

Moron
Part 1
by Mark James McDonough

Chapter 1

1

On John Moron's nineteenth birthday, his mother dropped him off for his freshman year of college with all the emotion that would accompany giving someone a lift to work. No tears. No big goodbye.

"No big goodbye?"

"Oh, I'll see you in a month for Columbus Day. Then I'll see you the month after that for Thanksgiving, then...."

Moron supposed she had a point. They were only a two-hour drive apart. But still. He watched this woman cry at MasterCard commercials, listening to the *Beauty and the Beast* soundtrack, and once during an episode of *Smallville*. Now her only child, her baby-boy, was leaving the nest and she didn't seem bothered. Maybe she was just excited to not do his laundry for a few months. Maybe she was sick of eating Jr. Bacon Cheeseburgers from Wendy's for dinner. Maybe she had some old pervert coming over to have sexual intercourse with her. Whatever the reason, she was gone and Moron was left in an empty dorm room. Empty for only a moment though, only long enough for a deep breath.

Moron couldn't remember what answers he put on the roommate questionnaire, but they were clearly the wrong ones. Any algorithm that spit this guy out needed to be deleted. He met him for the first time at orientation and their original encounter left a lot of room for improvement. Will Cavendish was his name. He had a tumbleweed for hair and it moved whenever his eyebrows did and his eyebrows moved up and down every time he talked. Moron never once saw him without his hands on his hips, and so there he would stand in the middle of their room, the wiry bastard, throwing the whole vibe off, cooing like a pigeon. This was the first thing he ever said to Moron:

"So, did your grandfather fight in the war?"

It was like that all the time. All of his greetings were questions reserved for deep friendships or maybe never.

"Yeah actually he did. Did yours?"

"Yep! Got killed over there!"

At overnight orientation as they lay in their beds Moron heard Cavendish's whole backstory. The thing he was most proud of, the thing he never shut the fuck up about, was that he had been a ballboy for some basketball team in the Pacific Northwest. Moron couldn't remember which one. Moron hated basketball, but this didn't deter his cotenant any. Cavendish went on and on about all the players he met and the autographs he had in some diary at home, like the ones you keep when you meet Goofy at Disney World.

"Let's see... I've met 'Lemon Lime' Larry Collins, 'Señor Soap' Max Diaz, 'Ass Ninja' Barry Andrews..."

Okay, these weren't the real names of the players. But they might as well have been.

Moron didn't know the difference.

When Cavendish entered the room for their official first day, before he even put his bags down, he asked Moron if he'd ever seen the movie *Disturbia*. *Disturbia* was a 2007 remake of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* aimed at teens and starring Shia LaBeouf. It was the only thing in the world Will Cavendish liked outside of being a ballboy. Over that next week, he'd watch it in its entirety six times.

Moron fantasized about scratching the DVD so he couldn't play it any more. Or maybe he'd just jam Cavendish's head through the TV. What Moron couldn't have predicted was that he'd soon long for the only problem being an infinitely repeating LaBeouf. The second weekend they were there Cavendish was bobbing in the middle of the room like usual but couldn't seem to get his words out. Moron felt physically ill. If this lunatic was at a loss for words, something very bad was about to happen.

"Well, John, I've got a question to ask you. I happen to have a girl coming over this evening and I was wondering if you might mind stepping out for a few hours."

John told him he wouldn't. He was a bit jealous of his freak roommate for succeeding with the fairer sex, but mostly he was just dying to see what the girl looked like. Turns out it wasn't a girl at all. As Moron exited, he passed Cavendish and his date in the hall. The woman he was holding hands with was somewhere between fifty and eighty-four years old. Moron felt terrified at the thought of this woman stealing all of his belongings. True, there wasn't much to steal, it wasn't like he had expensive silverware in there, but..oh! What if she used his toothbrush? He'd have to kill himself.

Moron came back later that night and the woman was gone. He still couldn't sleep thinking about where she might have been in the room. Did she put her ass on his pillow? It was more than likely. Where the fuck did Cavendish even meet her? He'd have to find a way to confront him about his behavior, but what had he even done really? All he did was watch a shit movie and politely ask to have the room for a few hours. Moron tossed and turned, unaware that the Cavendish issue was about to resolve itself.

That Monday when Moron was walking back from one of his gen-ed courses (My Body, My Health- a course everyone took because they found it funny one of the homework assignments was to masturbate) he noticed a commotion outside of his dormitory. Campus police were escorting someone out, and even from a distance Moron could see the tuft of hair bobbing up and down.

When he saw Moron, Cavendish shouted "they got me, pal!"

That was the last time Moron would ever see him. The police confronted Moron when he tried to get back in his room. They asked if he had anything to do with it and he could honestly tell them he didn't even know what "it" was. Cavendish had started to sell weed out of his closet and got caught the first day he did it. The campus cops informed Moron that if he was in the room when it happened, he would have been expelled too. When they told him this they waited for a reaction that would never come. What would Moron care if they kicked him out? The place was a nightmare. They'd be doing him a kindness. The cops became enraged, like they had been turned down by a woman at a bar. Red-faced and blue-balled, they stormed out and left Moron to his room, now empty once again.

Cavendish would slip further and further from Moron's memory until late next summer. Moron felt that a nutcase like Will Cavendish could only end up one of two ways: Either dead in

a shootout with police or the future president of the United States. An hour after he had this thought, he walked in while his mother was watching the news. There was a story about a kid who didn't buckle his seat belt correctly on a rollercoaster, Chief Thunder's Red Hawk Drop, a 400 foot mega coaster. The ride flung the teen onto the adjacent interstate, killing him instantly. Will Cavendish: dead at the age of nineteen.

2

Back during that freshman September, it only took two days for the university to fill the bed. They brought in a guy who had missed out on the original round of housing and had been staying in an open event space they forced beds into. There amongst twelve other young men, they slept and snored without privacy, refugees at school.

Hank Howard, relieved to now have only one other roommate, was everything Will Cavendish hadn't been. Big, quiet, tidy. If one thing had gone right, Hank could have been the All-American boy. But everything had gone wrong. He had the size and look of what Moron called birthday-card cowboys. The hunks that you find on the cover of gag birthday cards, the premise being that the man on the front has something for you, presumably that he wants to fuck you, but then when you open it up you find some insult about how old you are. It doesn't have to be a cowboy. It could be a dentist. "He's got a message for you." Then on the inside it says "it's time for new dentures!" Anyway, if Hank Howard was ever strapped for cash he had that to lean back on. Hank, a robot with all of his wiring removed, was more than happy to follow Moron's lead. Whatever Moron wanted to watch was fine with him, when Moron wanted to drink they drank, and whenever Moron went out, Hank followed. Moron didn't know how to feel about being a leader, but he liked Hank, and Hank drew the attention of women.

It seemed that their roles had been written for each other before they met. Hank would draw the girls in and it was Moron's job to keep them around. The flaw in their shared destiny was that Moron didn't know how to speak to women and Hank avoided words altogether. So, there they'd stand at parties, Moron asking girls what movies they'd seen recently and Hank, an action-figure equipped with beer-drinking action, only able to move when he was taking a sip of Keystone Light. In the embarrassment and despair, Moron felt a strong affection growing for Hank though he was afraid to admit it. He didn't think he could handle it if Hank ended their blossoming friendship.

If Hank was a friend, then Moron had reached the first level of university social life, but he needed to take it to the next level: romantic partners. There were girls, sure. But Moron would always fuck it up somehow.

One day when he was silently sitting with Hank at the dining hall, he noticed a spotlight that no one else could see. It was following a girl as she walked past the tables and chairs and the raised screens playing Sports Center with a solitary slice of pizza on her plate. She sat alone, a deity, her hair like uncooked ramen noodles, her face blank and bloodless like someone in an airport lounge waiting for the stewardess to tell them to board the plane. Moron's high school English teacher had taught them about Dante's *Inferno* and how Dante had written the whole thing based on his love for a muse that he may have never spoken to in real life. Moron thought Dante was a creep loser at the time, but now he understood. He would die for this stranger and, by some miracle, he found himself in bed with her that weekend. They just held each other, staring into each other's eyes until she drifted off to sleep. Without warning, Moron

felt a rocket-ship of a cough shoot through his throat and the force of it went right into her eyeball. She quietly removed herself from the bed and left his room. She must have withdrawn from the university the next day, because like Cavendish before her, she was gone from Moron's life forever. Maybe it was time for her to board her plane.

Hank had less trouble. Once the first girl accepted his silence like a blanket and spent the night with him, the rest of the freshmen class lined up.. Hank, a mechanical bull at the state-fair, was never with the same girl more than once or twice. It was hard even for the most sensitive of them to hold it against him because he hadn't broken promises or told them lies. He hadn't said anything. Moron knew it would break some unspoken agreement if he ever mentioned the silly amount of sex Hank was having, so he never mentioned it.

3

Moron went home for Columbus Day and drank in the woods with his childhood friends and the next generation of neighborhood kids. He didn't recognize their baby faces, little rascals, running around with an eye-patched dog. The police came to chase them out of the woods and Moron felt tired and old as he scraped his face against the branches. This part of his life was over and he felt foolish for trying to re-enter a memory. He went home and ate leftovers from his mother's fridge and drunkenly cried over a plate of microwaved lasagna.

4

When Moron got back to school he decided to sit down and check how he was doing in all of his classes. It was a mixed bag. Some- like the jerking off class- were going great. But then there was a class called Wildlife Conservation which he had never been to. He made it a point to go to the next session, but when he showed up the building was closed due to a burst pipe. It was like God was telling him it didn't matter. He figured he could pass the final exam anyway. Putting poison in water=bad. Feeding otters=good. Here's your A+. In reality, he'd end up getting a generous D. He was much more focused on trying to get laid than his grades. It was cliché, but it was all he could think about especially when Hank the fuck machine was pounding away.

Then one night it happened. She had an anachronistic first name like Josephine or Agnus or something similar. Her last name a mystery, she kept it as hers, something he couldn't know, but she grabbed him by the hand and gave him something else. They had sex in the woods behind a party house, naked in the dirt, romanceless, animalistic, unlocking something ancient in their DNA. It wasn't love making. Through the tinnitus birthed by his boozy blood and the vibration of their warring bodies he could hear something howling to him from above. Above the trees. Above the clouds. Something called to him and threatened to scoop him up in its talons. It would take him away from there, plant him on a rock, and it would end. It ended. Moron lost his shirt-literally- and had to call Hank afterwards to try and find him something to wear. Hank gave him his top and walked home in his wife-beater undershirt.

The next morning Moron woke up in his bed like a child in the backseat of a car that's been circling around the block. He lay numb and indifferent trying to consider the events of the night before. His confusion morphed into deep depression when three spots soon appeared on the tip of his penis. This was it. He was sure he was going to die.

On Tuesday, November 4th 2008, Barack Obama was elected the 44th president of the United States but Moron didn't find out until Hank put on *South Park* the next night. His mother

had been trying to text and call him about the election but he was ignoring everything and everyone. He had lied and told her he would send in a mail-in ballot. Once she found out that he hadn't, she stopped talking to him for a week. Didn't she know whoever was in the White House was inconsequential to whatever venereal disease was creeping through his body? But she couldn't know that because he wouldn't tell her.

Eventually Moron worked up enough courage to go to the campus clinic.

"I'm here to get tested for AIDS," he said to the girl working the visitor's desk.

She looked up from her English homework and tried not to laugh. "I'm just the sign in person. Wait to tell that stuff to the doctor."

The doctor looked like a bartender and had a similar amount of patience.

"Listen, you don't have AIDS," he said. The sides of the doctor's graying hair kept popping over his ears like a cover of a bent paperback book that couldn't close properly anymore.

"How do you know that?"

"Do you do intravenous drugs or have unprotected anal sex?"

"No."

"Then you don't have aids. I'd say it's HPV. We've got a pamphlet somewhere around here about it. Almost everyone at this university has it. It just means you're having sex."

"Are you supposed to be saying things like this?"

"I mean, probably not. But if you tell anyone I'll just say you're lying," he said, letting out a laugh he didn't expect. "Which one of us was having drunk, unprotected sex in the woods?"

"How'd you know it was the woods?"

"No shit? Really? I was just fucking around. Listen, read the pamphlet. Wear a condom. Relax a little bit." He smoothed his hair and left the room.

Human papillomavirus? That didn't sound like anything to take lightly. It was certainly better than AIDS but, despite what the doctor said, Moron couldn't help feeling like he was cursed. A modern Cain, marked, forced into a nomadic lifestyle, scorned by the masses. His only recourse was to lay under the covers and watch the first two seasons of NBC's *Heroes* on his laptop. He watched the first 34 episodes in three days and the term "binging" hadn't even been invented yet. Or maybe it had, but he hadn't heard it. Moron watched so much so soon that his brain altered the show's catchphrase and then fed it back to him over and over again.

"Save my cock, save the world."

"Save my cock, save the world."

"Save my cock, save the world."

5

When Moron went home for Thanksgiving, a tiny affair of just he and his mother, they ate their meal in almost complete silence then drank too much watching *The Godfather* marathon on AMC.

"I have HPV," he blurted out as Michael was standing outside of the hospital protecting his father.

"I'm dating a podiatrist," she said.

They would never mention the HPV again, but Moron would soon meet the podiatrist, a nerd pervert of a man. Well, the good news was he was a doctor and he seemed to be

genuinely interested in her. Moron might have even found their relationship cute if it wasn't for the man's profession. He couldn't stop picturing the guy with his nose in the arch of a patient's foot, sniffing away like there was no tomorrow.

6

Moron returned to his university with a feeling that this would be the last time he ever made the trip. College wasn't for him. The decision might not even be his to make. It was hard to tell just how bad his grades were because he was afraid to check. The next few weeks went by like a forgotten cigarette crumbling into an ashtray.

There was only one thing left to do.

Moron had been trying to build the strength to tell Hank he wouldn't be coming back after Christmas break. They sat watching TV in uncomfortable chairs and just as he was about to speak something astonishing happened.

"I just wanted to say something, if that's okay," said Hank.

"Sure, Hank. Go ahead."

"I really hope you'll come back next semester."

"Okay, Hank. I will."

And like that, Hank decided for him. It was out of Moron's hands. He'd come back the next semester.

Chapter 2

1

Moron spent Christmas with his mother and her podiatrist boyfriend, Roger "Rodge" Minor. Minor showed up wearing a Pink Floyd branded "ugly sweater". Minor was completely obsessed with Pink Floyd, the only classic rock band that Moron didn't care for. He was the type of guy that could tell you all of the track names in order when you gave him the title of any album. It was clear, at least to Moron, that the man's entire fixation on the group was because he shared a first name with their star, Roger Waters. What a complete fucking loser thing to do. Imagine a man named Albert becoming a theory of relativity fanatic. The one saving grace was that he hadn't been named Mick or Paul. Moron would be willing to fight the man if he had ruined one of the bands he actually liked.

Moron's mother could sense the animosity coming from her son and so she took him aside to have a conversation about being nicer to Ol' Rodge. She didn't understand. It wasn't about someone "replacing his father" or the thought of someone being intimate with his mother. What upset Moron was that he was inheriting a friend he didn't want. The better things went for them as a couple, the worse it was for Moron. He'd have to be around the weirdo every time he came back, creating a negative connotation with the entire concept of "home". But he didn't have the heart to say any of that. He just lied and told her he'd make an effort.

They all watched *The Twilight Zone* together on New Year's Day, and for his mother's sake, Moron pretended not to be annoyed when Rodge would give behind the scenes anecdotes about the episodes.

The next day, January, a burden at any age, appeared like an alien spacecraft casting a shadow across the entire state. Moron woke up in its darkness, aching. For what? To go back to

school of all things.

2

Hank couldn't help but smile when he opened the door.

"What are you smiling about, you big goof?"

"Oh, nothing," said Hank, now almost laughing with joy. Well, it was nice to have someone that cared.

Things progressed much smoother that semester. After just sneaking by in the fall, Moron knew it was time to take his studies more seriously. He still didn't have a major, but he could at least get better grades on his general courses and, except for Introduction to Astronomy, he stuck to his word. Astronomy was a bunch of bullshit. You'd think it'd just be remembering the names of the planets but there was math involved. Someone should really tell you that before you sign up.

Moron's life changed when he hopped on a bus to go to the town center. Overly crowded for three o'clock in the afternoon, he was obliged to offer his seat to a female student that got on at the first stop. She accepted the offer and, as he stood there sweating in his coat from the embarrassment of the exchange, asked him his name. Hers was Ruby.

Ruby was a PhD student at the adjacent university studying important and highly scientific stuff. In the coming weeks she'd explain her area of expertise to Moron over five times and he never retained a single word. It had something to do with mice maybe. Teaching them to drive cars or something like that. Her face was a central casting librarian face but her ass was bigger than some of the smaller countries of Oceania. They traded phone numbers and not long after he exited the bus, she texted him and invited him over to her place later that night. Part of him thought it was a trick, that maybe he'd be murdered, and part of him didn't care.

Her apartment was lined with books, hard and soft, stacked like spiral staircases leading to nothing. In the center of her living room sat an unfinished oil painting of a condor which she made no reference to. There wasn't a TV, but in the corner of the floor, there were DVD sets of *The X-Files*, *Firefly*, and every movie Studio Ghibli ever produced. She wouldn't murder him, but only kill something inside, and replace it. When he told her he had HPV, she said everyone did. She waited patiently when Moron couldn't form an erection. He didn't understand what the problem was. Once, in high school, he had prematurely ejaculated just by touching a girl's butt. Now, presented with an opportunity to live his fantasies, he sat hunched and useless, a stone gargoyle. Ruby saw something in her novice and brought him up to speed to the best of her abilities. They had each other non-stop for a month. She taught him sex and other things she wished she hadn't. Unavoidable things. His protector and his betrayer.

Sometime in February, as they lay there after their lust, she turned to him seriously and told him to declare his major as English.

"Why?"

"I think you'd make a great teacher, John. You remind me of my teachers. The good ones at least."

"How so?"

"You're... Just trust me. You'll thank me someday."

And so Moron declared his major as English and focused on a minor in Education. When he broke the news to Ruby, she smiled weakly, like there was something he was missing, like he

was a kid excited for Christmas, ignorant to the fact his parents were getting divorced.

"That's great, John. Really great."

The next week she broke things off with him. They were just at "different places in their lives." Moron left her apartment arrogant, stupid, storming down the street in the wrong direction. It was all the same to him. He knew how to have sex now. He'd gladly move on to bigger and better things. Unsure of how he got back to his dormitory, he found himself weeping uncontrollably into his pillow. Hank came over to check on him but couldn't find anything to say. He just stood over Moron like someone watching a crib. Moron fell asleep and Hank went back to his homework.

3

Hank slowed down the amount of casual sex he was having and approached something close to voluntary celibacy. Moron picked up where he left off and went to bed with anyone who would have him. There are few miseries quite like that of a stranger's ceiling the next morning. Despite the horrors, Moron willingly entered the loop every weekend and sometimes on weeknights if he could find someone to drink with. To combat the amount he was spending on beer and Rubinoff, he finally got the dining hall job his mother begged him to get at the start of the first semester. He worked, studied, drank, and never slept. If you're going to do it, nineteen is the time to do it, but even still, it was taking its toll.

Most of the students that worked at the dining halls would do everything they could to appear to be present but not do any work. This of course left more work for the non-students that worked there, adults for whom the job was their only source of income. Moron couldn't let them down, so he worked hard, and it paid unexpected dividends. There was something about the unrelenting routine of washing dishes that mercifully shut his brain down. Being a zombie had its benefits. He'd leave the hall sore and tired and a little happier. He eventually washed enough dishes that some backup generator in his brain snapped back on.

What the fuck was he doing with his life?

4

When Moron went home for Spring Break, which culminated with Easter Sunday, his mother and Rodge told him they were engaged to be married. Rodge was so nervous that pools of sweat had formed around his nipples and soaked through his light blue Nautica polo. Moron threw mashed potatoes off of his face and stormed out of the house. It was the most violent thing Moron had ever done (even if it was just ground up vegetables). He then came back in immediately and sincerely apologized to them both. Shellshock prevented Rodge from speaking. Moron figured that was the closest either of them had ever come to a physical altercation.

Tremendous guilt actually made things between the three of them a little better. Moron could no longer tap into that original anger he had for the foot doctor. Against his better judgment, he asked Rodge to *The Last Waltz* with him. Rodge got overly excited and Moron finally broke completely. There was something endearing about the guy once you got past all the extremely annoying stuff.

5

The hallowed “first nice day” of Spring exceeded all expectations. The university was more alive than it could be any other day of the year. The first day of school came with an unsuredness and the last with bittersweetness, but the first nice day was a culmination of everything that was and everything that could be. Mistakes, feuds, and breakups were things of the past and never of the present or future.

Everyone gathered down on the grass near the basketball courts, happy, hopeful, and of course, horny. In the group next to Moron’s was a girl speaking and laughing too loudly. She had a complete disregard for everything and everyone around her and Moron couldn’t look away. Small, hair so black it was the absence of color, and eyes too big for her or anyone else’s head, she was everything.

Moron turned only for a moment, to accept a sip of vodka or a cigarette, and when he went to look at her again, she was gone. Without thinking he got up and started walking around, group to group, searching. He wandered until the sunset, sure she’d be at the next turn. He summited a mountain, crossed a desert, and wrestled a knife-wielding alligator named Emerald Jack. Still, she was gone. Her memory stayed with him and unreasonably so. Irony process theory- every time he tried to not think of her, he did. She was out there somewhere and still inside of his chest. They would meet again.

6

If December went by like a forgotten cigarette, then April boomed away like an exploding cigar. Soon it was the end of the year and Moron had passed all of his classes, even introduction to astronomy. When it came time for the multiple choice final in the raised seats of the lecture hall, he just copied the person in front of him, bubble for bubble. He didn’t know who this person was and had no idea if they knew anything about the subject at hand, but it was a calculated risk. Moron knew nothing and this stranger must know more than nothing or at least have a knowledge base equal to nothing. You couldn’t know less than nothing. Whoever this unwilling Samaritan was got him a C+ for the year.

Hank surprised Moron by revealing he received straight A’s in both semesters so far. It wasn’t that Moron felt Hank was stupid, it’s just that he never heard him mention school work either way. If he continued to do so well with Accounting he’d have a very stable life for himself upon graduation. What a perfect coworker he’d be. Shows up on time, does what he needs to do, doesn’t ask inane questions like “what are you having for lunch?” or “how’s your family doing?” Whoever hired Hank would be hitting the jackpot. That was ages away though. They still had a few years to be young and carefree.

On the last night, Moron drank by himself on the small patch of grass outside the dorm. His apprehension for the university had turned to disdain and then to something akin to affection. He didn’t want to leave for the summer and was trying to squeeze one last meaningful experience out of his first year, too naive to know that holding on to it was a futile effort. Dawn came and went, the minutes slipping through his fingers, and one of the custodians gave him a light tap with his work boot to wake him up. A few hours later, Moron was packed into his mother’s car and en route home.

Chapter 3

1

Sophomore began as so many do, a conveyor belt of forgettable experiences. Despite the fact that Moron was starting his degree in English, a haze formed from the familiarity of their surroundings and lingered in he and Hank's new room which was only a building over from their previous one. Within the year neither of them could have told you any concrete thing that happened that September.

2

Moron's mother and Rodge, in a panic to get married, set the date for early October. The celebration was held in Rodge's mother's backyard. Rodge's mom was wheelchair bound, could no longer speak, and required a carer seven days a week. When she became upset, she'd pound on the sides of the chair, the rhythm spelling out "fuck you." She must have kept still when Rodge asked if the wedding could happen at hers. After all, who wouldn't want to help their son tie the knot?

And what is October if not a ceremony? Its pink-orange hues provide a backdrop for the year's big send-off. November is the intermission and December the finale, but it's the Octobers that mean the most. Summer's charm is still easily called upon, and winter, well winter doesn't exist quite yet. The leaves are luminous with color, trees full of fruit, and fields are full of odd-shaped vegetables. If one had to be trapped inside of a month, wouldn't it be a kindness if it were October?

Moron's mother suggested that Moron invite a friend to the wedding and it stopped him in his tracks. He considered his pals from his youth and already their faces were evaporating, no longer a part of him. Boys gone off to make money in landscaping or construction or, alternatively, to be swallowed and molested by the desert sands of Afghanistan. Calvin Reardon's face came to his mind, but not as it was as last he saw him. Instead the Calvin in his head now was whimpering, tears running down his cheeks as the mall security screamed at him for trying to steal a copy of *Diplomatic Immunity* from the Sam Goody store. Through his sobs he looked younger still, and Moron saw him as a seven-year old mad he got caught in a game of kick-the-can. These were the versions of Calvin that Moron knew, the man holding the M4 carbine in the village of Wanat was someone else. Even the boys closer to home, Tim and Bobby and Paul, existed in the halls of their high school, forever seventeen, drawing enormous dongs and tits on each other's book covers. Moron, only down the street from their homes, felt extraterrestrial, no longer in the same world. There was only one person he wanted to bring.

Hank showed up to the wedding, a cartoon ape in a suit, ostensibly to provide Moron company. What ended up actually happening was quite different. As soon as Rodge's mother found Hank in her sights she wouldn't let him leave her side. Any time he started to walk away, she'd beat on her wheels like the Mongol hordes of Ghenghis Khan banging their drums on the way into battle. Hank was a patient man, but Moron knew that even a saint wouldn't be able to withstand this torture. Thankfully she fell asleep during the nuptials. Now free, Moron's mother

allowed him and Hank to drink as they wished. There weren't many others there, yet still no one noticed or cared when the two of them snuck off into the living room.

They happened upon a well-crafted and maintained chess set and Hank asked Moron if he knew how to play. Moron admitted he knew *how to play* but confessed he wasn't very *good*. Hank didn't mind. He opened with the King's Gambit and Moron countered by bringing his pawn to d5.

"Did you do that on purpose?"

"Did I do what on purpose?"

"Your pawn. Why did you move it?"

"Weren't you setting up the thing where my king gets trapped?"

Hank smiled big and drove his fist into his palm with excitement. "See, you know how to play." This was the most animated Moron had ever seen the man.

"Guess we should get a board for the dorm," said Moron.

"Oh, I've already got one."

"Nice, well, bring it up when we get back."

"What do you mean? It's already up there. It's under my bed."

"Hank, you've got a chess set under your bed and you've never once asked me if I wanted to play?"

"The time wasn't right, was all."

3

Two people were about to enter their lives and break their shared mundanity.

When they got back to school, without much ado, a kid named Timo started showing up, first around their dorm, and then inside of their room. He wore a DC Shoes zip-up hoodie with the logo repeating all over it. It smelled so much like weed that a drug dealer probably could have sold it as product on the street. *Here smoke this sweatshirt, you'll get high as a fucking kite*. Some people heard Timo say that he was from Italy, someone else heard Germany, and still others heard Egypt. Hank, who had been opening up more and more behind closed doors, guessed that Timo was probably born and raised five minutes up the road. Moron found this astute, but they'd never find out for sure. His only real proof that he had been out of the US were packs of cigarettes that bore close-ups of cancer holes in lungs or dying babies, wrappers they used in foreign countries to dissuade people from smoking. The students at the college found the packs hilarious and they ended up being his "in" with various friend groups.

The kid was completely out of his mind, loved to argue with anyone over anything, and had an opinion on everything, even subjects he had no knowledge of. Some people seemed to find his brand of mania interesting, but Moron and Hank were not two of those people. Yet, the boy appeared in their room more than any other. He'd interrupt their chess games or sit down in their chairs and put what he wanted to watch on the TV or play the songs he liked. The only thing that Moron and he shared in common was a love of *Lupe Fiasco's The Cool*, but that wasn't enough to build a whole friendship on. Occasionally he'd demand to play one of them in chess and make moves that he knew he wasn't allowed to make, put his piece back in place, then make another illegal move. Things went on like this until he would make up some excuse—that a girl was coming over to his room or that he'd been asked to go backstage at some

concert in the city- and disappear until the next afternoon when he'd be back to make their day a little worse.

"What should we do about it?"

"Not sure," said Hank. "Let's make sure to lock the door and you and I can meet at the library tomorrow instead."

They followed Hank's plan, and God's honest truth, Timo was at the library waiting for them when they got there. They started to think he might have bugged their room but thought better of it when they considered how lazy and scatterbrained he was. But, like a fly, just when you suspected he was gone out the window, he'd reappear in the corner.

"I think I might actually stab him to death," said Hank when they finally managed to shake him that evening.

"Hmmm. Can't be doing that. Plus you wouldn't need the knife. You could throw him off the ceiling like a little baby. What if we just tell him how we feel?"

"Who throws babies off of the ceiling? But okay. I'll handle it," Hank said as he took a deep breath and continued. "I'm a wordsmith afterall."

When Timo came to their door the next afternoon, knocking hard and quick like an imbecile, Hank opened the door half-way.

"What are you doing? Let me in," said Timo.

"We've got work to do today. Maybe some other time," said Hank.

"Don't be an asshole. Let me in," said Timo trying to push past Hank without much success.

"Not today," said Hank while lightly holding one of Timo's arms. Timo tried to swim over him like a linebacker in football but couldn't manage to do so, and so instead he ducked under and almost got inside before Hank grabbed him by the shoulder and flung him back into the hall. Timo flew through the air and splattered against the wall like a gnat on a windshield.

"I'll kill you, bro," said Timo as Hank closed the door. Timo stood outside the room knocking and shouting and calling them pussies and cunts. Inside the room Moron was laughing so hard he wasn't making any sound. Hank lightly chuckled. The RA soon came out of their room and made Timo leave the building. The next day "someone" threw eggs off of Hank and Moron's window when they were out at their classes. The RA caught that same someone writing "cocksuckers" with a sharpie on their dorm room door and interrupted them before they could finish. When the maintenance man came to wash it off they could hear him shout "Who the hell is COCKSU?" They soon found out that Timo didn't even go to school there. The police banned him from campus. Sometimes they'd still see him in the town center arguing with cashiers in fast food places or smoking cigarettes in playgrounds and when they did he'd give them the middle finger and then run in the other direction.

4

If Timo was the darkness, then Corrina was the light. Hank met her while she was working at a coffee shop. She had recently transferred to the university from an out-of-state school and was looking for new friends to hang-out with. It didn't take long for her and Hank to become a couple and no one could blame either of them for their haste. Corrina Turner was living proof that truly great people still existed. She looked like she burst out of a 1950's ad for laundry detergent but she held none of the pretension or rudeness that you'd expect from someone with those

aesthetics. The only thing preventing Moron from falling in love with her as well was the knowledge that it would ruin everything. Sometimes he'd forget and find himself staring at her. She was funny, reasonable, and, most of all, kind. Not nice. Kind.

It's foolish to think that your friends are always going to be around, that things won't change, and that no one will get hurt. Yet, if they had thought that it'd be the three of them for the next few months or the next couple of years, they'd be underestimating their bond. The three kids hiding their faces in fear as they watched *The Descent* on DVD in dingy sophomore year housing would remain a trio throughout their lives. Corrina Turner would eventually become Corrina Howard. She was the greatest thing that ever happened to Hank (and ranked pretty high up there for Moron too). But, that's for other chapters.

5

Moron felt it was time for a Corrina of his own. Hell, he'd take someone even 60% as good. He lay in bed at night erect, his physical desire for Ruby never having sated, and yet he was aware that it wasn't and could never be a true love. He begrudgingly admitted that she had been right in ending things and with this acceptance came a loneliness that Hank and Corrina's company couldn't quench. Moron went on a few lunch dates at the dining hall but it wasn't a sexy place, especially when you were the one that would have to clean the dishes later. One girl asked him to a showing of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* and he fell asleep fifteen minutes in. Another one brought him to a Thai restaurant and became angry when he said there were too many vegetables in the food. To put it simply, things weren't going well. Logic be damned though, Moron sensed his big break was just around the corner. All you had to do to agree with him was ignore all evidence to the contrary.

When Moron went home for Christmas, Rodge greeted him with *Dylan: A Biography* by Bob Spitz. He was so excited to see Moron's reaction that he gave it to him on December 19th. Moron had actually got him something too: a *Twilight Zone* t-shirt with "The Mystic Seer" on the front of it. Moron's mother cried happy tears when Rodge unwrapped it. They were functioning like one little happy family.

"So, when are you going to bring a girl home to meet us, John?"

"Next semester. I promise."

Chapter 4

1

When Moron entered the room for his Creative Writing seminar, he instantly recognized the girl sitting at the desk in the back right corner. Trying not to trip, he walked over and sat down next to her. Her midnight hair was in a high tight knot on the top of her head and she sat with her hands folded, prim and proper, mocking no one in particular.

"Hey, I remember you," said Moron.

"Oh, yeah?! From where?" she said too loudly breaking her school girl character.

"Last year, sitting by the basketball courts."

"You're telling me you saw me sitting on the fucking grass a year ago and you still remember it?"

"Well, I guess when you put it like that..." said Moron.

"Is this going to be a problem? You sitting here I mean. I don't need you getting your drool all over me."

Moron was unsure whether to laugh or move or blow his brains out. Their first assignment was to write about a personal experience and Moron chose to write about seeing her for the first time. When they got their papers back, she turned to Moron, her eyes squinted like a cartoon detective.

"You didn't happen to write about me did you?"

"What? No. Of course not," said Moron.

"Oh my God! You did. Let me see that."

"No, I, okay, but..."

"Give me the paper or I'm calling the police."

Moron handed over the paper and she made a show of putting it into a plastic folder and carefully putting it in her bag as if it were evidence. Moron didn't sleep that night. He had never been more embarrassed in his entire life. Okay, maybe when he told the student working at the clinic that he was there for AIDS. But this was a close second. Why did he give her the paper? He could have just lied. Well, he tried to lie, didn't he? He just wasn't very good at that or anything else.

There was a letter waiting on his desk when he arrived at class the next day. "FOR THE ATTENTION OF MORON ONLY. ALL OTHERS WILL BE PROSECUTED". He glanced over at her before he opened the envelope and she sat statue still, head forward. Inside the envelope was his paper with a sticky note stuck to it that read:

This was incredibly LAME!

(but I kind of liked it)

Next time ask for my phone number you FREAK!

-CECILIA

"So, can I have your phone number?"

"Don't ruin the moment, Moron. If you behave, we'll see," said Cecilia.

After class she said she needed to go to the post office and asked him if he wanted to come. When they got to her car, a discolored hatchback that looked like someone had taken a hammer to, he noticed a strange bumper sticker on the back of her car.

"Is that a Pittsburgh Pirates sticker?"

"Yeah, so what? I like Pirates. It was on the car when I got it."

"But they're a baseball team. Did you buy it from someone in Pennsylvania?"

"Oh, shut up. Just get in the car," she said.

Moron walked over to the passenger side door and tried to open it but couldn't.

Cecilia started giggling. "I forgot that it doesn't work. I have to open it from the inside."

"So, you've got a car with a Pittsburgh Pirates decal and a broken door?"

"Yeah, and what do you drive? A fucking tricycle I bet," she said before she burst out laughing. He didn't tell her then, but he didn't have his driver's license. This made things worse when she found out a few hours later. She continued to ridicule him for that and other things, but seemed to enjoy his company. Over the next few weeks she was always asking him to join her on uncommon errands. Chameleon shopping at the pet store, buying a power drill from someone on Craigslist, or giving a ride to various senior citizens in town. All old people seemed to know her and everytime Moron considered this he'd laugh harder. Why were these things on

her to-do list? Why was she the way she was? He didn't know and didn't care.

She hated movies, the only TV shows she watched were on the Bravo network, and the only music she seemed to be aware of was the NSYNC Christmas album that she kept in her glovebox year round. He tried to show her how to use the internet to convert any song she found on YouTube to an mp3 for her iTunes and she didn't pay him any notice. When he checked her iTunes the only songs in there were from the NSYNC Christmas album.

On one of their many trips to the aforementioned pet store he told her that he once met TV personality and animal conservationist Jeff Corwin. Apparently he had already told her that anecdote on a previous visit and so this was her immediate response:

"Okay, so you met Jeff Corwin. Big deal. Stop acting like you met the fucking president or something."

It was the hardest Moron laughed in his entire life. He knew he was in deep shit. Totally in love. Did she feel the same way about him? When he asked if they were boyfriend and girlfriend she told him not to be a geek. When he asked if they should make it Facebook official, she deleted her seldom used account in protest. Everything she did was funny, but it also made him question his sanity.

2

Cecilia insisted on teaching Moron how to drive. The fact that she herself was the world's worst driver was irrelevant. They'd go to a big parking lot after class and she'd watch him scoot around. Sometimes she'd yell at him and other times she didn't seem to be present at all. One time she fell asleep. Sometimes he'd yell at her. These weren't serious arguments, they were playful more than anything, and could have been avoided all together if Moron had just got his license at sixteen like everyone else. He told himself he avoided lessons out of apathy but once he was behind the wheel he realized he had been subconsciously putting them off because of an underlying terror. Humans weren't meant to have something so big and so full of metal move so quickly. Anytime he'd reach over 10mph he'd brace for impact. She made him get his learner's permit and take the road test.

The lady that was to conduct the examination looked familiar but Moron couldn't understand why.

"I think I know her," Moron whispered to Cecilia. She came along because they required a licensed driver to accompany you and bring a car you could take the test in.

"You think you know the woman giving you the test? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Stop. Don't make me laugh. I'm sure I've met her before."

"Moron, are you telling me you had sex with the DMV lady?"

"No, but, that's it! That's it! This is the woman my roommate, my first roommate, the one that died, brought home to our dorm!"

"There's no way."

The woman then came out of the back and walked around the desk, still flipping through forms on her chart. "Okay, kiddos. Let's get this over with."

After the exam they parked back outside the DMV building and the woman asked Cecilia if she could give them a moment while they went over the results. When she exited, the DMV woman addressed Moron sternly.

"You know you blew through a red light and failed to signal during your three-point turn?"

"Yes. I'm sorry about that."

"Hmmm. What are we going to do about your test? It was one of the worst ones I've ever seen. Are you just doing this because that girl is making you?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, you really shouldn't be behind the wheel. Make me a promise, will you? Don't ever drive unless you absolutely have to."

"You're passing me?"

"Yeah. Who am I to judge?"

"Honestly, thank you so much. Are you doing me a favor because of Will?"

"Who the heck is Will?"

"We were roommates last year. You came over to the room. He fell out of Chief Thunder's Red Hawk Drop?"

"Hunny, I have no idea what you're talking about. Quit while you're ahead."

When he explained what happened to Cecilia, she was happy that he passed the test but even happier that he wrongfully accused a grown woman of fucking his exploded roommate. Moron never gave up believing that it was actually her.

3

It wasn't all fun and games. One night when they were out at a party a shady guy came up to speak with Cecilia. He had a rabbit's foot of a mustache and body that looked like melted ice cream in a plastic bag. Moron was able to put two and two together and realize they had some type of history. When the degenerate left, he asked her who it was. She told him just a friend. Moron proceeded to mope around long enough for her to continue the conversation a few minutes later.

"Is there something you want to say, Moron?"

"No. I guess I was just wondering if..."

"You want to know if I fucked him? Is that it? Why are you being so weird? Just ask me if you want to ask me."

"Yeah, then, did you?"

"Grow up. Of course I did. I've fucked this whole university. How about that? How about you? Which sea urchins here have you fucked, huh?" She stormed off away from the party and he wasn't sure what to do. Five-minutes later he still didn't have a plan of action, so he just started walking in the direction that she went. A mix of Déjà vu and nausea swirled through his intestines, his face plastic with confusion as he wandered. In some ways he knew even less about her than that first day he saw her.

Later that night he stood in her doorway apologizing, lacking assurance that it was even the right thing to do. She told him that she didn't want to talk to him but that he could call her tomorrow. When he got back to his room, he started to explain the argument to Hank and Corrina, but then decided it was all too stupid to articulate. He and Cecilia were fine the next day.

4

Cecilia and Corrina got along like two peas in a fucking pod. Hank had his reservations about her. To be fair to Cecilia, Hank only liked two people in the world which meant there was a 1 in 3,420,000,000 that he'd let his guard down around you. Plus, Hank and the others who sometimes gave disapproving glances didn't get to see the side of her that Moron saw. They didn't get to see how playful she could be. The two of them would lay in bed and she'd use anything she could find as a prop for a bit, including Moron's uniquely sharp hip bones. She'd say you could slice meat or cheese off of them and then do a parody of a guy at a deli saying "I got a pound of pastrami right 'ere" and continue to mime, cutting the pieces on Moron's hip. All the outside world focused on was their arguments.

They got into some bad ones. One Saturday night Cecilia slapped Moron in public and the next morning he couldn't remember why. They made up as they usually did, in denial that they were becoming a constant downer on everyone's evenings. In denial that their relationship was virulent. Just as things were approaching their nadir, Moron's mother came up to visit. He asked Cecilia if she'd like to meet his mom and Cecilia said she would. Moron had been so prepared for the alternative response that he didn't know what to say when she accepted the invitation.

"Don't make it weird."

The two of them went on a couples date with Moron's mother and Rodge. It was the only time he ever saw Cecilia unsure of herself. She must have been in some state of hysteria while she was getting dressed, because she showed up to the restaurant in a brown blazer with a yellow blouse underneath it, unmistakably the outfit of a saleswoman for honey. When he whispered to her and asked if that's what she was going for, she spit out her water. Moron's mother and Rodge were on their way to the table and so she had to hurry to try and clean it up. Cecilia wasn't whoever they were expecting. They were probably expecting someone closer to Corrina, someone who could move interchangeably between different personality types with ease. Cecilia's wheelhouse consisted of girls her own age, outcasts, hermits, meandering octogenarians, lizards, post office employees, and pirates. Cecilia's wheelhouse didn't include parents or step-parents. She sat at the table as quiet as Hank Howard.

"Excuse me, miss. You look like a gal that might know where I can get my hands on some honey," said Moron to Cecilia on the drive back to the dorms.

"Stop," said Cecilia.

"Come on. It's funny."

"They didn't like me."

"Yes they did. They like everyone. Did you see the size of the belt clip Roger had for his cell? You could fit a rotary phone in there," said Moron.

"I'm sorry," said Cecilia, pulling over. "Can you get out and walk the rest of the way?"

"What? That's crazy. I'm not doing that," said Moron.

"Listen, I'm not trying to be a bitch. Please, can you get out of the car? It's only a ten minute walk from here," said Cecilia.

Moron shook his head and stepped out onto the sidewalk and she was gone before he turned to look. He played the events of the day over in his head and was sure that he couldn't have done anything better. At this point he'd usually be drowning in inexperience, but for once he felt he had a pretty firm grip on the situation. This was it. They were breaking up. Can you break up if you never said you were boyfriend and girlfriend? Fine. They were "ending things".

What bothered him most is his mother would blame herself if he let her know the news straight away. He'd just lie to her. It wasn't like it would be the first time. Everything was settled in his head. He'd be in a fake relationship with Cecilia until the end of the summer and then let his mom know it was all over.

Except it wasn't over. Moron tried calling Cecilia three times that day and sent ten text messages. She didn't respond to any of them so he just got under his covers and watched his *It's Always in Sunny in Philadelphia* DVD sets. The next day she called him to join her on a trip to a pawn shop. She said the guys that work at those types of places give women more money if there's a man with them- something to do with them not wanting to get accused by the boyfriend of bidding too low. Out of all the guys to bring for muscle Moron wasn't the best pick, but she ended up getting fifty dollars for a necklace. The pawn shop man surprised them. Not so much by his actions but by his appearance. They were expecting some meaty slob with his sleeves rolled up and crumbs of food embedded in the hair on his arms. Instead they got a gentleman that looked exactly like Abraham Lincoln. And so, he became one of the many characters in the world of their inside jokes, another thing to reference in the secret lexicon they were creating. Just like Moron's hips were meat slicers, Cecilia was a honey saleswoman, and the lady at the DMV fucked his dead roommate, they'd now consistently mention Abrascam Lincoln. Moron didn't feel like they were on firm enough ground to ask where the necklace came from or why she was selling it. They didn't talk of jewelry or of lunches with parents. They just kept creating fake backstories for Dishonest Abe. Cecilia then took Moron to the movie theater to see *Hot Tub Time Machine* (which he assumed was her way of apologizing).

5

Where was school in all of this? It was wonderful. Moron read some books that changed his entire perspective on the possibilities of the English language and others so bad he felt he could write better ones (even at age twenty with a shaky grasp of grammar). Each page was encouraging in its own way, especially considering he had never read a single book assigned to him in high school. Instead he opted to use sparknotes.com and any other summaries he could find on the internet. The joke was on him -it turned out that literature was a pleasure he'd been denying himself for far too long.

Moron's professors took a shine to him as well. What he lacked in fundamentals he made up for in creativity. No one had previously seen anything of the sort in him. In junior high art class, when he was given a ball of clay and the possibility to build whatever he liked, he made a boulder. College freed from something within him, a cage unlocked never to be closed, an animal so hungry that it couldn't be leashed.

There was a slight problem, though. Sometimes when he'd check his notes at the end of the day he'd find troubling doodles in his notebook. They were in his hand writing but he didn't remember writing them. They all said "LEAVE". Whether it was his subconscious or a message in a bottle from a future version of himself, he didn't know, but did it matter? Some part of him was explaining what he needed to do. Yet, it wasn't that easy. What both the world at large and the covert agent in his own head didn't understand was that things could work between him and Cecilia. When they were alone, everything was perfect. It was other people that seemed to set her off. If only they could win the lottery and live in a mansion and avoid the general public. They would live happily ever after.

"I'm going to get a 5-Hour Energy, do you want one?"

"Moron, I guess we should just say we're boyfriend and girlfriend, right? Isn't it easier that way?"

"Yes. Definitely," said Moron.

Chapter 5

1

Somehow or another, at the end of their sophomore year when they were trying to figure out housing for the fall, Cecilia convinced Moron and Hank to sign on to live with a pair of twins she met in her history pre-requisite. Without much consideration, Moron and Hank entered a realtor's office with two brothers they had never seen before. Their names were Frances and Stephen Wolf and their names were most of the reason they were all in this mess. Cecilia, whose attention was drawn to oddities of any kind, pestered them into becoming friends with her and once she found out their names she referred to them collectively as Frankandsteve Wolfman.

Frankandsteve were disturbingly tall and skinny and when they were standing next to each other they resembled the prongs of a tuning fork. They were both business majors and if you know nothing else about business majors, know this- they usually fall into one of two buckets. A. Shitbags or B. Eccentrics. Frankandsteve were firmly in the second bucket. Moron, easily threatened by all men, had no alarm bells when he saw them interact with Cecilia. They presented as completely asexual. Luckily for them, they were geniuses. One of the first times Moron ever heard of someone working on a "phone app" was when Frankandsteve said they had one in a beta phase. They were like the Winklevossi without the athletic ability or inheritance or good looks or social skills. Corrina and Cecilia's favorite joke was that Frankandsteve's app was a dating website for twins named "Twintimate.com". It would be years before they found out what the app was actually designed for.

As they sat in the realtor's office that day to sign the appropriate forms, Moron could feel Hank seething in anger next to him. When they moved in with the twins that autumn however, Hank changed his tune. Turns out he and the twins had a joint obsession with video games. It wasn't *Madden* or *Call of Duty*. The three of them loved out-of-print games for defunct systems, stuff that only absolute mutants liked, like *Shenmue* for the Sega Dreamcast. Frankandsteve welcomed him to video game heaven, surprised that someone with his body type knew so much about their world. It was their first exposure to the onion that is Hank Howard. Those autumn days spent in their new house were some of the best of their lives. Moron would sit there getting destroyed by the other three in video games and not mind. He was just happy everyone was happy. Plus, Moron was 21 now which meant he could go to bars or buy alcohol with his actual license.

Most college kids would probably watch football on the weekends in some dive, but despite Hank looking every inch a linebacker, none of them ever mentioned wanting to do that. As Moron considered just how big Hank was, he decided to Google "Hank Howard high school football" and was surprised to see a link for a website called 247sports.com. In 2006, they ranked Hank as one of the best prospects in the state. Another layer of the onion.

The twins ended up being great roommates. They cooked for themselves, cleaned up

after each other, paid all bills on time (maybe it's easier when there's two of you) and would make sure you knew things about current events (like when the Chilean miners were rescued). Cecilia had created a nice little environment for all four men. The house itself was wanting, but that's par for the course for college beer dens. It was a yellow, single-story structure that was a five minute drive or a twenty minute walk from campus. The problems were mostly cosmetic except the weird pink mold in the basement. Frankandsteve worried it could be asbestos. When they asked the realtor about it she said "don't bother it and it won't bother you."

2

The Camelot days of their junior September and October unraveled in November. On the first of that month, Cecilia called and told Moron that her estranged grandma had just passed and, like the plot of some Charles Dickens novel, had left Cecilia a few thousand dollars in her last will and testament. Cecilia then asked Moron to come over to her house because there was something she needed to discuss with him. Moron's stomach thrashed like a squirrel caught in a trap with a peanut butter cracker. John Moron wasn't a spiritual man but he wasn't a stranger to premonitions either. He'd see entire sequences before they happened and not just things like "eating sixteen mozzarella sticks will lead to diarrhea". He was certain he knew his and Cecilia's dialogue already. They were stage actors with their lines memorized. Crisp fall air spiraled into his lungs, falling leaves halted their descent and enveloped him instead, and when he opened his bloodshot eyes he was sitting next to Cecilia on her bed just as she had asked.

"I'm so sorry about your grandmother," said Moron.

"She was a monster. Don't worry about her. I've got something else I want to talk about," said Cecilia.

"You're going to use the money she's giving you to pay for a study abroad trip to London next semester. You'll get someone to sublet your room so there'll be no issues," said Moron.

"Wait. What? Yes, but how did you know?"

"Well, you said if you had the money you'd do it. And now you have the money," said Moron.

"Okay, and how do you feel about it?"

"I don't have the money to do it," said Moron.

"No, I know that. But how do you feel about me going?"

"We both know there's nothing I can do to stop you," said Moron. He wanted to be supportive but couldn't find the strength. There was a horrible image in his head of Joe Strummer and Cecilia having sex. Strummer died in 2001 but that was beside the point.

"I thought you'd be happy for me," said Cecilia.

"You didn't think that," said Moron.

"No, I didn't, but you're being a real asshole!"

They got into a blow-out argument, reliving older spats and unleashing insults they'd been saving for a rainy day. Each felt worse afterwards and unearthed more resentment when they restarted an hour later. In the midst of this, Corrina had tried calling Moron five times. The only time Corrina ever contacted Moron directly was if she couldn't reach Hank. Finally, Moron called her back and she explained she was with Hank, but that something was severely wrong.

3

Moron passed through the faux-quaint college town back to his house like he was on an automated walkway at an airport- the only thing moving were his legs and the ground beneath his feet. The twin circus attractions stood chopping up something smelly in the kitchen as Moron went by them breathlessly towards Hank's room. Corrina waited outside it, shuffling her feet and chewing on the end of her phone thoughtlessly like a child. When Moron spoke she jumped and then gathered herself. She explained that something was wrong with Hank but she couldn't make out what. He had punched a hole in one wall and threw a chair at another. His yells were incoherent and Corrina genuinely didn't know what had set him off.

"I've never seen him like that," said Moron.

"Will you try speaking with him? I don't know what else to do," said Corrina.

"Yeah. Do you want to go wait in the living room?"

"What and play *Ms. Pac-Man*? I'll hang on the front steps. Text me if you manage to get in," said Corrina.

Corrina went outside and Moron spent a few minutes trying to get Hank to open-up to no avail and no response. Finally, he asked Hank if he wanted to play chess. The door unlocked and cracked open. Moron texted Corrina that she could head home for a while if she wanted to. She chose to continue waiting. Once Moron was in the room, Hank silently set up the board, took out Moron's King in five minutes, and then started setting up the board for another game.

"Can I ask you something? About chess. Not about the other stuff," said Moron.

"About chess, yeah," said Hank.

"Well, when we first started playing, you beat me the first two games. The first one took a little while, my guess was because you were double checking that I wasn't secretly a grand master, but in the second game you beat me pretty easily. I won the third game and even though I didn't say anything at the time, I knew you let me win," said Moron.

"I didn't..." said Hank.

"Hold on, let me finish," continued Moron. "Overtime as we kept playing, the games started becoming more competitive. I would win one-out-of-four, let's say. So, I start thinking I'm getting really good at chess. I'm, like, proud of myself. Then you know what I realized?"

"What?" said Hank, starting to shake a little.

"I realized I wasn't getting better at chess, you were just getting better at letting me win," said Moron. "How many games did I actually beat you?"

Hank's eyes were closed and he had his hand covering his mouth. Eventually he managed to say "zero" before bursting out into uncontrollable laughter. Tears of frustration and hilarity joined each other in streams down his vermilion cheeks. Hank's laughter started to peter off after a few minutes and then Moron continued.

"You're such a good guy that you got better at faking it just to boost my confidence. Whatever it is that made you angry, just know that you're great, and whoever did that isn't worth it. Plus, you've got a girlfriend that really cares about you," said Moron, praying it wasn't Corrina that Hank was mad at.

"I should actually probably call her. You wouldn't mind would you?"

"Jesus Christ, no Hank. She's actually still outside. I'll go get her and see what the two uncoiled paper clips made for food. Whatever it was, it absolutely stunk," said Moron.

Hank laughed again as Moron left his room. For the moment, the beast had been pacified but it would be another year before Moron learned what made him flip his lid in the first

place.

4

As Prince William was announcing his engagement to Kate Middleton, Moron was facing the alternate reality- his girlfriend was breaking up with him to go to London for six months. Cecilia suggested they make the most of their autumn semester and then make a clean break at the end of it. That made it impossible to live in the moment, his heart was already in a lonesome January, and the body that appeared in November and December was merely a ghost with a smooth-surface cavity in its chest. Relief and heartbreak see-sawed as he hovered over his future, for he understood his life would be healthier without her and yet he didn't want it to be.

Soon, it was time to say goodbye and indignation prevented him from saying anything meaningful.

Chapter 6

1

Melanie Yearwood's room was bitterly cold due to a broken window latch that the facilities team had yet to fix. Moron tried to remember why they hadn't gone to his house instead of her dorm but couldn't. Well, alcohol was the answer, but he meant more specifically. Maybe hers was closer? Where did they even end up late at night? A pizza place potentially. He recalled her buying a pack of cigarettes but could that have been at a pizza place? Marb Reds and anchovy please. None of it mattered.

The two had met at a party February 11th and consummated their relationship that night. He asked her to meet up for food that Monday, not realizing it was Valentine's Day. There were worse ways to spend the holiday, but he just hoped she wasn't getting the wrong impression. It wasn't that he wasn't attracted to her- the physical end of things was too intense if anything- it's just that he didn't know if he liked her. Not liked-her-liked-her. Just liked her even in a general sense. Melanie was a uniquely bad listener. She would hear what you said but misinterpret it every time. If she said she "I love crepes" and you said "oh, I think there's a crepe place in the town center" she'd take it as "the best crepe place in the world is in the town center." When she would go and inevitably be disappointed, she'd angrily say something like "I can't believe you recommended that crepe place." And at that point Moron wouldn't have the energy to argue. He'd rather be known for giving bad recommendations than to debate the linguistics of crepe conversations.

"Didn't you say this was your favorite band?"

"Who? Modest Mouse? No, last time the song was on you asked who it was and I told you," said Moron.

"No, you definitely said this was your favorite band," said Melanie. And it went on like that until she had constructed a whole new opinion base for Moron that he silently accepted. He was willing to let people think XXX: *State of the Union* was his favorite movie if it meant that she kept giving him handjobs in the slop closet at the dining hall.

One night when Moron was drooling and snoring and farting in bed, Melanie woke him,

not to scold him for his hog sounds, but to ask him a question.

"Don't you think we should be girlfriend and boyfriend?"

"What time is it?"

"Answer the question," said Melanie. She lacked passion and conviction. She didn't mean what she said even 15%. It was like someone ordering clam chowder at a restaurant when they knew they didn't like clam chowder.

"I don't know if that's a good idea. You haven't even said you have feelings for me," said Moron.

A bad courtroom drama preceded his statement, he the prosecution, and her the outraged defendant clearly exposed of their lie. Why did she ask him that he wondered? It could have been boredom or a bizarre sense of civic responsibility or maybe she just saw her other friends with boyfriends and decided she wanted one. They argued until Melanie's roommate, a nice girl who didn't deserve to be subjected to the moans of sex or of agitation, finally asked them to stop. Moron was happy for the excuse to leave.

Over the next few days Melanie reached out to him a few times and she seemed to genuinely miss him now that he was gone. He didn't miss her at all, but felt tremendous guilt because of that, and it left him wondering which end of things was worse- his or hers?

How can you tell someone that your time with them had nothing to do with them? What cruel bastards we all are.

2

Cecilia Skyped Moron from London exactly twice. The first time was the first night she landed and the second was drunkenly at 8PM her time which was 3PM Moron time. The first talk was dry, how was your flight, how's your accommodation, kind of talk. The second was incoherent babbling, Moron, Moron, Moron, just her repeating his name over and over, kind of talk.

Some days he missed her terribly. Some days, like the entire week after the drunken Skype, he didn't miss her at all.

3

One night when Moron and Hank were pre-gaming and playing drinking games at Corrina's house with her roommates, Hank got a call and was ecstatic for a reason to get out of Never-Have-I-Ever (a game you'd sooner get Jason Bourne to participate in). Hank left the room then rushed back in a minute later and screamed to Moron that they needed to go. Moron and Corrina chased Hank to the door as he blurted something out about Steve (of Frankandsteve) getting punched in the face. Frank had called him in a panic to say that they were at a party and someone hit Steve for no reason.

Hank was much faster than Corrina and Moron so they were grateful that he was wearing a plain white t-shirt, their north star dashing through drunken streets. The house they caught up to him at, the house that would cause a lot of pain for a lot of people, was three stories high but when the twins told them the party was on the top floor, it might as well have been a skyscraper. Moron could hear the music and see the lights, but from their vantage point he couldn't make out much else. Despite Corrina's protests, once Hank got a description of Steve's assailant from Frank he started stomping up the relentless stairs. Moron trekked behind him through a disgusting black slime formed on the wooden steps by snowy boots and a lack of

initiative.

The party was crowded and most of the kids in there looked the same. Moron's second biggest fear (his first being getting stomped into the black mush) was that Hank would find the wrong guy. He didn't. Like a Greek champion entering a battlefield, it seemed the group had a good idea why this scarlet hulk was standing there.

"Did you just punch my friend in the face?" said Hank pointing at some scumbag leaning against the refrigerator.

"No," said the scumbag.

"Yes, he did!" screamed a girl to Moron's right. That was all it took. Hank only had to hit him once. The force of the punch drove the kid's head back into the refrigerator, broke a Coors Light magnet, and dented the door. The body slid to the ground like a rubber snake. No one else moved and Hank grabbed Moron by the arm and started walking back down the stairs.

Moron felt every muscle, every bead of sweat, every sticky board underneath his sneakers, not able to do anything but hold his breath and count the steps as he descended. Just when he thought they might be in the clear, a stampede started sounding behind them. The two of them managed to get out of the door on the bottom floor and off of the porch. Or so Moron thought. Hank had stopped to block the door. The first three stooges out of the gate ran right into his fists and dropped like pigshit. Eventually though, too many got through. Moron started to make his way back onto the porch but the mob had other plans. Hank's body started coming over the railing and Moron screamed "I got it! I got it!", subconscious programming from his days in little league. He got it alright but Hank Howard weighed so fucking much. The two of them were sprawled across the lawn when a strange thing happened. Hank started laughing. Moron couldn't join in just yet. The pack of the wolves on the porch were licking their lips.

Corrina, Frank, and a one-eye-open Steve joined Hank and Moron. Frank, shaken up by the shame and hurt of being unable to protect his brother, was in worse shape than Steve.

"Corrina, take the twins and get out of here," said Hank.

"Let's just leave, Hank. This is so stupid," said Corrina.

"Let them come," said Hank.

Just as the horde was about to close in, three unknown guys walking down the street, bad samaritans if you will, joined in next to Hank.

"Looks like you guys are a little outnumbered. Do you need some help?"

"Hell yes," said Hank. And like that, they had a little back up.

Moron still didn't want to see any of it happen. He stood out in the middle of each group with his hands in the air.

"This is stupid," said Moron. "We'll just leave and it doesn't have to go any further than this." He thought they'd at least take a moment to consider his proposal but someone on the opposite team grabbed him by his shirt collar and flung him off the street. Gravel cut sorely through the palms of his hands. When he lifted his head, he saw the guy that tossed him now on his hands and knees himself, likely from a Hank Howard fist. A pleasing and carnal release broke through Moron's body. The schadenfreude was only temporary of course, ruined by one of the bad samaritans running over and booting the boy across the jaw. Moron's attacker fell completely limp and unconscious on the ground, perhaps no longer in the land of the living. Finally, Moron got to his feet and tried again, futilely, to stop mankind's oldest and most brutal past-time.

Eventually, only two combatants remained. Hank and their biggest guy. Hank had a one-inch gash on his left eyebrow, making it hard for him to see properly. Their guy bore a shredded shirt and a visibly broken nose. The two brutes stood smiling sickly at each other. Just as it looked as their showdown would begin, police sirens rang and everyone dispersed. Moron, Corrina, and the twins hid in some bushes down the road. The three of them had avoided injury (or further injury in poor Steve's case), and considering what Moron bore witness to, he considered himself relatively unscathed as well.

Hank and the other monster ran down the same side street and towards two overeager cops who greeted them with mace. Handcuffed in the back of the cruiser, Hank offered the clean part of his shirt to his opponent, his opponent returned the favor, and each helped to wipe the spray out of each other's eyes. Enemies only a moment before, now friends with a common goal- make sure they didn't permanently lose their eyeballs. The officers, afraid that Hank and his new tag-team partner might press charges against them and not the other way around, let them go a few streets over and told them to go straight home and stay out of trouble.

Moron often considered what it was that the savages were sharing in that moment when they locked eyes before their would-be fight to the death. Sometimes he would admit he knew and at other points he'd plead ignorance, but he felt it when he watched that boy, prone on his hands and knees, about to have his mandible shattered. It was humanity's entombed blood lust and he wished to never drink it in again.

4

On the night of May 2nd, SEAL Team Six compromised Osama bin Laden to a permanent end. A party broke out at the dormitories, all of the students flooding outside to celebrate. Hank called Corrina to see if she wanted to join him and Moron in walking down to the party, but she declined. She said that the murder of a man, even a horrible man, was a strange thing to dance over. Hank and Moron continued to the revelry anyway.

Moron used the international news as an excuse to Skype Cecilia when he got back to his house. It was likely she'd be getting up for her classes pretty soon anyway.

A man answered the call and then closed her laptop.

Chapter 7

1

If dreams are colorless then why would Moron always remember the lifeguard-red buoy bouncing in the darkness as he floated upwards, forlorn? When he awoke, he brushed the long black hair off of his arm and sat up to watch the beads of sweat roll down his chest like marbles.

"Are you okay?" asked Cecilia.

"Yeah. Just a dream," said Moron.

When she returned from London, she decided to call any and all sexual encounters even. With a banker's coolness, she dropped the subject. Moron knew it would rear its head over and over again but had no counter to her proposal, aside from breaking things off for good, which he wasn't prepared to do.

2

In order to fulfill the requirements for his minor in education, he had to spend one day a week at a neighboring town's elementary school. The school itself existed out of time, almost on a prairie, impossibly surrounded by nought. Moron had never seen a town like it in his state and yet there he was looking down at twelve of its confused kindergartener's faces. The teacher of the class and her assistant stared at him with the same doubt. Despite being a senior in college, he still looked too much like a child himself. That's what they all treated him like anyway. It seemed the only thing any of them wanted out of him was to keep the children entertained at recess. Sometimes he chased them around like he was a werewolf. Sometimes they chased him like they were angry villagers. He didn't learn anything about being a teacher, but he had fun- at least until he acknowledged his surroundings. The impoverished school needed more help than the faculty could bring it. Moron fantasized about hitting the lottery and giving all of the money away to them.

3

This next part of the story doesn't have much to do with John Moron. Oh, he was there, but only as a powerless observer. There was nothing he could do to stop what was coming, what had already been set in motion years before he ever met Hank Howard.

Moron, Cecilia, Hank, Corrina, and Frankandsteve decided they should go to one of the university's football games. None of them had been yet and it seemed like the appropriate thing to do, if for no other reason than to check off a box on their collegiate experience list. Hank, by far the most sporty of the group, seemed the most apprehensive. Moron figured it had something to do with whatever stopped his high school football career, but he could have never imagined what lay ahead.

They arrived at the tailgate and drank and partied just like every other student and alumnus there. When they needed to pee, they went into the woods without privacy, surrounded by dozens of people doing the same thing. Their early afternoon was full of events atypical for polite society but acceptable for a pre-game party.

Moron didn't clock the older blonde woman that approached their group and neither did Hank until she was standing next to him.

4

Hank Howard always had a difficult relationship with his mother. His parents divorced when he was ten and when it came time to choose a house, he decided to move in with his father. Jack Howard was the epitome of "local", a former athletic standout who made a career in real estate after he graduated, and stayed around to coach the high school football team hoping his son would follow the same path. Everything went to plan and Jack was especially proud when Hank's Pop Warner team won the National Championship in Florida. When Hank entered his freshman year, Jack achieved his dream of coaching his son on the same field that he once played. Around that same time, Jack's fiancée Sadine moved into the house.

The first time Sadine had sex with Hank was when he was fourteen years old. The encounter burdened Hank with tremendous guilt. It would take six months before it would happen again, the dalliance then became an affair, and each time Hank would feel less than the time before it. Jack didn't seem to notice. The only thing he paid attention to were the names of

the schools on the front of the recruitment letters. Destiny was calling Hank. He'd be the next big college star.

One Saturday morning during the winter of Hank's sophomore year, only a month removed from him delivering the best defensive season in his high school's history, the walls around him crumbled. His father Jack's f150 broke down without warning two blocks from their house. Jack was on his way to Home Depot which meant Sadine thought she and Hank had at least forty-five minutes before he'd return. She had asked Hank if he'd like to try doing it in the kitchen and when Jack walked in the house he found the two of them on the marble island that sat in the middle of the room. Jack punched his son in the face over and over and threw his fiancée to the ground when she tried to intervene.

Hank moved in with his mother and quit football to avoid seeing his father. They tried to hush everything up but Jack got drunk and told someone what happened over shots of whiskey at a bar. When Hank went to school that Monday he was inundated with equal parts scorn and cheers. Both made him feel bad. He didn't want to be some folk hero to his peers or to be considered a pariah by their parents. He just wanted to disappear. Hank begged his mother to let him switch schools but she told him the damage was already done. She told him that they'd all forget about it in a week. No such luck. Hank kept his head down at school and spent his free time self-exiled in his bedroom. Video games were his only friend for the next two years. When it came time to apply for colleges he waited until the last minute and when it came time to actually confirm his attendance, he waited even longer. He was wise enough to know the only reason the university accepted him in the first place was in a naive hope that they could convince him to come out of his football retirement. They tried and failed.

Hank's mother threatened Sadine with a restraining order and statutory rape charges if she were to ever contact Hank again. That kept her at bay for a few years. One year before the tailgate, in the fall of Hank's junior year of college however, Sabine direct-messaged him on Facebook. Her life had predictably fallen apart due to the gossip in their town and neighboring areas. She "just wanted to see" how he was doing, then she "just wanted to see if he missed her" and finally she "just wanted to" send him a picture of herself. Hank told her to leave him alone but the interaction caused him to spiral for a few hours. That's what led to the hole punching and the chair throwing. Hank managed to move past the Facebook incident with Corrina's help, but Sadine wasn't done with him yet.

Sadine was forty-two years old but dressed like she was half of that. The black Victoria's Secret leggings held snug to her body, the bottoms disappearing tightly into her Ugg boots. The North Face vest stayed open to reveal a tight white T-shirt with the university's name displayed over the chest. Recently done neon hair fell deliberately on her shoulders. Aesthetically, she was the fantasy she was wishing to display.

"How's it going?" said Sadine.

"Fine, thanks," said Hank in the same tone that you'd respond to a stranger at a bus stop. Because of his confusion, the rest of the group assumed this was just another alumnus trying to relive their glory days. Slowly, life came back into Hank's face and you could see his eyes start to process the situation.

"Can I talk to you privately for a moment?" said Sadine.

"No. You can't," said Hank. Corrina, who was the only other person present with some awareness of the situation, put two and two together.

"Is there a problem here?" said Corrina in a volume foreign even to herself.

"No, dear. I just wanted to talk to Hank for a minute if that's okay.."

"Would you mind if I asked you your name?" said Corrina.

"It's okay, Corrina. Let's just go," said Hank.

"Is this her Hank? It's her isn't it," said Corrina, continuing without waiting for an answer.

"Well, why don't you fuck off then!"

"Listen, missy, I..."

"Don't call her fucking missy," said Cecilia joining the fray. "I don't know who the fuck you are but if you've made her mad that means you must be an asshole."

Sadine walked away mumbling to herself as Corrina and Cecilia continued to hail obscenities at her. Moron and Frankandsteve stood beat red and motionless. Hank then asked Corrina if they could leave. After a few minutes, the whole group followed suit, knowing the excitement of the game couldn't match whatever had just happened.

They never really talked about it again, at least as a whole. Everyone learned the backstory one way or another and then respected Hank's privacy. Moron alluded it to it once which caused Frankandsteve to give him a look that said "you see this is why we don't fuck anyone."

It was difficult for Moron to process the situation. On the one hand the animal within yearned foolishly for the woman Hank had taken to bed over and over. Fourteen wasn't so long ago. Moron remembered dreaming of every girl and woman around him, even old gray English teachers close to retirement. On the other hand, he recognized he definitely wouldn't have been emotionally or physically equipped to handle it. The consequences were another thing entirely. Hank alienated a friend and a parent in his father, was beaten by him even though he was the victim, lost out on a potential professional career in sports, and became the town outcast.

Hank was quieter than normal for a few months after the game.

5

The first time Moron ever saw cocaine was in December of that year. Cecilia was doing it with some people at a party and Moron was too drunk to talk her out of it. He sat on a mangled couch next to some guy that looked like an old pile of laundry. Whoever he was, he had consumed too much of everything.

"I have some of the original Four Lokos stored in my garage if you want to buy any," he said.

"No thanks," said Moron.

"Do you like Belle and Sebastian?"

"They're pretty good, yeah," said Moron.

"You into the Occupy movement at all?"

"Don't know much about it," said Moron.

"Hey, do you have any more of that yak?"

"No, I've never done it. Someone else had it," said Moron.

"I'll trade you some of the original Four Lokos for it," he said.

"I... nevermind," said Moron.

"Don't you think it's all over?"

"Don't I think what's all over?"

"Everything," he said.

"Yeah," said Moron, closing his eyes. "Actually I do."

Chapter 8

It was the season of excess. John Moron, plastered from January through May, stumbled to the finish line of his college career, succeeding despite his worst efforts. He studied for, took, and passed the state's education exam which certified him for work upon graduation. Like it or not, he was going to be a teacher.

Hank accepted a job offer from a prominent accounting firm (Dickhead, Boobs, and Balls) that he had interned with the summer before. Corrina was going to be a nurse. The twins found a legitimate investor for their phone application (Copy Right; a way to license photos, music, artwork etc. from a community of creators at the touch of a button). Cecilia also attained her English degree but had more ambitious plans than Moron did.

The four boys gathered with their families on the shambly steps of the house they were about to leave forever. Someone's mother had bought cheap party decorations, and so each of them passed foolish sunglasses and necklaces around. Every so often they'd go inside and drink the pink lemonade Rubinoff they had stored in Poland Spring bottles.

They met the girls outside of the football stadium where the graduation was taking place (they'd finally get to go inside after all) and they found themselves swept up in the excitement. The sunlight shone through the plastic, causing the cheap vodka to shimmer. Moron floated inside the container, tanning on the waves, bouncing up and down happily in that salmon tinted sea. He must have spent too long on that vanishing ocean, for when he returned he was drunk and discombobulated. Cecilia was leading him by the hand towards the nearest entrance and the sashes on the students around him told him he was in the wrong group. The two of them had ended up in procession with the honor society. The paper dollar sign necklace he was wearing was the same color gold as the stripes the others had worked hard to earn and so he pointed to his sarcastically as they growled and huffed. But through the alcohol and the heat and the jeers, something crashed through, an overwhelming sense of meaning.

As they walked into the stadium Cecilia gripped his hand and looked up at him smiling with tears in her eyes. Though they were surrounded by thousands of people, this was the first and last time that there was ever just two of them. They were one. Even at the time he knew this was one of the very few salient moments life hands you. Neither of them would ever exist that way again, but that instant was theirs, and even senile and dying John Moron would remember the way she looked that day.

Emotions continued to flood and Moron thought back on all the people that had got him there and those that he'd never see again. He thought of his first roommate, Will Cavendish, but this time he didn't laugh. It was sad that he wasn't there somewhere among his peers. He was just a young kid like everyone else, looking for a new start that he never got. Moron thought of his mother who had never gone to college and his father who he never met. He even thought of Rodge Minor, the creepy foot doctor who became his step-dad. Rodge had bought Moron a suit to wear under his robe.

Mostly though, Moron thought of Hank Howard, the boy that saved his life. What would

have become of him if Hank hadn't asked him to stay? He wouldn't be at graduation there or anywhere else.

During the ceremony, Moron's awe and appreciation for humanity began to wear off a little. There were too many speeches for his drunken brain to process. The commencement speech was to be given by Ted Koppel, the British-American broadcaster best known as the anchor for ABC's *Nightline* from 1980 until 2005. Moron started sarcastically yelling "*we want Koppel!*" and "*Koppel or we riot!*". Cecilia disingenuously asked Moron to stop. She liked it and was laughing hard. The honor students seated around Moron didn't share her opinion. What started as dirty looks had transitioned to them shouting back at Moron to shut up. When Koppel finally came on stage one of them turned to him and asked "*Are you happy now?!*"

After the ceremony, Moron met Cecilia's parents for the first time. He wasn't in the best condition to be introduced to them but he hoped they'd grant him a little leniency considering it was graduation. He was surprised at how normal they seemed. Moron's mother and Rodge joined the group, and against all odds, Rodge sliced through the awkwardness. He must have dug deep inside and unlocked some rarely used part of himself, because he entertained everyone for an amount of time long enough to be considered an appropriate conversation. They said their goodbyes and Moron went out to dinner with his mother and Ol' Chuckles Minor.

Later that night, their last night in his apartment, as Moron and Cecilia lay under a bedsheet, he felt the cheap linen on top of him and reasoned that it was the only thing between them and a completely lifeless earth. The next morning they'd walk separately among the world's ruins. He'd be happy to not have to face that planet. He'd be happy to stay in bed and melt into the mattress, their final resting place, but reality wouldn't allow him that luxury.

"I'm going to teach in China," said Cecilia half crying half laughing. She covered her eyes so Moron couldn't look into them.

"I know," said Moron.

"How?"

"You mentioned wanting to go a few months ago and I knew you'd follow through," said Moron.

"I don't even remember saying that," said Cecilia.

"I feel as if we've already lived through all of this."

"You need to get some sleep."

"I love you Cecilia. I hope you enjoy every second of it."

"I know John," she said, brushing the hair from his forehead. "You should try it some time."

"China?"

"No," said Cecilia, smiling. "Nevermind."

