at work when I woke up. Her side of the bed was cold, and I ran my hand over her pillow to make sure I wasn't dreaming my solitude. She took a part-time job near The City to help with some of her expenses, which I thought was responsible of her. We spoke the night before and she told me she'd let me sleep-in, and would be quiet while getting ready for work. We agreed to meet her at work after her shift; we planned to have dinner together.

The flat was cold for an October morning. Maybe I just wasn't used to British weather. I slapped my cheeks and coughed up the cigarettes from last night, then sat up and went to the kitchen. The kettle took ages to boil. I leaned forward and waited, with my hands on the ledge of the counter and my head between my shoulders. I saw my breath every time I exhaled. It was grey outside but it wasn't raining.

The kettle clicked and I took a moment to warm my hands, using the steam that rose from its spout. I was dozing back to sleep from the steam when I noticed Melissa's door swing open, and saw Ray standing in the doorway completely naked. I'd never seen someone close a door so quickly, and I snapped my head away in embarrassment. He probably thought they were alone in the flat. Ray came back out a moment later, wearing a flannel onesie, and I acted as though nothing happened.

"Hey, Mate..."

I said good morning, and asked if he wanted some tea. He waved his hand and asked me if I saw anything. His voice was tense. I told him that I just heard the door open and close, and first took notice of him when he came into the kitchen.

He nodded and went for a piss. By the time he came out I was settled in the living room, rolling myself a cigarette to have with my tea. I forced a tired smile as he walked by, then went

back to my world on the couch. I thought about Patty, and where we might go later that evening. I had till four o'clock to leave the flat.

My tea and cigarette were consumed in silence, as I looked out towards Greenwich and Lewisham. The window was directed towards the Thames, but the flat wasn't high enough to see the water. Instead, I saw the low rooftops of the South East London projects, with their weathered, shingled roofs, rolling towards the horizon. A white building towered over the houses in the distance. It looked drab but official, and reminded me of the Ottawa General Hospital (where I was born). I smelled moisture in the air and soon a light rain started falling.

I placed my empty cup on the table, and remembered how Patty once cringed when she had made us tea and I asked her for a bit of sugar. "It's a big faux-pas to put sugar in your tea in England," she said. "You're only supposed to drink it with milk." I thought it was an odd thing to care about, because no one would chastise me for putting sugar in my drink, and people couldn't notice sugared tea by sight if you stirred it long enough. I obliged her when she said that, but now that she wasn't there I made it a point to relish my sugary tea.

I drew my attention back to the empty cup while I rolled another cigarette. I smirked as I gazed intently at it. It interested me how, from my perspective, I couldn't see the mug's handle. If I hadn't drunk from it moments ago, I could be driven to think it was a long and narrow bowl or porcelain vase. The thought fascinated me, and I smiled. I shifted my position on the couch and the handle's crest appeared behind the side of the vessel. My curiosity peaked. What if this object was only a cup because I assumed it was? What if my experience of the cup depended on the assumption that it had a handle, or that it was used for drinking hot beverages? What if people were like the cup? What if they came with a host of expectations, and what if those expectations were false? The cigarette dropped from my lips and I frantically patted it out before it did any significant damage to the couch.

My shower did little to make me feel good. I washed myself and sat down in the bath for half an hour, as the warm water rained over my neck and back. I couldn't understand why I was so tired. Maybe the mattress wires kept me on edge in my sleep. I pushed the thought from my mind as I got dressed and stepped out. The air was brisk and smelled of soot, and I spruced up a bit as I walked to New Cross Station. The sounds of Deptford were invigorating. Men shouted at each other, and women yelled at their children to discipline them. Cars honked at cyclists and fingers waved in the air, and kids shoved each other back and forth by the chicken shops. It wasn't Florence, and it certainly wasn't Ottawa. To me, it seemed like the real world, and for the first time I understood that I was a part of it. In that moment, as I stood by the entrance of New Cross Station and smoked my cigarette in my neat clothes, I felt connected to the putrid life of South East London.

The train ride from New Cross to London Bridge took forever. I sat by a window and watched the approaching skyline, and told myself that I didn't want to go back to Florence. Naturally, I'd miss Patty. I also dreaded going back to living with Pink in our dark and cold apartment. I recoiled at the thought of leaving London in a few days. My concerns dissipated as the skyscrapers grew and imposed themselves on me.

I tried to clear my mind, but for some reason I started to think about Joey. I knew him briefly when I was younger. When I was seven years old I broke my femur, and spent three weeks in traction at the children's hospital in Ottawa. In the bed opposite from mine was a kid around the age of ten called Joey. He was dying. He had some sort of brain tumour. His parents had quit their jobs to be with him at the hospital. They ran around and tried to make the rest of his life more enjoyable. It was all they could do. They brought him pizza, placed a TV with a Nintendo 64 by his bed, and they arranged visits with his school friends. They did anything they could to see him smile, and to help him forget that he only had a few months left to live.

I liked Joey, and felt bad for him. We occasionally played games and talked together, but there was something in the seven-year-old version of me that didn't like being physically near him. Maybe it was his unnaturally bloated face caused by his treatments, or maybe it was the constant smell of vomit that lingered around him. It could have been the jagged scar on the back of his shaved head. Whatever it was, I always felt uncomfortable when he limped too closely to my hospital bed. When I grew up and understood what was happening, I felt ashamed of only being comfortable with being his friend if he was across the room.

Joey's father was quiet and small, with salt-and-pepper hair and a beard, and he smiled a lot. His mother was lovely too. She was a short-haired, chubby Christian lady who spent a lot of time with me while my parents were at work. Every day for three weeks, she spared a few hours and sat by my bed. We spoke and played board games, while her son was dying a few feet away. She also smiled a lot; it made me feel good, and I liked being around her. She broke down once and I didn't know what to do, so I held her hand while she cried. She hugged me for that, but in doing so, pushed her weight down on the apparatus that kept my leg in traction. I bit the inside of my cheek to avoid making a sound.

A few weeks after I left the hospital there was nothing more the doctors could do for Joey, so they sent him home. Shortly after that, his mother triumphantly called our house to tell my family that Joey had made it all the way up the stairs without getting sick. A few more weeks passed, and she called again to tell us he had died in his sleep. I've never met a human with as much courage as Joey's mom. She had such dignity, and I felt the world owed her its unconditional reverence. I've never forgotten her, and I've never forgotten Joey.

I had to look away as the train pulled closer to London Bridge, because the City's skyline reminded me of Joey's scar.

The Old Stove

I returned to Italy on Sunday, and the Pisa airport did little to get me hyped about being back. The bus ride from Pisa to Florence was depressing. I missed Patty. I missed her smell the most, and the smell of the flat in Deptford. My neighbourhood in Florence reeked of dog shit roasting on hot cobblestones.

I was glad to be busy with school on my first week back, because it helped take my mind off of Patty and London. Doing a master's degree wasn't hard, it was just a lot of work. Our Research Methods class finished at 4:30pm, and word spread through the cohort that we were all to go out later. I didn't feel like it, especially since we were supposed to meet at 11pm in Piazza Della Signoria. Pink saw my hesitation when I heard of the plan for the evening, and coaxed me into showing up for "...at least one drink!"

He and I walked home after class, and I noticed that the tourists had begun their exodus out of the city, and onto their tour busses and taxis to their cruise ships in Livorno. The few that remained were older, and seemed like they could afford a longer stay in one of the city's fancy hotels. '...I want one biscotti, and a Coke!'

I repeated those words in my head after we passed her on the patio of the Helvetia Bristol Hotel. She was middle-aged and had 80s puffy blonde hair, wore many gold rings and necklaces, and waved her overly manicured index finger in the waiter's face as she placed her order. I was glad I exhaled a big cloud of smoke in her face as I walked past with Pink. Her waiter was obliged to nod and smile, and fetched her disgusting pairing.

"Did you hear that, Bro?" I asked Pink when we turned the corner.

"Yeah, on some real shit! That's a fucking disgusting way to talk to someone. And if you only want one, you call it a biscotto, not demand 'one biscotti'. And on top of that, you

don't have it with Coke, that's gross." He sighed and his voice took on the sound of someone who'd given up all hope in life. "That's the arrogance that gives us a bad reputation. At least the Americans in our group have some idea of what it's like to embrace different cultures..."

"I bet the only way she can hold her one biscotti is by wedging a fingernail in it." We both laughed and walked to the supermarket on Via del Melarancio, which was on our route home.

As per usual, the produce was crap. I bought some rotini pasta, a head of broccoli and a packet of two luganega sausages. It was the only meat that wasn't expiring the next day, so I thought I'd cook one and freeze the other for another time. As we got closer to our building Pink suggested we get something to drink, to get us in the mood for going out. After all, we had nearly six hours to kill before our meeting with the rest of the group. There was a little hole-in-the-wall shop by our apartment that sold booze and snacks, and offered four bottles of Chianti for ten Euros. Pink and I split the cost and we stocked up on wine. When we got home I let Pink cook his dinner first, since there was no room for more than one person to maneuver in the kitchen. Besides, all he had to do was steam some broccoli, while his hot-dogs puffed and bubbled in the oven. It was a quick affair. Then it was my turn. I boiled my vegetables and pasta beforehand, so that I had enough room on the stovetop to fry my sausage. I had the brilliant idea of pouring red wine into the frying pan to give the protein a bit of kick, but the element was too hot and smoke quickly filled the kitchen. Pink heard the sizzle and came to my rescue. He grabbed a dish towel and fanned the smoke detector while I finished my routine. It was not a good meal.

We gathered outside the Old Stove at 11:30 that night, and drank and smoked on the sidewalk. The small bar lined the square and faced the Palazzo Vecchio and Loggia, and was

flooded with young Italian art students from the neighbouring areas. The only reason you came to the Old Stove was to drink till four in the morning. You wouldn't know it was there during the day because its garage-style door was always shut, and the dining terrace of the adjacent restaurant stretched out in front of it. But at night all the other businesses in the piazza were closed and the Old Stove became a gathering point for all manner of pierced, tattooed and studded individuals.

Pink and I were mingling and one of my classmates, Karen, asked me about London. She was from Tennessee and had a deep Southern-American drawl. She was also a bit rotund, loud, and had a slight drinking problem. I told her how wonderful it was to see Patty, and how much I loved London. I repeated myself a few times because she was easily distracted, and would shout obnoxious comments at our colleagues throughout our conversation. The local crowd stared at the two of us, and I was embarrassed to be seen with her.

“Calm your tits, André! Y'all'll hump again at Christmas!”

My eyes went wide when she belted that out, and I pretended to be called over by another classmate and got away from her. She was soon distracted, and approached a group of Italians standing on the sidewalk near the entrance of the bar. I looked back at her as she stumbled through the crowd, and made her way inside to order another drink. The Italians didn't like her, and the classmate I was now speaking with patted me on the back with exaggerated movements for having survived a drunken interaction with her. She was blown away by the Palazzo Vecchio, and how it was lit-up at night. It looked magnificent, but was nothing compared to the picturesque buildings on every corner in London. She went on about how beautiful life was in Florence, and how she wanted to stay once she completed her degree. I smiled and nodded, but didn't agree. Life wasn't that beautiful there. The city was pretty and historical, but after a while it started to suck. You only stayed in Disneyland till you realized all the rides were the same, I thought.

Our topic of conversation ran its course and she asked about my trip to London. I told her all about Patty, Ray, Deptford and even the Royal George. She smiled and asked if that's why I was drinking Guinness.

“Yeah, I promised a friend that I'd train my taste-buds to like stouts and bitters, haha.”

She smiled and called me cute. Then she asked if Patty had planned to visit me in Florence. She was coming in a few weeks, I explained, then I planned on spending my winter break with her in London. I finished my pint and flicked my cigarette, then excused myself to go pee. The beer and the wine in my bladder were fighting it out, and I needed to break the seal.

I elbowed my way through the drunk Italians and thought they all looked the same. Everyone was heavily tattooed and wore drab and dark coloured clothes (most of which was leather), and they smelled like hippies. I held my breath as I squeezed past their sweaty bodies, and avoided inhaling odours of unwashed hair, waxy dreadlocks and smelly armpits. Italians didn't tend to move aside for anybody. Once inside, I searched for the toilets and saw a sign which directed me to the basement. The wooden staircase was wet, and I felt the humidity of the space as I descended. It was quiet there, and when I came down the last step my shoes were soaked. The basement was flooded, and I prayed for it to be water and not urine. I splashed my way to the Gent's and saw some urinals, then began to micturate.

Halfway through my pee, a tall Italian man with a beard and wearing skinny jeans, running shoes and a tight vinyl jacket walked into the bathroom. He stood at the urinal furthest from mine. He must have noticed me when he came in. He stared at me with his mouth open, as he pissed and swayed drunkenly. I tried to avoid eye contact, but he tried to get my attention. I didn't like that. At a young age, I learned that there was a strict 'no talking at the urinals' policy in men's toilets, and was glad to see that rule was upheld in the UK when I was there a week earlier. Apparently, this maxim didn't apply in Italy... I kept my eyes trained on the stain

above the urinal, and my stream weakened out of concern. He had a look in his eye, like he might pass out, throw up, or hit you at any time.

“Ehi tu!” he said. Fuck, I thought. I ignored him and he shouted the same words.

“Non parlo italiano...” I replied in broken Italian.

“You fah-king Americans!”

He worked his way towards me, from urinal to urinal, and maintained his flow till he got to the one next to mine. I smelled the whisky off him, and almost gagged as I hurriedly tucked my dick into my pants and zipped-up my fly.

“I’m not American!” I said, as I ran out of the toilet.

When I made it to the bottom of the staircase, I heard him vomit in what was probably the urinal I had just finished using.

Talk to My Assistant

I jogged across the courtyard to the Palazzo Strozzi after my evening class for my meeting with Dr. Whitfield. Despite what Pink thought of him, I thought I could benefit from his expertise if he was my thesis supervisor. I made up my mind to ask him to oversee my research project, and approached him a week earlier to ask if I could buy him a drink and have a chat. I thought it was weird when he asked me to speak with his assistant to book a meeting with him. But I'm asking you now, I thought. And your assistant is our T.A., so she could tell me right away if you're busy next week... I didn't argue with him though, and sent a formal email to the woman in question. Four days later she wrote back and booked me in for an evening meeting with the good professor at the Strozzi Café, where he first introduced himself to our cohort over breakfast.

I got there a few minutes early, so that I could have a smoke and gather my arguments. Patty visited me last week. Pink offered to sleep on our classmate's couch to give Patty and I space for the week. Between school and trying to fit our activities into our tight schedule, I barely had time to look over my research proposal. I found a table outside, by the white stucco wall, and I sat down to roll myself a cigarette. I puffed away and looked back on my week with Patty. We enjoyed ourselves, but after she left I was too busy to miss her the way I thought I should.

The only challenging aspect of her visit was sharing my single bed with her. It was an adjustment for both of us to have sex and sleep on my three-foot-wide mattress. In the end, it wasn't a big deal because I was just happy to be with her again. But I couldn't express the pain-in-the-ass Tetris game it was to coordinate our movements throughout the night. One of us had to lie on our side, if the other was on their back or stomach. I fell off the bed a few times, and

had the bruises to show for it, but I wanted to make her time in Florence as comfortable as possible so I didn't mind.

Whitfield was late. I sent him a quick email from my phone, and asked if we were still meeting. As I hit 'Send' I saw him walk down the stairwell that led to the administration offices of the Palazzo Strozzi. I stood up and extended my hand, but he zoomed past me and yelled "What can I get you!?" as he went inside to order.

"Scotch whisky, neat!" I yelled back. He smiled and nodded before he disappeared inside. As I sat back down I noticed that the right sleeve of my jacket was whitened. Upon closer inspection, I realized that my entire side was covered in pale dust. Every bit of me that was leaned against the stuccoed wall was dirty, and I scrambled to wipe myself clean before Whitfield re-emerged.

He came out with our drinks within thirty seconds. I was seated quietly at the table smoking a Gitanes (which I bought to prevent myself from having to roll as I spoke with him). I tried to look casual as I smoked and pretended to read *La peste* by Camus. He placed the whisky in my hand and moments later a barista arrived with a plate of gourmet sandwiches and olives.

"It pays to be the director..." he said with a smile. We clinked glasses and each took a sip.

I asked him what he was drinking and told me it was a Negroni. He explained how he had never liked them till he moved to Italy.

I nodded and spoke to him about my research project. He seemed interested and listened to me patiently, as I went through my sales pitch. "I guess what I'm asking, Professor, is can you help steer me in the right direction with my research, and, will you be my supervisor?"

His eyes squinted over the rim of his glass as he took a swig of his drink, and let out a faint laugh. He said yes to the first question, and that he'd let me know about being my

supervisor in the new year. Not the answer I was expecting, but I emphatically thanked him. I then told him I'd asked Amalia to be my supervisor as well, to get two perspectives on my project. "...I hope that's alright."

"Did you think I'd be jealous?" he said with a smile. I paused awkwardly. He clinked my glass again and told me to expect an answer in January.

I now had Whitfield talking about books, and he was deep enough in his rhetoric for me to have the time to taste one of the sandwiches. When I bit into one, the bread crumbled in my hands and the sandwich fell apart. I prayed that Whitfield hadn't noticed, and picked up the sun-dried tomato that fell on my lap without looking down. The napkins were on his side of the table, and I snatched one in a split-second when a noise in the courtyard made him glance away from our conversation. I was impressed with my slight-of-hand, but the beads of sweat on my face probably gave me away.

Once I cleaned the mayonnaise and sandwich fillings off my trousers (all of which was done under the table, as I kept my eyes fixed on his face), I reached into my pocket and grabbed a Gitanes. The familiar taste and smell of the dark French tobacco helped me relax a little.

"Did you just buy those to fit the young philosopher stereotype, or do you actually like them?" asked Whitfield.

I said they were my favourite cigarettes but weren't sold in Canada. So, I bought them whenever I felt like treating myself in Europe. He told me his wife smoked them, and he rarely met people who enjoyed them like she did. Whitfield was smiling and seemed to enjoy our little chat.

I asked him how long he'd been married, and hoped he'd be open to a casual question during our professional meeting.

“Oh, too long. I left Toronto when I was twenty and followed the Grateful Dead on their European tour. And since my dad gave me British citizenship, I just stayed in Europe. I met my wife at a show. Do you have a girlfriend?”

I told him about Patty, and how we met at the museum. He didn't seem to be listening to me, and he barely let me finish my sentence before launching into a speech.

“Three things matter in life André: money, power and sex. Once you've got all three, your life is complete.” He spoke in a fatherly tone, like he was trying to educate me about life. I'd seen *Scarface*, like everybody else, and knew that first you got the money, then you got the power, then you got the pussy. But I let him continue, and listened quietly. “...but you never know how much of those three you need, to find your winning combination.” That part wasn't in the movie, and he caught my attention. I asked him what he meant.

“I've been married a long time, so I've got sex taken care of. I don't need money because I've set myself up to be comfortable for the rest of my life. I guess I could always have more power, but as long as they keep bringing me free drinks and sandwiches here, then that's all I need. Besides, with more power comes less time to do the things you want.”

I hadn't thought of it that way. I was quiet and he smiled, then changed the subject.

“This reminds me of when I first befriended one of my university professors.” He drank the rest of his negroni in one sip. “He and I were at a pub, one night in London, and a beautiful young woman walked in. He stood to greet her and she kissed his seventy-one-year-old cheek. I figured she was one of his supervisees, and when she left he turned to me and said ‘I've slept with all of them.’”

I lit another smoke and looked at him quietly. What he said began to sink in. I forced myself to look intrigued.

“Think about it,” he said with a smile as he stood up. “I have to go meet my assistant Samantha now, I'll email you in the new year with an answer.”

He left, and I sat for a moment and I finished my smoke. Then I ate the sandwiches that were left on the plate, and had another cigarette. Samantha? I thought. She couldn't have been more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight. What did she see in Whitfield? I felt exempt from his story, he didn't seem inclined towards the masculine sex. I wondered what prompted his story in the first place. I sat for a while longer. I couldn't decide if I liked him less or more for what he just said.

Go Bald or Go Home

Pink and I sat at the kitchen table, and I rolled us each a smoke while he opened another bottle of wine. I was set to fly to London in a few days to spend my winter intersession with Patty, and was catching up with Pink before I left.

“What is it about London that you like so much?” he asked.

“I don’t really know... I just feel good when I’m there.”

“Is it because you know you’ll see your girlfriend and have sex that you like it so much?” He laughed and his sharp exhale blew out the flame I held to his face, to light his cigarette.

I didn’t think so, I told him. It was a perfect mix of old and new. Things seemed to work there, and people lived their lives there. Not like this fucking open-air museum of a town we were in.

He agreed and drank half his glass of wine in one swig. “We’re expected to do a master’s degree, and we’re housed in an ancient building – that’s really fucking pretty, mind you – but we can’t get an internet signal through the three-foot thick stone walls!” He took a long draw of his cigarette. “So people actually still live there then?”

I began my tirade. “Oh yeah, Bud. At least in the South East, they do. I’ve never seen a tourist down there, and people are actually born there, go to school there, work there, live there. It’s the last real cockney bastion of London! And it’s fucking fantastic, Bro!”

He asked about the people, and I told him that I found them welcoming. Even though Brits were stereotyped as reserved and cold. “You’ll have to check it out for yourself to know.”

I poured myself another glass of wine, and clipped the bottle on the side of the glass dining table as I returned it to its perch. Pink’s shoulders jolted up for a moment, but he soon

returned to his token head-down drunken position. The cigarette was pinched between my lips as I went through my movements, and my face felt warm from the smoke that rolled up my cheek. I pulled the smoke away from my mouth and hurt my lip. The rolling paper had gotten stuck to my skin, and I tore a tiny piece of flesh from my lower lip with my gesture. I tasted metal.

Pink didn't notice, so I carried on. I enunciated my words by moving my upper lip, while my lower one stayed clenched between my teeth. I told him how Brits, or at least most Londoners, made an effort to look good before they left the house. He replied by telling me that 'dudes' only wore sweat pants, wife-beaters and sandals when he lived in New York City. He added that all the women in New York wore yoga pants and tight white t-shirts every day. People rolled out of bed and went to the bagel shop without brushing their teeth.

"It can't be that stereotyped," I exclaimed.

He persisted, and told me it was the truth. It was just the way it was, over there. He closed his argument by saying that people generally looked like shit in Florence.

"I know, right!? I saw a girl wearing a bath towel as a dress, and she had on a shirt that said '10,000 of my potential sons died on your mom's face last night'. She probably didn't even know what it meant, and just grabbed the first shirt she saw on her boyfriend's floor that morning." We both laughed and drank a bit more.

"But no," I continued. "Most women in London actually make an effort with their appearance, and it's very nice. They all look good. They look strong and confident, and I'm into it!"

Pink seemed as though he wanted to say something, but held himself back. I asked him to share, and he said it would be nice to see women make the same effort in Florence, once in a while.

I agreed. “Women who were women were sexy,” I said. That’s what first attracted me to Patty. He didn’t seem to follow. I told him that she seemed like a woman when I first saw her, and carried herself like one. It made her seem strong and proud. “That’s why I’m not into girls,” I concluded.

“*Seemed* like a woman?” he asked.

I paused and blew a smoke ring, then split it with my index finger before it floated out of reach.

“They’re the same thing though...”

“Nah, Bro. There’s a big difference between the two. A thirty-year-old with a vagina can still be a girl.” He looked at me funny, and he began to sway drunkenly. “It’s like comparing boys and men,” I said. He raised an eyebrow over his half-closed eyelids. I explained that boys always looked for pleasure and immediate gratification. They were hedonists. Men had a sense of responsibility, and the size of a man could be measured by the size of the things that bothered him.

“Who said that?”

“I don’t know, some American politician... But I believe it.”

He shrugged, and I asked him what qualities attracted him in a woman.

“I’m not fussy. All I care about is that it’s completely shaved off. I don’t want to see any hair down there!”

I couldn’t believe his answer, and casually poured the rest of the cheap wine into our glasses as Pink walked into the kitchen to get another bottle. “What, so even if there’s a little bit you won’t touch her or look at her?”

He answered with his back to me, as he rummaged for a corkscrew. “I’d still fuck her, but there’s no way I’d go down on her. In fact, before I start dating a girl I tell her she has to

be completely shaved or waxed. I don't even want to see a landing strip or a tiny inverted triangle."

"Bullshit! That's fucking insane, Man. You can't make those demands on a person!" I said, as I chugged the rest of my glass so that he could pour me a new one. "What about you?" I continued. "How would you feel if every woman you wanted to fuck wouldn't suck your dick unless you agreed to be completely bare?"

"I already take care of that, so they don't have to worry."

"First of all, humans will always have hair growing in those places. Second, you don't know that *all* women prefer pubeless men to hairy ones (or that all dudes are repulsed by a woman's pubic hair). And third, why would you willingly make yourself look like a boy who hasn't reached puberty yet? Own your fucking manhood," I said.

"Nope!" he said, as he shook his head and smiled, like a kid who doesn't want to eat his vegetables. "I don't care what you say, you won't convince me otherwise."

It was my turn to raise an eyebrow. "Look Bud, pussy comes in all shapes and sizes, and no man – especially you – would turn it down, no matter how hairy it is!"

It was three thirty in the morning and the ashtray overflowed with half-smoked cigarettes and scrunched-up candy wrappers. A few empty bottles were strewn over the dining table, and a few more were stashed on the windowsill. We had moved on from pubic hair, and were now talking about our classmates. One in particular, Jasmine, was of interest that evening. She was from New Mexico and was very pretty. I remembered Pink said something along the lines of "I'd drink her piss, just to see where it came from..." I think he liked her, but we were very drunk and I couldn't be certain.

"Dude, she's hot. Why don't you just reach up into your vagina and rip down your ovaries, so you can grow a pair of balls and ask her out for a drink?" I slurred.

He puffed on his cigarette but didn't inhale. What was the point of asking me to roll you one, I thought. He finally spoke: "She is sexy, but she makes herself unattractive..." He paused as I refilled our glasses. I asked him what he meant, because she was clearly a bombshell.

"She goes through men like I go through razor blades!" He sounded as though he'd finally gotten that off his chest. It was a genuine emotion, and for a moment, it humanized him from the apathetic being that he was.

I sat quietly for a moment and watched him fumble with the lighter. His cigarette had gone out because his fingers were slobbered in spit, and wetness killed the cherry. He managed to relight his smoke, and aggressively tossed the lighter out of his hand, so that it slid across the table and flew out the window into the courtyard below.

The sky got lighter, as we spoke about childhood summers. Pink went on about how his mom made him go to Bible Camp as a child. I'd only heard of Bible Camp in movies or on TV, but never knew anyone who actually went to one. I was curious, and asked him what it was like.

"It's like a calisthenics thing, but it's religious..." he said through a burp. I heard liquid come up his esophagus, and he gulped it back down with a painful grimace. "Alright Man, I'm calling it. Gonna take a dump and go to bed." I waved my hand and acknowledged him. We spent the last few hours of our evening hunched over, and wine religiously spilled from the cups in our limp hands as we swayed from the alcohol. The Deluge, I thought...

Pink stood up and sauntered towards the rickety staircase, then held his balance on the wobbly railing as he went up. I sat in silence and thought about the semester, my return to London, Patty, my master's, and home. I heard Pink's initial fart, then by a splash. I could

handle one more, so I rolled myself the night's last cigarette and paired it with the last of my wine.

When I'd finished my nicotined ritual, I tidied up a little and went upstairs. The bathroom light was on, but Pink wasn't in his bed.

"Pink? Hey, Buddy..." There was no answer so I walked into the bathroom and saw him passed out on the toilet, with his cheek resting comfortably on a roll of toilet paper. It reeked. "Yo, Pink!" I said with force. I didn't want to touch him or get too close, so I kicked his foot and he woke up. "I'm not gonna wipe your ass, so get up and go to bed!"

Merry Christmas

Patty and I had spent a week in Paris, and celebrated Christmas together. We woke up at 3:30am on the morning of our trip, and caught the 5:45am train from St. Pancras to Gare du Nord. I was exhausted and grumpy, and my stomach hurt from lack of sleep. Whenever I pulled an all-nighter, or only got a few hours of rest, I always wake up with the worst stomach aches.

The Tube wasn't running yet, and the sky was still dark. We made our way through Deptford to the bus stop, dragging our luggage behind us. We had one suitcase for both our clothes, and one more for all the presents. We spent the better part of the day before trying to wrap each other's gifts in secret, but in such a small flat I was sure that Patty saw what I had gotten her. The heel of my boot had been sticking to the ground as we walked, and when we got to the bus stop I noticed I had stepped on a used condom. I scraped it off in disgust before helping Patty lift our luggage on the double-decker.

At around 4:20am we changed buses, and stood with our bags in the handicapped area on the first level of the bus. People were clashing on the bus, as early shift workers mixed with drunks on their way home from the pubs, bars and clubs. A young man of about my age came onto the bus and caused a scene. He was nicely dressed, and wore a business suit and a camel hair coat, but was belligerently drunk. He refused to pay when he boarded, but the driver insisted and pointed at the till. The man stood there and hit the till repeatedly, saying 'What is this!? What is this!?' Five minutes later, the driver gave up and let him on without paying. Patty was furious. I listened patiently and tried to calm her down, but she kept looking over at the man, and hating him more and more.

"He fucking stinks, like gin and bad breath!" she whispered.

“I know, but we’re moving again and going to spend Christmas in Paris. Let’s just focus on that,” I said with a smile. I could tell she was fuming.

We got off the bus and waited at a crosswalk opposite the train station, when the drunk man sidled up next to us. He swayed and stared at us a while. Patty turned her head towards me to keep from looking at him, but he was relentless.

“Where’re you going?” he said, as best he could.

“Don’t answer him! Just ignore him,” said Patty.

“Oy, I asked you a fucking question!”

“On holiday,” I answered as Patty and I began to cross the street.

“Right, I didn’t ask for a fucking American accent!” he said. As soon as the light turned green we walked at a quick pace towards the entrance of St. Pancras, with rigid necks and wide eyes. As we entered the station he shouted “Peace out, Bitches!” Patty found that a little funny and she giggled. To me it meant that she had gotten over it, and wouldn’t be in a foul mood during our train journey to France.

We arrived at Gare du Nord around noon, after a short delay in Folkestone. We were supposed to meet a man who would take us to the apartment we’d rented for the week, but since we arrived late he wasn’t there. We couldn’t adapt our phones to the French network to call him, so we made our way to the address ourselves and hoped he’d be there.

It was a beautiful day in the 2nd arrondissement. Although the man wasn’t at the apartment, we found a café up the street from the building and bought a few coffees to get their WiFi password. We managed to email the man, and he met us there. I was happy because I had enough time to enjoy my triple espresso and Gitanes while we waited. The apartment was tiny, but charming. The only downside was that the internet didn’t work. He assured us that he would have it up and running as soon as he could, then left us to settle in. Once we had unpacked,

unfolded the futon and made our bed, we went back to the café and emailed our families to let them know we had arrived safely.

The next few days were fun, but Paris was empty. I expected it to be a bit like London, where the streets were always packed no matter what time of year. But the city was quiet and rainy. We visited museums and landmarks and explored the city, but the general lack of people made me feel a bit uneasy. I had been to Paris before, but there was something bizarre about being there at Christmas. I could tell Patty was uneasy as well, because it was the first time she was away from her family during the holidays. That feeling manifested itself many times throughout our trip, and despite the smiles and jokes, I sensed deepening feeling of depression within her.

Things got really bad when we learned that the internet couldn't get fixed over the holidays, which meant we couldn't Skype with our families. Patty spent the better part of Christmas Eve crying in bed facing the wall, with her back to me. I did what I could, and sat by her. I tried to console her and cheer her up. She wasn't having any of it, so I took the other route and agreed that it was an upsetting situation, and offered to listen to her and allowed her to vent. She barely spoke to me that day, and somehow, I felt like it was my fault.

That night, on Christmas Eve, we had made reservations to a fancy restaurant around the corner from our apartment. I left her alone for a few hours in the afternoon, thinking it was best, and went for a walk. When I returned from my excursion she was getting dressed and ready for dinner, but she was still very quiet and barely made eye contact with me. I really didn't feel like being cooped up in Paris with this mood hanging over her head, but this was my holiday too and I'd done nothing wrong. I asked her to at least try to make the best of this situation, so that we could try to enjoy ourselves.

We walked to the restaurant and were greeted with smiles by the waiting staff. It was a lovely venue, and very classy. We were lucky enough to be given a booth in the corner, where we could focus exclusively on ourselves and enjoy a nice romantic meal. But shortly after the first course, Patty's anxiety came flooding back and she was on the verge of tears. I couldn't tell if they were sad tears, angry tears, anxiety tears or maybe all of them combined.

"What's the matter!?" I asked in an embarrassed voice. People were looking in our direction. She launched into a hushed rant about all the things that were bothering her. She had invited me to live with her in the summertime, between my time in Florence and us going back to Ottawa, but now she was against the idea. She had asked her flatmates if I could move in for a few months in the summer and they were excited for me to join them, but now she felt that she'd look like an idiot in front of them for having changed her mind. She had run out of money early on and had gotten a part-time job to support herself, but that didn't leave her enough time to work on her master's. She had wasted her study time outside of work with television and outings, and hadn't left herself any time to write her thesis. She didn't like the fact that she wasn't with her family for the holidays, but we both couldn't afford a trip home and had planned this Paris holiday for months.

There were more issues, but I stopped her because she was beginning to hyperventilate. The waiter came by and quietly cleared our plates, and I asked for the bill. Patty had dabbed her eyes with her napkin, and stared out the window quietly. I looked her in the eyes, with an emotionless expression. When she had finished, I realized that she still hadn't expressed what really bothered her. All the issues she brought up were little things that could be fixed, but Patty always let the insignificant details fester until they turned into big issues. And for some reason, she expressed herself in a way that made me feel like all of those issues were my fault. I had my moments too, but never cared about them enough to have an outburst. Still, I kept my mouth

shut and forced myself to see things from her perspective. I couldn't share her feelings, nor any, for that matter. For that brief moment, I felt indifferent towards her.

I was a step ahead of her on the walk back to the apartment. I didn't want to look at her so I turned up the collar of my pea coat and put my hands in my pockets. After a few blocks I heard her mumble "I'm sorry. I'm fine now..." When I heard those words, I stopped and looked at her. She caught up to me, and I held her hand as we walked the rest of the way together.

We woke up on Christmas morning, had sex, and took a shower. Then, we went to the bakery and bought a few pastries. We stopped at Monoprix on the way back to the apartment, and picked up a few items for our dinner that night. We changed back into our pyjamas and sat on the bed. Our breakfast consisted of chocolate croissants and mimosas. Then, we exchanged presents and lounged around for a bit. I was drinking champagne and orange juice all morning, and I had a steady buzz going by noon. It was a beautiful day, and we decided to go for a walk around the neighbourhood. Our apartment was on Rue Saint-Sauveur, just off the Rue St Denis, and right in the heart of the sex district. The walk was nice, and we both chuckled when a prostitute having a cigarette on the sidewalk wished us a merry Christmas, and said we made a nice couple. It felt good to see Patty smile after the previous night. I wanted to avoid a repeat of what had happened at the restaurant, and made it my mission to keep the happy times going for as long as I could. But I was getting tired. Although I never showed it, I felt more and more on edge around her. I tried to avoid doing or saying anything that could trigger an anxiety attack in her. But that day, she was smiling and laughed at my jokes as we walked through Paris. She didn't smile or laugh as she did when we started dating, but more like an old couple did. When you were fed-up with your partner, but were so used to each other that you couldn't help but love them. That day was a good day.

We walked towards the Seine and crossed a pet shop. I figured it was open on Christmas day, because the staff had to care for the animals. We played with the kittens and puppies for a while and were back on our way. I stopped us on a bridge over the Seine and grabbed Patty by the upper arms, brought her in, kissed her, and said “Merry Christmas.”

Happy New Year

On New Year's Eve, Patty and I were invited to Melissa's country home for celebrations. She drove us there from London, and let us stay the night at her house. We packed an overnight bag, and went down to Lamberhurst with Melissa and Ray on the 31st of December. Their extended group of friends, none of which I knew, were to meet us there.

The car ride was nauseating, but I felt better once we arrived at the big house just outside the village. Helen, Melissa's aunt and closest relative, waited on the doorstep and waved at us with a smile. Some of the others had already arrived and had begun drinking. We set our things in the guest room, and joined Melissa and Ray in the kitchen. The girls introduced me to the rest of the group. They seemed nice, but I wasn't very talkative. So, I opened a beer and stood next to Patty while she chatted, and caught up with her friends.

I was smiling quietly and Helen approached me. She asked me about my master's, Canada, and life in Italy. She was very kind, and I understood why Melissa was so close to her. She had a tumbler in her hand, and I asked her what kind of whisky she was drinking. She replied, then offered me a dram.

"Oh, no thanks. I just started a beer. Maybe later. I'm a big fan of whisky though."

"You're not one of those people who mix it with colas or fruit juices, are you?" she asked.

"Definitely not! There's a special circle in hell reserved for people who screw up whisky like that."

She laughed and I began to relax. By then, the rest of the group had moved into the living room, and were already playing drinking games. Helen excused herself and went upstairs to her room, and I joined the rest of the gang. Although I had a good interaction with Helen, I

was still a little nervous because I knew that I shouldn't cling to Ray or Patty all evening. When I walked into the living room, the girls had disappeared. I stood by Ray, who was speaking with a few people, and asked him where the girls went.

"They're off raiding the liquor cabinet!" he answered, and asked if I had met Phil. He pointed towards the smiling man next to him. The man looked presentable, and his face reflected his quiet personality. Phil's eyebrows were raised and his head bowed forward, and showed the signs of an academic life. I shook his hand and smiled. "And this here is Jimmy," said Ray. He gestured towards a tall and handsome man who had just joined us, and I introduced myself. Jimmy worked the room, and had broken off from another group of guys to come and introduce himself to me, and say hello to Ray and Phil. He didn't stay long. After a short interaction, he excused himself and went to the next cluster of people.

"So, how does everyone here know each other?" I asked.

"We all went to uni together," said Phil.

"Some of us are still there," said Ray. Phil laughed and explained that when everyone had graduated and moved to London, he stayed back to start his PhD.

We chatted for a bit, and I was casually introduced to the others as they mingled about. I hadn't smoked since London because I didn't want to be 'that guy' with people I'd just met, but I was dying for a cigarette and I took out my pouch of tobacco. Fuck it, I thought, I'm done being polite. When Phil saw the pack he asked if he could bum a smoke, and I rolled one for him. Jimmy jogged over as Phil and I set out for the patio outside.

"You guys going for a fag? Can I join you?" he asked.

I was relieved that there were other smokers in the extended group of friends. I tended to be one of those guys at parties who was always outside, although I knew I should try not to be that evening. We stepped out to smoke and made small talk, and they asked about my time in the army. I've never had an issue talking about parts of my military service, because I knew

it was a good way to keep an audience interested. I've never exaggerated my meager experiences, but the mere fact that I served seemed to interest people. So, I often slipped that detail into casual conversations as an ice-breaker.

It worked, and before I knew it Phil, Jimmy and I had smoked a handful of cigarettes. Jimmy went back inside first, and Phil and I soon followed. When we got to the living room we were hit with the smell of sweaty feet. The room was dark and full of music, and the girls were back from their raid. Patty danced alone in the middle of the room with her arms outstretched by her sides and her head back, so that her hair swayed with the music. She pulled the other girls off the couch or away from conversations to dance with her. I sat down quietly next to Phil and watched her dance her way from girl to girl. They established a relay system to keep her entertained, so that they didn't have to be with her all at once. Jimmy brought me a fresh beer from the kitchen, and joined Phil and me for a chat.

By 11:30 pm I was drunk and happy. The gang was still in the living room and having a good time, and Patty was dancing away. She's made of something else, I thought. I couldn't dance like that for hours without a break. Suddenly Charlotte, a tall and blonde school teacher, ran into the living room and shouted, "I just walked in on Ray taking a shit!" The room erupted with laughter, and she laid on the floor in the foetal position and held her sides. Charlotte gasped between her words, but we all understood her say that Ray hadn't closed the bathroom door properly before starting his business. She had flung the door open in a majestic way, and both she and Ray yelled in shock when they locked eyes. Ray jumped and tried to close the door, but he was so startled that a little more shit tricked out of his anus and landed on the toilet seat. He felt himself defecate so his natural reaction was to sit back down, but he plopped into his own poo.

Moments later Ray barged into the living room, shouting “EVERYBODY POOPS!” He made his way around the room pointing to everyone and saying, “You poop! You poop, too! You definitely poop!” I was laughing uncontrollably, and my mouth had been open long enough that drool began to pool beneath my lower lip. I placed my hand over my mouth and walked to the kitchen to compose myself and get Ray a beer. Moments later, the group had resumed its dancing and socializing, and I placed a fresh Stella in Ray’s hand and slapped his back. He put the bottle in the front pocket of his shirt, and fed sips from his breast to all the guys. When Melissa asked him what he was doing, he replied “What, you’ve never heard of suckle-bros?”

After my go at suckle-bros, I sat next to Jimmy on the couch and had a nice conversation with him about his work. He had recently secured the contract for Tic-Tac in the UK, working on their ad campaign. I was curious to know more and was about to ask him a question, but the girls started belting out the midnight countdown. As soon as we chanted “HAPPY NEW YEAR!” the speakers erupted with Careless Whisper by George Michael. We all paired up with our partners and slow danced. When the song started, Patty ran across the living room and wrapped her arms around my neck. She used me as a support for her limp and sweaty body. I indulged her and tried to give her a kiss, but she avoided my lips and turned her head in all directions to look at the other couples dancing. She broke free from my arms halfway through the song, and started pulling the other girls off their boyfriends to dance with her. She once told me that she didn’t like dancing with just one person. She preferred to dance as a group, and go crazy with a crowd of friends. I didn’t like that because I only knew how to dance with women, rather than with a big group. The girls, who didn’t look like they wanted to leave their boyfriends, indulged Patty and danced with her nonetheless. I stood alone in the middle of the living room, and felt like a fool as people danced around me. I must have looked irritated,

because Ray tapped me on the arm and invited me out for a smoke and a beer. We stood side by side while we smoked, and he asked me if everything was OK.

“She does this a lot,” I said. “It makes me feel like a fucking second-class citizen.”

“I understand. But focus on the good things, Mate.”

It was two in the morning when we came back inside, and Ray and I sat in the living room with the rest of the group. A few people chatted quietly, but most were asleep or passed out on the couches. Patty stood up, and with a smile she shouted “K, I’m going to bed!” That started a chain reaction, and people groggily made their way to their respective accommodations for the night.

I followed Patty to the guest room and we got ready for sleep. Just before I turned the lights off, she ran into the ensuite bathroom and threw up in the toilet. I curled my upper lip when I heard her vomit. She had closed and locked the door, and when I knocked to see if she was OK or needed anything she yelled for me to fuck off. I got in bed and she joined me moments later, then instantly passed out. The smell of her breath kept me awake for a while but I rolled her away from me, then sleep overcame me.

I didn’t sleep well, and woke up many times throughout the night. I got up to pee once, and when I got back in bed I thought Patty had stopped breathing. I leaned my head close to her face to make sure she was OK. She was fine, but only taking three or four breaths per minute. She was in a deep, alcohol-induced sleep. Once I was convinced that I didn’t have to nudge her back to life, I rolled over and tried to go back to sleep.

The following morning, we came downstairs to a busy kitchen. Everyone was involved in mass-producing breakfast for the twenty-odd people that had spent the night. Seeing as how the cooking was already underway, I grabbed plates and cutlery and began to set the table.

Jimmy had made the scrambled eggs for everybody. He placed every batch in a big bowl and covered it with a lid, to keep the eggs warm for all of us to eat at the same time. The steam couldn't escape, and condensation fell back down into the eggs. We all sat at the big dining room table, and Charlotte was the first to serve herself. She took one look at the eggs and gagged, then passed them on to the next person. We all felt quite similar.

After breakfast and the clean-up, we all went into the living room (which still smelled a bit like feet) to recuperate in front of the TV. A storm had made its way into the area. We waited till the early evening for it to pass, before we went back to London. Melissa drove us in relays to Tunbridge Wells for us to catch trains back to London. On the drive there and on the ride home, Patty had barely spoken a word. She was very hungover and I assumed that was the reason why. I was quiet all day.

La Belle Dame sans Merci

The bedsheets were stuck to my skin when I woke up, and I felt them peel off my damp body as I drew them slowly. Patty had just woken up and she saw that I was distressed.

She asked what was wrong, and I told her I had just woken up from a disturbing dream.

“Ugh, everyone gets nightmares. It’s not the end of the world.”

“It wasn’t a nightmare; it was just disturbing!” I shouted. I contracted my muscles and swallowed repeatedly. My hands shook as I wiped my sweaty face, but Patty had her mind on other things. I explained to her that I had killed a man in my dream, by repeatedly bashing his head against a rock. Once he was dead, nothing happened to me. I ordered lunch in a restaurant and went about my day. It was liberating.

Patty told me that dreams were a manifestation of things that upset you most, so that you could live them in the subconscious world rather than in the physical one. That sounded like bullshit to me, and I continued describing my dream.

“You don’t understand. I felt free, as though nothing mattered in the world. I could do anything I wanted, because I knew I was going to die someday. And I knew that the man I killed would die too, if it wasn’t for me.” I caught my breath. “If we’re all going to die someday, then what’s the purpose of life? What’s to stop us from doing anything we want?”

Patty hadn’t paid much attention to what I said, even when my voice cracked a few times. When I finished my rant, she let out an annoyed grunt and said, “Get over it!” before she returned to her phone.

I sat up in bed, defeated, and turned away from her so that my feet rested on the ground. My arms hung by my sides, and the back of my hands rested limply on my knees. My back was arched and my shoulders bowed forward, and I looked out the window as the last of the

condensation on my forehead dried up. When she had finished her morning ritual of social media checking, she sat up and said, “Loads of people get those dreams, you’re not the only one.”

“I don’t...” I said.

“What do you want me to say!?”

“I don’t know? Show some compassion maybe? I do it for you.”

“Just be a man and get over it.”

She walked out and went to the bathroom, as soon as I was going to say “What – can’t men be upset from time to time?”

Patty went to work later that day, and I went for a walk around the neighbourhood. There was a small cemetery off Deptford High Street, and I sat on a bench beside a three-hundred-year-old gravestone. The sun was out but it was a cold day. I sat for a few minutes and studied the grounds. There were no new plots, and many of the ancient stones were tipped over and surrounded with beer cans. After each smoke, I picked a stone and flicked my cigarette butt on it. I didn’t think the occupants minded, they were all dead.

I took out a worn copy of *Caligula* by Albert Camus from my inside jacket pocket, and began to read. Someone shouted on the High Street and distracted me from my book. I tried to concentrate on the story, but my mind was still racing from the dream I had that morning.

I put the book back in my pocket and rolled another smoke. The air was crisp and burned my nostrils every time I inhaled, and I sat quietly with my legs crossed. A young woman walked past me, and we looked at each other. I saw the name ‘John Keats’ printed on the cover of the book she was holding, and I raised my eyebrows. She smiled a genuine smile, not a passers-by smile, and I felt the cold breeze chill my teeth as I returned the gesture. She was beautiful, with long straight brown hair, a triangular face and proportioned body. I watched her as she walked

away and turned on the high street, and I snapped myself back to the real world and thought about Patty. I pressed my lips against each other and lowered my eyebrows.

I made my way back to Deptford High Street and turned right, towards the small independent coffee shop that I had recently discovered. It was tucked away in a lane off the high street, by the train tracks, and I knew there would be a spot for me to sit for a while and think. After a short wait to get my coffee I turned towards the tables to find a place to sit, and I saw the young woman from the cemetery reading quietly in the corner. I felt my pulse beating in my fingertips. I don't know how long I had stood there, with my trembling coffee cup in hand, but I knew I'd regret it if I didn't at least say hello.

I approached her shyly, not with the pompous attitude I had when I introduced myself to Patty almost a year ago, and tried thinking of something clever to say. She was reading Keats, and despite trying to be flirtatious, the only thing that came out of my mouth was:

“And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.”

She looked up and smiled. “That's my favourite poem.”

“Can I join you?” She pulled her cup onto her side of the table and made room for mine, and I sat down opposite her.

“I'm Emily,” she said, as she extended her hand.

“André.” Her palm was soft and delicate, and I thought I held it a little too long because she distinctly pulled it away and chuckled. I was lost in her brown eyes, and couldn't think of anything to say. I couldn't speak, but she smiled quietly and expected me to say something.

“So, what do you do?” I asked. I heard the nervousness in my voice when I spoke.

“I just finished a degree in English Lit, and now I’m working in a bookshop till I find something better to do. What about you?”

I told her I was doing my master’s in Italy, and was staying with friends in London over the Christmas holidays.

We spoke about Keats and poetry, then about the places we’d visited and travelled to in our lives. She had never been to Italy, and told me she dreamed of visiting Keats’s house in Rome. I told her about life in Florence and Italian culture, and ordered us more coffee. As I waited by the counter, I realized I had embellished my accounts of the Florentine lifestyle. But I looked back at her and saw her smiling in her empty coffee cup, and didn’t care. My stories seemed to make her happy. I felt my heart beating in my fingertips again, as I placed our new coffees on the table and resumed our conversation.

I’d never felt such a strong and immediate connection with a woman before, not even Patty. She spoke with such passion and tenderness, and her eyes were calming. I listened to every word intently, with my elbow on the table and my chin resting in my palm. We laughed all afternoon, and my cheeks hurt from smiling. A sensation I hadn’t felt in a long time.

Two hours and four coffees later, she told me she had to go to work. Before she left she grabbed the notebook and fountain pen I always carried with me and had placed on the table, and wrote her phone number in it. I liked that she was archaic about it, rather than send me a text for me to have her number.

We stood up together and walked out, and she wrapped her arms around me and softly kissed my cheek for what felt like an eternity. I held her tight by the waist, and relished the moment. I watched her walk away, and saw her marching with more enthusiasm than she was in the graveyard hours earlier. When she was out of sight, I turned the other way and walked back towards the flat. The crisp air wasn’t burning my nostrils anymore, but instead

accentuated the smell of her perfume that lingered on my cheek and neck. I didn't want to smoke and have her aroma replaced by the smell of cigarettes.

A third of the way back to the flat, my pace slowed down and my smile disappeared. I couldn't smell Emily's perfume anymore. I stopped in the heart of Deptford Market and repeatedly sniffed my scarf and lapel, but it was gone. Images of my girlfriend appeared in my mind, and I suddenly felt disoriented. Someone called me a *git* for blocking the way, but I ignored them and stared at the ground in front of me. "Wanker!" someone else said, as they hurried past with a crate of fish. I didn't move. I was afraid. A part of me knew I'd never see Emily's smile again. I'd never feel her breath on my cheek as I held her, or hear the wonder in her voice when she spoke of poetry. Patty was my girlfriend, and despite our turbulent relationship, we were invested in each other. The world had me cornered again.

I looked at Emily's number. People bumped into me on all sides, but I stayed on the busy road in the heart of Deptford Market. My eyes welled up as I exhaled slowly. I felt sick to my stomach and endured the painful lump in my throat, as I ripped up the phone number and threw it in the recycling bin. The moment of bliss had passed, and I returned to my life. Moments later, I found myself sitting alone by the fire at The George.

Us and Them

Ray met me by the steps that led up to Patty's flat. He was late but I didn't mind because it gave me time to smoke. Before I took up the habit, I always felt awkward waiting for someone in a public place if they were late. I'd stand there with nothing to do, and felt uncomfortable when people saw me standing by myself. Once I started smoking, I felt casual and relaxed about standing on the sidewalk alone.

When he showed up, we walked up the road to The Royal George for some early evening drinking. The crowd was different that day. The locals we were accustomed to seeing hadn't arrived yet, and the pub was filled with older, retired men from the neighbourhood. Ray bought the first round, and within three minutes I was back at the bar ordering another. The bartender was a stand-in for the owners, and he hesitated to serve us a second round after we had knocked the first one down so quickly.

"We'll be careful with those ones, Mate," yelled Ray from his seat. He poured our stouts and I walked them across the pub without spilling any, and sat opposite Ray. We tapped our glasses, knocked them on the table and chugged them like we did the first ones.

I told Ray about what had happened a few days earlier with Patty. My story compelled us to keep drinking, and Ray told me similar anecdotes from his part. It was good to talk to someone about it. Ray always said that going to the pub was like a therapy session for men. "You keep it all inside when it happens, and then you go drinking with your friends and let it all out. Once it's out, that's it! It's all finished, and you can forget about it and move on." He was right, in a way. But there were some things that I could never forget.

We kept drinking and chatting, and spent a good hour talking about work and school. Ray had just gotten promoted, and I had gotten positive feedback on an article that I submitted for online publication through my master's program in Florence.

"I think it's incredible that you're doing a master's degree, Mate!" he mumbled. "Like, I imagine you have to be so disciplined, and whatnot, to do that..." A low, wet burp came out of his stomach. The beer shot halfway up his esophagus and he swallowed it back down.

"Yeah Bud. And I think it's great that you found a job you're happy doing every day. You found your career, and now you can have a normal life. The only reason I'm doing this master's is because I can't find a job." I drank the rest of my beer. "That being said, I am very fucking proud of myself for doing this thing!" We laughed and Ray stood up to buy another round.

The owners of The George were now working the bar. They knew Ray and I, and had already started pouring us new stouts when they noticed ours had gotten low. As Ray approached the bar, one of the old retirees scowled at him, then turned to give me the same look.

"Alright, Sir?" asked Ray with a smile, as he extended his hand towards the man.

"You young people are very entitled, aren't you?" he replied, as he kept his hands in his jacket pockets. Ray turned and gave me a confused look. I knew exactly what was going on. He must have overheard us talking, and old men were the same everywhere in the world. Normally, when confronted by nasty old people, you were supposed to keep your composure. Being angry at the world for the way that it was, was often the only thing they had left. Old man or not though, he had interrupted my therapy session. I'd been looking forward to this time with Ray all fucking week, and not only had he soured it with his attitude, but he went against everything that the experience of the pub stood for. Ray had sat back down at our table with fresh pints, but I couldn't stop myself.

“Listen, you curmudgeon fuck!” I yelled, as I stood up and stumbled closer to him. “Fuck yeah we’re entitled! At our young age we’ve already accomplished so much more than you guys. What took you forty years to achieve, we’ve done in twenty! We go through the motions and push forward, beyond what people of your generation did when they were our age. But it doesn’t make a difference, does it? It’s an old man’s world, and no matter what we do we always come right back to where we started, because you guys keep fucking it up for everyone!” I was on top of him now, and yelled down the back of his neck. “We’re fucking entitled alright, because we’re a generation of janitors with PhD’s!”

The old man was terrified and raised his cane, but I grabbed it and pushed it back down. Before I knew it, Ray had me by the shoulders and pried me off my casualty. “We’re leaving,” he whispered, as he gave the owners an apologetic look.

Camden

We left the flat in Deptford around five o'clock in the evening, and headed north from New Cross station. Patty, Melissa and Ray talked throughout the journey. They were speaking about 'Britishy' things, and I sat next to them on the train and nodded quietly. What the fuck is *8 Out of 10 Cats*? It didn't matter, everyone was happy and we were on our way to a house party in Camden. I was told that lots of the people from new year's eve were going to be there, and was looking forward to a fun evening.

After getting off the train, we went to Tesco to get some beers. Things had been getting tense with Patty lately, and I wanted to get very drunk that night. I hadn't told her about Emily, but I couldn't talk to her about anything for that matter. Everything I said turned into an argument or panic attack. So, I learned to keep my mouth shut.

I came out of the grocery store with eight cans of Red Stripe, because they were only a pound each. I cracked one open and lit a smoke as we walked from Tesco to the apartment. Patty snapped at me in a hushed voice, saying that it wasn't a long way to the party, and that I shouldn't have lit a cigarette. I didn't respond and walked the rest of the way with Ray. She was right, and I had to butch my smoke out after a few puffs.

The atmosphere was lively when we entered the small flat. I was welcomed and hugged by a short woman with long brown hair, and her bearded husband. Their flat felt more like a home than Patty's apartment. I felt good there, I felt warm. Those sensations had become foreign to me in the last few months. But I pushed the thought to the back of my mind and smiled. Ray slapped me on the back and tapped his can of beer against mine, then we worked the room.

Phil and Jimmy weren't there, but I met another member of the group called Tim. He was my age, and was an aspiring comedian. Ray told me that he usually wore his grey suit to social events and get-togethers, because he always came straight from work. Tim put effort into his comedy, but that meant he had to put in as much time in his day job to support his aspirations. He drank a lot. Like a champion, in fact. I looked at him from across the room, and through the beer-laden atmosphere I saw him joking with Melissa and Patty. The girls would simultaneously laugh at specific intervals between Tim's jokes, and I realized that he was practicing his routines on them. When his audience gasped for air after a properly delivered joke, Tim stayed in the bit until they stopped. He was going to be good someday. Although he seemed to be enjoying himself with the girls, I could tell that his laughs were empty. Behind the laughter, he seemed sad. I confirmed this when I saw him finish his beer in one swig. He didn't tilt his head back to drink the remainder of his can, which he held limply between his index and thumb. Instead, he tilted his head and shoulders forward and pushed his jaw out to catch the dregs, while he kept his eyes down. No one had noticed this, but maybe they just assumed that that's just who Tim was. He slammed the rest of his Polish beer and went into the kitchen to get another. When he excused himself, Patty and Melissa sat on the couch and started whispering to each other with smiling faces.

When Tim came back into the living room and saw that his audience had left him, he got another beer from the kitchen and offered it to me. It was a can of Tyskie. He joined in on the conversation with Ray and the short lady who hugged me when I arrived.

"Hello Ray, how are you Pal?" he said as he slapped his back. Tim spoke quietly and almost patronizingly.

"Well, Mate; I'm well. How are you?"

“Capital! Couldn’t be happier to be here,” he said. Turning to the short lady. “Thank you for hosting.” His lips were smiling but his eyebrows weren’t raised. After that short interaction, he bounced away to talk to her bearded husband.

Tim and the other man spoke about cricket and golf. I was too drunk to remember the details of their conversation. Ray and the short woman were talking about their time living together at university, and I excused myself to get another beer. When I came back I stood beside Ray, with my back to Tim. An instant after I cracked open my beer, I was hit in the head with a hard metal object. I crouched down from the hit, but managed to save my beer. When I turned around I saw Tim holding a golf putter. He was practicing his tee-off swing with it.

“Dude, what the fuck!?” I shouted, as I held my ear.

“This is entirely your fault,” Tim replied.

“How the fuck is this my fault!? You just smacked me upside the head with a putter!”

“Well, what were you doing walking behind me when I was doing something stupid like that!?” He took a slow swing with the putter for all of us to see.

Tim apologized and got me a can of beer from the fridge to press against my head. Patty couldn’t contain her laughter. I had a good time, despite the pain, and I laughed away the incident. I stood quietly next to Ray and we studied the room with contentment. We smiled at each other, then my lips straightened out and I told him that moments like these never lasted as long as they should.

Remember All the Fun We Used to Have?

Patty and I had settled into bed and were about to go to sleep, after yet another sexless evening. She told me that she was stressed from her studies, and from not having seen her family at Christmas. If anything, I felt like sex could help her relax, but she had grown cold to my advances. There was only so much a man could jerk off when he was living with his girlfriend, I thought. Nevertheless, I maintained my composure and changed the subject.

Once the lights were turned off Patty worked herself up. She spoke about her courses, her work, her family and her life in London, all in a single breath. I knew what was coming. I couldn't handle another panic attack so I tried to steer the conversation by talking about how much I loved London. I described my evenings at the pub with Ray, and how easy it was for me to get on board with the pace of life here. But she wasn't listening, and had tumbled deeper into her anxiety. All the things that bothered her could be fixed with a little effort and hard work, I thought. The world didn't owe anybody happiness.

There seemed to be nothing I could say or do to break her free from the torrent of negativity that had taken over her brain, and my mere presence irritated her. I tried to give her space, worked my schedule around her life, and accommodated her as best I could. But for the past three weeks, she'd slept with her back to me. There were no more goodnight kisses, there were no more jokes in the morning when we woke up. I didn't know what to do, so I stopped trying. She wouldn't come around, and it seemed like she didn't want to.

I wasn't the only one to notice her behaviour. Her friends took her out the other week to cheer her up. Patty went along and had a good time, but when they came home she darted into her bedroom and sunk back into herself, instead of joining them all for a cup of tea in the living room before bed (as was the ritual in the flat). Her anxiety had affected my wellbeing

and health as well. I only got a good night's sleep, or had an appetite when she was in a good mood. She hadn't noticed that I'd been surviving on a steady diet of cigarettes and antacids for the past few weeks.

I was supposed to go back to Florence in a few days, and I wanted the rest of our time together in London to be happy. But that night was no different from every other in the past few weeks. I laid on my side and faced her, and she was on her back and stared at the ceiling. When I finished my rant about London, to which she paid no attention, I exhaled and asked what was wrong. Patty burst into tears and cried, "I miss my cat!"

I didn't respond because I didn't feel bad for her anymore. My lack of empathy upset me more than she did. I've always upheld the idea that it was my responsibility to make her happy, but she didn't seem to be helping herself and I grew tired of trying. Still lying on my side, I felt my esophagus start to burn. I hadn't told her about my sleepless nights or my acid reflux. I rolled onto my back and felt like the right thing to ask her was "What's really wrong?" The words came out almost automatically, before I could stop them.

Patty rushed to explain how she went through a lot of effort to make her life in London normal and comfortable. Then she said that whenever I showed up for a few days or weeks, she felt unbalanced and anxious. I didn't get it. I hadn't done anything to make her life difficult. My face was scrunched and my jaw was clenched as she spoke. If you fucking miss your life back home so much, then it should be the opposite, I thought. I'm the closest thing you've got to home over here.

She continued and said she felt responsible to show me a good time, and to look after me while I was in London. I felt insulted at that comment. Why the fuck did she feel like I needed to be babysat? I've not shown her any reason for it.

Patty was blabbing and sobbing. Between breaths, and with her hand over her mouth, I understood her saying that she had no sex drive and hadn't had for a while, but that she felt she

owed it to me to have sex before I went back to Florence. I was now pinching my thigh under the covers and tried to distract myself from my acid reflux burps. I watched her cry and hyperventilate for a minute, then managed to calm myself down. I mustered the courage to take on the role of the supportive and consoling boyfriend, and turned back onto my side and lightly put my hand on her shoulder.

“There’s no reason for you to think that,” I said. “I don’t expect anything from you, Babe. And let’s face it, you really don’t need to look after me while I’m here. You see how easy it is for me. I’m happy taking care of myself when I’m here. I just don’t want you to be upset over this.”

“I’m worried about the future. I know I said that I wanted you to live with us when you come back this summer, but it’s not a good idea.” She tried to explain why, but all she coherently said was that her room was too small for both our things. I knew it wasn’t the real reason she didn’t want me around all the time in the summer. She probably didn’t know either. Still, I suppressed my urge to make sense of everything, and explained that we would go back to our original plan of me finding a place of my own for the summer. That’s what we had agreed on when we were both still in Canada, and I hadn’t considered staying with her until she suggested it a few months ago. I told her that when I got my own room for the summer, we could go back to seeing each other at the same rate we did when we lived back home. And this way we’d look forward to all the great things we could do together in London. That seemed to calm her down a little. I reminded her about the nice moments we shared together throughout our relationship, and when I had first visited her in October. “The summer will be just like that,” I said.

Patty had stopped crying, and began to accept the thought that we could bring our relationship back to what it was. When the hiccups had stopped, I hugged and kissed her, then

laid on my back, expressionless. She wiped her cheeks and said “OK”, then turned her back to me and closed her eyes. A moment later, she turned around to face me, and fell asleep.

That's Just What Girls Do

Karen, my alcoholic classmate from the States, had been kicked out of the bar. I ran out after her and tried to calm her down, but she belted out a Taylor Swift song and approached passers-by with offers of blowjobs.

“Just let her be. If we try to stop her it's just going to encourage her,” said Cynthia, the one who teased me about my underwear the day after my birthday drinks.

“You live with her, so you probably know best. Does she get like this every time she drinks?”

“She wouldn't be if she didn't drink so much. Once she starts she doesn't stop. It's like she's competing with herself.”

I told her we were no better, and laughed. But she replied that Karen had taken her drinking to a whole new level. We watched her run down a side street and disappear.

I rolled a smoke and finished my beer. Cynthia spoke with a few of our female classmates that had filtered out of the bar. Most had found Italian guys to go home with, and were dispersing. Cynthia didn't have anyone to go home with that night, and my girlfriend was miles away. So, we stayed for a few more drinks.

I got along well with her, but our relationship was purely platonic. I made sure of that with all the girls in the program. It didn't stop Jasmine making a few passes at me, though. It felt nice to be desired. It would have been so easy to bend to her urges and sleep with her, but I held my ground and always turned her down.

Pink soon joined us in the smoking area out front, with fresh Heineken in hand. For a big drinker, I found it odd that he never tried Italian beers. I guessed he only drank what he knew. I asked him how he was.

“I’m just fucking peachy, Man. No one’s biting at my worm so I might as well just get a kebab and jerk off tonight.”

“Who’s not biting at your worm, Pink?” demanded Cynthia. “Point them out and I’ll wingman the shit out of you!”

“No, no... It’s OK. Seems like the Pink-man is destined to marry his own hand.” He took a quaff and mumbled a tune. ‘Hey, hey, what do you say...’ We all gave out a low, empathetic laugh. “I do feel like a bit of an asshole though,” he said, as he leaned back in his seat. He told us he’d been speaking with an Italian girl inside, who lived nearby. When he leaned in to kiss her she backed away, and she and her friends laughed at him.

Cynthia and I looked at him with pitying eyes. “It’s OK though!” he exclaimed. “I’ll grab a piece-of-shit kebab and head home after this beer.”

I told him we could stay out and keep drinking, if he liked. I wasn’t in a rush and had nothing else to do that evening. He declined and thanked me, then finished his beer and bummed a smoke from me for the road.

Cynthia and I walked back to the city centre. I wasn’t familiar with the area; it was a bit further north than I had ventured in the past. One of our classmates dragged us out here on a whim. Still, the walk back was nice, and we stopped at a corner store to get some beers for the road. We continued walking and Cynthia asked me about my winter visit to London. I told her about the pub, my friends, and Patty. She and my classmates had met Patty when she visited me in Florence a few months back. They all got along with her, and I remembered thinking that I was proud to show off my girlfriend to the world. I also told Cynthia about Patty’s mood swings, her anxiety, and general lack of sexual appetite.

Cynthia laughed, and I grimaced at her expression. “That’s just what girls do, André,” she said. I doubted that, I thought. She assured me that I shouldn’t be worried, and that every

woman went through phases like that. I explained that it had been going on for a while, but she cut me off and told me about a similar experience she'd recently had.

“I spent a whole weekend being depressed in my bedroom! I just felt really lonely, and missed my family, and wanted somebody there for me. On the Sunday I decided to get out of bed and go for a walk, when I met an Italian guy on the street. We got to talking, and he fucked me in the alley behind my building. I felt great after that!”

I looked at her quietly, and gnawed at the inside of my cheek. We had made our way to the centre of town, and the lights highlighted my expression of malaise. Patty wasn't like that, I thought. But since Cynthia's story did little to appease my worries, I rolled myself a smoke and puffed in silence.

“I can't hold it in any longer,” she said.

“What?”

“I gotta take a wicked piss! I know a dark corner off a side street nearby. Come with me and stand guard!” I followed her around the corner and she handed me her purse, before she disappeared into the shadows and pulled her underwear off to the side. I heard trickling water and saw her stream emerge from the darkness. I tiptoed around it as it crept through the cobblestones. It smelled foul, like rotten asparagus. My oesophagus burned and I let out a low, breathy burp.

The Big Wank

By eleven o'clock at night I could barely stay focused on my work. Pink was at his desk watching blooper reels on YouTube.

"Hey, Dude. Do you wanna hit up Finnegan for a quick drink? Get away from here for a bit?" I proposed.

"You go there a lot now," he said, while he stared at his screen.

"It's nice to be able to go down for a cheeky pint after a long day. Come on, Man. I really need to get out of the apartment."

"Nah, I don't like to drink during the week," he said. I know, you preferred to go crazy on Friday and Saturday nights, I thought. "For an Irish pub, you'd think it would be called *Finnegan's* instead of Finnegan," he added.

"Yeah, Italians don't really do things that aren't Italian very well. But you'd think that the Scottish manager would have picked up on it," I said. "Maybe they didn't have enough room on the sign to finish writing the name..."

Pink closed his laptop and went to bed, and I rolled a smoke for my short walk to the bar.

It was a nice walk up Via San Gallo to the pub. I liked going to Finnegan. It was close to our apartment, and away from the busy areas. There were no students or tourists, and I liked to sit at the bar and talk to the manager. It felt like the closest thing I could get to The Royal George in Florence. The pub wasn't cramped, there was a good local vibe there, and I felt comfortable going by myself to decompress after a day's work.

I passed a six-hundred-year-old Templar church on my walk, and a small public garden. I wondered what Patty was up to, then reminded myself that it didn't really matter. She knew that I sometimes went to the pub in the evening, but on that night I decided not to tell her. I didn't know why. My phone was in my pocket and I planned to text her from the pub if she messaged me.

The pub was on the corner of Via San Gallo and some other street that I didn't know by name. I flicked my cigarette and walked in. The place was livelier than expected, but I didn't dwell on it. Sid, the Scotsman, saw me walk in and gave me a nod. He began pouring my drinks: a shot of Tullamore Dew and a Guinness. I took the shot then propped myself on my usual bar stool. "Awright Mate?" he said in a hurry, then went back to his computer at the end of the bar.

To my left I saw two young women bent over a scrap of paper. I looked around and noticed the televisions were turned off, and there was no music playing. Groups of people were huddled around tables and spoke in hushed voices, and tried to keep their papers dry. What the hell was going on? I looked back at Sid and he held a microphone and a stack of cards in his hands. Wednesdays were quiz nights at Finnegan. That meant that as well as the music and TV, they also turned off the WiFi so that nobody could use their phones to search for answers. I quickly rolled a cigarette, grabbed my pint, and went outside to message Patty.

I'm quite tired, I've had a long day. I'm going to turn in early tonight. Hope you had a nice evening and I'll message you in the morning. Love you.

Once I had sent the message, I took my time to finish my smoke and drink. The lights outside the pub were turned off, and I heard cats fighting and distant voices in the darkness.

I took in the sounds of the street and went back inside, then tapped the bar with my hand. Sid poured me another Guinness and I sat down on my stool. They were now between rounds, and Sid hurried to get his customers more drinks before he continued with the quiz. He

came around after tending to the others, and with half my beer already gone I produced a five Euro note from my pocket. He waved my hand away, and said that this one was on him.

The two girls who were sat to my left saw our interaction, and introduced themselves to me. They asked me if I came here often, and what I was doing in Florence. They seemed to enjoy the fact that I was Canadian, and not American, and they invited me to join them for the quiz. They were both Italian and lived across town. I later learned that one of them was avoiding her husband, which is why they had travelled this far for a drink.

We chatted and drank, as we tried our best to answer Sid's questions. We came in third place in the quiz and won a chocolate bar. When the quiz was over and people slowly left the bar, the girls and I went outside for a cigarette. Moments later, one of the ladies said that she had to leave because her husband had been out looking for her. She hugged her friend then came towards me. We did the kisses on the cheeks thing, and I told her it was nice to meet her and chat. With the hand that held her purse strap, she extended her index and pointed towards her friend. "She's good to chat with too..." she said quietly, before leaving. I checked my phone and noticed Patty had messaged me a dry "*Good night.*" I quickly put the device back in my pocket, and the remaining girl and I finished our smokes and went back inside.

Chiara and I sat at the bar and ordered another round. We spent hours talking and laughing. I told her about my program, and I learned that she was a nude model for an art class at the Accademia. She showed me pictures on her phone of students' charcoal and pastel renditions of her. She was beautiful, and every few minutes our bar stools inched closer to one another's. Our legs eventually touched and I felt myself grow. I wanted to fuck her, but I knew it would mess things up for me. What if Patty didn't matter? What if none of it mattered? The world had me in a corner again.

By two in the morning most of the patrons had left, and Sid had barricaded the front doors of the pub. He passed out ashtrays to those of us who were still left, and said "Serve

yourselves, Lads, just put two Euro on the bar for every drink you take.” We were locked in. Those that wanted to leave had to interrupt Sid’s darts game, for him to let them out the back.

Chiara and I spoke for a while longer. We filled up our ashtray and pooled our change to buy more drinks. But eventually the time came for us to leave, and she walked down San Gallo with me, towards my apartment. She had parked her bicycle on the racks near my building, and when we got there she paused for a moment. Chiara stood cross-legged, and curled her hair around her fingers. I knew exactly what was going on.

“I would invite you upstairs for another drink, but we don’t have anything and my roommate is asleep,” I said.

“Is there no where we can sit and talk?” She smiled. “We can’t go back to my place because my boyfriend is asleep in our bed.”

I gave her an apologetic smile. I knew that even if Pink wasn’t in the apartment, I wouldn’t have gone through with it. There were many factors I had to consider. Ray once said that pleasures were only temporary, but morals lasted a lifetime. I didn’t know if those words applied to that situation, but if they did I sincerely hoped he was right.

“So...” she said, as she inched closer to me.

I gave her a quick hug and thanked her for a nice evening, then rushed inside my building. She remained motionless for an instant, then got on her bicycle and rode away. Once in my apartment, I heard Pink snoring upstairs. I went up to the toilet as quietly as I could, pulled my pants down, and had a big wank.

Domestic Disturbance

It was Sunday and I was alone in the apartment. I gave myself the day off, even though I had nothing else to do other than schoolwork. Patty and I had a nice chat earlier in the day, and I didn't want to pester her with messages because I was bored. I lost track of how many cigarettes I'd smoked, and my left index and middle finger had started to turn brown.

I dragged a chair to the big window by our dining table and rolled myself a cannon of a cigarette. It was a humid day, and the breeze smelled like sewage. I heard drums coming from the Medici Palace down the road, and in the courtyard below my window the neighbour's children pretended to be soldiers. I wondered if I had ever played at being a soldier as a kid.

That question triggered an immense inner dialogue about childhood. I began talking to myself, and pretended to answer interview questions about my past. I'd often been caught talking to myself, or practicing canned responses to hypothetical questions. I found comfort in knowing exactly what to say or do, if I was ever in the unlikely situations I had concocted in my head. Pink was the opposite; he'd never so much as rehearsed for an oral presentation. Was it confidence or apathy? I said the word 'apathy' over and over, because I didn't like the sound of my pronunciation.

A moment later, Pink walked in and saw me in the corner of the apartment, sat a chair by the big window as I mumbled 'apathy' to myself. "Doing that thing again, where you talk to yourself?" he asked, mockingly. He snapped me out of my trance, and the twig of ashes that clung to the filter of the cigarette that I had lit, but forgot to smoke, fell on my lap.

"You know my methods, Man," I replied, as I wiped my jeans clean.

“You’re gonna end up being that guy who sits in the park all day and talks to pigeons!” He approached me and whispered: “Try not to talk to yourself too much, I’ve got company.” A tall brunette with glasses and a ponytail walked in, and put her phone in her purse.

“Hi, how’s it going?” I asked.

“I’m well, thank you. Pink...” He walked over and grabbed her by the hand, then escorted her upstairs.

“We’re gonna chill and watch a movie, Dude,” he said.

She was a Swiss bartender who worked in clubs while vacationing in Italy, and Pink had met her over Christmas break. He was fortunate to have had the apartment to himself when I was in London, and he pushed our single beds together to have enough room to fuck her comfortably. Why didn’t I think of that when Patty visited me? At least Pink was kind enough to wash my bedsheets the next day. I later realized that my presence in the apartment was somewhat of a nuisance for Pink.

Pink came downstairs for a moment. “Dude, can I borrow that bottle of Chianti you’ve got in the kitchen?” I motioned for him to help himself, still sat in my chair with my feet rested on the windowsill. He poured two glasses, and brought them up along with the bottle.

I continued to watch the clouds, and went deeper into myself with each cigarette I lit. It was quiet. The sound of the movie had stopped, but then they began to argue. Their debate intensified, and she yelled “I’m leaving! You are a fucking cocksucker!” That got my attention, and I turned my head to see what had happened. The day had gotten a lot more interesting.

She clambered down the rickety staircase, with her flats in one hand and her purse in the other. Pink leaned over the loft’s wooden railing, and when he appeared I had never seen him so furious.

“You can judge me, you can laugh about me with your friends, BUT YOU CAN NEVER UNLICK MY ASSHOLE, BITCH!” She slammed the door on her way out. “I’m sorry you had to see that,” said Pink, as he came downstairs and chugged the rest of both their wines.

“Buddy, if you thought you were drinking before...” I said quietly. He grabbed the bottle by its neck and downed it, without so much as a gag or burp.

I Cannot Teach You Anything, I Can Only Make You Think

My classmates and I traipsed through Florence to meet our professor Amalia, who was to accompany us to a contemporary art museum. None of us were in shape for it. We had been out the night before, and Pink and I were still drunk when we woke up.

The hangovers kicked in when we met Amalia. “Make sure you take notes, and ask a lot of questions...” I recalled her saying before we stepped off. The walk there was distant to me. I kept my eyes fixed on the back of Pink’s shoes, as I followed him through the crowds. I gagged a few times from the heat of the early morning sun, but never got out of step with Pink. I was on a ruck-march, I thought. It was just like the army. If I made it to the museum, I knew I’d be fine.

When we got to our destination, Amalia introduced us to our guide. I felt a bit better, but Pink was in a walking coma. Karen felt the worst of us all. She swayed a lot and leaned on any object she could find, artefact or stanchion. We followed Amalia and our guide, but none of us cared. I felt bad for Amalia because she was the only one who spoke with the guide, and asked her about the collection. She wanted us to take notes, but I had rolled cigarettes the whole time to avoid having to do it on the walk home.

I was nodding in and out of a speech about a block of cement with chicken wire wrapped around it, when I spotted a public restroom. I slipped away from the group and found a water fountain. I must have drunk ten cups worth of water, before I refilled it and got one for Pink. The group was now beside a stack of truck tires with paint blotches on it. I rejoined my cohort and stood next to Pink, by the back. His eyes were half open and his lips were cracked and bleeding. Without a word, I passed him his water and stood next to him, squared with our host. When the guide paused between sentences, I took a long, loud obnoxious sip of my water. Pink

looked at me from the corner of his eye and fought back his laughter. We couldn't understand contemporary art. Why would people fetishize over a piece of chewing-gum stuck on a wall? I could just as easily have dropped a crumpled receipt on the ground, and people would have stopped to analyse it as an expression of teenage angst.

Halfway through the tour, the guide stopped us to speak about a large painting in the collection. There were no discernible shapes or patterns to it; it looked like right a mess. Our tour guide was very excited when we approached the piece, as it was her favourite in the collection. She explained that it was the most valuable painting owned by the museum, and that the artist painted part of it with his own faeces. I looked at Pink with raised eyebrows, and a douche-bag smile. "No wonder it looks like shit," he said. I smirked at his remark, and spotted Karen rocking herself back and forth.

"Oh shit!" I said to Pink.

He looked at her and stepped away from the group. "She's gonna blow, Dude. Man the harpoons!"

Amalia was angry that we had interrupted the tour. I looked at Karen, then back to Amalia, and thought 'Pink and me are the least of your worries...'

Suddenly, Karen grabbed one of our classmates for support, then projectile-vomited on the rare poop-painting. The smell of peach schnapps filled the air, and a few of the other girls in our class gagged and dry-heaved. The splatter of puke on the canvas began to drip, and pooled on the ground beneath it. Karen collapsed, and I remembered thinking that the painting looked much better now with vomit on it. The tour guide held her hands over her mouth, as Amalia mumbled "Oh my God, oh my God..."

Ne Me Quitte Pas

It was a normal Saturday at Finnegan. Sid had neglected his customers that night, and the bar was quiet enough to hear the thump of his darts hitting sisal. Despite his neglect, he ritually poured my drink when I walked in. We chatted for a while and he confessed that although he worked there, he preferred to drink in other pubs on his days off. He swore me to secrecy then left to collect glasses, but a couple at the bar overheard our conversation.

They were about my age. The man was from Naples and the woman was from Belgium. We spoke, and I told them my story. The girl spoke to me in broken French when I told her I was French-Canadian, but I barely understood her through her accent and the flow of tequila shots she would buy us. They were an interesting couple, and they seemed nice. I had been to Naples, and I spoke to the man about my experiences there. Belgium was foreign to me so I couldn't talk to her about her homeland, but she knew the lyrics to every Jacques Brel song by heart. She spoke to me through his poetry.

I gathered that Sid was friends with them because he often interjected into our conversation, but I had never seen them at the pub before. It didn't really matter. I didn't buy a single drink that night. I couldn't tell if they were naturally generous, or if I was just so interesting that they wanted me to stick around whatever the cost.

I had only planned to stay for a drink or two, but seeing as it was Saturday and we were getting along well, I decided to stay for a few more. At one in the morning we spoke about the various drunk-foods we ate in our respective homelands. I told them about poutine and its cheesy goodness, and the man told me about Neapolitan spicy pasta. He said it was a Campanian delicacy, and that they were going to make a pot once they got home later that night.

“You should go with us for food!” he exclaimed in broken English. His girlfriend smiled and agreed.

“Sure, where do you live?” I asked.

“There...” said the woman, who vaguely gestured with her arm towards the door of the pub. She assured me that it wasn’t far.

The air was nice and cool when we stumbled out of Finnegan. The Belgian girl hung on my arm as we walked, and I felt uncomfortable since her boyfriend walked casually on my other side. He didn’t mind that she clawed at my jacket, as I held her up by the waist with her arm around my shoulder. He and I communicated through our language barrier and tequila-tongues, as they led me away from the pub in a zig-zag pattern through the streets. ‘Not far’ my ass, I thought, we’re humping it across town.

We made it to their building and clambered up the stairs to the second landing. When we entered their apartment I saw three drying racks in the hallway flagged with clothes, a kitchen to my right with a big leather sofa in the corner of the room, and old maps Scotch-Taped to the walls everywhere. They went into the kitchen and I heard pots knocking against each other, and cabinet doors slamming shut. I didn’t know how long it took me to unbutton my jacket, but I felt myself sway back and forth as I argued with my outer garments. My ears were hot and I was dizzy, but the thought of a warm meal kept me going.

When I’d successfully hung my jacket on the back of their front door, I grabbed my tobacco, box of filters and rolling papers, and stuffed them into the front pockets of my jeans. As I turned to join my new friends in the kitchen, a naked young man with a red Mohawk haircut walked into the hallway by the drying racks. I froze for an instant and he acknowledged me in passing, as he went into the bathroom. I was confused when I entered the kitchen.

The two of them were well into their activities when I joined them. The man had cut chilies and prepped the onions and garlic, and the girl lit a cigarette off the flame of the gas stove, as she waited for the pot of water to boil. They had their backs turned to me when I entered the kitchen, but when they noticed me I was welcomed with a great “Eyyy”. They both approached me with open arms and hugged me simultaneously. Strangers weren’t normally this nice.

The notion quickly left my mind when I heard purring behind me. A cat had jumped onto the dinner table and rubbed its face on my back, as I leaned against the edge of the eating surface.

“That’s Figaro,” said the man.

“Hi, Bud,” I said to the cat, as I tried to pet it. It jumped back, but being persistent I put my cigarette in my mouth and picked it up. It scratched at my hands and forearms as I tickled its belly, but didn’t make any effort to get away from me.

“He likes you,” said the woman.

I let the animal go when the scratching became too intense, and turned towards the two of them. They had their backs to me again and were whispering to each other, as they prepared the food. I took another drag and the severity of the situation hit me. I was with a bunch of strangers that I could barely understand, and in their apartment in a foreign part of town. Long gone were the protective confines of the pub, and I suddenly realized that I had to get the fuck out of there! What was I thinking? I felt like that kid from the cautionary tales I heard as a child, who got into a car with a stranger because he offered him candy. I didn’t even know these peoples’ names.

It took about thirty seconds from the time I came to this realization to stumble out onto the street. They protested my departure, and told me I could stay on their couch in the kitchen. As I declined, and politely explained that I needed the therapeutic properties of my own bed,

the girl started singing “Ne me quitte pas...” At that moment, there was no doubt in my mind that this beautiful song would forever be associated with, and tarnished by, the negative feelings that I had experienced that evening.

The man gave me a crash-course on how to get back to San Gallo, but I barely understood him. I said “OK” and thanked them for their hospitality, then ran out of their apartment. When I stepped out of the building I tripped on the cobblestones and fell on the sidewalk. My eyebrow was gashed, and the warm blood dripped into my eye. A migraine took me. The street was spinning, and my breathing became quick and shallow. I picked myself up and leaned against the building I had just fallen out of, then vomited the evening’s contents on the sidewalk.

The nausea passed but my limbs still trembled, as they fought to keep me standing. The street had stopped spinning and my ears had cooled down, but my head still hurt. I was on a large main road in Florence, but I didn’t know which one. I turned around to get my bearings and saw the Duomo, in its entirety, brightly illuminated by the flood lights that were trained on it every night. It was such a bright and unexpected sight that I felt like someone had punched me in the face when I saw it. My knees buckled and I fell again, and was hit with the smell of the sick that I had just regurgitated.

I didn’t recall which way I went, but I made it home. When I climbed into bed I remembered how Whitfield once said, “You’re never lost in Florence if you can see the Duomo.” He was right.

Bits of the evening played on a loop in my head, as I propped my pillows up to avoid puking in my sleep. I didn’t know what would have happened if I had stayed with them. It might have been pleasant, but I was glad I left when I did. Shortly before I fell asleep, I noticed that I had forgotten to text Patty that day.

37 Days

I fucking hate it here, I thought, as I walked out of my evening class. It was dark when we finished our lecture, and I left without thanking the professor, or chatting with my classmates. I had even rolled my Old Holborn cigarette during class, so that I didn't waste time doing it in the hallway.

Florence smelled like brine and shit. The rain was coming. I put my rolled Old Holborn into my tobacco pouch, and produced a peppery Gitanes from my pocket. They were my incense sticks on smelly nights in Florence.

I was nearly at Piazza della Repubblica when my classmates crashed out of the lecture building, and I turned the collar of my jacket up and kept walking. Patty and my parents had arranged to visit me in Florence in a few weeks. After that, I planned to go to London for the summer with Patty. I couldn't wait to see them, and to leave this city for good.

I thought about Pink, and dreaded the notion of making small talk with him at our apartment, or of going out drinking with him again. He wasn't a bad man, but the last time we got drunk with our classmates he jabbed at my face and shoulders, and said "Man, I wanna hit you so bad right now!" As I dragged his limp body up the stairs to our apartment he repeated those same words, and I told him I'd throw him down the stone staircase if he ever spoke to me like that again. The next morning, I told him about his behaviour and he apologized, although he hadn't remembered anything of that night. And why should he? He was just another drunk study-abroad student, like me. The city was bursting with them, and most of them had never lived away from home before. They ran around like kids that were high on sugar at Halloween. They hadn't been burned yet, so they represented the epitome of debauchery. Everyone fucked around like sailors on shore leave. I'd known enough people in

Florence that had broken ties with loved ones back home, had filed for divorce, or had otherwise compromised their morals to be certain that that's what living there did to people. And all for the sake of a night out.

I looked down a side street off the Piazza, and saw that a group of young men had surrounded a young woman. They spoke English, with North-American accents, and one of them asked "You wanna come out with us tonight?" The girl, rather than walk away as they tightened their circle around her, squeezed her breasts and rubbed her ass against the crotch of the guy behind her. "What's your name?" I heard her say, before they were out of earshot.

I walked through Piazza del Duomo, and spotted the neon 'Martini' sign that had led me home on countless drunken nights. Further up, near the Basilica di San Lorenzo, the merchants had torn down their kiosks and the prostitutes had emerged from their alleyways. I saw them in passing and kept walking. Up the street, the old accordionist who always played on the sidewalk was on the ground, and nursed a cut on his forehead. As I approached him to offer my help, I understood him say that some drunken students had robbed him and kicked a hole in his instrument. I gave him all the money I had in my pocket and a tissue for his cut, but he threw the coins back at me and yelled something in Italian. I gathered that he wanted to be left alone, and by then more people had surrounded him. A woman spoke to him in Italian, and tended to his wound. I wanted to stay with him till the police or ambulance arrived but he shouted "Vaffanculo!", so I left him in the care of the woman and continued up the road.

I walked on, and stuck a fresh cigarette in my mouth. A big drop of sweat fell from my nose, and put out the flame I had brought to my face to light my smoke. I wiped my face with the sleeve of my jacket, slowly put the lighter back in my pocket, and used a match. My head was low, my hands were in my pockets, and my cigarette (which was now mostly ashes) had

been stuck to my lips since ignition. I felt like a piece of wood that was slowly being sanded down. The lights and tourists were now behind me, and the street was quiet.

A young man approached me from one side. He seemed well dressed, and smiled as he politely asked me for a cigarette. Do you think that will make you happy, I thought condescendingly? Without hesitation, I thrust my fist against his jaw. He fell, then I grabbed his arms and dragged him in a dark enclave off the road. I punched him repeatedly in the face and ribs, as hard as I could. I was silent, and he only grunted when my fists made contact. My hand was in pain, but I felt compelled to keep beating him. Pent-up frustrations left my body and entered his with every punch, and I felt alive again. A cigarette; a fucking cigarette. It was only a victory for as long as you smoked it. Then the despair returned. Didn't he get it? He'd eventually need another, and another, until one day they didn't cut it anymore. Cigarettes didn't matter, and neither did my beating.

He went limp so I stopped and stood above him, with my shoulders so tight they hid my neck. I controlled my breathing while he twitched on the ground. The faint glow of a nearby streetlamp gave the blood on his face and on my knuckles an orange hue. My heart slowed down and the adrenaline dissipated. There was no victim or aggressor anymore. We were back to being two men in the world.

I panted and stood square above him with my fists clenched, and watched as he rolled onto his back and looked me in the eyes. They weren't fearful or distressed. They were full of sadness: as though he had taken on the pains of the world. His tears streaked some of the blood off his cheeks, and without breaking eye contact he slowly reached into his pocket. I motioned towards him and threatened him with my fists. He whimpered softly, and covered his face with one hand as the other fished around in his pocket. The second beating never came, and he uncovered his face and produced a handful of loose coins from his trousers. He held them up towards me with a trembling hand. It was all he had to bargain with.

A tooth fell out of his mouth, and I realized what I had just done. I threw my pack of Gitanes on the ground and ran to my apartment, leaving him there with his arm outstretched. It had started raining, and the gutters and sewers overflowed onto the streets. The city was crying, and by the time I got home so was I.

Postscript

I hadn't realized how much I missed my parents till I wrapped my arms around them and felt the lump in my throat. They arrived in Florence a the day before yesterday, and I jogged across town to meet them at their hotel. I arrived a few minutes early and I figured I'd surprise them. It wasn't their first time in Florence, so I knew they wouldn't be out touring the sights. I turned off Borgo dei Greci and onto Via De' Bentaccordi, and saw them walking in my direction while on a stroll near their hotel. My jog turned into a run, and my mom smiled and clasped her hands under her chin. My father had tears in his eyes. I felt incredibly light as I embraced them.

"You've lost weight, André," said my mother as she repeatedly kissed my cheeks. "Allô Garçon," said my dad, as he squeezed me tight against him. "Wow, I can feel your ribs, André," he continued. "Please make sure you eat right, and cut down on your smoking!" I laughed at his remark. "We haven't changed, eh?" said my mother with a laugh. It was a good day.

Patty came from London the day after my parents arrived. The end of term was near, and both Patty and my parents came to see me walk at a fake commencement ceremony. We weren't really graduating, but it was the last time that our group was together, so the department organized a formal event before we all went our separate ways.

The ceremony was a bit ridiculous, but my parents were proud of me. Patty sat with them and made small talk throughout the afternoon. Afterwards, my parents went back to their hotel and left Patty and me to celebrate with my classmates. We were still in our nice clothes when we went out, which I knew was a bad idea. Karen had spilled beer all over my shoes. She had asked me for a cigarette, and twirled it through her fingers rather than smoke it. On Friday

nights in Florence, most bars served drinks in plastic cups instead of glasses, and we didn't hesitate to take them along with us as we hopped from one place to another. Karen had burned a hole in her cup with the smoke I had given her, but it was still half full of beer. As she brought the rim to her lips to take a swig, the beer fell out of the hole and splashed me. She and Patty laughed as I wiped myself clean with tissues.

Karen was in a bad state. She broke off from the group and ran around the empty Mercato del Porcellino. Her skirt ripped as she straddled the boar fountain, and her compression underwear was exposed for the world to see. Her torn garment flew behind her in the breeze, and she swayed forwards and backwards as though she rode a mechanical bull. One of my classmates (who took it upon herself to look after Karen throughout our stay in Florence) made it very clear that she was not going to deal with her on our last night in town. Another of my classmates volunteered to look after her, and Patty and I walked home.

It was nearly four in the morning as we walked back to my apartment. Pink slept on a friend's couch while Patty was in town, and she and I made him dinner one night to show our gratitude.

Patty and I spoke of my classmates, the fake graduation ceremony and our plans for the summer in London. I asked her if she had enjoyed this last trip to Florence, and without provocation she became angry and started to criticize my parents. She didn't like that my parents always invited us to dinner, or organized day excursions and activities with us. I retaliated, and said that any good parent would miss their son after nearly a year of being away from home. "They want to be involved in my life, and since you're a part of my life, that includes you too," I said.

She yelled about how my mother invited her to get their hair done before my commencement ceremony, and her voice echoed in the street. I yelled back that she wanted to do a nice thing, because she wanted to nurture a relationship with my girlfriend.

Patty blabbed about how, earlier at the hairdresser's, my mom asked her what her hair looked like when it was parted to the side. She asked to see it for a moment before setting her part in the middle again, but Patty firmly said no and they carried on in silence after that.

“Seriously!? You flipped out at my mother over that!? She’s a loving woman, and she tries to take an interest in you so that she can have a nice relationship with her son’s girlfriend.”

“She judges me! Both your parents do! I’m never comfortable and I can never be myself around them!” she cried.

“That’s a complete lie! I don’t know why you think my parents have a vendetta against you. They’ve been nothing but nice to you since the day they met you, and for some reason you’ve gotten it into your head that they’re monsters. Your anxiety flares up every time they’re around, and you automatically get defensive around them – especially my mom! Not only are you completely wrong about them, but it’s not fair to me! They’re my parents, and whether you like it or not they’re a part of me. So, whenever you rip into them it’s reflected on me. I am so fucking insulted, Patty!”

She tried to speak again but I turned my back to her and waved her off. Then I aggressively threw my cigarette butt against the stone wall of my building, causing the embers to break into pieces. It looked like a firework going off.

We went to bed without saying a word to each other. I slept with my back to her.

English Pewter

Ray waited for me at The Royal George, but I took my time as I walked up the hill and enjoyed the smell of the area. It had rained earlier in the day and the ground was still wet. The trees and grass around the neighbourhood let out a sweet smell, like wild chamomile, and for once I didn't feel the urge to smoke. Although that didn't stop me, and I lit up.

It was late in the day, at that awkward moment where the afternoon ended and the evening began. Halfway up the hill that led to the pub, I looked to the west and watched the sun graze the tips of the City's skyscrapers. I had been in London for nearly two weeks now, and Ray and I had made a habit of meeting at the pub every other night. I knew he wouldn't mind if I was late, so I stood on the sidewalk and appreciated the sunset. My lips touched the filter of my cigarette, and my mouth expanded and syringed smoke into my mouth. A bit of smoke from the lit end fluttered around my face and whipped my left eye, and caused that familiar burn known to smokers around the world. I didn't let it bother me, and inhaled the smoke that was now in my mouth as I gazed at the skyline. The embers that glowed with every toke mirrored the glare of the sun reflected off the Shard, and I drank the aromas that surrounded me every time I inhaled. I ingested the world around me with every cigarette. My experience was cut short, however, by the buzz of my phone. "...I'll be there in thirty seconds, Mate," I said as I flicked the butt onto the street, and continued my short walk up the hill.

The pub was bright and airy when I walked in. Most patrons sat outside in the beer garden, but Ray told me he had taken up residence at a table by the fireplace. The barkeep acknowledged me when I walked in, and said, "He's right over there, Mate. I think he's got something for you." I smiled and walked around the bar to find Ray.

He was right where he said he'd be, and he stood up to give me a hug. "Hey, Mate. You all right?" he said.

"Yeah, Bud. How's it going?" I replied, as I sat down across from him. He filled me in on his day and we made small talk for a while. "The barkeep said that you had something for me."

Ray smiled and turned his head, and looked at me with his left cheekbone instead of his eyes. I had grown accustomed to that look. He did it when he was in a good mood. "I told you I'd turn you into a Brit. And since we're here having a few cheeky pints, might as well drink them out of these." He bent forward and reached for something under the table. My eyes went wide and I let out a long "Duuuuuuude," as he placed two antique pewter tankards filled with stout in front of me.

The one closest to me had a beautiful handle, fashioned to look like a tobacco pipe. The one by Ray had a fox-shaped handle. My mouth was open for a while, and Ray laughed as he took in my expression. "There's another part to it as well," he said. He turned my tankard around and I saw my name engraved on its side. "I hope that's the right spelling," he said.

"That's amazing, Brother! And yes, it is. Where did you get these? What gave you the idea?" He laughed and explained that knowing how much I enjoyed being in the UK, and going to the pub, it would have been stupid not to get us tankards. He found them online, but had a hard time finding one with a pipe handle.

With a smile, he told me they were under the table the whole time we were chatting, and he was worried I might have kicked them over by accident. "And drink up, because that beer is now ten minutes old, haha." We both laughed.

I asked him if he had just turned up with the tankards, and casually asked the barkeep to fill them up. Then I asked how much they held. My excitement came through in my voice.

“They’re exactly one pint. We’re in Britain, remember? And no, that was a bit tricky. The pub is only allowed to serve drinks in their own glasses, so I had to buy the two pints, and pour them into the tankards myself. I spilled a bunch on my first try, so I had to buy an extra half-pint to top up, haha.”

I laughed and said, “We’re cut from the same cloth, Ray. Never deprive yourself of a full pint!”

“What does that mean?” he asked. I explained the intricacies of the expression, and he said, “Oh, you mean we sing from the same hymn sheet.”

I laughed and observed my gift again. One side was severely dented, no doubt the scars of a great night by its last owner. I thanked him again, and we clanked our tankards and each took a quaff. I asked him why he had chosen a fox for his tankard, and he remarked that it symbolized the stray foxes of our neighbourhood. There were quite a few in Deptford. “It’s just a nice reminder of where I got my start in London.” I smiled and we drank and talked.

I was so excited to show Patty my gift. I burst into her bedroom when I returned to her apartment later that evening, and held my tankard above my head like a trophy. She stood up and snatched it from my hands, and spoke without noticing the annoyed look on my face. “That’s amazing! Ray’s such a good gift giver!” I got over her brashness and told her about my evening at the pub.

After my story, we went through our nightly routine of teeth-brushing, pee-taking and last minute phone-checking, then went to bed. I was pleased with myself, and went over the events of the evening in my head. I loved that country, and tonight felt like some sort of final initiation into British culture. London was all I wanted.

My smile faded as I took in the sobering truth about my situation. Although I’d been accepted by the locals, I could never be one. I wasn’t from there. The darkness of the room

enveloped me and I closed my eyes. Before she fell asleep, Patty asked me why I drank so much. With my eyes closed, I whispered, “You think I’d do this sober?”

Welcome to the Neighbourhood

I found a room for the summer, as Patty and I had discussed. There was no way we could have spent four months together in her tiny bedroom. I moved into a single room above a chicken shop in South Greenwich, which was a short walk from Patty's flat (and The Royal George). I came across a letting agent online, and she spent a day showing me rooms within my price range in the southeast. The entire operation was a bit shady, because she worked for a man named John who only accepted cash payments. I later found out that he was a subtenant of various properties, and leased out the rooms under the table. No deposit was required, nor contracts to be signed. All I needed to do was leave the rent money on my bed and John would collect once a month. I always left a note with the cash, saying *'Thank you. Could you please confirm receipt of this month's payment?'* When I returned to my room in the evening, the money was gone and a second note was left on my bed which read *'And so it is paid.'*

The flat was a few meters away from a busy intersection, where New Cross Road, South Greenwich Street, Blackheath Hill and Lewisham Road met. Everything I needed to survive was within thirty seconds from my front door. An off license, chicken shop, pizza place and the best kebab shop south of the Thames were at my doorstep. There was also a Tesco nearby, which was useful whenever I felt like cooking and eating healthy. Most importantly, there were two pubs on opposite corners of the intersection. The first, The George and Dragon, was decorated on the outside with red wainscoting and cast iron lanterns, and had darkened windows. The other was unassuming and clearly a dive. Aged regulars always stood out front, and smoked and drank Carling lager on the sidewalk. The blinds were always closed, and the only illuminated part of its exterior was a small sign above the door that read 'The Graduate'.

I had moved in a few days ago, and had gotten the gist of the neighbourhood. My flatmates were nice, and had taken rooms in our flat a few days before me. One was a young Hungarian who insisted we called him Dax, since no one outside Hungary properly pronounced his Magyar name. He moved to London with his girlfriend and lived the bohemian life. Upon further enquiry, I learned that he worked full time at Le Pain Quotidien in Canary Wharf, and sold croissants and strudels to suits for lunch. His girlfriend was ‘funemployed’ and spent most of her days pampering herself, and only pretended to be hard at work in the kitchen minutes before Dax arrived from work. The other flatmate was a young man named Peter Svatik. He was a young Slovak that tried to make it as an actor in London, but worked hospitality jobs on the side to supplement his income. Peter told me we also lived with a Swedish girl, who I never saw, and a Lithuanian girl who kept to herself.

Dax and Peter were at the flat that day, and I wanted to get to know them. I suggested we all go for a pint, as I had done when I first met Pink. Dax was busy and turned down the offer, but Peter was keen. He suggested The George and Dragon because it looked cool from the outside, and no drunkards hung around its entrance. I didn’t protest.

We crossed the street in front of our flat and waited outside the pub for me to finish my cigarette. I looked through the tinted windows but could barely make out what was inside. It seemed empty, that much I could tell. Nothing unusual for a Wednesday afternoon. Without paying attention, I flicked my cigarette butt towards the street and it hit a car’s windshield as it drove past us. Peter saw it happen, and he grabbed my sleeve and dragged me inside. Outside, tires screeched and we nervously stood between the two sets of doors at the entrance of the pub. We waited thirty seconds and no one came, so we walked through the second set of swinging doors and made our way to the bar.

As we sat down at the bar, two men at a table in the far corner of the room waved at us and motioned for us to come join them. I thought it was a little odd because it’s not the kind of

behaviour you normally saw in Southeast London, especially not in pubs around these neighbourhoods. Peter's back was towards them and I pretended I didn't see them. The barkeep took our orders, and Peter and I waited in silence for our drinks.

I turned around and saw a man at the end of the bar drinking alone. He was tall and skinny, with long greasy hair and stubble. He was also wearing denim pants, a denim shirt and a jean jacket. He was eyeing us from the moment we sat down, so I turned my attention back to the bartender who had placed our drinks on the counter. I thanked him and he replied with a sharp "Yep..."

Peter was mesmerized with a small plastic dispenser at the end of the counter. It looked like a candy or a chewing gum machine, but none of us knew what it was. He leaned over and grabbed a sample of its contents.

"Oh, it's a condom dispenser," he said.

"Well it's good that the management encourages safe sex," I added.

"Yeah, the University of Greenwich isn't far from here, so they probably get a lot of young students coming in here to drink." He was halfway through his pint and told me he needed to pee, so he excused himself and left me at the bar.

As soon as he disappeared, a short, fat middle-aged man with cropped hair walked into the pub and ordered a fruity cocktail to go. The bartender wasted no time in preparing his drink, like he did with ours. He handed him a plastic cup and the pudgy man said, "Thankths Darling, thaths lovely!" then he walked out. I was a little confused. I rotated on my barstool and noticed a small stage behind me, with a banner that read "Try your hand at Drag Night 2014." When I swivelled back towards my pint the barkeep leaned over and said, "You're in the wrong place, Mate." Then he backed away and fiddled with the cash register. Peter had just come back from the toilet, and it suddenly hit me. The pub was very quiet and I didn't want the few patrons to hear what I wanted to say to Peter, so I took my phone out and texted him. "*We're in a gay*

bar. Down your pint and let's get the fuck outta here!" Once I sent the message I concentrated on my drink. A vibration came from his pocket, and from my peripherals I saw him check his phone and he began to chug his beer. We finished our pints in seconds, and once we did, we nodded to the bartender and bolted out of the pub. We heard the door lock behind us as we left.

I suggested we tried The Graduate, as we crossed the intersection.

"Now it makes sense why everyone was staring at us."

"Yeah, we were definitely not welcome... I have no problem with homosexuality. I mean, if that's who you are then that's who you are. Who am I to judge, you know? But it was fucking weird in there!" I told him about my interaction with the bartender, and how he essentially told me 'We don't serve your kind here.'

We got to the front door of The Graduate, and the old men outside looked at us in silence and studied our uneasy faces. When we walked in we were hit with the smell of stale beer, piss and shame; we felt at home. The pub was very normal. There were old men sitting at the bar not speaking to each other, assorted low tables and chairs spread across the front room, a dart board and pool table in the back, and an Irish bartender.

"Awright Lads?" he asked.

"Yeah, Mate. We just came from across the street. Did you know it's a gay bar?" I asked.

"Sure did, Mate. They yus'd to have a flag out-front but council vovted for 'em to take it down."

"We went in there because it looked pretty cool from the outside, but when the bartender told us off we downed our pints and ran here."

"Welcome to The Graduate then. What can I get you?" he asked with a laugh.

"Guinness for me," I replied with a smile.

"Me too please, Guinness," said Peter.

Fragile Egos

Ray and I were at The George enjoying a pint and having a chat. We talked about the music we used to listen to when we were younger. He told me all about Brit-Pop, and I told him about the classic rock and grunge that I grew up with. I had my iPod with me and gave him a tour of my musical past. We were on Aerosmith when Francis walked in. Francis was a bit younger than us, and had moved to Deptford from Canning Town a few weeks ago. He came to The Royal George religiously since he moved into to the neighbourhood, and Ray and I hated the fact that we had to listen to his racist rants every time we wanted a quiet drink. He had buzzed hair that did nothing for his short stature, and wore the same oversized parka every day, despite it being summer. We once saw him try to sell stolen Oyster cards to a group of locals in the pub. Nobody really knew what he did for a living, but nobody cared; everyone avoided him.

Ray and I turned our backs to the door when we saw him walk in, but he spotted us in our corner and came over. He had some sort of man-crush on us. Francis always tried to impress us with tales of his feminine conquests or masculine victories, and hoped that we would acknowledge him as one of our own. He needed friends, but he was a fucking asshole.

“Alright Francis?” asked Ray, when he sidled up to our table. Ray didn’t extend his hand as he normally did, and spoke in a monotonous tone.

“Yeah Mate! It’s Frank now though. All my friends call me Frank,” he replied.

“Hello Francis,” I muttered, still staring at my iPod.

Seeing that neither Ray or me were engaged in the conversation, he tried to establish a rapport and asked, “What are you listening to?”

“Aerosmith,” I said.

“Nice! I love that guy!” he exclaimed.

“Right... It’s a band, not a bloke named Smith,” said Ray. Francis laughed uncomfortably. His voice was full of colour, but he was desperate to salvage the conversation. “I think Rich wanted to see you about something,” said Ray. “He’s over there somewhere...” He pointed towards the opposite side of the pub, behind the bar and out of our line of sight.

“Is he here?” asked Francis. He thanked us for telling him, and said he needed to have words with him. He opened and closed his right hand repeatedly, and prepped his knuckles for a fight. I laughed at him. “Careful Mate, you don’t want these fists against your cheekbones,” he said.

“I don’t fight little boys,” I replied. “And watch it Francis, if Rich can survive prison twice, then he can knock you out by flicking his finger against your forehead.” He gave an uncomfortable chuckle (the kind you gave when you laughed at a joke you didn’t understand), then left us.

Ray suggested we have a smoke, and I rolled us each a cigarette. He asked me if I had ever been in a fight. I told him I had been in a few, but that I wasn’t much of a brawler. He enquired some more.

“They were mostly in the army, to be honest. Whenever two people would have a problem with each another, they’d get drunk in the mess hall and box it out. Once the fight was over, that was the end of it. You’d get it out of your system.” I licked his cigarette shut and started on mine. I told him the other time I got in a fight was when I was mugged in high-school.

“I’ve been mugged once, but fighting was never a part of it,” said Ray.

“What are muggings like over here?”

“The one time it happened to me, it was the first time I bought beer. My friend and I were walking back from the shop and this older guy stopped us on the street. We got away with giving him half of our beer and fifteen quid.” We both laughed. “What happened to you?”

When I got mugged I got the shit kicked out of me, and my wallet and phone taken out of my pockets. He looked surprised and said he was sorry I endured such an ordeal.

“It’s fine, it’s the way she goes, Bud,” I said, as I handed him his smoke and we walked out. “What’r your plans for Sa’ah’day, Mate?” I asked, in an attempted Cockney accent.

“If I ever hear you say that again I’m shipping you back to Canada in a sack!”

I smirked and reverted to my Canadian twang. I did want to know what he was up to that weekend, and suggested the pub if he was free. I lit his cigarette, then my own, then changed the subject. “Hey, Rich said that Francis shat his pants last week. Hahaha.”

“Yeah, I heard the same. He was wearing khakis as well,” said Ray.

“More like caca-khis now, hahaha. I saw the same thing happen to a guy on a flight a while back.” We laughed and sat down on the curb outside the pub, and felt the rumble of the cars and trucks that drove by.

I don’t know what prompted it, but I asked Ray if he’d read the article about the police officer in Ashford, in the Evening Standard a few days back. A cop had responded to a car accident just outside the town, and was first on the scene. The driver had hit a tree and the car was totaled. He recognized the driver as he approached the mangled vehicle; it was his friend from the constabulary who was off duty that night. He ran towards the car to help, but he saw his wife’s head in the dead man’s lap. Her mouth was still around his cock when she died. That’s how he found out they had been having an affair. “Can you imagine?” I asked.

Ray, who sat on the curb and rested his elbows on his propped-up knees, took a drag and shook his head. “Fucking shame,” he said. It was the first time I’d seen him not put a positive spin on something. He said that life made no sense, sometimes.

“It’s not supposed to, Buddy...”

We heard shouting coming from the pub, and ran inside from our smoke break to see what had happened. We stood by the bar while Francis yelled at a young man. I had seen him before, and spoken to him a few times. He was a Goldsmiths art student from up the road, and often came to The George to relax with a drink while he worked on his sketches at a corner table. I’d never seen him bother anybody.

I didn’t know what Francis was yelling about, but he slapped the guy’s face with one hand, while the other clasped his tight orange t-shirt and held him down. The student’s long gravy-coloured hair whisked in the air with every one of Francis’s slaps, and locals had gathered around the scene to watch him pine for his safety. “No... Please...” he whimpered between hits, as he covered his face.

“The fuck you on about!?”

“Shut it, Rich! It’s not your fight!” replied Francis. “Talk to me like that again, you fucking cunt!” he yelled at the young man, as his slaps turned to punches. I stepped towards them but Ray grabbed my arm and held me back, and shook his head in disapproval. Ray seemed ashamed and embarrassed, because he knew it was my first experience with the dark side of London pub culture that I loved so much. I didn’t protest, and stood beside him as we watched the scene. I slowly sipped my beer.

Francis picked many fights with strangers when he got drunk. He tried to pick one with Ray and I when we first met him. We were playing darts, and when he yelled at us about his issues with foreigners Ray and I threw our darts at him. He quickly got the message that we weren’t afraid to stand up for ourselves when Ray nailed him in the nipple. After that he sought our friendship, but seeing him with the Goldsmiths student that night only reinforced my dislike for him.

The yelling continued and the young man loosely protected his face between blows. Francis grabbed the student's pint and poured it in his bag, and destroyed his papers, sketches and laptop. "You fucking cunt! Put your fucking head down and walk away!" The student, who had been on the ground for some time, stood up and grabbed his bag. He didn't sling it over his shoulder, but held it tight against his chest as though he protected a child. "I told you to put your head down! CUNT! FUCKING CUNT!" Tears rolled down his cheeks as he walked out of the pub a broken man.

I slept on Ray's couch after that night at The George. I couldn't sleep at Patty's because I had already told her I'd gone back to my flat after the pub, but I was too drunk to walk to Greenwich. Ray was still asleep when I woke up, and I realized where I was after a moment. When the room stopped spinning I walked into the kitchen and turned on the tap, then wrapped my lips around the spout and hydrated my body. The flow was too strong and a lot of water came up my nose. I left the tap running and bolted to the washroom, where I threw up black foam from our stouts the night before. I argued with the toilet for ten minutes because it wouldn't flush properly, then I rinsed my mouth and made myself look presentable to the outside world. Colour crept back into my cheeks as I stared at myself in the mirror, and I felt well enough to leave the flat. There was no need to wake Ray before I left because I was scheduled to spend the evening at Patty's, and I knew he'd be there to stay with Melissa.

It was almost noon when I stepped out of Ray's flat. I walked north on Upper Brockley Road till I hit Lewisham Way, then turned left towards the shop for some tobacco. On my way to the Off License I saw the Goldsmiths student Francis had beaten up. His long brown hair was gone. He had shaved his head – but it was patchy, like he did it himself with his dad's beard trimmer. I stood on the sidewalk and watched him, as he walked towards the university without blinking. Something snapped...

Old Holborn

It had been another successful evening at the pub with Ray. We stepped out onto the road at closing time, and walked down the street towards the girls' flat. I'd planned to stay at my place that evening, but Ray was spending the night with Melissa. We drank a lot that night, but we both seemed to have kept our composure. We still had the late-night munchies though, and walked past Melissa and Patty's building towards the chicken shop on New Cross Road. Ray and I split some fries, and we sat on the curb of a quiet street off the main road to enjoy our snack.

He asked why I hadn't stayed with Patty that night. I told him I couldn't be at hers all the time. Patty and I met at the library and worked together every day, and I spent four or five nights a week with her. He said we might as well have lived together throughout the summer.

"It doesn't work like that, Bro..." We continued eating. Ray broke the silence and asked if I was happy. Happy was a strong word, I thought, and told him I was frustrated. He hesitated.

"How's your intimate life?"

"Barely alive," I said plainly. "Patty's got no sex drive whatsoever. I try to keep things light and interesting, and I try to get her in the mood, but she always shuts me down. We haven't had sex in a month. And before that we'd be lucky to do it once every three weeks, or so." He looked at me quietly. I told him the last time we had sex was when she came back from a shopping spree. She had bought some nice clothes, and was on such a high that she jumped all over me.

He was very surprised when I said that. To him, we seemed like a healthy couple. I told him that we played house very well, but that she suffered from deep-set anxiety issues. I rolled us each a cigarette as Ray finished the chips from the styrofoam cup. I spoke as I rolled, and

explained that we had spoken about her condition, but whenever I brought it up she immediately killed the conversation with a “I don’t want to talk about it!”

I exhaled in frustration and Ray squeezed my shoulder with his hand. “Did you know we almost broke up last January? Her anxiety was ruling her life, and I convinced her to go talk to a guidance counselor at her university. She felt great when she did, and apologized for how she acted and for the things she said.”

Ray seemed hopeful and enthused. “Well that’s good then,” he said.

It would have been if she hadn’t quit one week after I returned to Florence. I explained that she had developed a habit of not following through on things.

Ray finished his cigarette and broke the silence. “How about an open relationship?”

“That’s not really my style...” I said sincerely, and broke my gaze from the street and looked at him. “That being said, I’ve had many opportunities. So why haven’t I taken any of them?”

He said something about a strong moral compass, but really, I had clung to the idea that she’d come out of her slump. Eventually, I realized she wouldn’t. I canted my head back and blew a smoke ring, then swiped my hand through it. The cigarette butt flew out of my fingers, as I flicked it as hard as I could.

“So, how can you get back on track, then?” he asked, as though he coached me through my predicament.

“There wasn’t much of a track to begin with, Bud. And now we’re used to each other, that’s all.” My relationship with Patty mirrored my relationship to life. Nothing really mattered in life, I explained, because we were all going to die and the world didn’t care about us. I lit another smoke. “But I discovered the secret,” I whispered with a smile. Ray asked me what it was, and I put my middle finger in the air. “Fuck it all,” I said. “I squeeze as much meaning as I can out of life now, no matter how temporary it is. And when the happiness fades away and

I'm back at square one, I go looking for it again. My relationship with Patty sucks now! But it still has its moments. So I take them when I can get them, and try not to let the bad times get to me. She's also a reason to keep coming back to London." I smiled and looked up towards the starless sky. "You can't win against life," I said. "But I'm fighting back anyway." He looked down, pensively. "I'm far from perfect, Bud, but at least I'm honest with myself now."

Ray asked what made me happy. I didn't answer him directly. Instead, I explained it to him in terms I knew he would understand. "Think of it this way: every stout is a little victory. You gotta get creative with it..."

He grabbed my pouch of Old Holborn tobacco, my extra slim Swan filters and my green Rizlas and rolled me a cigarette. For an instant I felt very drunk, and fought the urge to throw up on the sidewalk. I didn't want Ray to notice so I turned my face away from him, and he put his arm around my neck because he thought I was crying. I kept everything down, and when the nausea passed I looked straight ahead towards the darkened street. He folded one half of the rolling paper lengthwise then licked the crease and removed the folded bit, before completing the cigarette. We smoked it together, in silence. When we were down to the filter, Ray put out the cigarette on the sidewalk and we stood up. He gave me a long hug and we parted ways for the night.

Farewell

I rode the tube into Central London to meet Ray. He had a job interview in the City and we planned to meet at the station, to spend some time together before I returned to Canada. I had maxed out the time I was legally allowed to stay in the UK, and we wanted to have one last hurrah.

I arrived early at Blackfriars and waited for him outside. An upsetting smirk left me when I realized that of all the times we'd hung out, it was the first time I'd gotten to our meeting place first. I put a cigarette to my lips and leaned against the outside of the station. I didn't want to leave.

Ray squeezed his way through the barrier and walked towards me, with a smile on his face and his arms ready for a hug. I stretched my lips and returned the expression.

"All right, Mate?" he asked, as he hugged me.

"How's it going, Big Guy?" I replied. "Any thoughts for tonight?"

"I reckon we walk along the river and into the City, and hopefully stumble on a nice place to settle down for a meal and a cheeky one."

"Sounds good. After you..." We set out for the Thames.

The London I had always seen as powerful and regal seemed tired that evening. The Thames was dark, the sun wasn't hitting the skyscrapers as it once did, and the City smelled of car exhaust. I walked along the river beside Ray and smoked quietly. He noticed my reticence and we spoke of my return to Canada. "When are you leaving, again?"

"The day after tomorrow," I replied. He was quiet for a while.

"How are things with Patty?"

"As good as they can be. Nothing's really changed..." He gave me an empathetic smile.

As we walked along the river I told him about the girl I met in the small café in Deptford a few months ago. I explained how easy it was to get along with her, and how pragmatic she seemed. He asked what pragmatic meant. I laughed, and told him it was when you dealt with things sensibly and realistically. He understood in part what attracted me to her, and asked for a cigarette. I passed him my smoking equipment and he prodded into my encounter with Emily.

I took a deep breath and told him about that afternoon, and how I ripped and threw away the piece of paper with her phone number on it. I often thought about what would have happened if I hadn't. After a long pause I asked, "Have you ever cheated on a girlfriend before, or come close?"

We stopped along the footpath that ran by the Thames and leaned over the railing as we smoked. "No," answered Ray. He explained how he came close once, before he left for uni. He was at a friend's house-party and had to stay the night. His girlfriend at the time was travelling and her best friend was at the party, but there was only one spare bed so they had to share. He had always known she fancied him, and he'd always thought she was sexy.

"So, what happened then?"

"Everyone had gone home and the friend whose house we were at went to sleep. She and I were lying on the bed facing each other, but we had our clothes on. All I had to do was lean over a few inches and kiss her, and it would have started the chain reaction..." He paused for a moment and took a long drag of his cigarette. "But I rolled over and went to sleep." I slapped his shoulder and he flicked his cigarette butt in the Thames.

I asked him why he didn't go through with it, and he said we weren't a monogamous species. But when you found someone who made you want to be, you knew you'd found someone special. "You'd never want to screw it up over a meaningless fuck," he said. I found his answer a bit cliché, but understood his point. I had never thought of sleeping with women for sport, but I knew exactly what he meant by a 'meaningless fuck'.

It was dark by the time we got to Southwark Bridge. We took our time and walked quietly along the river, stopping every so often to have a smoke and sit down. Ray broke the silence and it was his turn to probe into my past.

“What do you think back on the most from your time in the army?”

We walked at a slow pace and made our way from streetlamp to streetlamp. A barge had motored past us a moment ago, and I heard the waves spread themselves onto the muddy banks of the river at low tide. I put a fresh cigarette in my mouth and ignited it, then began my story.

“In January of 2009 we went on a three-day Winter Warfare exercise at Connaught Ranges, just outside Ottawa. Although it wasn't the longest I'd spent in the field, it was probably the hardest. Every day we'd do patrols and hasty attacks, and in between them we'd just try to stay warm. Even the soldiers who didn't smoke were bumming cigarettes off those that did, just to feel an ember close to their fingers. One day the temperature went down to minus fifty-three degrees Celsius, with the wind-chill. We couldn't sleep in those temperatures, so we stayed awake for nearly three days. It was so cold that our IMPs and canteens froze, so we didn't have food or water either.”

“What's an IMP?” asked Ray.

“It's what we called our ration packs,” I replied without looking at him, as we maintained our slow pace along the river. “I had drunk so little water over those three days that the little urine I could get out was orange and brown. We were basically pissing out fat.” Ray muttered a low ‘fuck...’ and I continued. “On the second night, we were ordered to go on patrol, and the section commander led us along the shoreline of the frozen Ottawa River, to avoid making our way through the bush. His reasoning was that we'd be able to move quickly and quietly, because we wouldn't be encumbered by the undergrowth of the forest hidden

beneath the snow. But we'd be close enough to the tree line to take cover in case we encountered members of the enemy platoon."

We stopped halfway to London Bridge, and leaned against the railing that overlooked the Thames. Ray was quiet and listened to my words. I rolled us each another cigarette and continued speaking. "As we walked along the shoreline that night, we heard loud bangs coming from the river. I looked out in the direction of the noise and saw ice and water shoot up in the sky every now and then. The flowing water beneath was cracking the ice on the surface of the river, then sucked it down momentarily before blasting the icy debris into the air. It looked and sounded like an artillery barrage, but it was just nature."

Ray looked at me and nodded. "Sorry," I said. "You were probably expecting a story about guns and stuff."

"No, no," he said. "I weirdly understand, if that's OK to say..."

"Thanks, Mate. Of everything I've done and seen in the army, that's the moment that stayed with me the most. It was both peaceful and chaotic." Ray smiled. "It was just beautiful to watch..."

I looked out on the Thames with my elbows on the cement railing. "I'm gonna miss you, Bud."

Reprise

I'd been back in Ottawa for some time now, and swallowed my pride. Everyone at the museum was happy to see me back at work, but there was only so much smiling and idle conversation I could make with my old colleagues. Was it me who changed, or did they simply stagnate?

Patty returned to Ottawa a few weeks after I did, and had a temper tantrum in the days surrounding her departure from London and arrival in Canada. She directed the brunt of her anger and anxiety towards me, so I left her alone. She had been in town a week before she agreed to speak to me. When we met, following nearly three weeks of separation, I tried to kiss her lips but she presented me with her cheek. When I asked if she was OK, she quickly and sharply said, "I'm fine, but I don't ever want to talk about it!" I left it at that.

Yesterday I worked in the basement of the museum, and stocked pamphlets in the utility closet. When I came up to the main level my phone buzzed in my pocket. It must have been important, because I never got messages in the morning. I looked at the screen and saw multiple text messages from Ray. *Are you OK, Mate? – Is your family OK? – I just heard, it's all over the news here. – Get back to me as soon as you can.*

I jogged towards my team leader and asked him what had happened. He explained that a lone gunman had just shot a soldier at the National War Memorial, who was on century duty at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. "He's made his way into the Parliament Buildings. We're on lockdown. If you have family in the area take a few minutes and send them an email. All phone signals have been cut by the RCMP, so internet is the only way to communicate."

I stood guard on that spot when I did my tasking with the Ceremonial Guard. I asked him how many they were, and if there were reports of them anywhere else in the city.

He didn't know, but told me to hurry up with my emails and inform the visitors. We were legally not allowed to make them stay in the building, but told them it was strongly advised. The team leader had just gotten off the phone with the police, and learned there was a chance a ricochet could make its way from Parliament onto the museum's campus. There was also the possibility that an assailant was in our building, but he told me not to say that to the visitors in the interest of avoiding panic.

I touched base with my dad, and he was fine. My mom, however, was in a building across the street from the Houses of Parliament. She had gone for an interview there, and I later learned that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police came crashing through the building, cut the power, and made everyone lie down on the ground. My mom hid under a desk for two hours, before she and the others in the building were given the green-light to go home. She was cooking dinner when I came home that evening, and described the downtown Ottawa area as barren and empty. A common sight if you were stumbling home at three in the morning, but an awkward one for a Wednesday at noon.

We were quiet around the dinner table that night. An unusual occurrence in my family. We ate my favourite meal, but it tasted bland. Ottawa was bland. It felt more distant to me than the day I left, a few years ago. I missed London. It felt like home the moment I stepped off the plane on my first trip to the U.K. when I was fifteen years-old. My recent stay had been no different. Only then, I truly made the experience my own. I was happy there, because I wrestled with my life.

I put my utensils down and told my parents I loved them, but that I couldn't stay in Ottawa. The following morning, I knew that I would light a cigarette and that the sun would not rise over the capital.