

## MY MISSPENT YOUTH

culty remembering events as they actually happened. No doubt it is a symptom of my aforementioned *point*, which concerns the tendency of contemporary human beings to live not actual lives but simulations of lives, loving not actual people but the general idea of those people, operating at several degrees of remove from what might be considered authentic if we weren't trying so hard to create authenticity through songs and clothes and advertisements and a million other agents of realness. In other words, this book is about a world ruled by accessories, about a citizenry that expresses its tastes, its politics, its dreams, and its heartbreaks via the trinkets on its shelves. But maybe that's just me.

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It started in cold weather; fall was drifting away into an intolerable chill. I was on the tail end of twenty-six, living in New York City, and trying to support myself as a writer. One morning I logged on to my America Online account to find a message under the heading "is this the real meghan daum?" It came from someone with the screen name PFSlider. The body of the message consisted of five sentences, written entirely in lowercase letters, of perfectly turned flattery, something about PFSlider's admiration of some newspaper and magazine articles I had published over the last year and a half, something else about his resulting infatuation with me, and something about his being a sportswriter in California.

I was charmed for a moment or so, engaged for the thirty seconds that it took me to read the message and fashion a reply. Though it felt strange to be in the position of confirming that I was indeed "the real meghan daum," I managed to say, "Yes, it's me. Thank you for writing." I clicked the "Send Now" icon and shot my words into the void, where I forgot about PFSlider until the next day when I received another message, this one entitled "eureka." "wow, it is you," he wrote, still in lowercase. He chronicled the various conditions under which he'd read my few and far between articles: a boardwalk in Laguna Beach, the spring

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training pressroom for the baseball team he covered for a Los Angeles newspaper. He confessed to having a "crazy crush" on me. He referred to me as "princess daum." He said he wanted to propose marriage or at least have lunch with me during one of his two annual trips to New York. He managed to do all of this without sounding like a schmuck. As I read the note, I smiled the kind of smile one tries to suppress, the kind of smile that arises during a sappy movie one never even admits to seeing. The letter was outrageous and endearingly pathetic, possibly the practical joke of a friend trying to rouse me out of a temporary writer's block. But the kindness pouring forth from my computer screen was unprecedented and bizarrely exhilarating. I logged off and thought about it for a few hours before writing back to express how flattered and touched—this was probably the first time I had ever used the word "touched" in earnest—I was by his message.

I had received e-mail messages from strangers before, most of them kind and friendly and courteous—all of those qualities that generally get checked with the coats at the cocktail parties that comprise what the information age has now forced us to call the "three-dimensional world." I am always warmed by an unsolicited gesture of admiration or encouragement, amazed that anyone would bother, shocked that communication from a stranger could be fueled by anything other than an attempt to get a job or make what the professional world has come to call "a connection."

I am not what most people would call a "computer person." I have utterly no interest in chat rooms, news groups, or most Web sites. I derive a palpable thrill from sticking an actual letter in the U.S. mail. But e-mail, though at that time I generally only sent and received a few messages a week, proves a useful forum for my particular communication

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anxieties. I have a constant, low-grade fear of the telephone. I often call people with the intention of getting their answering machines. There is something about the live voice that has become startling, unnervingly organic, as volatile as incendiary talk radio. PFSlider and I tossed a few innocuous, smart-assed notes back and forth over the week following his first message. His name was Pete. He was twenty-nine and single. I revealed very little about myself, relying instead on the ironic commentary and forced witticisms that are the conceit of most e-mail messages. But I quickly developed an oblique affection for PFSlider. I was excited when there was a message from him, mildly depressed when there wasn't. After a few weeks, he gave me his phone number. I did not give him mine but he looked me up anyway and called me one Friday night. I was home. I picked up the phone. His voice was jarring yet not unpleasant. He held up more than his end of the conversation for an hour, and when he asked permission to call me again, I accepted as though we were in a previous century.

Pete, as I was forced to call him on the phone—I never could wrap my mind around his actual name, privately referring to him as PFSlider, "e-mail guy," or even "baseball boy"—began calling me two or three times a week. He asked if he could meet me in person and I said that would be okay. Christmas was a few weeks away and he would be returning east to see his family. From there, he would take the short flight to New York and have lunch with me. "It is my off-season mission to meet you," he said. "There will probably be a snowstorm," I said. "I'll take a team of sled dogs," he answered. We talked about our work and our families, about baseball and Bill Clinton and Howard Stern and sex, about his hatred for Los Angeles and how much he wanted a new job. Other times we would find each other logged on to America Online at the same

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time and type back and forth for hours. For me, this was far superior to the phone. Through typos and misspellings, he flirted maniacally. "I have an absurd crush on you," he said. "If I like you in person you must promise to marry me." I was coy and conceited, telling him to get a life, baiting him into complimenting me further, teasing him in a way I would never have dared in the real world or even on the phone. I would stay up until 3 A.M. typing with him, smiling at the screen, getting so giddy that I couldn't fall asleep. I was having difficulty recalling what I used to do at night. My phone was tied up for hours at a time. No one in the real world could reach me, and I didn't really care.

In off moments, I heard echoes of things I'd said just weeks earlier: "The Internet is destroying the world. Human communication will be rendered obsolete. We will all develop carpal tunnel syndrome and die." But curiously, the Internet, at least in the limited form in which I was using it, was having the opposite effect. My interaction with PFSlider was more human than much of what I experienced in the daylight realm of live beings. I was certainly putting more energy into the relationship than I had put into any before, giving him attention that was by definition undivided, relishing the safety of the distance by opting to be truthful rather than doling out the white lies that have become the staple of real life. The outside world—the place where I walked around on the concrete, avoiding people I didn't want to deal with, peppering the ground with half-truths, and applying my motto of "let the machine take it" to almost any scenario—was sliding into the periphery of my mind. I was a better person with PFSlider. I was someone I could live with.

This borrowed identity is, of course, the primary convention of Internet relationships. The false comfort of the cyberspace persona has

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been identified as one of the maladies of our time, another avenue for the remoteness that so famously plagues contemporary life. But the better person that I was to PFSlider was not a result of being a different person to him. It was simply that I was a desired person, the object of a blind man's gaze. I may not have known my suitor, but for the first time in my life, I knew the deal. I knew when I'd hear from him and how I'd hear from him. I knew he wanted me because he said he wanted me, because the distance and facelessness and lack of gravity of it all allowed him to be sweeter to me than most real-life people had ever managed. For the first time in my life, I was involved in a ritualized courtship. Never before had I realized how much that kind of structure was missing from my everyday life.

And so PFSlider became my everyday life. All the tangible stuff—the trees outside, my friends, the weather—fell away. I could physically feel my brain. My body did not exist. I had no skin, no hair, no bones; all desire had converted itself into a cerebral current that reached nothing but my frontal lobe. Lust was something not felt but thought. My brain was devouring all of my other organs and gaining speed with each swallow. There was no outdoors, the sky and wind were irrelevant. There was only the computer screen and the phone, my chair and maybe a glass of water. Pete started calling every day, sometimes twice, even three times. Most mornings I would wake up to find a message from PFSlider, composed in Pacific time while I slept in the wee hours. "I had a date last night," he wrote, "and I am not ashamed to say it was doomed from the start because I couldn't stop thinking about you." Then, a few days later, "If you stood before me now, I would plant the warmest kiss on your cheek that I could muster."

I fired back a message slapping his hand. "We must be careful where

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we tread," I said. This was true but not sincere. I wanted it, all of it. I wanted the deepest bow down before me. I wanted my ego not merely massaged but kneaded. I wanted unfettered affection, soul mating, true romance. In the weeks that had elapsed since I picked up "is this the real meghan daum?" the real me underwent some kind of meltdown, a systemic rejection of all the savvy and independence I had worn for years like a grown-up Girl Scout badge. Since graduating from college, I had spent three years in a serious relationship and two years in a state of neither looking for a boyfriend nor particularly avoiding one. I had had the requisite number of false starts and five-night stands, dates that I wasn't sure were dates, emphatically casual affairs that buckled under their own inertia even before dawn broke through the iron-guarded windows of stale, one-room city apartments. Even though I was heading into my late twenties, I was still a child, ignorant of dance steps or health insurance, a prisoner of credit-card debt and student loans and the nagging feeling that I didn't want anyone to find me until I had pulled myself into some semblance of an adult. I was a true believer in the urban dream—in years of struggle succumbing to brilliant success, in getting a break, in making it. Like most of my friends, I was selfish by design. To want was more virtuous than to need. I wanted someone to love me but I certainly didn't need it. I didn't want to be alone, but as long as I was, I had no choice but to wear my solitude as though it were haute couture. The worst sin imaginable was not cruelty or bitchiness or even professional failure but vulnerability. To admit to loneliness was to slap the face of progress. It was to betray the times in which we lived.

But PFSlider derailed me. He gave me all of what I'd never realized I wanted. He called not only when he said he would, but unexpectedly, just to say hello. His guard was not merely down but nonexistent. He let

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his phone bill grow to towering proportions. He thought about me all the time and admitted it. He talked about me with his friends and admitted it. He arranged his holiday schedule around our impending date. He managed to charm me with sports analogies. He courted and wooed and romanced me. He didn't hesitate. He was unblinking and unapologetic, all nerviness and balls to the wall. He wasn't cheap. He went out of his way. I'd never seen anything like it.

Of all the troubling details of this story, the one that bothers me the most is the way I slurped up his attention like some kind of dying animal. My addiction to PFSlider's messages indicated a monstrous narcissism. But it also revealed a subtler desire that I didn't fully understand at the time. My need to experience an old-fashioned kind of courtship was stronger than I had ever imagined. The epistolary quality of our relationship put our communication closer to the eighteenth century than the uncertain millennium. For the first time in my life, I was not involved in a protracted "hang out" that would lead to a quasi-romance. I was involved in a well-defined structure, a neat little space in which we were both safe to express the panic and intrigue of our mutual affection. Our interaction was refreshingly orderly, noble in its vigor, dignified despite its shamelessness. It was far removed from the randomness of real-life relationships. We had an intimacy that seemed custom-made for our strange, lonely times. It seemed custom-made for me.

The day of our date was frigid and sunny. Pete was sitting at the bar of the restaurant when I arrived. We shook hands. For a split second he leaned toward me with his chin as if to kiss me. He was shorter than I had imagined, though he was not short. He registered to me as neither handsome nor un-handsome. He had very nice hands. He wore a very

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nice shirt. We were seated at a very nice table. I scanned the restaurant for people I knew, saw no one and couldn't decide how I felt about that.

He talked and I heard nothing he said. He talked and talked and talked. I stared at his profile and tried to figure out if I liked him. He seemed to be saying nothing in particular, though it went on forever. Later we went to the Museum of Natural History and watched a science film about the physics of storms. We walked around looking for the dinosaurs and he talked so much that I wanted to cry. Outside, walking along Central Park West at dusk, through the leaves, past the horse-drawn carriages and yellow cabs and splendid lights of Manhattan at Christmas, he grabbed my hand to kiss me and I didn't let him. I felt as if my brain had been stuffed with cotton. Then, for some reason, I invited him back to my apartment, gave him a few beers, and finally let him kiss me on the lumpy futon in my bedroom. The radiator clanked. The phone rang and the machine picked up. A car alarm blared outside. A key turned in the door as one of my roommates came home. I had no sensation at all, only the dull *déjà vu* of being back in some college dorm room, making out in a generic fashion on an Indian throw rug while Cat Stevens' *Greatest Hits* played on the portable stereo. I wanted Pete out of my apartment. I wanted to hand him his coat, close the door behind him, and fight the ensuing emptiness by turning on the computer and taking comfort in PFSlider.

When Pete finally did leave, I sulked. The ax had fallen. He'd talked way too much. He was hyper. He hadn't let me talk, although I hadn't tried very hard. I berated myself from every angle, for not kissing him on Central Park West, for letting him kiss me at all, for not liking him, for wanting to like him more than I had wanted anything in such a long time. I was horrified by the realization that I had invested so heavily in

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a made-up character, a character in whose creation I'd had a greater hand than even Pete himself. How could I, a person so self-congratulatingly reasonable, have gotten sucked into a scenario that was more akin to a television talk show than the relatively full and sophisticated life I was so convinced I led? How could I have received a fan letter and allowed it to go this far? Then a huge bouquet of FTD flowers arrived from him. No one had ever sent me flowers before. I was sick with sadness. I hated either the world or myself, and probably both.

No one had ever forced me to forgive them before. But for some reason, I forgave Pete. I cut him more slack than I ever had anyone. I granted him an official pardon, excused his failure for not living up to PFSlider. Instead of blaming him, I blamed the Earth itself, the invasion of tangible things into the immaculate communication PFSlider and I had created. With its roommates and ringing phones and subzero temperatures, the physical world came barreling in with all the obstreperousness of a major weather system, and I ignored it. As human beings with actual flesh and hand gestures and Gap clothing, Pete and I were utterly incompatible, but I pretended otherwise. In the weeks that followed I pictured him and saw the image of a plane lifting off over an overcast city. PFSlider was otherworldly, more a concept than a person. His romance lay in the notion of flight, the physics of gravity defiance. So when he offered to send me a plane ticket to spend the weekend with him in Los Angeles, I took it as an extension of our blissful remoteness, a three-dimensional e-mail message lasting an entire weekend. I pretended it was a good idea.

The temperature on the runway at JFK was seven degrees Fahrenheit. We sat for three hours waiting for de-icing. Finally we took off over the frozen city, the DC 10 hurling itself against the wind. Th-

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ground below shrank into a drawing of itself. Laptop computers were plopped onto tray tables. The air recirculated and dried out my contact lenses. I watched movies without the sound and thought to myself that they were probably better that way. Something about the plastic interior of the fuselage and the plastic forks and the din of the air and the engines was soothing and strangely sexy, as fabricated and seductive as PFSlider. I thought about Pete and wondered if I could ever turn him into an actual human being, if I could ever even want to. I knew so many people in real life, people to whom I spoke face-to-face, people who made me laugh or made me frustrated or happy or bored. But I'd never given any of them as much as I'd given PFSlider. I'd never forgiven their spasms and their speeches, never tied up my phone for hours in order to talk to them. I'd never bestowed such senseless tenderness on anyone.

We descended into LAX. We hit the tarmac and the seat belt signs blinked off. I hadn't moved my body in eight hours, and now, I was walking through the tunnel to the gate, my clothes wrinkled, my hair matted, my hands shaking. When I saw Pete in the terminal, his face registered to me as blank and impossible to process as the first time I'd met him. He kissed me chastely. On the way out to the parking lot, he told me that he was being seriously considered for a job in New York. He was flying back there next week. If he got the job he'd be moving within the month. I looked at him in astonishment. Something silent and invisible seemed to fall on us. Outside, the wind was warm and the Avis and Hertz buses ambled alongside the curb of Terminal 5. The palm trees shook and the air seemed as heavy and earthly as Pete's hand, which held mine for a few seconds before dropping it to get his car keys out of his pocket. The leaves on the trees were unmanageably real. He stood before me, all

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flesh and preoccupation. The physical world had invaded our space. For this I could not forgive him.

Everything now was for the touching. Everything was buildings and bushes, parking meters and screen doors and sofas. Gone was the computer; the erotic darkness of the telephone; the clean, single dimension of Pete's voice at 1 A.M. It was nighttime, yet the combination of sight and sound was blinding. We went to a restaurant and ate outside on the sidewalk. We were strained for conversation. I tried not to care. We drove to his apartment and stood under the ceiling light not really looking at each other. Something was happening that we needed to snap out of. Any moment now, I thought. Any moment and we'll be all right. These moments were crowded with elements, with carpet fibers and direct light and the smells of everything that had a smell. They left marks as they passed. It was all wrong. Gravity was all there was.

For three days, we crawled along the ground and tried to pull ourselves up. We talked about things that I can no longer remember. We read the *Los Angeles Times* over breakfast. We drove north past Santa Barbara to tour the wine country. I stomped around in my clunky shoes and black leather jacket, a killer of ants and earthworms and any hope in our abilities to speak and be understood. Not until studying myself in the bathroom mirror of a highway rest stop did I fully realize the preposterousness of my uniform. I felt like the shot in a human shot put, an object that could not be lifted, something that secretly weighed more than the world itself. We ate an expensive dinner. We checked into a hotel and watched television. Pete talked at me and through me and past me. I tried to listen. I tried to talk. But I bored myself and irritated him. Our conversation was a needle that could not be threaded. Still, we played nice. We tried to care and pretended to keep trying long after we

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had given up. In the car on the way home, he told me I was cynical, and I didn't have the presence of mind to ask him just how many cynics he had met who would travel three thousand miles to see someone they barely knew. Just for a chance. Just because the depths of my hope exceeded the thickness of my leather jacket and the thickness of my skin. And at that moment, I released myself into the sharp knowledge that communication had once again eliminated itself as a possibility.

Pete drove me to the airport at 7 A.M. so I could make my eight o'clock flight home. He kissed me goodbye, another chaste peck I recognized from countless dinner parties and dud dates from real life. He said he'd call me in a few days when he got to New York for his job interview, which we had discussed only in passing and with no reference to the fact that New York was where I happened to live. I returned home to the frozen January. A few days later, he came to New York and we didn't see each other. He called me from the plane back to Los Angeles to tell me, through the static, that he had gotten the job. He was moving to my city.

PFSlider was dead. Pete had killed him. I had killed him. I'd killed my own persona too, the girl on the phone and online, the character created by some writer who'd captured him one morning long ago as he read the newspaper. There would be no meeting him in distant hotel lobbies during the baseball season. There would be no more phone calls or e-mail messages. In a single moment, Pete had completed his journey out of our mating dance and officially stepped into the regular world, the world that gnawed at me daily, the world that fed those five night stands, the world where romance could not be sustained because we simply did not know how to do it. Here, we were all chitchat and ether jackets, bold proclaimers of all that we did not need. But what struck me most about this affair was the unpredictable nature of our demise. Unlike

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most cyber romances, which seem to come fully equipped with the inevitable set of misrepresentations and false expectations, PFSlider and I had played it fairly straight. Neither of us had lied. We'd done the best we could. We were dead from natural causes rather than virtual ones.

Within a two-week period after I returned from Los Angeles, at least seven people confessed to me the vagaries of their own e-mail affairs. This topic arose, unprompted, over the course of normal conversation. Four of these people had gotten on planes and met their correspondents, traveling from New Haven to Baltimore, New York to Montana, Texas to Virginia, and New York to Johannesburg. These were normal people, writers and lawyers and scientists, whom I knew from the real world. They were all smart, attractive, and more than a little sheepish about admitting just how deep they had been sucked in. Very few had met in chat rooms. Instead, the messages had started after chance meetings at parties and on planes; some, like me, had received notes in response to things they'd written online or elsewhere. Two of these people had fallen in love, the others chalked it up to a strange, uniquely postmodern experience. They all did things they would never do in the real world: they sent flowers, they took chances, they forgave. I heard most of these stories in the close confines of smoky bars and crowded restaurants, and we would all shake our heads in bewilderment as we told our tales, our eyes focused on some distant point that could never be reigned in to the surface of the Earth. Mostly it was the courtship ritual that had drawn us in. We had finally wooed and been wooed, given an old-fashioned structure through which to attempt the process of romance. E-mail had become an electronic epistle, a yearned-for rule book. The black and white of the type, the welcome respite from the dis-



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tractions of smells and weather and other people, had, in effect, allowed us to be vulnerable and passionate enough to actually care about something. It allowed us to do what was necessary to experience love. It was not the Internet that contributed to our remote, fragmented lives. The problem was life itself.

The story of PFSlider still makes me sad. Not so much because we no longer have anything to do with one another, but because it forces me to grapple with all three dimensions of daily life with greater awareness than I used to. After it became clear that our relationship would never transcend the screen and the phone, after the painful realization that our face-to-face knowledge of each other had in fact permanently contaminated the screen and the phone, I hit the pavement again, went through the motions of real life, said "hello" and "goodbye" to people in the regular way. In darker moments, I remain mortified by everything that happened with PFSlider. It terrifies me to admit to a firsthand understanding of the way the heart and the ego are entwined. Like diseased trees that have folded in on one another, our need to worship fuses with our need to be worshipped. Love eventually becomes only about how much mystique can be maintained. It upsets me even more to see how this entanglement is made so much more intense, so unhampered and intoxicating, by way of a remote access like e-mail. But I'm also thankful that I was forced to unpack the raw truth of my need and stare at it for a while. This was a dare I wouldn't have taken in three dimensions.

The last time I saw Pete he was in New York, thousands of miles away from what had been his home and a million miles away from PFSlider. In a final gesture of decency, in what I later realized was the most ordinary kind of closure, he took me out to dinner. We talked about nothing. He paid the bill. He drove me home in his rental car, the smell and

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sound of which was as arbitrary and impersonal as what we now were to each other. Then he disappeared forever. He became part of the muddy earth, as unmysterious as anything located next door. I stood on my stoop and felt that familiar rush of indifference. Pete had joined the angry and exhausted living. He drifted into my chaos, and joined me down in reality where, even if we met on the street, we'd never see each other again, our faces obscured by the branches and bodies and falling debris that make up the ether of the physical world.

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It's a good thing we don't own any. We can't afford them. Besides, they're not as timeless as they once were.

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Earlier this summer I was walking down West End Avenue in Manhattan and remembered, with a sadness that nearly knocked me off my feet, just why I came to New York seven years ago and just why I am now about to leave. Certain kinds of buildings seem almost too gorgeous to belong to the actual world, or at least the present-day world. Given the aluminum siding and brickface that proliferates throughout most of the United States, I'm always amazed that massive, ornate residences like 838 West End Avenue, with its yellow façade and black hieroglyphics, or 310 Riverside Drive, with its gargoyles and cornices, are still standing and receiving mail delivery and depositing kids in and out of the front doors like pretty much any domicile anywhere. When I was growing up in northern New Jersey, just twenty-five miles away from Manhattan, I had no concept that actual people could live in such places. My first inkling came when I was seventeen. I walked into an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and decided, within two minutes, what the controlling force of my life would be.

It was the summer of 1987, and I was in the process of learning how to drive a stick shift. My father is a composer and he allowed me to drive him to Manhattan in our Plymouth Horizon in order to drop off some lead sheets to a music copyist he worked with. The music copyist lived

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on West End Avenue and 104th Street, in a modest four-room apartment in a 1920s-era building. The moment the rickety elevator lurched onto the sixth floor and the copyist opened the door, life for me was never the same.

There was nothing particularly fancy about the place. It was a standard prewar with moldings around the ceilings and, most likely, porcelain hexagonal bathroom tiles that were coming loose. Although I'm not sure if there were faded Persian rugs on the floors and NPR humming from the speakers, it was just the sort of place for that. The music copyist and his wife had lived there for almost twenty years and although rent was the furthest thing from my mind at the time, I can now surmise, based on what they probably earned, that the apartment was rent controlled, perhaps \$300 per month. It's now difficult to imagine a time when I didn't walk into someone's apartment and immediately start the income-to-rent ratio calculations. But on that summer night, standing in the living room of this apartment, looking down on the streets whose voluptuous, stony buildings formed the shore to the river that so famously keeps *here* safely away from *there*, my life was changed forever. I mean no melodrama in this. From that moment on, everything I did, every decision I made, every college applied to or not applied to, every job taken or not taken, was based on an unwavering determination to live in a prewar, oak-floored apartment, on or at least in the immediate vicinity of 104th Street and West End Avenue.

I've always been somebody who exerts a great deal of energy trying to get my realities to match my fantasies, even if the fantasies are made from materials that are no longer manufactured, even if some governmental agency has assessed my aspirations and pronounced them a health hazard. Lately, my New York fantasy has proven a little too retro

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in my own good. Though I did come to New York immediately after college and lived, believe it or not, within four blocks of 104th Street and West End Avenue, it wasn't until recently that I began to realize that I wasn't having quite as good a time here as I once did. I say this as someone who has had a very, very good time in New York. I say this also as someone who has enjoyed a good deal of professional success here, particularly considering that I am young and committed to a field that is notoriously low paying and unsteady. But low pay and unsteadiness never really bothered me all that much. I've historically been pretty good at getting by on what I have, especially if you apply the increasingly common definition of "getting by," which has more to do with keeping up appearances than keeping things under control. Like a social smoker whose supposedly endearing desire to emulate Marlene Dietrich has landed her in a cancer ward, I have recently woken up to the frightening fallout of my own romantic notions of life in the big city: I am completely over my head in debt. I have not made a life for myself in New York City. I have purchased a life for myself.

As I write this, I owe \$7,791 to my Visa card. To be fair (to whom? Myself? Does fairness even come into play when one is trying to live a cream life?), much of those charges are from medical expenses, particularly bills from a series of dental procedures I needed last year. As a freelance person, I'm responsible for buying my own health insurance, which is \$300 per month for basic coverage in New York State. That's far more than I can afford, so I don't have any. Although I try to pay the \$339 per quarter charge to keep a hospitalization insurance policy that will cover me if some major disaster befalls, I am often late in paying it and it gets canceled. But lest this begin to sound like a rant about health care, I will say that medical expenses represent only a fraction of my

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troubles. I need to make an estimated quarterly tax payment next month of \$5,400, which is going to be tough because I just recently paid back \$3,000 to my boyfriend (now ex) who lent me money to pay last year's taxes, and I still owe \$300 to the accountant who prepared the return. My checking account is overdrawn by \$1,784. I have no savings, no investments, no pension fund, and no inheritance on the horizon. I have student loans from graduate school amounting to \$60,000. I pay \$448.83 per month on these loans, installments which cover less than the interest that's accruing on the loan; despite my payments, the \$60,000 debt seems to actually be growing with each passing month.

It's tempting to go into a litany of all the things on which I do not spend money. I have no dependents, not even a cat or a fish. I do not have a car. I've owned the same four pairs of shoes for the past three years. Much of the clothing in my closet has been there since the early 1990s, the rare additions usually taking the form of a \$16 shirt from Old Navy, a discounted dress from Loehmann's, or a Christmas sweater from my mother. At twenty-nine, it's only been for the last two years that I've lived without roommates. My rent, \$1,055 a month for a four-hundred-square-foot apartment, is, as we say in New York City when describing the Holy Grail, below market. I do not own expensive stereo equipment, and even though I own a television I cannot bring myself to spend the \$30 a month on cable, which, curiously, I've deemed an indulgence. With one exception, I have not spent money on overseas travel. All of this is true, just as it is true to say that there have been times when I haven't hesitated to buy things for my home—some rugs, a fax machine, a \$200 antique lamp. There are even more times—every week, for instance—that I don't hesitate to spend money in a social capacity, \$45 on dinner, \$20 on drinks. I make long-distance phone calls almost daily

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with no thought to peak calling hours or dime-a-minute-rates. I have a compulsive need to have fresh-cut flowers in my apartment at all times, and I'll spend eight or ten dollars once or twice a week at the Korean market to keep that routine going. This behavior may be careless, but it is also somewhat beside the point. In the grand scheme of things, the consumer items themselves do not factor heavily; it's easier to feel guilt over spending \$60 on a blender, as I did last month, than to examine the more elaborate reasons why I reached a point where I found it impossible to live within my means.

Once you're in this kind of debt, and by "kind" I'm talking less about numbers than about something having to do with form, with the brand of the debt, all those bills start not to matter anymore. If I allowed them to matter I would become so panicked that I wouldn't be able to work, which would only set me back further. I've also noticed that my kind of debt takes a form that many people find easier to swallow than, say, the kind of debt that reflects overt recklessness. I spent money on my education and my career. These are broad categories. There's room here for copious rationalizations and I'll make full use of them. I live in the most expensive city in the country because I have long believed, and had many people convinced, that my career was dependent upon it. I spend money on martinis and expensive dinners because, as is typical among my species of debtor, I tell myself that martinis and expensive dinners are the entire *point*—the point of being young, the point of living in New York City, the point of *living*. In this mind-set, the dollars spent, like the mechanics of a machine no one bothers to understand, become an abstraction, an intangible avenue toward self-expression, a mere vehicle of style.

I grew up in the kind of town that probably comes as close to defin-

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ing a generalized notion of the American Dream as any. It's an affluent, New Jersey suburb whose main draw is its good public school system. As in many well-to-do suburbs, if you're not in need of K-12 services, there's not much in it for you, and so virtually no one between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five can afford or has reason to live there. The result is that the teenager is king. He sets the cultural and intellectual standard for the community. Moreover, he does so without the benefit of any adult influence other than his parents.

As I try to sort out the origins of my present financial situation, I always come back to the feelings I had as a teenager in the suburbs and the ineffable hankering I felt to access some kind of earthier, more "intellectual" lifestyle. When I was growing up in the 1980s, the cultural hegemony of my world was mired in a 1950s sensibility that came directly out of the parents' nostalgia about their youths. I went to parties in junior high school where we actually danced to *The Big Chill* soundtrack. Kids wore Bermuda shorts and seersucker shirts. Unlike the self-conscious vibe of the world I entered later in college, there was nothing ironic in any of this. We knew no one older than ourselves or younger than our parents—no college or graduate students, no single professionals, barely anyone who worked outside of a corporate structure. Therefore the teen agenda looked a lot like the parental agenda, which was, even though it was the late 1980s, pretty much an Eisenhower-era paradigm: college, work, marriage, return to suburbs. As adolescents we were, for better or worse, the staple crop and chief export of the place. Realtors have been known to drive prospective home buyers throughout the town and point out houses in which kids have gone to Ivy League colleges.

My family was in a unique situation because we lived off of my

father's income as a freelance composer. Although I never had the sense that we were poor, I now realize that we must have, at certain times any-  
 way, come pretty close to it. The main reason I never felt poor was that my parents, who had experienced their own kind of lifestyle epiphany when they were first exposed to academic settings, had an aesthetic value system that was less a reflection of having or not having money than wish, in our opinion anyway, good taste. Unlike the neighbors, who had expensive wall-to-wall carpet and furniture sets from Seaman's, we had wood floors and oriental rugs, and I grew up believing that we were superior because of it. Even when I got older and began to run into my financial problems, I never had a conscious desire for a lot of money. I was never interested in being rich. I just wanted to live in a place with oak floors.

In what emerged as the major misconception of the subsequent twelve years, I somehow got the idea that oak floors were located exclusively in New York City. This came chiefly from watching Woody Allen movies. I wanted to live someplace that looked like Mia Farrow's apartment in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (little did I know that it was Mia Farrow's apartment). To me, this kind of space did not connote wealth. These were places where the paint was peeling and the rugs were frayed, places where smart people sat around drinking gin and tonics, having interesting conversations, and living, according to my logic, in an authentic way. As far as I was aware at seventeen, rich was something else entirely. Rich meant monstrous Tudor-style houses in the ritzy section of my town. Rich were the handful of kids who drove BMWs to school. I had the distinct feeling that my orthodontist, whose sprawling ranch house had front steps that were polished in such a way that they looked like they were made of ice, was rich. None of these particular trappings

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of wealth held my attention. In fact, nothing outside of the movies really held my attention until that night in 1987 when I saw the apartment on 104th Street.

How different the ride down that clanking elevator was from the ride up! Like a lover to whom you suddenly turn one morning and feel nothing but loathing, my relationship to my suburban town went, in the time it took that elevator to descend six floors, from indifference to abhorrence. With all the drama and preciousness of a seventeen-year-old girl, I now realized the pathetic smallness of my world. I now saw the suburbs, as I announced to my father, "for what they really are." The suburb/city alliance was, in my opinion, an unequal partnership between parasite and host, a dynamic permanently tainted by a sense that although the suburbs cannot live without the city, the city would hardly notice if the suburbs were all spontaneously irradiated by a tyrannical dictator of a distant star system.

Worst of all, the suburbs were a place from which escape held little romance. Unlike the kid from the small midwestern or southern town who saves up for bus money to come to the big town, the suburban New Jersey teenager who sits in her bedroom, listening to 1980s Suzanne Vega records and longing for some life that is being vaguely described in the songs—"my name is Luka, I live on the second floor" (could this be on 104th Street?)—doesn't elicit much sympathy. But I persevered, planning my escape through the standard channels: college selection. I'd seen the music copyist's apartment during the summer between my junior and senior years of high school and so applying to college that fall became a matter of picturing the apartment and wondering what kind of college an inhabitant of such an apartment would have attended.

My logic, informed by a combination of college guidebooks and

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the alma maters of those featured in the *New York Times* wedding announcements, went something like this: Bryn Mawr rather than Gettysburg, Columbia rather than N.Y.U., Wisconsin rather than Texas, Yale rather than Harvard, Vassar rather than Smith. My ranking system had nothing to do with the academic merits of the schools. It was more a game of degrees of separation from Upper West Side house plants and intellectualism. Somehow, Vassar emerged as the most direct route. After all, Meryl Streep, a girl from suburban New Jersey, had gone there (and later played Woody Allen's ex-wife in *Manhattan*), as well as the Apthorp-dwelling Rachel Samstadt in *Heartburn*, a character based on Nora Ephron, a personal role model of mine, not to mention a real life resident of the Apthorp. I also had some vague notions about getting myself into a position where I could become a writer, and this had something to do with being "artsy." So in a manner particular to restless suburban girls who consider themselves "different" and "unconventional" in much the same way that protagonists in young adult novels are portrayed, I was so consumed with going to a particular kind of artsy college and mixing with a particular kind of artsy crowd that I could do nothing during my entire senior year of high school but throw wads of paper into a wastebasket from across the room and say "If I make this shot, I get into Vassar."

I made the shot. I went to Vassar. It was either the best move of my life or the biggest mistake. I'm still not sure which. Though it would be five years until I entered my debt era, my years at Vassar did more than expand my intellect. They expanded my sense of entitlement so much that, by the end, I had no ability to separate myself from the many extremely wealthy people I encountered there. For the record, let me say that a large part of that sense of entitlement has been a very good thing.

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for me. Self-entitlement is a quality that has gotten a bad name for itself and yet, in my opinion, it's one of the best things a student can get out of an education. Much of my success and happiness is a direct result of it. But self-entitlement has also contributed to my downfall, mostly because of my inability to recognize where ambition and chutzpah end and cold, hard cash begins. Like the naïve teenager who thought Mia Farrow's apartment represented the urban version of middle-class digs, I continued to believe throughout college that it wasn't fabulous wealth I was aspiring to, merely hipness.

Though there were lots of different kinds of kids at Vassar, I immediately found the ones who had grown up in Manhattan, and I learned most of what I felt I needed to know by socializing with them. In this way, my education was primarily about becoming fully versed in a certain set of references that, individually, have very little to do with either a canon of knowledge as defined by academia or preparation for the job market. My education had mostly to do with speaking the language of the culturally sophisticated, with having a mastery over a number of points of cultural trivia ranging from the techniques of Caravaggio to the discography of The Velvet Underground. This meant being privy to the kind of information that is only learned from hours spent hanging out with friends in dorm rooms and is therefore unavailable to those buried in the library trying to keep their scholarships or working at Stereo World trying to pay the bills. It is to have heard rumors that Domino's Pizza has ties to the pro-life movement, that Bob Dylan's mother invented White-Out and that Jamie Lee Curtis is a hermaphrodite. It is to never wear nude panty hose, never smoke menthol cigarettes, never refer to female friends as "girlfriends," and never listen to Billy Joel in earnest. It is to know at least two people featured in the *New*

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*York Times* wedding pages on any given Sunday and to think nothing of giving \$80 towards a bridal shower dinner at a chic restaurant for one of these people. It is to know that anyone who uses the word "chic" is anything but. It is to know arugula from iceberg lettuce, Calder from Elise, Truffaut from Cassevetes. It is to be secure in one's ability to grasp these comparisons and weigh one against the other within a fraction of a second, to know, as my Jewish Manhattanite friends put it, "from stuff"—to know from real estate, from contemporary fiction, from clothing designers and editors of glossy magazines and Shakespearean tragedies and skirt lengths. Name-dropping was my drug of choice and I inhaled the stuff. By the time graduation came, I'd earned a degree in English, but that seemed incidental to my stellar achievements in the field of "from stuff."

I still wanted to be a writer. And with my ever-evolving sense of entitlement, that seemed more possible than ever. When I graduated in 1992, I followed a herd of my classmates into Manhattan, many of whom moved back in with their parents on Park Avenue. I got myself an entry-level job in publishing, and, along with a couple of friends, rented a five-room, prewar apartment with chipping paint on 100th Street and Riverside Drive, a mere four blocks from the scene of my 1987 epiphany. I was ecstatic. Such expert marksmanship! Such rich rewards for thorough research and careful planning. My job, as an editorial assistant at a glossy fashion magazine, paid \$18,000 a year. The woman who hired me, herself a 1950s-era Vassar graduate, told me that she hoped I had an independent source of income, as I surely wouldn't be able to support myself on my salary. But I did support myself. My roommates, an elementary school teacher who was making \$19,000 a year and a film student who worked part-time at a non-profit arts organization, support-



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ed themselves too. We each paid around \$550 per month and lived as recent graduates should, eating ramen noodles and \$.99 White Rose macaroni and cheese.

Looking back, I see those years as a cheap, happy time. It was a time at which a certain kind of poverty was appropriate; anything ritzier would have been embarrassing. Our neighborhood was a place for people who knew the city, for people *from* the city. Unlike the west seventies and eighties, which I've always experienced as slightly ephemeral, mall-like and populated by those who've come from elsewhere, the residents of this neighborhood seem to give off a feeling of being very deeply rooted into the ground. It's also a place that has absolutely no investment in fashion. No matter what the decade, there's an odd 1970s quality to the neighborhood. It's a place where you can still find people wearing corduroy blazers, a place that has always made me think of both the television show *Taxi* and the cover of Carole King's *Tapestry* album. Though I was living completely hand-to-mouth, I loved my neighborhood and looked forward to moving ahead in my career and one day being able to afford my own place in roughly an eight-block radius. From my position at the time, that seemed well within the range of feasibility. It was 1993, I was twenty-three, and I'd received a raise so that I was earning \$21,000. I had no idea it was the closest I'd be to financial solvency for at least the next decade.

I'd been told I was lucky to get a job at a magazine—I had, after all, graduated into what was being called the worst job market in twenty years—and even though I had little interest in its subject matter, I didn't dare turn down the position. Within my first week on the job, I found myself immersed in a culture that was concerned entirely with money and celebrity. Socialites sat on the editorial board in

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to give input on trends among the extremely wealthy. Editorial assistants who earned \$18,000 managed to wear Prada, rent time-shares in the Hamptons, have regular facials, and pay thousands of dollars a year for gym memberships and personal trainers. Many of them lived in doorman buildings in the West Village or Upper East Side, for which their parents helped foot the bill.

This wasn't my scene. I felt as far away from my *Hannah and Her Sisters* fantasy as I had in the suburbs. I didn't want to be rich. I just wanted to live in New York and be a writer. Moreover, I wanted to be a writer in New York immediately. After a year of office work, I decided that an M.F.A. program in creative writing would provide the most direct route to literary legitimacy. I applied to exactly one program, Columbia, which, not coincidentally, happened to be located in my neighborhood. It's also the most expensive writing program in the country, a fact I ignored because the students, for the most part, seemed so down-to-earth and modest. Unlike my Prada-wearing, Hamptons-going colleagues from the magazine, Columbia students, in their flannel shirts and roach-infested student housing, seemed as earnest and unrich as I was, and I figured that if they could take out \$20,000-a-year loans, so could I. Even as I stayed at Columbia for three years and borrowed more than \$60,000 to get my degree, I was told repeatedly, by fellow students, faculty, administrators, and professional writers whose careers I wished to emulate, not to think about the loans. Student loans, after all, were low interest, long term, and far more benign than credit-card debt. Not thinking about them was a skill I quickly developed.

If there is a line of demarcation in this story, a single moment when I crossed the boundary between debtlessness and total financial ruin I still hem, it's the first dollar that I put toward achieving a life that would

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do with overt wealth than with what I perceived as intellectual New York bohemianism. It seems laughable now, but at the time I thought I was taking a step down from the Chanel suits and Manolo Blahniks of my office job. Hanging out at the Cuban coffee shop and traipsing over the syringes and windblown trash of upper Broadway, I was under the impression that I was, in a certain way, slumming. And even though I was having a great time and becoming a better writer, the truth was that the year I entered graduate school was the year I stopped making decisions that were appropriate for my situation and began making a rich person's decisions. Entering this particular graduate program was a rich person's decision. But it's hard to recognize that you're acting like a rich person when you're becoming increasingly poor. Besides, I was never without a job. I worked for an anthropology professor for \$9 an hour. I read manuscripts at \$10 a pop for a quack literary agent. I worked at a university press for \$10 an hour. Sometimes I called in sick to these jobs and did temp work in midtown offices for \$17 an hour. A couple of times I took out cash advances on my credit cards to pay the rent.

There were a handful of us who were pulling these kinds of stunts. My roommate had maxed out her credit cards in order to finance a student film. I knew several women and even a few men who were actively looking for rich marriage partners to bail them out of their debt. One aspiring novelist I know underwent a series of drug treatments and uncomfortable surgical procedures in order to sell her eggs for \$2,500. A couple of promising writers dropped out of the program and left the city. These days, when I talk to the people who left, they give off the sense of having averted a car crash but by the same token, they wonder if they'd be farther along in their careers had they stuck it out. But this

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question of sticking it out has less to do with M.F.A. programs than with the city in general. Whether or not one is paying \$20,000 a year to try to make it as a writer, New York City has become a prohibitively expensive place to live for just about anyone. Although I've devoted a lot of energy to being envious of Columbia classmates whose relatives were picking up the tab for their educations, it's now becoming clear to me that assuming the presence of a personal underwriter is not limited to entry-level jobs at glossy magazines or expensive graduate programs. These days, being a creative person in New York is, in many cases, contingent upon inheriting the means to do it.

But the striver in me never flinched. As I was finishing at Columbia, my writing career was giving off signs that it might actually go somewhere. If I hadn't been doing so well I might have pulled out of the game. I would have gotten a job, started paying my bills, and averted my own impending car crash. Instead, I continued to hedge my bets. I was publishing magazine articles regularly and, after a few months of temping at insurance companies and banks, scored some steady writing gigs that, to my delight, allowed me to work as a full-time freelance writer. After five years and eight different roommates in the 100th Street apartment, I was earning enough money to move to my own place and, more importantly, had garnered enough contacts with established Manhattanites to find myself a two-year sublet in a rent-stabilized apartment. The fact that I got this sublet through a connection from a Columbia professor has always struck me as justification enough for the money I spent to go to school; as we all know by now, the value of a rent-stabilized one-bedroom is equal to if not greater than that of a master's degree or even the sale of a manuscript to a publisher. And though I still had not hit the literary jackpot by producing the best-seller that would

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pay off my loans and buy me some permanent housing, I still felt I'd come out ahead in the deal.

So it's not that I was sold a complete bill of goods. Things were going well. In 1997 I was twenty-seven, teaching a writing course at N.Y.U., publishing in a variety of national magazines, and earning about \$40,000 a year after taxes. (The teaching job, incidentally, paid a paltry \$2,500 for an entire semester but I was too enamored with the idea of being a college teacher to wonder if I could afford to take it.) Neither clueless suburbanite nor corporate, subsidized yuppie, I could finally begin practicing the life I'd spent so long studying for. I had a decent-sized apartment with oak floors and porcelain hexagonal bathroom tiles that were coming loose. Like an honest New Yorker, I even had mice lurking in the kitchen. I bought the rugs and the fax machine. I installed a second telephone line for fax/data purposes.

Soon, however, I had some hefty dental bills that I was forced to charge to Visa. I tried not to think about that too much until I ended up making a few doctor's visits that, being uninsured, I also charged to Visa. When April rolled around, I realized my income was significantly higher that year than any previous year and that I had woefully underestimated what I owed the IRS. Despite a bevy of the typical freelancer's write-offs—haircuts, contact lenses, an \$89.99 sonic rodent control device—I was hit with a tax bill of over \$20,000. And although the IRS apparently deemed sonic rodent control devices an acceptable deduction, it seemed that I'd earned too much money to be eligible to write off the nearly \$7,000 (most of it interest) I'd paid to the student loan agency or the \$3,000 in dental bills. Most heartbreaking of all, my accountant proffered some reason that my \$60 pledge to WNYC—my Upper West Side tableau couldn't possibly be complete without the NPR

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coffee mug—was not tax deductible as advertised. In the months it took me to assemble that \$20,000 I had to reduce my monthly student loan payments from the suggested \$800 per month to the aforementioned \$448.83 per month, a reduction that effectively ensured that I wouldn't touch the principal for years. I continued to pay my \$1,055 per month rent, and made every effort to pay the phone, gas, and electric bills, the American Express bills, and the hospitalization-only medical coverage.

It was around this time that I started having trouble thinking about anything other than how to make a payment on whatever bill was sitting on my desk, most likely weeks overdue, at any given time. I started getting collection calls from Visa, final disconnection notices from the phone company, letters from the gas company saying "Have you forgotten us?" I noticed that I was drinking more than I had in the past, often alone at home where I would sip Sauvignon Blanc at my desk and pretend to write when in fact I'd be working out some kind of desperate math equation on the toolbar calculator, making wild guesses as to when I'd receive some random \$800 check from some unreliable accounting department of some slow-paying publication, how long it would take the money to clear into my account, what would be left after I set aside a third of it for taxes and, finally, which lucky creditor would be the recipient of the cash award. There's nothing like completing one of these calculations, realizing that you've drunk half a bottle of \$7.99 wine, and feeling more guilt about having spent \$7.99 than the fact that you're now too tipsy to work. One night I did a whole bunch of calculations and realized that despite having earned a taxable income of \$59,000 in 1998, despite having not gone overboard on classic debtor's paraphernalia like clothes and vacations and stereo equipment, despite having followed the urban striver's guide to success, I was more than \$75,000 in the hole.

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There are days when my debt seems to be at the center of my being, a cancer that must be treated with the morphine of excuses and rationales and promises to myself that I'm going to come up with the big score—book advance, screenplay deal, Publisher's Clearing House prize—and save myself. There are other days when the debt feels like someone else's cancer, a tragedy outside of myself, a condemned building next door that I try to avoid walking past. I suppose that's why I'm even able to publicly disclose this information. For me, money has always, truly, been "only money," a petty concern of the shallower classes, a fatuous substitute for more important things like fresh flowers and "meaningful conversations" in the living room. But the days when I can ignore the whole matter are growing further and further apart. My rent-stabilized sublet is about to expire, and I now must find somewhere else to live. I have friends getting rich off the stock market and buying million-dollar houses. I have other friends who are almost as bad off as I am and who compulsively volunteer for relief work in Third World countries as a way of forgetting that they can't quite afford to live in the first world.

But New York City, which has a way of making you feel like you're in the Third World just seconds after you've thought you conquered all of western civilization, has never really been part of the rest of the world. In that sense, I suppose it's foolish to believe that one can seek one's fortune, or at least one's sustenance, through rational means. I suppose that part of the city's magical beastliness is the fact that you can show up with the best of intentions, do what's considered to be all the right things, actually achieve some measure of success and still find yourself caught inside a financial emergency.

I have to be out of my sublet by September 1. Even if I tried to assume control of the lease, the landlord will renovate the apartment

and raise the rent to \$2,000. I told a friend about this the other day, hoping she would gasp or give me some sort of reaction. Instead she said, "That's cheaper than our place." A two-bedroom apartment down the street rented for \$4,500 a month. A studio anywhere in Manhattan or the "desirable" parts of Brooklyn will go for an average of \$1,750. West 104th Street is totally beyond my means. Worse, 104th Street is now beyond the means of most of the people that made me want to live there in the first place. The New York that changed my life on that summer night when I was seventeen simply no longer exists.

Now, having taken all of this apart, I am determined to not put it back together the same way. Several months ago, on a day when the debt anxiety had flared up even more than usual, I arrived at the idea of moving to Lincoln, Nebraska. I'd been to Lincoln on a magazine assignment twice before, met some nice people, and found myself liking it enough to entertain the notion of moving there. But both times I'd discarded the idea of moving there the minute the wheels hit the tarmac at LaGuardia. Surely I'd never be able to live without twenty-four-hour take-out food and glitzy Russian martini bars. On this latest round of panic, however, I chewed on the idea for a while, decided that it was a good plan, and have pretty much continued to feel that way ever since. I can rent an apartment there for \$300 a month. I can rent an entire house, if I want one, for \$700. Full coverage health insurance will cost me \$66 a month. Apparently, people in Nebraska also listen to NPR, and there are even places to live in Lincoln that have oak floors. Had I known that before, I might have skipped out on this New York thing altogether and spared myself the financial and psychological ordeal. But I'm kind of glad I didn't know because I'm someone who has had a very, very good time here. I'm just leaving the party before the cops break it up.

**CARPET IS MUNGERS**

Once, when I was desperately searching for an affordable apartment in New York City, I looked at a place that was gigantic by local standards. It had two bedrooms, a kitchen nook, a dishwasher, and a sweeping view of the East River. The building was staffed by twenty-four-hour doormen and had a running track and a garden on the roof. It rented for \$400 a month. This was in a rental market where studio apartments rarely went for less than \$1,100 a month, and it was unheard of to have sunlight let alone things like dishwashers and running tracks. I was in dire need of a place to live. I had precisely ten days to find something before I'd be forced to put my stuff in storage and sleep on a friend's couch. But I did not rent the apartment. I did not for one minute entertain the possibility of living there. I did not even look in the closets, of which there were many. The reason is that the apartment had wall-to-wall carpet.

Carpet makes me want to kill myself. Wall-to-wall carpet anywhere other than offices, airplanes, and Holiday Inn lobbies sends me careening toward a kind of despair that can only be described as the feeling that might be experienced by a person who has made some monumental and irreversible life decision and realized, almost immediately after the fact, that it was an error of epic proportions. Carpet makes me feel

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the way the woman who married the multimillionaire stranger on national television must have felt when she was on the plane to the honeymoon in Maui, the \$35,000 rock on her finger, and her possibly sociopathic husband next to her in first class. Carpet makes me feel the way I felt when I was twelve and "went out" with Stephen Mungers, a boy from homeroom who I barely knew, for a week. In seventh grade, "going out" signified nothing more than a mutual agreement that the term would be applied to the parties involved; no physical contact or verbal exchange other than "You wanna go out?" and "Okay" was required. And even though the situation was entirely reversible, I remember that week as an unprecedented and traumatic psychological jaunt into a self that was not my own. I had, in the context of seventh grade and the various ideas I'd developed about who I was, become "other" to my own self. I felt somehow that I had betrayed a basic premise of my existence. And although I was unsure exactly what that premise was, I specifically recall spending that week practicing the oboe with such concentration and nervous energy that I finally mastered a particularly arduous exercise and decided, with more certainty than has since accompanied more serious matters, that as long as I went out with Stephen Mungers I would be wholly incapable of being the person I should be and, in fact, was. A similar effect occurs when I walk into a house where not one square inch of floor is showing.

Carpet is Mungers. Carpet is otherness. It is not my house and not the house of ninety percent of the people I know. It's more than just not my style, it's not my oeuvre. People always say to me, "Oh, I don't like carpet either. It makes me sneeze and it's so hard to clean." Sneezing and cleaning have nothing to do with my feelings on the subject. If *not* having carpet caused allergies and presented maintenance difficulties, I

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NPR, tell other people what they heard on it, and are amazed when the other people say they heard it too.

I am one of those people. My TV is in a room that also contains a pile of magazines I won't admit to reading, a Kenny Loggins CD I don't want anyone to see, and a Restoration Hardware catalog from which I want very much to order a Teacher's College Chrome Plate Schoolhouse light, if only Restoration Hardware was not so wannabe, so postiche. My apartment has oak floors and oriental rugs and, for as long as I can remember, oak floors and oriental rugs have played as great a role in my sense of well-being as the knowledge that after falling asleep I would eventually wake up. I haven't bought a can of Maxwell House in over ten years. I have an intellectual crush on former *Talk Of The Nation* host Ray Suarez and a WNYC coffee mug out of which I eat Grape-Nuts but never Total. I use Arm & Hammer laundry powder. The thought of owning a bed that is not a platform bed, i.e. one that has a box spring and therefore requires a dust ruffle, lowers my serotonin level. I do not wear colors any brighter than pale blue or dusty rose. I do not wear panty hose, only tights. I do not wear gold jewelry. I would never drive an American car. I stick to these rules because I am terrified of what would happen if I deviated from them. I fear the "other." I fear carpet.

Maxwell House is carpet. Total is carpet. All-temperature Cheer is carpet, as is commercial talk radio, dust ruffles, bright-colored clothing, pantyhose, gold jewelry, and the United States Automotive Industry. Carpet is the road you congratulate yourself for never having taken. Carpet is the woman at the supermarket whom you are glad not to be. Carpet is the house who bought the oddly-named and aggressively bland-tasting Savannahs when you sold Girl Scout cookies. Carpet is the job you held immediately after graduation, before you realized that a

## CARPET IS MUNGERS

career in marketing posed a severe threat to your emotional health. Carpet is the distant relatives you see only at funerals. Carpet is the high school sweetheart you would have disastrously married had you been born one generation earlier.

Here is a brief, heartbreaking story about carpet. I once loved a great man. He treated me with that rare combination of adoration and decency best known to characters that were once played by Jimmy Stewart and are now played by Kevin Costner. He showed up at my door with flowers. He embarrassed me in front of the mailman by sending me letters addressed "To My Sweetie" on the envelope. He could have been the one were it not for the sad fact that he could never, ever have been the one. For a brief period during our two-year relationship, I fantasized about our wedding: a Wyeth-esque outdoor affair, tents and mosquito netting, and a string quartet playing Bach in a wheat field. I would wear a 1920s-era lace dress with a dropped waist and go barefoot. Friends would toast scintillatingly. *The New York Times* would run a Vows column with a headline like "Passion on the Plains." But such an event would never come to pass. He was, despite his old-fashioned ways and gentlemanly demeanor, a reception hall and DJ type of man. He listened to Yanni. He enjoyed the television show *Wings*. His house had carpet and he was not bothered by it. He had, in fact, paid to have it installed. Though I believe to this day that his soul, at its core, is as pure and as capable of embracing my required snobberies as is the soul of any man with oak floors, it was shrouded in carpet. It was suffocating in pale-blue shag and our love was eventually subsumed under an expanse of Scotch-guarded fibers.

Carpet is the near miss, the ever-present land mine, the disaster that looms on the horizon. It's the efficiency apartment you'll be forced to move into if the business fails, the marriage collapses, the checks stop



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coming in, and the wolf breaks down the door and scratches up those precious polished floors. Carpet can be there when you least expect it, some of your best friends could have it. It could be the bad news at the end of the third date; sprawling across the bachelor pad from wall to wall, it's what makes you decide not to go past first base. When I take a risk, what I put on the line are my essential, uncarpeted conditions. To venture into the unknown is to hazard a brush with the carpeted masses. They taunt and threaten from the sides of the road, their split-levels and satellite dishes forming pockmarks on the prairie, their luxury condo units driving up the cost of living.

Where there's carpet, there's been a mistake. Where there's carpet, there's Mungers. The arrangement is temporary. The clock is ticking. Carpet is a rental car, a borrowed jacket you'd never buy for yourself, the neighbor's key ring, with some tacky trinket attached, that you keep in case she locks herself out. Carpet makes everybody a stranger. Carpet tells me it's time to pack up and move on. When there's carpet, every street gets me lost. Every restaurant is a Denny's. Every room is a hotel room. My feet can't quite touch the floor. I am so far away from home.

## INSIDE THE TUBE

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dried out in just the right places, kept away from the heat and the cold and from anyone too stupid to confuse it with a clarinet.

What I really miss about the oboe is having my hands on it. I could come at that instrument from any direction or any angle and know every indentation on every key, every spot that leaked air, every nick on every square inch of wood. When enough years go by, the corporeal qualities of an instrument become as familiar to its player as, I imagine, those of a long-standing lover. Knowing precisely how the weight of the oboe was distributed between my right thumb and left wrist, knowing, above all, that the weight would feel the same way every time, every day, for every year that I played, was a feeling akin to having ten years of knowledge about the curve of someone's back. Since I stopped playing the oboe, I haven't had the privilege of that kind of familiarity. That's not an exaggeration, merely a moot point.

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Several years ago, my oldest friend died, presenting me with an occasion not to be sad, not to cry, not to tell people and have them not know how to respond. Several years ago, I decided to create an ironic occurrence rather than a tragedy, a cautionary tale rather than the wretched injustice it really was. This is a neat trick, this business of utter detachment from everything less than great that goes on, this position of being perched on a cartoon drawing of a crescent moon, looking down at all the lonely people, all the stupid ones with their souls so foolishly close to the linings of their coats.

What my friend did was catch a virus from the air. This is true. This is, in fact, the only aspect of the event that remains unequivocal. I now suspect it was hantavirus—the strain that is passed along from even the most remote contact with rodents—but there was never any concrete evidence of this. Like a tuft of dandelion seed, this virus wafted into Brian Peterson's body as he walked down the street or sat by a window or perhaps even slept in the bed he'd purchased from Jensen-Lewis, the bed with the Ralph Lauren sheets for which he'd fastidiously shopped at Bloomingdales—"fabric for living." Except that he died. All but dropped dead. Unlike an encounter with a dandelion seed, contact with such a virus is a one-in-eight-million chance. Four to six people each year die

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of this. One stands in greater risk of being abducted by a celebrated criminal, or of being visited by the Publisher's Clearing House Prize Patrol, or of standing on the precise acre of land where a jetliner falls after the failure of a hydraulics system. This is the sort of chance that, upon impact, transcends itself and becomes something closer to fate.

Brian is someone who accomplished nothing in his life other than his death. This is an ugly admission, a brutal interpretation of facts I have not been able to process any other way. He died at twenty-two. Very few people came to his funeral. There were only a handful of friends to call, vague acquaintances who had faded into the murk of adulthood, who had disappeared down roads of maturity that always appeared to Brian as hazy and not worth the trip. His life had been a string of failures: an unremarkable education in suburban public schools, an abandoned college career, a less than half-hearted attempt to become a writer. He was an only child, spoiled by parents who had no friends and furnished him with an expensive car and expensive clothes that he drove and wore no particular place. His audience was himself, a reflexive relationship that resulted in unbearably empty spaces for both parties. This was a life bereft of even tragedy, until he finally fixed that. He let death come to him—although that, of course, is a matter of interpretation, as is every component of the existence and lack of existence of Brian Peterson.

I liked Brian because he liked me, because he laughed at my jokes, let me drive his car, and complimented my appearance even when I'd done something atrocious to my hair. I liked him because he didn't hold me in contempt for refusing to reciprocate the romantic aspects of his affection for me. He let me talk about other men. He let me watch whatever I wanted on his TV, even if it was *National Geographic* specials about the

spotted leopard of Ghana. I liked Brian because he had nothing to do with the passage of time. He was immune to maturity, resistant to forward motion. He existed the way childhood homes are supposed to and never do, as a foundation that never shifts, a household that never gets new wallpaper, or turns your bedroom into a study, or is sold in exchange for a condo in Florida.

When he left this planet, he left me and very few others, and if those Christian alternatives to life really exist, then he must know by now that we will never be reunited. If those opposable H's are true, then he is in Heaven for never committing any crime, and I'll find myself in Hell one day for the spin that I have put on his death. My spin is this: I believe that he couldn't do anything other than die. None of us who grew up with him could imagine an alternative. And the fact that he didn't officially kill himself was enough to make all of us believe in the supernatural, or at least some kind of devilish warden hovering over our lives, whispering in our waxy ears, "Do something, or die."

Some specifics: Over the New Year's weekend of 1993, Brian came down with the flu. He called in some antibiotics and took a few. Then he left the cigarettes on the kitchen table, lay down in bed, and never got up. Also on the table was the December 22 edition of the *New York Post*, the January issue of *Esquire*, and a copy of *TV Guide* already cracked at the spine. He was a person who planned his television watching as if the programs were activities written in a Filofax, as if they were the contents of his life, which they, in fact, were. They were standing appointments, not even penciled in.

On January 4, Brian's mother called me. I was eating a bagel. I answered on the third ring; somehow I remember this. She told me he was in the hospital, that he had lain in bed in his apartment for six days

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until she and his father had come in from New Jersey to see what was wrong. She said something about shallow breathing. There were some words to the effect of calling a private ambulance service, of Brian being too weak to move from his bedroom to the elevator, then the intensive care unit, some diagnosis of atypical pneumonia, some negative HIV test, some reversal of the pneumonia diagnosis, some rapid deterioration of lung tissue, doctors "in a quandary," relatives flying up from Florida. Apparently there was a priest involved; things were that bad. Brian's mother spoke in simple, even words. I debated in my mind whether I should call her Mrs. Peterson or Jan, her first name. If I called her Mrs. Peterson, as I probably had in the past, would that mean that things were normal, that I was acting "normal" about it? She told me not to come to the hospital, that Brian didn't want people to see him as he looked very bad. I wrote a card and sent it by messenger from my office the next day. I had one of those jobs which allowed for such things. I worked at a magazine about beauty. I had an office and a computer and a phone with many lines. I had swank health insurance, a gym membership, all the things Brian never got around to acquiring because he never got off the frozen plateau I'd long considered to be nothing more than his pathetic ass.

This is about death. Although for Brian, death seemed to be there from the beginning. It seemed to have settled, seed-like, into his pores from the time he was small. For Brian, there was something about life that he just couldn't do. And what was amazing was the unusual way in which he chose not to do it. Nothing about him was morbid. His world was clean and high in quality. He took hour-long showers. He wore Armani jackets. He drove his very expensive car to New Orleans for the hell of it. He dropped out of two colleges because he wasn't enjoying

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them. He refused to get a job because he didn't want one. His parents paid his rent on a huge apartment in SoHo, which he decorated with the obvious accessories of one who sees life through fashion magazines and Williams-Sonoma catalogs. On the walls, he had the Ansel Adams photograph, the Van Gogh print. Brian was the owner of six separate remote controls. There was the television, the VCR, the cassette player, the compact disc player, the other cassette player, the cable box. As with his magazines, he often spread the remote controls out into a fan-like shape on the chrome coffee table. He dusted and vacuumed every day. He talked about his life as being "very good."

Brian was a firm believer in not spending time doing anything that wasn't enjoyable. The result is that he did very little; there was never much to enjoy. I say this as a person who only really knew him from the beginning of adolescence to the end of it, a time when pleasure comes in tiny spurts, when happiness presents itself in bursts at the ends of long, painful confusion. He had absolutely no concept of work, of the notion of reward following sacrifice, of dark preceding dawn and all of that. It seems unlikely that he really ever knew how to study, that he understood what it meant to make a phone call in order to find a job or make a professional connection or even arrange for anything other than Chinese food delivery or a haircut, the latter of which he obtained at Bergdorf Goodman's for eighty-five dollars. I have never in my life witnessed a person like Brian, a person who never witnessed life. I have never in my life allowed a person to cater to my whims the way he did, believing, as he did, that I had a life, albeit a cheap and filthy life, full of low-paying jobs, too much homework, and a college dorm room that smelled—as he declared the one time he visited—like "urine." Maybe this is what I liked about him, that he could so easily turn me into a working class

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heroine, that even in my saddest moments of friendlessness and directionlessness, I had ten times the life that he had. And I never even had to feel guilty; he still thought his life was great, an empty space of leisure and blank pleasure that I too could obtain if I had fewer of what he termed “hang-ups.”

This is about death and it is about blame. I blame Brian’s parents for everything. The thing I say to no one is that they killed him. By paying his rent, by not making him study trigonometry or stay in college, by not saying no to the car or the apartment, or the gas money for solitary trips to nowhere, or the racks and racks of Paul Stewart shirts, Howard and Jan Peterson caused the death of their son.

The moment I declared this in my mind is the moment I became despicable. The emotions that surround my experience of Brian’s death are by far the ugliest and most unforgiving sentiments I have bestowed on any event of my life. I chose, perhaps for my own sanity, more likely because I was too afraid to choose anything else, to feel as if his death at twenty-two had been imminent from the day he was born. Because Brian died of no defined cause, because the diagnosis was inconclusive, because his parents allowed no autopsy, because he simply *died*, I chose to believe it happened on purpose. I chose to feel as if death for him was an achievement, a blessing, a trophy honoring all that he never bothered to complete. I chose to take his death as a cautionary tale, a message that, if one did not *do*, one would die. So I did quite a bit. I worked long hours. I swam at 5:30 in the morning. I told myself that I was going places, that I was a “comer.” Brian, of course, was a “goner.” Like the unearned Armani jackets, death became him. The turns of phrase went on and on.

Brian’s death took less than three weeks to complete. He was in the

hospital for seventeen days. The day he went in was the day most of our mutual friends from childhood had flown back from Christmas vacation to the homes that were constituting the early part of their adult-hoods. This meant California, Ohio, Massachusetts. I lived directly across the park from Mount Sinai Hospital, where Brian lay bloated from virus-fighting steroids and motionless from paralytic drugs. Any movement, the doctors said, would have stressed his lungs. When he lost consciousness, his parents asked me to start coming over; they believed he’d hear my voice and “wake up.” I took the bus to the hospital every third night. This was what I had promised myself: That even though his father called me twice a day to give me a “report”—“They still don’t know;” “Things are better;” “No, they’re worse;” “The numbers on the machine are up today;” “I was thinking about that time on Nantucket, did Brian ever mention it?”—I would not wreck my life by living, as they did, in the visitors’ lounge of the Intensive Care Unit on the fourth floor of the Guggenheim Pavilion.

This is also about lying.

The Peterson family unit was a tiny thing—mom, dad, kid. There were no other siblings, only a handful of relatives. No neighbors. No friends. I believe Howard Peterson received a visit at the hospital from his boss. After a few trips to the fourth-floor lounge, after a few times of seeing these parents who couldn’t speak, who couldn’t bathe, who had lost all sense of time, after a few times of seeing the faces of the nurses and medical students and even the relatives of patients who had been merely shot in the cranium or shattered on motorcycles, I realized that the only way to handle the situation was to tell lies. Though it was plain that death was something already occurring, that this hospital stay was no longer about healing but about the slow submergence of a doomed

ocean liner, the game to play seemed to be a game of denial. Jan and Howard Peterson were interested in everything that was not reality. They were interested in all that their son was not. They wanted to know about his friends and what movies he liked and, as they put it, "his art." They wanted to know who had left the pack of Lucky Strikes on his kitchen table and should that person be called regarding "the situation."

I told them yes and yes and yes. I scrounged for morsels of truth and expanded them into benign, purposeful lies. I told them Brian liked Fellini—it was true, I believed, that he had once rented 8 1/2 from the video store. I told them he was devoted to his writing, that he planned to arrive at a masterpiece one day and buy them a house in Nantucket. To their delight, I spoke about him in the present tense. I pontificated about all that I planned to do with him when he, as they kept putting it, "got out." I surmised that Brian would someday write a lovely prose poem about his stay in the hospital. They ate this up, "more, more" they said without speaking, though Howard spoke a lot, "needed to keep talking," he said, whereas his wife lay on the plastic couch in the lounge and looked at the ceiling.

I came to know Howard Peterson better than I'd ever known a friend's parent. Though I hated him for the delusional, sugar-coated approach he had taken to parenting, and obsessed as I was at the time with what I defined as *reality*, with the cold, hard truths of the corporate working-world, and rent-paying, and late-night subway rides taken because a cab would cost too much, I wasn't outwardly cruel enough to express any inkling of opinion. I hated him for denying his son the post-modern rites of passage, for never arguing with Brian, for never hesitating to write the checks, for perpetually neglecting to crack the whip. Even now, it is a mystery to me who Jan and Howard Peterson are. For

twenty years they lived in a small and badly decorated house in New Jersey. They drove a 1983 Oldsmobile Cutlass. Howard worked as a bond trader. Jan did nothing. They became rich in the 1980s and spent it all on Brian, invested it all in the enterprise that seemed an experiment in passivity, as if lack of movement was the ultimate freedom, as if people who say "I'm going to win the lottery and spend the rest of my life doing nothing" really know what they're talking about.

But my relationship to Howard during these days in the visitors' lounge presented me with an interesting set of rules, a subtle opportunity for mind manipulation. Since Jan wouldn't speak, and talking to Howard terrified me in that he broke down in tears after just a few sentences, my decision to "think positively" about the situation, to be optimistic and cheerful and phrase things in precisely the opposite way than I normally do, served the function of putting myself at a remove from the whole thing. As actors say, I made a choice. I made a decision to cross to upstage left, to tell them that Brian was working on a screenplay, to refrain from getting upset because, as I said, "There's nothing to be upset about because he's going to pull through." My best line was this: "Brian will not die because people our age can't conceive of death in relation to ourselves. It's not in his vocabulary, therefore it's impossible."

It was for this sort of language that Howard called me one night to come visit him in his hotel room. He and Jan were staying a few blocks from the hospital at a place called the Hotel Wales. Howard said he wanted to talk about Brian. He said he "wanted to gain greater insight" into his son. I was sitting in my room drinking wine from a plastic tumbler when he called. My bedroom window was open, and flecks of snow were floating in. A news report emitted from the clock radio, something about George Bush, who was technically still in office,

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although the inauguration was days away. I had been engrossed in the election, smitten by James Carville, newly invigorated by politics—the campaign buses and falling-down balloons of it all. Brian had taken little interest, though he'd appeared bemused by my chattering.

So this is what it was when Howard called: the wine in the tumbler, me still in my work clothes. I took a cab to the hotel and readied myself for more lies, for more of the acting I hadn't done since a high school performance of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*—a performance for which Brian had brought me flowers. I was terrified to meet Howard the way I had feared going onstage, the dread of the audience mixing with a longing for the whole thing to end in triumph, for some crowd to cheer, for a late-night cast party followed by peaceful sleep in my childhood bed.

This was a luxurious hotel, green and gold wallpaper, wood moldings polished until they were mirror-like. When Howard opened the door, he was wearing the same sweater he'd worn the past four times I'd seen him, only now there was a food stain on it. His hair stuck out on either side like a clown's. He wanted to hear the line again, the line about death not being in Brian's vocabulary. He wanted it repeated over and over, like a child hearing a bedtime story. I was afraid that if I flubbed the word order he'd correct me, that if I slipped into past tense he'd ask why. He said I was his favorite person to talk to these days, that the doctors were "paid to be pessimistic," that relatives were evasive, that his wife had given up and was simply praying.

The room was not a room but a suite—living room, bedroom, kitchen. Howard made himself a glass of water, took some pills out of his pocket, and swallowed them. He asked what books Brian read, what programs he watched on television. I said Dostoyevsky, Doctorow and

*Seinfeld*. I said *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; that one, I believed, was true. I said that Brian was a lover of the good life, that unlike the rest of us, he lived for the day, that he'd quit school because he'd realized it wasn't right for him. I and the rest of Brian's friends, I explained, were just robots for doing our homework, for not trying to beat the system. Brian was a rebel. He was a lover, a fighter, and a hero all in one. He would never die. There was no way it could happen.

This went on for three hours, until Howard went into the bedroom, lay down, and fell asleep. I waited ten minutes and slinked out. He'd left cab money for me on the table, which I took, like a whore. This was four days before the end.

Brian died around 6:30 in the morning, the time when I usually returned from my swim at the health club, my participation in the society in which Brian refused to take part. I arrived home, saw the light blinking on my answering machine, and knew. For a few minutes I avoided replaying the tape because there seemed no reason. Outside it was still dark, still dead, cold January. My chlorinated hair was frozen on my scalp because I never wore a hat to walk the four blocks from the club. Howard's voice was steady on the machine; "Are you there? Are you screening your calls? . . . Brian didn't make it." He began to say something else but his voice cracked and he hung up. All I could think was that I wouldn't have to go to the hospital anymore. All I could wonder was whether I should go to work. I had no inclination to cry, although I believe I tried, conjuring up sad stories, again like the high school actress to which this event had partially restored me. I tried to do something appropriate. I made coffee. I took a shower. I turned on the television and watched the news. It was inauguration day. Bush's out, Clinton's in.



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The two families passed each other on the White House steps like baseball teams shaking hands after a game. Such somber, upright civility.

I had found my metaphor. I had found the moment upon which to seize, the symbol around which to fashion the circumstance of my friend's death. No longer a random occurrence, an inexplicable meeting with a bizarre virus no one else catches, Brian's death became for me a national mandate, an obligatory component of a cultural changing of the guard. Just as I had delighted in the fact that the Clinton campaign's theme song was Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop," a message that had prompted me to propel my thoughts vehemently into all that the future would bring—the information superhighway, congressional term limits, corporate-subsidized health clubs for hard-working, *realistic* people like me—I rationalized that Brian's refusal to ever think about tomorrow had led to his demise. For the first time since he had become ill three weeks before, I allowed myself to spell the words out: Brian died because he refused to live. He refused to live because he refused to work. It was all out of some Ayn Rand manifesto: One must make profound sacrifices in order to live a life without compromise. Brian had attempted the latter without the former. He had seized the day so intensely that the day finally seized him. More turns of phrase. I reveled in them. I reclined back and watched my stylistic light show, curled up into my big, derisive comfy chair. In my mind, in the milieu that I had built around this event—the perfunctory hospital visits, the heading for the wine bottle the minute I returned home, the reluctance to tell other friends for fear that it would be awkward—I had set up an incident that had more to do with psychology than medicine. Brian was so drugged up, we were told, that he had no idea what was happening. He was a minor player. There was no dying involved, only the dealing with it. There was no body, only

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Hallmark cards. No last breaths of life, but instead cigarettes in the breezeway outside the Guggenheim Pavilion. As far as I was concerned at the time, there would be no grief, only irony.

And the sickest part about the whole thing is that I felt the irony while it was actually going on. There was nothing retrospective about this view, no longing for hindsight, as it seemed to have emerged precociously while events were still occurring. The monstrosity that Brian's parents were being asked to wrap their minds around was more, I knew, than I could ever conceive of. The singular event of their dying son carried more horror than the worst catastrophes in the combined lives of myself and everyone I knew. What could I possibly have compared it to? Being rejected by Yale? That my milk-fed existence was now being soured by a tragedy that was not my own but someone else's put me in the peculiar position of grieving vicariously, a condition so cynical that the only option was to shut up about it. So I faked it. I threw myself into their needs with a duplicity intense enough to distract me from whatever sadness it did not occur to me to feel for myself.

Gamesmanship is something this is also about. Verbal gamesmanship, *sparring*—though the feeling was more like hitting a tennis ball against a wall.

The words I said to Jan and Howard Peterson after their son was dead were even bigger lies than the ones I'd said when he wasn't. I continued with the present tense. "Brian's probably laughing at us now." And "Brian, though he is sad to leave you, is probably fascinated by whatever he is experiencing now." They loved this—especially Howard, who in the forty-eight hours between inauguration day and the funeral, had become obsessed with the afterlife, "the other side," as he called it. I spoke at the mass. I regarded this as an opportunity to do some writing,

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to "be creative," which was something my job was not allowing. I was a huge hit: People came up to me at the burial and congratulated me on my performance. My parents, though disconcerted at my use of the present tense in my speech, remarked that I was a skilled speaker. For me and the few friends who had returned home for the funeral, seeing our parents was almost worse than seeing Jan and Howard. They wore on their faces the look of having just avoided a fatal car crash. They were like people run off the road, shell-shocked drivers, breathing heavily and staring at the steering wheel while the tractor trailer ambled on ahead. "All I can think is thank God it's them and not us," my mother said to me out loud. I hadn't worn a coat—I didn't own a proper one to wear with a dress—and someone else's mother went home between the mass and the burial to fetch me one, which she angrily insisted I wear as we stood by the grave. My father expressed his fear that I would catch Brian's mysterious virus. Like me, he wanted to know the mechanics of the thing, how and where it gained its entry, what Brian had done to contract it, what error in judgment had been made to cause this.

After the burial, I returned to my apartment in the city, threw up, and continued on with my life. I came to see grief as something I would simply never have. I perceived it as a sentiment that dwelled in the hearts of others, tucked neatly underneath a rug I'd never even owned. I became obsessed with movement, with productivity. At the time, this meant doing a good job at work, being the best editorial assistant a slick beauty magazine ever had. I wrote killer photo captions, answered my phone perkily, filled out invoices until eight o'clock at night. I did all the things Brian never did. I didn't mention "the situation" to anyone. My parents called to check on me, thrilled when I didn't mention the event, relieved when I seemed not to have a cold.

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After about three months, Howard called and asked if I wanted to have dinner. He left a message on my machine, leaving Brian's old number as the place to call back. When I did, Brian's voice came on, deep and reticent. "I'm not available, please leave a message." I hated Howard all over again. He picked up when I spoke. He and Jan wanted to have dinner with me "in order to talk about Brian." They wanted me to meet them at Brian's apartment where they were staying. They wanted only to eat in restaurants where Brian had eaten, so could I recommend one?

Brian had only eaten in stylish places with ceiling fans and aspiring models at the bar. I had always hated this about him. I had always been embarrassed to go to establishments I had no business patronizing—establishments Brian had even less business eating in, although he always paid for both of us and ordered many drinks and an expensive entree and usually dessert. Once, while I was in college, he'd taken me to a place he'd read about in a magazine, a small club that had recently opened in SoHo. There we saw a girl from my school, a very rich girl with a famous mother, both of whom had been profiled in *Vanity Fair* a year earlier. This girl, who had never spoken to me on campus, came to our table and kissed me on the cheek. Brian was ecstatic. I was furious. I felt I was dressed terribly—and even if I had been dressed well, I would have been merely posing as a poseur, which was worse than merely existing in a state of delusion, which is what Brian did adamantly, with stubborn, insistent braggadocio. Still, this encounter held him for several weeks. He mentioned it repeatedly, talking about "Meghan's friend Countess X" to whichever of our other friends managed to drag themselves back into town to see him.

Restricting my lies to the big ones—how bad would it have been, after all, to suggest to Brian's parents that we eat at Pizzeria Uno because

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Brian had loved the single deep dish?—I told Howard to make a reservation at Odeon because Brian loved it and often used it as a location in his writing, which was true. When I arrived at Brian's apartment, the Lucky Strikes were still on the kitchen table along with the December 22 edition of the *New York Post*, the January issue of *Esquire*, and the copy of *TV Guide* cracked at the spine. "We haven't touched these," said Howard. He was wearing corduroy pants and a polyester sweater. Jan wore wide wales and an L.L. Bean blouse. We went to Odeon. I scanned the room for fear of Countess X. Howard said he only wanted to order dishes that Brian had ordered. I had no recollection but told him the salmon.

It was during this meal that Jan and Howard first began to demonstrate their expertise in "the other side." Howard had read several books on the subject and had brought with him a list of the titles so that I, too, could learn more about "Brian's new life." Howard had had dreams, he explained, where Brian spoke to him and elaborated on the fun he was having. They had been to a psychic on Long Island who claimed to see Brian amid a field of roses and flanked by two other people, an older man—"probably his grandfather," said Jan—and a pretty, young girl whose name began with M. "I thought for a moment that might be you," she said. "But then you're not dead."

Then Jan declared loudly that she was considering killing herself. "I know just how I'd do it," she said. What got to me about this was not that she said it but that she said it so loudly. I looked over at the next table at three impeccably dressed men whose eyes seemed to momentarily shift over to us. It seems bizarre to me now that I didn't ask her how she planned to kill herself for fear that it was an inappropriate question. It seems bizarre that even after this meal, after I turned down their

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invitation to go to a late movie, after I again took cab fare from them, which I pocketed and instead rode the subway, I met Jan and Howard several more times. This went on for about a year. Howard would call every few months, and if I was in a guilty mood, which I almost always was, flagellating myself as I did about every inadequate job performance or overdue phone bill or call I screened for fear it would be them, I said yes. I said yes and continued to lie and say that I had read the afterlife books and that I, too, awaited the day of my death so I could see Brian again and that the world was hardly worth inhabiting when such a vibrant figure was removed from it.

The dynamic was this: The more I saw Jan and Howard, the more evil thoughts I harbored, which caused me guilt, which caused me to dig in my heels and see them again. This was my self-styled redemption, my faux little journey into good Samaritanism. If I saw the Petersons on a Saturday, I could be bad for the rest of the week. If I lied to Howard about the salmon, I could call a co-worker a bitch behind her back on Monday. What happened was that I began to hate the world. Just as I hated Jan and Howard for being so lax as parents that their son died of what I believed to be inertia, I hated everyone else for existing in a condition that I defined as "fake." Like Holden Caulfield, I became obsessed with "phoniness." I saw everyone as innate liars, as zombified self-deluders who were dangers to themselves as well as the rest of the world. I hated people who walked too slowly down the sidewalk, grocery store clerks who took too long to count the change, days when there was nothing but junk mail. I hated anything that impeded whatever I considered to be progress, whatever I had determined was my ticket to a socialized, productive life. Unlike Brian, I would pursue a career. Unlike him, I would shop at the grocery store efficiently. I would meet friends for

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lunch and drinks and have people over to my apartment to watch the Oscars. I would walk quickly down the street because I actually had someplace to go. I would do anything necessary to participate in what I considered to be life, which, to me, meant getting up extremely early and doing things like putting all the apartment's trash into a small plastic bag, which I would throw out on the way to the club to go swimming, after which I would go to work, and for lunch go to the gourmet deli on Forty-sixth Street, where I would tap my fingers on the counter if the people in front of me were taking too long to order, because *I had somewhere to be*, because I was impressively busy with this thing called life, because I was sternly committed to the pursuit of whatever was the opposite of death.

By the following Christmas, Jan and Howard had stopped calling me. I had expected to hear from them around the anniversary of Brian's death, the one-year mark of the Clinton administration. When they didn't call I imagined them dead in their poorly decorated house. I imagined empty sleeping pill bottles on the night table, or a hose hooked up to the back of the Oldsmobile with Howard's lifeless body five feet away. Since I'd never learned how they planned to kill themselves, it was difficult to put my finger on one particular scenario. Like "the situation" itself, there seemed so many variations on the truth, so many evil interpretations of events upon which to fixate. Through one of our mutual friends, I learned they hadn't killed themselves. Like a normal person, this friend, in town for Christmas, had called Jan and Howard himself and then driven over to the house. Like a good person, he sat in the living room and spoke honestly about this horrible thing that had happened. Unlike me, he saw no reason to lie. Unlike me, he wasn't hung up on some twisted symbolism, on some mean-spirited rationalization employed to keep

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fear at bay, to keep grief a thing depicted in movies rather than a loss felt in one's own flesh.

Here's another true scene from the movie. It's a flashback, a time I remember with Brian from when we were small, playing with other kids. We stood in a circle and called off our teams, the reds versus the blues, something like that. Then we needed an "it," a dreaded tagger who would tap us on the shoulder and freeze us. No one wanted the job, including myself, and I'd watched as Brian just stood there, silent amid the chants, bewildered as the shouting came over him. "Not it!" I yelled. "Not it!" someone else yelled. "Not it!" we all said until there was no one but Brian, a pale and clueless eight-year-old, suspended in those moments before realizing he'd lost the game. And so it was him. He was it.