

**random Acts
of Vandalism**

When seen from the suburbs, the city of Vancouver appears almost parallel with the clouds tethered to the surrounding mountains. Full of white, like crack smoke straight from the pipe, they're pearly, creamy, with a hint of grey along the edges, a sign of pending precipitation. Carrying temporarily, ready to burst, they eventually self-crack like egg whites and disgorge themselves over the hills, down the streets, into the gutters and finally the Pacific Ocean's deep blue abyss.

The rain doesn't always come quietly here, but today it has, though it has fallen far enough to pick up speed and collect in thick, splashing drops. It runs down familiar viaducts, a child returning home from school, taking a well-worn path through backyards and corner lots. The rain falls so much here it has its own route. It knows where to go, does not stray from its well-defined trail to the sea. The rain here is simply part of the atmosphere, having tattooed its way onto a shadowed topography.

A young boy leaves his parent's home—two floors, three bedrooms, glossy white-framed photos in the hallways of soccer fields and campsites. He's left the dark corners of his room cluttered with appropriate push-pin posters, pushing out the back door and through the backyard. Dressed in his favourite dark hoodie—Alkaline Trio—white iPod headphones dangle out and back into his sweater. Cheeks just starting to experience acne, still fresh-faced but with red bites, dark eyes—this kid looks worn.

With dyed-black hair pushed across his forehead, he hops a brown fence and its runny, solvent, year-old stain, and lopes past a HomeSense bird feeder hung high in a thick, full-bearded evergreen. When he pokes out from the alley, he cuts left with the rain down towards the ocean, following gravity and the slight slouch this city sits in. He watches the rain trickle and scamper along the sidewalk crevasses, periodically emptying into gutters, only to

collect and run out again. Wash sprays up from the odd car, always a new model, always silver, always a four-door, it seems.

Each house has its own complexion, although they all look like relatives of the same species. New paint, big glass window exposing a living room with a fireplace or long flat-screen television. Hedges, bushes that have been trimmed each weekend, and putting green lawns just starting to grow a shag. Everything up here isn't brand new, but seems instead to be constantly entering a period of upgrade. The middle class morphs, mutates and renovates efficiently against its own will into the affluent, revealing a notable hybrid of haves and have-nots.

This boy walks slowly enough that he doesn't seem to have a destination in mind, but with determination enough that he must be going somewhere. The rain streams down his face from forehead to chin as the sun sets somewhere beyond the pall of western cloud, gone for another night, asleep in the ocean bed. It's dusk, everything has a sunglass tint, the smoky smear of grey and blue, though the streetlights have yet to come on.

When the boy reaches a crosswalk, he neglects to push the button, waiting instead for a break in the traffic to jaywalk, checking each side carefully before he proceeds.

Once across the residential road, he sees it loom up before him, lit by neon yellow scales across its backside. The Lions' Gate Bridge rises out of the lush, damp green trees like a massive, steel-constructed dinosaur, reaching across to take a bite out of Stanley Park. Cars crawl across her spine three lanes wide, packed tightly together.

By the time the bridge was built, back in 1937, eleven men had perished during her construction, which had spanned almost seven years. However, back in the '30s, this was considered a low death toll for the height and danger of the project. The city dubbed it a lucky bridge. Since then, ten suicides have been reported, one less than the steel- and ironworkers who perished during its architectural conception.

When the boy sees the bridge, it's as if he's looking at it for the first time in his life. When in all actuality, he's seen it many times. He's driven across it, biked across it and walked its green-railed

pedestrian crosswalk. He knows this bridge well—where the best spot to stop and spit is, how close to hug the rail so as not to get splashed by trucks and campers barreling across, how to throw a Styrofoam airplane off it and watch it soar as far as the rail yard some five kilometres away. A lifeless bird following the currents, dipping and diving and pulling back up into the blinding oblivion.

He also knows it's well over 500 feet from the pedestrian crosswalk to the cold, grey water below. When the bridge starts to arch up slightly like a cat's back in a stretch, one can do a 360 degree spin and see the Coastal Mountains, the Pacific Ocean, Washington State and Vancouver Island all in one dizzying turn.

When the boy approaches the bridge he starts to slow, to walk as if he's been dragged by a weight stuck, rammed into the corner of his stomach. It's as if he's carrying something heavy inside him, something that makes his steps start to labour and drag his Chuck Taylors just a little.

In his dark hoodie and tight black jeans he melts into the scenery. His presence is rarely noticed by any of the cars' inhabitants, what with the rain and the darkness and his camouflaged appearance.

With each step he starts to slow now, his hand gliding lightly atop the railing, music pulsing in his ears, his playlist put together specifically for this occasion. He gazes up at the lights stretching out over the span of the bridge. They have turned more white than orange, obscured and diluted by the water collecting in his eyelashes.

A bicyclist passes the boy on the sidewalk but does not make eye contact—it's not worth it tonight. Besides, there's not much to see other than the glowing lights, the falling rain, the passing cars and the rising shroud of the blackened horizon.

At the crown of the bridge the boy stops and looks out over the railing, out over Burrard Inlet. Lighthouse Park is barely visible in the distance to his right. It's serene, even quiet as he allows the constant drone of cars to fall into the background. On the boy's iPod, Aphex Twin's "Stone in Focus" begins to play. It pours through his ears, soothes his eardrums, massaging his brain like a quiet lullaby.

After what has been close to twelve minutes, the boy stands up straight, hands still on the railing, and starts to straddle the three-foot high steel divider. He's up and over, hanging from the other side, hands clenched tightly on the slippery wetness of the painted steel. He's broken through a barrier and he knows it. Everything starts to feel a little alien as he steps outside the comfort of his life. The point of no return has come and gone. The boy crouches down to conceal his presence, and now, even from a few feet away, looks like nothing more than a part of the bridge to anyone passing by—perhaps a gargoyle placed there by workers long ago. He could stay here for hours without anyone noticing. But he doesn't. He lets go.

Inside his mind a freedom unleashes him, sucking up all the uncertainty of his short life. He has started his descent into another world, instantly invigorating his heart into near cardiac arrest.

His body starts to tumble, his sweater comes up, his white iPod cords flutter as he falls and then whip from him in an instant. He falls like a rag doll, trying to right himself to see the ground, but he's not powerful enough. The wind currents just above the water, being funneled by the inlet and now the lower mouth of the bridge, take complete control of his limbs.

The boy falls for nearly six seconds, though he doesn't know it. He has blacked out, rendered unconscious by the very act itself. They say fully half of suicide jumpers die from heart attack before they even hit their destination. But this boy is young and his arteries still too free of North American opulence to be clogged enough to turn his motor off. He simply swallows too much air on the way down, the wind literally knocked into him.

An underground mine appears to explode from the dark sea, a plush, backwards-pulsating explosion of white water. A crackle of sound, almost like a cannon, accompanies the eruption of water that reaches up seven feet in the air, sixteen feet wide in diameter. The displaced water comes down and seems to swallow itself, and as quickly as it happened, disappears back into the small greasy waves washing into the bay, as if nothing has happened.

The Novelist

The entire high-rise office building of CBC is colour-coordinated. Blood red, black lined with silver and grey. Even the stalls in the bathroom match that flowery-looking symbol outside the doors here in downtown Toronto. Right now I'm looking at the back of one of these stalls, graffiti-free, staring at it as if I'm trying to see right through it.

My black suit is custom, open shirt one button down—a thin white pinstripe Pierre Cardin. A form-fitting black v-neck cardigan and dress pants. Black dress socks and black dress shoes. None of these clothes have been worn for more than a few hours. I sit in this stall, pants, belt and underwear down around my ankles, waiting for a shit I know will never come. I sit in this stall waiting for this shit that won't come thinking of how I got to this very exact moment in my life. How I am less than half an hour away from an “exclusive” interview with George Stroumboulopoulos, not on *The Hour*, but on *The National*. Peter Mansbridge is on vacation or something, and the producers at CBC felt I would feel more comfortable talking to someone closer to my age. George is the edgy, youthful demographic of CBC apparently. Sure. It's not as if one cares how they are executed. Whether death comes by sling blade, rawhide noose or gasoline fire. Death only leads to one thing in the end. If the pain is swift, it's really all the same. Soften the blow with this national boy-toy for all I care. Paint me up in Technicolor just to tear me down more vibrantly.

How I got to this point in my life. Just over two years ago I started writing a book after quitting my job amidst unusual circumstances which afforded me some time away from the burden of regular employment. The book recounted a lonely boy growing up amidst a chaotic home life. His parents were divorcing, he was dealing with depression and ADHD, and nothing really

seemed as if it was going to break for him. I waxed poetic for 295 pages of Generation Y angst—Facebook, sexting, global child and whatnot. *The Globe & Mail* called it “teen poetry angst for the iPod generation.”

I literally shat the thing out in a few months, I just holed up in my dad’s basement and plowed through it. I dropped 30 pounds and developed a nice cocktail of Vitamin D deficiency, hypersomnia, nicotine addiction and a bad case of the masturbations—as I like to call them. Bottom line was I needed an immediate distraction from life, and drugs, woman and violence weren’t as readily available as they had been in previous chapters of my existence.

The novel was published through a relatively small house in Vancouver. Made the critical rounds, stirred up some sales, and got championed by George himself on his show. He loved it, gave it a short plug, and sales went national. I peeked onto the *Maclean’s* Bestseller’s List for a brief stint. Apparently I had shades of a young Douglas Coupland, one raised in the “shadow of 9/11, the promise of Barack Obama, and the reality of life after the economic downturn.”

Six months in though it was just another book on the shelf and I was living off dwindling royalties, a small advance, severance, employment insurance and a small Canadian Council Arts Grant trying to write my follow-up.

I had shit.

Then, on September 23rd, sometime around seven thirty in the evening, 16-year-old North Vancouver resident Michael Vanbiesbrouck jumped off the Lions’ Gate Bridge in what would be a very successful suicide attempt. It would be another seventeen days before his body would be recovered deep underwater alongside Stanley Park.

Michael was presumed missing in what turned into a massive man-hunt, spearheaded by the RCMP and the Vancouver Police Department. He was believed abducted, or lost, or dead somewhere in the woods in the surrounding area. The story of the missing boy got local and provincial attention. He was a model student, top of his class. He was an accomplished piano player, having landed a scholarship to the Julliard School in New York.

For Michael to go missing was completely out of character, though his parents were aware he had a darker side. A kid troubled by their secretive ways and his cocktail of anti-depressant medications. A cracked marriage held together only by their promising son. A house long since devoid of feasible love, or viable compassion, or respectable comfort.

Finally, after over two weeks of abrading every lead, endless reports on the evening news, and a personal charity set up to help pay for private investigators, Michael’s mother walked into her son’s room for the last time.

On the dresser, which she had looked at numerous times, combed through with police and private investigators, was a copy of *Bending Light*, my novel. Inside the jacket cover was a six paragraph suicide note scrawled in black ink.

Stay together for the kids, they always say. Place a child between two opposing entities and see how long before that elasticity snaps. I knew full well what kind of internal terror Michael was drudging through. I’d grown up around it my entire life. Broken homes make broken kids.

At the end of the book, the young character in *Bending Light* jumps off a large commuter bridge outside his own neighbourhood, just outside a large city. My publisher chose the defining image of this bridge at night for the cover, which in itself won a national award. The fact it turned out to be an artistic photo of the Lions’ Gate Bridge at night was just dumb fucking luck. It was more allegory than literal; I’d kept the actual name of the bridge vague for obvious reasons relating to my own troubled past.

Once the note was given to the authorities, the police swept Burrard Inlet and found Michael’s decaying, half-eaten body stuck against a sunken grate twelve feet under the surface. The press got a sniff of it and, during a slow news week, couldn’t find much else to bite into. So they sunk their teeth into the story. Copycat suicide. Endless references to Kurt Cobain, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, “Gloomy Sunday,” and Japanese musicians Hide and Yukiko Okada. I was their brand spanking new info-tainment porn for the cycle. Endless high-end rotation reports in a 24-hour news world. Beat

the story to death, then move onto the next. A binge and gorge process I'd watched from the other side until now. Until the weather forecast told me something incredibly, remarkably and uncontrollably different.

I was instantly forced into hiding at my father's house just outside the city. He had a place just past Boundary Road, far enough away that the messy chaos of Van was still background music. It was good because my dad and I never talked. I had his unassuming good looks, symmetrical face with dark, Anglo-Canadian sculpted features—six feet, brown hair, brown eyes, you know the drill. I also had his tendency to go days without uttering much more than monosyllabic grunts. There was also this thick silence he seemed to carry around, at least around me, from as far back as I can remember, even before he left my mom. It was like he was carrying something inside him that prevented him from getting close to me. I never asked what it was. I can't remember him smiling once. It made for a quiet house, which worked, given the current circumstances.

We had to disconnect my phone, e-mail, and set up a private number. I couldn't go outside unless escorted by a bodyguard for the first few days. I couldn't do much other than sit in my father's den and watch the endless smutty television news clips, pictures of myself, the book, the boy, the bridge.

Bending Light also firmly planted itself on top of the *Maclean's* Bestseller's List, perched high above the others not looking to come down anytime soon. It made its way halfway up *The New York Times* Bestseller's List, however never hit number one thanks to Dan Brown and some vampires. I was only clipped by full-blooded Americana exposure. Thank God.

I saw a grief counsellor and psychiatrist once a day, and even took a call from James Frey. However, it did little to quell the swirling emotions and endless rumination controlling every waking moment of my life.

The first few days were a shock. An actual shock where you find yourself dramatically shaking your head when alone, still unable to comprehend the sheer monstrosity perched overhead licking its lips and sharpening its knives.

After the shock subsided, it was replaced by what I would call endless thought. Your brain trying to formulate the best way to respond to this because you know everyone wants to know how you're going to respond to this. You wrestle with the fact that now you are and will be an established writer for the rest of your career, having commuted atop some dead kid's corpse to financial bliss, unwillingly, unknowingly, and without consent. This was not your choice, or your decision. You were not a willing participant.

I lean over in the stall on the 24th floor of CBC in Toronto, rest my head against the toilet paper dispenser, rub my eyes with the pads of my thumbs.

I take a pull from the flask of vodka tucked neatly into my jacket pocket. I'm light-headed, sufficiently tired, half-assed jet lagged and my conscience is still throwing mounds of coal onto the thought fire. I look and feel like shit, but for some reason can't seem to defecate.

Once I emerge from the bathroom, I'm followed closely by my literary agent, my publisher, a publicist and an assistant, my father and a bodyguard. My entourage, a swarm of Gollum-like peddlers hanging onto my flesh like remora. They're all here for many reasons, the majority of which are not really about me at all. Rather their reflection of me within themselves, their place amongst this fifteen minutes of fame. Their places, their thoughts, their goals, their ambitions, anything and everything they want to get out of this. It makes me sick, but I keep a straight face.

Infamy will tax any soul, squeeze any goodness until it's black and hard. Distort any well-wishing into ulterior motives. It leads to infomercials and tell-all books and Levi Johnston and turns idiots into pundits and fucks into fuckers. It's a slime bucket of vile that people can only stomach because it has an endearing spotlight elixir. Entertaining bloodlust, the entertainment in and of others' suffering, and the disease inside all of us that wants to watch that car accident, over and over and over again.

Through the back rooms and hallways of CBC are posters of famous Canadians—Pierre Trudeau, Wayne Gretzky, David Suzuki. Signed photos, big Native artwork. Dark studios with photography lights. Endless black electrical cords snaking across a

scuffed floor with ground-in resin and rubber sole shoe marks. Trail marks from moving cameras, gum pressed into the wood, markers, coloured electrical tape in X's that look like they're marking buried treasure.

I've shaken fourteen different pairs of hands today. Women in power suits, men with creamy Italian-styled ties. They've all blended into one person, one producer—I can't seem to tell any of them apart. That vibration bellow of Blackberries in pockets, clipped against belts. Over and over and over.

I met George earlier. He seemed amicable. He sized me up, poked a bit into what he thought some of my responses might be. Tried to distance himself from any Frey-Oprah comparison with a "This really isn't like this at all, the country just really wants to hear what you have to say."

Wrong. The country wants to judge me according to what I have to say. Scrutinize me, hold me up to the light, place me under the microscope. Talk about me as if I'm simply another round of gossip for the chattering class, which I am.

I've become Twitter talk and casual dinner conversation.

The only reason I'm doing this is because I have something to say on air that I need to say. The interview is supposed to last twenty-two minutes give or take, but all I need is one sentence, one breath, to get my message across.

I take a deep breath amidst the talking and lights and confusion and sound checks. My armpits are sweaty, my legs stiff at ninety-degree angles, and I still can't calm the incessant stream of thoughts running through my head. I pray to God the medication kicks in soon.

It's a dark black table, grey background with red trim. On that table sit two brand new black coffee mugs, filled with water. George has a black dress shirt on. With all the lights pointed straight at me, everything else is muted. It's dark out there but blinding in here, and with all the attention focused solely on me, I squirm like a fish out of water, flopping around in the back of a boat, gasping for air.

The introduction is expected, as George rambles off my bio and the story to Camera 1, like when people talk about you like

you're not there even though they know you're sitting right there beside them. There's a section of angst growing within me, and now it's starting to spill static across my senses. I can't hear much else but static and a faint voice now. I feel so prodded.

George turns to me. A red light flicks on the camera behind him, pointing directly at me like a floodlight. "How have the past few weeks been for you, I mean in terms of how you're personally handling this?" George asks, making concerned eye contact. I can see why the ladies ooze over him. He appears sincere.

I hesitate a small second, my mind goes blank and my mouth starts moving. I'm beside myself now, an out of body experience, watching, listening to myself spilling syllables away like a seasoned practitioner.

"I've been okay. It's been tough, you know. It's the type of thing where I'm just trying to take it one day at a time."

"Have you spoken to Michael's parents? Have they been in contact with you?"

I wasn't expecting this question. Looks as though I'm to expect the unexpected this interview then. Fair enough. I'd be an idiot if I thought it would go down any other way.

"No I haven't spoken to them. I'm guessing they're still going through a grieving process right now. I'm probably not very high on their priority list, I'm guessing."

"But you've got to feel as though they would want to talk to you at some point about all of this," he says with that concerned look again. His hands have a tendency to move when he accents his points, much like myself.

"Yeah," I reply, shrugging a bit. "I'm sure they might have some questions for me, and I might have some questions for them. But this isn't something I want to rush into, or even push them into. They can get a hold of me if and when they want to."

"What would you say to them if they approached you today?"

I look over at George. He's prodding and he knows it.

"I don't know. I haven't gotten that far. I'm guessing they would have something to say to me first, some questions they would like answers for. And I would respond to those first before I said anything."

George looks at his notes. He knows he needs to change gears.

“During the writing of *Bending Light*, did a copycat suicide ever cross your mind? Did you ever think like something like this would happen?”

“No, not at all. If you think of how many times suicide has been portrayed in art, it’s not something you really fathom. I mean plagiarism and stuff like that is much more on my radar. But someone acting out my book, no, I was not expecting that at all.”

I take a sip of water. It’s luke warm. I really want a good stiff drink to sip on right now.

“What was your initial reaction though. What was the first thought that crossed your mind when you found out. Take me through that day.”

“I . . .” I hesitate. “I mean the first thought that crosses your mind is one of sheer unexpectedness. You’re blindsided. It feels like a bad prank. Then there’s this immediate wave of shock that overwhelms you pretty quickly.”

“You saw it online, that’s correct?”

“Yeah I was just surfing a news page—Google, I think—and I stumbled over it. It’s the type of thing where for the first few minutes you’re really just trying to gather as much information as possible. Then my agent and publisher phoned me, and they came over and got me filled in pretty quickly.”

George looks at his notes again. I think he wants more out of me, maybe longer answers. But it’s not my job to play ball with him today, so I’ll just give him what I feel like giving.

“I want to talk about the debate this has stirred,” he says. “A few weeks ago, a young boy from Winnipeg was found dead after a similar massive manhunt was undertaken by Winnipeg police. He was playing *Call of Duty 4*, playing it a lot, to the point that his parents actually took the game away from him. This obsession seems somewhat similar to that of Michael and your book.”

I shake my head. “No, this is different. Night and day actually. He wrote a suicide note in the jacket cover of my book. The cover played a big part in it too. But this wasn’t something where he was obsessed with the book like, say, Mark Chapman.”

“Do you feel any responsibility for his death?”

I shake my head again. “I mean, I do and I don’t. I want to take responsibility, but I’m not sure it’s just to do so. Did I murder him? No. Did I push him off that bridge physically? Did I intend to goad him into suicide like some Heaven’s Gate fiasco? Suicide is everywhere, look at *Thelma and Louise. The Happening. The Virgin Suicides. . .*”

I draw a blank after that. I’d written down fifteen movies and books and even a few paintings with suicide in them. But it was in my jacket pocket, and pulling it out wouldn’t really work right now.

“Are you at all worried about more? About more attempts?”

“I dunno. . . . I mean you can’t really think about that.”

“What was your train of thought when writing the book? Why have such a promising young character—someone who’s obviously struggling in certain aspects of his life—why have him give up like that?”

I take a deep breath of air in, but only a fraction seems to make it all the way into my lungs. “I just didn’t want to write a book that had a storybook ending. It wasn’t about that, it was about documenting the types of things kids go through these days. I was reading this article in *Vanity Fair* about the cluster suicides in Wales. . . . Something about it spoke to me, but the media couldn’t put a finger on it. There were all these kids killing themselves, none of them were extremely poor, they all had internet access and went to decent schools. It’s just today, being young, staring out at the abyss that is adulthood and responsibility, it can seem even more daunting in such a globalized world. We can seem so small and insignificant when you hear all these amazing stories about amazing people all day everyday, and here you are, in your one-storey flat with your parents who barely break even and college is for the rich and the gifted, and everything just seems way too big to take on.”

I can tell he enjoyed that answer. He lets it sink in for a few seconds.

“Talk to me about the allegations of exploitation within the book. I know that when I read it I definitely didn’t feel that way at all, but it does give suicide a very appealing factor.”

“It’s not an exploitation at all. I’m not romanticizing suicide either. *Romeo and Juliet* romanticizes suicide. I was never suicidal to the point of actually feeling as if I could actually carry it out and do it. All I wanted to do in the book was paint a direct picture of what kids can be hit with these days. It’s a bombardment. Maybe that’s what Michael agreed with.”

He got me to get back to Michael, and I’m moving my hands when I talk, my personal sign of nervousness. Now he’s going to use it as his bridge to the next question. The lights are still blinding, and I can’t see anyone but George. I’m sure they wanted it this way.

“What do you think you’d say to Michael given the chance?”

I look at him, confused. “Like now, after he’s dead?”

“If you got the chance to speak to him before he died. If he contacted you after reading your book.”

“I dunno, I’m not big on that question. I’m not his parents. From what it looks like he had a very promising musical career ahead of him. Julliard. The kid was going to be okay. But I can’t really answer that. It’s not something I want to answer unless it actually happened, and it isn’t going to happen.”

Someone signals for a commercial break. A bell sounds. Red lights go off. Someone comes up and dabs my forehead with a napkin.

I lean forward, unbutton my jacket, then lean back, exhaling all the air that didn’t seem to do me any good earlier. All I can do right now is breathe. George says a few words to me. We’re going to be talking about how suicide is portrayed in the media apparently. I nod. My agent struts over brandishing his Blackberry like a weapon, protective. I can smell his designer aftershave.

“You okay, you want anything?” he says, paternal hand on my shoulder. I look up at him, and then I pull out my flask and take a good long pull. He winces, shifting slightly to his right, as though trying to conceal my crutch.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Let’s just get this over with.”

He nods and disappears. Introduction music again. That red light. George speaking, looking directly at Camera 1. I just stare at him. There’s not much else to do.

“It’s a well-known policy within most media outlets that suicides are very taboo subjects,” he says. “Copycat suicides are a very serious threat, especially if a suicide is widely reported. However, if this person is famous, someone of note, it’s impossible to ignore. It leaves us in a difficult situation, one between bringing forth information that the public needs, and paying respect to the danger that very information can bring. The nationwide manhunt and media exposure for Michael Vanbiesbrouck ended in tragedy. One of a boy who many believed had simply run away from home, or was abducted. When his suicide became public, and the final words from that young promising boy were etched in a book about teen suicide, it brought forth many questions.”

Then George introduces me again, as the “notorious” author of *Bending Light*. The vodka inside me warms my stomach, slightly calms and slows the traffic of blood racing through my veins.

“We talked before the break about other instances of suicide in art. *Thelma and Louise*, you mentioned. *Romeo and Juliet*. This idea of life imitating art, we see it all the time. People quote their favourite actors, dress-up as superheroes on Halloween. We do it all the time. But when tragedy is involved, it really brings this issue to the forefront.”

George looks at me, then continues. “Do artists have a responsibility to their fans, to the people who purchase their work? Did you ever feel that with *Bending Light* you were speaking to a particular audience, and by that I mean a very impressionable one?”

I don’t answer immediately, choosing to take one good breath instead. “I mean, of course you know you’re speaking to someone—it’s art, it’s public, people are going to read from it, and be influenced by it if they like it. But art is very open to interpretation. I’ve heard so many different things from so many different people about the book. They all come up to me and say different things, talk to me about different passages and characters. Different themes resonate with different people. So to think that you’re ever going to be delivering a direct message to a certain audience, it’s preposterous, and very egocentric to presume, I think.”

“You’ve actually talked about some interpretations in the book. For instance, that the ending is possibly a dream, and with the allegory of the piano playing, that this is simply the protagonist shedding his demons and moving onto a better stage in his life. That the suicide in the book is simply a dream sequence, and a somewhat cathartic one.”

I nod. “Yeah, definitely. When I wrote it, I wanted a sense of ambiguity. The literal people who read that book will think it’s literal, and the ones more inclined to imagery and imagination may think otherwise. I definitely think it’s open to interpretation.”

“But Michael ended up taking it very literally.”

I pause to scratch my nose, clear my throat slightly, buying time to answer. “Once again, I wasn’t inside his head. I don’t know what was going on in his life. How much of an effect the book had on him, I don’t think anyone will ever really know. For all I know he may have read it, hated it, and that day just happened to see it sitting there and chose on a whim to write a note in it, and carry out the act portrayed in the book and on the cover. It may have been completely on a whim.”

George starts to ask another question, but I interrupt him. “Look, any artist who believes they’re changing the world with their work is an idiot. Art doesn’t influence life, life influences art. Without life there would be no art. Art is simply the mirror we hold up to ourselves, to our culture. You can’t have the egg before the chicken.”

I stop, think about what I said, realize it may have come off as pretentious. George glances across at a producer, who might be signaling something to him.

“Was there any discussion at any time after it was found out about Michael, concerning pulling the book off the shelf?”

I hesitate. “Yeah, we discussed it a few times. I initiated all of the discussions. We had some lengthy conversations about it, my agent, my publisher and I.”

“And why did you stick with the decision to keep the book in print?”

“I don’t know, partially maybe simply out of our own sense of ego. I mean, the part of me that’s ripping me to shreds right

now is realizing this is making me really rich. We’re working on United States distribution, a translation to French, international rights. Movie deals are starting to surface. I’m not going to lie to you, or anyone, this situation, as horrible as it is, benefits me immensely.”

“And how are you dealing with that?”

“I’m not.”

“You’re not?”

“No, I’m neglecting it, pushing it away. What would you expect me to do? I’ve learned to cope through tragedy by employing a cloak, just a shield around myself. I watched someone, someone I loved dearly, die slowly in front of me, but this, I don’t know how anyone would ever handle something like this.”

“You’re taking counseling right now, correct?”

“Of course, yeah, it’s been helping me through this. I dunno, I think this is one that’s going to stick, going to scar. This will be my cross to bear.”

Someone signals for a commercial break again. A bell sounds. Red lights go off. Someone comes up and dabs my forehead with a napkin.

I take a pull from my flask, this time in plain view of everyone. George catches me, smiling ever so slightly, an understanding smile. “Let the motherfucking kid drink,” he’s probably thinking. Let the pariah have some water.

~

I’ve cut my hair short, about an inch and a half long, died it bleach blonde, and have started keeping a short beard. I’ve also been tanning, and have taken to wearing aviator sunglasses frequently, all in an effort to change my appearance. To hopefully be able to bypass a few awkward conversations and random encounters with the many zealots that line the streets. I imagine I resemble a younger Leonard in *Memento*, and I’m certainly not far removed from his level of lunacy. There’s not much I can decipher beyond the shitstorm that’s presently engulfing me. Everything is tainted by its putrid residue.

My days are now spent moping around my father's house, sleeping in incessantly, trying to write, failing to write, and drinking copious amounts of alcohol. I feel like Capote trying to write *Unanswered Prayers*, another work of fiction forever hovering over his head. At least Truman had other works in his repertoire. Me, I was quickly moving towards becoming another one-hit wonder, forever known and tied to his first offering. Forever trying to leave the long suffocating shadow it's created. J.D. Salinger. Harper Lee. At least they'd written something memorable. I'd written smut that turned into a snuff book. I could already see my Jeopardy clue: "He was the writer of *Bending Light*, a marginal novel made infamous by a copycat suicide, and perished soon after in a hail of booze, drugs and insanity."

"Who is me, Alex."

Infamy. My bedfellow. She'd moved in, set up shop, ready to stay the night and possibly well into the morning of my life. She was now my Cheshire Cat, forever able to hang above my conscience and appear and disappear at will. She had become my incurable disease—ground teeth, pulsing headaches, wavering consciousness, anxiety clutching at my throat. A choke chain yanked upwards at the most inopportune times.

My mornings usually start around noon or later. A seething cold shower followed by some Oxycotin and Diazepam to sooth my latest hangover. Maybe some black coffee mixed with Bailey's. Anything to set forth on a productive day.

I screen my calls, check my email, turning down about two interviews a day from publications across the globe. But I've noticed lately they've started to become more infrequent, leading me to believe I'm moving beyond my fifteen minutes.

I start with a good stiff drink around one-ish. A double vodka, maybe some tequila straight up. Something to wash the medication out of my stomach and into my bloodstream. Then I sit my ass in front of the television in the downstairs den and flick for hours. I've paid for satellite TV to be installed, and now have over five hundred channels to browse through. I am addicted to television, unable to cope with the thoughts in my head, and am channeling them deeper into the dark vortex this box allows you to be.

The den is dark, dank, poorly lit, and I can hide for days in its corners. Large plush couch, one small window I've covered with a pillow sheet. Boxes and crap lying all over the place. A dining room table and brand new barbecue packed neatly into the corner.

It isn't all bad though. There are bright spots. For instance, my bank account keeps climbing. I will be a millionaire by year's end, not that that's any feat in itself these days, but it's noteworthy for someone like myself. I've started buying random things I've always wanted but never needed: a plasma screen TV, a brand new laptop to replace the old one I've had for years that my parents bought me for Christmas one year, a jet black Porsche, new custom suits and expensive shoes, a blender and, inexplicably, a trampoline I've never gotten around to setting up.

I've stopped listening to myself, and started listening to the television. She has much to tell me, all the time, filling my head with a state of faked informativeness. She speaks a lot, sometimes contradicting herself, but ultimately comforting me with her flashing vociferous colours. The lone boy who's wandered into his closet at night only to find solace in the monster stalking him after the lights go off.

I also have a list. When you watch as much television as I do, you start to play games with yourself to stay occupied during droughts of reasonable programming. First I start tabulating a running list of notable figures I see on any channel. Morgan Freeman and his wise-talking freckles jump out to an early lead, but he is soon overtaken by Paris Hilton, who is then overcome by President Obama. Finally there's a *Lethal Weapon* marathon on one weekend, which coincides with *Braveheart* playing on the History Channel and *What Women Want* on the Life Network, and Gibson runs away with it and I give up.

Now I am tabulating the periodically numbing rotation of abdominal exercise machines. I am at eleven and it has only been two and a half weeks: Ab Slide Torso Track II, Ab Scissor Ultra Abdominal Machine, Ab Lounger, Yukon Back and Ab Machine BAM-160, Ab Rocket, Easy Shaper Ab Exercise Machine, Ab Killer, Super Abdominal Machine, Ab Coaster, Ab Crunch Machine, Ab Roller.

It's not even 2pm on a rainy Tuesday, and I have a good buzz going when my agent comes over. His cream-coloured shirts, and his Blackberry whatever that makes a weird mooing noise whenever it vibrates across the coffee table, make me smile. It's fun to be friends with such smut. I like his sleaze. At least he's always straightforward with me about things people normally aren't straightforward about, which is something.

"Look," he says, sitting across from me in the den, sipping a beer. Whenever I offer one, he accepts after remarking about his shitty wife and stressful job. It's incredibly endearing, this false display of proletarianism. "You ride this out, you're the next James Frey. You keep putting books out and sooner or later people will forget about it. I mean *Bright Shiny Morning* sucked. It wasn't *A Million Little Pieces*. But he's moving on, he's a rich writer, something everyone dreams of. You made a deal with the devil, my friend. So deal with it and move the fuck on."

I nod. It's probably the best advice I've received in months.

Then he tells me to stop writing, in order to clear my head. Go kayaking, wakeboarding, skydiving, he says. Travel to Tibet. Or Australia. Take up knitting, adopt a kid with Down Syndrome, do something, anything to dislodge my mind from its present inertia. Get a girlfriend. Or boyfriend. Buy a dog. Start running drugs. Anything, he says. Anything but nothing.

Later that evening I'm out driving around drunk in my Porsche. It's a quiet night, the city is dead. I'm dressed in a grey suit, white dress shirt. I've started wearing all the suits I have, pretty much all the time. I figure why not, break them in. Falling with style, I like to call it.

I drive around, put back a six-pack of lime-less Coronas, then head to the liquor store for more. Denied. I smell like booze. I head to the next liquor store where the brown clerk more than happily serves me a large quantity of beer.

I head up to the hills, but on my way I spill a beer in my lap. Dismayed, I pull into the first parking lot, behind a shopping mall. It's a covered lot, dark, sparse, and behind it there's a set of train tracks and large bushes before a tract of residential housing commences. Beside the parking lot, down an embankment, sits a quiet

car dealership. Shiny BMWs tucked neatly into the turnoff to the highway.

I look over the parking lot, down the embankment, to the lights of the cars parked neatly in compartmentalized lines. I smoke a cigarette and pound a beer gazing down at the cars, lit in the night by overhead lighting. The highway off to the right, vehicles streaming by with their coloured tails in the daze of dark. The stars peaking through the tall trees to the left, guarding this quiet little automotive sanctuary.

I head down the embankment, my dress shoes slipping a little in the mud. I hop the chain-link fence with ease, though I almost stumble upon recovering from the jump down.

No alarms, no dogs. I walk down the little aisles of cars. Beer and smoke, dress shirt halfway open, hair crusted from day-old gel. Behind the service shop I find a tire iron lying beside the door, ostensibly used to prop said door open during the day. I pick up the tire iron, finish my beer and whip it off the hood of a yellow BMW 3-Series. It smashes beautifully, everywhere, all over the hood and windshield.

I glance around. Nothing. Cars slip past on the highway. A dog barks off in the distance. Smiling, I put my smoke in my mouth and bash the driver's side window. The sound of glass shattering is music to my ears. Millions of fragments, like a diamond rain splashing over the car and concrete.

I glance around again. Still nothing. The cars must not be alarmed. Guess they install them after you pay for it. One of those hidden little costs. Another driver's side window is smashed. And then another. And another. I stop. Listen.

Nothing.

I get up on the hood of a black BMW and go to work on the front windshield like an ancient axeman. My smoke falls to the ground as I pound and slash with the tire iron, sending shards of glass flying into my face. I kick with my dress shoes, knocking the window in. Then I hop down, break a few headlights, and another windshield. I stop. Nothing.

I'm breathing heavily, smilingly, as I create my own little economic recession here, car industry be damned.

I smash in another front windshield with a series of violent home run swings and overhead tomahawks. A deep sense of peace washes over me like a warm wave of nothingness, an orgasm of oblivion, as I hop down to boomerang the tire iron up over three rows of cars and into the front window of the dealership. A huge pane the size of a soccer net smashes instantly, and I flinch as it falls gloriously to the ground like a glass waterfall.

An alarm goes off, finally, and I run for it. Scampering up the fence, falling down over it, then scrambling up the hill in a furious, almost maniacal manner, I'm back in my car within seconds. Moments later I'm speeding out of the parking lot with squealing tires, out onto the highway, back into the inconspicuous night.

I laugh a while, take some deep breaths, then have another beer and a smoke while periodically checking the rearview mirror for flashing lights. No sign. Still clutching my beer, smoke dangling from my mouth, I turn on the satellite radio and check myself in the mirror. My eyes are so wide open. James Brown's *This is a Man's World* comes on. I crank it and start to sing along.

~

The next day I stagger out of bed at about three o'clock. I've been writing all night, into the early morning, and the rising sun finally sends me packing. The words come pouring out of my fingers, dancing like little spider legs across the keyboard—I can barely keep up. I've started writing a novel where the line between fiction and reality has become so blurred the writer has completely lost his handle on sanity. He's gone so far into his imaginary story he can barely distinguish truth from lie, fact from fiction.

My publisher has come over today as well. I'm relaxed, nursing some liquor in front of the television, when he waddles his way in. He's a heavyset guy, almost fifty and a failed writer himself, who self-published his first four books, mostly science fiction, before starting a publishing company. In this way he tried to publish more of his work, including a silly memoir about growing up

in Winnipeg, but it barely kept afloat. Eventually he gave up writing, but kept the house running, signing a lot of first-time authors, making ends meet through government grants and modest sales. He was actually a decent publisher, just a terrible writer. I'm sure nobody had the heart to tell him though.

But now things are different. He's about to move into a new office building, hire seven more employees, and sign fourteen new writers. The fact a lot of this expansion comes as a direct result of the success of *Bending Light* is not lost on either of us. Still, I'm happy for him. He has a habit of adjusting his glasses and playing with his beard when he speaks, his second chin hanging under the first one like a wattle, and I like him, despite myself.

"So we finished the French translation," he says.

"Oh yeah."

"*Lumiere Oscillante*," he says in a truly awful French accent. I wince ever so slightly.

"That's *Bending Light* in French, I take it?"

"Oui, monsieur."

I take a sip from my drink.

"You don't like it?"

"Naw, it's fine. Doesn't sound right, I guess. Whatever. I don't speak French anyways."

"I can assure you the translator we got is the best. He did Chuck Palahniuk's latest novel."

"I hated Chuck Palahniuk's latest novel."

He looks at me.

"Anyway," he continues, "you're all filled in on figures and distribution, so you're good to go?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. Thanks for stopping in."

He adjusts himself, his glasses, and strokes his beard.

"So have you been writing at all?" he asks eventually.

I inhale, and exhale very slowly.

"A bit," I tell him.

"That's good, good, anything you want to run by me?"

"Naw, it's pretty rough right now."

"Okay, how about you read me a couple paragraphs, wet my whistle a bit. I'd really like to hear it."

I nod unconvincingly. “Sure.”

I get up and grab my laptop, and place it on the coffee table. I open up the file I started working on last night, *Random Acts of Vandalism*, and start to read. I don’t tell him the working title.

“In essence, in absolutes, I guess all art must come from some form of reality, some degree of truth. Its roots must form somewhere in experience, however fantastical or absurd the finished product . . . but where does fact become fiction, where do art and life intersect? I don’t know, I don’t think anyone knows. It’s less a question, and more of a statement, of the nature of who we are, artists in reality, or real life artists . . .”

I look at my publisher, he smiles.

“Good, good, I like it. More, though, I want more. What else do you have?”

I scroll through. There’s a passage about witnessing a friend go through a coke addiction. In actuality it’s me, but I tell him it’s about someone else. Then I start reading: “Watching someone search for rock bottom, it effects you. They dig, ripping out morals, ethics, standards, dreams, goals, ambitions. They’re deconstructing, backwards, unwinding everything they’ve built up. They’re soaking up all the negativity and terror they can, determined to see how much they can really take, and how low, how utterly low and disastrous things will become before the void is filled. The problem is, they hover, somewhere above sustainability, and below productivity. A rat, a cockroach, feeding only to stay alive, breathing only to inflict more damage, the antithesis of life. Most wait, telling themselves salvation will come. . . . They become accustomed to waiting, not seeking. And every time their saviour passes them by, they become increasingly blind to that very search. . . . Death for these people is not a roar, although it may look like a spectacular finish. No, death for these people is a whimper, a fading, like morse code from a submarine slowly sinking into the abyss. . . .”

He signifies he’s pleased.

“I like, I like, but no suicides, okay. No more of those,” he says, and then laughs his Santa Claus-like laugh.

I give him a smile, then there’s silence. I take a sip from my drink. I feel raped now. Violated. I hate reading my work before it’s done. It’s like someone taking a cake you put in the oven, and eating it when it’s only half-baked.

“So,” he says, clasping his hands together. “How are you?”

“Me?” I respond, sarcastically, pointing at my chest.

“Yeah, how are you doing?”

“What do you think?”

“I dunno, that’s why I’m asking you.”

“I’m shit.”

“You’re shit?”

“Yeah. Shit.”

“Okay, anything I can do to help? I’m here for you now, so anything you want you just say the word.”

I rub my face, staring off at the wall. “Well . . .” I begin, but stop myself, clearing my throat before taking another sip of alcohol. I light up a smoke while my publisher waits patiently.

“Well when you can tell me how to function when half of me feels just fine about this kid copying the suicide in my book because it’s making me rich, and the other half feels genuinely sorry and guilty about it, then I guess you have something I want.”

He nods understandingly. “I know this is a tough, confusing time for you.”

I cut him off, waving my hand in a dismissive manor. “Yeah I’m fine, I don’t need any more advice. You find someone who went through this, you give them my email. Everyone has fucking advice for this. No one is in my shoes right now. No one has to sign cheques with blood on his hands.”

He motions with his hands for me to calm down a bit.

“There’s blood on those hands too,” I say, closing my eyes and narrowing my gaze on him.

“I understand, believe me. I’m struggling with this too. This isn’t how I wanted to grow my publishing house, on something like this.”

I wave him off. “Don’t even try. Don’t even try to *think* you’re going to wear this as much as I am.”

He looks flustered. His cheeks start to show a tinge of red. “What do you want from me? What do you want me to say here? I’m trying to help you. Do you want to pull the book? We can pull the book. What other option do we have? We either learn from this, use it to our advantage, move on, or we let this destroy us.”

I’m tired. I don’t want to talk to him anymore.

“I’m tired. I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

He sighs. “Okay, I’ll go. You call me, email me, tell me what you need.”

He stands up and shakes my hand while I’m still sitting down. Then he pats me on the shoulder as he walks by, waddling up the stairs and out of the house. I sit and ferment. Then I turn the television on and drown out my thoughts, quickly, like a skilled assassin holding his victim’s head under the water as it surveys the landscape for any possible threats or witnesses.

Intervention is on, I’ll be fine. I’ll wallow in someone else’s pity porn awhile.

~

Tonight I have a plan. I’ve done a bit of field work, made some rounds. Just off the end of the Skytrain in Coquitlam there resides a strip mall on the very edge of the suburbs. The iceberg tip of urban sprawl, gas stations abutting chain restaurants—highway runoff like a dirty slug, everything is always on sale out here. And the centerpiece of this strip mall is a Sony Entertainment store, around the bend slightly, just before the highway. Secluded in the dark at night, there are no stores around it open past 11.

Tonight at 12:30 exactly I’ll break into the Sony Entertainment store with a crowbar and baseball bat, and have four and a half minutes of play time before I have to be out the back door, over the fence and up a small hill to the nearest Skytrain station. In the span of twelve minutes I’ll go from criminal to public transit passenger, unbeknownst to the police. Either way I’m not stealing anything, not really, just damaging it beyond repair. That is my spontaneous justification for it all. Besides, I’m

sure they have insurance. Everyone needs a little chaos in their lives once in awhile, if only to wake us from sleepwalking through school, nine-to-five, kids, mortgage and into a pension and incommensurable deathbed.

It is now 12:15, and I’m sitting in the parking lot across the four lane street from the store. Seven beers inside my stomach, and half a pack of smokes swimming around in my lungs. I’m dressed in my black Gucci pinstripe suit, open collar white shirt, my dark brown alligator skin dress shoes. Style without substance.

12:20. I drink another beer listening to satellite radio in my Porsche. I’ve taken a liking to Rush Limbaugh. I hate everything he has to say, mind you, but it’s nice to hear his husky baritone voice splatter fear across the American psyche. His voice is soothing in a way, a psychotic lullaby for the impoverished mind. This man speaks to me in my native tongue of over-informed, under-appreciative asshole.

12:25. I pull my Louisville Slugger up front with me, along with my crowbar borrowed from my father’s tool shed. I don’t think he’ll mind. I have one more beer, light and suckle a smoke.

12:30. I’m out of the Porsche with crowbar and bat in hand, smoke dangling from the corner of my mouth. I’m across the road devoid of cars, and across the barren parking lot and its random oil patches and skeleton shopping carts. Multi-coloured fliers become tumbleweeds in the tar, unlit-neon-sign-blackness of this night.

I walk with confidence, with swagger, feeling like a character in a Guy Ritchie movie. In the moment, blood swirling around, oxygen rushing in and out. The air feels more vibrant, the lights more bright, the present more . . . present. It’s times like these you wish you had a soundtrack. Maybe some *Hot Pants* by Bobby Byrd.

The door opens with one quick forceful pry. No alarm though. Strange. I’m guessing it’s silent. I take two steps inside and then the alarm goes off. I nod to it in some weird kind of acknowledgment. Then I place the crowbar down the back of my pants, swing my trusty wooden bat up, and hit the first good, large LCD screen I find.

They don't break like windows, these things, the screens crack like flimsy plastic. If you hit them dead center for instance, the whole monitor will almost envelope the bat, wires and computer chips bursting forth like candy from a piñata.

I imagine the store owner tomorrow, watching this yahoo dressed in a full suit vandalizing the fuck out of his store. Staring at the tapes with the police, looking precisely flabbergasted. He's running through his mind the question of who could've possibly done this. As something this senseless, well, the perpetrator must have his motives. Old disgruntled worker? Family friend who never really liked him? His mistress's boyfriend? He scratches his head with the most perplexing look as some dickhead who looks like he's on his way to the lounge at Chili's bats for the cycle in his store.

I rapidfire my bat through a succession of screens down the side wall, then bust up half a dozen Sony camcorders, smacking them like Whack-A-Mole.

I glance at my round face silver Richard Mille watch: two minutes in, two minutes left.

I start to swing at a few more screens when I spot the pièce de résistance in the back of the store. A small room with sliding glass doors houses a Sony LCD Bravia XBR9 Series mounted on the wall. Fifty-two inches, decked out with surround sound. A plush leather couch beckons me in. I salivate.

The glass doors break easily enough with my crowbar. Then I give the garden of mounted speakers a good trimming. Finally I approach the television, take in a deep breath, and with one mighty side-hand swoop let all my fury come at her. A noise comes out of my mouth, half Bruce Lee scream, half female tennis star grunt.

I stand there in a state of accomplishment, huffing and puffing. The store's inventory is destroyed. Then I pee while standing on the couch, and check my watch. Time is up.

I unlock the back door, rip out through the alley, past the huge garbage cans, and up a small hill. I emerge at the Skytrain station, cross the street, up the stairs, and onto a train as it rolls right in. I'm exactly on time.

I sit down in a heap of exhaustion. There's only a few scattered passengers in my car. I take the baseball bat and place it between my legs, receiving a few stares in the process. I light up a smoke. A middleaged man dressed in a windbreaker looks at me.

"You can't smoke in here," he says.

I take a drag and blow it out. Then I wince at a pain in my back, pull the crowbar out, and place it on my lap. He looks at it with his concerned wrinkled face as though I pulled it out of my ass.

He wants to say something else, but he's looking at a young man with bleached blonde spiky hair, dressed in a suit with alligator skin shoes, sporting a bat and crowbar and smoking a cigarette, looking as though he just beat the shit out of someone. He hesitates, then closes his mouth, gets up, and proceeds to move down to the end of the car, keeping a sly eye on me as he goes. He's decided he's not going to be a hero tonight.

~

As soon as I get home I vomit out almost fifty pages, waxing poetically-charged literati gold. I'm dreaming up characters, all extracted from the past in some way, shape or form. I write until the sun comes up, peeking her head over the apartment complex, a beam of sun-dried orange and smeared yellow. The vampire heads to bed.

I awake early in the evening, full suit still on. Underneath it there's a layer of sweat encasing me like a cocoon. I cough a few times, roll over, then find my way to the bathroom for a very healthy piss.

I take a cab back to the mall to grab my Porsche, survey the cop cars and police tape, even make eye contact with an officer as I drive by on my way out of the parking lot and back home. I feel incredibly empowered.

My agent is over again—important, he said. Just had to see me. The publicist has been contacted by *Vanity Fair*, and they're doing a piece on the story. My story. Michael's story. Michael's parent's story. Whoever's story it is.

Apparently it would do more harm than good to turn down *Vanity Fair*. All they want is a reporter to come by, do an hour-long interview, talk about everything. I'm told it's been a long enough time since my appearance on *The National*, and this would be legitimate, respected exposure. It would be a story in a magazine sold and read around the world. This would be the most legitimate chance I would get to have my say, to stand atop my soapbox and tell everyone how I felt about the whole mess.

They've already lined up interviews with Michael's parents, my publisher, a few literary types, university professors, a psychiatrist who deals with copycat suicides. But they need me for the article.

They need their little pariah boy-toy to splash all over the pages like Pollock paint. They'll no doubt use me as the framing device, start off with an anecdote, something about my checkered past of dead friends and lost job, or my writing style.

I cough, hack out some phlegm onto the glass coffee table. My agent just looks at me, waiting for an answer.

"When would they want to do the interview?"

"A few days from now, maybe over the weekend."

I nod, run my tongue against the inside of my teeth, mulling. What am I supposed to do here? Say no and look dismissive? Say yes and look eager? Either way I fail.

I get up, head over to the impromptu bar I've made on the waist high book shelf in the corner of the den. I make two vodkas, handing one to my agent.

"Have you been seeing a psychiatrist?"

"Not really."

"So no?"

"Yeah. No."

"You sure that's a good idea?"

"Dunno, is it?"

"I dunno, kid. I'd be looking for any help I could get right now."

"Would you now?"

"I would."

"Okay then."

My agent swirls his drink a bit, stares blankly at the melting cubes, then speaks. "I'd do the interview. You're better off doing the interview. Michael's parents are doing the interview. You need to tell your side, because everyone else is going to tell their side."

"And what is my side?"

He shakes his head ever so slightly. "I think that's for you to figure out."

"Huh."

I take a healthy pull from my drink, then rub my face all over with my hands, like trying to clean off a layer of topical filth.

"Sure, let's do it."

My agent claps his hands together. "Great, I'll set it up. You're open this weekend then? You don't have any plans?"

"No, no plans. I mean I was thinking of lighting a McDonald's on fire, but I can reschedule."

He laughs, chuckles, it's not a funny joke to him, but he's humouring me. Must think I'm making some type of quip, and needs to validate it somehow by laughing.

I clear my throat as an awkward silence arises between us.

"Okay then, I'll set it up," he says, standing up to place the drink I made for him on the coffee table. He didn't even take a sip. He stops and looks at me. "You'll be fine. Just be yourself. Don't drink too much. We'll stop by beforehand and brief you a bit on what to say."

"Brief me? Are we in the army or something? I thought this was for me to figure out."

"We'll just go over some of the things they might want to talk about—your past, that kind of stuff. There's going to be some hard questions."

"I see."

I sit back on the couch as he leaves, take another drink, light up a smoke and turn on the television. I flick awhile, trying my damndest not to think, but it's futile. My phone starts to vibrate. It's my old friend Ryan. He's going out tonight to some lounge for drinks with a few friends, he texts me, and wants to know if I'd like to come along. Tells me it would be good for me to get out and meet some people. Would it now. We haven't seen each

other in years, Ryan and I. Don't even know how he got my number. Whatever, he's an old friend, and I feel as if I have an obligation to my past.

'Sure', I text back. 'Sing when you're winning.'

I shit, shower, and trim my beard—the holy trinity—then throw a bit of gel in my blonde spikes. Pull out a suit, my Givenchy navy blue thin cut, and a hard pink shirt, open. Dark brown loafers, matching pink socks.

I decide it might be good to eat a full meal, considering the last time I ate a full meal was in Toronto almost two weeks ago. I head out to a newly opened restaurant, a quiet one down by the docks. Overlooking the river, sparse lighting. One of those one-syllable places, spelled with an umlaut.

I order a steak, some fries, and a bottle of wine. My pink socks are sticking out of the end of my dress slacks, I can tell, because I keep catching the waitresses looking at them. They giggle, looking more intrigued than scared. I'm passing as a respectable, responsible guy with a rakish taste in underwear.

One of them comes over, a tall blonde with a caramel tan. She offers to refill my wine.

"Of course," I say, holding up my glass.

She pours, a smile sliding across her face. I look at her.

"We all wanted to say we like your socks."

I glance behind her, to the three other waitresses standing by the bar. They look over and giggle slightly.

"Tell them thank you, from the bottom of my heart," I say, palm over chest.

She smiles, finishes pouring.

"And what's your name," I ask.

"Deanna."

"Nice to meet you, Deanna. Thanks for the wine and the compliment."

"No problem, anytime," she says, then walks away after having another good look at me.

Sharply dressed, psychotically pretentious, hiding a viscous, terrible secret. I am Patrick Bateman. Dress me up, but don't dare take me out.

Deanna writes her name and number on my receipt. Probably after she saw the \$100 tip, I'm thinking. Folding the receipt away, I head out to meet up with Ryan and his scattered acquaintances.

Ryan looks good, healthy, dressed like a banker just finished work. He is actually. He's cut his hair short, almost shaved, his spiky blonde Japanimation hair long gone. Long gone are his drug days too, it seems, he's more of a catalyst, an update, a newer version of the troubled young man I once knew. Ryan 2.0.

We catch up on old times, talk about the drug binges and the debauchery. It's warming to see a familiar face.

Drinks are good, conversation is good. It's dark, candle-lit in the lounge. Nobody seems to recognize me, or care, or want to bring *it* up. I'll take it.

One girl takes a liking to me. A brunette dressed elegantly in a dark cocktail dress. Amber. Green eyes, looks a bit like Alyssa Milano. I tell her I'm between jobs. She understands, she says, adding something topical about the economic downturn. She's a legal assistant about to take the bar exam. Has her own car, her own place. A well-adjusted woman, Amber is, one who happens to be intrigued by me for some reason. She likes to fish for compliments. I tell her she looks stunning tonight, like I'd seen her some other night, and she was only radiant.

Amber tells me her parents just retired, finally. She's hitting the glass ceiling at the law firm though. Older employees not looking to leave the workforce just yet, willing to hold onto their jobs a little while longer until the hurricane quiets to a tropical storm. I concur with her dilemma through a telling nod. We're the generation waiting for the keys to the car, for the right to take the controls. Patience is our virtue, our curse, our conundrum.

I head outside to the deck for a smoke. Thunder clouds are moving in from the west. Dark skies hovering. It will rain tonight.

I head back inside just as a few people leave. Amber comes and sits beside me—we chat for a bit, mostly about school, and jobs, and life and whatnot. She's a nice enough girl, smart, head on straight, seems cultured.

Another couple leaves and I think it's time for me to go. Six drinks in and I'm starting to unravel, chatterbox. I tell Ryan I'm thinking of going home. Amber looks at me.

"You heading home?" she asks.

"Yeah, tired, you know."

"You wanna go have a drink somewhere?"

I look at her. She looks . . . something. I have no idea. Women are a strange, alien species to me. I haven't been laid in close to a year. I can't read her at all.

"Yeah, like at another bar?"

"I know this place by my house, it's quiet."

I nod. "Okay."

We head out, and I follow her car, a brand new black Beemer. She leads me down to the water, off to the west of the city, into the parking lot of a funky little bar off the main drag. They serve dinner late, then people hang around until closing. More of a hangout for people who know people who work there. It's nice though, and we sit in the corner, looking out over the beach onto the ocean.

Amber is a bit out of my league, but my Porsche tells her otherwise. She looks like she could have come from money—nice ring, nice purse, nice car—she takes care of herself, or someone does, financially. But then again I could be wrong. I really have no fucking clue. I'm guessing, and I usually guess wrong.

"So you're quite the mysterious one," she says to me after our drinks arrive. Her legs unfold slightly from the side of the table. Smooth. I don't know what I'm doing, or what I'm supposed to say here. She's obviously not humouring me, but finds me somewhat appealing or attractive in some way.

"Yeah, mysterious sounds good."

"No I mean you're hiding something."

"Hiding something?"

"Yeah, I can tell. I'm good at reading people, my Dad was a psychiatrist."

I cough. Take a long pull from my drink. I go to open my mouth, but stop, playing with the straw in my drink instead. I look out the window. "Look," I say, "I'm not big on interrogations

or anything. This secret, it's not something cool, okay? You invited me here."

She smiles. "I know, I'm sorry. I just had to point it out. I have secrets too, we all have them. I want to tell you something, and you seem like you're a good listener."

The word comes out of my mouth hesitantly. "O-kay?"

She adjusts herself, looks me in the eye. "I was dating this guy, he was a great guy, and we'd been going out for over a year. But something always put me off about him. I didn't know what it was. . . ."

"Okay. . . ."

"Anyways, so one day he just leaves me. He didn't give any reason other than he was into this other girl. He just left me, alone. Wouldn't return my phone calls, wouldn't give me any type of explanation."

I lean back in my chair as if she might pull out some type of weapon at any moment.

"So the strange thing is, this has been happening to me all my life. Every boyfriend I've ever had has just left me. No real reason, sometimes they just move away, or cheat on me. I've got all this baggage, and I never brought any of it on myself. I'm a good person. I don't lie, I volunteer, I've never hurt anyone."

She ends the last sentence as if I'm supposed to respond. I don't.

"These guys, they're all just assholes," she goes on. "I've never had a one night stand. Never cheated on a boyfriend. I mean am I not good looking? Tell me honestly."

I'm sitting there, leaning back to keep my distance. I don't answer, but take a sip from my drink instead.

"It's a simple question."

In all actuality, she's quite attractive. Good body, no fat on her. Nice face, good fashion sense, she's easily well above average. An eight. The type of girl that doesn't have to chase guys, if she waits long enough they'll come to her.

"You're good looking, so I'm not sure what you want me to say here."

"Just answer honestly."

“You’re hot. I mean you’re not drop-dead gorgeous, but you’re good looking enough not to be too worried about your appearance hindering you or anything.”

“Would you sleep with me if you had the chance?”

I take another sip from my drink, but I don’t take my eye off her at all. I’m getting the sense I’m on candid camera or something, like this is some fucking hoax.

“I don’t understand this at all. Is this why you asked me here?”

“I asked you here because I wanted to get an honest male opinion. You seem like a guy who’s been through a few things. I just want to know what you think.”

“What does it matter?” I say, my voice becoming a bit harsh. “Go ask some other guy. Go ask the bartender,” I say, nodding towards the bar.

“I want to ask you.”

I shake my head, about done with this. I lean forward. “Look. I’ve paid for my sins, and now I just want to be left alone. I don’t owe you, or women, or anyone, a God-damn fucking thing. So if you expect me to sit here and defend the male species. No, not going to happen.”

She comes back at me, accelerated. “Did you come here because you think you might get laid?”

I lean forward, rub my eyes with one hand. I’m not doing this shit, not tonight.

I stand up, pull out my wallet and put down a hundred in twenties. “Thank you for the drink, it was nice to meet you.”

I walk out of the bar, shaking my head in disbelief. I head up the street to my car, hearing high heels behind me, speed-walking.

“Wait,” says Amber.

I stop, wincing first before I turn around, expecting some sort of retaliation.

She comes up close, her perfume following in slowly, into my nose. She holds my hand. “Look, I know you’re hiding something, it’s weighing on you. Maybe an ex too, I think, but I don’t know. I don’t want to know. I just know I haven’t had

sex in quite a while, and I was just wondering if you could help me with that.”

I can’t help but laugh. I look around to see if any other human being might have heard what she just said.

“You’re fucking joking right?”

“No, I’m not. Look, if you don’t want to, that’s fine. I’m just attracted to you, and I’m really stressed out lately—I need a rebound lay or something. And you, you look like you might need the same thing. A . . . release.”

I still don’t know what to say. I’m flabbergasted. This must be what the Sony Entertainment store owner is feeling right now.

“Sex? You just want to have sex with me?”

“Yes, and you can leave in the morning. Actually it would probably be better if you did. If you don’t want to do this, it’s fine. I’m just offering.”

I take a breath in. I’m incredibly turned on. However I’m a man, so the bra section in the Sears catalogue turns me on.

“So, like at your house?”

“I only live a few blocks away.”

I just look at her, still unsure if I’m getting duped. I feel now as if I have the right to ask a few inquisitive questions.

“Are you a prostitute or something? I’m not paying for sex.”

“No, I’m not a prostitute. Look, I’m not going to wait for an answer, it’s starting to rain.”

She’s right, it is. Thunder grumbles across the bay, faint sheet lightning off to the west.

“Okay, Amber, you got me. Where’s your house?”

She looks at me, and smiles.

~

Sheet lightning. Lighting up the sky, an excess of oxygen white, a camera flash, hills and mountains exposed in the obsidian panorama. Thunder erupts, barrels overhead and into the eardrums, a peripheral ignition.

She comes into the room wearing only her panties. Slivers of light spill in through the blinds as she pulls off my clothes, runs

her nails over my chest and arms. She doesn't look me in the eye. I'm to remain anonymous to her. She just needs to feel sexy, feel wanted, turned on. I pull her in tight, willing to oblige.

Grunts and gasps join the thunder. I wince out a noise that grumbles from my throat. She grabs my shoulder blades and tries to rip them apart as I cough, pull out, collapse beside her. She rolls over onto my side, her pubic bone pushing into my ass.

I relax so much I start to free fall into the bed sheets. Unaware of anything other than the physical, unable to think about anything but the present, I close my eyes and sink into a deep unconsciousness, a beautiful opiate slumber as the thunder keeps us company in the dark.

It's the first time I've slept without dreaming in months. Deep, black, blissful sleep. Nothing, no consciousness. No thoughts. A blank page that remains unwritten until I awake a few hours later. Amber is fast asleep, snoring quietly. Cute.

I get up, get dressed and get out as we discussed. Breakfast would be simply awkward. I don't leave my card, or number. I figure I'll just leave, as planned. Don't fuck up good sex with bad conversation.

I go home and take a shower, and then a nap. When I awake, I turn to my laptop, spilling more characters onto the page. Story lines take form. After a few hours I pass out again with the laptop on my stomach, feet on the coffee table, my hands exhausted from hours of typing.

~

I'm awake. Startled, by a pounding at the door. The doorbell ringing incessantly. It's my agent, and publisher, along with a publicist, here to brief me for my *Vanity Fair* interview. An unbearable stress, almost forgotten, gallops up behind me.

"Remember, you want to seem like you're dealing with this—not too well, it's hurting you, but not destroying you. You don't want to seem like it isn't affecting you at all, but then again you don't want to seem like you're totally immersed in it, unable to let it go. Understand?"

"You want to remain humble, so keep money and book sales out of it. Don't talk about how this has made you a much sought after writer. But then you want to let them know you're a skilled writer and that you have talent, ideas, a second book well underway. Focus on this second book, but not too much because then you'll look like you're peddling, trying to drum up press."

"Offer him a drink, but don't drink too much. You need to be relaxed, seem confident, but not cocky. Try to divert the conversation away from Michael as much as possible, but don't make it seem like you're trying to divert the questions away from Michael. Try to be coy about it. Seamless."

I just stare at the three of them, these three censorship monkeys staring inquisitively back at me.

"Anything else," I say.

"Try to get out of the house. Go for dinner. Maybe introduce him to your father. You need other people to show that you're stable. He's going to be watching you like a hawk—it's all going to be on the record right from the get go—you know how it goes."

"I know how it goes?" I say, taking a deep breath in. "Okay, can you guys get out now?"

They all look at one another, nod and leave shortly thereafter.

I shower, trim my beard, and take a nap. I change into a black short sleeve dress shirt and tapered jeans. I'm supposed to look casual but not too casual. Not over or under-prepared. Ready but relaxed. I'm supposed to balance, hover, between a million different things. Untethered, I've lost all sense of gravity.

The journalist shows up on time. He's in a rented four-door car. Mid 40s. Glasses, short hair starting to thin and grey. He's probably done over ten thousand interviews in his life. I am simply the next one on the ever-growing list.

Steve Machin. That's his name, pronounced "Mash-in." He tells me a little anecdotal story about taking his American money to get it exchanged into Canadian. That's what you do when you come to Canada from the United States, you change your money. Because you usually get a bit more. Not this time though. The exchange rate is zero. He thought that was interesting. I smile politely.

He's been on staff at *Vanity Fair* for eight years and mostly covers lifestyle stories. Entrepreneurs. Artists. Public figures, that sort of thing. The occasional political story.

Columbia, where he did his master's degree. Where he worked on the desk at *The New York Times*, some other magazines—I'm zoning out. I stand up and head to my bar for a drink, asking him if he wants one. He declines, asks for water instead. I get him water.

He turns his recorder on, so I guess we're starting right away. He wants to talk for an hour. He's already done all the other interviews for the story.

The first ten minutes of the interview are the usual, trying to get background on me, filling in all the blanks. He's massaging my vocal chords into coherence, so when the juicy questions arise I'll be lubed up properly for that brilliantly placed pull-quote response. I know this drill all too well. He also notifies me that a photographer will be coming tomorrow. Drops it into the conversation casually, this bit about a local freelancer meeting me to take a few photographs. Fantastic, I say.

The usual suspects of questions start to roll off the conveyor belt. What was my initial reaction? How do I feel now? Do I feel responsible for his death? What would I say to Michael's parents if I got the chance?

He asks me if I blog, or Twitter. I don't. I have a Facebook account, an email. He asks me if I feel as if I think young people don't read books anymore. I say one young person read my book. He asks me if I feel a part of a new breed of Gen Y writers. I don't. Do I feel a part of any movement? I don't. Am I rebelling against technology, the global village kids are growing up in? I'm not. I download music all the time, spend a lot of time on the internet. I am not a part of the new scene, but I do participate in its recreation from time to time.

I tell him I feel like I'm in between generations. I had no internet or cell phone in high school, but now I spend just as much time in front of a computer as I do a TV. I was here before the revolution, and was converted by proxy. I represent the last remnants of a generation raised in a de-globalized world.

He asks me some of my influences. I rail off some notables. Movies? Sure. Music, yeah I listen to it. I'm not cutting edge, I follow the trends, pick which ones I like. I tell him I can remember a time in high school when I listened to music on a cassette player. He smiles, and I suddenly feel very old.

He asks me about my writing style. At night, in the morning, strict regimen? I tell him I write in spurts of inspiration, leaving out the detail that random acts of vandalism and sex have become my primary muse and motivation.

The comparisons to Douglas Coupland? Flattered, sure. For "The iPod Generation," as *The Globe & Mail* put it? I wince, and say nothing.

He asks me about my second book. It's coming along, I say. He asks what it's about. I tell him it's about art imitating life, but other than that, it's too early to tell. Working title? No, don't have one.

I'm being more than amicable. He's trying to soften me with each blow, work the body, get me to open up and drop my guard. He's good at what he does, and he's trying to make me feel comfortably confident in hearing my own voice.

He slyly lets the conversation veer off-topic a little in order to feel natural. We talk about *Oldboy* and the Virginia Tech massacre, those kids who lay down on the highway and died after watching *The Program*. John Hinkley Jr. and *Taxi Driver*, the rash of fight clubs in Silicon Valley after *Fight Club*, and *Futility*, or *the Wreck of the Titan* and the Titanic.

But the life imitating art discussion wears thin quickly, and he veers back to me. My past, my parents, separated, one left. No siblings. Grandparents? All gone. High school? I tell him I slept through most of it. What did I want to be when I grew up? A rugby player.

Then he goes back to *it*, one last time. I give him something.

"I had this dream a few weeks ago, I'm walking down the street and it's dark out. I go to cross the street, and as I do, I get blindsided by this car speeding down the road. No warning, no anything—I barely even see the headlights before it rams into me. I hurl around, feeling like I can't breathe, my lungs shrinking. Then

I hit the ground and everything goes quiet. . . . But then I get up, miraculously, unhurt. Completely shell-shocked, yes, but unhurt. I walk over to the car—it's just sitting there in the middle of the street, front window smashed, headlights still on, engine running. I look in the driver's side window, and I see myself. I see myself sitting there, staring straight forward, frozen—and then I woke up.”

I look at him. He's ever so slightly nodding.

“Honestly,” I say, “that's about as close as I've ever gotten to understanding this whole mess.” And I leave it at that.

He senses I've had just about enough. It's only been about forty-five minutes but he calls it a day. I walk him upstairs to the door where he gives me the card of the photographer looking to stop by tomorrow for photos. He leaves, gets in his rented car, like a burglar who broke into my house and rummaged through all my shit without stealing anything. I feel violated in the most passive-aggressive way.

I head back down to the den, and my father comes home a little later after a long shift. We eat dinner, watch sports highlights together, then have a beer. We talk to each other in single syllables, but it's comforting after having talked so much earlier.

I try to write later, but nothing comes. So then I do the next best thing and pump myself full of chewable codeine. I take four, with a shot of tequila chased by children's cough syrup. The most I've ever taken is two, so this should be interesting.

I watch television for a bit in the dark, *South Park*, followed by some European soccer. Then I turn the channel to static and press mute.

Time slows, then drags, then starts to flow like mud. My eyes begin to water, my head weighed down by my chin, and my mouth starts to dry up. I take a few sips of water. Each joint of my body starts to fabricate a soft glow around it, and I chuckle quietly to myself. My weight cuts in half—I'm barely pressing into the couch—as each valve of my heart pushes blood more slowly, transient white blood cells wallowing in the gridlock. I'm starting to worry about overdosing, but I'm way too relaxed to care.

Death has no relation to fear now. A somber reckoning, a comfort in the unknown, that's all. I know this feeling. An old

friend returning to familiar places. I feel ready to die at this moment, ready to leave the absurdity of this life behind for the reality of another unknown. I'm at ease with the knowledge of an afterlife. These drugs are doing more than their job right now. I could enjoy rape, I decide.

I have a sudden urge to fall asleep in a McDonald's ball pit, but it passes and I'm out.