The Lotus-Eater: My (Young) Life in Habits, Obsessions, and Addictions

by

Jack Reibstein
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If it feels good it’s alright!
If it feels good it’s alright!
-Joe Hicks & Sly Stone, “Life & Death in G & A”

It’s in my DNA,
Cause my fam like to get fucked up the same way.
-Danny Brown, “DNA”

We cannot erase addiction. We can only hope to replace it.
Sometime around last Christmas, one of the few times in the past couple years the two of us have lodged under the same roof, my brother had to attend a friend’s wake. That morning, Will hurried out the door, his tie still hanging around his neck, half of a bagel clamped between his teeth. He told me where he was headed, and while my mouth struggled to form the words I’m so sorry, the door slammed shut, trapping a bitter winter freeze into the front entrance.

The young man who had died (let’s call him Dwayne) was three years older than me. Dwayne was a grade below my brother, which explains why I never knew him; the two hung out in the same circles, hit up all the same parties, but Dwayne never reached the inner sanctum of my brother’s friends, the ones who would come over on weekends to play poker at our dining room table, smoke cigarettes on the back porch, hug my mom and marvel at my dad’s wit.

Three years’ difference meant Dwayne and I attended high school at the same time—he a senior, I a lowly freshman. We walked the same halls, sat in the same rooms, ate the same unfrozen school lunches, but never once, as far as I remember, crossed paths. Be that as it may, we shared space. His name might have been scrawled on an index card, tucked away in the front flap of one of the tome-like textbooks I carried from class to class. Maybe I was assigned his old locker, or wore the same neon penny over my shirt during phys-ed that he had also worn. The point is, we shared space, and now he was gone.

So there I was, ready to write Dwayne off as a ghost, another lacunal chapter in the Book of Will, when I decided, instead, to do some social media sleuthing. A brief
scroll through Facebook was all it took to find a memorial post composed by someone in my brother’s crew, a prayer for their fallen “brother.” Dwayne’s name, coated in blue, hyperlinked font, invited me to dig deeper.

Had I lived in another time, or in a house without Wi-Fi, I might have wrestled with the remorse I felt for my brother that morning, pinched and kneaded and molded it into something close to genuine compassion. Perhaps I would have thought of a way to cheer him up once he returned from the service. But I am covetous in my pursuit of knowing, of being “in the know.” Novelist Susan Choi would call this a culture of “already knowing,” a shame we, men especially, hoist on ourselves for learning in the present tense. We are dissuaded from consulting others, from asking questions, taught throughout our lives that information is either insubstantial or already in our clutches. It is not enough to read *Moby Dick*; that white whale of a book should already be slain and mounted on the shelf for the guests to see. I amass trivia on my brother’s friend in the same way I would research the Battle of Gettysburg. As long as the Cliff Notes to a person’s life are a finger flick away, how can I resist? I wonder if anyone at the wake was also playing Internet detective, scanning through Dwayne’s photo albums, the digital flipbook of his maturation: the unfortunate haircuts, growing muscles, faded eye black from junior varsity football games, then varsity, swim trunks from a tropical getaway, grease stained shirts from his first job at a pizza parlor, a white tux for prom.

Nothing about this felt indecent in the moment. I sat at the kitchen counter in my pajamas, slack jawed and tapping the FORWARD key, collecting shards of Dwayne’s short life, wondering how they would fit into the tragic addiction narrative by which he would be remembered. Most of us are gluttons for a good story, and when we are not
drawing the blinds to watch an entire season of television in one sitting, we are tuning into the public dramas we ourselves curate. And while much has been written about traditional dramatic structure resembling sexual climax, perhaps the same comparison can be drawn between a typical narrative arc and the “trip” one goes on while shooting up. Stories beget highs, highs beget stories, on and on until we are awoken by the passage of time.

When I was done hopping from one milestone in Dwayne’s life to the next, having cycled back to the present, my eye (and cursor) drifted up towards his cover photo. Cover photos are supposed to capture some other side of us not revealed in our profile picture: an art exhibit, a panoramic view of nature, a subtitled television still or pop culture reference, something that shouts, *I contain multitudes.* Dwayne’s first few cover photos were standard for a guy in his early twenties. One was taken in a parking lot, the frame filled from end to end with luxury sports cars. Another was a simple snap of an X-Box controller and an uncapped bottle of Miller High Life, a pairing of creature comforts bathed in harsh basement lighting.

But then, with one more click, one click too far, I saw a painful admission of sickness. Three or four photos in, I came upon a cartoon image so unsettling that I, fully aware of all the trash there is online, still struggle to understand why someone would ever upload it. There on the screen sat Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain, sitting around a kitchen table, almond-eyed, open-mouthed with smiling relief, shooting needles into their veins, an on-looking, haloed Jesus Christ preparing himself to follow suit, turning to the other four for guidance, fastening an extension of salmon rubber tubing around his forearm.
It’s not often that I, someone who was exposed to excessive televisual and filmic violence from a young age, am startled by something I see on a screen. Whenever the killer leaps into the frame at the climax of a horror flick, I am the one who is laughing at the audience’s reaction from the back row of the theater. But there was something about this image, its simplicity, how unapologetic and crude it was, that made me recoil, quit my browser, and slam my computer shut. I was ashamed to have dug so deep, not stopping at the real photos of Dwayne, of him reading picture books to his baby cousins as they fell asleep, of him wrapped in his parents’ arms. It was this stupid, mocking cartoon, crude in its design, sadistic in its intent, that stopped me cold, made me wish I could leap out of my own skin.

This happened last year. Heroin is something I’d been familiar with, and had, in the form of its chemical cousin, oxy, already infiltrated my home. But the knowledge that someone sat down with a pencil and etched something so inconsiderate, something that aggrandizes overdose, props it up as something to aspire to, something “cool,” made heroin more real to me than ever before, stripped it of its mammoth cultural weight, its unmentionability. In that moment, heroin was not a talking point in an electoral debate or something I prayed would pass over my house like the Angel of Death. It was just another thing to do, the ultimate item in a series of fads and fixations: video games, cars, beer, heroin.

A lot of exceptional musicians have written and produced under the influence of heroin: Miles Davis, Neil Young, Sid Vicious, Steven Drozd, Elliot Smith. The list goes on.

Simply type the word into any online music database and the first hit it spits out
will serve as proof. “Heroin,” a standout even when pitted against many other unforgettable Velvet Underground songs, is, I assume, the closest any piece of art comes to simulating the actual sensation of getting loaded. “It’s my wife, and it’s my life,” Lou Reed insists of the wonder drug, tingling and sedated in the first half of the rhyme, a defensive, off the cuff laugh escaping his throat by line’s end. Reed’s lyrics chase after the song’s instrumentation like a dog after its tale; he is at once possessive of the high (it, after all, makes him “feel just like Jesus’ son”) and at the mercy of the song’s untamed musicality, which invites us to tag along on his journey. The pace, dictated by percussionist Maureen Tucker, is reckless, scary, ramps up as she mallets away on the toms like a woman possessed, then slows to the steady thrum of a human pulse. It’s a necessary comedown, a reassurance that we are still alive. John Cale’s electric viola, screeching, gasping for air, adds to this scintillating disarray. It’s visceral, enough to make you worry that the blood in your feet is flowing in reverse. We “rush on [Reed’s] run,” retreat with him on a “great big clipper ship” to a world out of earshot from the urban dirge of late ‘60s New York, a world far away from “the politicians makin’ crazy sounds… and all the dead bodies piled up in mounds,” a world where smack isn’t common as candy, a world less complicated, a world still unknown. That is the power of “Heroin.” It all mounts to Reed’s resolution, “And I guess I just don’t know, and I guess I just don’t know…” After seven minutes of listening, we are back to square one, uncertain of where it is we went or why we went there, but knowing how we got there, knowing we’ll be back for more.

Once, as a child, left unattended, I consumed an entire bag of Lay’s Potato Chips. Not
one of those kiddie bags packed away in your school lunch with an abysmal chip to air ratio. We're dealing with a family-sized package, something to be emptied into a bowl and placed on a picnic table at a graduation party.

I was nine, and while my parents were prepping the house for a dinner party, I sat down with the bag on our leathery brown loveseat, any semblance of restraint disengaged, inhaling every last fried potato crisp. I did not notice what I had done until I was shoveling for crumbs trapped in the bag's tight, stubborn corners. While my parents were in the backyard lighting the grill, I balled up and deposited the evidence into the waste basket under the kitchen sink. My stomach twisted into a knot later that night, and I wouldn't have been able to explain why. “I hardly ate anything at dinner,” I'm sure I said, bracing for sharp pain, waiting for the lining of my stomach to be flooded with acid on a futile, surging hunt for nutrients.

Between ages eight and thirteen, my combined inertial tendencies and ravenous appetite caused me to gain weight at a startling pace. Somewhere in this five-year window, a negligible amount of boyhood doughiness cascaded into dangerous, life-threatening fat. My chubby cheeks, once endearing, were now but one part of a head-to-toe appearance that drew disappointed looks wherever I went. Lunch Lady Arms, Man Boobs, Pot Belly, Thunder Thighs: I had to overcome a lot of first impressions, asserting my charisma in order to dispel gut reactions from my classmates and their parents. Fatness was a public menace at the time, and between Morgan Spurlock's dollar menu journalism and nightly reports on the national news, I felt like the Scourge of America, a contributor to its growing collection of unsettling health statistics. Each time I managed to peer through the full-length mirror mounted on my bedroom closet door, my
connection to my body felt more and more tenuous. Even today, I look in the mirror and I see a vessel ravaged by corn syrup and white flour. When stood up alongside the other men in my family, you can track where the growth stops, inhibited by fatty sugars and sugary fats. This is a body that would have been turned away at Ellis Island, unfit in every sense of the word: unfit for labor, unfit for clothing, unfit for love. Above all, this body is unfit for learning. It’s a body that doesn’t listen, that can’t hear my distress calls over the whispers of others. There I am, but how could that be me? That’s not me. That’s the poster child for obesity.

My weight issue reached a tipping point when I visited my pediatrician at the beginning of the summer, seventh grade still in session, for my annual physical. I dreaded Dr. Landis’s office, with its heinous polka dotted paint scheme and dizzying smell of disinfectant. There is something about child friendly atmospheres that feel insulting to a thirteen-year-old. As if summiting Mt. Puberty isn’t enough, looking at the drop back down is somehow even more debilitating. Worse yet was Dr. Landis himself. I’d nod along as he harped on the importance of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and protein, nothing I hadn’t read on those Food Pyramid posters plastered around our school gymnasium. Landis did a poor job of hiding his impatience with me. I was inconvenient, a wrench thrown into his afternoon. My meetings with him gave me the impression that most of his patients were twig-legged angels, much like his own two children that were pictured and framed on his desk. These were the kids you see in middle school health videos who cross-country biked with their parents to apple orchards, drank their milk every night with supper, and prayed for God to smite cigarette companies. I imagine there wasn’t a single word spoken during those appointments. A
simple once-over would suffice, no blood work or vaccine shots necessary, maybe even a high five at the end. Then there was me, bracing to be chewed out by my holier-than-thou doctor.

“Is there anything you would change about yourself if you could?” he asked, goading me into one of his speeches. I pursed my lips together and flashed him an unconvincing look of preponderance before shaking my head back and forth, refusing to bite. “Really, Jacob? My records say that last year you wanted to get in shape.” No one I know, not even my parents at their most indignant, calls me Jacob. To this man, I was a simplistic web of legal info and numbers, and that’s exactly what he intended to show me next: my statistical trajectory. He pulled up a chart on his computer monitor of BMI (Body Mass Index, a measurement of weight versus height) scores, each blip on the graph representing one of his patients. Many of the black dots had chosen to congregate together in the center of the graph. My blip, surrounded and exposed by a red circle, was an outlier, cavorting with the other miscreant data points at the top. Who were these other kids? Did they have to endure this same speech?

With every check-up before that, I’d been able to shrug off his warnings by the time I climbed into my mom’s car parked out front, but this round belonged to Dr. Landis. I was shaken. The chart made it clear that I was drifting into territory from which I might never return. The stakes were obvious: make a change or meet your maker. Landis concluded with the same question, the same disingenuous injection of levity he ended with year after year, as though he hadn’t dropped the bomb on me: “Now the tough question… What’s your favorite color?”

At the risk of deploying the most overused aphorism in jazz criticism, here it goes:
sometimes it is not the notes you play, but rather the notes you do not play, that resonate
the loudest. “Sonny’s Blues,” a masterwork of James Baldwin, and one of the most
widely taught stories in American creative writing classes, is such an impressive rendering
of substance abuse that it does not bother explaining the nuts and bolts of drugs or their
physiological consequences in order to communicate the irreparable damage they inflict.
Baldwin doesn’t use a syringe in order to inoculate us with sorrow, for he knows the
mere specter of drugs will do just that.

I have faint memories of encountering this story years ago in some midday
language arts block, Baldwin’s vocabulary deliberate enough as to be suitable for high
schoolers, his grip over storytelling and narrative structure tight enough that it can be
used as a benchmark for aspiring writers, even a point of mimicry if the instructor
believes it to be a worthwhile prompt. My thesis advisor recommended I read “Sonny’s
Blues” over the summer in order to get the ball rolling on this project. I blitzed through
the story at a desk in the Burbank Public Library one day over the Fourth of July
weekend, eyeballing it as a PDF I found online, not even dignifying the story with the
print-out treatment it deserves. Having already read it, I wrote it off as the exemplar of
short story fiction it had become, not the harrowing account of fraternal anguish it has
been all along.

“I was scared, scared for Sonny. He became real to me again… I couldn’t believe
it: but what I mean by that is that I couldn’t find any room for it anywhere inside me,”
the narrator reveals after hearing his brother has been caught and jailed in a heroin bust.
At first, I did not notice the abundant similarities shared between the brothers in
“Sonny’s Blues” and me and my own older brother, Will. I guess this has something to
do with me phasing him out of my day-to-day thoughts, placing him out of my mind. Since I turned fifteen, when he flew away to begin his short lived college career at the University of Arizona in Tucson, I, too, have found it challenging to admit any room for my brother until there is some imminent reason for me to be concerned for his safety. That first year when he was away at college, the mere mention of his name by my parents made my heart sink, for I knew that lurking behind it was some spectacular form of trouble.

If we were to plot the effects of a drug bender as we would a catastrophic earthquake, the zone of impact being the user's body and psyche, its aftershocks still register in the lives of those they hold dear. We, the onlookers, can only digest so many tell-alls and firsthand accounts of drug use before tiring of the push and pull of setback and progress, self-ruin and triumph. Instead of leading us through sites revisited over and over again in addiction narratives (the drug deal, the party, the detox, the teary support group speech following a year of sobriety), Baldwin relies on a pained relationship between two brothers—a jazz player named Sonny and his older brother, our narrator—to demonstrate how drugs can usurp something as innate and binding as blood relations. By foregoing the obvious route, a story from the eyes of the addict, Baldwin grants us a fresh perspective on an age old conundrum, showing how Sonny’s illness eats away at his brother, too:

I wanted to say more, but I couldn’t. I wanted to talk about will power and how life could be—well, beautiful. I wanted to say that it was all within; but was it? or, rather, wasn’t that exactly the trouble? And I wanted to promise that I would never fail him again. But it would all have sounded—empty words and lies.

So I made the promise to myself and prayed that I would keep it.

That promise is the same one that both binds my brother and I together and inhabits the space between us. It has tormented me and made my respect for him
insoluble. Upholding the promise is like walking over glass; I trust that it is sturdy enough to endure, but see and fear the drop that lies beneath if it breaks.

Yes, Baldwin does allow us some snapshots of the club where Sonny’s music and former demons converse with each other, the streets Sonny was raised on where gospel and heroin fill the punishing void left by residential segregation and governmental negligence, the country Sonny lives in where a truck full of liquored up white men can crush his young, black uncle to death without facing any consequence. However, this backdrop to the story, as crucial as it may be, is auxiliary to its main source of tension: family. Addiction ensnares our brothers, sisters, parents and children. Even the people we think we know down to a science are at the mercy of cold, dispassionate brain chemistry.

In the end, neither man can hope to grasp the full breadth of the other’s suffering, with Sonny clawing himself out of the dark well of usage, his brother soldiering through the loss of his daughter. But as we see in the final scene, when Sonny, at long last, plays the piano in front of his brother, we can learn a lot from listening. It is these brothers’ fumbling attempts to understand each other, and the looming uncertainty of abstinence or relapse for Sonny, that make Baldwin’s writing, nearly sixty years later, alive and at play in my own life.

Like many dads who grew up in the ‘60s, mine dreamed of being a rock star. Unlike many dads, mine came close.

Once he’d biked home each day after final period, shrugging off the ridicule he received for his knotty haircut and bellbottoms, my dad would drag a chair over to his
record player, place Led Zeppelin’s *II* under the needle, memorize how far into each song Jimmy Page’s solos began, and pick along until he could replicate them note for note. Some day, kids like him would be listening to his record, trying to mimic his chops.

He lugged equipment to church coffeehouses and school dances, took on bass and rhythm guitar while his less talented bandmates hogged the spotlight, valued technique over showmanship (“Fuck Slash! That guy’s a hack!” he’d yell at the TV years later), studied the anatomy of his instrument, training each of his fingers how to dance along the fret board, tweak knobs, bend strings, milk the whammy bar of every last vibrative drop.

He hasn’t strayed from these austere routines, either. My dad has a guitar in his hand for at least an hour each day. He’s bought handheld tools and electric shock pads to stave off arthritis and keep his fingers agile. Whenever a television program breaks for commercial, he’ll look towards the ceiling, figure out the jingle, and will be strumming along by the end of the fifteen second ad. Two of his three guitars were built by him, and when they sound off kilter or don’t sit right in his hands, he’ll scrutinize them on a piece-by-piece basis, rummage through a red, cluttered toolbox filled with specialized clamps, strings, screws, scissors, and wedges, searching for the proper antidote. I’d wager, in his lifetime, he’s had more face time with guitars than he has with my mom, and they’ve been together for over thirty years.

It’s an everlasting obsession, one that’s outlived his alcoholism. I still remember him repairing his guitars when he used to drink, his work station smelling of sawdust, a harsh lamp illuminating the operating table, reaching for a glass of white wine to steady his hand like a rattled military surgeon gropes for his flask.
In the inevitable event that parents come up short in teaching their kids certain lessons, cartoons will often suffice. My fundamental encounter with drunkenness came from watching *The Simpsons*, a show that once described alcohol as, “the cause, and solution to, all of life’s problems.” Specifically, I enjoyed and continue to laugh at Barney Gumble, number one patron of Moe’s Tavern, town drunk of Springfield, and best friend to our hero, Homer Simpson. Hair disheveled and navel exposed, Barney is a blind follower of the Duff Corporation (a sendoff of Budweiser and other big brand beer companies) and an extension of Homer’s most annihilative tendencies. He chugs anything in sight, so long as it looks like alcohol. In many cases, it is not, leading him to consume varnish, gasoline, and other equally lethal substances. He delivers half of his lines from the floor, while the other half are interrupted by his trademark, lip quavering belch.

There is something reassuring in Barney’s alcoholism. No matter how far drinking backs someone into the corner, it is impossible to stoop *that* low. In *Drinking: A Love Story*, a memoir that doubles as a comprehensive and forthright guide to confronting a national health epidemic, Caroline Knapp explores this phenomenon:

Of course, active alcoholics love hearing about the worst cases; we cling to stories about them. Those are the *true* alcoholics: the unstable and the lunatic; the bum in the subway drinking from the bottle; the red-faced salesman slugging it down in a cheap hotel. Those alcoholics are always a good ten or twenty steps farther down the line than we are, and no matter how many private pangs of worry we harbor about our own drinking, they always serve to remind us that we’re okay, safe, in sufficient control.

My dad surrounded himself with plenty of “worst cases,” men who hopped from one doomed relationship to the next and partied like they were still in their twenties. These men scared me when I was young, but in hindsight, like dangerous animals encountered in the wild, they were probably more frightened of me than I of them, thrown off guard
by the presence of a child. Being a family man and a coherent speaker made my dad an oddity among his peers. Any accusations levied against my dad about his “drinking problem” were bound to seem farfetched to him; he knew what the “true alcoholics” looked like.

Cartoons batten this false security. They personify and exaggerate our worst traits and illnesses until they can defy the laws of physics and withstand anvils dropped on their heads. And so I felt safe and in sufficient control on the couch, laughing with my dad as he drank his Budweiser, my mind at ease knowing that he and I were light years away from Barney Gumble, the Platonic ideal of a boozehound.

A college-age alcoholic is a proven party hit, a joke so rock solid you could pitch it deaf and blind and still count on a laugh. I dare proclaim it the most frequent jest among college students. Sometimes it’s subtle. Maybe you arrive at a friend’s dinner party with white wine in hand and you mime glugging the whole bottle as your eyes roll into the back of your head. Nothing more than a micro-gag to inject some levity into your entrance. Then there’s the obverse, which can be as blunt as, “Psssh, of course I was drunk last night. I’m a low key alcoholic, remember?” I am not in the business of playing comedy referee, but I overhear remarks like that everyday when I am at school, and though there is no malintent behind them, it is equal parts confusing and concerning to see the language of help disguised as humor. “We got hospital drunk,” is a brag I have heard from friends summarizing their weekend escapades, the grin on their face belying the severity of what they have just said. No one actually ended up in the hospital, but what kind of a friend am I to not probe further?
When did the idea of a young addict become so preposterous, especially to people my age? A lot of us ship out to college under the pretense that this is the time when we are granted exemption from bodily care, leeway to overdo it. We are allowed this grace period before we settle into the adult bodies and adult brains with which we will confront our excess adult responsibilities. But is it really just a hall pass if it is redeemable for four years? In four weekends you can develop behavioral patterns that last a lifetime.

I have seen the snapped heels and crying on the curb, heads clasped under toilet seats, boys posturing as men, egos and chins gashed on the pavement, heard the utterances of never again and fuck me out the door and down the block, and the groggy, brain-deadened stammering on the unforgiving morning after. Hash browns and ibuprofen only cure so much. In a culture that centers leisure around consumption, how do we moderate, live between the poles of alcohol poisoning and a blood oath to asceticism?

Will was no stranger to drugs before college. From thirteen-years-old, he was skipping Hebrew School with his friends to behold Ziploc baggies filled with seeds and stems, no doubt pilfered from a classmate’s older sister or bought off some skull-capped high schooler looking to earn an easy buck. His first car, a Honda Civic, was hotboxed to the point of absurdity, the smell of cannabis enmeshed in the upholstery despite numerous cleanings and a rotating collection of air fresheners. As dubious as the “gateway drug” theory may be, it fit him to a tee.}

Where did this burning desire to get high come from? Was it a case of monkey-
see-monkey-do, mimicking a generation of parents who grew up in the psychedelic ‘60s and earned their money in the cocaine ‘80s? From a young age, I was repulsed and disappointed by the debaucherries of adulthood, the eagerness to choke down bitter beer and smoke. Until I grew older and could speak to them as equals, my drinking, cigarette smoking uncles struck me as gargoylish men, their rough faces, shaggy hair, and endless sweaters smelling of dusty old carpets and spent Marlboros, the stench of aftershave on my dad’s face washed away, replaced by noxious, liquored breath whenever he got together with them. At Will’s Bar Mitzvah party, the star of the night was the Newton Marriott’s open bar, and the neighborhood mothers who took advantage of it. They stood atop tables in high heels, cackling, waving their sunspotted arms in the air, splashing their Cosmos this way and that, howling along to Motown’s Tackiest Hits, forgetting the function was meant for and teeming with impressionable pre-teens. This show they put on sent me, only nine at the time, into hiding, while my brother and the rest of his thirteen-year-old posse tried and failed to persuade the bartender into giving them drinks of their own. Four years later, at my own Bar Mitzvah, still apprehensive, I refused to drink the ritual Sabbath Manischewitz, even stood by and watched as the Rabbi poured grape juice into the Kaddish cup, just to be certain he wasn’t pulling a fast one on me. As my brother and his friends grew more and more determined to score drugs and emulate the adult crowd, the mere thought of alcohol still had me running for the hills.

But drugs were as much a method of copying our parents as they were a weapon of retaliation against them. Getting high is one of the most obvious tactics of subversion for disaffected suburban youth. Studying and staying out of trouble, my bread and
butter, proved challenging for Will throughout grade school. What better way to deal with a lousy report card than roll some weed up in it? Being belittled by his teachers wasn’t nearly as bad when he was fading in and out of a kush coma.

What’s more, drugs, forever valuable, present their own career path. Will worshipped Tony Montana, Frank Lucas, Pablo Escobar—movie characters that murdered each other in Armani suits, criminal entrepreneurs who, when dealt a bad hand, demanded a reshuffle. We used to watch these films together, albeit for different reasons: Will to satiate his craving for action and male bravado, I to pad my status as a “cinema buff,” broaden my pop culture lexicon. It was clear to me that these movies were meant to entertain as much as they were to caution against outsized personality and moral turpitude. While this was not entirely lost on Will, he chose to disregard their tragic endings. To him, there was no worse fate than the one Ray Liotta resigned to at the end of *Goodfellas*, to be “an average nobody, to live the rest of your life like a schnook.” It was much better to be ruthless in pursuit of what he wanted. But the truth is, while there are few Michael Corleones in this world, cheap imitations abound.

Drugs were a comical, unpredictable force in my dad’s teenage years, exposing his gullibility and demonstrating the total lack of supervision under which he was raised. The two of us will drive around Newton, the Boston suburb where we both grew up, and he’ll point to different sites where his boyhood naiveté cropped up. There was the time when him and his younger brother, Pete, then just twelve and ten, smoked a whole “bag” of weed with their mutual friend, the three of them marching up Commonwealth Avenue in a zombie-like trance, staring at passing cars and worried dog walkers in
horror, as if their neighborhood had been transformed into an alien colony overnight.

Or the one time he dropped acid, a friend slipping it into his rum and Pepsi at a party, emerging from the basement for a ten-minute walk, instead embarking on a ten-year odyssey. They raided parents’ liquor cabinets, tasted first stolen sips of gin, then second sips then third sips then *ew gross wayt ago Reibstein these are new leather seats my old man’s gonna kill me!*

Law enforcement was less by the book then it was by appointment. *My kid’s into that bippy garbage. Smokes twice a day and dresses like a pansy. Give him a scare for me, willya?* The drinking age was eighteen, which means it was really sixteen, around the time his bands started landing regular gigs. *A reward system develops: wow the crowd, grab some brews, repeat next weekend.* As my dad would joke today, “Couple beers, couple bones, nobody got hurt.”

My dad jokes that his mother used to berate him for only being able to fit into clothes at the Tall & Husky store, even as the two of them walked hand-in-hand to the neighboring sweet shop. All seven remaining Reibstein men have entered and exited fat phases. My uncle Aaron lost his weight when my grandparents put him on an experimental weight loss supplement that was nothing more than dressed up speed. Aaron’s son, Daniel, my cousin, used to eat pads of butter at the dinner table before he was saved by Tai Chi lessons and a paleo diet.

My brother was no exception. At the peak of his bulk, 6’1” and over 210 pounds, he could put away three bagels loaded with chive cheese and crave Chinese food a few hours later. His mouth wrote checks his digestive tract couldn’t always cash. Him and his
friends would pool their money during school lunch and clear out the vending machine’s entire supply of Hot Fries, seeing who could crush the most bags without grasping for milk. His picture still hangs on the Wall of Fame at Eagle’s Deli in Cleveland Circle, where he polished off a pound of cheeseburger and a pound of French fries in under thirty minutes. I inherited most of my destructive dietary habits from copying my brother, but he was also a source of inspiration when I sought change. I would wait for him by the door when he returned from his late night YMCA workouts, rosy cheeked and drenched in sweat, and badger him about how it went as he winced through his smoothies mixed with generous helpings of insipid protein powder, all the while thinking to myself, *if he can do this, so can I.*

During his junior year of high school, he dropped five pant sizes, pulling off a rapid switch from wide load to prime prom prospect. Any advice from the newly minted Adonis? “Run around and don’t eat so much.”

Of all the heroin savants present in pop music’s bloated history, few are as surprising as Sly Stone. Though he was the driving creative force of the Family Stone, one of the most celebrated bands in American pop music, a group that brought Haight Street to Main Street, Stone is not mentioned in the same breath as the Bowies, the Winehouses, the Princes, not grouped with other tortured, self-destructive geniuses. Perhaps it’s because he’s still alive, or because we associate his music with wedding receptions and summertime barbecues, not inner torment. Early Family Stone, popular Family Stone, is full of ensemble oneupsmanship, call and response, and harmonies that push the limits of human vocal range.

The back half of Stone’s discography, however, starting with his 1971 opus,
There's A Riot Goin' On, a watershed political album and personal favorite of mine, is not music for hitting the dance floor; rather, it's music that seduces you to sleep. Peppy drum fills are replaced with the icy, automated Maestro Rhythm King, a prototype of the drum machines that would invade popular music in the 1980s. While the lyrics on early hits like “Dance to the Music,” “I Want to Take You Higher,” and “Everyday People” are crystal clear, they're often indecipherable on Riot and consequent Stone productions recorded under his label, Stone Flower Records. Many songs struggle to rise above anything more than a mantra (see “Just Like A Baby,” “You Caught Me Smilin,’” “Runnin’ Away,”). For huge chunks of the recording sessions, he told his backing band, one of the best in the biz, featuring virtuosos like bassist Larry Graham and trumpeter Cynthia Robinson, to take off, preferring to record each part of his arrangements himself. There’s no denying that drugs had to do with this sudden reclusiveness. “Feel’s so good inside myself, don’t want to move,” he bellows throughout “Luv N’ Haight.” The days of smoking a little grass and jamming among friends were over; There's A Riot Goin' On captures Sly Stone during a full on bender, wearing his self-administered isolation like a mink coat.

“What? You’ve never heard Jimi Hendrix?” my dad asks my brother and I, dumbfounded, as if it's beyond comprehension that a nine and thirteen-year-old aren’t acquainted with a man who’s been buried for over thirty years.

My musical vocabulary was understandably limited in the third grade. I was at the mercy of whatever my elders were listening to. In my mom’s car, we switched between a James Taylor hits compilation, the new Macy Gray CD, and the Shrek soundtrack; my
brother was enamored with the current gangster-love wave of hip-hop, dominated by
gruff yet smooth ladies’ men like Ja Rule, 50 Cent, and a resurgent Snoop Dogg, when
my parents entertained guests, golden oldies from Frank Sinatra and shimmering yacht
rock from Steely Dan colored our dining room, perfect for snapping fingers and mixing
cocktails. I liked it all, but until this moment, did not hear music as anything more than
enhancement, background noise, did not recognize it as something to be appreciated on
its own.

My dad flips through our CD collection, large enough to be a library, but too
disorderly to ever earn that distinction. Today, these cases are all boxed away in the
corner of my basement, having succumbed to the tide of digital filing, stripped of their
data, robbed of their import once imported into our PC. After tossing the Police and
Tina Turner over his shoulder and setting aside Stevie Ray Vaughan and Jeff Beck for
later (a gift to himself, the novices not yet ready), he arrives at the pièce de résistance. Electric
Ladyland, the neck-and-up picture of Jimi gracing the cover, his smooth, unblemished
skin in infrared, eyes closed and mouth open in ecstasy, either mid-solo, mid-orgasm, or
mid-high (the original cover was a group shot of a naked sprawl of women. Many had to
carry out the original vinyl in a brown paper bag, like a smutty magazine). He rests his
can of Bud on the receiver, steadying his hand, not wanting to compromise thousands in
audio equipment by spilling. He clicks a button and the machine grunts, popping out
something unimportant. Whatever it is, it’s getting flung into the rest of the heap. He
cannot press NEXT quick enough, skipping to the final track. Why would he pass
“Crosstown Traffic,” “House Burning Down,” “All Along the Watchtower,” all essential
moments in the Hendrix canon? Because he wants to split a nine-year-old’s mind in two,
and he knows there’s only one song with enough oomph, enough raw wattage to do that.

“Just listen,” he says, but cannot help air strumming along.

It starts strange, unlike any song I’ve heard. A croaking noise builds in the distance, like some cave dwelling creature’s call to its children. About ten seconds in, it gains shape, a warbly howl assuming center stage. “The Wah-Wah!” my dad notes, seesawing an imaginary effect pedal under his left foot, still awestruck thirty-five years later. The sound is woozy, yet never out of control, Hendrix yanking the leash every now and then to remind us what quiet sounds like. In the second such silence, Mitch Mitchell’s high-hat interjects, his bass drum pum-pum-pum-pum-pum-pump-pump along. Here is our first hint that something huge is in store.

Then, as if the band cannot hold it anymore, the weight of a dozen Marshall amps comes crashing down, a cascade of power trio gut punches leaving you breathless. The beer can rumbles.

Well I’m standing next to a mountain… That voice! Like Muddy Waters impersonating a volcano. And I chop it down with the edge of my hand. My brother is impressed, but not enough to stick around. He’s seen better on VH1. I, however, stay by my dad’s side. We listen to the song over and over again, play it backwards, play it until it’s just as much mine as it is his. He leads a drunken lecture through the rest of the album, pausing every fifteen seconds to explain its irrepllicable sound. Businessmen, they drink my wine reminds him to slip back into the kitchen and refuel. All night, drinking and listening, listening and drinking. I’m sure my mom had to send us both to bed that night, unable to fall asleep with subwoofers shaking the walls of her house. If it feels good…

For the next month, I beelined it from the front door to the boombox in my
brother’s room every day after school, devouring all the Hendrix I could get my hands on. *It’s in my DNA…*

The next day at recess, it’s my turn to ask, “What? You’ve *never* heard Jimi Hendrix?”
II

I was the only one of my friends who stayed sober through all four years of high school. If I weren’t so well-versed in the many dialects of teenage male smack talk, a proficiency I inherited from my older brother, I would have had a tough time retaining any of my friends. But they stuck by my decision, if not because they knew what had transpired in my family’s past, then because I never once condescended to them when they chose to get plastered. In fact, I accompanied them to parties with considerable enthusiasm, bouncing on the balls of my feet as we crossed the threshold into an overcrowded living room, elbowing my friends in the ribs, ready to cut loose after a week of calculus quizzes and waking up at the crack of dawn. And then, like clockwork, my energy would wane. I’d remember there was only so far I could venture into the night, as if there were liquid checkpoints stationed throughout the party. You must be this tanked to ride. Whenever the secret leaked that I didn’t drink, I’d be met with a circle of incredulous looks. “Really?” someone would ask, to which I would deliver a reserved yet annoyed nod and a rise of the eyebrows that together said, Yep. Now let’s bury this topic.

But worse than not being believed when you’re eighteen is being treated like an infant. I noticed an unspoken rotation emerge among my friends in which one would abstain for the night from drinking or smoking in order to keep me company. Though it was a good-natured gesture, “Jack duty,” as I referred to it to myself, felt an awful lot like babysitting. One of the most splendid contradictions of alcohol is that it is as much a benchmark for adulthood as it is an excuse for juvenility. Drinking is for the big boys, but when they do so, they become just that: big boys, full-sized adults with the coordination and reasoning capacities of toddlers. Though I felt as though I’d been
banished to the kiddie corner by the end of every high school party I ever attended, I was probably the only one in the building who, if the shit hit the fan, could have held a conversation with the police. Soon enough, people caught onto this, and relegated odd jobs to me accordingly, convinced that I had nothing better to do. *Take our picture. Change the song. Dim the lights. Hold my beer.* If I had held my breath long enough, I bet I would have been used as a coat rack.

As incongruous with juvenile delinquency as it may sound, my brother spent much of his teenage years golfing. Everyday, weather permitting, he’d drive his dank, odorous hybrid over to Newton Commonwealth, the local public golf course, and play until sunset. By junior year, he’d earned team captain status at Newton North High School and won them a state championship. Throughout the week he would hone his game with the team, and on the weekend he’d embarrass my dad and his friends, a revolving cast of alcoholic quinquagenarians, snatching cash out of their pockets as they gambled from hole to hole. If they were playing at a country club, they’d order him mixed drinks at the clubhouse, a taste of adulthood served in a glass tumbler.

This golf obsession spilled into every corner of our home, becoming the de facto theme of most rooms: they kept an old nine iron in the basement to stave off winter boredom, the head dented and scuffed from scraping off of half-century-old tiling; whenever I searched through the desk in my dad’s office for batteries or paper clips, I would brush aside opened sleeves of Titleist Pro V golf balls; Arnold Palmer’s face stared back at me whenever I opened our refrigerator; my brother’s room was a venerable shrine to Tiger Woods; and a copy of Ben Hogan’s *5 Lessons: The Modern*
Fundamentals of Golf, a linksman’s pocket Bible, sat by the toilet in the first floor bathroom.

Sweaty and smelling of fresh cut grass, Will and Dad would pour themselves drinks in the kitchen and recount that Sunday’s misdeeds: who duffed one into the woods, missed the big putt on eighteen, and who kicked their ball to a more favorable spot while no one was looking. As the vodka sodas piled up, so did the gossip on whose swing had deteriorated, whose mouth had grown too big for their game, and, most sordid of all, who couldn’t handle their booze. My dad found himself at the butt end of much of this chatter, and was always a good sport about it. Though he was no cheater, he could admit to being a piss-poor golfer and an even worse drinker. Still, his equanimous demeanor and conversational acumen found him favor with his golfing buddies, made him trustworthy and a good hang. “Reiby!” they’d holler when he walked up to the first tee box. The golf course called for “real men,” and that’s what they saw my dad as: a drinking, fooling, good-willed man.

My brother, the minor, earned his spot through thick skin and unvarnished talent. Though he appeared a fresh faced, fresh mouthed know-nothing, his swing spoke volumes, his feet square, hips fluid, the head of his club winding from six o’clock to twelve and then back at the bat of a lash, his own head so still you could rest an egg on its crown. The ball launched, it climbs an invisible mound, leaving the wooden tee behind to twirl in mid-air like a gymnast mid-vault. Unable to offer Will any advice on the game of golf, these men offered him what few tips they could spare on the game of life.

I’m not saying these outings put him on a fast track to snorting pills, but some of
these men were doing that, albeit not in front of my brother. One of them (we’ll call him Hal) would routinely show up to these 7:30 tee-times with remnant white powder caked under his nose. My uncle Pete would call it to his attention: “Hal, you’ve got a bit of schmutz.” Pete would gesture to his nostrils, and Hal, averting his eyes, would brush the residue of last night away with his worn, hirsute knuckles. Here, Will learned that the extra pockets and compartments on a Callaway bag were used for stowing away Miller Light, that golf courses were safe havens where men could do and say the unmentionable, that adulthood was knotted up with vice.

Or, at least, so I imagine. I’ve snuck glimpses into this world, was allowed to tag along a handful of times, but growing up, I spent most weekend mornings with my mother, who, irony of all ironies, is a substance abuse specialist at McLean Psychiatric Hospital. She did her best to shield me from the cynicism and resignation hanging over these rounds of golf, remind me, as she did her patients, that life is more than a game of skip hop from one stimulus to the next. No doubt she also told this to Will, if not belabored the point more so with him, but the rules of moderation falter when a pack of high-functioning alcoholics, guys Will looked up to, refuted them each week in style. After a few years of their company, he had adopted their gruff laugh, smoker’s breath, and jaded outlook.

Sly Stone used to board planes with a violin case lined with baggies of cocaine. Such an innocuous piece of luggage, he reasoned, would never attract suspicion from air marshals or the FDA.
When you work an internship, you’re lucky if your employer offers you lunch. My dad’s offered him blow.

At eighteen, he hit the jackpot of all high school vocational programs, working in a recording studio while Aerosmith, then nothing more than a local band, pieced together their self-titled debut. Lunch duty and fetching equipment were his chief responsibilities, but they could spot a fellow rocker in their midst, and allowed him and his band to open up for them at a few locations, even play a couple of songs at an album launch party. My dad denies ever doing coke with Aerosmith, something my friends don’t buy for a second, but I’m inclined to believe him, if only because he’s so transparent about his later use of the drug. “Nah, I was too scared at that age to do it. My friends were all over that, but I let them shut the bathroom door on me.”

Then the ‘80s happened. When my grandfather died in the spring of 1980, he left my dad parentless and penniless to face the new decade. Twenty-five, without a college degree, sizing kids’ feet for new sneakers at the Footlocker by day, teaching those same kids guitar scales by night, it slowly settled upon him that his dream wasn’t coming true, that he’d have to recalibrate his idea of success. His older brother took him under his wing as the Tech Boom got underway, affording him a weekend allowance to spend on dates, Celtics games, and the great unifier of the two: cocaine. “One thing about coke is that it makes you think you can drink like a fish. Just watch out for the morning after. Wham! Worst hangover of your life.”

Loose mop strands slap colorful cardboard displays as I swish up and down each aisle, obliterating the dirt and detritus of visiting boots. They resemble tassels, remind me of
flagellants whipping themselves for penance. I stretch up from my work-induced hunch and peep outside the window. Stop N Shop looms large, a behemoth in the backyard of this mom and pop beer shop. State liquor laws are the only thing preventing them from swallowing us whole.

Back to work. The little square tags I punch on each bottle litter the floor, scraped off by dirty fingernails, supplanted by lower prices.

“This says 7.99.”

“Ma’am, I can pull up any other bottle and it will say otherwise.”

“Not this one it doesn’t.”

I turn to the clock, then to the cameras my boss has installed at every corner of the store, a booze soaked Panopticon. Twenty minutes left.

“Eh, what’s two dollars, anyways?” Exact change slapped on the table. Brusque exit. The ping of the door sensor. “Would you like a bag?”

Rearranging crates in the walk-in freezer. If I were somehow locked in here, would I drink our supplies to stay warm?

One last late night rush, always ten minutes before closing. Flipping through a laminated binder for a price check. Man in a white-T, Jesus chain around his neck. Same transaction every Thursday night: Corona Extra 12 Pack. How do I not know this? The line behind him, now a chorus of toe taps and wrist glances. The limited edition AC/DC tallboys sitting on the shelves behind me frame my duress. 15.59, plus tax. Should have trusted my gut. The register hiccups open, my hands fumbling over crumpled, abraded bills. “Have a good one, buddy.” Right on cue, WZLX, nothing but classic rock, coming at you
with another power hour, and then, for the third time today, Steven Tyler pleads for *Sweeeeeeet Emoooooooootion.*

Each night, at around 5:30, or whenever we are done with our workdays, my family congregates in our kitchen for a sort of happy hour. We pop lids off of Tupperware, unseal plastic baggies, and commence our evening ritual of “picking,” as my mother calls it: noncommittally running our fingers over every leftover in the fridge and vacuum sealed treasure in the pantry. We tear off odds and ends of chicken carcasses and pretzel rods, just as we tear apart the people who give us grief at school or the office. But once our tension addled feast runs its course, and our eyes dart across the detritus left in its wake, the dusting of cracker crumbs and the split pistachio shells looking like empty caskets, we are left to wonder, *Why can’t we help ourselves?*

My hope is that this lingering question will be solved by rats: to be more precise, the behavior of lab rats under the watch of Dr. Mike Robinson and his Behavioral Neuroscience of Motivation, Reward and Desire lab, shortened to “Robinson Lab” by the Wesleyan University undergrads who run it. Searching for the lab in the basement of an academic building, I feel privy to a special secret; the people learning entry-level statistics two floors above me have no idea that I am about to witness live science in all of its grotesque splendor. I hope for a dungeonesque ambiance: furry critters tweaking out on meth, or floating in jars filled with luminescent fluid.

I could not be further off. As soon as my friends Carli and Ariel greet me at the door, I am reminded that we are still at school, not Area 51. Carli fills out a spreadsheet with Spotify open in a separate tab. Diet Coke cans are strewn about on work surfaces
and pictures of rats wearing silly hats are taped to the walls. The researchers made a
group Christmas card and matching T-shirts. Robinson Lab is one big, goofy family
committed to solving questions about risky behavior. In this way, they are a lot like my
own family.

But our coarse speculation and pointless griping over chips and dip is swapped out for Carli’s tabulations and vials containing rat brains. There is something reassuring about having my deepest insecurities substantiated by science, to know that an entire team right on my campus is scrimping and saving every last grant dollar to figure out why people like me can’t stand up to a slice of birthday cake. When I read a *New York Times* article about how Oreos and smack light up identical parts of the cerebral cortex, like matching Simon sequences, I feel less like a Neanderthal, and remember that every corner of the globe that has been tarnished by the American food industry is implicated in this mess. My fears feel less unfounded when buttressed by footnotes.

It is time to enter the rat quarters. Carli offers me a lab coat, and I jump at the chance to wear a costume—the English major playing scientist for the day. Dim pink lights and the miasma of rat droppings saturate the corridor, and remind me of the behind-the-curtain section of pet stores where they keep the snakes. We turn into a room with shelves holding bins upon bins of test subjects. Some of the rats have metal plates planted in their foreheads through which lasers can be inserted to scan their brain activity. This feature of the lab fits neatly into the science fiction movie that was playing in my head on the walk over here. Pitiful creatures. They’re nothing but a bunch of squeaky little dipsomaniacs, crackheads, and face stuffers, each one as helpless as I am.

Carli removes one of the rats from its hard plastic home. Much to my surprise, it
is adorable. As she begins to explain some of the recent experiments the lab has
developed, the rat tries to crawl up to her shoulder, each time sliding down her chest and
landing on the inside of her curled arm. One experiment Carli mentions is concerned
with how junk food interacts with opioid addiction, and I immediately think of my
brother. Were Pringles the precursor to pain pills? Throughout my visit, I fish for an
answer from Carli about the study’s findings, even some sort of educated guess, but the
data is still inconclusive. At this stage, my guess is as good as hers. There are many
variables that must be accounted for and sorted out before they can spell out a simple
“yes” or “no,” “do this” or “do that,” and that is assuming they find anything
substantial. The sex of the rat, whether they are obesity prone or resistant, how they
interact with the morphine: all of this must be taken into consideration.

“What about their environment?” I ask, noticing multiple rats stationed in each
bin. “Won’t their neighbors influence their decision making?” Ariel informs me that the
rats are social animals, that they are more unpredictable and over-groom themselves out
of stress when kept in solitude. I press pause for a moment on this unflinching, empirical
scientist mode that I have entered to remember that it is not a viable option to totally
isolate myself in order to escape my fear of addiction.

I ask them if they had any preconceptions about addiction that were challenged
in studying the issue from a neurobiological standpoint. Ariel talks about how most
people assume, as I have, that all rats in labs like the one conducted at Wesleyan are
easily manipulated, and get hooked on any drug you give them. “Not all rats are that
way,” she says. I have to keep reminding myself that we are not all born with the same
standard issue monkey mind. In some families, they have a single beer with dinner, or
buy a box of pastries to last the week, or even keep a hookah in the corner of their living room that they dust off just for holidays. All brains are made similar, but unique. A substance that proves ruinous for Ariel might bounce off me like rubber, or take years to flair up into a full blown, life altering habit for Carli. The cure—all I had hoped to leave with today seems unlikely to arrive in this lifetime, or any other.

I am allowed to hold a rat. The lab coat has come in handy after all. Her outstretched paws slip and slide all over my arms, and I begin to feel remorse for lumping her in with the rest of these verminous automatons. She nuzzles the inside of my elbow before upturning her nose and flashing me her ruby red eyes. What neurological signature, as singular as a thumb print, hides beneath that dime sized cranium?

My dad once told me about how, when Will was still three or so, before I was born, the two of them sat out on the back porch of our house to soak in the summer sun. Will wandered about in the yard while my dad noodled away on his prized, seafoam green Fender Stratocaster. For whatever reason, perhaps it was the heat, my dad returned inside. Minutes later, when it dawned upon him that he’d left his child unattended, he hurried outside to find Will sitting on the deck, happy as a clam. The strings of his guitar, however, were busted up, curling in on themselves.

I will be the first to admit that being the youngest child is an incredible gift. Sit back, keep your eyes peeled, and wait as your elders reveal the many bear traps lying ahead of you. Will’s journey through adolescence was a reference point for my own, and though he rarely hand delivered me any discrete advice, I never stopped observing how
he handled his business: how to make friends, which teachers to avoid, what music was cool, how to tick off Mom and Dad. Whether he was aware of it or not, he was always on the front lines gathering intel for the both of us. Often, I’d note his decisions, then make a break for some divergent route: athlete? Artist. Slacker? Student. Shit stirrer? Goody two shoes. Though my parents never instituted any strict rules like curfew or groundable offenses, my brother couldn’t go more than a few months without violating their trust. Fist fights, traffic violations, running with unsavory characters: I learned through Will’s example that these were the types of acts that disappointed our mom and dad. While he ran around the town sucker punching lacrosse players twice his size, getting caught making illegal U-turns in his Civic, and spraying freshmen with Super Soakers filled with bong water, I was making honor roll and practicing trombone in my room, a menace and a mensch under one roof. Will tripped over the many landmines of young adulthood, while I strolled along behind him to the tune of my parents’ applause.

But part of being the firstborn also means dealing with fresh, untested parents. The victories are sweeter and the missteps cut deeper because, in a sense, both parent and child are new to the madness of math tutoring, travel sports, and college applications. My parents will never appear as all-knowing to my brother as they will to me. My dad, in particular, let his guard slip one too many times, was caught in one too many compromising positions. I was insulated from his alcoholism for much longer than my brother was, did not know it with the same intimacy that Will did. In other words, I didn’t see our dad retching over the toilet bowl when I was seven.

After one of their Sunday outings, my dad, with an afternoon of club house cocktails swishing through his stomach, handed an unlicensed, sixteen-year-old Will his
car keys, unable to complete the forty-minute drive home himself. “You got it?” he half asked, half insisted. Luckily, Will did “have it,” and drove them home without a hitch, my mother never finding out. And though I’m sure my dad is aware that he made mistakes with Will, that he forced Will to parent him at times, his patience is short with his first son. He’s quick to complain about him when he’s not around and laud me as the family’s “last hope.”

As Baldwin’s narrator observes:

He and Sonny hadn’t ever got on too well. And this was partly because Sonny was the apple of his father’s eye. It was because he loved Sonny so much and was frightened for him, that he was always fighting with him. It doesn’t do any good to fight with Sonny. Sonny just moves back, inside himself, where he can’t be reached. But the principal reason that they never hit it off is that they were so much alike.

Neither Will nor our dad finished college, both positing themselves as street smart and people savvy. They both work in sales, love golf, and hold conservative values. They are cut from the same cloth, yet refuse to acknowledge it.

Then there was Rosh Hashanah, 2006, which brought about an unholy ruckus in our house. My dad, sloshed, on his way down to the basement, missed a step, and the rest of the staircase didn’t let him forget it.

Dad played the electric guitar at full blast most days we lived in that house, but I’m certain that fall was the loudest noise those walls have ever heard, my mother following it up by screaming through her tears. Yes, I saw it all, surveying the wreckage from the top of the staircase, but my brother was the one lying right there with our dad at the bottom, crumpled in a pile of folding chairs they were bringing back down to the garage. From my elevated vantage, it was clear to me, even at age twelve, that this was all so absurd, but down below, where Will lay bruised, this was all too normal. My brother, entangled in the mess, couldn’t have comprehended that he too is susceptible to the
myriad of judgment blinding addictions that plague our blood line. Dad fell down. Will came tumbling after.
Within twenty-four hours of being an undergrad, it became evident that to not imbibe at the College of William and Mary was to forego a social life. In all, three people from my freshman dorm, Yates Hall, were shepherded into ambulances for alcohol poisoning on our first night alone. Many touted Yates as the “rowdiest dorm on campus,” and if the metric used to prove that was HT/W (Hospital Trips/Weekend), they would have been correct. Drug dealers lived right next door and across the hall from me. One of them had an accomplice who was sentenced to ten years in prison for attempted manslaughter after selling one of our hallmates molly cut with cleaning supplies. The stank of weed was so thick in our hall that our RA, not wanting any of us to get suspended, would simply shrug his shoulders and laugh whenever he saw any one of his many red-eyed residents.

But it was the drinking that never ceased to astound me. Drinking at William and Mary happens on an industrial scale. The school’s underappreciated custodial staff and waste management workers will attest to this; every Monday morning the trash cans would be overflowing with glass bottles and aluminum cans. It was as if the entire student body agreed that their combined frenetic, libidinous anxiety needed to be tampered with something, lest it explode like a powder keg. Alcohol slowed people down, replaced the nervous stutter in their voices with a thick slur, and paved over the potholes in their personalities like cement. The drinking I witnessed during orientation and the weekends that followed was not meant for kicking back and unwinding. I would assure my fellow pre-gamers, as they stabbed Natty Lights with their car keys, that I had seen it all with my brother, but my nonchalance stood no match against their loud trap
music and disdain for “pussies.” It was damn near horrifying; some of these kids were getting wasted to make a statement, chugging with a chip on their shoulders.

A lot of this had to do with recruitment for Greek life. If you (and your liver) proved you could withstand the punishment of competitive bingeing, you had a leg up going into pledge week. Kids who I’d gelled with during orientation over cafeteria dinners and games of Madden forgot my name when we entered parties, shouldering up alongside the veteran frat stars they aspired to be. I had no intention of joining their ranks, but no matter the circumstances, being flat out ignored is always going to sting. Rather than hug the wall with the sober kid, many of these fair weather friends high tailed it over to the beer pong table, practicing their form, mansplaining game strategy to onlooking sorority sisters, warning opponents about elbow position, and slapping their fellow inebriates five. Some nights I’d fill up a solo cup at the keg just to sample the sheer power of *holding* a drink, hoping to camouflage myself as someone having a good time, or, at the very least, not stick out like a sore thumb. While this prop beer maneuver provided momentary relief, my tense shoulders and respect for volume control often blew my cover.

With each passing weekend, my party cameos grew shorter, my excuses sounded lamer, and my retreats for late-night quesadillas and the refuge of my room arrived earlier. I was aware that my friends back home would have found my routine pathetic, that watching bootleg movie streams on my laptop was a far cry from the rollicking good time that had been promised to me in brochures, the promise of the “college experience” that all elite universities sell. My fear of succumbing to the same pitfalls that had plagued the other men in my family was, in time, usurped by the fear of trekking
through my college years friendless and forlorn. Nobody likes a nineteen-year-old hermit.

I wish I could eat like my dignified, gastronome peers, for whom meals are like conceptual sculpture, and are meant to be savored and agonized over, not decimated. The house I grew up in did not aspire to culinary exceptionalism. We ate like most white Americans, albeit with a hint of Jewish flare: bagels instead of white bread, tuna fish instead of egg salad. My parents cooked chicken dinners and baked zitis, and never shied away from take out. We didn’t spring for fancy items when name brands scratched our itch.

When I eat, that is all I’m doing. Food is a kill switch to my otherwise critical brain, and prevents me from thinking beyond what is three inches in front of my face. Left alone, I will hunch over my dinner, gobbling it up in quick bursts. Whatever traces of primordial man remain in me come alive when I’m staring down the barrel of a sandwich, and before I know it, it’s gone, and I’m once again ashamed of myself and baffled by biology’s oldest disappearing trick.

Before it was shut down, the joint KFC-Taco Bell a block from my school was a favorite spot for my friends and I—teenagers with a bit of walking around money and nothing to spend it on but junk. This was before chain restaurants had the desire or know withal to disguise themselves as bohemian, before they appropriated the decor of local coffee shops and industro-chic bistros. Parents, pressed for time, bought their children buckets of fried chicken, but drew the line at letting them use those filthy, filthy bathrooms. The floor tiling was chipped and the counters were mottled with stains from
smudged food scraps. In the backlot, high school seniors sold weed out of their backpacks.

On one trip to this fast food duplex, two of my friends decided to race each other. Who could clear their tray of four hard-shell beef tacos first? I was unaware of this, probably because I was awaiting my own incoming starch orgy, but still, with the same order, finished before either of them. “We’ll give you the five bucks, Jack. You earned it, fair and square,” they laughed, and all I could do was flash a scuzzy, half-embarrassed smile, knowing I was following in the footsteps of my older brother, the food champion.

Sly recorded much of There’s A Riot Goin’ On on a Flickinger recording console, custom built for him. Since it was installed into a sunken ground, this little space came to be known as “Sly Stone’s Pit.” Among its many innovative features, the Flickinger board in “Stone’s Pit” had backlighting installed for Sly and his posse to better see the little white lines they aimed to snort off of it.

Beyond booze and weed, I don’t know how far Will ventured into drugs prior to college, but Google image search “University of Arizona” and you’ll find an entire subheading at the top of the page entitled, “Party.” Pictured are throngs of tanned undergrads crowding swimming pools, like nomads gathered around oases. Ever the socialite, he was doomed from day one. Living on a campus miles from the border, inundated with narcotics and ruled by frat culture, it wasn’t long before he’d develop a dependency on oxycodone, a bottled, destigmatized version of the same affliction that derails Sonny.
The first time I saw my brother after he left for Arizona, it must’ve been past 1:00 the night before Thanksgiving. He had arrived earlier that day, but we don’t partake in the same rituals my friends share with their siblings. I don’t clear my schedule to meet him at Logan Airport, bear hug him curbside, and spend the afternoon with him, filling him in on every last detail he might have missed in his time apart from me. Instead, I spent my early dismissal from school playing touch football with my friends while he reconnected with his own.

So when he texted me to let him into the house that night, there was a sheepish hug at the door, and then, within moments, fighting.

Arguing is inevitable between Will and I, has been ever since I was old enough to retaliate against his incessant nettling, but I didn’t think he would be so contentious this early in our reunion. For all the insurmountable tension that’s prevented Will and I from being as chummy as I’d wish, there’s a tacit love between us. I know that he would go berserk if anyone laid a finger on me. When we were young, he used to drape a warm soaked hand towel over my forehead at the onset of a headache, prepare us overstuffed deli sandwiches when our parents were out of the house. He looks after me. Ours is the sort of brotherhood where, if need be, a kidney would be spared, though the donor would never let the other live it down. But whereas I both dote on Will and scrutinize every word that leaves his mouth, his ability to disengage is so sharpened that he can pick a spot on the wall and forget I’m even in the room. I listen for him to slip up, while he doesn’t listen at all. This selective hearing snowballs into accusations of insanity.

*You’re fucking out of your mind, dude.* Back and forth, we make this claim.

Together again, I had hoped we could overcome this new, continental distance
between us, that it would reveal some deep, nascent connection neither of us could have detected while caught up in quotidian concerns like sharing a bathroom or vying for day-old, refrigerated leftovers. Would a newfound maturity emerge during this new chapter in our relationship, now that we’d have to tolerate each other no more than a few weekends per year?

Apparently not, seeing as it took all of five minutes to reignite my puerile frustrations with him, for him to reassert a power dynamic first introduced to me when we were small children, back when he used to grab ahold of my fists and pinion my arms behind my back, provoking me to scream for adult reinforcement. All at once something inside gave and threatened to come pouring out of me… I was furious because I knew he was laughing at me and I didn’t know why… “You hear me?” Sonny pulled away. “I hear you. But you never hear anything I say…” If we had contained the deluge of judgment that burst out of us, even for just five minutes, and listened to each other, maybe I would have learned what was ailing him.

Instead, we argued. Over what, I do not recall. My brother and I quarrel on issues of any size. Who knows what sparked this particular fight? It could have been that his ridiculous, sagging head of hair that he’d neglected to cut in three months rubbed me the wrong way, or perhaps it was something as self-defeating as a political disagreement.

In any case, we were arguing loud enough, pounding away at the kitchen counter with enough gumption to wake my parents from their upstairs slumber. They creaked down to the kitchen, one following the next, their squinting eyes readjusting to kitchen lights on full blast.

There we were, the four of us: my brother and I jumping on each other’s every
word, our mother shushing us, attempting to restore peace in her house despite just waking up, my father reeking of cheap Chardonnay, piggybacking his wife’s comments, pretending to follow along.

These days, on the rare occasion when we are all together, we agree that this period was a rough one for the Reibstein clan. My dad, unbeknownst to any of us, was nearing a split in his lifelong partnership with alcohol, but in the meanwhile, was making last ditch efforts at resolution, reconciling with liquor four or five nights a week. I could not blame my brother for wanting to place 2,600 miles of space between him and our house, but I sure as hell resented him for it. As I saw it, he abandoned me, left me in charge of extracting our drunk dad from the couch at night, watching after him as he made his wobbly ascent to his bedroom on the second floor.

So Will and I went to bed, a wall between us, still feeling 2,600 miles apart. What I didn’t know was that my brother, despite his claims otherwise, was miserable at his new school. Years later, when Arizona was far behind in Will’s rearview mirror, my mom would recall exiting his dorm complex, tucked under the shadow of U of A’s booming football stadium, to catch her flight back to Boston. What agony it was to leave her first born, the same child who hadn’t so much as shed a tear when he broke his arm in a Little League game years ago, now eighteen, alone and sobbing. I also didn’t know, months later, that his situation would worsen, that he’d tough out the pain again after breaking his wrist in a game of pickup basketball. This event, which should have been no more than a nuisance, a medical detour during his freshman year, would send him down a perilous path. Classwork, still elusive, rode a backseat to his new pain medicine. In the months to come, he would watch one of his new college buddies overdose, a horrid
pallor overtaking his skin, his body losing all function but to outline the human ventricle highway, until, after minutes of touch and go, debate over whether to call 9-1-1 or run, miraculous resuscitation, trillions of cells banding together to form one life saving gasp for breath.

Some speculate that the EMTs called to resuscitate Jimi Hendrix mishandled his body, that if they had placed him on his stretcher correctly, he’d never have choked on his own vomit, and would still be here today. Others would argue that a man who ran with Hell’s Angels and Black Panthers, dabbled in heroin, slit his forehead open with a box-cutter to open up a direct avenue for acid to travel to his brain, was beyond saving. In any case, he is gone, a fatal barbiturates overdose claiming him at age twenty-seven.

That morning, my dad, fifteen-years-old, still in bed, hungry for the fourth Jimi Hendrix Experience album, woke up to the news of his idol’s death on his clock radio. He didn’t have to look far for a pillow to cry in.

At this Fine Wine, Brews, & Cigar shop, we also sell scratch tickets. They sit in glass cases numbered 1-6, and range from 1 to 5 dollars, every one of them hand torn by me. Rip. Scratch. “Shit.” Rip. Scratch. “Shit.” Rip. Scratch. “That’s a winner.” Rip. Scratch. “Shit.”

There’s a woman who enters the fine wine, brews, and cigar store every day, but never leaves with any of these things. Her hair is a violent collision of pink and red. Think Sharon Osbourne, or Jean Gray from the X-Men comics. As an employee of the Supercuts that adjoins our shop, she has cut my hair before. We’ve never acknowledged this proximity, that we work together, separated by a wall. She is above pleasantries, has
absorbed so many hollow “hellos” that the word has been dashed of its significance. Instead, we engage in a pure two-way exchange of goods and services. There is an unspoken understanding that we rely on each other.

She passes through the front door, ignoring the wine racks, the humidor, and the ziggurat of summer ale. She lifts a Poland Springs water bottle from the fridge, stamps up to the register, and chooses her tickets. “Give me two of ‘4’ and one of ‘5.’” I snatch the key off the top of the cashbox by my feet and flip open the latches to these games of chance, sliding stacks 4 and 5 out, folding each individual ticket over, tearing them apart from their conjoined siblings. She scoops up a copper shovel from the Take-A-Penny tray, provided by Mass Lotto with an outline of the state’s borders at the bottom. The side of the coin scrapes through little cartoon pots of gold stamped on the card, bits of latex shrapnel flying in Lincoln’s face. Mining for luck with Honest Abe. She doesn’t hit on anything from the first card, so she flings the loser into the waste basket behind the counter, past my leg and out of her sight. The second card she slides to the side, which I assume means victory, however brief, though you’d never surmise as much from her unaltered expression. The second card is already forgotten, her thumb and pointer finger still pinching the penny. Card number three is all that matters right now. It’s the one that’ll empty the register and give her a breath of fresh air, settle up one of the many bills nipping at her heels, afford her a night of unmitigated fun. Come on. Win her some concert tickets, a round of drinks at a salsa bar, back medication, a microwave that works, fumigation for the roaches, a tank of gas, a newspaper subscription. For fuck’s sake, number three! Win her something.

I rearrange cartons of cigarettes, break down cardboard boxes for the recycling,
and give her privacy, her midday ritual, the thrill of potential bounty. Off sails number three, into the trash.

“This one’s good,” she says, handing me her second selection. I check. Twelve matches twelve. It holds up. “Payout is two dollars,” are the words that escape my mouth. What am I doing? Running a saloon? Give her her money for another dud scratcher so we can both move on.

“Keep it. Let’s use it on the Powerball.” My eyes widen. I turn about face, confronting the store’s oldest, dustiest contraption. The lotto ticket machine, which spits out slips of paper with as much robotic, antiquated charm as Zoltar spits out fortunes, is a mess of buttons, none of which I understand. Baby blue and relegated to the corner, the thing is a sleeping giant, and will beep every few hours when the store is at its emptiest to remind me of its awesome power, of the one function of my job I have yet to perform.

“I think I’m the only one who can keep the rules of that machine straight,” my manager told me on my first day. “If I’m not here and someone asks, tell ‘em it’s busted.”

But her glare does not entertain rebuke. She has ordered a Powerball ticket. Anything I say at this point is dead time between her demand and walking out the door with a pink, thin slip of the future clutched in her fist.

“I’m not gonna lie to you, I have no clue how to operate this thing,” I admit, pointing to Big Baby Blue, this God-knows-how-old mart appliance that looks like a typewriter that swallowed another typewriter. One false move and I could be its next victim.
She sighs, and with the patience of a piano instructor, feeds me precise instructions that I follow key for key. After a couple betrayals from my fingers, at which point she loops back like an audiotape to step one, I play the correct composition, rewarded not by a tinkling melody, but by the hum of a device preparing to regurgitate. Out spits the much coveted square of paper, the day’s date laser printed below a randomly generated numerical draw. How did she know how to do that?

“I worked at a Tedeschi’s when I was your age,” she says, answering the question splayed across my face.

I assume nothing came of that ticket. From the moment it entered her grip, it was begging to be discarded next door in a cluttered drawer of shears, clippers, and spray bottles. Every day that summer, she dedicated a considerable cut of her paycheck to gambling, and along the way, coached me until I could summon tickets for any of these myriad games on my own: Mega Millions, Mega Bucks, Lucky for Life, Mass Cash, each name enticing on its own, redundant when taken together. In these lessons, it seemed as though she was not teaching me how to tame Big Baby Blue, but rather showing me how self-defeating it was to poke the beast in the first place. This woman was no dummy. Her service at Tedeschi’s must have taught her what a scam the Mass State Lottery is, how it amounts to nothing more than further entrenchment of systematic impecunity, the poor getting poorer.

Tedeschi Food Shops is a misleading name, conjures up visions of a family run market with barreled produce, cheese for sample, and prime cuts of beef fresh from slaughter. Tedeschi’s is where you go for scratch tickets. It’s the place I went when I turned eighteen and bought my first and last. That’s the item you get there, because
those harsh fluorescent lights shine all night and bare all under their glow, reveal the dirt caked in your fingernails and the sweat yellowing your pits. You’re tired of this place, so what do you do? You gravitate towards the one piece of merchandise that might extricate you from this whole system of cheap goods and empty sales. These cardboard miracles, with their toothed edges and bright, bubbly fonts, offer the chance, as miniscule as it may be, that you’ll never have to set foot in a Tedeschi’s or a shitty liquor store ever again.

She must have learned the lesson. You can’t work in one of these places without learning it, can’t graduate to another job without understanding the fruitlessness of unlocking these glass cases. How did she forget?

Of the seven Reibstein men, five of them have had their gallbladder removed. My brother and I are the two remaining holdouts, but as we progress through our twenties, I don’t doubt that we’ll join the club. The gallbladder is by no means a necessary organ, but the bile it produces helps absorb fat. Mine doesn’t stand a chance against my frequent saturated fat and GMO laden benders. When your life is one continuous bacchanal, something’s got to give.

It’s 8 AM, and all I want is that jelly donut. Mr. Monson, my seventh grade homeroom teacher, all business every other day of the year, has bought our class a box of Dunkin’s to ease the sting of standardized testing. I’m distracting myself by sharpening every pencil I own twice, exiling myself to the other side of the room while my friends dirty their faces with powdered sugar. The bags under my eyes are heavy. The combination of
skipping breakfast and staying up to watch the Celtics rally from a twenty-four-point
deficit in the NBA Finals has left me exhausted and in need of a carbo boost. My
brother’s commentary from last night rings through my head: “The NBA is rigged. The
refs are in Vegas’s pocket. How else could the C’s come back to match the spread?” I
choose to ignore him. This Celtics team, that came in dead last just a year ago, is ready to
defy the critics.

“You get one, yet?” one of my friends asks me, licking residual icing off his
fingers.

“Nah man, I don’t eat that shit any more. I’m on a diet.”

I hear conspicuous laughter from the row behind us as I take my seat. Rickey,
the star basketball player of our grade, already guaranteed to make waves in high school,
has no problem mocking my figure. A friend nonetheless, right now he is beside himself,
close to falling out of his desk.

“What’s good, Rickey?”

“I bet you don’t last ‘til lunch!”

I was never a rash child, but there was no deliberation over what came out of my
mouth next.

“Better idea: I give you a dollar for every pound I gain this summer, but you owe
me one for every pound I lose.”

Rickey grips the sides of his desk, rocking back and forth, swiveling his head,
pausing to lock eyes with each member of his posse, as if to say, Are you guys hearing this? I
just struck gold.

“Deal, fatty,” he says.
“Deal.”
Much of Will’s timeline concerning his addiction to oxycodone remains foggy to me. Snippets are presented to me out of the blue. When new information makes itself available, I file it away and do not prod any further, afraid to reopen healing wounds. Here, however, are ten irrefutable facts provided to me by him and my parents:

1. My brother broke his wrist during the spring semester of his freshman year at Arizona. There is a surgically implanted pin still holding it together. He was prescribed pain medicine in order to aid his recovery. Around the same time, he began habitually snorting oxycodone at parties and the like.

2. He watched one of his college friends overdose on his dorm room couch, and minutes later, by the grace of God, saw him regain his pulse.

3. His drug habit was concerning enough that my parents withdrew him from the University of Arizona. When he returned from Arizona, his habit did not lessen, as his old friends from high school had also developed the same addiction during their freshman year, many of whom also had to drop out of school.

4. Hundreds of these pills traveled through his hands. Him and his friends threw extravagant basement parties, dealing out the pills to whoever would pay their fair share. Fellow addicts kept him up late at night after these parties, lighting up the phone on his bedside nightstand, begging him for more drugs that he did not possess.

5. He has been, much to his surprise, involved in a robbery. He once drove into Boston with a friend to score. Will was ready to pay for the drugs, but his friend, sitting in the back seat, pummeled the dealer once he entered the car, stripped
him of his cargo, kicked him out the door, and ordered my brother to hit the gas.

6. The law knows nothing of Will’s history with drugs.

7. My parents administered a home drug test to Will. My dad watched him piss in a cup, though somehow missed that he was actually filtering someone else’s pee from one cup into the other. To my brother’s shock and dismay (though later he would count it as a blessing), the test still came back positive. Only later did he realize that the cup in which he’d stored his friend’s untainted urine had, at one point, also been used to store painkillers.

8. My brother has never injected heroin, though several of his friends have.

9. The last time he used, he crushed two pills on the dashboard of his Civic, vowed they’d be his last, and they were. My brother has been drug-free for five years since January 2017. Though it was not coordinated, my dad is also five years sober since that time.

10. As recently as last December, my brother attended the funeral of a friend who overdosed on heroin.

I have told my friends to steer clear of pain pills before. These lectures are never planned, and I carry out an unseen debate within myself before I go through the trouble and backlash of initiating them. One August night, my high school friends and I were vegging out on reclining couches, watching The Eric Andre Show, a program on Adult Swim that most people, besides me, cannot pallet unless they are next-level baked. Adult Swim’s readiness to cast plot to the wind in favor of loud, colorful nonsense is not suitable for those seeking a familiar viewing experience, so kids my age rip bong before
setting out on these televisual journeys. Most of my friends were stoned at the time, and
when the relentless bombardment of alternative sketch comedy ran its course, we
chatted about how high they were, how high they needed to be to endure those fifteen
minutes of nihilism and prankish chaos.

Whether or not weed is, as the D.A.R.E program insisted, a gateway to
consuming other drugs, it’s certainly a gateway to discussing them. Soon, we were on to
the acid they’d dropped and the shrooms they’d gobbled while studying abroad.

Then, the inevitable: Marc, the friend who had always had the fake ID to buy us
beer in high school, whose joint rolling skills were unparalleled, who introduced some of
the other guys to coke at a New Year’s party senior year, sank further into his sofa, and
spoke up about vibing with oxies, how they knock you on your ass, get you real good.
My friends all disagreed, and soon enough, without me saying anything, the conversation
began to match the tone of an after school special:

“Marc, you realize that shit can get you hooked on heroin, right?”

“Nah, dude. It’s not like that.”

“Yo, oxy is super addictive, Marc.”

“I’m telling y’all. I’m straight, I’m straight. I don’t overdo it.”

“That’s literally what everyone says.”

“Nah, nah…”

A cheesy smile. Forced laughter. At this point, still silent, I excused myself.

“Gotta take a leak.” I, myself, was a little tipsy that evening, so while I washed up, I eyed
my reflection in the bathroom mirror, contemplating whether or not I’d get into it with
Marc. I mulled over the words Will had left me with after his friend’s wake earlier that
year. *Don't ever mess with that stuff. It'll ruin you. Tell your friends if you have to.* In that moment, his hair and suit jacket wet with melted snow, Will had taken a leap and made himself vulnerable to me, cast aside the image of “strength” he wanted to project as an older brother, and exchanged it for an honest appeal. I would follow his lead. I even prepared what I was going to say in advance. *Yo, Marc, I don’t mean to go all middle school health class on you, but…*

But when I reemerged from the bathroom, Marc was on his way out the door, bored of *Eric Andre* reruns, so instead of reaching out before he left, I preached to the choir, telling the rest what they already knew, that Marc was playing with fire.

It’s never the people who need to hear it that do.

Other portions of the *Riot* recording process took place in Stone’s English Tudor style mansion in Bel Air, where he sat atop a mountain of uppers and downers, a smorgasbord of pills and powders. Much of the groaning and vocal ennui suffused over the album’s syrupy grooves was sang while Sly laid flat on his back, unable to muster the energy to stand. The album’s crackly, muddled texture is also the result of physical (and historical) erasure. Stone would invite women to his pad, show them to the booth, and promise to hit RECORD (*You wanna make it on the record?*) if they stuck around afterwards. The next morning, once he was done getting high and having sex with them, he would shoo them out the door, revisit the tape, and scratch out their contributions. *If it feels good…*

One of the main preoccupations of the Robinson rat lab is interrogating the distinction
between “liking” and “wanting.” Their research indicates that different parts of the brain house these different motivations. Every fiber of a heroin addict’s being can want to shoot up, but that does not necessarily mean he is enthused to be doing it.

I fear I listen to music to stay ahead, to remain in that safe space of being “in the know,” but there is nothing venerable about the pursuit of knowledge if it serves nothing but your own damn self. In the past four years alone, since I began to keep a log, I have downloaded and given the headphones treatment to over 600 albums, each a notch in the championship belt I have awarded myself as Biggest Music Nerd. I punched these notches while walking to class, cooking dinner, stretching after a workout, lying in bed, studying and writing (my concentration will inevitably fold when pitted against Aretha Franklin), planning for my future and hiding from it. I first encountered the life affirming rhythms of the Harder They Come soundtrack while putting the finishing touches on my college applications. Two years later, Parquet Courts unleashed my pent up discontent, enough so for me to say fuck it and transfer. While the veil of connoisseurship might disguise my habit as a hobby, I am not immune to returning to old standards, nestling myself in a cocoon woven by Stevie Wonder moog synth and Carole King lullabies. I am a oenologist, not a drunk. I’m a cratedigger, not a bum.

And still, I can do intellectual gymnastics until I’m blue in the face, but music is not a drug. Music doesn’t deplete your bank account, force your partner to leave you, or kill your friends. There is no Music Support Group. No horn section has ever made me throw up into a solo cup. What, then, is my excuse?

“It’s time to go to bed,” is something a parent demands of their child, not the other way
around. With his ears covered by bulbous, archaic headphones, eyes closed, head rolling back and forth on a cushion, left leg propped up on the couch’s extending “L,” I want to rip the cord out of my dad’s phone and grab him by his stubbly, sandpapery cheeks. “I have school in the morning,” I tell him, clapping after each word for emphasis. All I ask for is a little hustle so we can both get to bed.

No acknowledgment, his clouded noggin still rocking side to side. *There are places I remember all my li-i-ifes, though some have changed…* Really? Is this a middle school graduation? What a mistake this was, showing him how to use an iPod. He will be up until 1 AM reliving his childhood. “Fine. Sleep on the couch tonight. I’m going to bed,” I say as I march towards my room, but I know that I will be asleep no sooner than him, gritting my teeth in the darkness of my room, waiting for the treacherous sound of feet thumping their way up stairs.

In the summer of 2008, I turned fourteen and lost close to forty pounds. Most of this weight was shed during a relentless seven-week marathon of playing basketball alone and refusing to eat. At the request of my brother and I, my dad had bought us a basketball hoop to erect on the street outside of our house. It was anchored by a water-filled base, and whenever you stepped on it, some of this water bubbled out of the circular opening designated for a hose, like a dolphin with an incontinent blowhole. The hard plastic backboard deadened the ball’s bounce and rendered bank shots “cheap.” A handle on its spine adjusted the height; we would often lower it for the little girls who lived next door when they wished to break up their playtime routine of peddling their bikes around the cul-de-sac or throwing chewed up tennis balls to their lazy-eyed Dachshund. This hoop,
which stood proud during the summer, like a synthetic tree, is now buried under mounds of garbage. It was killed by its gravedigger, heaved off to the town dump by the same Waste Management truck that had sideswiped it when coming around a corner too fast. Though my dribble-drive to the basket was never stellar and my post-up skills were nonexistent, it was devastating to see this fixture of my street toppled on its side. Without it, I might have never undergone the most significant transformation of my life.

The one piece of my wardrobe I wore more than any other during my weight loss was a white t-shirt with a picture of Celtics starting forward Kevin Garnett looking defiant, determined, fingers braced, his right fist pounding his chest. Splattered across the shirt in shamrock green letters was “The Big Ticket,” one of several monikers he earned over the course of his illustrious career. There was no discrepancy between my daily uniform and exercise clothes. Athletic wear compliments fat kids. When the belt buckle tsk-tsks you, reach for the elastic waist.

So there I was, this 5’3”, 155 pound, roly-poly Jewish boy, draped in a men’s large shirt stamped with the likeness of a rim rattling dynamo. I did my best to emulate his tenacity on the hoop outside my house, only ever stopping my hustle for passing cars. Whenever the UPS guy drove by, he would stall his truck outside my house while we chatted about that championship bound Celtics team. “Big Ticket” though I was, deep down, I didn’t want to be like KG. Every player in the NBA is gigantic, but not everyone was like KG, exercising brute strength from the tip-off. I wanted to be like Ray Allen, the bone thin sharp shooter with perfect body control and a jumper smooth as butter, or Rajon Rondo, the chirping, head-banded floor general with no-look passes that could make a cameraman lose his job. These were athletes known for their grace, for
gliding up and down the court while the big uglies like KG barreled into each other under the basket. I’d been mistaken for a big guy my whole life. That summer, I made it my mission to shrink.

Most of the workout came from me chasing down errant shots and layups that would carom off the base of the hoop and skip down the street. I shot jumpers from fifteen to twenty feet out. If I sunk the \( j \), I would mosey over to the next spot along the imaginary arc. If I missed, I would corral my rebound and lay it in. The ball would roll under cars parked along the sidewalk, and I’d have to drop flat on the cushion of my belly to fish it out, hot asphalt singing my fleshy thighs. Sometimes it would skip all the way down the street, and as the yellowing grass on my lawn and I gasped for air under the July sun, I would envision Dr. Landis waving his cursor over my BMI blip, Rickey, with his shit-eating grin, banking on my failure, every instance I was outran or humiliated in gym class, every time I walked my fat ass home from school alone and feeling sorry for myself, working over fistfuls of cheddar Goldfish and Animal Crackers in my mouth, masticating entire species of zoological foodstuffs in my kitchen as the straps of my backpack continued to dig into my soft shoulders. With all of this pain and pride blinding me, I’d draw a deep breath and break into a sprint, my own sweat intermingling with the sweat of the KG graphic on my shirt.

My regiment was simple enough: put the ball in the hoop 150 times, and you earn a glass of water and a cold shower. Do this once or twice a day. Tell your parents you ate breakfast and lunch when you didn’t. Repeat until your blip traverses the BMI chart, wading through the mass of black dots, and breaches through to the other side. The thin side. The proud side. The “healthy” side.
The needle arcs to 150, like that of a speedometer when you floor a Maserati. All of that
time I spent in the kitchen has been reallocated to the bathroom. I check the scale six,
seven times a day, sometimes after just ten minutes have elapsed. This is not one of
those digital scales that measures you down to the nearest hundredth of a pound, that
reads the balls of your feet and displays your exact weight, birth date, blood type, and
favorite flavor of ice cream. This is a manual machine. It is simple, something I could
disassemble and put back together again with my dad. There are methods of negotiating
with it. For starters, I see the dial is resting a tick to the left of absolute zero. Pick it up,
flip it over, and toggle the wheel on its back. There. Perfect zero. Okay, maybe it’s a step
to the right of zero. Who cares? It’s the middle of the day. Didn’t you once hear that
we’re heavier in the middle of the day? Whatever this stupid machine tells you is a gross
exaggeration. Step back on the scale. Still not what you want? Push your arm down on
the towel rack. That’s it. Beat the needle down. Watch that bastard plummet...130…
120...110. That’s where you need to be. But isn’t weight a deceptive measurement? Isn’t
mass the real issue? Weight is just an arbitrary number used to explain our gravitational
pull to the earth. Did anyone calculate the force of g in this equation? Maybe g is
different in my house than it is elsewhere in my neighborhood. Gravity’s always had it
out for me.
The best drinking songs come with instructions, demands to be met. “Everybody in the club gettin’ tipsy!” J-Kwon announced in 2004, and weekend warriors in cocktail dresses and Polo Ts have followed orders ever since. Lil John needed but two words—“shots” and “everybody”—to get his message across. “Swimming Pools (Drank),” unskippable at social functions, the hit that established Kendrick Lamar as an industry titan, might be the only song in the canon of dance floor ready hip-hop that is both hyper-conducive to binge drinking and as sobering as a hard look in the mirror. It does not take an astute hip-hop head to figure this out. Cursory inspection of the lyrics reveals them to be less an endorsement of popping champagne than a disclaimer against bingeing in any form. But the structure of the bridge, which pits Lamar against his own sonorously modulated voice, each call and response punctuated by the snap of a rim shot, would satisfy any typical drinking anthem’s quota for explicit instruction:

Pour up (drank). Head shot (drank).
Sit down (drank). Stand up (drank).
Pass out (drank). Wake up (drank).
Faded (drank). Faded (drank).

Other sections of the song may undercut these orders, but calling out “drank” becomes a game more irresistible than a freshly mixed screwdriver. Much of Lamar’s oeuvre can shoulder hefty social commentary because he knows how to avoid sounding heavy handed, intuits precisely when to withhold his own opinion and instead play Devil’s Advocate in the service of dramatic tension. On another track, “u,” a scathing condemnation of celebrity penned to himself, he bellows, Loving you is complicated! Loving you! Not loving you! One-hundred-proof! His songs are operettas, one-hundred-proof debates, the warring factions in his head resorting to all sorts of fell trickery and emotional
blackmail. That song ends with Kendrick alone in a motel room, trading lines with swigs from a bottle. “Swimming Pools” comes to a head when a fellow partier pulls him aside:

Why you babysitting only two or three shots?
I’m a show you how to turn it up a notch.
First you get a swimming pool full of liquor, then you dive in it.
Pool full of liquor, I’m a dive in it.

The lack of logistical foresight and sheer bravado of these lines, when read plain on the page and divorced from the proper setting, make them sound batshit crazy, but the allure of the character Lamar embodies is too strong, too seductive to ignore when caught up in the rush of a packed dance hall, engulfed by the “dark room, loud tunes” he mentions earlier. The artist himself is by no means advocating for anyone to submerge themselves in Tanqueray; he is at once illustrating how drinking to “drown your sorrows,” or to keep pace with others, is a ladder with no end, while also demonstrating how easy it is for music to goad us into overindulgence. At one point, the voice of his “conscience,” pitched up and rapped in double time, butts in to warn Kendrick he’ll be “history” if he continues to soldier on with such flagrant disregard for his body. However, it is a case of too little, too late. By then, you, the listener, are also poisoned, waiting for convenient amnesia and the hypnotism of the song’s hook to boomerang back.

Nobody had to point a gun to my head to make me drink my first drink. A slight twist of the arm was all it took. That first January at William and Mary, I regained my stride when I was cast in a stage play set in post-apocalyptic Brooklyn. Theatre had been my passion in high school, and returning to it restored my faith in the school I had chosen, reinvigorated my social confidence and competence. Though my character was a homicidal lunatic, rehearsal put me at ease. It gifted me an hour or two each night to be
someone else, someone far more lonely and dejected than myself. Being noticed, being challenged to delve deep into an unexplored place inside, or channel something that resided in that space, was the ultimate head rush, a dizziness and disorder that emanated from within.

As was customary at the end of a production, our cast was gifted, among other treats, a handle of booze by one of the college’s secret societies (William and Mary loves their secret societies. Shout out to the XIII’s, of which I was a member for a day: you guys throw one hell of a picnic!). After holding an audience Q&A and striking the set, the cast party loomed. Would it be rude to not show up? Over the course of two months, our team had become tight knit, but I was the lone freshman, and every clique at William and Mary, no matter how dorky, is held together by a hierarchy based on seniority and drinking. Would there be anything for me to do at the party other than twiddle my thumbs and try my best not to look like a narc?

Before I could make a break for it, my director declared a round of celebratory shots for the cast and crew. When it had completed its journey around the circle, the onus fell on me, the affable freshman, to polish off the bottle of Fireball Whiskey, a liqueur so cinnamon sweet that a six-year-old could knock it back without any complaints. An apprehensive, “ehhh,” might have escaped my mouth, but as the eager staring of the crew bore into my self-conscience, it must have morphed into an, “alright,” because before I knew it I was sozzled, running around campus in the muumuu that had been my costume for the show, haphazardly shaving the knotty, psychopathic looking beard my director forced me to grow in the first floor bathroom of the party spot, and greenlighting any other rambunctious impulses I might have had. I danced like
a moron. Hours flew by without me noticing. Alcohol, that soothsayer, whose false sense of security I’d refused to buy into for years, was speaking to me in a language in which I had never known I was fluent. For the night, it was my secret weapon. It shrank the universe down to the faces in front of me and the red solo cup in my hand. “I’ve never been this drunk!” I said to one of my scene partners, launching myself into hysterics, I alone knowing that I’d never been drunk at all. “Quit acting like a tool, Jack,” he told me, handing me another High Life. I concurred, and crushed the can within a minute.

I worry I’m becoming my father, not what he is, but what he once was, every time I have a drink. Doesn’t matter if it’s a cold one with the game or a Jello shot among screaming party-goers. Every time I partake, my mind jumps thirty years ahead to me opening my car’s passenger door, unlocking the glove box, and watching an avalanche of empty miniatures come jangling out.

I’ve never felt that anxiety while listening to music, and I’m not sure whether that should comfort or frighten me.

1977. My dad staves off an angry crowd, attempting to win them over with a thunderous solo. The sound technician is adjusting their levels on the fly; somebody wiped the board by mistake. His guitar is verging on inaudible, and there is feedback with every bass string plucked. Where the fuck is Karl? The guys from Warner Bros. are here tonight, and our singer’s gone AWOL?!

A hail of boos, and a chant: “Southside Johnny! Southside Johnny!” What a kick in the teeth it’d be if this was the end. Flopping as the opener for Southside Johnny and
the Asbury Jukes, a perennial opener themselves, the sacrificial lamb to almost every Springsteen concert.

My dad is ready to approach the mic, call it off, when their singer, Karl, drunk as a skunk, saunters out from behind the curtain, unaware of his lateness and the crowd’s thirst for blood. He acts coy, flirts with the mic stand, all of which would’ve been acceptable behavior twenty minutes ago. My dad cues the drummer to launch into one of their staples, one of the first songs they’d ever written together. *Come on you bastard, sing!* It’s a valiant effort, but Karl abandons the song midway, his vision spinning out of control. My uncle Pete, in the front row, averts his eyes. This is tough to watch.

Bottles of Heineken sail over their heads, shattering on the drum set, the dream blown to smithereens. A hand clasps on my dad’s shoulder, its owner giving off a pungent toxicity. “Beam me up, Scotty!” The reference to Star Trek is drunk speak for, “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

The morning after the cast party, 10 AM on a Sunday, my alarm reminded me of a matinee screening of Charlie Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush*. Attendance was mandatory as part of one of my classes. After dancing my way into the first pair of pants I found on the floor and scraping off the remaining tufts of chin hair I’d missed shaving the night before, I booked it down the stairwell and out the front entrance of Yates Hall, the Kanye West slant rhyme *Sunglasses and Advil, Last night was mad real* ringing loud and true in my head for the first time. Nothing aggravates a hangover—your first ever, no less—like a cloudless sky, and as I crossed Boundary Street into Colonial Williamsburg, my hatred for the garter-wearing, triangle-hatted, fife-whistling, drum-pounding historical
reenactors that marched up and down the edge of my campus burned as hot as the unconcealed, unrelenting sun in the sky. It felt like the entire Revolutionary War was being waged inside my ears.

Finally arriving at the Kimball Theatre, I sured up a spot in a line that extended out the door, noticing a poster on the theatre’s brick facade that advertised the matinee as a “Family Screening.” Sure enough, after grumbling “one, please,” at the box office attendant and sidling my way into an empty seat, I found myself in a sea of screaming children, all of whom were adorned with promotional bowler hats and fake mustaches, which, in my agitated state, were looking more Hitler-esque by the minute. “Mommy, popcorn!” one of the young movie-goers demanded, yanking at her mother’s pocketbook. “Jany, we just took you out for waffles,” the depleted parent pleaded, but the little tramp dug in her heels. “Mommy: Pop. CORN!” Back and forth they bickered, and right as I was about to launch them both into the balcony, the owner of the cinema stood to a polite applause, thanking us all for coming, his own miniature silent film star/Führer upstaging him. The little rascal tugged on his father’s pant leg to everyone’s delight but me and a few wailing neonates. A ticker of my inner monologue at that moment would have read something like FUCK THESE KIDS FUCK THESE KIDS START THE MOVIE FUCK THESE KIDS…

But everything—the headache, the dry mouth, my grudge against the entire K-5 population of the city of Williamsburg—subsided within the span of the opening credits. The familiar whir of film stock running through a projector was like a cool rinse for my dehydrated brain. Though I hadn’t expected much from a ninety-year-old slapstick flick, every second of that film delighted me.
But of course it did. Wasn't this my own sedative all along? Movies and television, the temporary amnesiacs that they were, waited for me every last Friday and Saturday in college that I had quit early. They had been all the uppers and downers I had ever needed up until that weekend: concert films showcasing the leather clad genius of Eddie Murphy and the cosmic cool of LCD Soundsystem; the Coen Brothers' Cliff Note comedy renditions of classical epics; rebellious Soviet teen melodramas I justified watching by calling it “homework” for my Russian film survey class; and, at my lowest, The Simpsons. AV comfort food. I exalt The Simpsons for its boundless trailblazing and synthesis of pop-culture, but beneath it all, I hold the show dear because of its unfailing ability to transport me to a simpler time, a time when alcohol was harmless, a magical potion that made yellow, cartoon men garble their speech and fall out of their chairs.

And then, something unexpected happened. Somewhere along the homestretch of The Gold Rush, between the infamous dinner roll sequence and the final kiss, perhaps out of a false sense of privacy brought on by the darkness of the theatre, I began to cry. A college boy with tears streaming down his face and no acoustic guitar around his neck is a rare sight, but there I was, thumb and forefinger resting on the bridge of my nose, drying my eyes with the sleeves of my sweatshirt, seat neighbors to my left and right none the wiser. It wasn’t the immortal, black-and-white beauty of Chaplin’s shoddy Alaskan mining town that reduced me to a blubbering mess, but rather the irreversible mistake I had permitted myself to make that previous evening. Although it had been the most fun I had had in months, I could not dodge the worry that I had somehow betrayed all the former iterations of myself: eighteen-year-old me and seventeen-year-old me and so on. There they were, together, united in a spirited strike against spirits, and
here I sat on the other side of the fence. I had gotten drunk, and what was worse, I had loved it. For years I had wanted to be the one to stamp my foot down and do it, be the one to uphold a celibate lifestyle, dry up the family bloodline. Like many an after school special, I had crumbled under the faintest hint of peer pressure. Who was I, and more importantly, would drinks be back on the menu next weekend?

When I arrive on the first day of eighth grade and approach my lunch table, there is a resounding look of astonishment from my friends. Most of them have yet to see this more compact version of me. No one comments until I’ve taken my seat, when one of my friends beckons through the megaphone of his hands, “We want the old Jack back!” We all laugh. Me, too.

There’s a purple and gold portrait of Jimi Hendrix that hangs in my bedroom. Ruffled shirt, Afro like a solar eclipse, he looks regal as hell, no older than twenty-seven, but could pass for as old as forty. Maybe he was that old in spirit. Maybe he packed more into those twenty-seven years than any of us ever could have. That’s a platitude people often break out when someone’s life is cut short: “He died young, but he lived, really lived, more than most do in their whole lives.” The unending tape trail he left would suggest as much, troves upon troves of recordings released every year, long lost accounts unearthed from sealed vaults and old shoe-boxes alike. If content was the sole measuring stick, you’d think he’d lived til a thousand.

But I bet that means very little to his loved ones. It meant nothing to my dad when he was fifteen, and it doesn’t mean much more to me now.
One day this summer, I was walking along the Pacific Ocean, when a shaggy beach bum barked out to me, “Brother!” He looked like he’d been sitting there, in that exact spot, for one hundred years, the legs of his chair pitched deep in the sandy lip of Hermanos Beach. “Do you know where I could find a joint?”

I’m thinking fast now, grasping for something invisible by my sides, doing my darndest to not appear condescending, to communicate my sincere desire to help, but can’t. “Boy…” I say, searching for the right words.

I don’t smoke often. In fact, I hate almost everything about weed: the overbearing stench, the drowning sensation I experience each time the smoke sits atop my lungs, marijuana’s ever-moving price point, how it unnerves me, forces me to retreat deep into myself and duck for cover in some furrow towards the back of my mind, like trench warfare in a sulcus. I’ve harbored a deep loathing for drugs as long as I can remember, but it’s often trumped by my wish to please people. All I want is a neat, rolled up J to materialize in the back pocket of my swim trunks, to award this poor guy his one gram of enjoyment for the day, to put that worried, bearded smile at ease.

Still searching: “I don’t know.”

He looks down, laughing at himself, at the whole interaction, excusing me from his beach throne. “I’ve got a fucked up life, man.”

This last summer was full of moments like that: me, combing my memory for anecdotes about addiction while real examples stared at me from no more than ten feet away, sudden and blank faced, at once demanding further inspection and drawing their blinds on me. Conversations would arise with co-workers and complete strangers about
substance dependency, without me prompting them or saying so much as a word about
my own familial history or predisposed fascinations with the subject. I find these
discussions enlightening and worthwhile, but they tend to reach an abrupt end when they
wander into vulnerable territory. People love dissecting someone else’s issues, but not so
much their own.

I didn’t intend to write about my brother when I first formulated this project.
I’ve neither asked for his blessing, nor suspect he’d be happy relinquishing it to me.
When the time came to break ground on this floating, shapeless addiction thesis, I began
to second-guess the prospect of a non-fiction anthology. Maybe some Cerberus of
memoir, short story, and poetry would do the trick? Or perhaps a novella would
challenge me to exercise some of my lesser used writerly muscles? In retrospect, I think I
was searching for the proper medium to insert my brother’s story. If I could construct a
terse, first person rendering of the New England opioid epidemic, and replicate the
language of my brother and his friends, maybe I could avoid mentioning him by name,
bypass another awkward confrontation between us while shedding light on an issue that
haunts thousands of people his age. In a strange turn, it was a piece of fiction, “Sonny’s
Blues,” that spurred me towards writing this memoir.

When such drama enters your life, it’s coated with a shameful tinge of voyeurism.
Baldwin demonstrates this when his narrator peers down from his apartment window,
spying on Sonny as he walks down Seventh Avenue. Later, he is tempted to search his
brother’s room, something I’ve done myself. *I scarcely dared to admit to myself what I’d be
searching for. I didn’t know what I’d do if I found it. Or if I didn’t.*

When I rummaged through Will’s belongings, years ago, I found a cloudy bong
wrapped in a CVS bag, hidden in the corner of his closet. I don’t remember whether at this point such a discovery shocked me, or was par for the course, but in any case, what was I hoping to find? Something worse, or nothing at all?

It’s difficult to not feel like a profiteer to his suffering when I write these words. Who am I to bandy about his struggle to anyone who will hear it? It’s not as if he couldn’t do this on his own. On the contrary, Will follows right along in our family’s long line of lurid storytellers. I’ve coaxed segments of his story out of him, as much as is in this collection, but nothing more. He doesn’t seem invested in reliving it all, and for good reason; he would rather move on. He has moved beyond ascribing all of his hardships in life to some faceless villain.

I go to excessive lengths to be heard. Whether it’s a stage play, a comedy show, or, more recently, a sixty-to eighty-page creative writing thesis, my thoughts and feelings are rehearsed and labored over before presented to those around me. Will, on the other hand, whoops and hollers around our house without a care in the world. He belts explicit rap lyrics and shakes his ass until someone (usually me) orders him to desist. The golf course is where he demonstrates his grace, and even there, according to my dad’s post-match griping, he’s not necessarily a delight to be around. He feeds off of doling out and rising above trash talk, and will curse himself out if he doesn’t perform to his own untenable expectations. But nonetheless, he’s a clubbing virtuoso, a student of the world’s most challenging game. It’s something for him to divert his energies into, to hash and rehash until he achieves his desired result.

I tinker with sentence structure, pound away at my keyboard; he perfects his chipping finesse, wallops Titleists with his mighty swing.
I dredge out my issues; he’d rather escape, move forward. That doesn’t make him worse, or less insightful, but it does, in part, explain why he’d be more susceptible to a drug problem.

I’ve seen my brother golf, and it’s awe inspiring. From what others tell me, he has all the trappings of an amateur legend. He shot the best round of his high school career after falling into a creek and sustaining a concussion, silencing the other team’s snickers with his exceptional play. Months ago, while visiting my parents and I for a weekend, he piped some drives into the woods behind our house, maintenance workers from the house next door oohing and ahing during their lunch break. He looks at home in his spikes and ratty fleece, hundreds of yards of green and a flapping flagstick ahead of him. The course knows nothing of him, but it’s his mission to know the course. Watch as his other battles fall away, back heel in the air, driver slung over his left shoulder, eyes to the horizon, his one preoccupation residing between a ball and a hole. To quote Baldwin, “[It’s] his kingdom. Here, it is not even a question that his veins bear royal blood.”
Epilogue: Brunch and Death

It is a Sunday morning in Southern California, and the brunch alarms are sounding on my phone.

The previous night, my drunk self, much to the chagrin of my neck and left elbow, tossed itself into bed with flagrant disregard for whatever pains might crop up in seven hours’ time. I brush some leaves out of my face. The owners of the apartment I am subletting, a Georgian family (former slice of the Soviet Union, Georgia) who’d just lost a child to cancer, love plants and have filled their home with them, with two clay pots hanging over the windowsill above where my head rests. Whenever I wake up for work, I lay still for a minute to admire how the morning sun bounces off their leaves, how their tendrils coil right over the top of my head like a sylvan crown, how they push so hard against the grim reality of sleeping in a dead child’s room and the general drabness of the apartment just to give me something nice to wake up to. The plants are like one of those blessings they teach you about in Hebrew school. Normally, it is something I cherish.

But today is Sunday, and I haven’t been to Hebrew school in ten years. My head is banging. I could care less if the plants withered up and died.

I inspect my flat tire stomach and sixty-year-old eyes in the mirror of our apartment’s pink bathroom. Why always a pink bathroom? It is every bit as emasculating in here as it was in the bathroom my brother and I shared in our childhood home, the one with the peeling bathtub and the scale that taunted me every morning anew. Today, I am 155 pounds. I know this without checking. This weight is the weight I cannot escape, and the weight I will die with, barring some obscure flesh eating disease. Under
the blare of the shower, I plot how to depart from the cycle of eat, drink, shame, repeat.

As I towel off and slip into my favorite pin-striped shorts, I implement a plan: one final, glorious brunch, the last bite of which will be the best bite of my life, the crowning bite, the culmination of years of engorgement, the bite that will let me lay down the fork for good, a bite dripping with sweetness and savor and umami and whatever else it is I crave, the bite with which I graduate to a healthy life. After this bite, I will sweep the contents of my pantry clean, call my mom and tell her to not bother making me a baked ziti ever again. After this bite, all the nutrients that enter my body, my “temple,” will be grown in my backyard or delivered via injection. I will program my cellphone to trigger a warning alarm whenever I enter a 100-yard radius of a Steak ‘n Shake or any other capitalist food trap. Whenever I have to grocery shop, I will hypnotize myself to wander to the produce section in my state of semi-consciousness, avoiding the market’s white flour midsection, the rows upon rows of bright, colorful boxes and flavor blasted fanfare. I will wake up gripping the steering wheel, groceries buckled up in the back, a head of broccoli or bushel of bananas or rain stick filled with chia seeds protruding from each bag. I will be an allegiant comrade in Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution, will be the first person to uncover what we knew all along—that there is a human skull in those chicken nuggets, that every bubble that fizzles in your cherry cola is the equivalent of one minute tacked off of your life, that an ice cream sandwich can lie dormant in your digestive tract for years, biding its time, waiting for a secret code word to detonate. All of this, and more, will I do after one last brunch among friends.

My roommate and I solidify plans. He has a high school friend staying with us for the week, and I have a high school friend who moved out here a month ago. Super.
We will bring our high school friends and show them off to each other like pets. Does this place in Glendale we found on Yelp meet our discerning brunch standards? Affirmative. Into the VW Jetta we roll, the San Fernando Valley heat transforming the seat belt into a deadly weapon. It is one of those 100-plus days, and the one block walk from the car to the restaurant calls for some sort of protective space gear, not the pin-striped shorts and pit-stained button-up that are failing me.

We see a carafe of water set at the table where we are seated and everything else becomes irrelevant. The five of us (one of the high school friends brought a college friend!) were all different shades of fucked up last night but united in dehydration this morning. The most coveted item on our table is not the ketchup or the salt or the food we are about to receive but the water. Water, water, water. The waitress has to refill the carafe four times.

Someone orders eggs-in-a-hole. I order duck hash because I have one week left in California and when else am I going to order duck hash? I have been building a case in my head that spending the summer in LA was made worthwhile by the local cuisine, and though it is what I will end up telling people wondering how my summer was, it is not true. I spent most of my time in LA ordering and cooking shitty, nutrition devoid garbage, as I would have anywhere else. The difference is I got lucky a few times: soul-healing ramen in Little Tokyo, overstuffed gyros in North Hollywood, two-dollar fish tacos by Hermanos Beach. I left with a handful of recommendations for others hoping for their crack at Manifest Destiny, but at the end of the day, they have Doritos everywhere.

The duck hash arrives. I gobble it up in minutes, resurfacing for air only when
necessary. The last bite comes and goes. This was just another sly rendition of fat and carbs, sliced, diced, and plated just so, as to trick me into believing there was something unique and artful about the way I chose to soak up the rest of the gin swishing around in my stomach this morning. You must try the duck hash in Glendale, I can picture myself saying. Please. Somewhere along the line, we convinced ourselves that going out drinking was labor intensive, and next morning’s brunch was deserved, our feast in Valhalla. Brunch should never be anything more than a gastronomic anomaly, as rare as a meteor shower. Somehow it has become a permanent fixture in people’s schedules. Fourteen dollars for a single buckwheat pancake? Get the fuck out of here. If you have eggs in the fridge, fry them. It is all in service of the same feeling.

The high school friend who I brought, whose name is Jonathan, accompanies me across the street to a farmer’s market. A man with glasses, a bucket hat, and signs draped over his front and back reminds us to register to vote. There are rows of vendors promising shade and samples on sticks. California produce is cheap, healthy, and delicious, but we did not have the patience or electrolytes for cheap, healthy, and delicious this morning, forking our business over to the glorified grease refinery over yonder. The looks on the merchants’ faces seem forgiving when we tell them we are here to browse. When we first saw the market, we had anticipated the energy of a bazaar, but even the farmers and craftsmen have submitted to the heat.

Determined to catch up, Jonathan and I agree to forge on. Forest Lawn Cemetery, final resting place of some of the silver screen’s biggest stars, is a short drive away. We park at the base of the cemetery’s series of daunting hills and panoramic views. We begin our climb.
Gravity is now in cahoots with the sun, one punishing our quadriceps while the other flays our thick New Englander skin. But this impromptu workout is worth it. Each new installment of sepulchral architecture is more ostentatious and resplendent than the last. Errol Flynn, Michael Jackson, and Elizabeth Taylor, to name a few, are buried here somewhere, but these granite mausoleums, plotted alongside precipitous drops, aligned with breathtaking views of the Valley sprawl, bare names that do not scan for us. Old politicians, we conclude: state senators who greenlit the development of Studio City and Warner Brothers, themselves not immune to the pull of fame. What compromising secrets followed them into the dirt? What extraordinary drugs were they given to speed up or stave off their visit here?

We trudge upward, our hands stuffed down our pockets. For what we assumed to be a massive draw for tourists, this place is deserted. The occasional car rolls by, so slow that you can hear the tires crunch over pebbles as they turn. I am happy to be sweating the day away with Jonathan, the two of us reminiscing about high school, about how our friends were not as kind and unassuming as we pretended they were, how they stockpiled liquor in exchange for social capital, how some of us are now undergoing a slow, agonizing metamorphosis into alcoholism. Us kids who could do no wrong, who thought we had avoided disrepute by staying off the football team and not calling women “bitches” to their faces, are beginning to sour. It concerns me and Jonathan to see our friends drink to be somewhere else, even if that means shacking up with the worst version of themselves: Casey Affleck in the bar, woozy from too many pints, ready to cold cock some other nobody across the face. It concerns us, and it also annoys us. What a nuisance it is, and how innervating and helpless it will be to see these real life
soap operas unfold over years and years.

But the sun coaxes more than gossip out of us. The toxins of last night are draining into my socks. Last night I drank so that I would stop observing. Liquor hoisted me above myself, into a delirium that most people prefer to my usual introspective, measured approach to being. Cell phone footage evidences this buffoonery. I found a bottle of tequila and made it mine. Other interns peeled off to rip lines of coke and Adderall. A police officer followed up on a call about a noise disturbance, but backed off after two minutes of chatter and an iPod being disconnected, made pliable by a party of rich white kids. Clusters of us guys gathered in packs to spit in cups and speak the unrepeatable.

This drinking, these parties, make me a willing idiot, which is a very different animal from the accidental idiot that, try as I might to conceal, slips free every now and then when I am at work or on a date or talking to my parents or all alone. The willing idiot is lionized among people my age, revered for beating the accidental idiot to the site of embarrassment. Who can fault you for botching a joke when everything you say is already incomprehensible? Don’t mind him, he’s always like that. And so we drink, in avoidance of the accidental idiot at all costs.

After thirty minutes of walking, we are undone by the heat, and wish we could be cooling it like Walt Disney’s severed head, which, if the rumors are true, might be somewhere within this very compound, cryogenically frozen. Lucky for us, we reach a plateau, and a place of respite, for beyond a stone wall lies a sort of prayer garden: a space for “quiet, spiritual reflection,” says an engraving outside. As much as we want to keep talking, shade is too enticing to pass up right now. We step forward, ready for the
hush of man made nature to blanket us, when, from the corner of the bower, someone calls out.

“Y’all monks or somethin?” True, between the rambunctious curls of my Jewish beard and Jonathan’s brown skin and shaved head, we may look like two members of an interfaith convention from the neck up, but our clothes, particularly our Nikes squishing along the mossy path, are as indicative of our age and unaffiliation with the cemetery’s spiritual staff as anything. We do not know how to respond, but recognize that we have caught this man, no more than a few years older than us, in the middle of one of those reflective moments the stone wall out front had made us promise not to spoil. Far away as he was, pitched up on a hill, there was no mistaking that his eyes were bloodshot from crying.

Laughing at his mistake, or perhaps at an undetectable sarcasm in his previous question, he asks a new one—“Well then, you want to take a shot with me?”—and pulls a bottle of vodka from behind a tree root that had obscured its sight. Ridding myself of the residual storminess in my stomach and creakiness in my neck from last night had required half a pound of potatoes and a near hike this morning. The prospect of drinking again is sickening to me. “We are all set, dude,” me and Jonathan say on top of each other, neither of us wishing to insult the stranger or admit ourselves a mid-afternoon toast. “I could really use the company,” he continues, anticipating the excuse we were struggling to form.

We approach the young man’s tree, at this point more concerned than curious. We learn his name is Alec. “Is everything alright?” Jonathan asks.

“Oh yeah, just crying my eyes out to Jesus,” Alec says, gesturing backwards, as if
Christ himself is wading in the bushes behind him. After taking a reckless gulp from the bottle and passing it to Jonathan, this young, dejected man, adorned with patchy facial hair and a backwards cap bearing the name of a skating brand, divulges his past to us.

Drinking alone in this sanctuary space is only one in a litany of rock bottoms Alec has hit throughout his short life. Raised in Georgia (peaches and cream, just-an-old-sweet-song, Georgia), booze had been faithful to him and his girlfriend when parents and school had given up. But Alec and his girlfriend’s arrangement, like most kinetic, juvenile delinquent romances, was destined to be quashed by the realities of adulthood. Girlfriend gets clean, and Alec spends a year or two trying to rekindle a ménage à trois between him, her, and the bottle. Nowhere else to turn, he bobs in and out of his parents’ house, but after catching him with heroin, they boot him out for good. He admits himself to a clinic in California, but walked off the campus less than a week before today, when we find him under a tree, trading off gulps of Popov and Coca Cola as if the end of the world is nigh. Alec has trained the narrow gulch of his esophagus to expand in a way that maximizes his fluid intake. His pours are foolhardy, dangerous even, and what’s worse is he wants us to match him, mark ourselves complicit in his downward spiral.

Watching someone drown is scary for an instant; see the danger, and react. Watching someone drown themselves is not so simple. Instead of springing to action, we flirt with intervention. We give the addict uneasy smiles when what they need is a life preserver. Of course I would save you, as long as I don’t have to trample your feelings to do so. As much as Alec’s red eyes and sheepish smile beg for this to be a casual drink among three friends, Jonathan and I hide our discomfort about as well as a crash victim hides a hemorrhaging wound.
But, against our best judgment, we cave. To Alec’s delight, Jonathan and I each throw back a shot, both of us fighting the excess saliva that floods our gums in response.

Our efforts to inspire Alec are meek at best. We pepper him with platitudes, it is always darkest before dawn and so on. I do my best to concentrate, recite one or two of the thousand truisms my psychologist mother has taught me about addiction, but they fall on deaf ears. How do you advise someone that won’t remember a word you said the next morning?

He asks us if we are Christians. No. Will we take him to a liquor store? No again, but Jonathan, sensing Alec has nowhere to go, does him one better and lets him crash on his floor for the night.

Walking down the short set of stone steps that lead out of the garden proves taxing for Alec, given his diminished coordination. He grips us each by the bicep for balance, and as we make our descent, a perverse tide of joy wells up inside of me. Perhaps this is the sort of epiphany of beneficence that dawns upon my mother when she sits with her patients, that there is an overwhelming amount of sickness in the world, but that it can be overcome with personal care and attention. Just look at us go. We are literally about to lead Alec down the road to recovery!

If only we could remember where that is. How did we get to the garden? Lost in conversation, neither Jonathan nor I paid much attention to where we were going. The winding hills of the cemetery are so vast that the parking lot by the entrance is totally out of sight from where we are. The road bifurcates again and again as we roam along, and we cannot choose the right option for the life of us. Each trail we walk down leads to a dead end or some hulking landmark neither of us remember seeing. Each time we are
forced to double back, it is with increased impatience, for both this labyrinthine
graveyard and our new travel companion.

As tragic as his story was, neither of us perceived a mean streak in Alec. He
seemed rather simpatico under his tree with his booze, as if these were the only things in
life that he needed. That Alec, however, is gone. This new one will not stop bothering
us. Do we want to see a kick flip? No, Alec, we are in a cemetery. He hops on his board
anyway, and almost falls flat on his face when he attempts the trick. Do we want to hear
a joke?! he yells. No thanks, Alec. Please keep your voice down. Too late. After several
false starts, and some follow up questions from Jonathan and I, the three of us, as if
solving a mystery, piece together how the joke is supposed to be told: something about a
priest and an organ. Alec trails behind us and keeps straying from the road and towards
the grave stones. We slap our thighs and call to him, as if he were a dog running off-
leash. A rusty Saab drives towards us, and Alec, God knows why, flips it off. Alec and
the barrel chested driver behind the wheel nearly come to blows, but the situation is
defused by our insistence that Alec is unwell and the tears of the grieving woman in the
passenger seat.

By the time we reach the car, Jonathan and I are worn out. Getting lost in this
place has made it a tourist trap in the realest sense of the phrase, and we have never been
more ready to bail out. Being responsible for someone who disobeys me at every turn
has called for deep reserves of energy and patience that I do not possess; I gain a
newfound appreciation for young parents who bring their children to amusement parks.
Though both of us know better than to snap at Alec, that his illness is not for us to use
as ammunition against him, the usual pathos that I project to the outside world is
clouded by a merciless rage, a desire to rip the cigarette from his skater bum lips and command him to act like an adult.

Alec slumps into the back of the car. Devil may care attitude towards the Saab driver aside, he has been emphatically apologetic since the moment we met him. Every gaucherie he committed on our journey back to the car was redacted and replaced with a, “Sorry,” or a, “Y’all must think I’m…” At his most vulnerable, with the back of his head pressed to the tree in the garden, he had confessed that he felt stuck in a loop of unkept promises, resigned to being a continual disappointment to his parents, his god, and himself. It is the same profuse apologizing that came from my freshman roommate when he threw up on our dorm room carpet, the same that came from my dad late at night when he could not stay up on his own two feet. Maybe this is what people are searching for once they have voyaged beneath a certain depth in the bottle: fuel for the guilt machine, a more circuitous route towards that unnecessary apology we all feel compelled to deliver for being alive.

Within a minute of pulling out of Forest Lawn, Alec is out cold, lulled to sleep by the trapped heat of Jonathan’s car, an oven on wheels. Neither of us know what is next for Alec once Jonathan drops him off in front of the supermarket the next morning. Perhaps this one gesture was what he needed in order to put himself on the straight and narrow path. Perhaps Jonathan and I are textbook perpetrators of enablement. In any case, we are two of many to make a brief cameo in his life, two of many to wonder if he persevered. It is exhausting, monitoring a person as they dance on the edge of demise. And yet how much more exhausted they must be, passed out in the back seat.
Works Consulted


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