

A THOUSAND GOLDEN YESTERDAYS

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

A Thousand Golden Yesterdays

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How can the chaotic, dissonant headspace brought about by trauma-induced dissociative disorders be effectively and accurately portrayed in creative fiction? *A Thousand Golden Yesterdays*, a novella-length creative artifact, endeavors to find one answer to this question by depicting the unstable, rapidly deteriorating mental state of its protagonist, Logan Cox, through prose that continually shifts between first person, second person, and third person narrative points of view; this approach is one strongly informed by research into dissociative disorders and the effects of physical and emotional abuse throughout one's formative years using academically relevant resources such as the DSM-V. Logan's mental deterioration is primarily brought about by his being asked to deliver a eulogy at his recently deceased father's funeral. As he travels from his home in Los Angeles, California to the site of the funeral in Houston, Texas, Logan experiences a series of traumatic flashbacks to moments of his father's abusive behavior toward him and finds himself beset by increasingly unsettling, surreal imagery in the present; this all culminates in a climactic, primal expression of Logan's rage and psychosis as he is finally called upon to give the aforementioned eulogy. The primary purpose of this work beyond exploring methods of realistic portrayal of mental illness in fiction is to experiment with the idea that different points of view can meaningfully interact with and inform a character's mental state as

they recount and recall different events, thus becoming a more significant symbolic component of the narrative as a whole. This experimentation is intended to generate conversation within the world of creative fiction regarding how the points of view and established narrative conventions one utilizes when writing can be selected with greater symbolic intent if one's protagonist or narrator suffers from mental health issues, particularly post-traumatic dissociative disorders such as fugue states and depersonalization.

DEDICATION

To John, Ruairi, Trevor, Dalton, and Madison; your help could never be repaid.

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Finally, thanks to my family, whose love and support gave me the confidence to pursue my dreams.

SECTION I

RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT

The underlying motivation for this project stems from a simple but pressing desire on my part to write a realistic and well-informed depiction of mental illness in an original creative work without the sensationalized language and distorted truths that tend to accompany such depictions in other media; far too often, mental illness and its effects are used irresponsibly and without proper context in art, reduced to the level of caricature and somewhat lazily invoked to justify any number of inexplicable behaviors, atypical personality traits and irrational decisions. These portrayals can lead to deleterious consequences for those suffering from mental health problems by creating an unfairly negative stigma against them in the American (and, indeed, the global) public consciousness. The goal of such portrayals, I believe, should not be to demonize or to sensationalize victims of mental illness for the sake of narrative tension but rather to sympathize with them and increase the public's awareness and understanding; authors and other creative artists, especially in today's interconnected world, hold a certain responsibility to inform as much as they entertain and provoke thought.

A Thousand Golden Yesterdays's specific focus on post-traumatic dissociative disorders comes from personal experiences with individuals diagnosed with these disorders that prompted me to conduct independent, cursory research on dissociation and trauma; my wish to continue this research on a more intimate, in-depth scale was then married with my aforementioned desire to faithfully and intelligently depict mental illness through creative writing in order to create the overall framework of inspiration for the artifact. The novella's plot was subsequently developed out of a growing fixation on the works of writers in the American Southern Gothic genre, such as

Flannery O'Connor's *The Complete Stories*, Harry Crews' *A Feast of Snakes*, and Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*—I thought that the dark, violent, and often discordant cultural character of the American South as portrayed in these works would serve as an interesting and appropriate backdrop for an examination of the many symptoms that manifest in various dissociative disorders.

With these decisions made, the overall problem to be addressed by the work became clear: How can one most effectively and coherently portray the effects of a dissociative disorder with accuracy and realism in an extended creative work, and in what ways might the narrative of this work be structured in order to accomplish this? As I began my more in-depth research, I quickly determined that it would be most effective to limit the creative manifestations of these symptoms to one or two key narrative elements; upon further consideration, I decided that it would be best to correlate these manifestations to the point of view the piece is being told from at any given time. Indeed, there is a great deal of research regarding dissociative mental illness stemming from past trauma that can be applied to one's choice in point of view when writing about characters that suffer from these illnesses. For example, depersonalization disorder, a frequent post-traumatic development characterized by persistent feelings of being separate from one's body and mental processes, can perhaps be more meaningfully explored and demonstrated to a reader through 2nd or 3rd person narration rather than 1st person narration—the disorder's symptoms of detachment from direct agency and bodily autonomy can be linked with the narrator's greater degree of separation from characters' feelings and thought processes in these points of view. Research regarding these disorders need not only be applied in this context, of course; there are ultimately a multitude of narrative techniques that can be used to enhance a work's portrayal of post-traumatic mental developments, such as unreliable narration, which

could perhaps be the result of a PTSD sufferer's dissociative or psychogenic amnesia regarding events related to the onset of trauma.

After settling on this idea of correlation between dissociative mental state and narrative point of view, the project's structure went through several iterations—at first, I planned on writing each individual chapter or section of the novella in a different viewpoint. These extended sequences were effective to a point, but seemed somewhat limiting; after several attempts to draft out sections of the work in this style, I eventually decided that it would be both truer to the research I had been studying and more creatively daring to have the point of view continually shifting between first, second, and third person multiple times throughout each section—this would offer me the greatest opportunity to vividly render a scattered, piecemeal dissociative consciousness in a unique and memorable way. Each point of view has been designed to represent a different piece or voice of the protagonist Logan's heavily detached and sporadic viewpoint: the first person depicts Logan at his most personal and introspective as he attempts to navigate his growing paranoia, the second person depicts an internalized abuser figure who constantly berates Logan and occasionally adopts a tone strikingly similar to that of his late father, and the third person depicts Logan's defensive attempts to detach himself from emotional situations and view himself and his experiences in an objective light. In tandem, these points of view complement, intersect, and even berate or challenge each other as they describe details of Logan's experiences, which in particular speaks to the memory- and perception-altering effects of dissociation and post-traumatic disorder.

The ultimate intent of this project beyond meeting the expectations of the problems and questions raised above is one of contribution to the wider creative discussion; I believe that my experimentations with narrative form via my work's continual shifts in point of view may be

able to generate more discourse within the world of fiction as to how writers can utilize different established narrative conventions to more accurately and creatively represent symptoms of mental illness and, more specifically, post-traumatic stress disorder. As these disorders become more and more commonplace and less taboo of a subject within our society, narratives centered around these experiences will naturally increase; and, beyond giving the subject the amount of gravitas and sympathy it deserves, writers should always strive to make the form and delivery of their work best suited to the content it represents. This work may indeed be one of many that could help encourage and inspire other writers to move beyond convention and subvert established narrative precedents to their advantage.

SECTION II

LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES

A Thousand Golden Yesterdays's main academic foci that serve to underpin the piece's general creative approach are sourced from two different areas of inquiry: one into psychological writings, particularly those focusing on dissociative disorders, and one into other creative works deemed inspirational in their tone or setting. These two foci are combined into an overarching, consistent vision that aims to set the dark, intrusive nature of dissociative disorder against the often grotesque and bizarre backdrop of the American South as depicted in novels classified within the genre of the Southern Gothic; as the main character, Logan, descends further into the disturbed depths of his own mind and comes to terms with the long-lasting effects of the traumatic physical and emotional abuse he suffered at the hands of his now-deceased father, the elements of the text that are most identifiably part of the Southern Gothic are amplified and made increasingly surreal.

My primary information pertaining to dissociative disorders was mainly sourced via the official resources offered by the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD for short) that serve to inform the general public about the ins and outs of the many different manifestations that these disorders can take in different people, as well as the links between these disorders and patterns of abuse experienced in formative years. The information provided by the ISSTD cites the most academically relevant research on the typical symptoms and patterns of affected behavior caused by dissociation and its subvariant afflictions, much of which is also utilized in the popular DSM-V published by the American Psychological

Association; this research is what I subsequently studied and synthesized in order to inform my understanding of the disorders I wished to represent in my creative work.

Logan Cox, the protagonist and central character of *A Thousand Golden Yesterdays*, suffers from a variety of symptoms that fall under the larger affliction of dissociation, which is typically classified as a general psychological condition that leads to separations and discontinuities in a person's awareness and patterns of conscious thought. These discontinuities are most commonly observed in the realms of memory, emotion, and identity. A person suffering from dissociation may, for instance, look upon highly evocative and emotionally charged traumatic memories with an unmoved, emotionless affect, or face difficulties in reconciling and understanding key aspects of their own personality; they may not be able to understand why they feel how they feel at any given time, and are liable to repress or compartmentalize certain patterns of their behavior such that they are only activated or carried out under situations of extreme stress (Akyüz et al.; Guralnik et al.; Jacobs & Bovasso). Take, for example, cases of dissociative fugue states, which are most commonly triggered by these stress factors: someone who enters the influence of such a state will, often without warning, spatially relocate themselves to destinations sometimes hundreds if not thousands of miles away: in the process, they typically undergo a shift in their identity or perception thereof, taking on a persona that may be entirely different from how they prefer to conduct themselves (Maldonado et al.; Nash et al.). Indeed, the concept of the fugue state was, in many ways, the initial jumping-off point with which I developed the overarching road trip narrative that ties together the different sections of my work: Logan's decision to attend his abusive father's funeral, requiring him to make an exhausting 3-day drive from California to Texas, is one that he largely cannot understand, and he increasingly

questions his own underlying motivations and decisions as his destination looms before him both temporally and physically.

This fugue state is not the only symptom of general dissociation present in Logan's psyche, of course. He also exhibits strong signs of depersonalization, a state characterized by repeated feelings of being outside of one's own body. Sufferers of depersonalization disorders often report a pervasive, intrusive sensation that makes them feel as though they are watching their lives play out on a movie screen; they feel as though they have been robbed of the ability to be an active participant in their own emotional processes (Foote et al.; Nash et al.). This facet of the dissociative experience was one that I was particularly motivated to effectively represent in my creative work: I did so by using the third-person narrator of my story to describe Logan's movements and actions as though one were watching them play out on a screen or behind a glass wall. In effect, this third-person perspective becomes almost an anthropomorphized version of depersonalization disorder, fragmenting and agitating the processes of Logan's consciousness.

Of course, when mentioning this idea of fragmentation of consciousness, it becomes necessary to mention what is perhaps the most famous and culturally relevant potential symptom of the dissociative processes: dissociative identity disorder (DID for short), which is more commonly known to the general public as multiple personality disorder. Patients reported with the illness manifest a variety of different alter personalities which contrast from the essential self of the host personality, who responds to the patient's given name; these symptoms have been popularized and perhaps excessively dramatized in movies such as *Split* and *Sybil* (Beidel). Therapists, physicians, and psychologists alike are mixed on whether or not the disorder is one that can be conclusively proven to be a real phenomenon rather than a condition that is largely

therapist-induced; ultimately, I have found the research on DID to be too inconclusive for me to feel comfortable with attempting to represent it in this creative work.

The research conducted for the project was not entirely based in psychological writings and clinical studies, however: I also did a significant amount of independent survey into the fiction genre of the Southern Gothic, often characterized by grotesque characters, dark humor, and persistent feelings of alienation. I considered these elements very tonally synchronous with the key points of dissociative disorders, and felt that the genre would be a fitting backdrop for a gritty, realistic exploration of said disorders. To this end, I read a good variety of books by authors widely considered to represent the style, including Harry Crews's *A Feast of Snakes*, Flannery O'Connor's *The Complete Stories*, and Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. These works were instrumental in helping me contextualize and more vividly render the characteristics of the American South that much of the work takes place in, and allowed me to imbue my writing with a strong, focused sense of place and cultural character.

Ultimately, my research is what allowed me the confidence to make some of my bolder, more risky creative decisions during the process of putting together my first rough draft: it inspired significant portions of almost every element that comprises the larger whole of *A Thousand Golden Yesterdays*. I believe that, with the research I have conducted, I will undoubtedly be able to walk away from the LAUNCH experience with a much stronger piece than I would have had had I not participated in the program: a piece that creatively and intelligently represents disorders that affect millions of people across the globe with both pathos and a memorable, innovative style of storytelling.

SECTION III

EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE

My primary venue for the presentation component of my project is at the LAUNCH Undergraduate Research Symposium, held on the 27th of February, 2019. The LAUNCH Undergraduate Research Symposium is a low-stakes environment in which LAUNCH students can deliver a 10-minute presentation on their work and the research they have done to produce it in front of an audience of their peers, their mentors, and active listeners who will provide feedback after the presentation's conclusion. Any student affiliated with the LAUNCH program has the opportunity to sign up for a one-hour time slot at this symposium, in which they, along with two other students, will deliver their ten-minute presentation. Following these thirty minutes of presentation, the floor is opened up for a Q&A for any curious attendees to ask the students questions about various aspects of their projects and what inspired their research foci. Next, a small group of active listeners composed of volunteering professors from various departments across campus will provide each presenting student with individualized feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of their performance, as well as potential areas of interest that the student could incorporate into their overall research framework. The entire session is guided and kept on track by a moderator, who is also a volunteer, and who may also provide feedback to the students if they so wish. The event is entirely free to the public so that any interested students or professors may attend. It is also a multidisciplinary event: students doing a Creative Works project may be presenting along with students doing a Liberal Arts/Humanities project, a STEM project, or a LaTeX project, and the diverse departmental makeup of the active listeners reflects this. Students are thusly encouraged to make their presentations as universally understandable as

possible, and not to confuse their audience with industry-specific jargon. I am signed up for the 1:00-2:00 P.M. slot, and I will be presenting my project “A Thousand Golden Yesterdays” along with Sarah Jones’s project “Phosphonate Functionalized Inorganic-Organic Hybrid Hydrogels for Bone Regeneration” and Jacob Knostman’s project “The Coach-Athlete Relationship: The Impacts of an Athlete’s Race/Ethnicity on Preferred Coaching Styles.”

I have structured my presentation similarly to how the Creative Works thesis template itself is laid out. I first want to introduce my project’s plot and basic creative conceit of continually moving through the different narrative points of view of first, second, and third person. Then, I want to explain the inspirations that led me to my research focus and how this focus lead me to develop the work’s foundational concepts. Next, I want to give my audience a more specific overview of the various elements of my research that have directly informed elements of my creative work, which will include succinct definitions of the psychological terminology that my research centers around. Finally, I want to perform a short reading of a selection of my work-in-progress so that the audience can better understand how I have transformed and creatively interpreted my research. As I have rehearsed it, this material should be able to cover the ten minutes I am allotted for my presentation almost exactly. Overall, I am both excited and anxious to finally display some of the fruits of my hard work before an unfamiliar audience; I am very interested to see how the project is received by fresh eyes and ears that have not been developing and living with this project for months, as my overseeing professor and I have.

SECTION IV

REFLECTION

The development of the research process throughout my project was fairly straightforward, without much amendment from the methods I had initially decided on using to collect information and make decisions at the project's inception. Most of the choices I made stemmed from my most prominent goal in creating the work, which was to make a creative artifact that portrayed mental illness and recovery from trauma in an inventive, forward-thinking light strongly informed by solid, consistent research. I kept this goal in mind as I sourced various materials from which to draw inspiration for my creative choices; I wanted to, above all, utilize work that was not heavily steeped in speculation or overtly in service to any particular agenda in order to insure that I was not drawing from a biased or inaccurately drawn portrait of the mental illnesses that I wished to represent in my work. As such, most of my research was conducted in strictly academic realms; I primarily utilized peer-reviewed surveys, experimentation, and case studies published in prominent, relevant academic journals, such as the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. Using these sources allowed me to develop a coherent understanding of dissociative processes and reactions to trauma from the more objective and less emotionally colored perspective of someone working within the fields of psychology or psychiatry, which helped me to make better, more well-informed and intentional choices that I may not have been able to make otherwise in a context in which I did not attempt to incorporate research into my creative work. In addition to these academic sources, I also studied popular and influential creative works deemed part of the Southern Gothic literary genre for inspiration in crafting the novella's tone, setting, and characters.

I produced *A Thousand Golden Yesterdays* for an intended target audience of adult readers with an interest in inventive, dark, and deeply psychological character studies; I do not think that this is the only kind of audience that can find value and enjoyment from my creative artifact, however. Logan's harrowing journey into the depths of his own psychopathy and memories is an experience that I believe has been vividly portrayed enough in my work for it to be relatable and understandable for a wide range of adults; however, the work, with its frequent usage of profane language and strong emphases on experiences with sexuality, toxic masculinity, and mental instability, is not appropriate for child or adolescent readers. Many of my decisions in writing *A Thousand Golden Yesterdays* were made in consideration of my intended audience. For instance, Logan's age was made to be twenty-eight years old with the intention for his goals, ambitions, and overall station in life to be broadly understood by readers in their twenties. The creative choices that came from my research and significant efforts to develop a coherent, well-informed understanding of the topics I wished to address should be edifying for the average reader in many senses; as this work has been created with the intention to depict the internal conflicts and headspace of a sufferer of mental illness, I believe that it may be able to humanize a category of the population that is frequently stigmatized and demonized within both our local and global popular cultures. This work has massive potential to generate sympathy toward sufferers of mental illness and post-traumatic disorder. It also contains many inventive and original creative ideas, particularly in its formatting, that I think could inspire other writers to experiment with the ways in which they write and present their pieces.

In the celebration and presentation of my artifact at the LAUNCH Undergraduate Research Symposium, I was able to come to a clearer understanding of how my work and my creative choices in writing *A Thousand Golden Yesterdays* would be understood by a wide and

varied audience of scholars, students, and consumers. It quickly became apparent that the work's formatting, using different subheadings to represent different points of view that comprise the main character Logan's psyche, is an effect that is slightly more difficult to translate into an aural performance context than the typical short story or novel. Ultimately, I chose to hold up one, two, or three fingers as I read a short, five-minute excerpt from my work that I prepared as part of the presentation; this seemed to effectively communicate to the audience which subheading was being read at which time. After the presentation, it was noted by the active listeners for my session that it would perhaps not even be necessary to use this technique for the entirety of the reading; they felt that, once they understood the different styles and personalities of each of Logan's points of view and became oriented in the work, the visual aid was no longer needed, and the language and different pronouns used in each point of view was enough to convey my intended means of experiencing the work. Other than this, I was met with very positive feedback for both the style and content of my presentation; I was informed that the excerpt I read was very moving, powerful, and immediately understood as strongly connected to my research focus.

The Q&A gave me a great opportunity to elaborate to pick up on areas of my presentation that were potentially ineffective in communicating my means of researching the disorders I chose to center my work around; a few audience members wished for me to elaborate further on what resources I specifically chose to use to inform my creative approach, and were interested to learn more about the kind of content my sources covered that was then translated into the work itself. I also had the opportunity, when asked about how the interplay between the three dynamic voices of Logan's psyche would evolve and change over the course of the novella, to more concretely articulate and explain my understanding of the overarching plot and themes of the work in a way that allowed me to understand the work I had done in an objective, maximalist

sense; I was able to better comprehend the big picture and narrative structure of my efforts and somewhat detach myself from my own intimacy with the work's creation and conception.

Following the presentation, I did not make any significant changes to my work or the approaches that informed it; my feedback indicated to me that this would largely be unnecessary, and that the path I was currently on was a very strong one. If I were able to create the artifact again, however, I would most likely attempt to accelerate my overall timeline in order to have a finished rough draft for review by my thesis advisor, Dr. Harris, much earlier in the school year than I did; I would have liked to have had more time to internalize and reflect upon his feedback in order to make more considered changes in accordance with his commentary. In particular, I think that the ending of my work is an area that could have benefited from more gestation in the editing and revision process; as it stands here, I am content with it, but I wonder if there are ways in which I could have adjusted it for more overall narrative satisfaction and thematic coherency. This is a natural consequence of a fixed due date, however; there is always the feeling of regret and missed opportunity that comes when elements of your creative time frame are somewhat out of your control. Overall, I am incredibly thankful to have been able to work with LAUNCH for this project; the clearly defined standards and expectations of the program allowed me to methodically create a work on a much larger scale than anything that I would be able to organize and plan on my own without supervision or oversight. I am immensely satisfied with what I have been able to produce for this program, and I know that *A Thousand Golden Yesterdays* is a piece that I will be able to look back upon with pride and admiration for years, if not decades, to come.

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CREATIVE ARTIFACT

A THOUSAND GOLDEN YESTERDAYS.

“You must never run from anything immortal; it attracts their attention.”

I.

i. I don't know how to write a eulogy. I pulled out my notepad and pencil to start one but I've gotten next to nothing done. I wish to God there were a book on it. That there were a book on it or that I didn't have to do it; that there were a book on it or that I didn't have to do it for my father, Clay, the bastard, resting dead in Houston.

ii. You're writing about yourself again. Self-centered bitch.

i. I'm in the middle of Phoenix, Arizona and I'm dying in this fucking heat. I've been jammed up in bumper-touching traffic for damn near half an hour now. My A/C's broken so I've got my windows rolled down all the way but it's not doing any good. Everything sticks to everything, like melting wax: me to my car seat, my tires to the road, my hands to the wheel. I'm sweating more than I ever have. I think this city lies on the border of hell.

I figured I'd complain about it a little here just so I could let it out for a bit. Maybe put me in some better frame of mind so I can get the eulogy underway.

iii. Logan Alexis Cox is twenty-eight years old. Logan lives in Los Angeles but right now he's in Phoenix sweating buckets in a hot car. There are loose papers covered in sloppy handwriting strewn across the passenger seat: torn out pages from the notepad: Logan's best efforts.

ii. Efforts that ended in failure, as yours typically do. As they always fucking do.

i. I keep getting stuck on how I should open it. Everything I've come up with feels phony. I can't figure out how to pay tribute to someone I'm glad to see dead. Someone who left me crying and beaten and bruised more times in my childhood than I could probably count.

ii. But you deserved it, didn't you? Acting up, carrying on—like a little fag—a little girl—

iii. Logan glances up from the notepad on his lap into the infinite reach of cars in front: all makes and models and colors stretching out to the horizon. He pulls open his sunroof and looks up. Pale blue sky and wispy clouds crossing in and out of the boundary of the narrow window.

ii. *Focus*, dipshit. Sit up straight. Eyes down. Back to work. Get something done. Anything. Write your eulogy. Write your touchy-feely journal crap.

iii. Logan frowns and tears the lined sheet out of his legal pad; he balls it up and tosses it to his right to join the others in the passenger seat of his car—a red four-door Toyota sedan with scuffed paint and crusted-on bird crap across the hood—and starts writing again at the top of a blank page. His eyes squint in the harsh sunlight.

i. This car is the worst thing in the world. It is the god damn hottest thing in the world. I'm in a furnace and there's nothing I can do about it till I

ii. get back home—because the car people you trust are back home, but they couldn't fix your A/C in time, because you drive a horrible old shitbucket car that your dumbass can't bear to part with for whatever reason, a car that needs very specific kinds of parts—

i. I would've had to wait three days for them to get the stupid parts in for me, because they keep them all in some godforsaken warehouse in the middle of nowhere, I guess. And I didn't have three days, because I had to leave right then, because all of a sudden

iii. Logan's sisters Kate and Rebecca texted him and then called from Rebecca's cell phone the night of June the 20th while he was in the middle of eating dinner: a Hungry Man Salisbury steak meal and a bottle of Coca-Cola. When he saw the name on the caller ID he groaned and said Leave me alone— goddamn *pricks*—

ii. Pricks, idiots. You've never liked them. Why have you never liked them? Is there anyone in the world you've ever gotten along with, *shitslice*?

i. And I was about to ignore them, too—but I didn't, because there was something weird about them calling at that hour. It got me curious, so I answered: Hey, what's up? I said.

ii. You were trying so hard to be casual like you didn't fucking hate their guts, and they probably could tell you were faking because you're a shit actor and you try too hard. You were getting ready to put on your usual bullshit about how you were doing, how everything was fine, the works, but then you started hearing Kate sniffing after she said Hi, Logan, *whatcha been up to*, and then Bec said

iii. Dad's died. The funeral's on the twenty fourth, down here. We want you to come down and—give a y—a eulogy, alright? You write, don't you? You know your way around words.

Logan said nothing at first. His eyes stared blankly into the brown watery gravy of the Salisbury steak. He brought the bottle of Coca-Cola to his lips with a trembling left hand and took a slow, measured sip. He burped, then cleared his throat and spoke.

Come again, now?

ii. And then the pricks couldn't stop carrying on over the phone about this and that and the wood choice for the coffin and the people they'd invited and you couldn't stand it—their

shrill voices were giving you a headache and you so badly wanted to reach through the line and pull out their tongues—

But of course, you didn't. You never would, because you're weak, a weak little faggot, a spineless Nancy. You waited until a break in the blabber and you forced a smile into your voice and said, I'd love to.

i. Bec was quick to speak up and say Thank you, thank you. I know you weren't on the best of terms with him sometimes, but this means a lot.

The best of terms, God almighty. What a fucking way to sweep it all under the rug. I almost yelled then. I think they could feel me ready to boil because then Kate butted in and said You can think about it some more if you want, Logan.

ii. But no, you sank. You crumbled. You said, Don't you worry one bit. I've got it. I'll do it. You let them collar you like a dog.

i. I don't know why I said yes then, or why they even asked me in the first place. God knows there are probably a hundred other people they could've asked who'd do a better job at it than I can. But after all my trouble trying to write today, I'm starting to think that maybe there's a better way for me to go about the whole thing. Like maybe I could trash him. Crap all over him once and for all when he couldn't possibly overhear. Rest in fucking pieces, Clay Cox, the biggest douche I ever knew. The end.

ii. You could be the hero for once in your miserable life.

iii. Logan smiles and twirls his pencil around in his hand: he sets it and his notepad down in the passenger seat and puts his feet up on top of the car's dashboard. He hums a tuneless, circling melody for a short while before a chorus of sharp honks jolts him out of his seat and he

hits his head on the edge of the open sunroof. As he curses under his breath he stares ahead through his windshield. The cars in front that stretched so far are all but disappeared.

ii. Weren't paying any attention, were you, stupid?

iii. Logan grabs his notepad and pencil and scribbles frantically as he cranks the car's gearshift and takes his foot off of the brake. The car begins to roll forward.

i. The traffic's clearing so I'll get a move on. I'm staying at this funny place on the edge of town, the Brown Beagle Inn. I liked the name and I liked that it was cheap. Note to self to call Aunt Elaine after I check in. P.S.: longer letter later.

Ha ha ha.

iii. The honking escalates to deep cacophony and Logan relents and puts his foot on the accelerator and tosses the legal pad rightward to the passenger seat atop the nest of torn sheets.

—

iii. The red-and-birdshit four-door sedan pulls into a parking spot in a mostly empty lot in the Brown Beagle Inn. The hotel is a stark concrete box sticking straight up out of the ground in the middle of nowhere—in the melting dustblown desert waste on the outskirts of Phoenix—with no windows on the outside: just concrete poured in ridges that make it look like an icebox cake with all the cream scraped off. The sun is descending and the heat from midday is all but gone; in the driver's seat, Logan shivers, muttering under his breath.

i. Cold. Too cold. Way too cold.

ii. Get out of the car. Don't freeze up. Get your phone and your keys. All you have to do is walk up to the front desk and tell them you're checking in. Can you do that? Can you, stupid? Can you, faggot?

i. I can do anything. I can do anything.

ii. Then get a move on, dipshit. Dumbass.

iii. Logan turns off the headlights, turns off the car, and grabs his backpack; as he does so, he glances at his notepad and pencil still sitting faceup in the passenger's seat.

i. Bury him. I'll bury him deeper than shovels could. Deeper than anything.

ii. You won't do *shit* until you check into this fucking hotel.

i. Right.

iii. Logan opens the driver's side door and steps out into the cold night.

II.

i. This coffee is terrible.

ii. This coffee is fucking awful.

iii. Logan takes another sip of the coffee provided to him in the hotel lounge and gags.

i. I don't think I've ever had a worse cup of coffee. I really don't.

ii. Bitter as hell. You deserve it.

iii. Logan is undressed for the evening, drinking coffee shirtless in his loose plaid boxer shorts on the edge of the queen-sized bed in the middle of his hotel room. Logan sips then grimaces then sips then grimaces again, then says out loud:

i. Fucking hell. I don't know why I'm still drinking this.

iii. Another sip and his face twists and shudders. He reaches blindly for a packet of sugar from a loose pile of several on the nightstand. Grabs it. Rips it open.

Pours it in. Stirs.

ii. Fucking *weenie*. Can't even man up and handle a little cup of coffee.

iii. A sip—the verdict—

i. Bleeech.

iii. Logan slams the coffee down onto the nightstand, scoots out of bed, and shuffles over to his suitcase—it is black, unmarked, nondescript.

ii. You like it like that. Luggage as boring as you.

iii. Logan unzips the top pocket of the suitcase and rummages around with hands made chapped and cracked and bleeding from the Arizona heat. He pulls out a tape recorder. He presses the button marked "RECORD".

i. Hello. This is Logan Cox. That's me. This coffee stinks. This coffee stinks and these sheets are scratchy.

These sheets are scratchy and the coffee stinks and the bathroom trim is coming off the wall and I feel like I'm gonna be billed for that.

It's day one. Night one.

ii. And you're already dead tired. Impressive, considering you've done nothing at all.

i. I, uh, couldn't work anything out with the eulogy.

ii. Goose egg. You wasted your fucking time. You don't have much of it to begin with.

i. Writer's block, I guess.

ii. You know writer's block is a fake idea, right? You know that's a piss-poor excuse, right?

i. I'll keep at it, though.

Um.

iii. Logan walks over to the bathroom and squats down at the spot where the trim is coming off the wall, next to the bathtub. He picks at the trim with his free hand. It peels off easily.

He glances up at the showerhead to his right.

i. Maybe I'll take a shower. People get ideas in the shower.

ii. Yeah, but *you* won't.

i. Or, maybe I'll—

iii. Logan's phone buzzes loudly from the bedroom.

i. Ugh.

iii. Logan stands up and his knees pop. He grunts. Walks back out of the bathroom. He doesn't turn off the light.

ii. Shithead. You didn't turn off the light. You're wasting electricity.

iii. Logan eases himself back onto the edge of the bed, sets the tape recorder down beside him, and checks his phone. It's a text from

i. Trent. Fuck. Fuck off.

iii. The text reads,

“Hey

How are you

I miss you :’((”

ii. It's been a year since you broke up with him and you're still too much of a chickenshit to block his number. He does this sadsack brokenhearted bullshit routine every other week and you never try to stop him, probably cause you still think about him whenever you're bored or when you're beating off—

iii. Logan's eyes are unfocused. He lets his hand lose its grip on his phone. It falls to the carpet with a soft thud.

ii. If Clay could see you now, faggot—he'd curse you or skin you alive or beat you to death or

i. Stupid fucking Trent. Goddamnit. Shit.

iii. He leans back on the bed, gazing in the direction of the ceiling. He blinks, and his eyes survey the room.

The walls are beige and glossy. A black and white Ansel Adams landscape photo of mountains and trees hangs above the headboard, framed in faux-wood and clear plastic.

There are no windows. The lamp on the nightstand flickers intermittently.

i. God, it's like a prison cell.

ii. Always complaining. You're always *complaining*.

i. So, who's the warden?

iii. The question settles in the stale air, swallowed by the gasping rattle of the air conditioner. The phone on the floor begins to vibrate again, continuously.

i. No, not a call, no calls—

iii. Logan hangs his body listlessly over the side of the mattress. Blood rushes to his head. He claws at the phone making muted buzzes on the carpet.

i. Please, God, don't make me talk to someone. I don't wanna fucking *talk*—to *anyone*—

iii. Logan checks the caller ID. Elaine Tomlin.

i. Fu—aah—Elaine—

ii. Did you forget about calling Elaine? Pick *up*, Logan. Pick *up*. Fucking loser.

i. You know what? I'll—30 more minutes to myself. Just 30 more minutes. I'll say I was asleep—

ii. Useless little faggot. Can't make a fucking phone call. Grow up.

i. God DAMN.

iii. Logan presses the green button on the phone's face.

ii. Happy voice. Happy voice, idiot.

i. Elaine, hi!

iii. A rough, scratchy voice cloaked in the compressed haze of the phone speaker responds.

Jesus, Logan, were you asleep? Did I wake you? You said you were checking in half an hour ago.

i. Oh, ha—um—sorry, sorry—actually, I was—um—

ii. Go on. Tell her that you were asleep. Lie.

i. I was, uh—I got coffee, and then I was in the bathroom, and—well—I’m really sorry—

iii. Logan. Jeez. It’s fine.

i. Sorry. Sorry.

iii. Elaine sighs.

So how’s Phoenix?

i. It’s hot as balls here.

iii. That’s it?

i. Yeah. Hot, and dry.

iii. Jen used to live in Phoenix, you know. Way before she met your father.

A pregnant pause. The lamp on the nightstand pops.

i. Ah, shit.

iii. Huh? What’s up?

i. Nothing—the stupid lamp just went out—

iii. Sheesh.

i. This hotel sucks ass. I thought it’d be all cute and fun, cause it’s got this goofy name—the Brown Beagle Inn—

iii. Hm.

i. But—ugh!—it’s the worst. The decorating especially. Leaves a lot to be desired.

iii. You *would* pick up on that, huh?

i. Huh?

ii. What the fuck does that mean? Bitch—asshole—if you were in the same room right now, you'd fucking

iii. What with your interior design degree, and all.

i. Right—well—I mean, fuck's sakes, you don't have to go to school for four years like I did to see it's shit.

iii. Logan's eyes sweep around the room again.

i. Like, literally. It's all *brown*.

iii. Ok.

Elaine giggles.

ii. Get to the *point*—stupid woman—waste of your time—

i. So you saw my text, yeah? About what they got me to do?

iii. Oh, the eulogy? Uh huh. Yeah. I can't *believe* you agreed to that shit, Logan.

i. Well—

iii. I mean, after all the shit that scumbag did to you—why in the fucking world would you do that?

ii. She says it like she knows everything the scumbag did to you but she doesn't know a goddamn thing. Not the half of it.

i. I don't know, really. They asked. Bec and Kate did, and it just. Seemed right at the time.

iii. “Seemed right at the time”? How could that ever “seem right”? There's nothing in it for you, Logan.

ii. She'll never let you live this down. Vile woman.

i. Well, I had a thought, actually, on how I'd do it.

iii. Oh yeah? Just a sec.

Logan hears shuffling sounds on the other end of the speaker.

I have to put on my night cream. You're on speakerphone now. Go ahead.

i. I don't know, I'll probably chicken out on this, but—I thought that I could, like, just trash him in it. Get up there and go to town on him. Talk about what a shitbag he was, you know? Send him off with a middle finger up.

iii. Silence on the other end for a few seconds: long enough to where Logan feels compelled to continue.

i. But, you know, I guess that'd be kind of dumb—

iii. No, no, I think you should do it. I really do.

Logan's hand grips the phone tight enough to turn his knuckles white.

i. Huh?

iii. Logan, look.

Elaine breathes out through her nose.

Every time we talk you bring up Clay and how much you can't stand him. Did you know that? It's like a fucking tic for you. Every time. Going on about how he made your life a living hell, this and that—I know you said he stopped after Jen—

i. Killed herself.

iii. Elaine stops and sniffles.

Yeah. So at least my fucking baby sister dying was good for one thing, huh.

i. Don't say that—

ii. Why? You think she's right, don't you—heartless bastard—

iii. Do you know why?

i. Know what?

iii. Why she did it, Logan. Do you know why your mother did it?

i. She didn't leave a note, she didn't say shit to anyone. You know that. Where are you taking this?

iii. You talk about how bad Clay was—what if he's why?

i. Don't—no, don't put that shit in my head, Elaine, goddammit—

ii. Think about it. You should think about it. What if, what if—maybe it was his fault all along—he killed her, he killed your mother, you knew it, you thought it all along—

iii. And you know what? I never told anyone this, I never told you this—I didn't want it to fuck you up, Logan, God—

i. Just say it, Jesus.

iii. She called me the day before she did it and said that she was really upset with Clay—that they'd had an argument, and that she wanted to talk to me, and—

Elaine begins to sob.

And you know what? I said I was too busy. I didn't take her seriously enough. Why would I? She seemed so happy with him and with you all the rest of the time, I figured she could get over it herself that night, and maybe we'd talk about it the next day—God, Logan, do you know how often I wish I could go back to that? I could have done something. Why didn't I do something?

i. It's—it's not your fault—

ii. She makes everything about her goddamn self, doesn't she?

iii. Logan.

Elaine lets out a shuddering breath.

Do you understand what I'm saying? I'm saying—I'm saying *fuck* your father. Ruin him.

i. Elaine, fuck—

iii. What's the fucking problem, Logan? I would *love* to know what your problem is with that—after all your bitching and moaning—

i. Shut the fuck up!

iii. Logan hits the speakerphone button, gets up, and begins to pace the perimeter of the bed.

i. Elaine, I don't know—I mean, shit! It's easy for you to say! You don't have to *do* it, you don't have to *live* with these people, you're barely fucking *related* to them—

iii. Well, so what? *You* are. You can hit them where it *hurts*. For me, for Jenny, for your own fucking self—

ii. It's getting late. Aren't you tired? Hang up on the bitch.

i. Well—God—I'm not just gonna fight your battles for you, OK?

iii. Logan. For fuck's sakes.

Logan ceases his pacing and clutches his temples.

Logan. It's for the *both* of us.

ii. You're going to hang up right now.

i. Elaine, I—God—

iii. Logan rubs his right foot back and forth across the high pile carpet.

ii. Right *now*.

i. Just let me think about it. Fucking hell. It's a lot to think about.

iii. Look, let me just say—

Elaine coughs, raspy, dry.

If you don't do it, you'll regret it, ok? That's it. I know what regret is, Logan. You'll wake up every morning and you'll think about how you had the chance to get even with that heartless prick for once in your life and you threw it away 'cause you didn't wanna hurt anyone's fucking *feelings*.

Logan walks back over to his phone and picks it up.

Logan, I know you want to do it. I know in your heart you want to—and now you're chickening out—

Logan's thumb hovers over the "END CALL" button.

Logan, are you still there?

His eyes are fixated on nothing in particular.

Logan—

ii. Logan.

iii. Logan, don't you dare hold back.

i. I—

iii. Logan's thumb jerks forward and presses the button. He turns his phone off.

ii. Good. You're a good boy.

i. Oh, God.

iii. Logan lays prone and presses his face into the carpet, groaning.

ii. You need to sleep.

i. I need to sleep.

iii. The tape recorder clicks.

III.

Look at me when I'm talking to you, young man.

Clay strikes Logan across the face. Logan begins to weep; his knees buckle and he sinks to the floor.

Daddy, please—

Logan, I said—

iii. Look at me when I'm talking to you.

i. Huh?

iii. Logan looks up to see an overweight, balding man wearing an orange-and-blue striped rugby shirt and pleated khaki-colored corduroy trousers staring at him.

You're not listening, says the man.

i. Um—Sorry, I—I don't—

iii. Logan quickly whips his head around and takes in his surroundings. He sits on the top level of a grey picnic bench underneath a shaded pavilion. The pavilion stands in the middle of a small grassy field. To Logan's right, a forest of tall, swaying pine trees. To his left, a parking lot holding two cars: his and someone else's.

i. Where—

ii. Rest stop, dumbass. Rest stop.

iii. Logan mutters to himself.

i. Rest stop. I'm at the rest stop. You drove—you—I drove—

ii. You drove for *five-and-a-half* hours and you are here to stretch your legs and eat a sandwich and the fatty bald man is bothering you and you are very

i. Annoyed. Just shut up. Leave me alone.

iii. What'd you say, tough guy?

The balding man is standing across from Logan, clasping his hands together at his stomach. He puffs his chest out.

i. Nothing. Sorry, who are you?

iii. The balding man's bushy eyebrows raise.

You haven't listened to me one bit. Good grief. Your generation. All the same, huh?

i. No, I'm just, uh. Bad with—bad with names.

ii. Liar.

iii. Oh, piss off.

i. H-hey, lots of people are, dude.

iii. Don't call me "dude". And I'll say it again. You shouldn't be littering here.

The balding man points with a stubby finger to a crumpled up ball of wax paper—the wrapping of Logan's sandwich—which rolls about gently in the short breezes of hot air that pass through the pavilion.

You know we're having an environmental *crisis* right now?

i. Uh—yeah.

ii. You piece of shit. Piece of shitty shit-shit. He's right.

i. Sorry.

ii. Not good enough, asshole.

iii. That doesn't cut it. You're a young kid—

i. I'm 28.

iii. Like I said. A kid. You should know better. Your *generation*—your lazy-ass *generation*—is inheriting this mess. The least *you* can do is do your part to not make it any worse.

Logan mumbles.

i. What the fuck?

iii. Speak up.

i. Look, I'll pick it up in a second—

iii. You'll pick it up *now*.

Am I clear, young man? Am I fucking clear?

Clay grabs Logan's chin and jerks his head up.

Look at me.

Daddy, I'm looking, I'm looking—

iii. Logan shudders, then shakes his head; he smiles at the balding man.

ii. Creepazoid. Fucking weirdo. Kick his head in.

i. No problem, sir.

iii. Logan fumbles and slides off the bench. He squats down and picks up the crumpled ball.

i. See, I got it.

iii. I wanna see you put it away.

The balding man points to a recycling bin marked PAPER.

Go on, kid.

i. I'm 28. I'm not a kid.

ii. Yes you are. Still the same kid you've always been—still the same kid that Clay—

Clay is shouting, roaring. His eyes are wet, bloodshot.

You're not gonna have a room much longer if you can't pick up your fucking things,

Logan!

He grabs Logan's shirtfront and pulls him forward. Logan feels Clay's hot breath flow over his face.

*I'll be back here in thirty minutes and this place better be **spotless**. Do you understand?*

Yes, Daddy—

Yes, what?

*Y-yes—yes **sir**—*

iii. Quit staring off into space. I'm waiting.

The balding man taps his foot into the grass outside the pavilion.

ii. Look at those shoes. Those shiny leather loafers. Fatso probably paid a thousand fucking dollars for them.

iii. It's your generation. I swear. You kids can't focus on anything—not without your *devices*—

i. Sorry. I'm sorry.

ii. You should cut up those fucking alligator shoes. Fill them up with sand and throw them in the river.

iii. Logan stands up, turns, walks forward a few feet and makes a basketball shot for the wide open mouth of the can.

It misses.

i. Ah, fuck.

ii. Suck-ass. How could you not make that one? You look like an idiot right now.

iii. Logan shuffles over to the crumpled wax paper resting some inches away from the can, picks it up, and drops it in.

ii. Idiot. Idiot. Throw yourself in with it.

iii. He turns to face the balding man. His face twists up in a plastic grin.

i. Happy now, bud?

iii. Watch that mouth, smart guy.

The balding man sneers at Logan and walks over to the car in the lot that is not Logan's.

ii. The car, too. Look at his car. Looks fresh out of the dealership. Fucking new car smell. He probably didn't do shit to deserve it. You should take it from him. Drive it into a ditch.

iii. The balding man opens the car's passenger door and grabs a thick pair of polarized sunglasses.

You just be more careful with your trash, kid.

i. I'm *not*—

iii. Ignoring Logan, the balding man puts on the pair of sunglasses and begins to walk off down a path leading from the pavilion into the forest. Logan begins to mutter again.

i. —Not a kid. I'm 28 *fucking* years old—

iii. Logan begins to shout.

i. And I'm not a fucking kid! I'm not! Asshole!

iii. The balding man does not turn around.

ii. You sure act like a kid. Bitch-ass.

iii. The balding man disappears into the treeline.

i. Fucking—piece of—

iii. Logan glares into the distance, then pulls out his keys. He runs to the balding man's car and scrapes a thin line of paint off of the side.

ii. Show him—you'll show *him*—get it all, take all the fucking paint off—

iii. Logan stops, then drops the keys.

i. Shit—no—fuck, what am I doing—

ii. The right thing. Don't stop—don't stop—

i. No, *goddammit*—

iii. Logan drops his keys to the ground, then puts them in his pocket and walks back to the pavilion.

i. God, what am I gonna do? If he sees that—

ii. He'll know it was you—he'll sue you, he *will*, idiot, stupid—

i. Shit. Shit. You know what? I bet he won't notice. God, I hope he doesn't notice.

iii. Logan smacks his forehead, then begins to pace around the perimeter of the pavilion.

i. That was *weird*.

ii. Get in that garbage can, shitstain.

i. I don't know how I attract all these weird fucking people in my life.

iii. Logan fumbles around in the back pocket of his shorts and pulls out his tape recorder.

i. Day two. I littered. I keyed a car. I've been driving, I'm going to keep driving. It's one-something P.M., I think. I wanna go *home*.

ii. Little kid. Stupid kid. Just like a kid for you to say that.

i. I've got *leg cramps*.

iii. Logan makes a shapeless, flailing gesture at the sky with his right arm.

i. I'm probably getting gray hair. I'm probably gonna be bald like this asshole—this dude that just, like, came out of nowhere and—and bitched at me for forgetting to put my paper in the trash, or the recycling or whatever—it was so *weird*—everything is *weird*—I mean, paper, it biodegrades anyway, right? In the *soil*? I don't fucking know, but like.

iii. Logan walks back to the pavilion and lies across the seat of the picnic bench. His head, upside down, just barely touches the concrete.

i. It's just a weird thing to get on my ass about. And then I keyed the guy's car. Like an idiot.

ii. A *dunce*.

iii. Logan moans.

i. Everybody is on my fucking ass. I can't believe it. I can't *do* this. God. I'm being a bitch. Am I being a bitch right now? I just wanna complain. I feel like I'm being a bitch complaining. I don't know why I'm telling the tape recorder all this.

ii. Useless tripe. You're always feeling sorry for yourself.

i. Fuck. I didn't. Didn't press the button. To record. Ok. Whatever.

iii. Logan tries to sit up and bumps his head on the underside of the picnic table.

i. *Fuck!*

iii. He slumps back down, and the back of his head hits the concrete.

i. God.

iii. He allows inertia to slowly drag the rest of his body across the seat, until his whole body is twisted up underneath the picnic table. The table's underside sports a constellation of small pastel globs of chewed gum.

i. I'll just live under here. That's what I'll do.

iii. Logan laughs to himself. The sound reverberates off the low ceiling of the bench.

i. Yup. Bench life.

ii. Why don't you get up off your ass and do something?

i. I'll die here.

I'll die here.

Logan lays prone underneath his bed. He hears Clay's footsteps pounding up the stairs to his room.

He can't find me here, he can't find me here, he can't find me here—

His mantra grows louder and louder, until he's shouting.

He can't—

Logan begins to cry.

I'll die here.

i. No—no—please, no—

ii. Get up, Logan.

i. I can't—he can't, he *can't*—

ii. Get *up*. Stretch your legs. Exercise before you become a fatso like the bald guy.

You're in terrible shape. You've been sitting in a car all day. You're eating too much junk food.

You're gaining weight. You're going to be one of those bloated motherfuckers who washes themselves with Wet Wipes on a stick. Helpless dying alone in an empty room. Diabetic. You'll get diabetic. The kind you can get from eating like shit.

i. Do something. I'll do something.

iii. Logan crawls out from under the bench, rolling onto the grass beside the pavilion.

i. Off I go. On a nice *walk*.

iii. Logan slowly stands up and begins to walk down the trail that the balding man took.

He takes short steps.

i. You know what? This is nice. It's a nice day. This'll be nice. I already feel better.

iii. As Logan enters the forest, he glances up to the tops of the shivering pine trees. A lone needle drifts down from the sparse canopy,

i. Ouch.

iii. poking him in the eye.

ii. He was just like Clay, wasn't he—just like Clay, that fatty was just like him—remember Clay? Remember? All the things he did to you? Oh, but you *wish*—you *wish* you were a real *man* like he was, instead of the little faggot you are now, a real man like

i. Clay.

iii. Logan stops walking. He shakes his head, and his eyes settle on a thick tree beside the narrow forest trail. He promptly spins himself around, landing with a short *thud* onto the ground beside the tree. He leans his head against the trunk.

ii. You hate walking.

i. I *hate* walking.

ii. Why'd you do this?

i. Why'd—why is any of this happening? What am I *doing* here?

iii. Logan pulls out his cell phone from his right front pants pocket. He sees a missed call and voicemail from his sisters.

i. Ah, jeez.

ii. You put it on silent. Shit for brains. Brains filled with shit.

i. I guess I have to listen to this.

iii. He opens up his voicemail app. The message is 2 minutes long.

i. God, really?

iii. He presses “PLAY.” Two voices in unison.

Howwwwdy, Logan!

i. Corny-asses.

iii. Rebecca, the older, speaks.

Why didn’t you pick up, Logan? I know you have Bluetooth in your car—

Kate, the younger, interjects.

We just wanted to call and see how you were getting on, what with all the driving you’ve been doing—

i. Yeah, all the *fucking* driving. I’m going insane.

ii. Like you weren’t already.

iii. —we hope it hasn’t been too bad, now. But I know you’re a trooper, Logan.

ii. You can hear that treacly plastic smile of hers seeping through the speaker. Soaking your eardrums. Rotting your fucking brain, oh God—

iii. Kate continues.

Anyways, we were talking and we realized we didn’t give you a copy of the program or anything. Stupid us!

ii. Yes, stupid them. Stupid motherfuckers.

iii. I’m gonna scan it real quick and then send you an e-mail, OK?

i. Like I give a shit about the *program*. Jesus.

iii. Ah, I might have the wrong address here. I’m just gonna send it to the one I remember. Tell me if you don’t get it, alright?

Logan grumbles.

i. Oh, *sure*. I'll be *right* on that.

iii. Rebecca speaks.

And Logan, you should call us when you get this. We don't know where you are. OK?

Kate returns.

Allllrighty then! Talk to you soon, Logie! Hope you've got a great speech goin'! We just know that big ol' Hollywood brain of yours is cooking up something amazing!

Byyyyyyyee!

CLICK.

There are no new messages.

ii. As if.

Take a look at the program, Logan.

i. Well, maybe it's all in the morning and I can get the fuck out of dodge by, like, 1 P.M.

iii. Logan opens his e-mail app and taps on a message from Kate—subject “FUNERAL PROGRAM.” Message “Here it is! Hope you can join us for dinner on the night of the 23rd. See you soon!!” He rolls his eyes and opens the PDF attachment, then freezes.

On the first page of the program is a brightly colored photo of a small family at the beach. The family is all lined up in a row, with a parent at either end. On the left, a tall, pretty woman with chestnut brown hair and a slight smile that shows no teeth. On the right, a stocky, red-faced man with a graying close-cropped haircut in the style of a military high-and-tight.

Between them, three children: two girls and a

i. Jesus. Where'd they get—how—

ii. You remember this day, don't you? Don't you, don't you—

Logan Cox, mewling and light: a boy of eight years old, sitting placidly on a blue-and-yellow striped beach towel, gazing out at the lush waves of the sea under the quiet gray of the afternoon sky. His mother, Jennifer, lays beside him. Her sunglasses face the clouds.

A thick, trunklike leg appears in front of Logan's line of sight, and then another. He looks up. Clay looms over him: in the soft light, he casts no shadow.

Logan, this is ridiculous, says Clay.

Whatcha mean?, says Logan.

Clay squats down so that his eyes are on level with Logan's.

Don't you dare backtalk like that. Do you understand me?

Yes, sir, Logan mumbles.

I can't hear you.

Yes, SIR.

What I mean is that we're out here on the beach on a lovely day and you're not doing a damn thing. I didn't drive an hour for you to sit on your ass. Right, Jenny?

She speaks without moving her head: Oh, don't be so hard on him, Clay—

It's discipline. It's just discipline. A boy needs discipline. Don't you think?

She sighs.

Listen to your father, Logan.

But Mom—

Clay cuts him off. And you especially don't backtalk your mom, Logan. Am I clear?

Yes, sir.

Go on and play with your sisters, or swim, or something. Alright?

Yes, sir.

Good boy. You're a good boy.

Logan stands up and shuffles over to his sisters playing with a mound of sand a few meters away from the surf.

What are you guys doing?

Kate and Rebecca raise their heads in unison. Kate looks at Rebecca expectantly.

We're making sandcastles, Rebecca says. Wanna help?

Looks stupid.

Come on, Logan. We're gonna make one that goes all the way up to Heaven. There's a bunch of sand here.

I don't wanna play your dumb game.

Daddy!, Kate yells. Logan's being mean!

You better straighten out, son! Don't make me come over there!

You heard him, Logie. Kate giggles.

If we're gonna play you can't call me that.

Rebecca grins.

Logie, Logie, Logie, Logie—

Shut up! Shut UP!

Logan's words carry across the beach, farther than he expected. Sheepishly, he turns around to look at his father: Clay glares daggers at him.

Alright. Call me whatever. I'm playing sandcastles now.

You can go find some good shells for decorating. We're gonna make the castle part.

OK.

Logan wanders up and down the beach, stopping every few feet to bend over and scoop a shell into the pocket of his swim shorts. He picks up a small, hollowed-out shell and stares at it for a few seconds: he mutters to himself.

Maybe this is the kind with a crab inside.

Gingerly, he pushes his pinky finger into the shell's opening, waggling it around until he suddenly feels the pinching vice grip of a sharp claw on his fingernail. He yelps in surprise, shaking his hand around wildly until the claw relents and dislodges itself. The shell falls with a soft thud into the sand.

Logan inspects his reddened finger with curiosity. His ears prick up at the faint sound of laughter at his back, and he turns to see Kate and Rebecca doubled over beside their wet mound of sand, pointing at him. His face twists up into an ugly, flushed frown.

He picks up the shell and throws it as hard as he can into the ocean.

Logaaaaaann!

Rebecca, her face still wet with tears of laughter, calls out.

Logaaaaaann! Hurry upppp!

I'm coming!, Logan yells: he loses control over his voice and it degrades into a hoarse whisper. He repeats himself, then begins to walk back to the sand castle.

As he reaches his sisters, Logan grabs the shells out of his pocket and tosses them onto the beach beside Kate.

Here.

Kate giggles.

Do they all have crabs in them?

Quit it.

Logan looks down at his feet.

Nuh-uh. They don't, OK?

Thanks, Logie.

Logan looks up: Kate is smiling without affect. Despite himself, he smiles back.

Don't mention it.

Logie! C'mere! Rebecca calls from the other side of the sandcastle. Logan walks around to meet her.

Look what washed up. Rebecca brandishes a large clump of green, translucent seaweed, piled up in her hands such that it resembles a bird nest.

Logan cocks his head. It looks like hair, he says.

Rebecca giggles. You should put it on.

What?

Come on, please?

*I don't **wanna**—*

Pleeeeeease, Logan? Or I'll tell Daddy—

Don't—don't say that. I'll do it, OK? Logan grabs the pile and arranges it haphazardly on top of his hair.

Haha! Kate, look, look! Logie looks like a mermaid!

Kate runs around and begins to laugh alongside Rebecca. Yeah! Like a mermaid! Ha!

Haha!

Quit laughing!

No, you look cool, Logie! Really!

Really?

Yeah, yeah!

Logan smiles and blows the girls a kiss, then puts his hands on his hips, joining in the laughter. Am I a pretty mermaid?, he asks.

Yeah! Prettiest on the beach!

Logan makes a pouty face like the women he sees in the fashion magazines his mother reads: the ones who pose with their butts sticking out and their eyes wide open. He begins imitating the pose until a rough hand grabs him by the wrist and pulls his body up so that only the tips of his toes touch the sand.

Ow! Ow ow ow! Stop it!

Logan looks up to see Clay squeezing his wrist tightly. Clay's face, his whole body, is filled with red-hot rage; shadows catch in his age lines and darken his deep-set eyes.

Clay's voice is controlled. Logan, what the hell are you doing?

N-nothing—

Doesn't look like nothing to me. You answer me now, son.

Logan's body starts to shake all over.

I-I don't, I don't know, I'm just—

Clay's growl breaks into a booming yell. Are you a little sissy, Logan? Are you a little faggot, Logan? You wanna be a fucking girl, huh?

Tears begin to stream down Logan's face. Daddy, no, I'm not—no—

Kate speaks: Daddy, don't—cut it out—

*Kate, you stay **out** of this—Rebecca too—*

Logan's mother sits up.

Clay, you stop that! What are you doing?

The hand holding Logan's wrist clenches harder.

You are being a fucking embarrassment, Logan! No way in fucking hell are you—no, no son of mine is gonna be a fucking little FAGGOT—

Daddy, you're hurting me, you're HURTING meeee—

Clay, get the fuck off of him! You get the fuck off him now!

Logan's mother gets up and runs over to where the two stand. She grabs Clay's ever-clenching hand and tugs at his grip until it loosens; Clay whirls around to face Jenny, breathing heavily. Logan falls to the ground. He gets up and scrambles behind his mother.

Don't you fucking touch me right now, Jenny—

Clay smacks her face with his open palm. Jenny yelps, then touches her hand to the wound.

Fucking shit, Clay! What the fuck's wrong with you right now?

Logan buries his head in the back of her knee, sobbing.

Jenny, I just—I can't—Logan's a boy, he can't be doing that kind of crap—

Fucking psychopath! He's your kid! He's our kid! You don't fucking touch him like that! Don't—not ever again!

She grabs Clay's shoulders, then shoves him back; he stumbles, almost falling. She squats down and strokes Logan's cheek.

Oh, God, Logan, did he hurt you? Are you OK?

She turns to face Clay, yelling.

Clay, I will pack up and leave RIGHT now—I've had it, I've HAD it, I can't DO this anymore—you can't TREAT people like this—

Jenny, don't make a scene, don't—people are staring—

They're not fucking staring at ME! Fucking psycho! Oh, God, I've had it—Kate, Rebecca, come on, come to me—

Clay's face warps and shudders as his eyebrows knit together. The anger leaves his face and his eyes begin to moisten.

Oh—Jenny—no, no, don't—Shit, no, I'm—I'm sorry, I—come here, Logan, I'm—I'm really sorry, Logan, I am—

Clay pushes Logan's mother aside and begins to walk toward Logan with his arms outstretched.

Please, give me a—give me a hug, OK, I'm so sorry, I won't ever do that again—

Logan kicks sand at Clay and yells.

I hate you! I HATE you! I hate this stupid family! I hate everything!

He takes off away from Clay down the beach. He sprints for what feels like hours until he collapses in the surf from exhaustion.

He rolls over on his back. The slow dregs of waves lap at his head.

The sky is grey, cold, boiling.

IV.

iii. A short *crunch* sounds from under the rear wheels of Logan's car. Kate yells.

Logan! Watch it!

i. Shit. The *mailbox*—

ii. You unbelievable fuck-up. This is why you need a backup camera, dumbass, shitstain, stupid—

i. Ah, Jesus.

iii. Logan puts his car into park and opens the driver's side door. He scoots himself out of his seat and onto the warm pavement: he is beset by the muggy, dense air of the Houston suburbs.

i. God, it's like stepping into a bowl of soup.

ii. Potato soup. The real fucking chunky kind.

iii. Logan walks around to the back of the car and sees the mailbox sticking out from under the right rear wheel. As he does so, he glances over to the house he is parked in front of: for the first time, he gets a full view of the building.

ii. Just like you remember.

Logan Cox, 23, stands alone at the front door: Clay lives here.

i. No, fuck off, fuck off, fuck off—

iii. Jeez Louise, Logan.

Kate stands on the curb, wearing a short gingham plaid dress with a flared skirt that ends above the knees. Her brown, soft hair catches the golden light of the afternoon hours and frames her face with a bright halo. Rebecca, wearing jean shorts and a baggy t-shirt, walks up behind Kate, surveying the scene. She purses her lips.

You hit the mailbox, Logan.

Rebecca peers down at the crumpled metal resting next to the back tire.

ii. Like you don't *know*. Like you don't *know*. Fucking mouth-breathing *bitch*.

iii. What was that? Mouth-breathing *what*?

Rebecca raises her eyebrow.

i. Oh, no, uh—I was thinking about something else—

iii. Right.

i. Sorry, I'll put the mailbox back up—uh—Let me just—

iii. Do it later. Come on and get your bags in.

Rebecca nods to the trunk of the car.

i. Um, actually, I just have a backpack.

iii. A *backpack*? You have everything you need in a *backpack*?

i. Yeah—

ii. Hit her, slap her, punch her, punch the ground, punch the tire, punch the stupid mailbox—break, tear, rip, kick—remember—

Logan swallows and eases a strap of the backpack he wears off his shoulder. He stares at the doorbell as if expecting it to ring all by itself: he balls up his right hand and knocks on the door one, two, three times. Waits a few seconds, knocks again.

After some time standing under the yellow porch light, gazing up at the swirling gnats that gather around it, Logan spies movement on the other side of the large glass pane embedded in the doorframe; slowly, he cranes his head back down to meet it. A walking shadow, taking form, filling in—like a page out of a coloring book—with paunch and a reddened face and the same close-cropped haircut he had fifteen years ago.

iii. Logan!

Rebecca is snapping frantically in Logan's face. Logan dazedly fixates on her fingernails: ruby red polish.

i. Sorry.

ii. Get it *together*, fuck-up.

iii. Kate claps her hands together.

Oh, but we forgot, didn't we!—Of course, you've been driving all day—no *wonder* you're tired. You should come on in before you pass out. We'll fix you a sandwich, yeah?

i. Thanks. I'll—I'll get my bag.

iii. Logan fumbles around in his pocket and blindly presses at buttons on his key fob. The trunk pops open. A green hiking backpack lies against the trunk wall.

The shambling thing, the shadow that is his father, it shuffles toward the door. A tight smile is plastered on the thing's face; Logan thinks he senses an air of desperation to it, or maybe he's projecting, maybe—

All at once, the door is opened:

Hello, Logan.

i. Snap *out* of it, for fuck's sakes, snap out of it, shit—

iii. Don't hang around out there too long, Logie! You'll melt in this heat!

Kate stands by the front door, tapping her foot on the welcome mat.

ii. She should shut up. You should shut her up.

iii. Huh? Did you say something, Logan?

i. N-no—Just a second, I'm—I need to get something out of this pocket.

ii. Poor little Logie. You can't help but remember it all, hm—

Hey, dad.

Logan cannot meet his father's eye at first: he starts from the concrete floor of the front porch and works his way up, from the disheveled combat boots to the light blue denim jeans with stains on the crotch to the off-white singlet to, finally, the face—

It is nothing like what he remembers, this face: where it was filled out, hawkish, piercing, it is now caved in, sunken, crumbling: it once towered above him: he now meets it exactly. The only things that are not withering imitations of their former selves are Clay's eyes: the same shocking electric blue, almost bright enough to make Logan squint.

Logan only maintains eye contact for a moment before casting his glance back down and adjusting his backpack.

Can I come in?

iii. Of course you can, silly.

i. Huh?

iii. Logan is standing before the open threshold of the house.

ii. You're *losing* it—you're going cuckoo crazy—you won't last a minute in here—

iii. You must have low blood sugar. You'd better eat something quick.

Kate grabs Logan's right arm and begins pulling him in; Rebecca shuts the door behind him. As Logan stumbles onto the doormat, he begins to take in his surroundings; Rebecca, walking forward, puts her hands on her hips and sighs.

It's crazy—it all still looks just like we left it when we were here last—

ii. Just as terrible as it always was.

iii. Oh, poor thing, I bet he missed us—

i. *Poor thing?*

iii. Rebecca turns around, frowning.

What's the problem?

Logan fidgets, cracking his knuckles.

ii. You fucked up, you fucked up—better think of something quick—

i. Well. I don't know, I—I guess I just, I have kind of a hard time with being sympathetic with him sometimes.

iii. Oh, *come* on, Logan—I mean, I know you guys weren't always on the best of terms, and that he was a little mean before—well, neither of us really *remember* how he was, being that we were so *young* then, how he was before Mom died—

i. What, I mean—don't you remember—OK, example, don't you remember how he was on that day at the beach you have a picture of in the funeral program you emailed me?

iii. Kate squints and rolls her eyes to the ceiling.

Uh—what, was he a little cranky from the hot sun or something? I don't remember. I thought that was a fun day for everyone, from what I recall—

ii. They're fucking brainwashed. Holy shit. He probably filled their heads full of *lies*, lies and *bullshit*, didn't he—

i. You really don't remember a thing.

iii. Rebecca speaks.

I don't either. What do you mean, Logan?

i. It doesn't ma—well—what did he tell you? About what he was like, before?

iii. Well, stuff like—uh—that he yelled at you when he shouldn't have, and—

Rebecca's shoulders roll forward; her voice softens.

Well, I don't know. He never wanted to talk about it—

Kate butts in.

Logan, he straightened up, though, didn't he? I know he was kind of strict with you a lot, but—but you have to give him some kind of credit. He got his stuff together after Mom died.

i. He was never bad to you guys. I'll give him that.

Did you know it's been fifteen years—to the day—since Jenny passed?

The two men are standing in the kitchen: Clay has his back to Logan as he digs something out of his freezer. Logan glares at him with all the intensity he can muster.

You mean, when she killed herself?

Logan, that's—

That's what?

Clay's head sinks.

Yes. When she killed herself.

Yeah. I know. I remember.

That's an awful coincidence, isn't it?

Yeah.

Clay turns back around and Logan hurriedly softens his gaze. Clay holds two microwaveable chicken pot pies in his hands.

So that's dinner?

Something wrong with that?

Clay smiles tightly. Logan looks off to the side.

It's fine, I guess.

I'll put yours on first.

Is there anything to drink?

iii. We have sweet tea and tap water.

Rebecca stands by the refrigerator holding a bright orange plastic cup.

ii. No, not tap water—all sorts of germs and bugs in it—God, they don't even have a *filter*—you'll get sick—who knows what kind of brackish shit they put in the pipes here—you'll drink it and you'll get dysentery and you'll die, Logan, you'll *die, die, die*—

i. Sweet tea, then.

ii. Oh, but if you die, then you won't have to do the eulogy, will you?—switch, switch before it's too late—

iii. You want a sandwich, Logie?

Kate brandishes a loaf of white bread in front of Logan's face.

i. Sure.

iii. You like turkey? Turkey and cheese?

Logan shrugs.

i. Yup. Yeah. That's great.

iii. Drink up, Logan.

Rebecca hands him a tall glass of sweet tea choked with ice.

i. I wish you wouldn't call me Logie anymore, Kate.

iii. Logan takes a sip of the tea.

ii. Vomit. Vomit and sugarwater.

i. Mm. It's a little sweet.

iii. He sets the glass down on the counter. Kate presents him with the finished sandwich on a blue-and-white china plate. She grins.

Now, *Lo-gie*, she says, drawing out each syllable.

Kate walks over to Rebecca and slings her arm over Rebecca's shoulders.

—What kind of a sister would I be if I didn't tease you every now and again?

Logan cracks a quick smile.

i. Well, you sure wouldn't be *my* sister.

iii. The trio all laugh.

Logan is close to done with his meal when Clay joins him at the dinner table with his own potpie and two beers. Clay raises his eyebrows.

You didn't eat much on the way here, huh?

No.

Well, that's fine. I can make you another one of those if you want.

Clay forces out the same tight smile that he's been stretching across his face all night.

Logan returns the gesture halfheartedly.

Thanks for letting me stay here.

It's no problem. No problem at all. Any time.

The two eat in silence for a few minutes. Logan finishes the pie and takes a hesitant sip of beer. He burps, breaking the quiet. Clay raises his head.

So, when are you leaving tomorrow?

Logan takes another, heartier sip of the beer.

Probably 9. 9 A.M. And then I'm picking up my friend who lives a few hours away, then we both go to California together.

Oh? Who's your friend?

His name's Trent. We met in college. We're gonna be, um—

Logan brushes a stray hair out of his face.

Roommates.

iii. So how's everything up in California, huh? See any movie stars? Walk any red carpets?

Kate makes a flourishing hand gesture with each sentence.

i. Uh, nope.

ii. She's taking the piss out of you again. Doesn't that make you mad? Why don't you tell her how you feel, Logan?

i. Kate, I—

iii. Huh? What's up?

i. I—uh—

ii. Come on.

i. Never mind.

iii. Logan coughs.

i. I actually don't really live anywhere where you might see that kind of stuff—celebrities and whatever else.

iii. Rebecca speaks.

You don't have any famous clients or anything with your, uh, interior design stuff?

i. No—well—a little while ago I helped do the bedroom of this girl who was on the newest season of Survivor, if that counts.

iii. Oh, cool!

Kate smiles.

That's *really* cool, Logan.

I didn't even know that show was still on.

Rebecca smirks.

ii. Patronizing—so fucking patronizing—get out, get out, run away, go home, you can't take this, not another second—

iii. Have you found any special girls, Logan?

Kate raises her eyebrows and grins.

ii. You sure *haven't* found any special girls, have you, faggot? Only simpering, sauntering boys, huh, faggot? Just think how *ashamed* they'd be if they knew—oh, if they knew about *Trent*—

And what are you doing in California? What's lined up for you there?

Well—nothing's really super lined up yet, I guess—but I have enough saved up that I can afford the rent at the place we'll be living for a few months, and I'm sure I'll find something by then.

You can't be serious, son.

What's that supposed to mean?

Logan refuses to look up at Clay, who places his fork down on the table and clutches at his temples.

Logan, it's—you have NOTHING waiting for you there?

It's hard finding interior design jobs. I dunno.

Well, God, of COURSE it's hard finding a job with that kind of—

That kind of what?

Logan squeezes onto the cap of the beer bottle he holds in his right hand. It begins to cut into his flesh.

iii. Don't look so embarrassed! You don't have to tell us if you don't want to—oh, but we'd love some nieces and nephews, Logan, we would.

Kate takes Logan's glass of sweet tea and takes an experimental sip.

Oh, not too sweet at all! That's just right. Your tastebuds just aren't acclimated back to the South yet.

She laughs at her own joke.

ii. You have to get out of here. You're going to explode. You *should* explode—all this *vapid* conversation—

i. Look, can I ask you two something?

iii. They speak in unison—Of course—noticing their synchronicity, they giggle and point at each other.

i. Why did you want me to do this eulogy? Like, what's your reasoning? I mean—you said it yourself—we—me and Clay were never on the best of terms—

Son, don't get all—all OFFENDED now, but—I think it's a load of crap that you spent four years at college for—to learn how to fucking DECORATE—and you took out all those loans—

Well, so what? I did what I wanted to do.

Logan's grip on the beer bottle cap grows tighter and tighter.

I know you did, Logan! God, I know you did! You certainly didn't want any of my fucking advice, did you?

Clay takes an angry, gulping swig of his beer, emptying it; he sets it down on the table.

What advice are you talking about? Joining the military? Spending 5 years working a stupid fucking grunt desk job like you did and bragging about it for the rest of my life? That advice, Dad?

Son, you'd better tread real fucking lightly. You watch your goddamn mouth with that shit, OK? I have every right to be proud of my service.

Don't call me your fucking son.

Logan, I—you're being ridiculous—

Logan feels heat dancing inside him, swallowing his toes, his head—his head boils, words bubbling up out of his mouth—

No, fuck you! God, you've got the American flag out on the lawn and the dumbass little veteran stickers on your car—what did you ever fucking know about, like, real COMBAT, for fuck's sakes? You act all fucking wounded, like—like you've got PTSD from doing inventory on Jeeps—

Clay stands up, slamming his hands down on the table.

Logan, you little fucking SHIT! I had friends who DIED out there—

Yeah, so fucking what? So fucking what? So you took all that fucking hurt and you took it out on me, and you took it out on Mom—

You shut up! Just shut the fuck up! Don't you dare fucking bring up Jenny!

Clay grabs his plate and throws it to the ground: it shatters into hundreds of pieces. The tile it lands on cracks.

iii. What are you looking at, Logan?

Kate follows Logan's eye to the cracked tile in the kitchen floor he is fixated on.

i. Nothing.

iii. Rebecca speaks.

Logan, we honestly—you never *talk* about whatever it is he did to you before Mom died—I mean, we’re your sisters, right? But you never *talk* about it—and we don’t remember anything that bad—and he really did care a lot about you, we can *prove* it—

i. What do you mean?

iii. Rebecca takes a slow sip of the iced tea: the condensation on the glass runs down her hand.

We—me and Kate, we called him every week—before he got *really* sick—and every time, without fail, he’d say, you know, “So how’s Logan doing?”, but—but you were always busy, and you never had the time to talk to *us*, so we never had anything to tell him, and—

Rebecca quickly snuffles. Kate picks up the sentence.

And, Logie, we saw him on the day that he died—on his deathbed—

ii. Shut up. Shut up. Rest in pieces, rest in shit, bastard got what was coming to him, you made a mistake doing this, coming here—

Tears run down the faces of both men. Blood drawn with the bottle cap streams from Logan’s fist and collects at his elbow before dripping down onto the floor. Clay lets out a quick, heaving sob.

Son, you can’t—I miss Jenny every day, you can’t—I loved that woman—

Funny fucking way you had of loving her, huh! Beating her and—

Please, son, please just—please—I don’t—

Christ! If you had any idea how fucking SCARED I used to be of you—but, God! I’m not anymore! You’re just a stupid, mean, hateful—OLD man—and nothing you do now is ever going

to make up for what you did to Mom, what you did to me—what you did to a fucking KID, a little KID, you scumbag, shithead, asshole—son of a—

LOGAN! You LISTEN to me!

Clay's voice echoes across the dead hallways of the empty house. His electric blue eyes are puffy and streaking with tears. He pushes his chair to the side: it topples over onto the ground.

You know what? You're a DISGRACE of a son! A fucking disgrace—you think you get to come into my house, and decide whether or not I've earned the fucking right to be a better person—

Did you hear me, asshole?

Logan's voice is hoarse, aflame.

You can kick around all the chairs you want. Throw some more plates, whatever. I said I'm NOT fucking scared of you anymore—you're not gonna intimidate me—just because I'm not the son you wanted—just because—just because I'm a little—

iii. And, Logan, swear to God—the last thing he said was—

A—a little—

iii. It was—

A little faggot?

iii. It was your name, Logan.

The fury in Clay's eyes dims with confusion.

Logan, what does that—are you telling me—no, no, you're not—

YES!

Logan's vision tunnels.

YES! Me, a fucking queer! Who has a fucking BOYFRIEND! A BOYFRIEND that I'm going to go LIVE with—that's who Trent is—my BOYFRIEND—and I'm NEVER gonna give you any grandkids! What a FUCKING shame! Jesus CHRIST!

iii. And I guess we thought—well, maybe that—that we could get you for him—that you could send him off.

Logan's voice begins to crack.

And Daddy, I'm so sorry I'm—I'm not the right kind of son for you, I'm not good enough, I'm a fucking joke, I'm pathetic, I—you were right about me all along, I'm just a stupid fag, I don't—you always knew—

Clay is frozen solid.

Son, I don't know what to—no, you're not, you're not—

I—I am.

Oh, God, Logan—God dammit—

Clay picks up his chair and sits down. He puts his head in his hands and begins to weep openly.

Logan stares at him for a moment.

Dad, I—

Clay looks up: his face flashes with anger.

You just—you just get out of my fucking house right now, Logan. You go get fucking lost.

Logan flinches as if stung. Without words, he begins to pick up his backpack. Clay stands back up and holds a shaking hand out to him.

Shit, no, Logan, I—God—I didn't mean it, hang on—We can talk about this, I just need—need a few minutes, OK? Just a few minutes, to—

Fuck off.

Logan turns his back to Clay and walks to the front door. As he nears the threshold a clammy hand grabs limply at his wrist. Logan wheels around to see Clay, his bleary eyes drowned with tears.

Please, Logan. Don't go.

Logan twists out of Clay's grip: a grip much weaker than it was all those years ago. Clay looks dazedly at his own hand.

Logan opens the front door of the house and steps out into the night. The sky is starless. He walks up to his car.

He looks back one last time. Clay, his face soft and flushed, is still fixated on his hand. The door hangs open, swinging back slowly from the cool breeze of the evening.

Logan gets into his car, starts it, and drives.

iii. But if—if you don't want to do it, Logan, it's—one of us can—

ii. No.

i. No. I'm doing it.

ii. You'll get the final word in. Won't you?

i. I'll—I really want to.

iii. Rebecca and Kate both smile.

Logan, we know you're going to do a good job, says Rebecca.

Don't be nervous, says Kate.

i. Oh, no way.

iii. Logan returns the smile; it breaks out into a full-faced grin.

i. Not at all.

V.

Logan?

Logan, honey?

Logan, get up for a minute.

iii. Logan?

The warm yellow light of Logan's room flickers on. Logan lies face-down, curled up in a small ball on top of the sheets and comforter, still wearing all the clothes he walked into the house with.

ii. Up. Get up. Useless. Worthless. Get your dumb fucking ass *up*.

iii. Logan sprawls himself out across the bed and rolls over, looking at the source of the voice. Rebecca, dressed in a tight black evening gown, groans.

Logan! You were asleep in here?

i. Sorry. Fuck. I'm sorry, shit.

iii. We're going to dinner in ten minutes. You'd better fresh up.

i. D—dinner?

iii. Rebecca's mouth draws together tightly.

I thought Kate told you. We're having dinner tonight with the other funeral guests.

i. Oh, God, how—how many people is—

iii. It's three other people. Kate said she *told* you all this stuff.

Rebecca's eyes sweep up and down Logan's reclined form.

Do you have anything black?

i. Sure. Yeah. Yeah, I'll be—look. I'll be ready in a sec. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

iii. It's fine. Just get ready, OK?

Rebecca sighs and closes the door. The muffled clomp of her heels down the hallway echoes off of the bare walls of Logan's room.

ii. You didn't even *listen* to her—dumb—stupid—get dressed, get *dressed*, Logan—

i. Fuck.

iii. Logan unzips the top pocket of the green hiking backpack beside his bed. With his eyes still half-closed, he feels around in the bag's depths for some moments before pulling out a wrinkled black button-down shirt.

ii. You're going to look like shit. Shit outside, shit inside.

i. Goddamn it—it's so *wrinkled*.

ii. Like skin, like Clay's papery old skin—wearing his skin, like a coat—

iii. Rebecca's voice sounds from downstairs.

Logan, I'm starting the car! You'd better not make us late!

i. I'm coming! I'm coming!

—

iii. Logan, Logan! Oh, I've been hearing so *much* about you, kiddo—

In the foyer of the restaurant, an older man wearing a fitted black tuxedo grabs Logan's right hand and shakes it vigorously.

i. Uh—who—

iii. Ah, what, Logan, you don't remember me? What is it, the hair?

The man squints at Logan, raising his salt-and-pepper eyebrows.

It's me, Jack! I was your dad's work buddy—I used to be over at the house all the time, don't you—

ii. Old fart. Don't know who the fuck he is.

iii. What'd you say, son?

i. Uh—

iii. Kate pushes Logan to the side and begins shaking the old man's hand.

Don't mind my brother, please. He's a little tired—oh, he's been driving nonstop for three *days* now to get here! I think he's still a little cranky.

As Kate continues talking to the old man, Rebecca grabs Logan's arm and pulls him to a corner of the foyer.

Logan, what the fuck was *that*? Are you feeling OK? You still tired?

i. No, I'm fine. I don't—I don't know, I'm just a little stressed out.

iii. Well, get your shit *together*, for God's sakes. You're going to be speaking to these people tomorrow morning.

i. Right, no, I'm—I'm fine.

ii. Be *careful*, Logie—wouldn't want anyone to think you've lost it, would you?

iii. Come on, Logan. Our table's ready.

Kate takes Logan's hand and guides him to a wide, circular table in the center of the restaurant with place settings for eight people. Menus sit open in front of each white ceramic plate. Logan is ushered to a seat close to the bathrooms; Kate and Rebecca sit on either side of him.

Logan is introduced to everyone, properly; there is Jack, the man he did not know, his wrinkled face made ghoulish by the dim yellow lighting overhead: Stephen, somebody his father knew in the Army, who wears black slacks and a black "POW-MIA" shirt: his uncle, Isaac, who has eyes that remind Logan of

ii. Those blue fucking watery shit eyes. Clay's eyes. Snake oil. Bastard. Pluck those eyeballs out like olives on toothpicks. Eat them with your thumbs.

i. I work in interior design. That's my degree. Graphic and interior.

iii. Well, how about that!

Isaac smiles.

ii. Food in his teeth. Food in his ugly fucking teeth. Yellow bastard teeth with coffee stains.

iii. Well, I'm glad to hear you're doing well, Logan. You know, it's been *years* since I saw you.

Stephen, the Army man, pipes up.

Since *any* of us saw you.

ii. What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

iii. Speak up, now? What was that?

Jack, the work friend, is peering over the table at Logan. His bushy eyebrows waggle.

i. I—no, yeah, I just—it's busy. In California. I'm busy.

iii. Kate elbows Logan.

Yup! He works with *movie stars* and, oh, and what was it you said—he got to meet someone on Survivor the other day, he said!

ii. Fuck up. Shut the *fuck* up. Bitch.

iii. Jack speaks: Logan, you really need to speak up. You're mumbling.

Rebecca glares at Logan. Isaac grins.

Frog in your throat, huh? You'd better shape it up before your big number tomorrow, hadn't you, boy?

The party, save Rebecca and Logan, laughs.

i. I—yes, I—

iii. Logan's arm shoots out from behind his menu to grab a few breadsticks from the center of the table. He puts them on his plate, then shoves one in his mouth. He chews and stares at the tablecloth.

ii. Let me speak, faggot. Let me say what you're thinking.

iii. Oh, you're nervous. It happens to us all.

Jack reaches across the table and touches Logan's hand. Logan closes his eyes, swallows the ball of chewed-up bread in his mouth, and nods. He takes a drink of the ice water.

Out of the corner of Logan's eye, a shadow passes from the foyer of the restaurant, stopping briefly beside his table and standing directly across from him before it passes into the men's bathroom. He follows its path by turning his head. Rebecca turns her head with him and clears her throat.

You looking for someone, Logan?

ii. You know what it is. Go see it.

i. Nope. Uh uh. I'm just taking in the restaurant. Nice place.

iii. Logan's hands grip tightly to his menu, turning his knuckles white. A young waiter steps up beside him and clears his throat.

Are we all ready to order?

Isaac looks around at the other guests, then nods.

Sure we are. Right, Logan?

Logan continues to look to the bathroom.

ii. It's waiting for you in there.

iii. Kate waves her hand in front of Logan's face.

Logan? You ready?

Logan's nose twitches.

ii. Fuck *you*. Don't fucking touch me, you *bitch*—

iii. Did you say what I think you just said, kid?

Stephen stares at Logan, whose eyes begin to rolling up to the ceiling. Rebecca hisses in his ear.

Do you need a fucking minute, Logan? Have you lost your *mind*?

ii. Yes, you have, you have! Loony fucking Logan Cox, that's me, Cox sucks cocks, dumber than a box of *rocks*, ready to put the old shitbag Clay in the *ground*—

iii. Logan!

Kate slaps Logan on the cheek. His gaze focuses and his head whips around to face her.

Jesus, Logan, what is *wrong* with you?

Jack chimes in: Goodness, you're being a real bad sport right now—

Isaac leans over to Logan, pushing his menu to the side and gazing into his eyes.

A *real* bad sport, little boy.

Rebecca grabs Logan's shirt collar.

Logan, do you not want to do this? Is that why you're being so ridiculous right now?

Cause you can step down from the eulogy if you're gonna be such a creep—

i. No! No, no—

ii. You're not going to take that from me—you *bitch*—fucking *cunt*—

i. No, shit—I don't—I'm sorry, I don't mean it—I—

iii. Stephen cracks his knuckles.

Why don't you take a breath of fresh air? You seem a little agitated.

i. I'm f—fine—

iii. Or maybe I'll *make* you step outside.

ii. I'm—I'm—

i. No! Goddammit—

ii. I'm—

i. I'm *sorry*. I need to—

ii. —to go to the bathroom.

i. Go to the bathroom. Taking a—

ii. I gotta take a leak. A fucking piss, OK? Get off my *fucking*—

i. No, shut *up*! Sorry, sorry, just—I just need a minute. Just a minute.

iii. Logan pushes himself out of his chair and stands up. His knees come close to buckling. His weak little faggoty knees.

ii. That's right. Your faggoty little knees, you—

iii. Logan smacks himself on the head, then turns to the waiter.

i. Shrimp scampi. That's what I want.

iii. Logan walks off to the bathroom, his face red and moist. Tears form at the corner of his eyes. He turns his head back to the table to see Jack and Isaac pointing at him and gesticulating wildly; Kate is crying into Rebecca's shoulder. Stephen stares at him coldly, then runs a thumb across his neck. Logan swallows and turns his head back forward. As he approaches the bathroom doors, he halts, thinking—

ii. Thinking, Maybe I need the *women's* one cause I'm being such a big fucking *girl* about everything—

i. Such a *girl*. Such a fa—a f—a *faaaa*—

iii. Logan hits himself in the head again, smacking his cheeks, his forehead. He closes his eyes and massages his temples, then walks through the door to the men's room.

i. Get it together, Logan. Come on. You bitch. Dumbass.

iii. The bathroom is dark and cold. The floor is covered in checkered black-and-white tiles. There are no doors on the stalls. A large crack in the shape of a spiral covers the water stained mirror above the sink, lit by a fluorescent bulb that flickers sporadically. Logan's eyes circle around, following the mirror's spiral from its outer edge to its center. He walks to the mirror slowly and places his forehead in the center of the spiral. He begins to rub his forehead against the split glass.

i. Come on. Cut me. Just a little bit of blood. I bleed. I'm human. I need to see it—just a little—

ii. A little bit of that hot blood running down your face—remember when Clay hit you too hard, and you were hiding in the bathroom looking at the mirror just like this, bleeding, and you cried and snotted and you smeared your dirty filthy blood all over the mirror—

iii. And then he wiped it spotless, because he was so *afraid*, so afraid of what Daddy was gonna do if he saw the mirror, wasn't he, the little sissy—

i. Shut UP!

iii. Logan rams his head into the mirror. It splinters at its edges. A shard of reflective glass falls onto the checkered floor and shatters into finer, sharper pieces.

Logan leans his head back and weeps. A familiar voice rings in his ear.

What's the matter, honey?

i. N—no—that—

iii. Logan looks back to the mirror. The shadow from the dining room stands behind him. Its silhouetted form is clearer now: skinny, tall, waifish. It steps toward him: its feet make no noise. It comes closer to the light above Logan's head, revealing its full form.

i. Trent—

iii. Hey, baby.

Trent, wearing navy blue athletic shorts and a black tanktop, stands a few inches above Logan. His thin, pale hands grip Logan's shoulders and begin to massage gently. Logan's stance wobbles: he slumps backwards into Trent's form.

i. You can't—you can't—

iii. Can't what?

Logan cranes his head up and looks Trent in the eye.

i. We're not dating anymore. You can't call me "baby," or "honey," or whatever—

ii. Shut up. Don't ruin this.

iii. Trent says nothing but continues to massage Logan.

I think you miss me, Logan.

i. That's—

ii. Totally true, totally true—

i. No it's not! No, it's fucking *not*—

iii. Logan adjusts his stance, leaning forward.

i. It wasn't working out, right? So we stopped. And that's that. I don't care anymore.

iii. I embarrassed you. I know that.

i. No, it's—

ii. Yup—dressed like a *fag*, acted like a *girl*, limp wrists in public—clinging to you like a bimbo in an action movie, kissing you in broad fucking daylight, it pissed you off, disgusted you—

i. Shut up—please, I—it’s not that simple, I—

ii. I’m in your fucking *head*, dumbass. I know what you think.

iii. That’s disappointing.

Trent’s massage stops; he rests his hands on Logan’s shoulders.

I loved you. I still love you.

i. I—look, this isn’t the kind of conversation I need right now.

iii. What? What do you *need*, Logan? To go back out there and embarrass yourself in front of everyone again?

i. You don’t have the right—you don’t—you don’t know what I’m going through—

iii. No, but whatever it is, it’s making you an asshole, babe.

ii. A psychopath, a fucking sideshow freak—part of the circus—

i. I’m trying my best, ok? I’m trying my best. I’m not—I’m not just *giving in* to everything, I’m—I just don’t know how to cope yet.

iii. Either way, Logan, you need to get a grip.

Trent spins Logan around and holds his arms to his sides.

I’m real worried about you, hon.

i. No you’re not. You’re—I don’t think you’re even real.

iii. Trent frowns.

Says who?

i. Says *me*.

iii. Hmm. Maybe you're right.

Trent looks away from Logan and sniffs, then grabs Logan's chin and looks Logan in the eye.

Hang on. I should tell you something.

i. What?

iii. This eulogy'll kill you if you let it. Are you going to let it?

ii. Yes, *yes*—

i. *No*—I'm just stressed out, is all—

iii. Trent's eyebrows knit together; he sighs.

I don't believe you. Tell me how you really feel.

Trent lets go of Logan and begins walking back into the darkness.

i. I'm—

iii. A tear starts to form on the inside corner of Logan's eye. He sits down on the floor.

i. Trent, I don't know how I feel. I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do.

iii. Your best. Do your best, honey.

Trent's form begins to melt among the shadow.

i. Tell me what to do! Tell me! Tell me what the fuck to do! I can't do this—I don't—

iii. Figure it out, OK? I know you can.

Trent's voice echoes tinnily off the walls of the bathroom.

I love you.

i. I l—I love—

With a loud *boom*, the bathroom door swings open. Another shadow turns the corner, filling out under the flickering light.

You alright in here, boy?

Isaac stands in front of Logan, extending a leathery hand.

i. Can I just have a second?

ii. Just a fucking second, old bitch?

iii. Isaac retracts his hand as if stung by a bee.

Watch your lip.

He turns to leave, but hems and haws for a few moments: then turns back to Logan.

I can't leave you in here crying on the bathroom floor. I told them I would get you.

He squats down to Logan's eye level.

You're being damn *silly* right now is what you're being.

i. I'm sorry, I just—

ii. Just—

i. Shut *up*—it's a lot of pressure. A lot. He's a tough guy to talk about. It's hard. I don't know what I'm doing.

iii. Oh, Jesus. Does anyone?

Isaac's mouth twitches. He moves his gaze to the wall behind Logan; he puts his hand on Logan's shoulder and pushes himself up.

I'm going to wash my hands. You'd better be up and running by the time I'm done, boy.

i. Y-yes—yes—

ii. Yes, *sir*.

—
iii. It's all set up out here, in the backyard.

Rebecca points to a row of six metal folding chairs lined up in front of a small wooden podium. Behind the podium, at the edge of the backyard, a dense, dark forest of pine trees.

And the coffin's going to be there.

She gestures to the area to the left of the podium.

You're starting it off with the eulogy, and then we're going to load up the hearse and drive back to the parlor. And there'll be some refreshments there. Got that?

i. Yeah.

iii. Logan opens up the sliding glass door that leads to the backyard and walks outside with Rebecca.

i. Isn't this kind of fussy? Getting the body and the coffin, driving it here, driving it back?

iii. It's what he wanted. He told us so.

Rebecca touches Logan's shoulder; he turns around to face her.

Are you going to be OK, Logan? Like, really OK? You *cannot* cut up like you did at the restaurant out there.

i. I'm fine. I just—

ii. Showed your true colors—

i. I don't know. It's weird meeting all these new people, and they all have a certain image of this person you're gonna talk about, a very specific, personal image, and—and maybe you have a different one than they do—

ii. Understatement of the fucking century.

i. And, I don't know, it just felt like a lot to have to live up to. In that moment. And I lost my cool.

iii. So what image do you have of him, then? Be honest.

i. It doesn't matter.

iii. Rebecca sighs.

It *does*, Logan. There's no point to this if you're lying to us about everything.

She turns her back to Logan.

It's not like I—like me and Kate think he was some perfect fucking person or anything.

But he was our dad, and he was a good dad, for the most part, and we thought this would be a good thing to do. But, Logan, if there's something you *know* about him, you don't have to be fucking fake about it—you don't have to do something you don't believe in. Just tell me what you're thinking.

i. I believe in it. I do. I swear I do.

ii. Dirty fucking liar.

iii. So what's getting you so wound up, then? What's making you freak out and yell and curse at everyone and make Kate *cry*, and—I thought Stephen was really gonna go in that bathroom and *kill* you, we had to hold him back—

i. It just got to me for a little bit. All the nerves.

iii. Logan, I don't know if I buy that.

Rebecca turns back around; she folds her arms and purses her lips.

Being nervous or whatever is one thing, but that—it wasn't—not *normal*.

ii. She should just call you a freak and quit mincing fucking words.

iii. I *trust* you, I do—me and Kate both do—so just—

She shrugs.

I don't know. *Don't* do that again. Please.

i. You got it.

iii. I'm gonna go to bed. See you in the morning. You're on at ten.

i. I'll stay out here for a bit.

iii. Alright.

Rebecca turns and walks away. The sliding glass door opens then closes. Logan sits down in one of the folding chairs that face the podium.

ii. You know what you have to do. You have to. Are you going to do it?

i. I'm gonna—I don't know.

iii. Logan leans back in his chair and looks into the sky: starless. He moves his head down and gazes into the deep rustling black of the forest at the edge of the backyard.

i. I don't *know*. It's so easy to think about—it's so easy to imagine—but, but *doing* it, that's another thing—

ii. Too much of a pussy-ass weak-willed faggot to see it through.

i. God—dammit, no, I'm—

iii. The sound of the sliding glass door opening then closing. Logan feels a wrinkled hand on his shoulder. He leans his head back further to see Isaac's face.

i. Ah!

ii. Those eyes again. Clay's Day-Glo eyes. Pop the damn things open.

iii. Sorry, Logan, I didn't mean to scare you. Just wanted to talk.

Isaac sits down on the seat to the left of Logan's and lights a cigarette.

i. About what?

iii. I think you know what. Your performance tonight.

i. Look, that's not me, it really isn't—

iii. Isaac grabs Logan's knee and takes a drag of his cigarette. He blows the smoke a few inches to the right of Logan's face.

Disgraceful. No other word for it. You made a fool of yourself.

i. I'm really sorry. I don't know what to tell you.

iii. Logan, I get the feeling like you don't have the best intentions.

Isaac taps ash into the grass, then leans back and takes another drag.

What do you think about that?

i. I think—uh—

ii. You could jump up and hit him with the folding chair. Take off, leave town, never come back.

i. I think you're wrong.

ii. Put him in the same moldy old coffin that Clay's going in—two brothers together—poetic—you'd be doing them both a favor—

iii. That's interesting. Of course, what else would you say?

Isaac chuckles.

Watch this.

He takes another drag, then blows smoke rings toward Logan's face. The rings break and dissipate on his nose.

Neat, huh?

i. Very cool.

iii. Ha! "Cool." Yes, cool, cool.

Isaac ashes the cigarette onto the rim of his folding chair.

Look, no games. I'll be upfront.

Isaac takes a long, long drag. The release and exhale feel endless.

I think you're up to something, and I think you want to *desecrate* the memory of my poor big brother. And it would be a *damn* shame if that were to happen.

i. I—I agree.

iii. My big brother was a little bad sometimes. A little bad, sure. Made a few mistakes, yeah. I'll bet. We all do, don't we? Don't we *all* make mistakes?

i. S—sure.

iii. I don't think *anyone* should be taken to task for things in the past—you certainly wouldn't want to be, would you?

ii. What the *fuck* is that supposed to mean—

i. Wh—uh—what are you talking about?

iii. Well, Logan, I didn't want to say anything about this around the others, since it seems like you're not telling anyone about it—

Isaac moves his hand further up Logan's leg, up to his inner thigh. Isaac gazes into Logan's eyes and raises his eyebrows.

You might be hiding a certain persuasion, hm? You don't cover for it very well.

ii. He knows—he sees it in your eyes, your pouty lips, your walk, you're terrible at keeping in the closet, you fucking *fag*—

iii. Logan scoots his chair violently to the right. Isaac's hand slips off Logan's leg.

i. I don't know what you're talking about. And please don't touch me like that.

iii. Isaac laughs.

Touchy, aren't you!

He stares at the smoldering lit end of his cigarette, then takes a quick drag.

Logan, I think you and I both know—you won't do it. I don't think you're *man* enough to do it. You're weak.

ii. A pussy—a spineless little wimp.

iii. Really, I'm not nervous at all. But I just thought I'd let you know that I'll be keeping an eye out.

i. I won't—you can't—

iii. Can't what? Huh?

i. Uh—

iii. That's what I thought.

ii. Faggot. Man up and say something—

iii. Whoops. All done.

Isaac flicks the butt of the cigarette into the grass.

What a good smoke break that was. Enlightening conversation.

Isaac stands and looks at the podium for a few moments.

Be very careful, Logan. Very careful.

He walks to the sliding glass door. Logan looks down into the grass where the cigarette butt still smolders and crushes the embers with the heel of his shoe. The sound of the door opening then closing.

i. I'm fucked.

ii. You're completely, utterly fucked.

iii. Logan cranes his head back up to the dark sky. His ears ring with the muted sounds of rustling from the forest.

i. Finished.

VI.

Logan?

i. Oh, God. I can't do this—

Logan, honey—

ii. Shut fucking up. Shut the fuck up.

Logan, I need you to get up, precious.

iii. Logan's head will not shut the fuck up.

Please, honey.

i. Fucking shit. Fucking shit.

iii. Settle down, kid.

Stephen glares at Logan from across the other side of the dining room table in Clay's old house.

ii. Stupid Stephen.

iii. Stupid Stephen with his bloodshot eyes.

The whole stupid crew is sitting at the table eating breakfast together. No one sits next to Logan.

Logan's black button-up has found a way to become even more wrinkled. His black slacks have followed suit. He stares quietly at the piece of cooling buttered toast on his plate. He hates the toast. He doesn't want to eat the toast. Everything looks red.

i. Red like blood.

ii. Poor Logan.

iii. Poor, poor Logan.

ii. No one will look Crazy Stupid Logan in the eye because the freak won't stop talking to himself.

i. Freak. I'm a freak.

iii. Could you just eat your breakfast, please, Logan?

Rebecca sips her glass of orange juice with murderous eyes. She leans over and whispers something to Kate. Kate bangs her fist down on the table and whispers back loudly enough for Logan to hear:

—Because it's what Dad would've wanted, God! Just give him—he's stressed out.

Kate turns toward Logan.

You're just a little stressed out, aren't you, Logan? You're high strung. That's just who you are. But you'll get up there on that podium and all the nerves'll just—just *disappear*, I'll bet.

Isaac laughs.

Disappear. That's the way. Little bit of nerves never hurt anybody, did they?

ii. *Disappear*. You'll choke. Shithead.

iii. Logan the shithead will probably choke.

i. I'm gonna choke. I will. I'm gonna—

iii. You'll do fine, OK, Logan?

Rebecca rubs her temples.

You're going to do just fine. But stop with the freaky *muttering* stuff, OK? You sound like a serial killer.

ii. I'm—

i. Fuck! No. Not again. No. I'm just working some some things out. That's all. Just running through the speech. Under my breath. That's *all*.

ii. That's *all*, huh? That's *all*?

Logan, wake—

i. Aah—I'm—I'm gonna head outside, OK? I need to clear my head.

iii. Alright, Kate says.

She smiles at Logan and gives him a thumbs up.

But we're going to start in maybe ten minutes, OK? Out in the backyard.

i. I'll be good to go by then.

iii. Logan stands, takes a bite of the cold toast on his plate, swallows, and walks out to the foyer of the house. He opens the front door and steps out onto the lawn.

ii. Close it, stupid.

iii. Logan continues walking: out to the garden beds on the right side of the lawn. He stops at a group of blue lilies. He sits cross-legged in the grass beside the lilies and puts his head in his hands.

i. I'm fine, I'm—

Logan, honey?

I need you to get up.

Logan begins to stir; his eyes open, slowly.

i. Fine, fine, fine, fine, fine—

Mom?

Jennifer Cox is knelt at the foot of Logan's bed. She brushes Logan's hair out of his eyes.

Can I talk to you for a minute, Logan?

What time is it?

Logan's words slur from half-sleep. He rolls his head over and looks at the alarm clock on the dresser drawer by his bedside. It is 12:03 AM.

Can't we talk later, Mom? In the morning?

Logan's eyes begin to close again.

Logan. Please. Just listen to me for a bit, alright?

Logan's eyes open fully. He notices the thin, drying streaks of tears trailing down from the corners of his mother's eyes, down to her chin, where a drop quivers, ready to break and fall down.

What's wrong, mom?

Nothing's—

Jennifer sniffs.

Nothing's wrong, honey. Not at all.

The teardrop falls, landing on Logan's comforter. It darkens the grey cotton, making it look almost black.

Honey—I'm gonna go away for a while, OK?

What do you mean?

Logan sits up. Jennifer strokes his head, pulls on his hair softly from the base of his neck.

I mean that you won't be seeing me.

Why? Did I—

Logan's eyes begin to well up.

Did I do something bad?

No, honey. It's not you—and it's not Kate, and it's not Rebecca—Your father and I—

What'd Dad do?

Logan, I just—I want you to promise me—that you’ll always be kind. No matter what. Do you promise?

OK.

Go back to bed, sweetheart.

But what’d Dad do?

Logan yawns; his eyes flutter.

We can talk about it in the morning, honey.

i. I—God—oh, God—

iii. Logan leans his head forward and vomits into the lilies. The toast comes back up along with the water Logan drank when he woke up.

i. Fuck this—fuck—*fuck* this—

iii. Logan?

Logan turns to the open door; Kate stands in the threshold.

Are you OK?

i. Fine.

iii. You sure? I can cover for you, or—

i. I’ll be out in a minute. One minute. Alright?

iii. Kate’s shoulders slump and fold inward.

Ok. One minute. No problem.

She turns to leave: as she does so, she turns her head back to face Logan, and speaks.

I love you. You’re gonna do great.

She gives a thumbs-up, then walks out of sight, leaving the door open.

ii. You can run away, right now. Look.

iii. Logan turns to his car, parked beside the still-crushed mailbox.

ii. You have your keys—you don't need anything that's in that backpack—run, Logan,

run—

iii. Logan Cox has one chance to get away and not mess it all up. Logan Cox has one chance.

i. Fuck.

iii. Logan Cox gets up, and turns—

ii. Wrong way, faggot—listen, faggot, you're going the *wrong way*—

iii. He walks back toward the front door; his eyes are glazed over. A small blob of toast vomit stains his shirt collar.

ii. Dumb fucking sissy faggot stupid bitch—get out, get *out*—

iii. He opens the door and puts one foot in front of the other to get to the back of the house, through the kitchen. He reaches the sliding glass door; on the other side, the podium sits, empty. The open coffin rests to the left of the podium: behind it all, the dark pine forest.

Rebecca, Kate, Jack, Stephen, Isaac sit in their folding chairs. At the sound of Logan's hand jostling the handle of the sliding door, they all turn to face him.

Just promise me that—

i. I can do this—I can *do* this—

ii. You can't, you *can't*—

iii. Logan slides the glass door open. The quiet wash of wind blowing through the pine needles blankets his ears.

ii. Turn back—

—That you'll always be kind.

i. I promise.

iii. Logan walks to the podium, bowing his head; he mounts it, and looks down at the open coffin to his right. His father is there, wearing a blue plaid cotton shirt and dark jeans. His face is now much less sunken and collapsed than Logan remembers: it has been made more filled-out and serene by the embalmer. The gentle wind blows small rising cloth ripples across Clay's shirt that make him look as though he is still breathing.

ii. Like he could wake up and grab you and drag you down to hell with him.

iii. Logan laughs under his breath and gazes at the crowd. He breathes in, and out.

Everything feels like falling; everything is tinted red.

—

x. "Fuck Clay Cox."

The guests all gasp as one: an exclamation swallowed by the wind and carried to the fences. Logan smiles and rolls his head back and forth, cracking his neck.

"That's the page I'm starting on. Fuck him. He was a shit. A lousy shit and a drunk and an asshole who beat me and beat my mom. OK?"

The crowd cannot speak; as if they know not how.

"And I'm really sorry to all you who came out here and wanted me to tell you all about how great a guy he was, but that's not the person I knew.

The person—the motherfucker *I* knew—he liked to smack me around and call me names whenever I did something he didn't like—"

Logan coughs.

"Maybe you know a few of those names. Faggot. Sissy. Queer. Whatever he felt like. And it all stuck with me for twenty years of my stupid, miserable fucking life.

And you know what? He's dead now. Fucking dead. Hallelujah. Rest in shit."

The crowd remains still, a single entity enraptured, hanging on each word.

Logan turns to address the corpse that lies peacefully beside him.

"And I will *never* forgive him for what he did to me. What he did to my mom."

Logan's voice cracks on the last word.

"And maybe if she were here—if she *could* be here—she'd tell me not to do this. Maybe this was a bad idea—coming all the way out here and—but I—no, I think it—"

Get it together, you fuckup—come on—

"Shit. I'm sorry. I really am. I'm not as good at this speaking thing as some of you think I am."

Logan laughs and pulls at his shirt collar. He turns back toward the crowd.

"What I'm trying to say is—nothing is right about me. Look. You've all seen how much of a freak I am, right? Talking to myself. Crying in the bathroom. I broke up with my boyfriend a year ago and I'm still not done getting over it. Did I mention I had a boyfriend? That I'm a big, dumb—"

Logan pauses and swallows.

"Faggot? Me? Yup. Yes. I am. That's who I am. And maybe all of that or none of it has to do with my dumbshit asshole father. But I bet I could've been a better person if he hadn't done all the stuff he did to me.

And I think he made my mom want to die—he treated her so *bad*, every fucking day, and left bruises on her that she'd have to cover up when she picked me up from school—"

Logan gestures to Kate and Rebecca.

"You guys don't *know* about any of this. He didn't *tell* you anything, did he?"

Their faces are flushed and darkening; their mouths are both agape. The wind blows their hair in their faces, in their mouths: they seem not to notice.

Logan does not wait for them to respond.

“He didn’t. I know he didn’t. But he knew I knew. And—and I just wish—”

Logan laughs again and turns to the wild dark green of the woods at the edge of the backyard. He puts the palms of his hands on the podium and leans his head back until he faces the clouds.

“I just wish he’d said—maybe just once—”

The clouds are red: everything is.

“That he was fucking sorry. Without any bullshit behind it. Without playing the victim for it. I think that’s all I wanted. I think that’s all he needed to fucking do for me to feel OK about everything. Right?”

Logan steps off the podium and walks over to the open coffin. He kneels down and caresses his dead father’s face, stroking his cheek. Pushes open the closed eyes: the whites are yellow, cloudy. The irises are as horridly blue as they ever were.

“Well, I guess I could’ve asked for it, huh? Maybe I should’ve stuck around when you told me to.”

Logan pokes Clay’s mouth; his lips are pliant, giving way like soft taffy.

“Maybe I should’ve done a lot of things. But you should’ve, too, asshole.

I mean—what do you guys think—”

Logan whirls around to face the guests.

They’ll kill you—impale you on swords—

The folding chairs are all empty.

“Hey, where—”

It is almost too red for anything else.

“Where—”

Logan looks back to the coffin, and it is empty, too; a cold hand taps Logan on the shoulder.

—

iii. Well?

Stephen’s voice cuts through the blustering wind.

Are you going to say something or not?

i. Huh?

iii. Logan blinks. The party of 5 sits before him. He is standing rigid at the podium.

i. What’s—

iii. Logan checks his watch. It is a few minutes after he stepped out to begin his speech.

ii. Look what you did.

i. Haven’t—Have I started yet?

iii. No, Logan.

Rebecca slaps her forehead with her hand.

Just speak, kid. Anything.

Jack fidgets and stares down at his shoes.

Why don’t you just sit down?

Isaac grins.

ii. Good idea. Sit down, Logan. Let the grownups do it.

i. Oh, God.

iii. Logan leans to his right and throws up more toast. The guests all recoil.

Stephen yells.

Get off the stage, for fuck's sakes!

Logan grips the podium tightly and mutters.

i. Fucking hell. I can't do this.

iii. Kate stands up and begins to approach Logan with an outstretched hand. She makes eye contact with Logan and smiles.

You don't have to—Logan, you don't have to—

i. Just shut up for a second.

iii. Kate's smile falters.

Huh?

i. I can't do this. You know why I can't do this? I can't find the fucking hate anymore. I just can't.

iii. Stephen stands up from his chair.

And what's that supposed to mean, huh? Are you pulling something?

i. You know what I was gonna do when I got up here? I was gonna tell you all about how much I hated him. Hated Clay. It was gonna be so fucking cool, I was gonna get revenge, but I guess I can't *speak*—

iii. Logan steps off the podium and walks to the open coffin. He runs his hand across its lid.

i. Because it's all pointless, isn't it? What am I fucking proving to anyone? Who gives a shit? None of you give a shit.

iii. Kate speaks.

Logan, don't say that—we all care about you, we do.

i. There's no *point*. He was a fucking loser. What do I get out of—of stooping down to his level?

iii. Don't you talk that way about him, boy—

Isaac stands up and begins to march over to Logan, who continues to rub his hand across the lid.

i. What? What way? It's the truth. Clay Cox was a fucking loser. But it doesn't feel like anything at all to say it. There's no rush and catharsis or whatever anymore. I don't—I don't even know if I hate him. It feels more like I just pity him. And the sad fucking hateful miserable life he probably lived.

iii. Isaac now stands directly in front of Logan.

I'm *warning* you.

ii. His breath smells like shit.

i. Your breath smells like shit, Isaac.

iii. Logan looks down at Clay. Clay's shirt no longer moves in the wind; his face twitches.

i. I'm done thinking about this. I'm not doing it.

iii. Logan pushes down on the lid as hard as he can. Its slam makes him flinch. Isaac grabs at Logan's shirt collar, pulling him forward.

Fuck you! Fuck—

Isaac closes his fist, then winds up and punches at Logan. Logan dodges the punch easily; Isaac slips and stumbles, falls to the ground. Kate gasps.

i. I pity you, too.

iii. Logan walks past the coffin and podium, approaching the dark pine forest at the edge of the backyard. He turns to face the crowd. Kate and Rebecca are by Isaac's side, helping him stand; Stephen and Jack are struggling to lift the coffin's heavy lid back up.

i. Kate! Rebecca!

iii. The two women look at him.

i. I'm sorry. I'll talk to you guys later.

iii. Isaac, now standing, points at Logan.

Coward! You're a coward, Logan! What'd I tell you?

i. I guess, yeah. I guess so.

iii. Come back here and fight me like a *man*, you little—

i. Oh, fuck off.

iii. Logan turns back around and sprints into the forest.

VII.

iii. The forest is thick, choking, filled with darker and darker green; the pines whisper and shake with the wind. Logan sits cross-legged on a large, thick log that lays over a stagnant river.

i. I wonder if they're looking for me.

ii. Probably not.

i. I'm so tired.

ii. You're tired. You need rest.

i. Maybe I can just take a nap. Right here.

ii. Beautiful.

iii. A pine needle lands in Logan's lap; he pulls it apart at the base and folds the two stems in half, then quarters, then eighths.

i. I don't want to think about any of this anymore.

ii. Then don't.

i. I really only had the one chance, didn't I? And I screwed up.

ii. Big time.

i. I don't know why it feels so OK.

iii. Logan stands and begins to walk back and forth across the log, stretching his arms out as though on a balance beam.

i. I think I'm gonna be fine.

ii. Just fine.

i. There's nothing left to worry about.

iii. Frowning, Logan dismounts and bends down to the creek surface. He stares at his reflection. He gingerly rubs at the stark dark circles under his brown eyes. His jaw is soft,

unsculpted: his cheeks are flushed: his chestnut hair hangs down from the top of his forehead, stringy and wet from sweat.

i. I don't really look like him at all.

iii. Logan stands up and tosses the bits of pine needle in his hands into the creek. They float for a while before sinking.

i. Fuck you, Dad.

iii. Logan bites a piece of loose skin off of his lip.

i. Sorry.

ii. He's dead.

i. And that's enough, for now.

iii. Logan starts to walk back the way he came.

—

i. Oh.

iii. Logan passes from the edge of the forest back into the backyard; the folding chairs are all gone. The podium has disappeared. The coffin too.

i. Well, shoot.

iii. Logan walks to the sliding glass door and pulls it open, then calls out.

i. Hello? Anyone home?

iii. His voice echoes. He shrugs and walks inside, pulling the door closed as he does so.

ii. Time to get going.

iii. Logan walks to his room and picks up the small green hiking backpack that lays by his bedside. He slings the backpack over one shoulder and slicks his damp hair back.

ii. You look ridiculous.

i. Yeah.

iii. Logan leaves his room and approaches the front door. He can see his car through the large glass panel in its center.

He turns and surveys the foyer.

i. I could just burn this whole place down if I felt like it.

ii. You won't.

i. But I won't.

iii. Logan sits down cross-legged on the floor of the foyer and pulls out his phone. He sees three missed calls from Rebecca and one from Kate. He shrugs.

i. Shit. I really am the worst.

iii. He goes to his contacts and scrolls down until he sees Trent's name. He taps it, and presses the call button.

i. Please—

iii. The phone rings six, seven, eight times; eventually, it goes to voicemail.

i. Figures.

iii. Hey, this is Trent! Leave your message after the tone.

The phone beeps.

i. Hi, Trent—it's Logan. Wait, no, you already—you probably saw the caller ID, you know who this is—

ii. Relax.

i. Well, anyway. I'm in Houston right now, but I'll be back in LA in a few days, and. And maybe we can hang out.

iii. Logan swallows loudly.

i. I'm sorry I—I know I don't text back. But I just want to talk to you about something. A couple of things.

iii. Logan coughs.

i. I'm sorry. Text me, or—call me back, when you can. I'm sorry.

I love you.

iii. Logan hangs up and puts his phone back in his pocket. He stands up and starts to walk toward the front door. His ears prick up at the soft patter of footsteps behind him. He turns around to see Kate.

Hey, Logan.

i. I thought you guys had left already.

iii. Everyone else did. I had to go lie down.

i. I'm sorry.

ii. Stop apologizing.

iii. Kate walks toward Logan and takes his hand; he flinches.

Logan, what did he do to you? What did Dad—

i. I'll talk about it later. When I'm up for it. We'll Facetime or something. Just not right now. I've had enough of it.

iii. Kate looks down at the floor.

i. Alright?

iii. Fine.

Kate lets go of Logan's hand.

I need to get down to the funeral parlor. They're waiting for me there.

She looks into Logan's eyes.

Logan, are you coming?

i. You just go on ahead. Don't wait on me.

iii. Alright.

Kate brushes hair out of her eyes and walks to the front door. She opens it, then looks back to Logan.

We don't hate you. Nobody hates you. It's all going to be OK.

i. Thanks.

iii. Be safe, Logie.

The door closes. Logan listens to the muffled sounds of a car starting up and driving away.

ii. Get out of here.

i. Will do.

iii. Logan opens the front door and steps outside. He stops.

i. No, I'll close it.

iii. He closes the front door.

He walks down to his car, unlocks it, and gets inside. He tosses his backpack to the passenger's seat.

He starts the car.

He looks out the window to the house.

ii. Smaller than you remember.

i. Everything is.

iii. He puts his foot on the gas, and drives away.