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COOL FOR AMERICA

By

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Bachelor of Arts, Columbia University, New York, NY 2008

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing, Fiction

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May, 2013

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On Christmas Eve I wandered around my mother’s house looking for things to wrap. For the last three days I’d been slamming doors and doing coke and bad coke and forgetting that it was the season of giving because my girlfriend had left me for a married anthropologist. My sister Patricia hollered from downstairs, looking for scissors. Nope. I needed presents.

I opened the game closet and tried to find something without too many pieces missing. *NFL Monopoly* was unopened, but identifiably from fifteen years ago. Warren Moon was an Oiler. The Oilers existed. Was it nostalgic kitsch yet? It went in the maybe pile. I heard Patricia pound up the back steps with Achi’s little dog claws clicking behind her.

“You’re wrapping, yeah?” she said. “I need paper, tape, scissors.”

“Everyone’s got problems,” I said.

She looked over at my gift pile: A VHS copy of *Con Air*, a dusty martini shaker, a ceramic pig. “Maybe some of your presents can be from both of us?” I said.

“Somehow that doesn’t seem fair,” Patricia said. My sister was supposedly in recovery and therefore disapproved of my selfish, destructive drug binge.

“I’m doing my best,” I said. Achi nuzzled my leg because she loved me and wanted me to be happy.

“Give me the wrapping stuff and I won’t call you out on how full of shit you are,” Patricia said.
I went and got the stuff from my room. When I came back Patricia was examining the underside of a massive pink conch shell. “‘Souvenir of a lifetime, St. Martin’s ’96,’” she read. “Do you remember that trip?”

“No,” I said.

“Me neither,” she said. “Those vacations all blur together for me. I guess we were probably fucked up.”

“We were, like, children in 1996,” I said.

“I bet it was nice. Oh well.”

I followed her downstairs but took a detour to the back deck to smoke a cigarette. There was some new snow out there that crunched under my feet in a not-hostile way. Someone had put cows in the field behind the woods, and I could hear them moaning. This was New Jersey. Princeton, for Christ’s sake. The cows knew they were far from home.

The last time I’d had sex with Melanie had been in her little house outside Nashville. That night it rained so hard I thought the roof was going to come down on us, and Melanie wouldn’t make a sound no matter what I did, but she wouldn’t tell me to stop, either. In the morning, at the breakfast table, she told me that she was unhappy, and made it two of us. As I drove back north the rain turned to snow—appropriate, if trite.

My mother opened the porch door.

“I don’t care that you’re smoking,” she said. “As long as it’s just for now.”

My mother didn’t really care. If I had a kid, I’d slap him if he smoked, or make him smoke a whole pack until he threw up like in the old days.

“If you don’t go to bed, Santa won’t come,” my mother said.
“It’s 9:30,” I said.

“Not in the North Pole,” she said. “How does Patricia seem to you?”

“A little anxious,” I said. “But I don’t think she’s doing anything.”

“Keep an eye out,” she said.

She went inside and I got a text message from Melanie, who wanted to stay in my dead grandmother’s house for a week, to “get my shit together.” I threw my phone into the woods, and then felt so stupid that I started crying. Inside, Patricia was wrapping presents at the kitchen table.

“I hate to see you like this,” she said.

“Would you drive me to the train?” I said. “I want to go to New York.”

“No,” she said.

“Would you shoot me in the fucking head?”

“Help me wrap this,” she said. I sat down across the table from her and put Achi in my lap. She squirmed and whined but I held her tight.

“This is what I got Mom,” Patricia said. It was a jagged chunk of shiny blue rock. “It’s from Brazil. I always get her books so I thought, ‘This year, make it a rock.’”

“Expensive?”

“The heart’s love is priceless,” she said.

Patricia was three years younger than me. She’d been in and out of rehab but seemed to have pulled out of it. I’d never been, myself, but until recently we’d taken turns being the one with the substance problem. Now it was just me me me. She lived in New York and I’d mostly been in Tennessee, but now that that was over I guessed I might move to New York too. My sister and I were both writers in our twenties—
sometime teachers, freelancers, grant-appliers. Even with her problems, and even with my age advantage, she was doing much better than me. She had a play opening off-Broadway in March and a sweet NYU fellowship.

“Can we at least go to a bar?” I said.

“Bobby, it’s Christmas Eve.”

“Tucker’s is open,” I said. “I went last year.” Last year I’d passed out at a table in the bar and woken up on the sexy, motherly bartender’s couch. Alone, though. Really!

“You should think of this as an opportunity to pull it together,” Patricia said.

“You still have a choice.”

“If I stay in this house one more hour I’m going to lose my mind,” I said. “I’m not fucking kidding. I’ve done a lot for you when you were in bad shape.”

“When I was an alcoholic,” Patricia said. “You are begging an alcoholic to go to the bar with you.”

“Right, but you’re OK now,” I said. “I’m not.”

“It’s called enabling. Jesus, just go yourself.”

I really didn’t want to go alone. I’d been having waking nightmares about Melanie, thinking she was behind me, hearing her voice in the room. And driving, after the 12-hour tear from Nashville, gave me paralyzing anxiety attacks. I fled to my room and cut out a line on my desk. This was the decent stuff, which I’d been trying to make last by alternating it with the bad stuff I’d picked up in town. I hunched over to do the line and heard a soft knock at the door. I got up and opened it a crack.

“Look, you don’t need to be secretive about what you’re doing in there,” Patricia said.
“Sure I do.”

“Well,” she said. “Is it any good?”

“It’s not bad,” I said.

“OK, look could I… could I have some?”

Of goddamn course. “You really shouldn’t,” I said.

“I know, I know,” she said. “But I’d love to have just a little, you know? It’s Christmas.”

She was so sweet about it. This wasn’t the old junkie sis, chugging vodka out of a water bottle before family dinner. This was Patricia when we were kids, asking if she could come up into the tree house. No, this was not my finest moment.

“Will you drive me to the bar?” I said.

“Yes,” she said.

I cut the line I’d made in half and gave Tricia the chopped straw. She bent down over the desk. “Oh man, it’s been a while,” she said.

“Savor it,” I said. “You aren’t getting any more.”

She did the line and put her hands up over her head. “This is alllll’s I need,” she said.

I did mine and put my hands on her shoulders.

“To Tucker’s,” I said.

“Can I have just a little more?” she said. “Since I can’t drink?”

Well, we’d gone this far. I cut her a line from the bad stuff.

“Ugh, that one burned,” she said. “Yuck.”
We got in her car and rolled out slowly through the sleeping Christmas-lit neighborhood. The inside of the car reeked of old cigarettes and French fries. We lit new cigarettes to cover it up. The radio was playing “Do They Know it’s Christmas?”

“I wish they’d play the Italian Christmas donkey,” Patricia said. “You remember the Italian Christmas donkey song?”

“It might be too racist now,” I said.

“America can suck my dick,” Patricia said.

There was joy in me for the first time in weeks. We, the Christopher kids, were single and high and going to see the sad people in the bar on Christmas. We would tell them, like that angel, to rejoice and be glad. I hoped Melanie was sober and sitting around with her pretentious parents, missing me.

“Yo, we should pick up some candy canes,” I said. “To distribute unto the drunks.”

“Def pick up some canes,” Patricia said. “Gas station, yeh?”

In the gleaming convenience store there was candy everywhere, and stopping at the canes would have been foolish, nay, impossible. We bought gummi sharks, Christmas Hershey Kisses, red and green M & M’s.

“No one really likes candy canes anyway,” Patricia said.

“Did you know that they’re supposed to be shaped like shepherd’s sticks? I said. ”Crooks, rather? And the red stripes are the blood of Jesus. I guess everyone knows that.”

Back in the car, Patricia rubbed at her cheek. “My face is itchy,” she said. “Does my face look weird?”
I turned on the light in the front seat and, yikes, her face *did* look weird. There was a fiery blotch spreading from her nose up across the side of her face.

“It’s a little red,” I said.

“Shit, it really itches,” she said. “I’m not allergic to coke. I used to do it all the time.”

“Maybe you’re allergic to the other stuff in it.”

“What other stuff?” she said. “Isn’t it just baby power or something?”

“Yeah, or something,” I said. “There’s not, like, an FDA label. You’re not really allergic to things, are you?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “But shit, this is kind of bad. Fuck. Did anything happen to you?”

“Not that I can tell,” I said. I’d done plenty of that lousy batch I gave her and nothing had happened, though it was definitely mostly not coke, since it didn’t do much of anything. “It’ll probably go away.”

I turned off the light, hoped for the best.

“Bad things always happen to me in cars,” Patricia said. “Tom broke up with me when we were driving home from Cape Cod. Then I crashed my car and had to go to rehab. Cars are a real problem area for me.”

“No, you right,” I said. “Trains though. I’d live on a train if I could.”

“OK, my face is officially fucking on fire,” Patricia said. We were at the parking lot of the bar, which looked dark but open, with maybe five other cars out front. Patricia pulled down the driver’s side mirror and looked at herself. Her face was a mess. The right side was so swollen that her eye was almost closed.
“Oh Bobby, I really don’t feel good,” she said.

“I’ll go in and get some ice and some water. And maybe Maud will have some antihistamines or something.”

“Who’s Maud?”

“My bartender.”

“I might need to go to the hospital, Bobby.”

“It’ll be OK,” I said. “If something really bad was going to happen it would’ve happened already.”

I patted her on the shoulder and she jerked away. I hustled into the bar and immediately felt better in the bleach-scented dimness. The front area was a liquor store, half-lit and empty, and a couple of guys were slumped at the bar in the back of the room. Maud was looking up at a TV that was playing *It’s a Wonderful Life*—it was the scene where Jimmy Stewart abandons his new wife to calm the run on the bank—(what a pit of bleakness *that* movie is) and the blonde girl whose name I can never remember was standing next to her wearing her waitress apron. As if they needed a waitress tonight. Maybe she had a bad family life and wanted to be my new girlfriend?

“Maud, I came to celebrate the birth of Christ with you, but I wonder if you have any antihistamines?”

“Bobby!” she cried. “What a nice tradition this is. What’s the matter?”

“My sister’s having an allergic reaction to something,” I said. “She’s all anxious about it.”

“Aw, the little drunk?” she said. “That’s a shame. I have some Advil.”
“Let’s give it a shot,” I said. “And some ice in a cup and a cup of water?” And.

“How about a couple shots of vodka?”

As she got the stuff an old guy at the bar turned to me and said, “Crap on your Christmas.”

“I’ve got some candy in the car,” I said. “You like Hershey’s Kisses?”

His gray eyes danced like a bowl full of jelly and he worked his grizzled jaws like he already had that chocolate in his mouth. “Don’t you have a fucking family to bother?” he said.

I took down my shots and gathered the supplies from Maud. “Couch is free, kid,” she said.

“Did you expect me to pay for it?” I said.

“But the drinks aren’t.”

“On my tab,” I said. “And tip yourself mega holiday bucks!” I didn’t have a tab.

In the car, Tricia was leaning back in her seat with her eyes closed. She was mutating before my eyes. “Bobby?” she croaked. “You need to drive me to the hospital.”

“Take this Advil,” I said. “You’ll feel better.”

Going to the hospital would be the worst thing. It would be bright-lit and filled with terrible Christmas decorations and one sad paper menorah. It would be another installment of the Christopher kids story: the time they spent Christmas in the hospital from bad drugs. It would take its place next to the time Patricia passed out in her own vomit during our father’s campaign rally, and the time I broke my arm falling out of a moving car, and the time Patricia tried to burn down our father’s girlfriend’s house,
which was also the time she found out our father had a girlfriend. Couldn’t this be the
time that Patricia’s immune system saved the day?

“My throat is swelling,” Patricia said, and she sounded awfully convincing. I
raised an Advil up to her lips but she shook her head and closed her eyes, laid her head
back against her headrest in defeat. Fine. Sometimes, when duty calls, you do eventually
have to pick up the phone, even if you’ve been letting it ring for a really long time.

“Didn’t they move the hospital?” I said.

“It’s a new one,” Patricia said. “It’s on 95 by the Princeton Pike exit.”

“I guess it’d be good to know what the new hospital’s like,” I said. “Assess the
baby zone and such, for our future procreation needs.”

I got out and guided her around to the passenger seat. She was stumbling. I
clanged the driver’s seat back and jammed out of the lot. She started wheezing in a
spooky way so I gunned it to 80 on the highway and rolled down my window to let the
cold winter air fill the car and drive out the bad spirits. I thought about calling our father
but what was he going to say? Go to the hospital. Then he’d show up there and I’d have
to deal with him.

“OK, Trish?” I said.

No answer. I looked over and her eyes were closed, but I could still hear her
rasping, slowly.

I assumed that we’d be pulled over by the cops at this point, but we weren’t, and I
slowed down to follow the mercifully straightforward signs guiding the way to the
hospital. I parked in an emergency parking zone and dragged Patricia out of the car and
shuffle-stepped her to the door fast. Her face looked like a half-deflated basketball and her breaths had gotten shallow.

The lady at the front desk—mountainous, sleepy—told me to have a seat.

“Shit’s on the verge here,” I said. “Look at her.”

“Sir?” the desk lady said. “Have a seat.”

There was the usual collection of waiting-room people-- the wild eyed man with a mustache and a stab wound, an obese black guy who seemed to be wearing a floral bedsheets, a latina woman impassively clutching a comatose child. Thanks for nothing, Obamacare. I declined feeling like a part of the cosmic web that contained them. If they were anything like me, they were assholes who had brought this on themselves. But I was wrong about the Christmas decorations; there weren’t any.

Patricia raised her head. “This is on you,” she wheezed. As if I’d tied her to the chair and shoved coke up her nose.

She put her head back against the wall and went back to rasping. Then a nurse called her and took her down a hallway. Only then—life sure distracts you when it’s full of horrible things—did I remember I’d thrown my phone into the woods. So I couldn’t flip through old obscene text messages from Melanie, or even the sad late period ones, where I demanded to know about the guy she was fucking and she just responded “I’m sorry” over and over again. I was stuck with my useless guilt. I had created an idiot life for myself. If there was love in my heart, it was corrupted. I locked eyes with the obese man and he looked very very angry.

“Christopher?” a nurse said later. “Brother? Would you come back with me please?”
I followed her through the swinging doors. Patricia was in a bed with railings, hooked up to an IV, eyes closed. She still looked bad but the swelling in her face seemed to have gone down a bit. A gawky young guy in a white coat was standing next to the bed. A doctor, I guess.

“So, Robert, your sister has had a serious allergic reaction to something in the cocaine she ingested. My best guess is that it’s levamisol, which can have some horrific effects, especially long-term. That stuff can literally make your face fall off.”

“Great,” I said. “How’s my sister?”

“She’s stable,” the doctor said. “She’ll spend the night and we’ll see how things look in the morning.”

“Can’t we go sooner?” I said. “It’s Christmas.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” he said. “She’s sedated now, and I’m not clearing her to go until tomorrow, when I’m sure she’s out of danger. Are you a drug user, Robert?”


“You should really consider the health risks. If your sister hadn’t come to see us, she could have ended up in a very bad place.”

“Dead?”

“Let’s just say it wouldn’t have been good.”

“No, I want to know,” I said. “I want to know the full fucking extent of my negligence so I can know how guilty I’m supposed to feel.”

The doctor had a patient little smirk on his face.

“Yes, she could have died,” the doctor said. “Lucky for her she has a responsible brother.”
Well, that triggered my despair, which I have a real problem with. “I’m so sorry,” I said to Patricia who couldn’t hear me, and the doctor, who didn’t care. I thought of my mother, asleep at home, soon to be confronted by this; she’d try to get Patricia to leave her good teaching gig and go back into treatment. I sat in the padded chair next to Patricia’s bed and watched her breathe. Each breath felt like an accusation. I fell asleep sitting there.

At seven Patricia woke up.

“Oh fuuuuuck,” she said.

“How do you feel?” I said.

“You can’t tell Mom about this,” she said. “God, what the hell is wrong with me? And you.”

“We’ll get our shit together,” I said. “We’ll figure it out.”

She turned away from me, faced the wall.

“I’m going to figure it out,” she said. “And you’re going to stay the hell away from me.”

When we got home a few hours later my mother was sitting at the kitchen counter drinking coffee. She looked older than I’d ever seen her. She listened to our ridiculous story—we’d gotten up early to surprise her with a real Christmas tree, but then Patricia had a weird allergic reaction to the sap, she’d gotten it on her face, and we’d gone to the hospital—and accepted it, with a weariness that made it clear she didn’t believe us. Patricia went up to her room without a word to me and I went outside and found my
phone, which had barely reached the tree line. I had three more text messages from Melanie about staying at the house.

I made more coffee and sat with my mother.

“Do you ever think about how I’m going to feel when you kill yourselves?” she said.

“We’re fine, ma,” I said. “It’s Christmas.”

“Even on Christmas,” she said. “Why do you even come back here?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I took my coffee upstairs. I flushed the bad coke, but kept the good stuff. Just in case.

A couple hours later, we sat in the living room unwrapping presents. We were tying. My mother unwrapped the shell from St. Martin’s.

“I remember this trip,” my mother said. “This is a really strange present, Robert. Obviously.”

“Me and Patricia can’t remember it,” I said. “We wanted you to remind us.”

I tried to catch Patricia’s eye but she was staring at the wall behind my mother.

“You didn’t go,” my mother said. “Your father and I went for our anniversary. St. Martin’s was nice—quiet, pretty sunsets. A Caribbean island.”

I sipped my coffee. It was better to have never been somewhere, I guess, than to have forgotten it. Patricia handed my mother her next present.

Cool for America

I snapped my leg in two and lost the summer-- six months on crutches and I’d be lucky if I didn’t limp for the rest of my life. I went to the ground for a slide tackle in a pickup soccer game and felt what turned out to be my tibia shoot through my skin. I couldn’t believe how fucking badly it hurt and I must have conveyed that since I spent the next three days on morphine. They sent me home all messed up and helpless but it’s amazing how much trouble I got myself into anyway.

This was in Montana, where I worked as the writing instructor in a summer program for gifted rural high-schoolers in Missoula. Show the kids the big city! I’d just turned thirty and had a tolerable assistant professor gig at a small college in Tennessee. But even before the leg thing, the summer wasn’t going well. I broke up with the woman I’d been seeing back East over some petty bullshit right before we were supposed to drive west together. She kept the puppy. I got through the drive with a twenty-five disc audiobook of *Lonesome Dove*, by the end of which I was convinced Larry McMurtry was the American Tolstoy. (He is not.) Then my rented house, in the part of town ominously called the Upper Rattlesnake, was full of mice and mold, and there was an unadvertised pickup in the backyard with no tires. I drank myself to sleep and showed up to the usual classroom of half-wits, hung-over and nasty, and sent them away with some Chekhov stories they wouldn’t read. Then I went outside and joined the instructor-student soccer game.

Missoula has mostly treated me well in the four summers I’ve spent here and I don’t want to come across like an asshole. But when I got hurt it was hard to get anybody
to come around and help me, even though the Rattlesnake is ten minutes from downtown. I couldn’t drive, I couldn’t teach, the leg hurt so much that at first I couldn’t even use the crutches unless I had to piss. On my second day home, Jim, a climbing instructor from Boston who’d gone native, left a Tupperware container of homemade granola at my front door with a note reading GET GOOD, PAL. For the next couple of weeks I got to know an older church lady one of my colleagues had tipped off to my existence. She brought pasta salad and talked up Rand Paul. On days when no one came around I tried to read through the haze of pain medication but it depressed the hell out of me. I ran out of cigarettes and didn’t want to ask anyone to bring me more. I got lazy and pissed in bottles.

One day during this rough patch there was an unscheduled knock at the door.

“It’s open,” I said. “If you’re here to kill me I won’t stop you.”

“It’s Chloe,” the voice at the door said. “Jim’s wife. I brought you a pizza and beer and some cigarettes.”

Whatever Chloe looked like, I loved her. “You are an angel sent from God,” I said.

She backed through the door with the stuff stacked on the pizza box. She was pretty in a messy way—dark hair piled up on her head, a sharp bent nose and big mouth. I guessed she was five years older than me, mid-thirties. She was wearing ratty pink denim shorts that looked like they were about to fall apart. She put the pizza box down on the coffee table and opened the pack of cigarettes. She took one out and tossed the pack to me. “Do you smoke in here?” she said.

“Do I have a choice?”
She glanced around the musty room and into the kitchen.

“You rented this place.”

“Sight unseen,” I said. “Should’ve kept it that way.”

“Jim said you were funny.”

“I’m really grateful to you for coming out here,” I said. “You guys live nearby?”

“No, we’re over on the north side, but I’m part-time at Rattlesnake Gardens,” she said. “Almost no-time, lately.”

“So I’m not tearing you away from your duties.”

“Well, I’m missing The Price is Right.”

“You’re welcome.”

I wanted her to recognize my vulnerable position and, unbidden, lean over the couch and give me a delicate kiss. But we had a wonderful hour anyway. She was sympathetic but not full of shit, like a good nurse or teacher or police officer. In previous summers I’d had drinks with her husband and he’d helped me on the field when I got hurt. His hobbies—back-country bike expeditions, bouldering—brought out my insecurities, but I knew he was an Easterner deep down, and anyway he liked to drink. Now I knew he had excellent taste in women.

“I’m going to go home and take a run,” Chloe said. “I’d invite you along but…”

“I’m gonna be hearing shit like that the whole goddamn summer, huh?” I said.

“If you’re nice to me.”

My eyes followed her to the door like a well-trained dog’s.

“Call when you need things,” she said. “Don’t be a pussy about it.”
Somehow her coming by opened a lock of empathy in the hearts of my acquaintances. Chris brought me a card signed by everybody in the program and a bottle of whiskey. Mary Jo, the hip art instructor, showed up with pot. Lisa, a former student of mine who now lived in town, played Big Star songs on the ukulele and filled me in on Jim and Chloe.

“He totally doesn’t appreciate her,” she said. “He thinks he’s such a stud because he’s a climber and a biker and whatever but he doesn’t realize he’s just, like, cool for Missoula, not for real life. She’s cool for America.”

“What’s so bad about him?” I said.

“He doesn’t give her enough attention,” Lisa said. “I always see him with his buds at the Union, drunk as shit on, like, a Tuesday. And it’s, Oh, Chloe’s at home reading, or Chloe’s at the movies. It’s depressing.”

“You can’t really understand anybody’s relationship from the outside,” I said.

“I’d totally get with her if she was into that,” Lisa said. “I wouldn’t even feel bad about it.”

The next week Jim and Chloe got me into the back of their Subaru and took me to the hospital for a checkup on my progress. I felt every bump in the road but I tried not to make too much noise.

“I remember when I broke my ankle on a climb,” Jim said. “Getting back to camp was a bitch and a half. But I had to do it, you know? I put a stick in my mouth to bite down on when the pain got bad.”

“Maybe you were a dog in another life,” Chloe said.
The news at the hospital wasn’t good. The bone hadn’t been healing properly and they were going to have to do surgery. I’d have to rest the leg for another three months and do serious physical therapy.

“Look on the bright side,” Chloe said. “If you were a horse they’d have put you down a long time ago.”

We went back to my house and Chloe and Jim decided the only thing to do in the face of my bad news was to throw a party. I would hold court on the couch and everyone would celebrate around me.

“And the best part is, if a boring person starts talking my ear off, I won’t be able to get away,” I said.

“Just think how nice that’ll be for the boring people,” Chloe said. “Some of them probably haven’t gotten through a story in years.”

Calls were made; beer was brought. My summer colleagues straggled by, along with grad students I’d never seen before. Some of them even talked to me.

“Do you like it better here or in Tennessee?” said a chubby guy in black-framed glasses.

“Usually here,” I said. “But stuck on a couch in the mountains is worse than stuck on a couch in the South. Out here I could be doing something. Back home I’d be on the couch anyway trying to stay cool.”

“Maybe if you’re still here in the fall you can give a guest lecture.”

“There you go,” I said. “‘Injury and Attitude: Peyton Manning, E.L. James, and the Rise of the Obvious.’”

“Are you on drugs or something?” he said.
I drank a little more on top of my pain meds and things got funky. There were these people all over my house for no reason. They were out back sitting on the rusty pickup and crowded in the living room dancing a little. It felt like hours since I’d seen Chloe, whose fault all this was. Then she was at the foot of the couch, up at the edge of the cushion to avoid my swollen leg. She didn’t seem drunk but I got the sense that she was lit up somehow, different. Something was activated in her.

“Have you always lived in Montana?” I said.

“I grew up in Helena,” she said. “And made it all the way to Missoula.”

“You could conquer the Eastern states,” I said. “With your legs and everything.”

“Probably,” Chloe said. Then, a couple moments later: “Jim’s not a bad guy. He knows what he’s about. He’s not trying to be something else.”

“What would you say he’s ‘about’?” I said.

“Climbing. Working hard,” she said. “You might think he’s kind of full of shit but he’s not. He came all the way out here to follow his passions, you know?”

“I liked him better before I knew you existed,” I said.

Chloe leaned across the couch and rubbed my head. “Aw, it wishes I was single,” she said.

I watched somebody’s black lab fending off the nipping of a mutt puppy on the floor.

“Maybe when you’re all fixed up we can talk,” she said. “As it is you’d be a sitting duck.”

I went in for the surgery a week later and it seemed to go all right, though it set me back on the movement front. It was now July and I wouldn’t be able to travel for a
few months, so I took a leave of absence from the fall semester back East. After a week at home, I got bored enough to ask the head of the program if I could teach my class from my house and she said yes. Apparently Chris had been “teaching” Vietnam movies while filling in for me and she was already getting emails from parents. So that Tuesday the high-schoolers sat cross-legged around my couch and we talked about Hemingway’s “Indian Camp.”

“What do we think this ending is all about?” I said.

“The kid thinks he’s never going to die?” a girl said.

“Good,” I said.

I sent them home with Isaac Babel and a handout about the Russian Revolution. I felt so good to be teaching again that I invited Chloe and Jim over to smoke and drink beer and watch Buster Keaton movies. Halfway through The Navigator Jim said he wasn’t into silent movies and went off to the bar.

“Be good,” he said. Was this an Arthurian morality test?

“You don’t have to stay,” I said to Chloe. “Buster’ll keep me company.”

“Naw, this is tight,” she said. “Chaplin without the bullshit.”

We smoked a joint and had some more drinks and watched Sherlock Jr. It had gotten late and Jim hadn’t called about picking her up.

“He’s probably just drunk,” Chloe said. “Like me.”

“Well, you can take my car if you’re all right to drive,” I said.

“I shouldn’t. But hey, there’s a bed upstairs you can’t get to, right?”

“Not if I crawled,” I said. “There’s sheets and stuff in the closet.”

“Sleep well,” she said, getting up. “Don’t dream about me.”
When I woke to sunlight there was a note on the floor in front of the couch:

“Never came so hard in my life. Let’s do it again sometime. Yrs in Christ, the Navigator.”

I spent the day emailing Tennesseans and trying not to think about Chloe. My mother called and pledged to visit soon; I advised against. My friends and colleagues had worked out some kind of rotation to attend to me (the details of which I could not follow) so I was not surprised to hear someone coming in the door that afternoon. But I was surprised that it was Jim.

“Howdy,” I said. This was not something I said. “Hey buddy,” he said. “Figured I’d take Chloe’s shift today. Since she was here so late. Or early, I guess.”

“Yeah, she crashed upstairs,” I said. “I thought it was better than crashing my car.”

“I appreciate that,” Jim said. “I was in no condition myself.”

I became aware then that Chloe’s note was still there on the floor. I decided that God would not let it be seen.

“You get up to anything in particular last night?” I said.

“Some asshole got his ass kicked by a bouncer at the Rose for putting his hand on a girl’s shoulder. It seemed real excessive.”

“Whatever happened to the code of the mountains?” I said.

“Like the code of the sea and the code of the jungle, it may never have existed at all,” Jim said.
He was now standing nearly on top of the note, which I prayed was face down. He tossed me a pack of cigarettes and took the groceries into the kitchen.

“Look man, there is something I wanted to talk to you about,” he said. He was standing directly behind the couch so I had to crane my neck back to see him. “I know how Chloe can be with guys sometimes and I don’t consider you a threat. But this is a friendly reminder to keep your shit to yourself, all right?”

“I live on a couch,” I said.

“Gotcha,” he said. “You know, we’re taking the students floating tomorrow.”

“Flip a punk for me, yeah?” I said.

Jim’s visit got me thinking--a rarity. I’d spent years of my life getting educated—college, graduate school, bullshit teacher training—and now I was a teacher myself, but I still didn’t really believe in it, at least not in the visceral way that some people believe in Jesus or supply-side economics. The pursuit of unavailable women was the closest I could get to a life’s passion.

Later that day I discussed Babel’s “Salt” with the kids and I was surprised by how deeply they felt it. They were shaken by the narrator’s throwing the woman from the train and ordering her shot. When I suggested that the woman had betrayed the narrator’s trust, they got pissed at me. It was wartime. She had no choice. She didn’t deserve to be murdered for attempting to save herself. Of course they were right. They were good kids. I gave them George Saunders’s “Sea Oak” and felt sad when they were gone.

The next morning Chloe sauntered in the door in a sundress.

“Bad week,” she said. “I wish someone would just pay me to be myself.”

“I would if I wasn’t so damn broke,” I said.
“Jim talk to you?”

“He was concerned that I not get the wrong idea,” I said. “Which I respect.”

“I thought I could count on you to think independently.” She knelt down in front of the couch so that we were eye to eye. “I’m pretty bored with things.” “Flattering as that is…” I said.

“Don’t tell me you’re not that kind of guy,” Chloe said.

“I’m not a kind of guy,” I said. “I’m a unique fucking snowflake.”

“I just mean I don’t think you’re the type of guy who gets a girl’s interest up and just leaves her hanging.”

She leaned over and kissed me.

“See?” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

She kissed me again. When I tried to pull her down to the couch she pushed me away and raised an eyebrow. She did a twirl, her dress fluttering up enough to show her blue underwear. She thought she was being cute but I was annoyed. She left before anything else happened.

I needed more than anything to get out of the house, so that afternoon I got Lisa to drive me into town and brought along some Percocet. We had big plans—dinner, and God willing, drinks. I felt all right while we ate, and the bar we went to afterwards was sparsely populated. We set up camp with local IPAs in a corner booth.

“What’s going on with you and Chloe?” Lisa said.

“Nothing,” I said.
“Fuck you, nothing,” Lisa said. “Jim’s been going around saying he should kick your ass.”

“If there was something going on, I wouldn’t tell you,” I said. “The first rule of having an affair is not to tell anyone you’re having an affair.”

“So you are.”

“That’s exactly what I didn’t say.”

My leg was starting to ache, but we’d just gotten there, and I needed to learn to deal with the pain. I looked up to see Chloe and Jim walking in.

“Small town,” Lisa said.

“Be cool,” I said.

They spotted us and walked over. Jim extended his hand. “Look at you, out and about.”

“I am risen,” I said.

Chloe looked at the floor.

“We were gonna meet some folks but it doesn’t look like they’re here yet,” Jim said.

“So have a beer with us?” Lisa said, and kicked my good leg under the table.

“That’d be great,” Jim said. “If you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” I said.

Jim went to the bar and Chloe sat down with us. She played with a strand of hair that had fallen into her face.

“Been reading anything good?” I said.

“I just read The Razor’s Edge,” she said. “I liked it except for the end.”
“Sort of dated maybe,” I said.

“I’m at the point where I only want to re-read stuff I’ve already read,” Lisa said. “Why read something new when you know there’s something you already like?”

“Because it gets tedious?” Chloe said. “Even if it’s bad, at least it’s something different.”

Jim came back with three beers.

“This one’s for whoever,” he said. “Whichever one of you wants it first.”

“What’s going on with you, dude?” I said.

“I went climbing out at Kootenai yesterday,” he said. “The big wall was open and it was perfect conditions. I brought a newbie and she did a great job belaying.”

“I would never trust someone like that,” Lisa said.

“Oh, come on, it’s the best feeling in the world,” Jim said. “Your life in somebody else’s hands.”

“It’s only in somebody else’s hands if you mess up,” Chloe said. “The first line of defense is not falling.”

“Right, but I wouldn’t trust myself not to fall,” Lisa said.

“That makes sense,” I said. “I wouldn’t either. But I guess I understand why somebody might find that fun.”

“Fitzgerald says that’s the sign of a smart person,” Jim said.

“Oh, you did go to college,” Chloe said. Jim put his hand over hers. He probably got that from a Starbucks cup.

“I think the best option is to just to be right,” Lisa said. “Even if you can’t see the merit of the other argument or whatever. What matters most is being right.”
“Ah, youth,” Chloe said. “I remember when I thought you could be right about things.”

“You’re right about some things,” I said. “Somerset Maugham, Buster Keaton. The Replacements. The things that matter.”

“Those are the things that matter?” Jim said.

“To some people,” I said. “Interesting people.”

It wasn’t in my best interest to fuck with Jim, but I couldn’t help it. Back in college—my peak period of undisguised contempt for others—I’d always had my bigger, stronger buddies around if I took things too far. Now, I was on my own.

“I guess I usually have other stuff on my mind,” Jim said.

“I’m sure,” I said. “World hunger and such.”

“You ever think about not being such a fucking smartass?” Jim said.

“Thought about it, yeah,” I said.

“Hey, guys,” Chloe said. “Let’s not get into dick-measuring here.”

“That’s really more your thing isn’t it?” Jim said.

Chloe got up from the table and walked out the door.

“Hey, nice work, bro,” I said and took a sip of my beer. Jim reached out and punched my glass into my front teeth. I heard a hollow thunk. The glass dropped heavily onto the table, intact. I tasted blood in my mouth.

“What the fuck, Jim?” Lisa yelled.

The bartender was already on him. “Out of here, now, let’s go,” he said.

I tongued my front teeth. One of them felt broken.

“You need to stay away from us,” Jim said.
“You know where I’ll be,” I said through the blood.

The old timers at the bar stared at me like cattle. Just another night in the old saloon, I guess. I held a cocktail napkin to my mouth and called a dentist Lisa found in her smart-phone. He said to come in the morning. As I gimped my way out the door I looked up and down the block for Jim. No sign of him.

Back at my house Lisa asked if I needed anything; I told her I needed to be alone. I took three Percocet, poured myself some whiskey, and lay down on the couch.

Some time later I heard somebody knocking. I’d actually locked the door, for the first time that summer. “It’s Chloe.”

I thrust myself up onto my working leg and opened the door a crack. “Where’s Jim?” I said.

“Jim’s dead,” she said.

“What?”

“Not really. I don’t know where Jim is. Can I come in?”

“You really shouldn’t be here,” I said. “You heard what he did?”

“He called to tell me,” she said. “I hung up on his ass.”

“Well, this is the first place he’s gonna look,” I said.

“If he comes here I’ll call the cops,” she said. “And he’s already got a DUI. Just let me in. Please.”

Her hair was all over the place, sticking out of her messy up-do. I locked the door behind her.

“Let me see,” she said. “Jesus. Do you have the rest of the tooth?”

“No,” I said. “Should I?”
“Sometimes if you have the rest of the tooth they can put it back together.”

“It’s just a tooth,” I said.

She kissed my forehead, my nose, my chin. She went for my lips and I pulled away. My mouth felt like a swamp of bone and blood. She pushed my shoulders down slowly and I maneuvered myself into a sitting position on the couch. She unzipped my fly and pulled down my shorts. When she lowered herself onto my lap a sharp pain went through my leg. I tried to ignore it and concentrate on getting inside her, but I’d taken too many Percocet to get hard. She tugged on me until it became unpleasant and I put my hand on her wrist to stop her. She gave me a tight-lipped smile and settled beside me on the couch. She made herself come, loudly, or at least pretended to, and rested her head on my shoulder. “That was nice,” she whispered in my ear. I gave her a Percocet and she curled up and slept until the sun came through the big picture window.

“Damn, I’ve got to go home,” she said.

“I don’t know if you should do that,” I said. “You want some breakfast?”

“You don’t have any food,” she said. “I’ll be OK. Jim was just upset because you were being a jerk. Now I fucked you and you don’t need to be a jerk any more and things will settle down.”

It occurred to me that I did not know or understand this woman.

“I’ve got a dentist appointment in a couple hours,” I said.

“You know, I went to high school with these two girls, twins,” Chloe said. “They both became dental assistants or hygienists or whatever, and they worked in the same office. So you’d go in and get your teeth X-rayed and it would be Amanda, and then you’d go sit in the chair to get your teeth cleaned and it would be Mary. They looked
exactly the same, they both bleached their hair, they both wore those little white dentist coats. I always figure dentists are having sex with their assistants, you know, and you have to wonder what was going on with those two. I mean, they were doing stuff in the chair, probably. This was back in Helena.”

She gave me a hard kiss on the mouth--it hurt like a motherfucker-- and went out the front door. I ran my finger over the jagged edge of my tooth. At least it had taken my mind off the leg.

I slept through my dentist appointment. Maybe if I left it broken it would make me look tough. The students came at two and circled around me like I was Socrates, with a glass of whiskey instead of hemlock. We’d just started talking about George Saunders when Chloe came in the front door and slammed it behind her. She went straight upstairs. I’d been looking forward to talking about the story but I couldn’t concentrate on what the kids were saying. I let them go early without assigning anything. When they were gone Chloe came down.

“Jim’s freaking out,” she said. “He wants to leave me.”

“Do you think he will?” I said.

“Well, we were having problems before you came along,” she said. “I don’t know. Meeting you might have clarified some things for me. Like maybe I need to be with somebody more interesting, you know? Like you were saying.”

I didn’t like where this was going. “All relationships have their rough patches,” I said. “You might feel differently in a little while.”

“Can I stay with you for a couple of days?” she said.
“I mean…” She was standing over me. The skin around her eyes crinkled like she was going to cry. I stared at the ceiling, my leg throbbing. “Of course you should stay. Obviously. For as long as you need to.”

“Jesus, for a second I thought you were going to say no,” she said. “I’m gonnna bring some stuff in from the car.”

She went out, leaving the front door open. I watched her pull a suitcase and a duffel bag out of the backseat and set them down in the driveway. She leaned back into the car and emerged with a waffle iron piled high with paperbacks. She carried it into the kitchen without looking at me.

“I wish I could help,” I said.

She pressed her hand to my shoulder and went out to get the rest of her things.
Jim stood in front of *The Torment of Saint Anthony* and heard the voice of his long dead teacher Frederick Becker. *If that’s a Michelangelo, then I’m Raphael,* it said. *Look, if that’s a Michelangelo, I’m Leonardo fucking da Vinci.*

He moved closer to the painting and overheard an old woman saying, “Those demons really remind me of the ceiling at the Sistine Chapel.” The bespectacled man next to her nodded sagely. Jim (and anyone else who read the panel on the wall) knew that the painting was based on an engraving by Schongauer, and that whoever had painted this had just followed the German’s lead. *Not that the demons in the Sistine chapel look anything like that,* said ghost Becker. *And they aren’t on the goddamn ceiling.* The Met was claiming that Michelangelo had done the painting when he was twelve or thirteen years old, and Jim could hear those ages being murmured through the crowd gathered around the painting. *I’ll give ‘em that. It certainly looks like it was painted by a twelve year old.*

Jim was a lousy painter and a decent art critic. He was on staff at a second-tier New York weekly and his writing was respected, not loved. Getting his stuff collected for a book was an ongoing multi-year ordeal. Publishers argued that no one would buy it; Jim did not have a convincing riposte. He felt most at home with the Abstract Expressionists and their aesthetic descendants, and he thought Warhol and all the post-Pop he’d spawned was a crime against humanity. Whatever cachet he had in the intellectual community—at conferences, at panels on ‘The State of the Art’—was based on that unbreakable, willfully stubborn principle.
He was no expert on Renaissance art, but he’d studied it under Becker as an undergrad at Cornell, and absorbed his wisdom through years of harangues in his office and over whiskies. Becker had seen something in Jim: promise, or maybe just patience. Almost everyone else in the department couldn’t stand the old fucker, but Jim got him. He found Becker’s orneriness affecting in a field that was intent on quietly burrowing into obscurity. Whereas other members of the department specialized in 18th century American latticework or the pottery of rural France in the interwar years, Becker was still wrestling with Donatello and Giotto. As Jim examined the painting—the bizarre fish-like monsters and clinging trolls, the resigned, implacable expression on Anthony’s bearded jowls—he became more and more convinced that the attribution was a disaster that required public shaming. You know who loses when you don’t call these people out? Becker’s voice said. The artist who gets saddled with a piece of shit in their catalogue for all eternity.

He went home and wrote a first draft of his review. It was an unmediated blast of scorn at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and all those who would destroy the reputation of great masters for the sake of short-term publicity and increased admissions. In his last lines he directly quoted from Becker’s piece objecting to the Met’s Duccio purchase in 2002: “Let's say that they're honest. Let's pretend they're honest and that they're just mistaken.” He remembered the days spent arguing with Becker over that Duccio and their long drive to the city in Becker’s beaten Saab when Jim insisted Fred actually look at the thing before he got himself into trouble. They’d stood in front of the little Madonna and
child and Jim had felt a disconcerting combination of relief and annoyance when he couldn’t help but agree with Becker’s assessment: it didn’t look like a Duccio.

“Look at the pumpkin head on that baby Jesus,” said Becker, nearly pressing his nose against the painting’s glass case. “You think Duccio painted pumpkin heads? This is some 18th century junk right here. And that’s being generous.”

“Sir,” said a security guard. “Please stand back from the painting.”

He spent the car-ride back (lengthened exponentially by his old-man driving) dictating an open letter to the Times in which he challenged the painting on every conceivable front, from its shaky provenance (“They have no idea where this thing was before 1904! It could have been painted in 1903!”) to the awkwardness of the Madonna’s neck angle (“Is it an early premonition of this moronic Yoga craze?”). Jim dutifully wrote all this down and typed it up in his dorm room, only to have Becker hand-correct four more drafts over the next 24 hours.

“Fred, I can’t do this all day, I’ve got class,” he said.

“Class? “Becker said. “This will be important for much longer than whatever else this overpriced institution is teaching you.”

He was probably right. The Times printed his letter and wrote a good-sized article (with an appropriately cranky picture of Becker), which the Met responded to in apocalyptic terms, calling him a “fraud” and a “publicity hound sniffing for something to relieve himself upon whenever the spotlight dims.”

“Let’s put it on my website!” Beck said. “We have a website, yes?”

Jim put it on his faculty page until Cornell made him take it down.
After another exchange the Met threatened to sue Becker, which he found delightful. He’d been dodging libel laws since he said that it looked as though the David had been “cleaned with Spic and Span” and got sued by the Italian government.

“If they ever get close I’ll just die on ‘em,” he said one night. “Boy will they regret that lawsuit.”

He died of a heart attack two years later, after Jim graduated.

“Those bastards killed him,” Becker’s wife Josephine said to Jim on the phone.

“Which bastards?” Jim said.

“All of em,” she said. “Nobody ever listened to Freddy and it built up ‘til it killed him.”

Or maybe it was all the cigarettes and gravy fries.

As a critic, Jim was conservative, though he wasn’t “radically conservative,” as Becker defined himself. He didn’t like things that were glib or willfully stupid (hence his problem with Warhol and Koons and Hirst et al) but he had a high threshold for experimentation and even gimmickry, provided it met a minimum standard of craftsmanship. He’d gone out on a limb in February, defending what had elsewhere been called a “hopelessly trivial show” at the New Museum, in which a giant slide was installed to shoot attendees through three floors of the museum. “What we want from art is to be surprised and exhilarated through the deliberate choices of the artist,” he’d written. “If what that requires today is overgrown playground equipment, then so be it. It is far better than another cluttered copy of a copy reminding us there’s nothing new under the sun.” He’d wanted to prove he wasn’t just a Rothko worshipping nose-picker, but he worried that he’d gone too far. Maybe it was just junk.
When Karen got home from work Jim was sprawled on the couch reading one of John Richardson’s Picasso books. He realized in moments like this that he presented as frighteningly single-minded. It couldn’t be healthy to decompress from a day of art criticism by reading dense, biographical art criticism. He thought of high school, when his mother had found him reading *Moby-Dick* on breaks from writing a paper about *Hamlet*. She hadn’t exactly told him to watch some TV instead, but she’d encouraged him to do “something relaxing with his break time, maybe,” and he’d had to explain that reading Melville was relaxing to him. She changed her tune once he started smoking pot and saying he wanted to be a painter, but he got into Cornell, and that was enough to quell criticism about his life choices for the next half-decade. His partner Karen—wife was so retrograde—was understanding about his monomania; it was a precondition of their marriage that he be allowed to pursue his critical career even if he didn’t make much money at it. Anyway, she was a psychotherapist, so their money was fine.

“I’m gonna trash this fake Michelangelo the Met’s got up,” Jim said during dinner.

“Oh, is it that bad?” Karen said.

“It’s a total bummer,” Jim said. “They have no idea where it came from.”

“Be careful,” Karen said. “This is a good gig.”

“I won’t get fired,” Jim said. “The magazine put a photo-shoppped picture of Lady Gaga kissing Obama on the cover last week. They’ll be happy to have some classier publicity.”

Karen picked at her pasta. She’d started seeing a new batch of low-income patients a month earlier, and the case-load, on top of her regular clients, was weighing on
her. After they’d had sex the night before, Karen told him that she couldn’t get the face of one of her new patients, Franklin, out of her head. He was a fork-lift operator with a smashed-flat nose. He’d run over one of his buddies on the job. Jim fought sleep while she talked it out, then found himself with that unpleasant image in his head, too.

“One thing I’m worried about, and I know it’s stupid, is that we’re supposed to have dinner with George and Allison tomorrow night,” Karen said. “So can you try to keep your problems with the painting to yourself until after that?”

George was George Trachtenberg, the son of Arthur Trachtenberg, who had donated the Arthur and Chiara Trachtenberg Oceanic Galleries to the Met. George had gone to college with Karen and was severely defensive about the museum’s reputation. Jim wondered, not implausibly, whether he and Karen kept getting invited to dinner so that George could keep advance tabs on Jim’s (usually boilerplate) opinions about the museum’s exhibitions. George and Allison were snobs, and Jim wasn’t fond of shaving or not wearing sweatshirts. *I don’t wanna upstage the art by lookin’ too good.*

“The review won’t be out till next Monday at the earliest,” Jim said. “But if it comes up, it comes up. I’m not gonna lie.”

“Right,” Karen said. “But try to be diplomatic.”

*Diplomatic? This ain’t the hotel school.*

The next day he edited his review and sent it in. He’d thrown in some Vasari quotes (which were generally being used to promote the painting’s authenticity), and more Becker, and had even come up with a snappy suggested title: *The Torment of Michelangelo by Demons*. He took a walk in Prospect Park and admired the dogs. He and
Karen both wanted one but they didn’t think the apartment was big enough. In a couple years her school bills would be paid off and maybe Jim would sell a book or try to get a teaching job, and they’d get a bigger place even closer to the park so that little Buck or Bonzai could have room to roam and grow. Jim did harbor the idea that one day he might just surprise Karen with a puppy in his arms and deal with the consequences from there. Once she saw the little guy it wasn’t like she’d be able to send him back to the pound. But they’d lasted this long because neither of them did things like that.

Karen tended to keep him out of trouble. They’d met on the night of Obama’s election at a house party. They smoked cigars on the roof and watched the bottle rockets exploding out of the windows of Clinton Hill.

“I don’t think I like New York, but this makes it seem OK,” she said.

“Obama winning?” Jim said.

“Just the whole thing,” she said.

He put his arm around her. “It’s all downhill from here.”

The next week he took her to a Goya exhibit at the Frick, and the next to a Black Lips show at the Mercury Lounge, and by early December they were inseparable. She was a girl who had her shit together, and he was smart enough for her to not get bored with him, so far.

Jim eyed the runners chugging along the park’s circular loop. Every month or so he joined them, feeling like a schmuck in a baggy t-shirt and mesh shorts, gasping along and swearing to stop smoking, even at parties. But mostly he couldn’t be bothered to exercise. It was tedious, and he always forgot to charge his iPod, and he had real work to do anyway. He waved at someone he vaguely knew, an older writer or an agent or an
editor. Whoever he was, he always spoke kindly of Jim’s columns at social gatherings. There was a spot for him in Jim’s heaven.

When he got back to the apartment his editor, Castor, had emailed him back about the review. “This is great, of course,” the email said. “But do you really want to fuck with the Met over this? Of course I’ll back you up whatever you decide.”

He hadn’t written the review to start trouble. But if it started some trouble, that might not be a bad thing. Maybe that was the book—Everything that Glitters: Michelangelo, the Met, and the Decline of Expertise. Someone might buy that. Sure, he’d lose some friends, but he’d gain some too. And, money.

Jim wrote back saying he wanted to go forward with it. Castor was a good guy—a little bit of a coward, but that was to be expected. He was an editor.

Jim thought about attention the way other people thought about… he didn’t even know what. Money? When he was able to acknowledge his self-important loops—imagining his articles from their print layout to the online criticism they would garner to the NPR interviews they would prompt to the book deal he would get—he hated himself. But most of the time it was such a steady, humming background accompaniment to his daily activities that he didn’t even notice it. He settled into the couch and read about Picasso in Paris during World War II.

“So what are you working on?” George said.

Jim was sitting next to Karen on the generously plump Trachtenberg sofa, wearing his green tweed jacket with the elbow patches and a red knit tie. He hadn’t
shaved, exactly, but he had “cleaned up” his patchy beard with some arbitrary electric razor buzzes. He looked into his glass of red wine.

“Oh you know,” Jim said. “Gonna do a piece on the Serra thing opening next week. Probably’ll write something mean about that Maurizio Catellan thing at the Guggenheim if nothing more interesting comes up.”

“Too jokey for you?” George’s wife Allison said.

“I mean, I don’t mind jokey,” said Jim. “I just don’t like things that are bad.”

“Unlike the rest of us, of course,” said Karen.

Jim felt the need to play the scrappy intellectual around the Tratchtenbergs, who acted, not unjustly, like they lived on a cloud. George worked for Lazard, though he didn’t need to, and Allison worked at a photography gallery, though she definitely didn’t need to. Spending time with them made Jim feel poorer and smarter than he actually was—thus, superior.

“I went and looked at the Met’s new Michelangelo yesterday on my lunch break,” said Allison. “It’s just incredible that they got it.”

George nodded. “It’s a hell of a thing for the city.”

Karen smiled tightly and put her hand on Jim’s knee, willing him through her fingertips to let the moment pass. He could not.

“So you think it’s real?” he said.

“What do you mean?” said George.

“I mean, you think it’s not a fake?”

George laughed weirdly. “I mean, it’s a copy. Is that what you mean? It’s a copy Michelangelo did of a German print.”
“It’s a copy someone did of a German print, for sure,” said Jim.

The group was silent.

“Have you guys seen that new Iranian movie yet?” said Karen. “About the married couple who might be brother and sister?”

“No,” said Allison quietly. “It looked tedious.”

“I hope you’re not serious about the Michelangelo,” said George. “Or at least that you aren’t going to write about it.”

“We’ll see,” Jim said. “I’d rather not get conflict of interest-y here.”

“I don’t work for the fucking Met,” said George. “But I think you’d have an interest in not looking silly.”

Jim smiled. “I’m not that worried about it.”

“Let’s have dinner,” said Allison. “No more talking about art!”

George brought it up again while they were eating asparagus soup.

“You’d have to be fucking crazy to say there’s a problem with that painting,” he said. “Do you really think they’d pay that much if there was a problem with it?”

“I can’t see what the price would have to do with it,” said Karen. Jim felt a surge of relief that she hadn’t abandoned him. “Anyone can make a mistake, George,” she said.

George seemed to lose some bluster with Karen’s intervention. He smiled.

“I just don’t want to see Jim get in trouble,” he said. “I don’t like my buddies to get in trouble.”

“Here’s to staying out of it,” Allison said, and they all raised their glasses and knocked them together.
They talked reasonably about other things for the rest of dinner—people from college, Karen’s crazy patients, Mitt Romney. But when Karen followed Allison to the kitchen to help clean up, George waded back in one more time.

“I’m really not trying to be a jerk,” George said. “And this isn’t a threat. It’s just a fact. If you call that painting into question, a lot of doors are going to close for you.”

“Is the Met really that thin-skinned?” Jim said. “Are they really conducting purges?”

“Don’t be dramatic,” George said. “You’re a smart guy. But you’re not an expert on this. And nobody misses Fred Becker.”

“I do,” Jim said. “And I’d have to be real limp-dicked not to go ahead with a piece now that you’ve said that.”

When Karen came back they said their goodbyes quickly. They were getting up early and hiking in the morning but they were really grateful for the dinner and hoped they could do something again soon.

“I guess that was our last dinner party with them,” Karen said while they were waiting for the subway.

“Maybe we can befriend some other pricks to make up for ‘em,” Jim mumbled.

“Right, because I love being humiliated in front of people I respect,” Karen said.

“We’ve got a free press for a reason,” Jim said, quoting Becker. “If fascism came back George would be right at the front of the line, jackboots polished.”

“Jim, he’s Jewish,” Karen said. “I hope you know what you’re doing. You’ve got to pick your battles.”

“I’ve picked them,” Jim said. But he felt a lot less sure of himself now.
The next day they took the Metro North to Beacon and hiked Breakneck Ridge all morning. From the peak they looked out over the Hudson and saw smoke rising from a tiny island down the river.

“What do you think that is?” Karen said.

“Someone’s reputation, ritualistically burning,” Jim said. “Dissipating into the atmosphere.”

They drank beers at a little bar in town and watched a college football game. The man sitting next to Karen at the bar ate an entire steak dinner and told her about his problem with “deweys.”

“Seems like I pick ‘em up practically every time I drive,” he said.

“Have you thought about not driving drunk?” she said.

“Thought about it, sure,” he said.

When they got home Jim had an email telling him the review had cleared legal and was going to be in that week’s issue, with a teaser on the cover.

When the article came out—online Monday night, in print Tuesday—he heard mostly good things. A few friends sent him emails telling him he’d nailed it, and Castor called and told him he’d been asked to go on Newshour on Friday. The first sign of trouble was a call he got from Josephine Becker, Fred’s widow.

“James?” she said. “I’ve read your article and I think you’re wrong.”

“I’m sorry you think that, Mrs. Becker,” Jim said. “Why?”
“Because you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Josephine said. “You’re exactly the problem.”

“I may not be an expert, but I’m, you know, a critic. I’m entitled to my opinion.”

“Entitled, exactly.”

The line went dead and Jim felt a little pit of worry open up in his gut. Josephine was strange but she’d always known what she was talking about. Fifty years with Becker would do that to you. He bought a copy of the magazine at a newsstand (despite his free subscription) and went to his coffee-shop. There was the piece, with a big reproduction of the painting in the middle. His title had been scrapped and replaced with “LIKE MIKE?” Not exactly an improvement, but not intolerable. He read through the piece slowly and found that little had been changed from the draft he turned in—a couple of synonyms substituted, a few short connective words added. Stuff to make the copy-editors feel valued. It all seemed fine, but Josephine’s call was eating at him. He wished, for the first time he could remember, that he could take back what he’d written.

After taking a long walk, during which he smoked four cigarettes, he went home to face his email. With what already felt like familiar dread, he opened a message from Steven Lemmington, the curator of European paintings at the Met. It was very long and full of punchy, well-chosen paragraph breaks. For a moment he was amazed that Lemmington had composed such a thing in the time between the article’s publication twelve hours earlier and now, but then he remembered that he’d told Trachtenberg, who’d surely told his father, who’d surely told Lemmington, and the letter became less impressive. He skimmed it and picked up the litany he knew to expect from the reprimands he used to read out loud to Becker: “scrupulous authentication process” and
“paint pigments” and “exploring legal options.” He forwarded it to Castor after adding, “Rather weak sauce, eh?” to the top. He read a couple of newspaper articles online and checked his email for a reply. Nothing. He read a couple more articles and checked his email. He checked his email. He checked his email.

Jim was a mess when Karen got home at 6:30. He was on the couch trying to get through one goddamn page of Picasso. He’d gone to the movies for the afternoon to get away from his email, and left his phone at home too. But as a result he’d spent the entirety of the John Le Carre adaptation, and then the lousy Spielberg flick, in a state of total anxiety, feeling phantom buzzings and imagining the hate mail piling into his inbox. When he finally went home he found little changed, phone and email-wise, which only made him more nervous. Why hadn’t Castor gotten back to him? Why weren’t more of his friends writing to tell him how brave and good he was? Why weren’t his sworn enemies writing incoherent emails full of poor arguments and bad spelling? The message from the Met seemed to him like a rock pushed into a garden hose, stopping all of the rest of the news he wanted from flowing out. Christ, even his fucking metaphors were garbage.

“Hey hon,” he called out. There was no response. He went to the kitchen and found her leaning over the counter, with her hair in her face.

“Honey?” he said.

She looked up at him and her eyes were red from crying.

“My patient?” she said. “Franklin? He killed himself today. He jumped in front of a subway car.”
Jim’s first reaction was—he didn’t even let himself think it. He didn’t let himself think: Great, just what I need. But if he wasn’t letting himself think it…

“Oh, God,” he said. “That’s so horrible.” He hugged her as she sobbed.

“I shouldn’t fucking care so much, it’s my job not to care so much,” she said.

“But this poor guy, he’d never been in therapy before, and now I’ll never be able to help him…”

He rubbed her back and made soothing noises and she repeated herself over and over again.

“OK,” she said finally. “OK, I’m going to take a shower. Can you just boil some pasta or something?”

When she’d gone into the bathroom he checked his email. He had a message from Castor. It said, “Hey Jim, Legal thinks there might be a bit of an issue with this. We’re going through the Met letter and your piece very carefully. I’m sure it’ll be fine, but I thought you should know. I still think it’s a great piece. With best wishes, Carl.”

This was not fine. He put some water in a pot and put it on the stove, then read his article again. He tried to read the letter from the Met in closer detail but it was making him physically ill so he stopped. Karen found him slumped at the computer with his head on the desk.

“Honey, the water is boiling,” she said.

He got up, kissed her on the head, and poured half a box of pasta into the pot. When they ate they sat next to each other at the dinner table and Jim rubbed her hand at stray moments. He couldn’t think of anything to say about himself that wouldn’t sound
ridiculously self-involved, and he didn’t want to start her crying again by asking about work, so he didn’t say anything.

When they were in bed reading, Karen said, “How are people liking your piece?”

“Pretty well,” he said. “You know, some good, some less good. But overall not bad.”

“Have you heard anything from the Met?”

“Nope,” he said.

“Well, no news is good news.”

The next day Jim got up early (for him) and met his friend Miguel at a preview of the new Richard Serra exhibition. Miguel was a translator Jim knew from college and he was more capable than most of making Jim feel better about things. Most importantly, he didn’t care much about the “art world,” or much of anything besides Marxism and literature written by dead people. They walked along the giant steel curve planted in the middle of the sixth floor gallery.

“So what do you think?” said Miguel. “How’s this piece of steel? Better or worse than the last one?”

“This is an old one, actually,” Jim said. “Good as it ever was, I guess.”

“But you needed to look at it again to write about it?”

“That’s how it works,” Jim said. “I’ve got ethics and shit. Gotta scope the layout, gotta see if I… I don’t know, feel differently with the passage of time. Gotta do a relevance check.”
“Yeah, check that shit for relevance,” Miguel said, jutting his chin at another massive piece of metal.

A short guy with glasses, who Jim recognized as an assistant curator or something, came up to them.

“Hey Jim, good to see you,” he said, and shook his hand. “Everything looking, um, authentic today?”

Ah boy. Jim gave him a shit-eating grin. “Be pretty hard to fake one of these!” he said. “You’d need a lot of steel!”

The curator laughed. “Has the Met sent their kill team out for you yet? I hope you’re keeping out of dark alleyways.”

“Aw, they appreciate me checking up on them,” Jim said. “Keeps ‘em honest, right?”

“Sure, sure,” said the curator, his eyes saying he knew better. “Just be nice to us!”

Jim wondered whether the Met’s displeasure had hit the Internet yet or whether this guy was just picking up word from the underground art railroad. Either way he was feeling lousy.

“These museum people are creeps,” Miguel said.

“For sure,” said Jim. “Becker thought we should just leave all the art outside or in churches or wherever. Let God sort it out.”

“Then we wouldn’t have to waste our time in these fucking rooms with white walls, eh?” said Miguel. “Like mental patients.”

They stood in front of a massive black panel. It looked as though a layer of tar and sediment had been left on the wall to build up for a hundred years. It towered over them
like a cancerous accusation. Jim had never seen this piece before, and he thought it was
damn good.

When he got home he had an email from Castor saying that the Met claimed to
have “irrefutable proof” of the painting’s authenticity and that, since Jim had failed to
contact them or perform any first-hand research before writing his piece, he was
vulnerable to a libel suit. The Met demanded a full retraction in the next issue. Castor
ended the email by saying that, though he thought it was totally unnecessary, the “editors
have been forced to reassess though, assuredly, soon, reconfirm” Jim’s place at the
magazine. In other words, they were really, actually, thinking of shitcanning him. Soon.

Was there a right thing to do? He should probably quit before recanting, quit
before getting fired. He no longer cared, particularly, whether the picture was by
Michelangelo. But he did care about having the right to speculate about it. Becker had
been protected by tenure; he was, he now realized—late-- thoroughly on his own. He
really, really didn’t want to lose his job.

So he suppressed a wave of nausea. He called George Trachtenberg at his office.

“Jim, how are you, man?” said George.

“I’ve been better,” said Jim.

“Read your piece the other day,” said George. “I thought the writing was pretty
good. Good use of language.”

“I’m glad, George, I’m glad,” said Jim. “Listen, I know things were a little tense
the other night, and I just wanted to call and apologize. We’ve been friends a few years
now and... and, well, I hoped you might find it in your heart to ask your father to call the
dogs off on this one.”

George laughed. “What dogs, buddy?”

“You know what I’m talking about George,” said Jim. “You were right. I should
have listened to you. So I’m asking if you would talk to your father.”

“This all sounds kind of conflict of interest-y to me, man,” said George. “It all
sounds kind of like you fucked up big time and I couldn’t help you now even if I wanted
to.”

Jim exhaled hard. “Yeah?”

“Yup.”

“All right, well, it was good catching up,” Jim said. “Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah, let me know if you need a reference,” said George.

Jim hung up and took a walk. As he wandered through Prospect Heights the ghost
of Becker abandoned him. There was no garrulous commentary, no train of thought
besides his own repetitive self-pity. Karen would love him even if he got fired, or she’d
pretend to, and that would be even worse. Or perhaps this would be the final repellant,
and the fall from this middle rung of legitimacy would lead straight into the abyss. He
would be pathetic, and unemployed, and probably unemployable, at least in this business.
He’d be forced to write for some shitty website about the top ten bars to get laid in. He
stopped in front of the puppy store a half-mile from his house.

In the window there were two fluff-balls—one tan, one white. They looked like
new-fangled hybrids, in-bred for cuteness and to fit into New York apartments. They
tumbled over each other, rolling in their cut-up newspaper and snapping their little teeth
in the air. Jim thought that if he had one he would be happy in a way that a lousy art review could never destroy.

He pictured himself coming through the door with that little tan one wriggling in his arms, trying to lick his face. Karen would look shocked at first. “What should we name him?” Jim would say, and her face would change to one of unmitigated joy. “Alphonse!” she would say, and Jim would accept this shitty name because it wouldn’t matter what the puppy was called, Jim would call him Bonzai in his heart and in quiet moments when they were alone together.

He couldn’t buy a dog now. Even though he was feeling crazy he recognized how crazy this was. Karen would be upset, and she was the only person who wasn’t upset with him yet. He needed to keep her goodwill intact until he admitted he’d been lying to her.

What he really needed to do was to go back and look at the picture again. If he looked at it very carefully then he could say, in good conscience, sort of, that upon further evaluation he had changed his mind, and the painting could well be an extremely minor and poor-quality work of Michelangelo’s, and that only his outsized respect for the master had led him to his retrospectively false conclusion. He wondered if he’d be tackled trying to get in the front door.

He walked to the European paintings section and stopped before the entrance to the gallery. He saw the scattered people in front of *St. Anthony* and was able to picture every detail of the painting, the rich colors, the saint’s unshakeable grimace. He stepped closer slowly, the lines and figures resolving themselves into focus as he walked. For a moment, he made himself believe it was a Michelangelo. Sure it was; it was beautiful. He
had made a mistake. But as he kept staring, he doubted it again. His gut—the thing where his connoisseurship would be, if he had it—was telling him it was wrong. He didn’t fucking know who painted it; he had no way of knowing who painted it.

He turned away from the painting and wandered downstairs to the Arthur and Chiara Trachtenberg Oceanic Galleries, into a room displaying the art of Polynesia and Micronesia. Most of what he knew about Polynesia he’d learned at Disney World as a child. In a word: nothing. He wondered whether the Trachtenbergs actually cared about this stuff, or whether this was just the gallery that needed building when they were ready to dump their cash. He could imagine them caring in a condescending, colonialist sort of way—these natives make such interesting little things, don’t you think? Wouldn’t it be fascinating to collect some of them?

He looked closely at a wooden sculpture of a seated man with his hands on his knees, empty eyes staring straight ahead. His lips were pursed in an almost-frown. The wall panel explained, tentatively, that the little guy might have been involved in “canoe magic,” in which he would have been sent down the river to distract demons from the village. It was a neat, well-carved thing. There was no glass around it, and he put his face very close.

“Sir, please stand back from the art,” said a security guard.

Jim took a step back. Fuck him. He practically lived in this museum. He looked at the guard, who was staring right back at him. You want something to get upset about?

He reached out and touched the sculpture. For the first time in days, he knew what was going to happen.
As far as I know, no one discouraged Thomas and Cynthia from getting married, though Elyse and I talked about it all the time in the months before the wedding. They didn’t seem happy in the weeks before their wedding. At the time we attributed their weariness to the stress of the wedding arrangements, which were endless. Elyse and I spent the days before the ceremony vowing to each other that if we ever, God forbid, decided to get married, it would be in a field with a small band of friends and relatives and a barbecue grill. We would have a proper wedding for our 25th anniversary, if we made it that long, when we were rich and had nothing better to do with our time.

Thomas and Cynthia’s wedding, once it finally happened, was beautiful and grand and we all had a lot to drink in Baltimore. The toasts all began with “When I first met whoever” and ended in tears. The food was good, even the vegetarian option. Elyse and I fucked wildly in our swank hotel room—before the service, before the reception, and then late, after it was all finished, drunk and sentimental and a little bit sore. I left the hotel on Sunday with the feeling that my fears about the marriage had been overwrought and irrational and that we’d all be so lucky to have such wonderful weddings. Elyse and I went to Turkey for two weeks at the same time as Thomas and Cynthia went on their honeymoon to the Galapagos, and we all came back to New York the same week. One night when I had to stay late at the studio Elyse had dinner with the newlyweds and came away troubled.

“They looked ready to kill each other,” Elyse said. “Cynthia kept talking about their move to LA, which I hadn’t heard a thing about until now. And every time she
mentioned it I could see Tom’s eyes go dark, and he’d change the subject, or laugh it off.”

I’d known Thomas since middle school and knew he wasn’t an expressive person. He was a brooder and a mumbler. This had been one of my concerns about their getting married—I couldn’t figure out what he really thought about it, and I wondered whether his potential wife knew any better than I did.

“Did the honeymoon go well?” I said.

“They saw some big turtles,” Elyse said.

“What could be better than that?” I said. “I wonder what their sex life is like.”

This was in August, and it ended up being a busy month for me. I worked for the NBC Nightly News and I’d been promoted to the political bureau in time for the primaries. I was in Iowa for the straw poll and stayed a few extra days, checking out the campaign headquarters of the candidates and interviewing their flacks for background. A couple of voicemails from Thomas piled up and I called him when I got back to the city.

“I might be in trouble,” Thomas said.

“What did you do?” I said.

“Nothing. But shit’s a mess.”

We met at this corny outdoor bar in Bryant Park with expensive drinks. Thomas still had on his jacket and tie from the workday and I had the evening off. The dusk was settling slowly and I enjoyed the knowledge that it wouldn’t be dark for hours. Thomas looked haggard. His raccoon eyes seemed to get deeper into his skull every time I saw him.

“So I realize you may not know this, but Cynthia is bisexual,” Thomas said.
“All right,” I said.

“But on the spectrum or whatever, obviously, she likes men more,” he said. “A lot more. Otherwise we wouldn’t have gotten married. But—and I hope you can keep this between us—on our honeymoon we met this woman traveling alone. Isabel. And Cynthia found her very attractive.”

“Sure,” I said.

“It was the honeymoon, and I was feeling… open-minded, or generous, or something, and I told her she could… do whatever with Isabel, if Isabel wanted that, of course. And so one night they got together.”

He paused but he didn’t seem overly troubled by this particular thing, and I suddenly had a glimpse of a more interesting and many-sided person than I’d previously imagined.

“I thought it was kind of exciting actually,” he said. “And in the nights after that our sex was great. But during the days she and Isabel got very close. Like, doing everything together close. It was a bit much, and I said so to Cynthia. I expected her to tell me I was being dramatic but it was just the opposite. She said she was in love with her.”

“Shit, that’s really bad,” I said. “But I mean…it must have been a weird time? What with finally having the wedding done and being away and everything.”

“That was how I saw it,” Thomas said. “Because otherwise it’s some shitty romantic comedy, right? But it’s kept up. They talk on the phone all the time. Cynthia’s become obsessed with the idea of moving to LA because that’s where Isabel is.”

I waited a moment and said, “Does she want to leave you?”
“No,” Thomas said. “She just wants to ‘pursue this.’”

“And you don’t think you can deal with it?”

“I don’t know what it is! And I don’t think she does either. So you know, I love her but I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do. Probably not move to LA right?”

“That would seem silly to me,” I said. “But I guess I don’t know Cynthia as well as I thought I did. What’s this Isabel like?”

Thomas let out a deep breath. “Very loud, very talkative. She’s pretty but… she’s not what I’d choose. If I were going to jeopardize my new marriage.”

I tried to put myself in Thomas’s sneakers. There didn’t seem to be a quick escape hatch but it also didn’t seem hopeless. Ours was a self-consciously progressive gang and part of me was thrilled to encounter such a great opportunity to model my reasonableness. What would my father have done about this?

“It seems like the only thing to do is give it time,” I said. “Don’t do something stupid and try to discourage her from doing something stupid.”

“I know, I know,” Thomas said. “I mean, we’re not moving to L.A.”

“At least you’d have nice weather?” I said.

When I told Elyse about this she didn’t seem worried at all.

“She’s got a crush, she’ll get over it,” she said, clipping her toenails.

“Still, it’s kind of lousy, isn’t it?” I said. “Of her I mean? To be so difficult about it?”

“I don’t think it’s lousy of her to be honest about the way she feels, no,” she said.

“I think it’s probably healthy.”

“Right, but they just got married,” I said.
“Love doesn’t operate on a schedule, darling,” Elyse said. “You never know what’s going to happen. I could drop your ass tomorrow if I met the right guy.”

“Oh, girl,” I said.

“I could just fuck over your whole sense of everything,” she said. “Wouldn’t that be funny?”

When we had sex that night I kept imagining Elyse as other people. Monica, the cute black girl on my production team. My blonde friend Kim who was almost fifty—impossibly old. Every time we switched positions she became somebody else to me, and the sex itself became different—quieter and gentler when I thought of her as Monica, hungrier when it was Kim. Variation without deceit! Anything’s fine if you keep it to yourself, right?

A few days later we met Thomas and Cynthia for dinner at an upscale pizza place with brick walls and exotic but locally grown toppings. Thomas looked paler than usual and a little queasy. Cynthia looked gorgeous but amped up in a maybe on drugs kind of way. We shot the shit for a while—had we watched Game of Thrones? We had to watch Game of Thrones—until finally there was a deliberate pause. Thomas and Cynthia looked at each other and then at us, like, ready?

“So… we’ve been talking,” Cynthia said. “And we wanted to talk to you about a big decision we want to make.”

LA? They were separating?

“We’re going to adopt a baby,” Cynthia said.

Thomas smiled weakly at me. How the fuck did they get from a cross-country lesbian escapade to this?
“What a surprise!” Elyse said.

“I know, it sort of surprised us too,” Cynthia said. She took a bite of her pizza. “I have some issues that would make it hard for me to have my own baby. And we also thought, you know, there’s a big problem with overpopulation in the world right now. So this seems like the perfect combination of, just, biology and common sense.”

“I guess I didn’t realize you wanted to have kids so soon,” I said.

“Well, we didn’t know either,” Thomas said. “But we did a lot of talking this week” (Cynthia nodding rapidly) “and we realized that was the main thing we both wanted.”

The main thing?

“We thought you’d be the perfect people to talk to about this,” Cynthia said. “I mean, obviously because you’re some of our best friends. But also because of Elyse’s sister.”

Elyse’s sister Amanda was adopted from Russia and her family was very low-key about the whole thing. Amanda was sixteen now, a good kid if a little crazy.

“Sure,” Elyse said. “I’m a big fan of adoption.” She took a sip of wine. “I don’t mean to be discouraging—at all—but do you think you’re ready for something like that? You know, we wouldn’t be ready yet.”

Cynthia laughed. “You guys aren’t even married!” she said.

I raised my eyebrows at Cynthia.

“I know what that look is about,” Cynthia said. “I know Thomas told you about my little infatuation. I’m not ashamed of it. I realized—we realized—that it wasn’t about Isabel at all really. It was about wanting something I couldn’t have.”
“And you think it’s a baby?” Elyse said. “Have you been reading 19th century psychology textbooks or something?”

“Ha ha,” Cynthia said. “No, I haven’t. But I’ve been in therapy for ten years and I’ve gotten awfully good at self-analysis. Thomas and I know we love each other, that’s not the problem. And we’ve thought it all the way through.”

So eventually we moved on to baby questions—boy or girl, which country to adopt from, how old the baby should be—all discussed with the jaunty tone you’d use when talking about getting a dog, or something less cognizant. An apartment. A car.

“What the hell is wrong with her?” Elyse said when we were back at home. “And with him? Does he not realize she’s insane or is he just a pussy or what?”

“I don’t think it’s quite either of those things,” I said.

“I hope if I ever get as crazy as her you’ll tell me about it,” Elyse said.

“What, if you ever want a baby?”

“No, if I ever want a baby when it doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

Elyse was really tense and distracted all night. When I tried to pull her towards me, once we were in bed, she pulled away.

“I really don’t want to have a baby,” she said.

“Good,” I said. But, you know, these things change. We had sex for a little while but Elyse didn’t seem into it and we stopped.

The next time I saw Thomas was about a month later. We were both at a going-away party for a friend of ours from college. I’d been busy with work and hadn’t been
thinking about him and Elyse, but now I was curious. We got ourselves into a corner of the bar away from the crowd.

“So this adoption thing,” he said.

“It seems like a bad idea, man,” I said.

“I guess we’ll see,” he said. “I do want to have a kid someday.”

“With Cynthia?” I said. “Wasn’t she about to run off a week ago?”

He slouched further. “Don’t throw that back in my face.”

“You’ve got to be aware of the facts of your own life,” I said.

He sighed and took a sip of his beer.

“Maybe this is totally crazy,” he said. “But I’ve been thinking about how maybe these big decisions aren’t really that big a deal. Like, with the way the world is, it doesn’t matter if we adopt a kid and split up in five years. Things’ll work out, or not, and planning properly isn’t going to make much of a difference. Because you never know what’s going to happen anyway.”

I didn’t know how to respond to this. He looked at me with the earnestness of a little boy who has just suggested for the first time that God might not exist, smiling a little as though he expected me to scold him.

“I don’t think that’s the right way to look at it,” I said finally. “As I understand it, you plan as best you can and if shit doesn’t work out, then you get philosophical about not sweating the small stuff. But you have to plan first.”

There was a loud cheering and clinking together of glasses over by the bar that drew our attention for a moment.
“You’re probably right,” Thomas said. “But Cynthia and I do love each other. I think we’re going to be together for a long time.”

“That’s great,” I said. “So wait five years to adopt a kid. My parents waited five years to have me.”

“And then they got divorced, right?” he said.

“Exactly,” I said.

A couple of days later I was in Montana working on a story about the Senate race there. We flew into Spokane and drove six hours to Butte, keeping an eye on snow-covered mountains all the way. Elyse and I didn’t feel pressure to get married, but still, there was an unspoken assumption that we were as good as such, despite our declared indifference to that endpoint. Thomas’s view of life struck me as dangerously stupid, but on some level we were all just sort of wading along like that. Everyone was in a relationship for some provisional reason and no matter how many steps forward you took, or refused to take, everything might end up bad anyway. So: smoke ‘em if you got ‘em?

I talked to Elyse from a motel in Butte.

“The kids were a nightmare today,” she said.

“Montana is beautiful,” I said. “I think you’d like it.”

“Anywhere with less goddamn people sounds good to me right now,” Elyse said.

“You should have a drink,” I said. “The school day is ended, you may go in peace.”

“If I start I won’t know when to stop,” she said. “That’s why I need you here.”

“I’m good for something.”
“Cynthia is still on adoption trail twenty twelve. I ran into Jess today in Union Square and she said Cynthia is, quote, shopping for an agency.”

“You need to get her drunk and get the dirt on what’s going on in her head,” I said.

“I don’t know if I want to hear any more about it,” Elyse said. “Even if I am her designated expert.”

“It’s awful, but you know you want to hear about it,” I said.

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “Knowing is power.”

I found myself at a loss for more to say to her, which had been happening to me more and more frequently. We were always talking to each other-- what else were we going to do?—but I felt myself holding back, choosing not to ask the extra question about her day of teaching or deciding not to tell the story about the weirdo I met on location in Cedar Rapids. I don’t think it was boredom. It was something to do with efficiency.

“Everything else going OK?” I said.

“Not too bad I guess,” she said.

We said goodnight and hung up. I wasn’t tired but I also wasn’t interested in seeing Butte by night. Once you’ve seen a few Western dive bars you’ve seen enough. I read my copy of Trouble Zone. My friend Alex had a poem in it about horses and the dawn. He lived in New York. I fell asleep in the middle of a story about a homeless teenager living in the Columbia library.

The next night we were in Missoula after the Senate candidate’s event at the University. Monica and I went for drinks at the Union Club, which looked like it hadn’t been renovated since 1956.
“Do you want to get married?” I said.

“To you?” Monica said. “No. But to somebody maybe, sure.”

“I’m worried that it would be really fucking boring,” I said.

“I don’t think it would be any more boring than anything else,” said Monica. “Not more boring than being in a relationship. Or being single. I’ve been with Jason for two years and my thing is just keep the boat above water.”

“I guess there’s no reason to make trouble,” I said.

“Trouble always comes,” Monica said. “Don’t worry.”

Monica was beautiful and smart and wore cool glasses. I wanted to kiss her or something and change the dynamic of our lives. Surprise her, surprise myself, something. But I didn’t think she’d be into that, and I didn’t actually want to mess up what I had. Like assholes since the beginning of time, I just wanted everything.

“You want to move to Montana with me?” I said.

“Sure,” she said. “I’d be the hottest black girl in the state. By default.”

“That’s all I want for you,” I said.

When I got back to New York the next afternoon I was hung over from flying and drinking. Elyse and I were supposed to go to a birthday party at our friends Lewis and Christopher’s apartment. I knew Elyse had been looking forward to it. It was going to be a big deal—lots of people, lots of booze, dancing. Cynthia and Thomas and everyone else would be there. We had to go.

“How’s my dress?” Elyse said as we were walking out the door.

“Green,” I said.

“Too green?” she said.
Lewis and Christopher lived in a big Williamsburg apartment that, through the whims of an improvisatory carpenter, resembled the tree house of a madman. Both Lew and Chris were writers and they were a model couple—Lewis was older and bearded and paternalistic and Chris was small and manic and full of kinetic energy. They were excellent hosts.

When Elyse and I arrived with our six-pack the apartment was already jammed with people, and a haze of cigarette smoke hung over everything. My friend Jonathan, a textbook editor, got in my face immediately about the latest Obama thing and I gamely pretended that, as a member of the news media, I knew more than I was saying. He was thinking of joining the campaign, did that sound like a good idea? If he quit his job, could he get one in the administration? I had no fucking clue, but I made reasonable sounding suggestions. I realized that I wanted to get trashed.

I found some bourbon in the kitchen and poured a healthy amount into a plastic cup and rejoined the chatting. William had sold a book about mass hypnosis. Malcolm was almost done with his PhD and thinking of moving to San Francisco if he got the job offer he wanted. I saw Elyse on the couch across the room talking closely with Cynthia and felt all right about that. I thought to give a silent prayer of thanks that Cynthia’s problems were not my problems.

There was some dancing—New Order and Whitney Houston off a laptop—and more drinking, and eventually I found myself smoking a joint out behind the building with a guy I vaguely knew. He talked to me about jumping freight trains. When we were good and stoned a voice behind me said, “Paul, your girlfriend’s a real bitch, you know that?”
It was Cynthia. She was smoking a cigarette and she was stumbling drunk.

“How’s that Cynth?” I said.

“She’s judgmental as shit,” she said. “It’s like, I’m sorry Elyse, that everyone isn’t quite as perfect and well-equipped as you are to deal with the world. But it’s not her life and it certainly won’t be her goddamn kid.”

“I think she was probably just trying to be helpful,” I said.

“Oh, sure, both of you,” she said. “You’ve been going around telling Thomas he doesn’t know what he’s doing. Neither of you have any clue how dull you are.”

“You’re right,” I said. “We’d be a lot more interesting if we made stupid choices like you guys. Go in for some conveniently timed sexual experimentation. Adopt some poor kid who’d be better off in Siberia.”

“I know the way you look at me,” she said.

“Right, I can’t take my eyes off you,” I said.

“You go around saying I’m so crazy,” she said. “Wouldn’t you like to fuck a crazy girl?”

I stared her down. She was squinting at me in a way that was either seductive or just drunk. She was beautiful in her way—very pale, very thin, long dark hair. When Thomas started dating her I’d been a little jealous. I hadn’t started seeing Elyse yet and it seemed absurd that such a slouch of a guy should end up with someone like her while I went around by myself.

I turned back to my joint-providing buddy. He was gone. Cynthia was slumped over, looking at the ground like she was going to puke. Through my own haze, I tried to
forgive her nastiness, and forgive myself for mine. It felt good to accept her words for the moment instead of fighting them.

“I would,” I said.

“What?” she said.

“Like to fuck a crazy girl,” I said.

She softened. “That’s nice of you. Maybe we’ll be each other’s second marriage.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to marry one.”

She stopped swaying and looked at me straight on. Soberly.

“Don’t get married,” she said.

I nodded and put my arm around her. We went inside and back up the stairs to the party. Things were getting ragged. A couple of people chattered at me at a pace I couldn’t make sense of and then Elyse grabbed me and pulled me to the dance floor. Some cheesy 80s ballad was playing. Lewis and Christopher were doing elaborate spins and dips and a few other couples were slow-dancing ironically, heads on shoulders, hands on hips. Elyse and I danced close, and I spun her every once in a while since it was the only thing I knew how to do. It was genuine. Everyone else was full of it.

When the song ended, Elyse and I got new drinks from the dwindling liquor table—we settled on straight gin with no ice-- and sat down on the couch.

“Cynthia’s in pretty rough shape,” I said.

“The wages of crazy is disaster,” Elyse said.

“I feel bad for her.”

“She doesn’t deserve your pity,” Elyse said. “Even if you’re stoned.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” I said.
“No.”

Across the room, we saw Thomas and Cynthia dancing, or rather, Thomas trying to keep Cynthia on her feet while she tossed her head and stumbled around. But our friends were drunk all the time and sometimes did far more awful things than this.

“Thomas isn’t so bad,” Elyse said. “At least he knows what he wants.”

I watched him closely—the way he kept Cynthia from falling, the way he responded with a joke and a laugh to the people around him making dumb comments about what a mess Cynthia was. Getting her home would stretch to the pre-dawn hours, and she would wake up and remember nothing. But he would remember, and he wouldn’t say anything, and that would be one more chip out of whatever they had.

I looked at Elyse as she sipped her drink and watched the couple dance. There was no way to know when I would outlast her sympathy.
Your Wyoming Boyhood

1.
He’s a third party candidate, they said. We’re going to change how things work. I’ll give it a look, I said, if you pay me. We’ll pay you fine, Bixby, they said. Be our man. Be our communications director.

Me, I’m not ideological. Tax me, don’t tax me, fuck me, fuck the poor. If you look at history… but who looks at history? I mean, look at a dictionary. Look up crepuscular. Look up something else.

They flew me out to Wyoming. It’s Rudd Tilson, they told me when we got off the plane. Oh, I said, the billionaire. We’re keeping that kind of quiet, they said. Keeping that quiet is one of your jobs. That, and the ex-wife. Later, of course, it would be the anti-Semitic thing, and the Chinese money, but at first it was just the billion dollars and Marie.

Tilson had crazy eyes. Too many nights alone on the range I guess. My initial impression of him was that he was calm for a short guy; I’ve known a lot of little screamers. He wore those thick black glasses that had gone from being outdated to moderately cool in the forty years he’d owned them, and I liked that he wore his white hair in a mullet rather than some fashionable Edwards trim.

“What’s your favorite book?” he asked when we sat down together.

“The Bible?” I said.

“Wrong,” he said. “It’s that Chinese one about the art of war. It is my sun and moon.”

Whatever, I thought.
He’d also been reading about the Yalta conference. “The entire distance from Saki to Yalta was guarded by Soviet troops,” he said. “A considerable number of them were young girls. It was real Roosevelt weather, if you know what I mean.”

I thought he was making some joke about how Roosevelt was a communist or a pedophile and I gave him a grin that seemed to hit the spot. It turned out he wasn’t making a specific joke, just free-associating on middle-school history fragments he recalled. It’s a real damaged soul that can’t make a personal connection in a basic guest-host encounter. We got on fine. He gave me food and a robe and I acted nice and tried not to spill anything on the bed.

Tilson’s property was big, true, but so is Wyoming. Some of this country is huge, unlike DC or the terrible place I was born and raised (Delaware). This idea that Americans dream big, think big—we have a big country, sure. But where has thinking big ever gotten us?

Tilson had made his money in mineral rights and counter-intuitive investments and a couple of suspiciously brief stints as the head of petroleum-oriented companies. Though he was often cryptic and mostly incoherent, he had shown focus in accumulating his money, and, it seemed, his political views. He was for less regulation, more oil exploration, lower taxes, higher military expenditures—the usual Republican shit. But he wouldn’t run in the Republican primaries because, he said, he didn’t want to “bend over for their primitive suck gauntlet.” That first night at dinner he dismissed their potential contenders as “goofs and hypnotists” and said he’d never take their fucking money.

I was charmed.
Message from: Archie Clemmons [campaigndirector@tilson12.com]
Subject: Launch etc
12-17-10 (3:44 AM)

Bix:

What’s the status on your end re: loose ends we discussed last night? The plan is still to launch 1/11/11 per Rudd’s NON-NEGOTIABLE demand but am concerned that message unity with regard to Marie still isn’t 100%. I’ve given you my two cents (or 20 bucks probably at his point) but this is obviously gonna fall heaviest on communications so want to be sure you feel comfortable with the message and followups etc.

Hope the weekend in Wilmington has proved life-affirming, family filled, etc.

--AC

Message from: Mike Bixby [communicationsdirector@tilson12.com]
Subject: Re: Launch etc
12-17-10 (7:43 AM)

AC—
Wilmington is cold as balls and Mike Jr. will not settle for a store-bought Christmas tree. Situation “to be continued…”

Re: Marie, I think we are 99 percent there. They got divorced twenty-five years ago, BEFORE any known association with the Wrong to Death crowd. “While Mr. Tilson has always believed in the sanctity of life, he strongly condemns terroristic actions of any kind, and rejects in the strongest terms etc etc.” I think that’s fine. My concern remains the period BEFORE the divorce, BEFORE Marie joined WTD, when they’re still married and she’s posting addresses of doctors and making threatening phone calls, etc., which we KNOW somebody is going to dig up. I like the argument line that “this kind of erratic and irrational behavior was significant among the couple’s irreconcilable differences,” but as we’ve talked about, the danger zone lies in the fact that anybody doing their homework is going to find that this stuff gets NO MENTION in the court filings, that Rudd’s screwing around was the mitigating factor, and that Rudd was plenty involved with fringe pro-life folks back in the day (not that that would hurt him on its own.)

The fact is, we don’t know WHERE she is at this point, and if she pops up she risks extradition hassle (even if she’s someplace nice and soft on extradition.) Her story WILL come up, and yeah, there’s gonna be a conversation about how Rudd Tilson’s ex-wife contributed to the deaths of clinic workers since she organized and paid for at least some part of the bomb situation. It’s a matter of a.) NOT OVERTLY LYING ABOUT IT and b.) staying CALM and ON-MESSAGE. There’s no bridge we can’t cross with cool heads and tight assholes.

Further thoughts? Ain’t politics grand?

--BIX
PBS Newshour, 1/12/11

Judy Woodruff: Why did you decide to run for President?

Rudd Tilson: [laughs] Well, Judy, if you had the money, wouldn’t you run for President? With due respect to my 300 million compatriots, I’m the best man, woman, or child alive for the job. I’ve got thoughts about this country that you wouldn’t believe. Second off, I know how to get the job done. And my thoughts are become action.

Bumper stickers proposed by Rudd Tilson, strategy meeting, 2/14/11

A Hand on the RUDDer, a Finger on the TILSON ’12

WYoming? WHY NOT TILSON ’12?

No Sleep TIL SONRISE ‘12

Lose Yourself With TILSON ‘12

Love Yourself With TILSON ’12

Find Yourself With TILSON ’12 (the winner, since Rudd thought “we really needed to take advantage of that ‘self’/‘twelve’ rhyme.”)
5.

Yes, it turned out that back in 2011 Rudd had taken $4.5 million from the Chinese government for his campaign through a complicated series of back channel payments, promising in return that the Chinese would have “great influence in the foreign and domestic affairs of the United States during the Tilson presidency.” This was odd, even by Tilson’s standards, because he didn’t need the money and categorically disliked the Chinese. When news of the donations finally broke (mercifully after he’d dropped out of the race), he said, “It was just a simple trick. I wouldn’t have given them fuck-all. Don’t you know a good con when you see one? It was a very old-style trick.”

6.

Tilson ’12 mass mailing, 5/4/11

To my supporters, young, old, and otherwise:

What a time it is for our country! We’ve never seen a time like it before. Though we struggle forward and onward like the pioneers of the Westward Expansion, we wonder what we will find at the end of that long trek. Is it the ocean? Economic opportunity? Perhaps.
But what if what we really want can’t just be found by trying our best? What if no one has ever wanted us to *be* our best? What if I asked you, now, just once, to be your best? Would you come and be with me then?

I won’t ask you. I’ll TELL you: COME, NOW, AND WALK WITH ME TO THE SEA, AND WE WILL REACH THE FURTHEST SHORES OF TRIUMPH.

This is my promise. Let’s blow a hole in everyone’s expectations.

Yours, hopefully,

Rudd Lexington Tilson

7.

Rudd’s middle name is actually Lester. He changed it to Lexington for the campaign “to express solidarity with America’s great battle places.”

8.

July 4 Campaign Event with Rudd Tilson at Yellowstone National Park, as reported in *The New York Times, 7/5/11*

Ol’ Faithful, Tilson, Shooting Up
Jackson, WY—At a Fourth of July event held in front of Yellowstone National Park’s most popular attraction, the geyser known as Ol’ Faithful, unaffiliated Presidential candidate Rudd Tilson spoke forcefully about his support for America’s park system.

“Listen, I was born in this park,” Tilson said. “My folks knew what a valuable legacy they’d be setting by coming here for the birth of their first child. Every year I come and camp as close as I can to the spot at which I first entered the world, and I visit the ranger station where I was kept safe and warm until morning’s first light.” Tilson’s claims could not be independently verified, as all birth certificates from the decade of his birth were destroyed in a fire in 1943.

Tilson stayed at the site for three eruptions of Ol’ Faithful, posing for pictures and playfully threatening to “burn up the kids in the boiling water” if they didn’t listen to their parents and behave. Recent polls have shown Tilson running neck and neck with a generic Democratic or Republican nominee.

Tilson exited the event via a helicopter launched from the little-used helipad that he lobbyed to have built atop the Smoky Pine Visitor’s Center in 1988.

Yes, I understood early on that Tilson was a disaster as a human being, one with lizard-savant intelligence and hallucinogenic notions about the colors of the political spectrum. But that didn’t disqualify him as a candidate.

Here’s a squirmer: My involvement with Tilson ’12 started as a one hundred percent swinging dick move. If I could somehow sell Tilson, I’d prove that I was a first--
or at least second-class operator, and I’d be set up for good. But was I cold-blooded enough to have been all right with a world in which Rudd Tilson was actually in charge? I guess so, yeah. As we rolled along and Rudd’s polling held, then rose, I started to figure that people deserved what they got. Was he _that_ much more of a head-case than Reagan? Than Clinton? How many glaring personal flaws is too many?

The “Tilsonians,” as his supporters called themselves, adopted bright orange as their color of choice to honor the legacy of England’s Glorious Revolution, a subject that Rudd talked about constantly and inaccurately on the campaign trail. A couple of our events turned violent, with our supporters bloodying some mainline Republicans who were starting to harass them about splitting the vote. Obviously these fights worried the hell out of me, but Tilson was delighted. “Reminds me of those late nights after the state fair when I was a boy,” he said. “People have a little too much to drink, spend a little too much time in that dancing tent. A little knock on the chin did just fine to remind you what’s what.”

Tilson’s problem, in the long term, was that he wanted nothing to do with the modern political process, which puts you in a difficult position if you are trying to participate in it. He didn’t support local candidates, attend other people’s dinners, or release coherent policy documents. He also distrusted the Internet—he was right about that on some level—which meant that small donors never found a way in. It wasn’t that we NEEDED money, but we tried to explain to Rudd that people LIKED donating money. It made them think they were buying a share in the candidate. Well, he said, if we felt that way he was happy to host some $100,000-a-head events.
These made a great deal of news, not much of it helpful. One event was modeled on a scene in a Batman movie that Tilson had recently watched, in which the Riddler holds a party in a sensory deprivation chamber intended to trap Batman. Rudd thought this notion could be “harnessed for good,” to remind supporters of his campaign’s “spirit warrior ideal.” Rudd hired an installation artist to design a massive tank, and thus hosted the first “sensory deprivation dinner dance” in political history. It was closed to reporters, but some of the guests just couldn’t keep the “experience” to themselves (despite the confidentiality agreements.) Politico’s “Did Rudd Tilson Host a Drug Orgy Last Night?” was typical of the coverage. I told reporters that any untoward activities had been the work of a “few bad apples” and the story went away, sort of. In the end, everyone had fun. No one got hurt, and we toned it down after that. Cowboy poetry slams, “beef and bluster” buffets. Wyoming stuff.

No, I don’t expect to be forgiven for my involvement with all this. I do expect a book deal.

10.

Transcript of Marie Tilson video broadcast on CNN, 10/14/11, from an undisclosed location.

MARIE: I speak out recognizing the possible risk to my own freedom and safety, but I feel I must set the record straight, for the sake of the country and for the righting of my
own moral compass. My ex-husband, Rudd Tilson, is running for President, and people need to know the real story of his and my involvement in Wrong To Death.

I have taken, and continue to take, responsibility for my work to avenge the voiceless unborn. My organization has stated repeatedly that the deaths at the Cheyenne clinic bombing of 1987 were entirely unintentional, and I will have to live with the regret for those lost lives. But that does not mean that I renounce my fervent belief in what Wrong To Death stood for, for I know that our work saved countless lives, and countless souls.

What people need to know is that in 1982, Rudd Tilson, with the grace of God, provided the money and operational personnel for Wrong to Death generously and anonymously. He understood the righteousness of our cause, and although our marriage did not survive, his support of WTD kept our bond alive, and I will forever be grateful for that low-burning but undying flame. You won’t find records of this support—he graciously insisted that no records be kept—but his commitment to the cause was substantial and permanent. America would be blessed to have such a warrior as its leader.

11.

NBC Nightly News interview with Rudd Tilson, 10/22/11

Brian Williams: Mr. Tilson, what people want to know is: where do you stand on the tactics engaged in by your ex-wife’s so-called “liberational” pro-life organization?
Rudd Tilson: I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: I condemn, absolutely, those actions, and I did not make those payments. There are no records because these payments exist only in her head. I don’t know if she’s trying to destroy me or if she’s just lost it. I should remind you that we don’t even know where that woman is. She could be sipping tea with Hugo Chavez. She’s very sick woman and I think we need to take that into account.

Furthermore, resurrecting these so-called “culture war” issues is not going to fix this country’s economy, which, in case you hadn’t noticed, is in a state of calamity. I disagree with my Republican friends--

Brian Williams: Mr. Tilson, we were talking--

Rudd Tilson: DISAGREE with them in that I think those tweaked-out kids down at Wall Street and around the country made more than half a point. We’ve all been thoroughly swindled by the financial dogcatchers of this country and by a lazy government bunch that cares more about examining their own butts than giving people a chance to make a buck!

Brian Williams: Some have argued, Mr. Tilson, that as a billionaire and the former head of an extraordinarily profitable corporation, you yourself are a part of the problem rather than a part of the solution.
Rudd Tilson: Look Brian, everybody wants more money. We’re not talking about free love or brotherhood or justice. We’re living in Marx’s pure materialist society. I’m in a position to give people more money. They’re gonna have jobs drilling oil all over, and tapping gas out of the shale too. And then their gasoline and heating bills are gonna go down and they’re gonna get jobs building safety-conscious free-market pipelines. These people want regulation because they are ignorant of the fact that regulation is the single factor most likely to stifle the growth of this economy. I say, let them eat regulation. I’ll eat steak, dammit, and so can my friends when I’m the President.

12.

Proposed text of Tilson ’12 campaign commercial, as written by Rudd Tilson, 1/16/12. A heavily edited and condensed version began airing in Iowa, South Carolina, New Hampshire, Nevada, and Arizona, 1/22/12.

While you swindled fools are leaving your homes to vote in jury-rigged primaries run by charlatan horse-trainers, you could be doing something of far greater value: circulating and signing a petition to get me on the ballot in your state in November.

It’s a choice you have to make: do you want a damp-handed haircut as your next leader or somebody who’s read the dictionary three times? Look up centrifugal. Look up polyphony. Catch yourself an education, why don’t you?

These are hard times in America. The world is great with us, and we are heavy with its concerns. This is not a time for joke-talking. Look inside yourself and see the problem. Look outside yourself and solve the problem. It’s a two-sided operation.
Printing out that petition and signing it, that’s where it’s at. You’ll find it at my web page (fill in name later), along with some other helpful tips.

People are often saying, “These times are a lot like the Great Depression, and who was the President who solved it?” Franklin Roosevelt. Let’s be him again. Together.

13.

We started tanking in the polls in February. The Republicans coalesced around their own crazy person and ran a professional operation. The descent was sudden and irreversible, and Tilson became discouraged much more quickly than I thought he would. I take some responsibility for our message control problem, though I’m not sure that anything short of a tracheotomy would have kept Tilson on point. The anti-Semitic thing is what really got the attention for sinking us, but we might have been able to overcome it with more discipline.

Tilson’s exact quote, at a rally in St. Petersburg, was, “I know the Jews around here aren’t going to like this, but maybe it’s time we stopped catering to them. Maybe they’ve had their crooked hooks in us for long enough.” He followed this with his boilerplate suggestion that we give less money to Israel.

The phrase that really stuck was that “crooked hooks” thing. It seemed, I think, worse than it really was. What did it even mean? To me, it called to mind an Old Testament walking stick, like a shepherd’s crook. Commentators thought Rudd was subliminally evoking “hooked noses” or “crooked money-lending practices” or
something, but he was never one for the subliminal. I think he was just being weird, as usual.

We ran in circles trying to fix it but of course we didn’t find a lot of support in the Jewish community. We got a few fringe figures to show up with Tilson at campaign events, but, whaddya know, a rabbi who doesn’t believe in aid to Israel isn’t a rabbi you want on your side. They ended up raising more associational questions than they answered. We tried to let the issue fade away, but, sure, we faded away with it.

When Tilson told me he wanted out at the end of March, I wanted him to keep fighting. The cycle was such that plenty could still change, but he’d lost his fire. We were on the campaign bus together one night towards the end, rolling through Ohio in the dark. Everyone else was sleeping or working, but I saw him staring at his reflection in the tinted window so I sat down next to him.

“You feeling all right?” I said.

“No,” he said. “It turns out my heart isn’t big enough for this whole country. It was big enough for lots of it, but there are spaces that I cannot find it in me to love.”

“You can’t love all of them,” I said. “And all you need is for just enough of them to love you.”

“That was the old way,” Tilson said. “There is a new way. But we didn’t find it.”

He said this like an accusation, and I felt as though I’d failed him. What he said was at odds with his own behavior—he had deliberately alienated people throughout the course of his campaign, and they’d finally gotten tired of it. He thought the crazy we were riding would never peak. In many ways, it probably hasn’t. But it did for us.
As we wound down the campaign Tilson was very bitter about what he perceived as the forces arrayed against him; I won’t be more specific for the sake of his reputation. He’d spent $50 million of his own money. I haven’t spoken to him since then, and I’m not sure where he is. I’m in Delaware, near the water, sipping cool blue margaritas.

14.

Farewell Speech to Supporters, as reported in the New York Times, April 2, 2012

Tilson Pulls Out, Apologizes

Jackson, WY—Rudd Tilson, the rogue Presidential candidate who briefly captured the public’s imagination, withdrew from the race today in an address to his supporters in his hometown.

“I worked hard, talked at you, loved you,” said Tilson in an emotional speech that lasted nearly two hours. “I wanted things that I didn’t know I wanted. You brought me to the brink of something and then pushed me off the edge of something. Now I’m at the bottom of something, and I don’t know if I’ll ever get back up. I’m so sorry to all of you.”

Tilson entered the race on January 11, 2011, promising a new approach to campaigning, “dissociated from the ghost practices of past-times.” He rose steadily in the polls through 2011, weathering criticism of his sometimes unconventional style and rhetoric. His campaign proposed an increase in drilling for natural resources, further
deregulation of the financial industry, and “power boost one-ups” involving unspecified “mega incentives for the great and gifted.”

His campaign had been hobbled in the past few months by controversies related to the pro-life activities of his ex-wife, Marie Tilson, his alleged anti-Semitic remarks at a campaign event in Florida, and accusations of drug use and inappropriate sexual activity at a lavish fundraiser in New York.

“I tried to do things in a way that I hope you found electrifying,” said Tilson at the end of his speech. “I hope that I made you happy. I still wish I could be your leader, and who knows, on some level, what the future will hold. Except for death. Look up pestilential. Look up malediction. Don’t look down.”