



A Good Kid

and His Ghosts

Lonnie Ray Atkinson

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by Lonnie Ray Atkinson

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Lonnie Ray Atkinson
(written in 2019 and 2020)

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Prologue

(me and Lisa at the diner)

My Best Friend - - December 21, 2016

I like this diner. It reminds me of something out of the movies.

I don't even know why she's looking at the menu. She's just going to order pie.

“Can you believe it’s just a few days before Christmas?”

“It’s unbelievable. I can’t believe 2016 went by so fast.”

“Or how shitty it’s been. I’m afraid to even see what 2017 is going to look like.”

“At least we can’t lose Cohen, Bowie, and Prince again.”

“At least there’s that.”

“Hey, you want to order some pie?”

“Sure. I was thinking we could order three pieces. One for you, and two for me.”

“Why two for you?”

“Because that way, when you ask to have some of mine, I can just give you the second piece, and I can actually have a whole piece to myself.”

“And you would do that to me?”

“Do what to you?”

“Make me eat two whole pieces of pie, and then have another big bite of yours.”

“If it’s worth that to you, then I guess so.”

“You’re the worst friend.”

“You’re the best friend.”

Chapter One

(Because, at the end, everyone involved should feel a little disappointed.)

I always say I never did anything bad enough to land me in court.

But that's not true.

I just never found myself in court.

Yet there were times... Excuse me, there were people.

Not many.

But enough for that statement to not be true.

Mrs. Fincher was one of those people. Which was particularly hard for me to process, seeing how close we ended up.

And as much as I like to attribute the time and the conversations we shared years after I left her classroom to the grace she showed me when I was in it, there's a part of me that can't help thinking she had made a mistake. That maybe she shouldn't have given me the benefit of the doubt. That there was no doubt.

Those things I did were wrong. And I shouldn't have been able to get away with it.

Surely, there were more instances. Some I just don't remember. Some maybe I've blocked. But when I think about her and that time, four stand out.

The first makes so little sense I can't put together exactly how it started. I know what I was thinking. I was thinking the same thing I was always thinking.

Wouldn't it be funny?

It was her free hour, and I believe it was me and two other students in the room hanging out, working on our journalism assignment. Mostly we were just sitting around talking.

I guess it was the way she was standing. It reminded me of how someone stands when they're getting searched by the cops.

She was leaning forward, with both hands on the window, looking out at the buses pulling up.

Wouldn't it be funny if I acted like I was frisking her? A superficial pat down, you know, just for effect.

The thought couldn't have lasted for more than a second. I like to think if I'd given it longer, I would have hesitated. Yet even if that were true, it's irrelevant. Because I didn't.

It was so random even the other teenagers in the room didn't think it was funny. Lucky for me, their shock at my wantonness was greater than hers.

She was undoubtedly taken aback. But she acted more confused than upset.

She said, “What are you doing?” Not really in an accusatory way, but more like how an older sibling might reflexively say “what are you doing” to the idiot brother they’re used to being bothered by, or maybe the way a worn down parent might talk to a problem child. Or maybe a teacher who kept finding herself barely patient but still merciful enough to let slide what should clearly be known better.

When I didn’t get a laugh from my friends, it hit me how inappropriate it was. I can’t remember what I said to try and save face; I just know it must have sounded muddled and pathetic.

I also don’t remember exactly what she said that let me know I was in the clear. I think it was something like “you’re weird” or “you’re crazy” or something like that. Something tempered enough to assure me, once again, that she was going to overlook my actions.

I assumed, at the time, she chalked it up to my immaturity, to an inappropriate sense of humor. But that’s really just the excuses I gave myself for why I had committed such an unacceptable act.

I had just put my hands on her. As if that was ok.

Not because I was a dumb kid, not because I thought it would be funny. But because I could.

The second time was just as random, just as fast.

It was in the computer room. A couple of us were in there talking when she came in and reached over my shoulder for something.

In that moment, I thought it would be funny if I grabbed her wrist and made this kind of French “Hmm Hmm Hmm” sound and kissed up her arm.

Wouldn’t that be funny? Even now, saying I thought that makes me feel better than just saying I grabbed her wrist and started kissing up her arm.

Yet it doesn’t matter if I thought it would be funny. What matters is if I had the right to do it.

I clearly believed I did.

Her reaction this time was different. I didn’t exactly know how to read it. Then again, I don’t know how I expected her to react. I guess I figured she would just swat me across the head and say I was crazy or something. Something like before.

But she didn’t say anything. She just looked flustered and quickly left the room.

My friends all looked at her as she left, and then they looked back at me. I remember being surprised by their surprise, not at her but at me.

They didn't say anything either. I couldn't believe it. They actually looked disappointed.

It was like overhearing that the world didn't revolve around me. Not that I would have admitted I thought it did. And who knows? Maybe I didn't really think that. But like so many young people, especially those with a certain amount of privilege, I'm sure I thought it revolved more around me than her.

I was a young male, straight and white, protestant and lost. I acted as if I wasn't aware of such attributes, really only unaware of one.

And even now, it's so easy to make it about me. To slip into excuses, veiled in achieved reflection.

To even go over the details like this seems like an exercise in non-apology.

Like how I remember thinking, before it happened, just as I was perceiving her arm to have presented itself in front of my face, that such a succession of kisses would be taken as humor. It would be like *Pepé Le Pew*, the cartoon. You know, innocent.

Of course, *Pepé Le Pew* wasn't really innocent, was he? And this wasn't a cartoon... Excuse me, I wasn't a cartoon.

Neither was she. She was a person. And I had just put my mouth on her. As if that was ok.

Not because I was a dumb kid, not because I thought it would be funny. But because I could.

The next time was in class.
English. 5th Period.

She taught English because she loved literature. She knew what it meant to find that love, and she wanted her students to find it too. Or at least I imagine that's how it started out.

I don't really know. Maybe I'm romanticizing, and I find that useful.

I just know that by the time I sat in her classroom, she seemed to be running on fumes.

She was a single mother with three kids, teaching in a poor school. Working far too hard for the pay, much less the recognition.

I had no clue what her existence was like. My investment in her was more curiosity than anything else, and my respect was more or less

transactional. Some days, she was my favorite teacher. Other days, she might as well have been a gas station attendant.

As much as I liked cutting up with her, as much as I enjoyed finding out trivial facts about her home life, I had no idea who she was as a person. I had no idea what her dreams were or what her fears were or what an absolute drag it was to prepare lesson plans and lectures for kids that weren't listening to a word she had to say, to grade those same kids' papers and essays at night when she could have been spending more time with her own children. I had no idea how much of herself she was sacrificing for us. For me.

And when that supply ran low, I didn't have the decency to yield.

I just couldn't understand how she could ever lose it. How, for all the chances she'd given me, every now and then it was just too much.

I like to think she threatened me first. But there's a difference between warning and threatening.

She warned me. I threatened her.

I had smarted off to her. Not unlike times before.

That's actually why I was so caught off guard with her response.

She said something like, "You know I could get you kicked out of school."

It seemed excessive, and abrupt, in light of the times before. The dozens of times before.

It was a taste of gravity, and I didn't like it.

Plus, it was in front of the others.

And, like returning a serve, I countered.

"You do that, and I'll have my day with you."

How awful. How permanently awful.

And yet as awful as it is for me to say those words aloud now and admit to them having ever come out of my mouth, up until this very second, right now, I've contemplated pretending as if I didn't remember the exact wording.

It's the reason why I don't always like being honest. It's the reason why sometimes I'm not honest. Because sometimes my honesty frightens me.

I'm trying hard to be sincere, to be sorrowful. Yet I'm scared, because I don't know what I'm more ashamed of. That I said it, or that I'm still so embarrassed over how it came out. How inauthentic and reaching I sounded. How transparently full of shit. How awkward and fake tough.

I hate that. But I mean it. Something in me still wishes it had come out a different way, that it at least sounded cooler.

How messed up is that?

All the remorse, all the guilt I feel, all these years later. And yet I still harbor the same feelings of insecurity that led me to blurt that out. That in the middle of my shame is this special cringe that proves I haven't really grown the way I'd like to believe.

It's almost kind of perfect. To know that about myself, to want so badly to change it. But for everything to have failed thus far. Kind of like a terminal illness only I know about. No outward symptoms. I just know it's there.

Obviously, I'm being overdramatic. But I'm not overstating.

I wish to believe I'm better than that kid. I'll be disgusted for the rest of my life at what that kid said. And yet because I still find myself somehow caring about how he said it, I can only believe I still am that kid.

I knew her warning was meant to get me to think about what I had to lose. What I didn't know was what I *needed* to lose.

Maybe that's why she said it. Not because she really believed I should get kicked out of school. But to call my bluff. To knock down the bully I was trying to be. To show me that I was all show. To teach me something I couldn't learn from a book, at least not one someone else had written.

And you know what the best part is? After what I said to her, she could have easily gotten me kicked out.

But she didn't. In fact, she didn't even offer a comeback. She just kept on with the material, kept on with her lesson.

And here I am. Decades later. Still there. Still in 5th Period. In that same seat. In that same moment.

And, yes, still making everything about me.

The last instance that comes to mind also happened in the computer room. With only two computers, this tiny space, adjoining Mrs. Fincher's class and Mrs. Burnett's class, seemed too small to really call a computer room. It seemed even smaller when you were having a heated argument in it. Smaller still when there were other people there watching.

It's probably better that I don't remember what we were arguing over, or what she said to me as she was leaving the room. If I did, I would probably put too much focus on it. Which would subtract from how inexcusable my reaction was, and border on suggesting an excuse.

I just remember our voices were raised, and whatever she said to me let me know I wasn't going to win.

I could have just taken a breath and let her walk out. I know that now.

I know I didn't have to do anything.

I didn't have to lash out. I didn't have to save face. I didn't have to pick up the closest thing I could find and throw it.

She had overlooked a lot. More than she should have been expected to. More than I wish she had. She even overlooked this. But it was only chance that she was able to do so.

Anyone old enough to remember the original 8-inch solid black kind knows that floppy disks might as well have been ninja stars. They were thin and sharp and sailed through the air like a boomerang.

It would have certainly drawn blood, had it hit her. Maybe worse.

I would have no doubt been expelled. Arrested. I don't like to think about the rest.

I remember watching it curve in the air after it left the three fingers I had thrown it with. It was this instantaneous state of panic, realizing there was a possibility it was going to hit the back of her head.

When it bounced off the wall, it was startlingly loud. She hadn't seen me throw it, but she turned around quick enough to see it fall to the ground.

"Did you just throw that at me?"

In that split second, I couldn't think of anything else to say. And Dennis was so close to the door. As if, somehow, that would have made it better.

"No, I didn't. I threw it at Dennis."

If I would have just said it like a smart-ass, it would have been bad enough. But saying it like I was telling the truth, like I somehow expected her to believe that, was beyond insulting.

For how bad I have felt since I knew enough to feel bad, I love that she asked me if I threw it. Because just asking me that cut so much deeper than whatever had been said before she began to walk out of the room.

There was no denying I had.

And though it was probably just whatever came to her in that half a second, just something she said to get her bearings, I want to believe she knew exactly what she was doing. That she wanted to see what I would say next, what I could possibly say after having thrown a sharp object in her direction.

To ask me that was to give me the choice.

I didn't have enough integrity to say yes and apologize. And I was too much of a poser to say yes and dig in. Instead, I chose to deny it and humiliate myself.

She then paused and left the room. Never mentioned it again.

I'm not one of those people who won't cop to the things they've done because they can't let themselves believe they are capable of such harms. And yet, when I remember, when I trace through those moments, I fear that I'm doing what those people do.

I want to believe that disk was just aimed at the wall, no different than if I had gotten up and punched the wall.

Except I didn't get up and punch the wall. That would have meant breaking my hand, and I wasn't about to do that. Doing that would have meant I was out of control, and I wasn't out of control.

I just wanted to believe I had it back.

I also like to tell myself it's the first and last time I can think of that I even came close to being violent or aggressive with a woman. But that seems more like a pat on the back than anything else. As if that is at all relevant to it having happened that one time.

It also implies, even if I only owe it to luck, that this time was not an actual act of violence. It implies that the other three instances were not actually violent either.

But, obviously, that's not true.

To commit to any of such acts was to send a message, of violence. It was to say I can do anything I like, to you.

Even if I didn't actually aim that sharp object at her that day, even if she wasn't technically physically harmed by any of those moments, the truth remains that each one was an assault. And no amount of remorse or growth can ever change that.

I assaulted her.

I put my hands on her. I put my mouth on her. I threatened her. I put her person in physical danger. As if, each and every time, it was ok.

Not because I was young and rebellious.

Not because I was confused and full of angst.

Not because I was just a boy being a boy... Excuse me, not because I was a boy being what men demanded women accept it was to be a boy.

I may have been able to wear those rationalizations back then. But I cannot wear them now.

I did those things because I could.

Mrs. Fincher proved that.

Why she reacted the way she did, I don't know. Maybe she thought that, even with all I had done, there was still a good possibility I would have found a way to skate by. To find someone up the ladder sympathetic to my entitlement.

Or maybe it was because she figured that it didn't have to be her that taught me that lesson, that I'd keep screwing around and eventually pay the price another way.

Or maybe she thought I actually had a chance. Maybe she saw right through my posing, but didn't see past my capacity.

I like to think that, instead of her being right about one of those three, she was right about all of them.

A couple of years after I graduated, I came back by the old classroom to say hello. After all, Mrs. Fincher was one of my favorite teachers.

When I got there, she was in the middle of 5th Period.

She had 6th Period free, and she let me sit at my old desk in the back while I waited for the class to be over.

And for twenty minutes, I watched the students disrespect her. I watched how they talked and laughed so loudly. I watched how they ignored her, as they went about their business.

Maybe I was just used to college etiquette by then, but it all seemed so much worse than I remembered. And whether or not that was the case, seeing this behavior from the outside, it was hard not to be angry at her students.

Thinking about it now, it just makes me angry at myself. To have witnessed how inconsiderate they were to her, and know. I had been so much worse than any of them.

When class was over, we had a nice conversation. I casually asked her how things were going with school. She told me if she didn't get a job as a professor at this college she had applied at, she was going to quit teaching altogether.

At the time, I attributed it to how much worse the students had gotten. As if I had not made my contribution. I remember being happy for her when I found out she got the job. I remember being relieved.

We kept up conversation once or twice a year, for a few years, and then trailed off. During that time, she agreed to take a look at my writing. I knew how much she cared about the written word, and she was the only person I trusted to give me guidance.

Of course, I get embarrassed now just thinking about her having given her time to such trash. Having given it real consideration. Having spent enough time with my words to have actually found something that moved her.

There was so much there to criticize, to tear down, to ridicule. She could have destroyed me. She knew it, and she would have been warranted in doing so.

But she didn't. For whatever reason, she only ever gave light to the good parts. Not in a phony or patronizing way, but in a way that let me know something was there.

I like to tell myself it was exactly what I needed at the time, and that she knew that.

It's possible, I guess.

It's also possible that I'm being generous to her for being generous to me.

And I know what that sounds like. How strange for me to second-guess her, after everything I did wrong.

Still, the longer I ask myself, "How could I have done those things to her," the more it feels wrong that she let me go.

I have no doubt, if she were standing in front of me right now, she would tell me she did the right thing. So why can't I accept that? How can I, even now, disrespect her, disrespect her agency, by even suggesting she was mistaken?

Maybe it's because I feel so empty-handed. My gratitude will never be enough. My contrition will never be enough. And because I cannot match her grace, maybe I wish to adorn it with a cemented memory of how unworthy I was as its recipient.

I've wondered on occasion if this is one of the reasons I feel the need to write. Like I can never stop. I know how much she loved the written word. Maybe words are the only thing I have to give her. Not these words, not words of apology or confession. But all the ones that come after. All the ones I fear I'll never get to.

Or maybe it's the words themselves I fear. Maybe I'm afraid the words that come after these will be just as disappointing as the person I was. Maybe I feel this need, to write, because I haven't written anything yet, worth her letting me go.

Or maybe, once again, I'm just making it about myself.

The funny thing is, with how close we became, I would be willing to bet she doesn't remember any of what I just told you. Or at least not all of it, and definitely not with the same detail. Not that it wasn't

consequential, not that it wasn't wrong. But because she had a bigger life than me. A bigger life than that school.

From what I know of her, I suspect there was nothing in her that needed to hold onto those specific moments. And even if there was, the memories we hold onto are not always our choice.

I also suspect, for a number of reasons, that during the many years she spent in that building, she sustained far worse and lasting wounds.

I don't like thinking about that. Not just because it hurts me, but because it leads me. To consider. She let me go for the very reason I can't bring myself to do the same.

Because for all the arguments people make, or accept, so they can go on believing the world is more flat than round, Mrs. Fincher saw me the same way everyone else saw me. The same way I saw myself.

As a good kid.

My Agent - - January 10, 2018

“Once we solidify this as your brand, we can get you doing ads.”

“Why would I want to do ads?”

“Why does anyone do ads? Because it’s an option.

You think Bobby De Niro dreamed as a little boy of one day being able to hock a credit card in between episodes of Wheel of Fortune? You think that was what he thought about as he was training to be an actor, learning his lines, working his ass off trying to get the right roles and perfect his craft? Think that’s all he ever really wanted out of his career?

Fuck no. By the time De Niro did those ads, he was already so rich he probably didn’t know how much money he actually had.

He didn’t do it because he wanted to do it. He did it because he couldn’t not do it, because the sensation was too rare to not experience. He did it because he had made it to a place in his life where it was an option.”

“But what does that even mean?”

“It means he did it because it felt good. It felt good to know his name was worth an extra couple million bucks. Felt good to show it off to the schmuck at the other end of the ad, the schmuck who’s gonna watch that ad and consider getting that credit card simply because he thought De Niro was a badass in Taxi Driver. The schmuck who knows he *can’t* do that, and that he could *never* do that.

But you know who can? The guy from fucking Taxi Driver.”

“But you don’t know that’s why he did it. Maybe he did it to raise extra money for his charity. Maybe he did it to help people.”

“Maybe. And maybe he could have just given more of his own money to the charity instead.”

“So you admit you don’t really know.”

“I don’t admit to shit. That’s your job.

I can only tell you that I’m committed to getting you to the point where you *will* know.

And when the companies come knocking down your door, *and they will*, we’ll see if you’re tougher than Bobby De Niro.”

“And what companies do you think are going to come knocking for someone like me?”

“If you listen to me, and let me do my thing, they’ll all come knocking.”

“But why? Even if I wanted to sell stuff, what I’m doing doesn’t really lend to any products.”

“Doesn’t matter. You can sell anything you want. That’s what a brand is for. You want to sell vacuum cleaners, you can sell vacuum cleaners. You want to sell Rolexes, you can sell that.

As long as you have enough fans, as long as you’ve established that brand, you can sell whatever you want.”

“But I don’t know anything about Rolexes or vacuum cleaners.”

“Neither do I. But I know celebrity, and I’m going to make you so famous you’re going to quit asking those questions.”

“What if I don’t want to be that famous?”

“You wouldn’t have spent this much time back and forth on the phone with me if you didn’t.

And I definitely wouldn’t have spent this much time with you.

Seriously, the only reason we’re even having this conversation is because you don’t understand the world you’re in.

Just look at what you’re asking me. ‘Why would someone buy a vacuum cleaner from me? I don’t know anything about vacuum cleaners.’

What you don’t understand is that you’re not asking a question about a vacuum cleaner. You’re asking why things are the way they are. You might as well be asking why the wind blows harder some days than others or why the sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

They’re purposeless questions. You have no control over *why* that kind of stuff happens. And if you want to enjoy the breeze in your hair and the sun on your face, you’d do better to just accept that it *does* happen.

And, look, I understand. I feel that this is all new to you. But you’re going to have to trust me when it comes to this stuff.

I know this world. This is my world.”

“I just don’t get why I can’t keep doing what I’m doing and see where it takes me. I don’t know why I have to have a brand, or *be* a brand.”

“Oh, I’m not going to make *you* a brand. I’m going to make *this* your brand. So even if you fizzle out, even if at some point, no, *when* at some point, others come along who are better at it than you are, your name

will still be associated with it. And once we've done that, once we've made your name synonymous with this, you'll never have to worry about anything ever again.

Think of it like the Air Jordan logo. Most of the people wearing that logo today weren't alive when Michael was playing. But guess what? They're still sporting his shoes, and those shoes still cost the same to make as a pair of Walmart specials but sell for ten times as much.

And let me tell you something. It's not because Michael Jordan's logo was cooler than any other logo. It's because of the moment that logo represented. The fucking zeitgeist of a player who didn't just show what he could do, but showed the world how much more could be done, how much more was possible. That was the phenomenon, and that is what he made *his* brand. And because that phenomenon outlasted his actual career, it's a brand that until this day sells shoes for ten times the price."

"Yeah, but that's not a good thing. That's a terrible thing. I don't want to follow a model that exploits what I'm trying to do in order to rip people off."

"You're not ripping people off. You're giving them what they want at whatever price they're willing to pay for it."

"But what price is that? By turning this into a brand, how much more am I expecting the audience to pay?"

"Is that what you're really worried about? What the audience is going to pay?"

Because there's an audience out on the street corner if you just want to go out there and give it away for free.

But that's not the audience you want, is it? You want an audience that's not going to flip a coin into a stranger's hat and then keep walking. You want an audience that's going to pay real money to someone they believe they know. And not only that, you want them to pay that money *in order* to believe they know.

Not that they actually know, but that they believe they know.

Believe they know the real you. Not who you *were*, but who you are.

You want an audience who's willing, no, eager, to overlook the person you were back then and reward the person you are right now.

And that, my man, for someone like you, is a tall order.

But you know it's one I can pull off. As long as we maintain an understanding.

You can hit the showers and head home any time you want. But as long as you're in the game, it's because you want to be in it. And if you're going to be in it, there are certain rules you're going to have to play by."

The Interviewer - - January 03, 2021

“If you don’t mind me switching gears a little, I’d like to ask you about a line you wrote in one of your poems.

It was an untitled poem in *Earning My Confessions*. Towards the end of it you wrote, ‘and those dreams I’ve been having only complicate my memories.’

I thought that line seemed almost out of place with the rest of the poem. It’s difficult to know what to take from it without any context.”

“I don’t guess I knew what to take from it either. I wrote that poem just about the time when this thing started to happen.

I was having these super vivid dreams. The kind that when you wake up, you feel like you have to address what happened in the dream, as if it really happened. It was beyond unsettling.

I would call them nightmares, if I hadn’t gotten so used to them now.”

“Do you remember them past just when you wake up?”

“I remember them right now.

I remember all of them. The same as I do anything else that’s happened in my life.

It’s creepy. I know they’re dreams, but only really because of how bizarre they get.”

“Would you mind describing one?”

“Sure.

There’s a few that are kind of recurring. I guess I could tell you one of those.”

“What do you mean by ‘kind of’ recurring?”

“I mean, just to give you an example, the one I was thinking about is one I’ve been having for a long time. And it always starts out with a confession.

But the confession itself is different. Every time.”

“Is it one of yours?”

“That’s the thing.

I can't hear it. Or at least I can't make out what it is the person is saying. I can hear that they're saying something, but not enough to tell what's being said.

I only know it's a confession."

"How do you know it's a confession?"

"It's hard to explain. I guess I just recognize the desperation in their voice. A desperation that, for me, springs from guilt."

"So what do you *think* the person is confessing?"

"It's not about *what* they're confessing. It's why. And to whom.

I may not understand what is being said. But I understand what's going on between the person confessing and the person being confessed to."

"And what do you think it is that's going on?"

"I'm not sure exactly how to describe it other than a fetish."

"Like a sexual fetish?"

"Yeah. But there's no real sex taking place.

It's just this person sitting on the floor, looking down. As if they're not allowed to look up.

And there's this other person who's standing above them. And that person is demanding more. And the more the person on the ground tells, the more the person standing craves it."

"How do you know it's sexual?"

"From the way the person standing acts.

They're not masturbating or anything like that.

But the excitement in their voice as they demand more is acutely sexual."

"So you can understand what *that* person is saying, but not the person on the ground?"

"Right. I can tell the person on the ground is giving the person standing what they want.

And as the excitement builds in the one standing above, the excitement builds in the voice of the one offering. As if they know what they're there for."

“To satisfy the one standing above.”

“In a way, but not really.

At some point randomly in the confession, the person standing above climaxes, but it’s all very superficial.

It’s the least convincing part of the performance.”

“What do you mean by performance?

And how do you know the person climaxes if they’re not masturbating?”

“Because instead of them physically climaxing, at the height of their excitement, a curtain falls and the performance is over.”

“So it’s all been for show?”

“I actually don’t know that part. It definitely takes place on a stage.

I just don’t know if they know it’s a stage. Like maybe, to the people on the stage, everything that is happening is real and they don’t know that the audience is watching. And it’s a real exchange between the person giving and the person receiving.”

“It’s *their* stage.”

“Exactly. And the audience is spying in on their stage. Spying on this exchange of needs.”

“But you said the person standing above is not convincing at the end.”

“That’s right. Everything else until that point is convincing. Just not the orgasm part.

But I’m not really sure that means the whole thing is an act.”

“How do you mean?”

“Maybe the person standing above is faking it because they believe the person on the floor needs that climax.

Maybe it’s less of an act than it is a gift, or service. Maybe the person standing above is really the one performing a service.

At least that’s how I interpret the fact that I can only make out what *they’re* saying.”

“But you said you’re not *sure* if it’s a performance.
You still think it could be.”

“Possibly. Part of me thinks the person standing is still the most important one on stage. Because if it *is* a performance for the audience, then maybe the person standing above is a kind of surrogate for the audience.”

“Like a surrogate for witnessing the confession.”

“Not really. The audience can hear the confession. I just can’t.”

“Then what kind of surrogate does the audience need?”

“Like a surrogate to get off.

Maybe the audience can’t get off themselves. So they do it vicariously through the person standing above.”

“But that’s the part I don’t understand. If that’s the service being performed by the person standing above, and it could be a service for the audience, or it could be a service for the person on the floor, then, either way, why do you think the orgasm is the least convincing part?”

“Because, at the end, everyone involved should feel a little disappointed.”

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“Wow.
That’s grim.”

“I know.
It’s why I said. They always leave me unsettled.”

“But you’re not really in the dream yourself.”

“I kind of am, and I’m kind of not.
It’s like I’m there, but no one knows I’m there. Or at least the audience doesn’t see it.”

“So you’re not either person on stage. You’re actually in the audience.”

“I’m not on stage, but I’m not exactly *in* the audience either.

It's like while the whole confession thing is going on, I never really see the stage with my own eyes. I only see it reflected in the eyes of the audience."

"What does that mean you see it reflected?"

"I mean that, during the dream, I spend it pacing up and down the aisles, looking in the eyes of different audience members.

But I'm really only half paying attention to what's going on on stage.

It's like I'm more interested in how the audience is reacting to what's going on on stage."

"And does the dream end when the curtain falls?"

"Actually, no. Because when the curtain falls, the lights go on. But the audience doesn't actually get up to leave.

Instead they sit, looking at the curtain. Waiting for the lights to go back down and the curtain to open back up."

"And another show to begin."

"That's right."

"So how does the dream end?"

"Well, I said that they don't see me, but that's not quite right. Because the dream actually ends when I get to an audience member whose eyes finally focus in on my eyes."

"They can see you."

"They actually look back at me. They don't say anything, but they can see my eyes. And it's like you said, they can see me, and see what I've been doing.

And as I'm looking at them looking at me, actually seeing me, I see these tears well up in their eyes.

And the tears are so full and heavy I can barely see their eyes anymore.

But before one tear can fall, I wake up in this terror, with my heart beating out of my chest."

"And why do you think that is? What do you think scares you?"

"Because I can't tell what kind of tears they are."

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“Wow.

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Ok.

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I think that’s a good place for us to take a break.

When we come back, we’ll have more with Lonnie Ray Atkinson,
author of the recent book *A Good Kid and His Ghosts*.”

My best friend - - August 10, 2018

“Nope, can’t do it. You’re going to have to read them. I told you.”

“So you can *hear* them, from me, through the phone. But you can’t read them.”

“I know it doesn’t make sense. But I don’t care. If I start, myself, I won’t be able to handle it. I know it.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know. I feel like I’ll get obsessed or something. And if I don’t get for real obsessed, I’ll still get sucked in and end up spending way too much time reading the shit.”

“Then why do you want *me* to read them to you?”

“Because with you it’s a goof; it’s fun.”

But if I leave it to myself, I know what’ll happen. They’ll eat my fucking brain.”

“Then why even step into the shit?”

“Because I have to knooooooooow!”

“Oh my God!”

“I have to. I have to know. I can’t help it, I’m sick. It’s a fucking condition.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Is it my fault I’m a modern human?”

“Modern human. Oh my God.”

“You know it’s true. You know it’s true.”

“What’s true?”

“If a tree falls on Instagram and nobody hearts it, did it really happen?”

“I can’t believe I’m friends with you.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t help it. It’s like I’m Schrodinger’s cat, except *I* don’t know either.”

(laughing) “You’re so stupid!”

“Did you like that?”

“No, you’re just stupid.”

“Can I just say, though, I do feel bad for making you do the work.”

“Don’t feel bad. Seriously. You shouldn’t; I actually enjoy it. I don’t really think of it as work. I think of it like curation.”

(laughing) “Curation. I love it. You’re like a curator of hate.”

“Curator of haters.”

“Exactly! That’s awesome.”

“Plus, I kind of like seeing how many people hate you.”

“Oh, do you?”

“I do. Seeing how many people hate you reminds me how many people don’t hate me.”

“I’m glad I could do that for you, with my life.”

“It’s a dirty cross, but somebody’s gotta bear it.”

“Exactly.”

“But do you have to bear it? Seriously, do you?”

“Here we go.”

“No, I’m serious. You don’t communicate back; you don’t even have your own accounts. Why do you care what’s going on in that world?”

“Because I have to.”

“But why, Lonnie?”

They’re strangers. You shouldn’t care what they think.”

“I know I shouldn’t, but I have to. I need to.”

“But why?”

“Because the strangers rule.”

“No they don’t.”

“Yes they do, they fucking rule. I wish they didn’t, but they fucking do.

They matter.”

“To who? Not to you.”

“They matter to each other.”

“Yeah, but you’re also convinced they should matter to you. And they shouldn’t. At least not the way you receive it.

I mean you’re not even in that world. You don’t know these people. You’ll never meet these people. You wouldn’t even know any of these people existed if I didn’t read you their tweets. They might as well be characters from a book. Actually, you’d care about them more if they were characters in a book.”

“But they’re not characters in a book. They’re real.”

“That’s not the world.”

“It may not be the world, but it’s a world.”

“I’m just saying it’s not a world you have to be in.”

“But I do. If I want to be able to do business with strangers, I have to accept it.”

“You have to accept death threats?! Because that’s what you have. You *have* death threats. And rape and torture threats. And threats against your family.

I know we have fun with it sometimes, but you have real threats. I see them. And sometimes they’re so bad, I don’t even know whether to tell you.

I mean I know you’re not going to do anything. I told you to call the police with that one tweet that time, and what did you say?”

“I said, ‘It’s part of it.’”

“And how messed up is that? That you can so casually hear stuff like that and resign yourself to doing nothing. Like you got a bogus parking ticket.

That can’t be part of it.”

“It’s not like I’m happy about it. There’s just nothing I can do.”

“So what, you just chalk it up to the new norm?”

“I guess.”

“That’s messed up.”

“I know it’s messed up. I don’t disagree with you. I’m trying to figure out and process why I feel the way I feel.

I know it’s irrational; I know it’s unhealthy. And I don’t want you to think I’m not hearing you. I think about it all the time.

I actually have this weird scientific theory about why it’s fucked up on an even different level. And you can tell me if this makes sense or not. But I got to thinking about it, and physiologically, we’re still relatively the same humans that we were a hundred thousand years ago. And those early humans came to live in groups, or tribes, of usually less than 200 people.”

“Ok.”

“So if you think about it in terms of how our circumstances shaped our evolution, including our brain development, I’m not sure it’s neurologically healthy for us to receive direct feedback from more than a couple hundred people.”

“Says the person who’s on the verge of becoming a bestseller and can’t not have me read him his hate tweets.”

“But that’s just it. I think expressing yourself to masses of people is fine. I think that’s totally healthy, because you’re releasing whatever creative junk you have inside you.

But when it comes to how, like you said, it’s received, I don’t think it’s a two way street.

Because, unless you’re like in a position of authority, and in that case you need and deserve as much feedback as possible, but if you’re not in a position of authority, I think there is a point in which the human brain can be overwhelmed with the judgment of strangers.”

“So you think communicating *to* more than your immediate tribe is ok, but being communicated *at* by more than that may not be ok?”

“Well, when you put it like that it doesn’t sound that great. But yeah, kind of.”

“It’s weird hearing you, of all people, say that the world can’t be our tribe?”

“I’m not saying that. I’m saying *humanity* can be our tribe, but more in the sense of a cosmic or spiritual or pan-conscious tribe, if that makes any sense. But in terms of your tangible, more immediate tribe, I think that has to have limits if we’re going to maintain psychological health.”

“I kind of get what you’re saying, but when you say it can’t be a two way street...”

“I don’t mean it can’t... I think... I think logically it should be a two way street. And I even think morally it should be a two way street, in the sense that I’m not saying that I should only be accountable in moral terms or logical terms to the people who were by chance within my tribe.

I think when you’re contributing to a greater audience, you most definitely owe it to everyone to at least try and put yourself in their shoes. You owe it to everyone because you could have been anyone. That’s the whole cosmic tribe thing.

But when you start to see your physical or even psychological accountability as *belonging* to more than your immediate tribe, and again by tribe I don’t mean in racial or demographic terms or any of that, but more in terms of the people in your life who you’re close to and depend on for sustainability. I wonder if we only have the capacity for so much immediate accountability.”

“You mean you wonder if you only have the capacity for so much guilt.”

“I didn’t really think about it like that, but I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. That’s why you’re doing all this. It’s like you’re making yourself crazy and then trying to figure out how to save yourself.

It’s so obvious to be unironic.”

(laughing) “Am I that obvious?”

“It’s kind of pathetic.”

“There are no words for how much I...”

“In fact, I can’t tell whether it’s more pathetically obvious, or obviously pathetic.”

“All right all right, I get it. Enough with the serious stuff. Let’s have some fun, speaking of obvious and pathetic.”

“You sure you don’t want to talk more about your theory that’s not really a theory, but more of a thought?”

(laughing) “Fuck you.”

“You sure you don’t want to get all philosophical to rationalize why it’s no big deal that everybody hates you?”

“You’re my best friend. You know that?”

“Don’t be gross.”

“Ok, here we go. Let’s do it.”

“Are you finally ready?”

“Release the hounds.
But make sure you read them slow and deadpan, like you did last week.”

“Ok, ready? Here we go.

Quote ‘I wish I wasn’t an atheist so I could believe in hell. That way I wouldn’t have to think you’re going to simply die when you die. You deserve all the things a Christian hell could give you.’ Unquote.”

“Saving the best for first I see.”

“Oh that’s not the best.”

“Let’s at least hope he’s right about God.

Though I have to say, for an atheist, that’s quite an endorsement of Christian justice.”

“I know, right? I like that he throws in that he’s too smart to believe in the injustice of a Christian hell, but that his sense of entitlement

to judging is so strong that his deepest fantasy is for it to be true and hell to be real.”

“Exactly.”

“There’s kind of a lot going on in that one.”

“From now on, maybe not so much complexity on the first one.”

“Oh, you don’t want complex? Then how about this one:
Quote ‘Hey, bastard. Snort my taint.’ Unquote.”

“Classic!
Snort my taint. Short and sweet.”

“What more can you say?”

“Snort my taint really says it all.”

“All that was needed to say.”

“It kind of makes me a little nauseous. Now that I’ve heard it, I can’t get the image out of my head.”

“Like if you just think about someone actually snorting a dry taint.”

“Ok, stop. I can’t think about it.”

“It’s like the nostril is being dragged along th…”

“No, for real. I’ll throw up. Just do another one.”

“Ok, ok. How about this one:

Quote ‘And our society rewards pansies like this. Is this what you pansies really call progress? You can pretend that you’re more enlightened all you want. When the shit hits the fan, these fuckbois and their feelings are going to be the first to fall.’ Unquote.”

“Ooooo, alliteration. I like it.”

“Yes. I liked the old school ‘pansy’ reference too. I didn’t know people still said pansy.”

“I also liked the ‘you think you’re better than me’ vibe. You think you’re better than me? With your feelings and your conscience?”

“Consciences are for fuckbois.”

“Did he at least spell fuckboi right?”

“With an I.”

“At least there’s that.

Ok, next one... Wait, are these from the fan page or the account run by Sprott and Neville?”

“The publisher, why?”

“Nothing. It’s just what we were talking about a few weeks ago.”

“About people still tweeting directly at you even though they know it’s not actually your account?”

“Yeah, like they word them as if I’m going to see it.”

“But they’re not reeeceally wrong, are they?”

“Ok. Snark taken.

Next one, please.”

“Ok. And this is one that’s not directly addressed to you:

Quote ‘This fucking tittytard. Probably sucked mama’s titty till he was in the third grade. What am I talking about, you still ain’t weaned. Go kill yourself, tittytard.’ Unquote.”

“I like how the tweet is less about me than it is him trying to make ‘tittytard’ become a thing. And then he can tell all his friends that he started it.”

“You didn’t let me finish. I was going to tell you, he actually hashtagged tittytard.”

“Noooooooo.”

“Can you believe it? Turns out he was just trying to use the online hatred for you as a springboard to his own celebrity.”

“Slang celebrity.”

“Is there really any greater celebrity?”

“Ok, do another.”

Ok, here we go. And you’re really gonna hate this one:

Quote ‘You sound like one of these libtribs raised on Mr. Rogers. Fuck you and Mr. Rogers.’ Unquote.”

“How dare he speak ill of Fred Rogers like that. I will find that person, and I will kill them.”

“In honor of Mr. Rogers.”

“Exactly.”

“I knew you’d hate that one. But I think you’ll actually like this next one.

Quote ‘You wanna cry, you little bitch? I’ll give you something to cry about.’ Unquote.”

“Niiiiice. An old-fashioned abusive father reference.”

“Nuuuuhstalgia.”

“Nostalgia.”

“Ok, ok. Last one.

Quote ‘Hey, clever guy. I know this all must feel really good right now, but for how long? Do you seriously think this is going to fix you? You can’t wash your hands with crocodile tears.’ Unquote.”

“Holy shit. You had to throw in one that would hurt.”

“Sorry. That’s the game you’re in now.”

“You’re right.

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But mmm.

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Damn.”

A Visitor - - November 28, 2018

“Hey! Look at us here together. And with this weather too. It’s like the perfect day. What’s been going on with you?”

“Oh, I don’t know! How about internet trolls making my life miserable ever since you put me on blast!”

“Trolls? What are you talking about?”

“All the little online freaks. They fucking tracked me down. I even got contacted by a magazine for an interview.”

“But how could they? I didn’t use any names or anything.”

“I don’t know. My guess is they asked around to some of our piece of shit friends, and one of those losers sold me out. Probably for drug money.”

“I’m so sorry. I swear to you, I never meant for that to happen.”

“You never meant for that to happen? Dude, what did you think was going to happen?”

What the fuck were you thinking even talking about that? What are you thinking talking about any of this stuff?”

“I really never thought anything like this would happen. I was just trying to come clean in a way that might...”

“I don’t care what you were trying to do. That wasn’t your call to make.

You didn’t reach out to me. I bet you didn’t reach out to anyone, did you?”

“I didn’t exactly.. I didn’t think.. I don’t.. I guess I was afraid you might...”

“You were afraid of what? You were afraid we wouldn’t let you use it?”

So you just went ahead and did it anyway. Classy. Real fucking classy.”

“I didn’t even know where you were. If I did, I know I would have talked to you.

I guess I thought of it like an open letter.”

“Obviously, you didn’t try that hard to find me, if they could find me.

And what the fuck are you talking about ‘open letter’? That’s not the way you communicate with someone you fucking know.

Oh right, it wasn’t me you were communicating to. It was your fans.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry. I should have tried. I should have made...”

“You should have taken two seconds to think about us.

I mean I get what you’re trying to do with this. And until you brought our shit up, I was kind of tripping out that you were getting famous.

But you can’t do it *like this*.

You have to change stuff. You have to make it to where no one can figure it out.”

“Yeah, but if I do that too much, then they won’t really be true.”

“So it’s better for us to have to deal with a bunch of shit, so you can feel good about being honest?

Who the fuck do you owe here?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just...”

“No, I know what you meant.

And it’s fucking bullshit, and you know it.”

“It *is* bullshit. You’re right.

And I need to think about how I can do better to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

“You know, if you would have just asked me, I probably would have been ok with it.”

“I know. I should have asked you.

I guess I wasn’t sure if you’d want to hear from me.”

“But that’s what I’m saying. That’s bullshit.

I mean you put it out there, didn’t you? You had to have figured I was going to hear it then.

You were telling everybody else how bad you felt, but not me.”

“You’re right. I know.
Like you said, it’s bullshit.
And I’m wrong.
I was just being a fucking coward.”

“But why?
You know we’re more than that.
You know we are.
Besides, we were fucking kids.”

“I know. And that’s why I owed you more than that.
I should have just asked you.”

“You should have asked everybody. I mean even if you wouldn’t have talked about our shit, didn’t you think this might come back on all of us?”

Aren’t you worried what the controversy could do to the people around you? What if a friend or family member was trying to get a job, and the person they’re interviewing with finds out they’re close to you?
That could fuck them up too.”

“To be honest, I hadn’t really thought about it, because, honestly, this is the first time it’s ever come up.
You’re the first person it’s happened to.
But you’re right; I’m going to take your advice going forward. I can’t be as exact about stuff. I have to change enough that it’s not traceable, but still authentic.”

“How about you just not do it in the first place?”

“I.. I..
I don’t know what...”

“It’s ok.
I know.
You found a thing. I feel that.
Like I said, before you brought us up, I was kind of cheering you
on.
I just wish you could have been smarter about it.”

“You’re right. I should have been.
And I’m going to be.
And I appreciate you being this cool with me about everything.

Because you don't have to be. But you are.
And for what it's worth.
I really am sorry. Not just about this.
But for what ha..."

"I know you're sorry.
I knew that back then."

"You did?"

"Yeah.
I know it was a thing.
It was a fucked up thing, but it was what it was. And we're not
those same people.
Lord knows what I would have to tell if I was doing what you're
doing."

"I just want you to know that whatever hurt I caused you, I really
do feel awful about it."

"Well, for what it's worth, in the long list of things that people
have done to hurt me, that one's pretty far down on the list. So far down I
probably wouldn't have thought to even put it on the list."

"I don't know whether I should feel comforted or sad by that."

"I'm just tripping that I'm the only one they tracked down. I mean
you had some pretty fucked up confessions.
I'm glad I wasn't part of one of those."

"I wish no one would have been part of those."

"I was surprised. I didn't know *some* of that about you."

"Yeah, and now everyone knows."

"But that's why you're getting paid the big bucks."

"Ah, don't put it like that. I promise you, I'm not doing this
because of the money.
I hope you know that."

"I figured you weren't. I figured it was more like, 'Hey, you gotta
take what comes your way, right?'"

“I don’t really know what it’s like. I’m just glad you’re not too mad at me.”

“I told you. I know.

I just wish *you knew* before you felt the need to do all this.”

“Me too.

Though I’m not sure if it would have even mattered, at least not in my head.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“I know.

At least that much I *do* know.”

Excerpt from *The Man Who Confessed Himself To Death: My Time in the Confession Industry*

It is no secret that, over the last couple years, I have made a great deal of money. And if I can continue finding/producing these little pockets of blood, I stand to make quite a bit more.

I'm not sure you could call it a career. It's been more like riding (and occasionally taking a brief turn steering) a trend. Trying not to think about the time when, once this trend is over, I will have to contend with the consequences.

I can tell myself what I offered was pure, and at least in the beginning that was true. But once this momentum took on a life of its own, I had a choice of whether to continue making those offerings, a choice of whether I wanted to participate in what it had become.

I told myself, as long as what I was giving was genuine, I was not responsible for the rest of it. I focused on the glimmers of light.

Yet no matter how much good slipped through the cracks, I knew what I was doing.

I helped turn the call of one's conscience into entertainment, into a commodity. I helped make the intimacy of one's contrition into a fad, scrolling down the page.

And I continue to do so. Because I am weak and vain, I continue to corrupt the potential for redemption. I probably won't stop until the fad has reached the bottom and all remorse is suspect.

I don't know what my confession will be then. I only know, if there is any justice, no one will accept it.

Chapter Two

(And that's how it started.)

The Doctor - - February 23, 2017

*This chair is too comfortable for me to be squirming so much. She knows that.
How long can I look down at the pattern on the rug before I'm forced to make eye
contact?*

*I wonder what she thinks I'm going to say.
Maybe she's already sized me up, waiting to see if she's right.
No. That's just me projecting.*

*I hate that I'm doing this, but I know I need to.
I'm here because I want help.*

I have no idea what to say.

“So is this like in the movies, where you look at me and say something like ‘Tell me about your mother,’ and then I lay back for fifty minutes and unwittingly bore you to tears while you stroke your beard and occasionally add an item to your grocery list?”

“Don’t be daft. Do I look like I have a beard?”

“Ok, humor. I like that. That’s a good start.
But seriously, I don’t know.
How is this supposed to work?”

“It can work any way you want it to work. If you want me to ask you questions, we can do that. Or if you have an idea of why you’re here, we can start with you telling me whatever you feel comfortable with and go from there.”

“Ok, well, I guess... I... I guess my friend made me make the original appointment to see someone because I told her I was having this problem, and she said it wasn’t normal.
She actually said that it was kind of normal, but kind of not.”

“All right. Let’s start there.”

“Ok, sooooo, I’m not sure the best way to convey it, but I guess you could say I’m nostalgic. Like really nostalgic.”

“When you say ‘really’ nostalgic, what exactly do you mean?”

“I mean I’m nostalgic on a whole different level than most people, at least I think. Like my friend told me that sometimes she feels the way I do, but never to the degree I feel it.”

“What is it you feel?”

“It’s like this extreme mix of fondness and sadness. And the fondness is this joy that comes over me when I remember a certain time in my life. And when I say remember it doesn’t even seem like the right word, because it’s more like I’m experiencing exactly how I felt at that moment, even if it’s just for a few seconds.”

“And the sadness?”

“The sadness is my longing to be back there, to *actually* be back there. I want to be there so bad.”

“But you said it’s almost like you are there.”

“But that’s just it. It’s like the closer it feels like that moment, the harder it is for me. Because I’m getting this sense that it’s right there, yet I know it’s not. And the more real it feels, the more I’m reminded how it’s all gone.

And then just like that, I’m weeping in the middle of whatever I’m doing.

And I seem to find myself having these feelings so often, yet I don’t want to avoid the things that make me have these feelings. But at some point I don’t know whether I’m going to be completely overwhelmed.

I don’t know what mental illness is supposed to feel like, but I feel like sometimes it can’t be healthy to feel *this*, the way I feel it.”

“I can understand why you would see this as a problem.

And while I can’t know the exact degree to which you feel this sensation, I can tell you that this kind of longing is not uncommon, especially with people in your age group.”

“It’s why the 80s and early 90s is still so big, right?”

(slightly laughing) “That’s true.

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I’m taking for granted that these are your teen years, what you’re having the nostalgia about?”

“Mostly teen years. There’s a couple things in my early to mid-twenties, but mostly teen stuff.”

“So what is it about that time period? Why do you think you’re experiencing these emotions?”

“That’s the worst part. It’s not just those emotions I’m experiencing. If it were merely too much joy to handle that would be bad enough.

But with me, it’s not just the longing. It’s something else. It’s like the longing doesn’t only come from a good place.

When I’m crying, it’s not just joy.”

“What is it?”

“It’s like this laceration.

A laceration that I can’t not feel, but one that won’t heal either. But the pain is worse because it’s connected to those good feelings.”

“What do you think the laceration represents?”

“I know what it represents. It represents shame.

These moments are so difficult because it’s like this beauty and this shame, simultaneously.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“It’s like I can recognize the part of me that was innocent, and I miss that person. I want to be that person again and get to feel all those feelings again, all over again. I want to live that time again.

But then I also recognize the other part of me. All those times when it was right there. I could have done the right thing, and I didn’t. And I’m so disappointed in that person. And I’m so angry at that person, and that person hurts me so bad.

And I want to be him again too, so I can go back and not do all those things. And the degree to which I feel such joy in these moments is the same as how much I feel this anguish of knowing all the things I can’t take back.

And it’s weird, because I feel like I should be ok, because I can see what it is that’s wrong. But no matter how much I acknowledge what’s going on, I don’t know how to get rid of it.

So, until that happens, there’s just this weeping and this wanting that’s pulling my brain in a million different directions. And sometimes I don’t know what to do.

And those sometimes feel like they're becoming all the time.”

The Interviewer - - January 03, 2021

This isn't really as bad as I thought it'd be.

*Though, listening to her on the air, I would have never imagined the studio like this.
The lights are so low. I can't even see the walls.
Strange.*

*I don't know, maybe it's to set the mood.
Whatever it is, it seems to be working. I feel good.*

*I like the sound of her voice in person.
Familiar.*

Yeab, this is good.

“And that’s how it started.”

“Pretty much.”

“You had no idea it would lead you here.”

“I don’t know how you could know.”

“And it was actually the doctor’s idea that you try these confessions?”

“Yeah, she said it might help with the feelings I was having. She thought if I said this stuff out loud in front of someone, and publicly confronted the things I felt I couldn’t take back, that maybe it would help me at least deal with it better.”

“She was the one who referred you to the support group.”

“Yeah, she told me about the group and where it was located and the time and all that. She said she knew it had helped former patients and that she really thought it might be a good outlet for me.”

“To confess past wrongdoings.”

“Yeah, but not just to confess. To confess in front of strangers.”

“Strangers who also had something to confess.”

“Right. That was the point. That you’re in a group of people who you wouldn’t feel awkward saying these kinds of things in front of.”

“Strangers who wouldn’t judge you.”

“Right. But more so because they’re too busy judging themselves.”

“I guess so.

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And you still go to that same group today?”

“When I can. I know it sounds corny, but I feel like it keeps me grounded.”

“That must be nice. To have some place to go now and not have to worry about people judging you.”

“Believe me, I see the irony. I start out confessing in front of strangers so there’s no judgment and end up making a career in the judgment business.”

“The question is: do you still see it as therapy?”

“The public ones? No way.

Any situation where your survival depends upon people’s approval is not therapy.”

“That’s interesting you say that. I’m sure there’s a few thousand stand-up comics who would take issue with that.”

“Maybe new comics. But any artist who’s come to terms with what their industry is about knows it’s not exactly the healthiest environment for growth.

It’s the reason why I still go back to my original group. I feel like I can still make progress there.”

“Do the others in the group look at you differently now?”

“No. Because it’s the same folks. It’s kind of like going back home to see your friends. No one thinks you’re a big shot when they’ve seen you at your worst.”

“So it’s not really a group of strangers anymore.”

“That’s true.

But I’m not sure I need them to be strangers.”

“You mean they’re not the strangers you need *now*.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Do you ever think if you hadn’t taken your friend’s advice and made that initial appointment, how different your life would be? If you hadn’t met that particular doctor, you might have never found your way to that support group?”

“Yeah, but it’s even freakier than that. This is actually my favorite part of the story.

My doctor wasn’t actually the first person I saw. It was really chance that I even found her.

I originally went to see some pill pusher that I got referred to by my primary doctor because my primary doctor said she didn’t feel comfortable treating me for mental health. But the doctor she referred me to didn’t do mental health either. And the experience with him was such a disaster I almost didn’t see anyone else.

I remember telling myself I was done going the doctor route.”

“What changed your mind?”

“I got worse.”

“And how did you end up picking the right doctor, the one that ended up introducing you to the group?”

“Yelp reviews.”

“No!”

“No, I’m just kidding. A relative of mine who I really trust had gone to undergrad with her and they had kept in touch over the years, and she said she was really solid. So I gave it another shot. It’s probably the only reason I agreed to see her.”

“Lucky for you, you did.”

“Yeah, well, things were getting so bad I figured I would at least give it one more chance.”

“And now, almost four years later, here you are.”

(laughing) “Yeah, wherever that is, right?”

“Hmm.”

The Group

“If everyone would take their seats, please.

Great. Now, before we begin, let me just say that this is a place of trust. What is spoken here will be respected for the trust it offers, and all words shared in this space are a matter of mutual confidence.

Ok, let me see... Who hasn't gone first in a while?
Hmm.

Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?”

“Sure.”

“Great, go ahead.”...

My best friend - - February 28, 2017

*This phone is a trip. It looks like the one Great Aunt Odessa had.
Sounds like how phones used to sound, on the old rotary lines.*

I guess that makes sense.

“So, wait, he wasn’t even a therapist?”

“Nope.”

“What kind of doctor was he?”

“I don’t even know. I was so pissed I just got up and left.”

“He had to have been a specialist for you to get referred to him.”

“I don’t know what he was. I just know he wasn’t a therapist.”

“And you thought you were getting an hour. But it was like a regular doctor’s visit.”

“Yuuup.”

“Holy hell, that’s awesome.”

“I felt so fucking stupid. I went in there thinking I was going to work through some stuff. And this dude’s literally looking at his watch waiting for an opening to duck out.”

“And you thought he was just being rude.”

“I thought he was being an asshole.”

“Wait. Hold on. Was it like a regular doctor’s office? Like in a clinic?”

“Yep. One of those small little examination rooms.”

“And you didn’t catch on?”

“That’s what makes it even more embarrassing. I go in, and I’m thinking this isn’t what I expected a therapist’s office to look like. Because

there's like literally those anatomy posters on the wall, and stuff about washing your hands and shit.

But because I haven't been to a therapist before, I don't really know what to compare it to. And then I start thinking that I watch too many movies, and that why wouldn't it be a regular doctor's office? And then I start thinking that maybe I'm judging the room and being like too snobbish or something, like therapy deserves more than this or something, and I literally start feeling guilty."

"Oh my God."

"I swear to you. All this shit is going through my mind as I'm waiting for the doctor to come in."

"It's like a demonstration of how much you really do need therapy."

"Exactly."

"So, wait, did you get led back there by a nurse?"

"Oh yeah. She took my blood pressure and everything."

"Oh my God. How did you not know what was going on?"

The only thing that could have been better is if she would have given you a gown to wear."

"I would have left."

"No you wouldn't have. You would have sat there in a gown and started telling your life story.

Wait, when you were in there waiting, are you sitting on the edge of that little bed with the paper sheet?

Did the doctor knock before he came in?"

"Of course I am. And of course he did."

"Oh my God, this is the greatest thing that's ever happened to me."

"Hearing this story."

"Yes."

"You are easily the worst asshole I've ever been friends with."

“Shut up and tell me what he said.”

“He didn’t say much. He just told me he had other patients to see and then tried to write me a bunch of prescriptions.”

“What did you say?”

“I asked him how the prescriptions were supposed to help with what I had just told him. And he says that it’s probably not, but that we’ll see if it helps with the effects of those feelings.”

“He said, ‘We’ll see?’”

“Yep. He said, ‘We’ll see.’”

“What was he trying to give you?”

“I don’t even know. By that time I was so embarrassed and mad and feeling like an idiot that I wasn’t even paying attention.”

“You should have gotten them anyway; you could have sold them.”

“Now, that’s the advice I need right now.”

“You could have given them to me, and I would have sold them for us.”

“I appreciate you not thinking only of yourself.”

“Youuuu know it.

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But, for real, you like this new doctor?”

“Yeah, she seems cool.”

“No drugs?”

“No drugs. She doesn’t even do coffee. The best I can get is green tea in her office.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all this?”

“To be honest, after everything went down with the asshole doctor, I was confused and embarrassed and kind of disgusted. And, plus, I didn’t want you to be disappointed in me for not trying harder to make it work.”

“You should have told me. I wouldn’t have judged.”

“I know. I just felt fucked up about it.”

“Well, I’m glad you found somebody you feel comfortable with. I really hope they can help you get through this stuff.”

“Yeah, me too.”

The Group

...“All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to let these things out. I appreciate everyone maintaining their quiet, attention, and respect throughout.

Now that we’ve gotten the ball rolling, is there anyone who would like to volunteer to go next?”

“I will.”

“Great, go ahead.”

Interlude

(confessions)

White Dog

It could happen any time. Though more often than not, it was in the middle of Biology. I'd be sitting there working on the in-class assignment, and out of nowhere...

“You spaghetti eating, pizza slinging, garlic breath, Luciano Pavarotti, dago, guinea, wop, non-singing motherfucker.”

Then I would turn around and look the kid who said it dead in the eyes, and...

“You gold teeth having, gold chain wearing, fried chicken eating, three-hundred-sixty-degree basketball dunking...”

By that point one of us, if not both, had broke. It didn't matter how many times we did it. It didn't matter that we could never get the quotes totally right. It was funny every time.

Funnier still because, from that point on, they would never miss an opportunity to talk about how I was Italian.

Of course, I wasn't Italian. In fact, like so many white Southerners whose families had long since traded in whatever story they had for the opportunity to call themselves white, I had no idea what I was.

Either way, it didn't matter. The white guys in *Do The Right Thing* were Italian, so I was Italian.

A few years ago, I rewatched *Do The Right Thing*. It saddened me that, almost 30 years on, it seemed just as relevant, if not more. Yet what stood out the most was how much I didn't remember. How much I didn't get.

I realized how much more my friends had gotten out of that movie.

It's telling how people can watch the same scenes and have different takeaways, depending upon context. It's sad how little interest I, like most white people back then, had in context.

Of all the contributing factors, my lack of curiosity in context, including the context of our special time together, is what ultimately led me to betray the community of kids who I owe so much of what was good in my young life.

For us, it was a joke. The back and forth. You call me something; I call you something. We're both stereotyping, we're both being unfair, we're both in on it.

Of course, that scene wasn't a joke. There was real commentary behind it. There was heavy commentary behind it.

Unfortunately, I didn't get that commentary. Though I had watched the movie, I hadn't paid attention to it. I hadn't paid attention to

the nuances. Just like with race, just like with my classmates, my investment was too on the surface.

I thought us both joking about it like that meant it was even, the same way I thought that racism was racial prejudice, therefore this kind of back and forth was equal. It was just a game we were playing, and fair was fair.

And though it may have been a game, the rules were not the same. Because it wasn't even, and it all wasn't equal. And racism was not just racial prejudice. And fair wasn't always fair.

I didn't understand when the joke extended beyond Biology class, beyond the scene from *Do The Right Thing*, that I was being given a gift. A gift given not because I was funny or wild, but because I had become something special in their lives too. And because they thought I could handle it.

Then one day, after another two years of trading jabs with my friends, I heard my name and turned around.

“That’s what Lonnie is. A white dog. You’re a white dog.”

It was Janeese and Tika.

I think they had found out there was a Led Zeppelin song called “Black Dog” and thought it would be funny to call someone white a white dog.

And it was funny. To us kids at least. We all laughed and had a good time with it.

That is, until I showed how little I actually comprehended the game we’d been playing the previous two years.

They must have been calling me “white dog” for three or so weeks. And because I knew it was a joke, it never once bothered me or hurt me.

I would come back with something silly every now and then. Sometimes, I would just say something like, “Now how you gonna do me like that?”

And because it was playful and we were silly, we would all laugh. And like most things, it was all ok. Until it wasn't.

I often wonder. Had Janeese not been the one to say it that day, would that insult have never entered my mind, no matter how many times she might have called me “white dog” after that? I think about how timing and circumstance can change everything, can mean the difference between saying something stupid and benign and saying something that can't simply be pulled back or excused away or even apologized for. How if it had been Tika instead of Janeese that day, would I have come up with a different comeback? Just like all the other comebacks, something stupid or benign.

But that day, and that moment, an image popped into my head.

I think it was because she was a bigger girl. And though I had assured myself I was above being racist, or sexist, my mind was filled with a great deal more than the stereotypes we used for banter.

I remember, for some reason, we were in the auditorium. And she referred to me as “white dog” again. And then she said it again. And then again. Not unlike she had done in the last three or so weeks.

But then I said something I hadn’t said those other days.

I said, “Ok, Mammie.”

And just like that, the smiles were gone.

Janeese didn’t say anything. She just looked down, stunned. Like I had just shot her.

Before I could process the looks on their faces, Tika said, “That’s not ok, Lonnie. That is not ok. That’s hurtful. What you just said is not ok.”

And instead of just listening to my friends, I got defensive.

“What? What? Come on. What? You’ve been calling me ‘white dog’. Why can’t I call you ‘Mammie?’”

“That’s not the same. What you just said was wrong. What you said was hurtful.”

“But you’ve been calling me ‘white dog,’ and I haven’t taken any offense at that.”

“It’s not the same, Lonnie. And you should know better than that.”

And she was right. I should have known better than that. But I didn’t care enough to. At least not then.

As much as I loved those kids, as much as I believed I loved them, I still couldn’t bring myself to ask the most basic questions.

Their banter with me wasn’t admitting that all things were equal. It was them trying to let me in. And give me a chance.

And I repaid their love with an image that erased all the years and the progress that went into making such a gamble seem worth taking.

I had mistaken the generosity of my friends’ acceptance as some sort of license or password into a club. I thought, because I had gone through that scene from *Do The Right Thing* countless times with my other friends, this was the same. I thought I had been let in on the joke. And now I could add whatever I wanted onto that joke.

But it wasn’t a joke. It was their friendship with me and the foundation of clemency it was predicated upon. And I sullied that. With carelessness and arrogance and racism.

I had no idea the complexities black children were juggling. I couldn’t see the extra world black girls and black women were holding together.

Outside of school, I rarely hung out with black girls. Meaning I never got to know so many of my friends the way I should have. And

because the girls in our neighborhood were fair game for any kind of back and forth, I thought it was all fair game here too.

Except the girls in our neighborhood weren't fair game. And my sexism was just as hidden in plain sight as my racism.

I pleaded the same case for another minute or so, and then said, "Ok, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like all that. I'm sorry."

I remember, at the same time that I felt genuinely bad because I could see how much I had hurt her, I also resented the fact that I was being made to feel bad for something I didn't know, or at least claimed not to know. I remember expecting her to let me off the hook, right then, as she was still processing what had happened, and just make things go back to normal.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. It wasn't just that I could be sorry and she was supposed to move on like nothing had happened.

Something had happened.

Janeese was one of the sweetest girls I went to high school with. And I had just spit in her face. Her face and the faces of all black women, all black people. And then I had the audacity to tell her it wasn't all that big a deal.

I did that. And there was no normal to go back to. Because our normals had never been the same. That one word had put this disparity on full display. And all I wanted was to go back to a few seconds before when I didn't have to think about that.

I still feel so bad about it. But I know now that I'll never fully understand the pain I caused in that moment.

One word. A few seconds of our lives. That's how quick it can happen. That's how important the context is. That's how uninterested I was.

I took what could have been a playful memory to revisit at our 20 year reunion and turned it into a reminder that, for however much white people tell you they've grown or they get it or they're your friend, the surface you dance upon with them is thin.

And if you would have told me that back then, I would have argued with you the way I initially argued with her.

But the truth was and is, for all the years I spent at that school, the years I was blessed to be in the presence of so much strong and proud and beautiful dopeness, I never understood what the game really was. And I most certainly never understood what was at stake.

Domestic Violence, Among Friends

Even years after feeling awful for those years, I considered bullying to be between a guy and a guy, or a girl and a girl.

Maybe it's because I saw bullying in terms of fighting or public violence. As if the indignities being visited upon the young women we considered to be our friends didn't constitute violence. Like they weren't constantly forced to defend themselves, like they weren't always fighting against something, that something coming from us, that something being us.

I know of very few girls I came up with who didn't have to swat away or decide the best way to remove some guy's hand from her ass or her tits on a near daily basis. Who didn't get called a bitch or a freak or worse for whatever disagreement she dared to have. Who didn't roll her eyes and shake her head when one of these followed the other, and then started all over again.

I know it's not noteworthy or unique to feel bad about it. In fact, I've had a couple of guys from the neighborhood over the years tell me they've come across one or two of them and apologized.

They know like I do, it's easy to apologize years later. When there's nothing to lose. When you're the one now, who needs relief from the memory of who you used to be, who you were in her life. Who you should have been, but couldn't bring yourself to be.

That's what the apology is for, isn't it? Not just that she deserved more from you, better from you. It's about why you didn't stand up in that moment, when she needed someone to stand up, and no one stood up.

Maybe if you say you're sorry now, she won't still remember you like that. Maybe if you bring it up before she does, it'll be like you're standing up now. Maybe if you give that little nod, all will be forgiven. Both of you lucky to have crossed paths. Both better off than before. Nice and smooth. Erased from the slate. No need to revisit. No harm, no foul.

As if it can really, be ok. To you or to her.

There were lots of hers. Each one administered the degree of torture she could stand and still allow us to be around.

For some, it was their looks or lack of. Some, it was their hot body or lack of. For some, it was their smarts or their style or their means or lack of. Some, it was their sexual activity. Some, their lack of.

Often it was a combination of these things. But even if it was just one, it was enough. And if there wasn't anything, we could always make something up.

What should have been the little quirks that made us each fit together so perfect, and what would indeed become points of nostalgia for those who wished to reminisce, was stretched into a weakness. That's where the effort went. Because once you had something on her, unless she was willing to stay inside and be alone, you might as well own her. Or at least a share of her.

Depending upon the weakness, it could go either way. Some wounds were pressed on constantly, like a form of conditioning or discipline. Others were simply threatened to be pressed on, established as a deterrent. And while pain was part of either lesson, it wasn't hurt for the sake of hurt. Though, it cannot be understated. They did hurt. It's just that that concern was theirs, not ours. Our concern was in the function of that hurt. For once a wound was manufactured, its primary benefit was that of control. It was to let them know not to resist or to leave. It was to keep them in their place.

In short, it was domestic violence, among friends.

Like everything else that I can't pull back from those flames, I mitigated my conscience at the time by telling myself that I was by far the worst. Yet, by that, I really just mean that more times than not I refrained from joining in. And the occasions when I did, I would make sure to say what was most acceptable, rather than what was least acceptable. But acceptable to whom? To the guys I hung out with who were only trying to impress each other? Or the girls who often went along because it just didn't seem worth it to risk more.

I guess I mean that I was careful not to be too harsh. Not because I was principled enough to be setting any real moral boundaries. I was just more polite.

Which means that, even when I felt bad, it was more about the severity of their treatment than the essence of the treatment. Because, when it came down to it, we all took shots at each other. Everyone got fucked with in some way. It was all just a part of hanging out. Or some other excuse we would use to deny that there was something special at play when we were afflicting *them*.

It almost hurts me more than anything else to think that, at the time, they saw me as nicer. You know, for not piling on. For not making it worse. For not adding to the momentum.

It hurts me even more that I took that recognition. I took credit. For not saying the thing that had been said. For not taking my turn in saying another thing. For my decency, to just laugh and that be it.

Because I had to laugh, right? I had to go along in some way, if I was going to hang out.

Anything less than a laugh, or at least a smile, would have been seen as silence. A disapproval. Not just of what had been said, but of what

was really going on. You couldn't just stop the music while everyone was dancing. Because then you would have seen, not everyone was dancing.

But I couldn't even muster that least possible disapproval. I had to laugh. I had to smile.

Then I acted as if it was silence. Told myself it was resistance. That's how cowardly and morally shallow I was.

For me to have viewed my so-called silence as an achievement is not just a commentary on the pervasiveness of misogyny and the logic it provided my peers and their pressure, but it illuminates just how truly horrid these girls were treated, by all their so-called friends, myself included.

It's why I use the words we and our when describing that treatment. Because even if all I was doing was just being there, just hanging out, it was just as much mine.

The bully can't do it by himself. He needs those flunkies next to him. Knowing which side is the easiest to be on.

That's why when you apologize to that old friend for not doing more back in the day, you're not really apologizing to her for the insults themselves, the sickness she had to endure. You're apologizing for not being a real friend.

A real friend would have seen what was going on and risked their standing with the other guys to stop it.

And I don't mean just the public insults either. I mean the private displays as well. Because the private stuff was so much worse. When girls weren't around to hear it, when you didn't have to look them in the eye to say it. Those were the times when you could say just about anything.

Riding around in a car at night or hanging out after school in someone's basement, you could say whatever you wanted. You could say what you saw her as, what you had done to her, what you were going to do to her. And with her not there, there were no consequences. And by that, I mean that you knew none of the other guys in the room were made of anything either. If they were, they would have called you on it. Challenged you on it. But instead, they all laughed and went along, adding their own jokes and decorations.

And though I may not have gone as far as some, I went a few places. And if it ever got bad enough with one of the other guys that I did object, it rarely went further than a laugh and me saying something like, "You're definitely going to hell for that one."

That's why, when that apology comes, it has to include more than what happened when we were all hanging out with them. It has to also encompass all the things that were said when they weren't around.

Taking up for her while she was there, you could have at least looked like you were standing up against bullying. Taking up for her when she wasn't around would have looked like you were standing up for her

equality, her humanity, her being more than just an object for target practice.

I didn't do either. And everyone like me who took credit for simply not joining in contributed just as much as the worst of us to the multi-year gauntlet those young women had to travel through. And we contributed to a lot more.

I could tell you a hundred different stories about the ill treatment of the girls in our group, each one more unacceptable than the last. And all in the light of day. But I don't imagine any of them would come close to the stories they would have told. The ones from their perspective. And, even more, the ones the crew didn't know about.

Because while we were too busy hiding behind or paving over our own insecurities, we didn't stop to think that maybe it wasn't just our shit they were having to live through.

And though we may have not been responsible for those particular stories, there's a reason why each generation has them.

That's how rape and sexual assault and domestic violence are passed down. Not through teachings, but definitely through lessons. The things that are not taught.

The things we didn't hear the men in our lives talk much about. And the things we didn't seem to find ourselves talking about either. Not because they were expressly off limits. But more because that kind of talk wouldn't have really fit the slut you had at one time or another made her out to be.

It may not be a violence that you invite or wish upon her. But you do make room for it, just enough room. By not talking about certain things. By not acknowledging certain things. By not acknowledging her.

And it's easy to say there was so much more at play, so much else to blame our behavior on. Too much else to take it all yourself.

And, in a roundabout way, that's true. It's not one reason. It's many.

But one reason for sure was that guys like me and my friends are good enough to say we're sorry a decade or so later, but not good enough to draw that line when it was our generation, and our friends.

I'm not saying those girls couldn't take up for themselves. They did, every day. But they needed backup. They needed someone that wasn't them. They needed the friendship we pretended that we offered. They needed solidarity.

Of course, another reason we didn't step up was partly for the same reason they allowed us to keep coming around. Risking being ostracized just didn't seem like a real option. Not then, at that time in your

life. Especially when our group didn't really seem all that much different than other groups of kids we knew, and because we knew other groups of kids who were playing with far worse weapons than ours.

And the reality is that we may have not been the best ones, but we were friends. In that, we were what we had. Or maybe just what we knew.

In any case, we did have a lot of good times, and we shared a lot of laughs. And despite all the pain that was normalized in between, we did make a lot of good memories.

It's just a shame so much can get normalized. Or, even more, how it gets normalized. Because it's not the guys at the center, sneering and spitting forth the daggers, that make it seem ok, like it's just a part of life. It's guys like me, on the periphery, telling ourselves we're not actively involved.

Telling ourselves those girls are tough; they can take it. That the wounds probably won't be that bad.

Horace O

I see these online trolls now, young men flirting with white supremacy. And I don't understand them. I don't understand them because I've never flirted with white supremacy.

That is not to say that white supremacy hasn't flirted with me. That's how it works, most of the time.

It's the reason I don't understand the current trolls. Racism, and racist acts, for most, are not a conscious thing. They're something that just seems to make sense at the time. Nudged along by almost every institution and sphere of influence, these acts are the outgrowth of a mind not used to critical thinking and/or not empathetic enough yet to ask certain types of questions.

If you would have asked me then, I would have told you I abhorred white supremacy. And I did.

But that doesn't stop the courting.

Any guy who's ever been a piece of shit knows what it's like to work on a girl's insecurity to try to get her to fuck.

The difference is that when white supremacy works on you, it's not just you that's going to get hurt.

It gets more embarrassing every time I have to say "again." But again, it started off with, "Wouldn't it be funny?"

"Wouldn't it be funny if we made a bunch of shirts that said, 'Horace O' on them? You know, like the Malcolm X shirts, but this would be the word Horace through a giant O."

I like to think if I would have said it to any of my other friends, it would have probably got a couple laughs and ended there. Unfortunately, the friend I was hanging out with the day that stupid thought popped into my head was just clever enough to make it make sense.

"Yeah, and at the bottom, you could put, 'Bake any beans necessary.'"

As soon as he said it, I thought it was perfect. Perfect because it *didn't* make sense. That was the beauty of it. That was the point.

There had already been lots of black consciousness and shouting out to Africa in the fashion of the late 80s, early 90s. Some due to the impact of Public Enemy, as well as the music video they did for Do The Right Thing in '89.

For the most part, I didn't think much about it. I remember even having a shirt one time with Bart Simpson on it sporting a high top fade and red, black, and green garb. Take from that what you will.

Anyway, in 1992, after the Malcolm X movie came out, kids started wearing the X. Especially the hats. A solid black hat with a big white X on it.

I don't know if it was marketing or promo ahead of the movie or if it caught on after, but it seemed like overnight every other kid walking down the hallway was rocking a giant X on either their hat or their shirt. And if it wasn't just an X by itself, the words underneath that X read "By any means necessary." A message loud and clear. One you didn't have to have seen the movie or read Alex Haley's book to comprehend.

The movie hit theaters in November of '92.

Tension was still smoldering between white and black folks over the LA riots earlier that year... Excuse me, tension had been smoldering over the Rodney King beating the year before, and the subsequent acquittal of the police officers caught on tape brutalizing King had ignited that tension into an uprising.

I remember we had just gotten TVs in all the classrooms not too long before that so we could watch some corporate sponsored educational current events programming in the mornings. Meaning, every morning, for over a week, we watched the images coming out of LA. Images that seemed to make *Do The Right Thing*, a film that had been released three years prior, look almost prophetic.

And can I say, just on a side note: It's not coincidental that both *Do The Right Thing* and *Malcolm X* were "Spike Lee Joint"s. Those movies, like so many others of his, seemed to go beyond just the documentation of historical and cultural moments. Lee's films allow you to feel the temperature on a particular day, to hear what's playing on the radio, to see the looks on everyone's faces, to smell what's hanging in the air, to taste the air itself.

In fact, I would suggest Spike Lee had a sense not just for documenting these kinds of moments, but guiding them. And although he'll be remembered as one the greatest filmmakers of his generation, in my eyes, he'll never get enough credit for knowing what his audience needed.

I needed it, just like my friends rocking the X on their hats and shirts needed it.

I was just too oblivious to know... Excuse me, just too indifferent to care.

And because of that, I betrayed Spike Lee, and the art he gifted me, as well.

At any rate, during that week of extra special tension, a rumor started that there was going to be a riot at our school. Of course, it was

nonsense. But rumors don't have to make sense. They only have to put you on edge.

By 4th Period, we started questioning whether it was actually a possibility. If so, everyone knew what kind of fear it would put into the white kids. I had seen the clip of Reginald Denny getting hit in the head with that brick more times than I had seen the Rodney King tape. And the moment those questions starting turning into "what if's, I started spouting off some fake macho, but all too racist, disclaimer about "if anyone comes through that door for me, I can't be held responsible for the words that might come out of my mouth" or something stupid like that.

What I didn't know about the Reginald Denny case, what they wouldn't show white people a hundred times in a day, was how Bobby Green Jr., a local black resident and fellow truck driver, made his way over to Denny and ended up driving him to the hospital.

I can still remember my friends softly responding to my ignorant, unfounded bluster.

"Don't worry, Lonnie. We won't let anything happen to you."

So tender and protective. It still makes me choke up when I think about it.

It was the loudest thing I heard all day. Nothing happened. And when it didn't, their words remained. And so did mine. One sentiment so big. The other only big enough to show the contrast.

It's only fitting that the words they offered to comfort me also served as a mirror. Because as soon as they said them, I saw myself. I saw how reckless I was with their own worries. I saw what was always in the back of my mind.

I was so small back then. I had no idea how much I needed them in my life.

And, later that year, when they found themselves embracing a symbol of resistance, it's like I had forgotten all about that moment, that example of solidarity, that demonstration of humanity.

I told myself that a lot of the students were just posing. Hell, half these kids were doing good to memorize enough trivia to pass their daily history quizzes. I didn't believe they knew anything about that history. And I sure as hell didn't believe they had read Alex Haley's whole *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Yet the truth was that *I* hadn't read Alex Haley, and I didn't know anything about that history.

My suspicion of their lack of knowledge was a projection, born of jealousy and insecurity and my own lack of curiosity. I resented them for what I believed they couldn't know, rather than myself for what I didn't see. I focused on what I thought were the academic shortcomings of others when I should have been focused on my own personal ones.

I didn't care enough about my fellow students to understand why they might feel such pride wearing that X, what that X actually meant to them. I never asked them. I only assumed.

I know now those assumptions were anchored in fear. Racism tells you that what it's done, and what you've been, has never been anything more than a natural order. And when you see even the tiniest bit of power exerted from the souls of racism's prey, it scares you. For you can only imagine what's in store for you if this unfamiliar power were to get out of hand.

Of course, I didn't interrogate why I felt threatened. I just acted out. Like a small child not getting their way, I might as well have been sticking my tongue out, yelling, "Na na nuh boo boo."

All over a short-lived fashion trend... Excuse me, all over the retelling of a story, one of defiance and growth and clarity of justice. All over the invocation of a hero and historical figure I had almost no understanding of beyond those terrifying four words.

"By any means necessary."

Years later, when I finally read Malcolm's other words, I saw the gift I had missed and the friends I had dismissed. So arrogantly, so casually.

"Don't worry, Lonnie. We won't let anything happen to you."

If only I had kept that gentle example of love in my heart. I might have had a different reaction. I might have resisted those feelings of resentment. I might have invested more into my own learning. I might have instead felt joy when I saw them shining with pride. I might have, even if somewhat misplaced, been able to experience a kind of vicarious pride. Or at the very least a pride, even if somewhat misplaced, in my solidarity.

I don't know. Maybe that would have been the moment I started to put it all together. Years before I actually did.

Maybe.

All I know is that if I would have just paid a little more attention to the lessons my friends were teaching me rather than judging them for the ones I thought they were struggling with, I wouldn't have questioned their sincerity. And I sure as hell wouldn't have gotten those idiotic shirts made.

Horace O. Bake any beans necessary.

I originally thought it not making sense was subversive. Nobody would know what it meant. Thus my commentary on everyone wearing the Xs.

If that were not morally and intellectually weak enough, the fact that it didn't really make any sense beyond the irony I ascribed to it also served to provide a certain level of deniability. An out if anyone pushed you on what it meant.

I know this because I actually took that out one time. My first semester in college, I wore it to the computer lab. And if memory serves me correctly, it may have been the first time I ever wore that shirt in public after high school. Anyway, a black kid checking out from the lab noticed the shirt and asked me what it meant. I told him it was just a surf shirt. He contemplated my answer for a second and then let it go. It reminded me of the times I had been let go before, the leniency shown over and over for someone white who didn't really deserve such leniency.

Maybe that kid felt he didn't have to push it. That it was enough that I had to make up something so not to have to explain what the shirt really meant. So not to take a stand.

It was strange. I didn't know that kid. I never even saw him again. But I think about him every now and then, and how I owe him calling me out and showing me how quickly my own embrace of resistance fell apart under even the slightest scrutiny. With one simple non-confrontational question, he showed me how wrong I was. How wrong all of it was. How feeble my reasoning had been. And how much of a coward I had been.

That interaction is why I never wore that shirt again. And it's why I should probably clarify my earlier statement.

When I say I don't understand these internet trolls nowadays, that's not entirely true. Because I realize now that having those shirts made up was itself a form of trolling. For at the heart of the troll is the cowardice. The deniability. To say it's just a joke. To make the statement for as long as you feel you can get away with it. To then abandon all responsibility for the message you were most definitely trying to send.

I remember, even while I was selling them, feeling uneasy about it. By the time word got out and people started asking me for them, I started to wonder if I had made a mistake. Of course, at that point, I could just tell myself that it was really all just a way to make money, to make money off a joke. Something that didn't really mean anything anyway. As if that would have made it ok.

But that deniability began to fall apart when I couldn't deny why people were buying them. In fact, some of the guys that wanted to buy the shirts, I knew, were stone cold racists. Overt ones. Maybe not skinheads, but the kind of assholes I tried to stay away from.

I remember their laughs when they saw them. I remember the looks on their faces as they were putting them on. If I could deny what I was doing before, I couldn't deny it once they were wearing it.

But by that time, it was too late. I had committed to the joke. And though what little money they gave me is long since gone, until this day I can't get their laughs or their looks out of my mind.

I sometimes wonder if any of them still have that shirt, somewhere in a closet or storage. I wonder if they've learned anything since then. I wonder if I've learned as much as I think.

But more than that, I wonder how many of my friends who were rocking the X shirts, or were at least invigorated by that moment of early 90s defiance, knew about my shirts. If I can remember it right, I think some of them did and some of them didn't.

For those who did, I wonder why they didn't say anything. I wonder if they figured I was just being stupid and gave me a pass. I wonder if they thought I was showing my ass and was letting me do just that. I wonder if that was all they needed to know about me, and they just put up with me until graduation.

For those who didn't know, I wonder what they would think if they found out now. Would it change their mind about me? Would it matter that I've changed? Would it still hurt them?

Would any of them, those who know or those who didn't, still believe me if I told them that I loved them so much for what they offered my life. And that it was their gentle examples of love, their leniency, their acceptance that gave me the reason to begin asking the right questions. And that I so justly and severely twinge whenever I think of how I betrayed all of that. And that all I want now is to somehow make it right.

I hope they would believe me when I told them that.
The love they showed me was enough. I just wasn't enough.

Camel Crickets

It was kind of like someone else bringing up a dream you didn't remember you'd had. Except it wasn't a dream. I only remember it like a dream. In that, I can only remember pieces.

Not because it was worse than other memories or things I had done, but quite the opposite. It was, at the time, simply forgettable. And all the reasons why it seemed so inconsequential, at the time, are each and every one nothing less than obscene.

I don't know how many days, but it was a few days later. Maybe even a week or a week and a half. Who knows, maybe it was only a couple days.

I just remember her looking at me all crazy. Half smirking, slightly nodding her head, like she had something on me.

“What?”

“You know what.”

“No, I don't know. What?”

“Oh, I think you do know.”

“No I don't. What are you talking about?”

“I don't think you want me to say.”

“Say about what?”

By that time, everyone else had started to pay attention to us.

“Do you really want me to say?”

“Come over here and tell me.”

She came over and whispered in my ear, “You know. What happened over at Jimmy's.”

Even when she said that, I still hadn't put it together. But from the tone in her voice and everyone starting to look curious, I thought a little harder.

And then it hit me.

I don't even know if you could call it a real basement. It was really just a small, concrete block room under the house. The only door or steps were from the outside.

The thing I remember most, aside from all the dust and it being kind of humid down there, was the camel crickets. For a good part of the year, it was jumping with what seemed like a plague of these massive humpback beasts.

They didn't make noise, and they didn't bother you more than hopping on and off of you. But they were huge. And there were hundreds of them. All over the place.

Now I see what a perfect metaphor they make. These silent crickets. Giant, taking up so much space. They would, to the average outsider, have commanded all the room's attention. But to us, they were just something that we kind of got used to. After a while, we didn't even pay them any attention.

Me and Jimmy used to work out in that room. I think that's one of the reasons he wanted her to come down there. He wanted to fuck her on the weight bench. Plus, she could run out and hop the fence if his folks came home sooner than they were supposed to. I think we were only about 14 or 15 at the time.

I remember being outside, bored, waiting. They were down there a long time. I think that's what makes so much of it seem like a dream. The waiting. Walking around outside in the dark, doing nothing. Walking around in literal circles. Trying to pass the time. Getting tired. Waiting for them to be done and come out. It seemed like forever.

When the door finally opened, it was just him. He came up alone. I figured she was just getting her clothes back on.

I think I said something like, "Hey, man. Y'all want to hang out now?"

And like it was nothing, he just said, "Go down there and get your dick sucked."

"Come on, dude."

"Nah, man. She said it was ok. I asked her."

"Whatever, dude."

"Nah, man. I'm for real. Just go down there."

I remember still not believing him. For a little bit. But then she didn't come back up, even after he went inside the house. I think it was to change his shirt.

I waited again, for what seemed like forever. Contemplating.

I hadn't ever tried anything with her. We didn't ever even really make jokes like that.

I used to give myself credit for not calling her a slut. Not that anyone would deserve credit for something like that. It was just that I was one of the only guys who didn't call her that. For the same reason, I used to give myself credit for not trying to use her.

And yet there I was. Thinking about it. I could feel myself getting hard.

She was still down there. With the light out.

At some point, I figured he must have been telling the truth.

As if it mattered if he was telling the truth.

If I had or hadn't gone down those steps, just the fact that I had considered it real, from his words, is enough to feel the way I feel.

The fact that I did go down those steps only compounds how wrong it was.

Everything was wrong about it.

And yet I can't remember it with the same detail I normally remember the things I confess.

I know that it was pitch dark down there, and I could barely see her.

If I'm right, I think I had unzipped my pants before I walked down, but with my shirt over so she couldn't really see. I think that's right.

I think that's right because it's what I remembered when she whispered in my ear, "what happened over at Jimmy's." I remember thinking, because I hadn't technically exposed myself to her, or at least I don't think I did, that I had already acquitted myself from that charge.

It's why I think I was so confused at her bringing it up. I believe my thinking was, if she hadn't technically seen it, I hadn't done anything technically wrong. And just saying it like that now, makes me ill at who I was back then.

And even still, it's worse than that. Because, even if I am right about that part of it, it's not that I had my shirt covering myself because I was thinking of her. It would have been because I wouldn't have wanted her to see that I wasn't as big as Jimmy if she wasn't really going to do it.

I may not be able to fully remember if I didn't expose myself to her. But I know for sure what the reason was if I didn't.

Even now, as I'm going through it in my mind, there's still a part of me contributing to the wrong of that night. Wanting to believe I'm at least

remembering that one part right. Again, not primarily for her. But to just believe there was one less sin, committed to.

And even though it was for just a second, the fact that I thought that now. Not just then, but now. Right now. Even if it was just for a second, shows me why I'm right to still feel as bad about it as I do.

And still, I can't be sure. I just don't remember enough to know.

But what I can't remember the most is what she said. Or even what I said.

I don't remember one word of it.

I remember it being slightly embarrassing. But quick. Like a few seconds quick. So quick that, in my mind, it was over with the moment I realized it wasn't going to happen. Like a transaction that never took place.

I'm sure I said, "I'm sorry." But that would have been to save face.

The fact that I don't remember our exchange in that moment shows how little I thought I had to be sorry about.

I just remembered nothing happened. That it was all a misunderstanding, even if an embarrassing one.

And though I'm trying to now, I know that I will never fully understand how much *bad* happened, in that nothing.

It's why she was making such a big deal out of it, days after it had already left my mind. It's why she seemed shocked with me. I imagine she was thinking a lot of the things I can recall about it now, but so much clearer than I saw it then.

Like me somehow thinking it was ok, just because he told me. As if something like that, something that had never even been hinted between us, shouldn't have been at least a conversation, between us. Me coming in the room the way I did. Me just expecting whatever it is I expected. Me not remembering enough to even be sheepish the next time I saw her. And probably a whole lot more that I'm still not far enough along to grasp.

I remember thinking she was cool enough to not have busted me in front of everyone. Maybe she just wanted to make me squirm a little. And when I realized that maybe I was missing something, and that that something was not something I wanted everybody else to know, she did just that.

She made me squirm. For how long didn't matter. It was enough to put me in my place. My place with the rest of them.

But like I said, she didn't bust me. And I was grateful for that. I think I said something like, "Let's talk about it later." But then we never did.

I remember us being cool after that and her never bringing it up again. I remember thinking that it confirmed why I had such a hard time

recalling things. That it must have not really been that big a deal. Rather than the more plausible explanation. That it was just one more grievance she saw no point in pushing. Not because it wasn't legitimate, but because I had confirmed that I wasn't any better than the other pieces of shit we hung around.

In fact, I was worse. Because the real reason why she was tripping on it was that she knew that I knew better, and that I was supposed to be better.

But I wasn't better.

Everyone only thought I was.

Salutatorian

I went to “a black high school,” at least that’s what the white people referred to it as. The figure that always seemed to float around was 80 or 85 percent. From my memory of walking the halls, that sounds about right.

It was bizarre, sort of funny sort of gross, to watch other white people bow down or show you special deference when they heard you went to Oakwood. Like it made you tough or possessing of some kind of special grit that allowed you to make it through.

We were a poor school, so there wasn’t a real drug problem. We had our share of violence, but it was rarely over race. In fact, there was far less animosity between white and black students than in schools where the ratio was more even. It was, in a way, to white kids’ advantage to be outnumbered. It made it easy not to push it if something went down. There was no question who would win.

Sure, I was given the tour. The politics of prejudice, being bullied because I was white, even of tokenization. But only now do I see all the privilege that was also included in that tour, far more than any of the treatment I perceived to be discrimination.

And as for the legitimate grievances, I don’t attribute those to the school, or at least not to the students. For whatever troubling memories I had, they only serve to show how many more were magical.

I don’t think of it like white people who were or would be too scared to attend a black high school. When I think of Oakwood, I think of the world I was invited into. I think of my algebra class freshman year, sitting in the middle of older, cooler kids, sophomores, taking me in. Amused at my jokes. Amused at how eager I was to talk about the new video that had come out the day before on Rap City. I think of being let in on inside jokes and everyone laughing at Dr. AJ’s jokes. I think of our ragtag Science Olympiad team, which was basically just anyone enrolled in Ms. Jakowski’s physics class, beating the pants off the rich, white schools in our district. I think of clowning before the teacher walked in. I think of drumming on desks. I think of listening in on my friends talk about black church services and black funerals and black family reunions. I think of White LL’s swagger walking down the second floor Main Building hallway with a played out tracksuit and a fake gold rope. I think of Thomas Earle giving dap, saying your name forwards and backwards. I think of being included in who was asked over to watch Def Comedy Jam at June’s house on Friday night. I think of making a fool of myself Friday night, as I couldn’t pull off the new dance move everybody else was learning on the spot. I think of breakfast with everyone at Shoney’s. I think of the bowling

alley. I think of the Beta Club Convention. I think of us being able to let our guards down around each other, even if it was just for a little bit. I think of us sharing a time together. Of early 90s R&B, of Martin and A Different World, of overalls and asymmetricals, of Cross Colours and Starter Jackets, of rap songs that could only get play on car speakers, of dance moves that seemed like they were coming out almost every week, of Boyz n the Hood and Menace, of New Jack City and New Jack Swing, of Roc and In Living Color, of House Party and Harlem Nights. I think of how I can't imagine my high school experience without their laughs and their smiles. I think of how I cry now when I hear the song or even the phrase "young, gifted, and black."

I like to think I caught a glimpse of the "it" in "that's where it's at."

I often say that going to that school saved my life. Though a more accurate way of wording it would be to say that the kids in that school saved me from a life. A life where I would have been able to make my mind up about black people without ever having spent any real time with them. A life where I wouldn't have known what it was like to be shared with, the laughs, the music, the language, the joy of black youth.

That's how I think of Oakwood. And that's why it crushes me how little of that I understood at the time. How much I got it wrong, despite all the chances I was being given.

A black high school wasn't like a Historically Black College. You choose to go to a Historically Black College. A black high school was just segregated.

But having spent time on the campuses of both, attending one and being employed at another, I can say that the feeling of community pride felt at a black high school during a pep rally or a game or homecoming, and definitely at graduation, is in many ways similar to that of an HBCU.

When I think of our own graduation, I actually think more of the parents than the students.

I think of the anticipation and preparation the days before. The excitement and rushing around the morning of. Everyone getting dressed up, taking pictures. The drive over and finding parking. Trying to find the right place to sit. Constantly looking down at where their own graduate was sitting. Thinking about the moment it was their turn to cheer.

Of course, those are all things you see at any high school graduation. What I mean about it being similar to an HBCU is the faces. To look all around you and see. Black people. To scan the venue and gaze at a sea of families that look like their own. To look down onto the floor of graduating seniors and see so many black children.

For people who every day must walk around in the very real legacy, indeed the lurking, of one of the greatest crimes in human history, the

cheers of celebration and pride, when their child's name is called to step up and walk across that stage, are only amplified by this context.

And in the midst of such an outstanding day, I think of the parents in that venue thinking to themselves. Even here, at a majority black school, there had to emerge some white asshole to fuck something up.

As bad as I wanted it then, I'm so glad now I wasn't Valedictorian. It's fitting that I was runner up. Second place. Not quite there. Not quite getting it.

Like so many other magical mediocre white males, I didn't really have to work at it, or at least not harder than any of the other kids. It just sort of came easy.

People who have street smarts call it book smarts. And though I hardly ever carried any books home with me on the bus, I guess that's what I had. Too bad I didn't have the smarts enough to read anything beyond the Cliff's Notes of what was assigned.

If I had, maybe my speech that day wouldn't have been so full of shit. Maybe if I had been more curious, that speech might have had some real reflections on what I had just been a part of.

Instead, it was basic and incurious. Just like I was.

Every now and then I go back and read an old print out I kept of it. It's the closest thing I have to self-abuse.

I'm actually happy it's so cringeworthy, from beginning to end. I deserve to look back and see how stupid I was. How smart I thought I was. How clever I thought I was.

If only I were lucky enough to have said nothing. Lord knows I hadn't put enough together at the time to have anything real to say. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

Early in the speech I had thrown in a line about me entering as a freshman "into my own personal Heart of Darkness," the reference being to Joseph Conrad's book about Africa. A book, to show you just how full of shit I was, I was assigned but never read.

And although the Heart of Darkness line was supposed to be a dig at me, it was unnecessary and inappropriate. There were a million different ways I could have made the point I was trying to make. By using that comparison and expecting every last person of color, none of whom knew me from Adam, to simply not take it the wrong way, I ended up making the opposite point instead.

The reference was supposed to be an acknowledgement of how racist I used to be. Did you get that? Used to be. How rich is that? An idiot patting himself on the back for no longer being a dumbass.

How perfect that the theme of my address centered around me giving my fellow graduates advice for going out into the “real world,” as if I had any clue what the real world even was. I didn’t even use the word “advice.” I used the word “guidelines.” Unbelievable.

The pretension was awesome. Platitudes and poorly borrowed quotes. Faked profundity, garnished in condescension. Like a paper written the night before it was due, any adult could see right through it.

This isn’t to say there weren’t a couple nice moments. But those were more of the variety of a broken clock than any earned wisdom.

And I know this, because immediately after those couple decent moments, I blew it.

For some reason, as I was writing that speech, I decided to follow up what may have been the only things in the speech worth saying with a paragraph about race and respect.

What this had to do with us all graduating and going out into the world I still don’t know. It served no real purpose in the address other than to grab the last word in a conversation only I was having. A conversation I’m not really sure I knew I was having.

The paragraph began, “Many people have the misconception that they are better than another group of people simply because of the shade in their flesh.”

And although the sentence was obviously referring to white people, it was not meant as a scold. But rather it served as a cover for the rest of the paragraph. Something to point back to. A shield of sorts.

Not to mention, it was a thinly veiled attempt to show how noble-minded I was, you know, to point out “white racism,” and to point it out first. Though hardly a revelation to anyone in the crowd, it really just served to get that sentiment out of the way. And though not all this may have been conscious, my intention of throwing that acknowledgement out first is pretty glaring in light of the next sentence.

“Then there are others that believe they are exempt from the charges of racism. And in some cases, there are those who believe they deserve more than others.”

In my mind, when I wrote those two sentences, there was still some degree of deniability. Just the right measure of cowardice. As if the words “then there are others” hadn’t made it all too clear who I was talking about.

And even if I could tell myself it was conceivable this could also refer to white people, the white people who ran up to me after the ceremony snuffed out all notions of ambiguity. Mostly strangers. Shaking

my hand. Thanking me for the courage I had shown up there. One was even a teacher at the school, expressing that what I had said was something he had wanted to say for a long time.

It's a strange thing. To be congratulated for something and, at the same moment, realize how ashamed you should be. Because even I knew then. The only things that white people want to say but can't are awful things.

I may have wanted to fool myself about what I was doing before. But the looks in those white people's eyes revealed what all the black people in the audience had just seen.

Another white person telling them what racism was... Excuse me, telling them that they didn't know what racism was.

And my qualification to imply such absurdity? That I had spent a few hours a day around more black people than white people. That I had been the minority for a portion of the day, for a portion of the week. As if I could, in any way, equate any occasional injustice I perceived suffering during our special 6-hour-a-day setting to the enduring aftermath of slavery and institutional white supremacy throughout American life.

To even use the words "believe they are exempt from the charges of racism" showed how arrogant I was and how convenient my definition was of racism.

I ended the paragraph saying, "It is true that every man and every woman deserves the benefit of the doubt in any situation, but respect must be earned and lost. This does not mean that only certain people should be treated with respect, for everyone deserves fair and equal treatment. But earning respect is different. Respect is simply when you prove your love and dedication to something through a humble spirit. True respect has no prejudice, no love, no hate, and can be lost, just as quickly as it can be gained."

And while to most of the white ears in the audience this statement probably sounded pretty benign, I can only imagine what it sounded like to the people sitting on either side of them. People who knew what it meant for white folks to define respect, for white folks to decide when it is lost or how it is earned.

From the local news to the New York Times, from local police to the highest levels of the federal government, white people have forever and again used the word "respect," and their right to define respect, as a fig leaf. Something to hide the shame of what comes after someone not white disagrees with that definition.

I've often wondered why I wrote that last part. Maybe I thought there were times I hadn't been given the respect I deserved.

If anything, I was given far more than I deserved. Far more patience, far more pardon.

Whatever discrimination or ill treatment I had experienced in those four years could just as easily have been swapped out with the marginalization of kids in any other high school whose difference and minority status served them up as an easy target. It could have been rich and poor or preps and punks or jocks and goths. Just another difference to be exploited.

It doesn't make it right. But it also didn't give me what I thought it gave me.

I thought, like far too many white people still think today, that racism was just racial prejudice. And since in my high school setting the most obvious exploitable circumstance was the color of my skin, I believed my encounter with being *the other* gave me some kind of special insight into what it was like to be black.

And for any peeks I did get into actual discrimination, it never once hit me that at 2 o'clock, every day, I got to go home and be white. And at no time in their lives, not even as they were attending a black high school, did my friends not know what it felt like to be black, in America.

It should have been evident. Day after day, being together. Through grades and seasons. Years of their lives. And I never even came close to learning.

I had been a minority. But being a minority is not the same as being black, in America. And all the sharing, love, and acceptance I had been gifted by my friends could still not penetrate what was so deep down that I couldn't not go there, on that day, in front of them and their families.

Now, I don't want to give you the impression it was a diatribe. It wasn't. I also don't wish to be so self-important that I believe I ruined the day. I think it's fair to assume that most in the crowd shook their heads at what I had said and then went back to focusing on what was important to them.

Still, I also know that you don't need to impale someone to make them bleed. Sometimes all it takes is a pin prick.

I added that to the day. One more insult. An indignity casually tossed into the accumulation.

I had a knack for making things about me. And if I'm honest, I still do. What I did not have a knack for was self-examination and self-critique.

The knack for self-critique I finally did develop now finds me returning to the moments of that graduation that I assume no one else even remembers. The only moments I can remember.

I'll never be able to look at what should have been my own day of achievement and think of anything other than my failure.

I may have not ruined their graduation, but I definitely ruined mine. The memory of it, what it stands for in my mind.

That they had to sit through that shit, on that day. I can never let anyone forgive me for it.

But I am sorry. I promise that much.

Ironically, I ended the speech by telling my class, "I love you."

That wasn't a lie. It's just truer now.

You gave me everything I needed to find my way. And though I wasn't able to call it up that day, I didn't lose it.

I have it now. I cherish you still.

Thank you for saving my life.

Last transaction

“Although guys hated the cliché of girls being more mature, we generally ceded the point, if only to weaponize the knowledge. If a girl seemed more immature than you, there’s a chance she’d be easier to fuck.

Of course, if a girl seemed too much more immature than you, there was probably a reason why. Though you definitely didn’t ask. In fact, you tried your best not to think about why it seemed she was using physical intimacy to stand in for something that was missing or lacking. No need to risk the possibility of feeling guilty, or worse, like you needed to help her or something. That wasn’t why you were there.

You were there for the transaction. And even though you were both getting something out of it, indeed something different than the other was getting, the one who could more clearly see the other’s insecurities had the greater bargaining power.

Her immaturity was a weakness. Not to be healed, but to be exploited.

That’s all she was. That’s all we were.

And I know that’s not a brand new take on the story of teenage boys, that we had a trash perspective, that all roads led to getting laid. But my confession for taking part in such ritual comes decorated with a special ornament.

By that time, I might have been able to say I saw her as more than just an easy fuck. But I didn’t treat her that way. I wasn’t really interested in what all had gone on in her life since we last talked. I wasn’t interested in the place she was living, or her on-again-off-again boyfriend. I listened and looked at the clock, making just adequate enough small talk. Until it was time.

I wasn’t a teenager anymore. I was actually in college. I think I was 20, which would have made it almost three years since we’d seen each other, and around six years since we’d first hooked up.

And while I was getting old enough to not be proud of where I’d been, with girls, with her, I still came back. Still looking to use our history. To bet she still saw things a certain way. To bet she hadn’t grown.

She was the first girl I’d ever treated that way. And that was the last time we saw each other. I actually don’t remember how we parted the next morning; I can’t remember a word we said to each other. My performance in bed the night before had been a joke. Probably one of the worst of my life. It had been a long time since I’d been with someone, and since our days together she had come to expect far more. She didn’t explicitly tell me,

but I knew she was disappointed. And the degree of my humiliation is one of the only reasons I don't mind so much that memory.

The last words I do remember her saying to me were after we had finished and we were getting ready to go to sleep.

She asked me, 'Have you ever measured yourself?'

I've wanted to be a writer all my life, and I tell you, I could have never written a more perfectly timed sentence.

She had summed it all up.

I answered and turned to sleep on my side, away from her, hoping she would leave it there. She did. And I sat there with my eyes open, thinking. There was a reason why I was still so lost, still so alone. I had made the choice to be a loser.

And although it was clear that night she still had her share of problems, the bargaining power had shifted. Not that she had any real power in her life, but she definitely had the upper hand in the transaction. And in the darkness and grinning silence of that room, I could see just how far I had not come.

I had told her no. It was both the truth and a lie.”

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“All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to...”

Yep, he's looking. Never fails.

Why does he always have to sit next to me?

Here it comes.

(whispering) “Hey, that was really great. I just wanted you to know that.”

Just nod and smile.

“...and respect throughout.

Now that we've gotten the ball rolling, is there...”

Bell sounds.

“If everyone would take their seats, please.

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"Sure."

"Great, go ahead."

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"Back in early 2000, a friend of mine who was always more adventurous than I was suggested we work a restaurant job for a few months, save up all our cash, and then go see some of Europe.

As soon as she said it, it made total sense. Although, I know for sure, if she hadn't brought it up, a thought like that would have never entered my head.

Just like a lot of East Nashville, I was one of those guys who couldn't see past the driveway. And I remember, after we got back, when I would tell friends and family we had backpacked around Europe, so many of them had the same response. 'How do you do that?'

I can't thank my friend enough for giving me the answer.

Even today, I'm not all that great a planner when it comes to trips. And I really don't like doing much of the touristy stuff. But we didn't know anybody in any of the places we were going. So it just made sense to let the guidebooks shame us into standing in as many lines as we could find.

I didn't know shit about art or museums, but I knew the Louvre. And of all the art places she said we had to go, that one seemed like an obligation.

It was a hell of a long line. But once it started, it moved much faster than we expected. When we got to the actual entrance we found out why.

We already had our money out when we saw the signs. Something about a dispute with the Coat Check Union, meaning there would be no coat check for the day, and for us to accept their apologies. And for this inconvenience, admission today would be free.

I remember us both commenting about how lucky it was we had come on that day. We were trying to make our money stretch, and not

having to shell out that entrance fee was huge. Plus, we didn't care about coat check anyway. Hell, I was such a podunk, I wasn't even sure what it was. To us, it just seemed funny that they would make admission free over something that small. We were just tourists, Americans. All we knew was that they were losing a shitload of money that day, and we had the coat checkers to thank for our good fortune.

There was no reservation, no hesitation. We just walked right in. And here I am now, two decades later, unable to get out.

I can tell myself it happened quick, that we didn't even know what was going on, until it was over. That the line was moving so fast, and there weren't any picketers out front. There was just a sign at the admission booth. Besides, everyone else was going in like it was nothing. We just figured it was what they did when someone went on strike, and that was their punishment, the lost revenue. It must have been the equivalent of a couple hundred thousand dollars, maybe more. Maybe that's how it worked in Europe. I had heard of workers in Europe striking at the drop of a hat, and I wasn't even sure if their concept of a strike was the same as ours. I mean, hell, all the other workers were there; they had to be for the place to be open. It wasn't a kiosk or a gas pump. It was the Louvre.

And maybe that's another thing I can tell myself, that the only union I ever knew about was for factory workers, like the one my old man was in. Of course, I knew there were other unions, in coal mining, the railroad, teamsters, stuff like that. What I mean is that I only knew of unions in a certain type of work, stuff like manufacturing and utility. Unionization was way down in the states, and I don't think I really knew that service or hospitality unions even existed. All of which is to say, the only crossing of picket lines I understood was the guys who went in to take the jobs of guys who were walking the line, guys like my old man. It would be years before I would come to see there was another way of crossing that line. And, anyway, there were no picket lines here. Just a sign with an explanation.

And I guess all this is just a long way of telling myself I just wasn't there. Not just yet.

I was in my mid-twenties. Just starting to ask a few more of the right questions. In fact, I brought one book with me on the trip. It was Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. It's a big book, and I didn't finish it until almost the end of the trip. Paris was our first city.

Not saying it would have automatically made the difference. It took me a long time after that to even be interested in how the labor struggle fit into wider political struggle.

But it did give me a little push, and a little light. And eventually I did get there, or at least a whole lot further along than where I was then. I even wrote a song, years later, about not being a scab. I wrote it to be a

union anthem, something the unions could use to garner solidarity. I suppose I also wrote it, even if subconsciously, to help make right the wrong that happened on that day.

And yet, here's the thing. It's not that I went in. For everything I just mentioned, for everything I still don't understand about labor and unions and strikes in other parts of the world, for seeing that the Louvre was forgoing all that cash and the other workers had come in to work that day, for all that, I know I wasn't working with enough to be mad at myself for going in. I probably shouldn't have done it on principle, but that's not the wrong I can't get over.

The wrong I can't get over is how easy it was for us to walk right in and not once think about the demands of the workers who were on strike. Because, no matter their dynamics, that's what it was. A strike.

I never once thought to ask one of the other workers there if it was actually ok that we were coming in. I never thought to clarify my assumptions, because my assumptions worked in my favor.

I didn't ask anyone what their grievances were, that they would call for a strike like that. In fact, the whole rest of the day that I walked around and took in the many pinnacles of Western curated culture, not once did I spare another thought about the people responsible for me saving all that money. Not even a pause, not even a question, not even in all my boredom.

Nor did I stop to think about my old man. He was the one who told me about scabs. He was the one who told me about unions. He was the one who, for his family, worked a job he hated his whole life because it offered decent pay and benefits for a guy with no education.

I worked a lot of shitty jobs when I was young, but I never experienced what he did. Never really got it the way he did.

I was never interested enough in my old man's world. And I'm ashamed at how naïve I thought he was when he would tell me that I needed to go to college so I could have that piece of paper. I resented him for laying so much guilt on me about it.

I knew he had it bad, but I didn't understand how bad until I finally started listening, years later. How bad he had it was the exact reason why he needed a union. Because without whatever little bargaining power they had, it would have been far worse.

And there I was, almost twenty-five years old, gallivanting around Europe, taking in the art and the architecture and the beauty, marveling at hundreds of years of contribution from those who worked in culture.

And not a moment spared for the contribution of workers like my father, or those striking workers that day.

It wasn't just that I didn't know. It's that I wasn't curious.

I still don't know how guilty to feel. I just know I feel guilt. And that I owe an apology to my father and to the Coat Check Union. Another and another I'll never be able to deliver."

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"All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to..."

*Yep, he's looking. Never fails.
Why does he always have to sit next to me?
Here it comes.*

(whispering) "Hey, that was really great. I just wanted you to know that."

Just nod and smile.

"...and respect throughout.
Now that we've gotten the ball rolling, is there..."

Bell sounds.

"If everyone would take their seats, please.

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Ok, let me see... Who hasn't gone first in a while?
Hmm.

Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?"

"Sure."

"Great, go ahead."

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“I gave a girl a fake name one time. It was in the food court at the mall. She had sent her friend to ask a friend of mine what my name was. My friend came over and asked me if he should tell her. I couldn’t see who he was even talking about, so I told him to tell her my name was Robbie. I think I was 16 at the time.

And although to a lot of folks that may sound relatively benign, that I may not necessarily want to give my name to a complete stranger, me basing that reservation upon her looks or possible lack of was already problematic.

And even that would still be forgettable in the scheme of teenage things if I hadn’t ended up hooking up with her at a later date.

I should have corrected the situation the first time we talked on the phone. But I didn’t. I was afraid it would mess things up. I didn’t see an easy way of coming clean where it didn’t make me look like a jerk. I was embarrassed that I had given a fake name in the first place. So I just let it go, figuring it didn’t really matter one way or the other.

Before long, we had had sex and she still knew me by that name. Then another time, and another, and so on. Each time, her knowing me by a name that wasn’t mine, me pretending to have a name that wasn’t mine.

This carried on until we lost touch.

Me being someone I wasn’t or her seeing something in me that wasn’t really there or any of that. It’s too cheap a metaphor to even learn anything from, maybe even to be true.

The fact of the matter is I didn’t know who the fuck I was either. It’s why I had such a hard time offering myself to someone, fully. I played it safe in the years I could have been learning from my chances. I sought out sparring sessions with girls who were less liable to expect someone who would fight for them, especially if it meant fighting my own insecurities.

I may have not known who I was. But it’s clear now how little I thought of myself.

Years later, I found out I had been cheated on by a previous girlfriend. I remember how disturbed I was, that I had thought things were one way when they were actually another. I thought I knew who she was, and realizing that I didn’t know just made me feel like a chump.

I can imagine what the girl who didn’t know my name would think of that. Though I’m sure she would be better off not thinking about me at all.

At the time, we only ever saw each other every now and then. But every visit, I would think about telling her the truth. And every time, my respect for her proved less valuable than my convenience.

There were a couple times, however, when I had reason to believe she had found out. I never knew for sure, and I wouldn't have known when. And if she did, she didn't let on. And because I couldn't be sure, I wasn't going to take the chance of bringing it up.

If I had my way, though, I'd like to think she did figure it out. Not that it would in any way let me off the hook. I guess I just like to think that, even then, things were one way when I thought they were another. And that it was actually her that was getting what she wanted from me, with the extra satisfaction of letting me make a fool of myself.

Either way, I'm sorry. She deserved better than that."

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"All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to..."

Yep, he's looking. Never fails.

Why does he always have to sit next to me?

Here it comes.

(whispering) "Hey, that was really great. I just wanted you to know that."

Just nod and smile.

"...and respect throughout.

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Hmm.

Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?"

"Sure."

“Great, go ahead.”

“I was moving away, and it was supposed to be the last time we were going to see each other, at least for the foreseeable future. He told me the new Mexican place that had just opened up on Old Fort Road had really great cheese dip. And it did. So good that it’s one of the two things that stuck with me from that night.

We were close to the end of our meal when I brought it up. We’d been having such a good time, talking about the last few years, talking about how we met.

He was probably one of the better friends I made in college, in that he was good to me. I don’t know how good I was to him, other than just hanging out and talking. But he was definitely good to me.

He even gave me a room to crash in when I found myself, mid-semester, without a place to live. And though I never felt we were the closest of friends, I still felt a certain endearment and special gratitude.

We had come to a pause in the conversation and had returned to the chips and queso when I said, ‘So, man, I just have to ask you. We’ve been friends a long time, and I hope it’s ok if I say it. But you’re gay, right?’

I don’t know what I expected. Maybe I expected a look of relief before confirming my assumption. After all, I thought I was doing him a favor. Like letting him know he didn’t have to hide it from me.

What I did not expect is what he said.

‘No... No, why would you ask me that?’

I won’t go into all the reasons why I assumed it. But they were more than just the stereotypical ones I had grown up with.

I listed off a few of them and told him the only reason why I was bringing it up was that I wanted him to know I was ok with it.

He tried to cover for a couple of the things I mentioned, his answers reaching. I clarified what I was referring to, in no way argumentative, but like a friend.

I saw that he was struggling. Flustered, almost panicked.

In a near acquiescence to my points, he replied, ‘Yeah. But I’m not gay.’

It’s all he could offer. He looked like he was on the verge of tears. I said, ‘Ok, man, I’m sorry I brought it up. I apologize.’ I changed the subject, and we made it through what was left of our meal.

I saw him a couple times over the years after that, when I was home to visit, and then we lost touch altogether. I knew those couple times not to bring it back up, and he didn't mention it.

And though I'm not sure when or if he came out, I credit him more than any other person in my life with changing my mind, about gay people, about a lot of things. It's something I wish I could have told him one of those times we reunited. But I understood by then why I couldn't.

From where I started, acceptance of anyone LGBTQ, as people just like me, as people in general, as anything other than sinners, seemed a million miles away. It was my time and memories with him that made me no longer scared to read and to listen and to pay attention to the struggle of yet another set of folks just looking to live an undisturbed life.

But it was long after that dinner at the Mexican restaurant that I learned, you don't ask. Because it's not your business anyway. Your business is to make sure that person knows they are loved. And if the day comes when they're ready, great. And if the day never comes, so what? They're still the same person either way. Isn't that what I thought I had learned from him? That there wasn't any real difference between us? Not because he had or hadn't come out, but because who he had been to me.

And though I could chalk it up to not knowing any better, that would be disingenuous. There was still a lot I could have known, had I just the slightest penchant for sensitivity and interested concern.

I had made it my moment. When of all moments, that one should have been his. And if he decided the moment was never right, then I should have been ok with that too. If we were that close and he couldn't talk about it, it just meant he had his reasons. None of which had anything to do with me.

Or at least those are the things I tell myself now. More of this acting, like I know what I'm talking about.

Even in my confession, it's tempting to do the same thing I did that night. To ignore the irony of my surprise at his seeming lack of self-awareness, when I, myself, couldn't see the real reason I brought it up.

Like so many times in my life, maybe even right now in this confession, I flattered myself for being so open. For coming so far.

And maybe I had come a long way, and maybe I knew I owed that luck to the man I was sitting across from. Yet the way I chose to repay him was to invade his privacy and to try and force his hand.

It's why I also know the apology I offered that night, right before I changed the subject, doesn't and won't ever count for shit.

There's so many things you just can't say sorry for. Because once they're done, it's done.

It's just one more thing I owe.

I can't believe myself. I couldn't just let him tell me."

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"All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to..."

Yep, he's looking. Never fails.

Why does he always have to sit next to me?

Here it comes.

(whispering) "Hey, that was really great. I just wanted you to know that."

Just nod and smile.

"...and respect throughout.

Now that we've gotten the ball rolling, is there..."

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Hmm.

Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?"

"Sure."

"Great, go ahead."

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“I rode the bus with her. She was sweet and funny, sharp. Pretty too. She was a grade below me. We would flirt a lot. I kissed her for the first time at her birthday party. After that, we would go to the dollar movies together and sit in the back, kiss for the whole film.

Eventually, though far too quickly, we talked about doing more. I think I was 13. I think she was 12, but she may have also been 13.

It was easily the biggest party I would have ever gone to. A classmate of mine who was kind of wild, at least for our school, was throwing it at his mom’s place. I’m not sure where his mom lived, but I remember it being a bit of a ride to get there. For some reason, that made it seem even cooler.

There was a bunch of woods in the back, and it was a really nice house. The girls were going to be there the first night, only to be picked up late. The boys would then stay on through the weekend.

We had planned it, me and her. We had agreed that would be the time.

We didn’t have it worked out where; we just figured we’d find a place where nobody was for long enough to make it happen.

Neither one of us ever used the word virginity. Though I do remember using the words 'do it' a lot the weeks leading up, just to be sure we were talking about the same thing.

And sure enough, we were. I think it was about 7:30 or so; I remember the sun was starting to go down. We waited until a bunch of the other kids had gone outside for some activity or something, made our way into the bathroom, locked the door, and turned off the light.

She laid down on the floor, and I laid down on top. I figured since we’d been kissing every chance we got, and I didn’t know how much time we had before someone interrupted us, we should probably go ahead and get to it. We took our shirts off, and I helped her take off her shorts. I can still remember her lying there in what little light the blinds let in.

I stood up to get the condom out of my pocket. I kneeled back down and began to take my shorts off.

I have no idea what I thought I was getting ready to do. I hadn’t even tried to put on a condom before. It wasn’t even mine. A buddy had stolen it that day from his older brother and given it to me a couple minutes earlier. I was too scared to even go into the convenience store and buy my own.

I remember my heart pounding in my temples as I started to rip the edge of the condom raper.

That’s when she saved us.

I can't remember her exact words. I think it was either a simple 'I don't want to' or maybe 'Is it ok if we don't?' I just remember being both disappointed and relieved at the same time.

And though I've often thought I would have been much better off if she had actually been my first, even if it had been another time, thank God she stopped things that evening.

I would have been awful. Just awful.

And I know that because of what came next.

I think I mumbled something like, 'Ok. Yeah, that's ok.' It was obvious she was right. And I wasn't the least bit upset. But for some reason, I just got up and stood there, like I didn't know what to do next.

I then turned around and picked up my shirt off the floor and began to put it back on.

'That's when she said, 'You don't have to get up.'

When I heard those words, it was like I was looking at myself outside myself. I could see how much of a dick move it was. To just get up and start dressing, like that's all I had come for. Like that's all she was there for.

It might not have been a lot, but those six words said it all.

So we weren't going to 'do it.' So what? She was still my friend, she was still the same girl I had been kissing all afternoon and every weekend we got the chance. I owed her more than being like that. I should have thought how nervous she was, just like I was. How, after that, she might need to be held and shown how much she meant.

But that wasn't my instinct. My instinct was to act like if we weren't going to do it, then we might as well quit.

I remember when she said it, turning to her and feeling a mix of embarrassment and shame. Lying there, with stripes of blue light running across her half naked body, she was so beautiful. And I was such an asshole.

I laid back down, on top of her, and we began to kiss. It was nice. Though I couldn't really enjoy it.

I just kept thinking how awful it was for me to get up like that.

We kissed a little longer, and then someone knocked at the door. I probably could have told them to go away, but instead I took it as a way out. I didn't want to ruin things any more than I already had.

And though I know of all my confession fodder this one probably seems pretty minor, it reminds me how memories are the sum of their parts. And if any part of that whole is weaker than it should be, it can lead to everything falling down.

At 13, I didn't know how to treat a girl. And it would be a long time before I would even start to figure it out. And while I would have been

lucky to have lost my virginity to her, I'm so glad she didn't lose hers to me. So glad.

My God, just thinking that that could have been her first time. What a mess I could have made of that memory, even more than the one I left her.

I sometimes wonder how her first time went. I hope it was with someone who could appreciate her the way she deserved. Like so many things in my life, I came close and then screwed it all up when it counted the most.

In any case, I owe her one. Not just the apology but a thank you. For saving me, saving us, that evening.

We were barely teenagers. What a memory to have. I just wish she could see how wonderful she still looks in mine."

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"All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to..."

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"Sure."

"Great, go ahead."

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"There's not a lot I really remember about Benjamin. I can vaguely remember what he looked like. I think I can make out the color of his hair. I remember his smile. It was the most pronounced thing about him.

I remember him being a little dorky, even at that age. But nice, and silly, like me.

I think it was the second grade, but maybe it was the first. I'm not really sure. I just know he was the second real friend I made at school.

I remember him spending the night over at my house the night the Wizard of Oz came on. It only came on once a year, and he was who I wanted to watch it with.

I remember spending the night over at his house and playing video games on the Atari. I remember being blown away by this one game. I think it was Demon Attack. I remember how nice a house Benjamin had, at least compared to ours, and how nice his mother was to me that night.

I remember actually going with him the next morning to the doctor, to get his shots. I'm pretty sure they had something to do with his allergies. He would get lots of them, regularly.

I think it was the third grade when he started going to a different school. I may have seen him once after that. Twice at the most.

After the eighth grade, I also quit going to that school. I stayed friends with a couple of my old classmates, one of whom's mom worked in the school office.

When I was in the 11th or 12th grade, I can't remember which, I was hanging out over at that friend's house when his mom asked me if I remembered Benjamin Nicely. When I asked her why, she said that Benjamin's mother had dropped by the school and given her a letter to give to me if she ever saw me.

She said that evidently Benjamin still talked about me and his mother thought it might be nice if we reconnected. She also said that Benjamin's mother mentioned that Benjamin had experienced some health issues over the years.

She hadn't read the letter, so that's all she knew. She asked me if I wanted it, or if she should tell her that she hadn't seen me.

I chose the latter.

And although I was in high school and was an entirely different person with my own life and a whole new set of friends, and the request seemed odd seeing that we hadn't spoken since the second grade, meaning the only thing we even knew of each other was our second grade selves, I still feel an enormous amount of remorse over not taking that letter.

I know why I didn't. I was afraid of knowing why. And I was worried that once I knew, it would be an obligation.

I had no idea what 'experienced some health problems over the years' meant. I remember him having the allergy issues, serious enough that he had to have all those shots. But to have sent me a letter like that made me think it was something far worse.

And if the reason wasn't because he was sick, then it made me wonder what else was wrong with him. Didn't he have his own friends? Why would he still be thinking about a kid he was friends with in the second grade?

Not once did I think that maybe he just had a fond memory of me, as fond a memory as I do of him now. Maybe he was just curious how I was doing. Maybe he just wanted to see if we could still be friends.

But because I wouldn't take that letter, because I wouldn't read it, it's something I'll always wonder, and something I'll always feel sorry for.

What an awful person I was. Such a fucking coward, thinking it was better if I didn't know.

Better for me.

I'm not really sure if the letter was from Benjamin or from his mother. My only prayer is that it was from his mother and that Benjamin didn't know anything about it.

Even still, that wouldn't make what I did the slightest bit better.

To refuse that letter, to not read those words, was to not acknowledge his humanity.

I think about it from time to time. And I wonder. And I see, how wrong I was.

Not knowing is always so much worse than knowing.

Maybe he just needed a friend. Maybe he was dying.

All I'll ever really know is that I couldn't be bothered.”

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“All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to...”

*Yep, he's looking. Never fails.
Why does he always have to sit next to me?
Here it comes.*

(whispering) “Hey, that was really great. I just wanted you to know that.”

Just nod and smile.

“...and respect throughout.
Now that we've gotten the ball rolling, is there...”

Bell sounds.

“If everyone would take their seats, please.

Great. Now, before we begin, let me just say that this is a place of trust. What is spoken here will be respected for the trust it offers, and all words shared in this space are a matter of mutual confidence.

Ok, let me see... Who hasn't gone first in a while?
Hmm.

Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?”

“Sure.”

“Great, go ahead.”

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“She was one of those girls that cussed a lot the first time you talked to her. She was a few years older than me, and hypersexual right off the bat.

It was actually on the phone. We hadn't talked before that. She had gotten a friend to give me her number at the pool hall.

When I called her, she brought up fucking almost immediately. There was no real getting to know one another. It was just an establishment

of what was going to go down if we ever got together. The rest was just small talk and silly posturing.

It was pretty obvious what both of us were interested in. It was obvious to me, from what little she told me in that first conversation, that she was far far more experienced than I was.

Those are the first things I told myself. There were a lot more. But none of them mattered either.

It didn't matter that we were really just strangers, that we had no real connection. It didn't matter she went down on me almost immediately. It didn't matter that she was just like she was on the phone.

It didn't matter that when we fucked that first time, I was over so quick. It didn't matter that I figured she couldn't have been satisfied.

It didn't matter if we were cool after that, if we hooked up a bunch after that. It didn't matter that we hung out after that without hooking up. It didn't matter that I met her mom after that, that we all hung out together in her front yard a couple years after that.

I told myself it was just a question.

And maybe that was true, until I asked it.

It didn't matter the way I asked. It didn't matter that I was polite, that I was soft-spoken upon asking.

It didn't matter that I had friends who had asked girls that before. It didn't matter that I had friends who were girls that had done it before.

It didn't matter that she had agency and girls could actually be into that, that girls could be into whatever they wanted to be into.

It didn't matter which way she answered.

What mattered is that I shouldn't have asked. It was a question only she may have asked. At least at that juncture in our familiarity.

And she didn't ask it.

I know why I asked it. It wasn't to be thoughtful, like I pretended. It wasn't a question to benefit her.

I simply thought it might make me cool.

It didn't.

It only made me hate myself. Years later, when I quit telling myself it was just a question.

I should say there's more to it than this. And there is. More to why I'm making such a big deal out of it.

The point is that it was a question only she may have asked. And she didn't ask it.

I asked it.

Twice.

Even if politely. Even if soft-spoken.”

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“So what was the question?”

“That’s not really the matter.”

“Not the matter? Of course it is.”

“Then let me put it this way. That’s not your matter.”

Bell sounds.

“Ah, come on. What’s with all the coyness? There’s no need for mystery with us.”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

“Ah, man, why not? It’s just us. Why can’t you tell us?”

“Because you don’t need to know.”

“Then why bring it up at all?”

“Because I never told her I was sorry. And I’m not even sure where she’s at now. Or if she’s even alive.

But I’ve needed, for a long long time, someone to hear me say how sorry I was for asking.”

Bell sounds.

“All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to...”

Yep, he’s looking. Never fails.

Why does he always have to sit next to me?

Here it comes.

(whispering) “Hey, that was really great. I just wanted you to know that.”

Just nod and smile.

“...and respect throughout.
Now that we’ve gotten the ball rolling, is there...”

Bell sounds.

Bell sounds.

Chapter Three

(Like a ledger, taking up more and more space.)

My Agent - - October 28, 2017

This phone is a trip. It looks like the one Great Aunt Odessa had. Sounds like how phones used to sound, on the old rotary lines.

I guess that makes sense.

“Hello. Is this Lonnie?”

“Mr. Tapper?”

“You got me.”

“Great.

I’m sorry it took me so long to call back.”

“Not at all. I’m just glad you did.”

“It’s been a strange few days.”

“I bet it has.”

“When I was given your message I didn’t exactly know what to think. I didn’t really expect anyone like you to call.”

“That indicates how much we have to talk about.”

“I guess so. I feel like I’m kind of in disbelief. The whole show thing was not what I thought it was going to be at all.”

“Oh yeah, I figured they blindsided you. That’s the way they do with a lot of these reality type deals.”

“I was actually really mad the other night when it aired. Like really mad. Like furious.

I’m still furious about it. It’s one of the reasons why it took me a while to contact you back; I was afraid you might think I wanted to do more of that.”

“No, it seemed pretty obvious that you didn’t sign up for that. And besides, fuck the show. The show is going nowhere. What’s important is how this is blowing up online.

And that’s not about the show. That’s about you. That’s why I called.

I'm not here to do what *they* want. I'm here for you.
So forget about those vultures. All you need to focus on is you.
Can you do that?"

"I think so. It's just that it's a lot, you know?"

"No, I get that. And you're right. It is a lot. But it can also be a lot of good. We just have to look at it the right way.

Now, my question is what is it that *you* want? If I'm a genie and I'm granting you one wish, what is it that you want to do?"

"I want to write."

"Perfect. I can make that happen."

"How can you be so sure? I mean *I* think I'm good, but the fact is I've never been able to get anything picked up by a publisher or literary agent, or even a journal."

"That's all changed now. You let me work a little magic and I'll let you pick the publisher."

"I guess what I'm saying is I don't know how good my stuff really is."

"Doesn't matter. You're hot. That's what counts.

And you have to make hay while the sun shines. And the sun, my friend, is shining *on you* right now.

What kind of writing have you done?"

"I've done a little of everything. Comedy, poetry, songs, screenplays. I never really stuck with one specific thing; I jumped around to different things."

"Even better. Just more avenues we can explore. You want to do comedy, I can set you up with a tour. You want to write songs, I can get you signed tomorrow. You want to do a fucking TED Talk, I can get you speaking engagements all across the country. I can get you a fucking commencement at a liberal arts college you've never heard of, and they will fucking pay.

There's so much money in speaking gigs you wouldn't believe it. I'm telling you, celebrity is nuts."

"Yeah, but just like this whole show thing wasn't what I wanted, I want to make sure I'm straight with you about my intentions. I look at my

writing as art. And I don't want to do anything that I don't feel has real art in it or doesn't make a real contribution."

"And I get that. And I love that you feel that passionate about your writing. But you do have to recognize one thing. You're talking to me because of an accident.

And what I mean by that is that this kind of fame is totally unpredictable as to how long it will last. And that's something you need to understand if you really want to make a name for yourself outside this viral debacle that just went down.

Even as good as I am, I can't guarantee you anything. All I can guarantee you is that there is gold in them hills.

But only for a while.

And that means I have to move, and you have to be willing to put in the work.

Now, I'm not a literary agent; I'm a talent agent. I don't know how good your writing is, and frankly, I don't care how good your writing is. What I care about is why people think you're interesting and how we can use that interest to develop a real career for you.

And I appreciate you being straight with me. But I need to be straight with you too. Because I don't want there to be any misunderstanding between us.

It is not my job to care about your art. That's your job. That's what makes you valuable.

Me, personally, I don't know shit about art, and I don't want to know shit about art. Because once I know about it, I may start to care about it. And if I start caring about that shit, I won't be able to do my job effectively.

Having said that, I admire someone with ethics. And I'll tell you what I tell all my clients. You can say no *to anything* I put in front of you. And if you're firm on it, I'll respect it.

But if you say no to *enough things*, there are going to be less things I'm going to be able to put in front of you. And if you say yes to the right things, and say yes enough, then you're going to be able to make as much art as you want.

And part of that is being strategic with what you say yes to.

What I bring to the table is that I can smell a market coming a mile away. And however unfortunate it is that you got taken advantage of, there is a way we can find you an audience in this. But we need to strike while the iron's hot.

If you're willing to hear me out, I believe I have a plan that we can use as a launchpad for whatever hopes and dreams you have as a writer. Because when I saw you say what you said the way you said it, I saw the

potential. Not just for some viral anecdote, but the potential for a phenomenon. I saw the potential for fire.

And fire catches.

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I can tell you have a lot to say. Are you ready to say it?"

"I think so."

"No, not you think so. You know so.

I don't want you to think anything. I want you to know it. I want you to be consumed by it because that's how bad you know it. I want you to hear it calling you in your fucking sleep.

If I'm going to invest my time, my money, *my name* in you, you're going to have to give me a reason to. You're going to have to convince me.

Because, see, I don't think you have something to say. I know it. I can tell it. I can feel it. But you have to be ready. You have to be ready to say it.

So tell me. Are you ready to say it?"

"Yeah."

"Are you? Are you sure you're ready? Are you ready to say what you've been waiting all these years to say?"

"Yes."

"Are you ready to say it?"

"Yes!"

"Are you *ready* to set a fire?!"

"I guess it depends on what kind of fire we're setting. But yeah, I believe I am."

The Interviewer - - January 03, 2021

“Before we get into the theme of the book, I’d like to talk for a second about the title, *A Good Kid and His Ghosts*. As someone who’s become almost synonymous with confessions, do you really see the person that did all those things as a good kid? Do you really believe that? That you were a good kid?”

“It depends on what your definition of a good kid is. Or what context you’re using the description in. That’s a lot of what I tried to explore in the book.”

“I’m just thinking of the sheer volume of stories you’ve given us. How can you have *all* these things to confess and still consider who you were a good kid?”

“It’s a fair question.

It’s obviously subjective. And I use a rather subjective definition.

But I believe the definition I use is honest, because it’s the definition we would have used at the time. And by that, I mean how people saw me at the time. In that time. In that moment. In those circumstances.

I used to laugh when I was in college, when I would tell stories of stuff we did in high school; how amused my new friends were at how ‘crazy’ or ‘terrible’ we’d been.

But in the neighborhood where I grew up, we thought we were good kids. Good kids in the sense that we knew bad kids. Real bad kids.

I mean we did some messed up stuff. But the bad kids did way worse.

Some of them were mean. Some of them were just stupid.

A couple of them were cold not-playing-around criminals.

And the ones in *their* bunch that were considered the good kids spent most of their time trying to keep up with those criminals, or at least impress them with their own bad decisions.

For our part, we did our best to either steer clear of those jokers or try and keep on their good side. And the few times we couldn’t avoid doing either... Well, it scared the hell out of me.

But, anyway, in our group, I was, at least most of the time, relatively good.

And it's not really that I was the *only* good kid for miles, or that I was all *that* much better, or that my heart was in a different place or anything like that. It was mostly just what I *wasn't* willing to do.

Out of the bunch I was the one that didn't smoke or drink or do any drugs. I drove the car, at least when no one else could.

I wasn't as harsh. I wasn't as risky. I wasn't as ready for violence.

I wasn't *as* racist.

I wish I could say I wasn't as sexist or homophobic, but I'm not sure of that.

All of which is to say that, in a crew of bad kids, I was a good kid. And in the neighborhoods that made up East Nashville, that crew of bad kids wasn't really all that bad.

As to the number of stories I have, maybe you're right. I can't say that everyone has as many stories as I do. But I also think, if you're introspective, you can find a lot that you don't want to remember honestly."

"It sounds like you're saying there are probably less truly good kids than we would like to admit."

"Again, it's subjective. But if you're thinking of a good kid from the convenience of your own circumstances or your own privilege or even the time that's passed, I think you're missing the point.

To ask whether or not you would do the same thing I did back then is easy. Because you're not really asking if you would do it back then; you're asking if you would do it right now, with the hindsight of age and perspective, not to mention progress."

"You mentioned looking at it from the convenience of privilege. Can you expand on that?"

"I actually think the more privileged you are, you probably have more stories like mine than you're willing to come to terms with. Partly because privilege opens up opportunities to skip past or get over on others, often without knowing. Because that's what a lot of privilege is; it's not knowing. Or not having to know."

"You really think you didn't know?"

"Maybe knowing is the wrong word. Maybe thinking is a better word. Not having to think about it. The only time you're *forced* to think about your place on the social or economic food chain is when you're being

oppressed, when you're the one being gotten over on. And, of course, it's easier to not think about those things if you don't have to.

So if you're not thinking about them and you're not questioning the way things are, you think it's just natural for you to act the way you act. And whoever gets chewed up down the chain? Well, that's natural too.

Most of our perceptions of kids being either good or bad are based on our expectations of them. And those expectations are based on a whole bunch of circumstances those kids didn't have any control over and *we like to think* we don't have any control over either.

And it's that privilege that helps certain people in your life to overlook your 'youthful indiscretions.' Otherwise, they would have to acknowledge privilege and what it can make room for."

"I don't think it's just kids who get overlooked. I would say that gets applied to adults as well."

"I think you're right. I was just speaking to what you asked specifically about being a good kid. And I guess what I'm trying to say with all this is that sometimes when I look back, I think part of my, for lack of a better way to put it, downfall was being a good kid. Because when the norm is already problematic, a good kid can take part in some pretty deplorable behavior."

"Yes, but don't you worry that explanation could apply to *so* many people that it could also be seen as an excuse?"

"Oh, no, I'm sure it's used as an excuse. That was my point about people dismissing actions as 'youthful indiscretions,' as if all the awful behavior a kid like me engaged in was somehow natural, and thus ok.

I've had so many people tell me they think I'm being too hard on myself. Like I don't know that children's brains aren't fully developed, that they don't fully develop until into our mid-twenties. Like I don't understand how cultural norms shape the way we approach moral and ethical decisions. Like I don't understand how institutions and social structure play into our circumstances, and thus our choices.

On the contrary, I think I understand quite well the impact one's circumstances can have, especially when you're young and impressionable.

I can grasp that.

But I think it's too generous.

I'm not blameless simply because I was born when and where I was.

Sure, maybe some of this stuff was just innocent mistakes. But I also don't want to take away from my choice. The same way I made the choice to not be as bad as some of my friends, there were also tons of kids in those days who made the choice not to be as bad as someone like me.

I *had* a choice.

It's the reason why I *have* so much guilt.

For me, there's no balance between choice and circumstance when it comes to my guilt. I understand and acknowledge how much my surroundings played a part. But that doesn't change the fact that it was me doing that stuff. And that I *know* it didn't have to be that way.

Maybe I couldn't escape my circumstances back then. But I can't escape those choices now.

You can only make those decisions one time, in that moment.

After that, it's lost. You can't get them back. They may come back, but you can't get them back."

"I'm not sure if I follow."

"I'm saying they come back on their own terms. But not on yours.

Even if you forget them, they're still there. Those things I did will never go away. What happened will always exist.

That's why I think it's better for you to find them before they find you. Because if a certain moment wants to find you, you can't run from it.

You can hide, but you can't run."

"I thought it was the other way around."

"That's if you're running from people. It's not the same with your past.

It's like I talked about in the book. When it comes to the things you've done, you can hide certain things from others, you can even find ways to hide them from yourself. But the things that want to find you, you can't run from that.

You can't run from something that wants to haunt you."

"But isn't it, in a way, a blessing that you can't run from it?

If you could run from it, you couldn't learn from it."

"I think that's right. And I did that, and I'm continuing to do that, or at least trying to do it. As I reflect, as I make my attempts at honesty.

That's why I'm not the same person I was back then. That's why I try my best to constantly acknowledge my current circumstances, so I can identify and fight against the various temptations I'm faced with presently."

“But you’re still being haunted.”

“This is true.”

“So what is it that you’ve learned?”

“I’ve learned that that fight is a choice. And that I wasn’t fighting. Or at least not hard enough.

And that’s what makes the difference. That need to fight.”

“The difference of what?”

“The difference of what I thought it meant to be good back then and what I consider to be a chance at being good now.”

“Do you think you’re a good person now?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not a lot. But I know I want to be.”

“And you don’t think you wanted to be good back then?”

“You mean when I was a good kid?”

“A good kid doing bad things.”

“Maybe I did. Or at least I would have thought I did at the time.”

“So why didn’t that kid fight harder?”

“Again, I’m not saying I didn’t fight at all. Just not as much as I find myself doing now.”

“But why is that?”

“Because it’s easier to fight for what you earned. And I had to find mine, that measure of right and wrong. I had to search for it.

His was given to him.

And, for a while, he was ok with that.

And I know it may not make any sense to anybody else, but I think that’s something I may never be able to get over.”

“Even though he was a kid?”

“Even though he was a kid.”

Excerpt from *A Good Kid and His Ghosts*

Is carrying it with you enough? Is playing back those moments in your head enough? Is holding onto it so tight you worry you're going to break, yourself, enough? The whole time, not even knowing if the other person remembers.

What is your debt to society when your consolation is that you were never deemed prosecutable?

Is that the difference between a crime and a sin? That a crime can be paid for? While a sin can only be forgiven? That crimes can be quantified, for calculation of punishment. But all sins are equal in the eyes of the Lord. And what if you no longer believe? Can you still call them sins, and yourself a sinner, if you no longer believe? Or are there just actors and actions?

I've been thinking lately about how convicts can be defined, even after their debt to society has been paid, by the crime they were convicted of. How unfair that is. A life summed up by a single act.

And yet, because I did not have an act singled out in that way, somehow I've defined myself by all the actions I would like to take back.

And I know. My running, my anxiety, my depression. It's all irrational.

And I suspect. It's my background, as a believer.

I once committed to the concept of eternity, in the afterlife. And though I let my faith in that story expire, I still believe in eternity, in that eternity is however long you're aware of something. And the longer you can hold onto a memory, the closer you get to eternity.

I'm no longer committed to an afterlife. But I am committed to the eternity of those moments.

Some might ask, "Then why not the others?" Is there no room, in how I choose to define myself, for those other acts? Those acts of kindness and love and humility and solidarity?

On the contrary, I think those acts are most definitely included, in that I want to show - my capacity, as a human.

But I also want to show - my tendencies, in this system.

I have had so many, good moments. I am seen by so many, as good.

But the same can be said for every war criminal who ever lived, every CEO who took his turn ravaging this planet, every good man who hurt a good woman.

Everyone is a good person when they're not being a bastard. Just because there's not a prison for the multitudes of us who were never deemed prosecutable, it doesn't mean there shouldn't be. And it doesn't mean I can't make one.

Not for them. A prison like that you have to volunteer for.

But for me.

A kind of debtor's prison.

Because I believe, choice matters.

Choice is broad and long-lived. It takes on a life of its own, even if you've completely let go of it. It's something that never really dies.

This also goes for the choice to do nothing. I would say, especially the choice to do nothing.

For even if you get lucky enough that they don't come back up, even if they've been long since forgotten, they've still contributed to the flow. The trajectory of this and all other choices, that constitute and make up what we call circumstance.

And that trajectory, in however much or little your share lies, is a debt.

And maybe that's why I don't want out.

I can't tell you if I'm defined by this debt or if I'm defined by my payments. Or if one is an extension of the other.

I just know it is a debt I own, willfully.

There are different ways to pay on it. And I may never know which one is right. But that's ok. Because it's not really a debt you can fully pay off. Not by yourself, anyway.

The sentence in this prison is to dismantle the prison. And I know I don't have the strength to do that on my own. So for the rest of my life, I am resigned to chipping away at the bricks nearest me. And maybe, at least I hope this to be true, the more light I let through these bricks, the more others will pitch in to chip away at the ones nearest them.

For that reason, I do not want absolution. I want to live inside the walls, because I need to live with what I've done. Living with it influences everything I do going forward. It reminds me how easy it is to produce another brick, far easier than chipping away at one.

I can't tell whether this all sounds too optimistic, or optimistic at all. Or whether it's just something to make myself feel, at least for the few minutes I'm writing this, less alone and purposeless. Either way, I'm committing to believing it.

You often hear about gang members or white supremacists getting out of prison or getting out of the life, and having certain tattoos removed. Sitting for hours and hours, over weeks and months. Having those symbols effaced or needled over. Makes you wonder, just because the formality is

gone, if you ever really escape it. Or if those tattoos are still there, in your mind.

I never went as far as to get the tattoos, of racism. Of sexism, or homophobia. Of classism. Or any other kind of violence. But for how far I did go, they feel like tattoos nonetheless. Ones that I will never not see, when I look at myself in the mirror. Like a ledger, taking up more and more space.

But that's ok too. I don't want to remove that ledger. I want those tattoos there, to remind me. That redemption is not a day to look forward to. It's just the process itself, of paying. And in this kind of prison, paying is all you have. It's what brings in the light through the walls. It's what makes the time move forward.

A Visitor - - September 29, 2019

“Hey! Wow, it’s so great to see you. And with this weather too.
It’s like the perfect day.
What’s been going on with you?”

“Confessions as *poetry*?”

“What was that?”

“Confessions as poetry.

I’m just trying to wrap my head around that.

I’m trying to wrap my head around how you can think what went down with us is some poetry.

You think that shit is poetry? You think that shit is beautiful? That shit hurt me. And now you’re making it all flowery and eloquent.

Fuck you.”

“I don’t think it’s beautiful. I don’t think it’s beautiful at all.
That’s not what I’m trying to do.”

“Oh, I know what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to make fucking money off other people’s pain. People like me.

And somehow you’ve convinced yourself you deserve any of that money. Do you know how fucking gross that is?”

“That’s not why I’m doing it. I’m not doing it for the money.

And you’re right. I don’t deserve the money. And I would love to share it with you if that would be ok.”

“I don’t want your money.

Oh my God, you think that’s what this is? I’m here for my cut?

Wow, you really are a piece of shit.”

“That’s not what I was saying. I was just...”

“You named your book ‘Earning My Confessions.’

Earning my confessions!

Well, I’ve got news for you. You didn’t earn shit.

You didn’t earn those confessions. *We* earned them. The people you hurt earned them.

And yet you think that shit is poetry.

Fuck you.

Do you know how fucked up you have to be to turn that into poetry?

That I have to read that in a fucking poem?

Do you know?

Of course you don't.

Because you're not even sorry."

"Yes I am. I promise you I..."

"No you're not. You're a piece of shit, just like you were back then."

"I swear to you. I'm not that person anymore. I've..."

"Yes, you fucking are. I know you are."

"No, I've changed. I promi..."

"You don't get to change.

You don't get to be somebody different.

I don't let you.

What do you think about that?

I don't forgive you.

In fact, I'm doing the opposite of forgiving you.

I say you can't move past that.

I won't allow you to change.

Because you don't get the say.

I get the say. And *I* say you'll always be that piece of shit.

How about that?"

"Please don't say that.

I promise you, I'm trying to be someone different than that.

I may not be all the..."

"No.

I don't care what you're trying to be.

You'll always be what you did."

"I know that. You're right. I'm always going to have that with me.

But that's why I'm doing what I'm doing.

I can't change what I did to you or any of those other people.

And I don't know how to make you whole.

Because the truth is I probably can't.

But I know that that doesn't mean I don't still owe something.

And the only thing I feel like I can pay is what I owe to those who could be hurt by someone like me, like I was back then.

I owe them trying to do whatever I can to bring attention to all the fucked up ideas and mindsets and societal circumstances and bad choices and being a coward and everything else that let me do any of that shit, so maybe just maybe I can help stop that shit going forward. So someone else doesn't have to feel the way I made you feel.

That's why I'm doing it this way. That's why I did it as poetry. Because just doing these as stories or essays or straight descriptions doesn't always allow people the same space to look at themselves.

But art does. Art gives you that space to reflect and look inward and make certain connections that might help you interrogate your own feelings and beliefs and actions. And by finding a kind of art in spotlighting what went wrong with me, I want people to reflect on their own understanding of who they are, so maybe they don't *have* to go wrong."

"That sounds really great and all.
But I don't buy it.
Because you *didn't* have to go wrong.
You just did."

"I know I did. And you're right. I can't do anything to have made it *not* happen.

All I can do is try to find some kind of better contribution going forward, maybe not necessarily to balance it out, but to at least do something rather than nothing.

And to let you know that I am truly sorry."

"I'm not saying you're not sorry.
I know you're sorry. You told me you were sorry back then.
And just like then, I don't accept it.
And that's what I'm leaving you with.
You're not forgiven. And you never will be.
I don't care if everybody else gives you that.
I don't.
Because that's what I have. And you can't do anything about it."

"Look, I completely understand that you have every..."

"No.

You can't talk yourself out of this. You can't use a bunch of clever words and make it all just disappear.

I'm not some fucking poem that you can write my ending however you want me.

Fuck you, confession as poetry.
Fuck you.
That's my poetry.
And this is my poetic justice."

"Wait, where are you going?
You don't have to go. We can..."

"I told you. I don't care what you've got to say.
And I ain't got nothing *left* to say.
So you can sit here and keep wasting your breath, but I got better
things to do."

"Please come back. Let me figure out a way to make it up to you."

"Have a nice day..."

"Please. Come back.
Please."

The Doctor - - April 30, 2017

“I remember a few years ago I attended this kind of social justice adult summer camp retreat type thing. And it was only about 30 people or so there, maybe 40. But, anyway, there were these kids there that couldn’t have been but like 18, 19. I think one was even 15. And these kids were not only super bright but they had all this knowledge and theory and analysis that I was still trying to accumulate.

A lot of this stuff had taken me forever just to process; some of it I was still trying to grasp. And here they are, right out of high school, already mastered that shit.

And I ain’t gonna lie. My ass was jealous. Seriously. But it was weird, because it was like this conflicted jealousy. I was so proud of them for being who they were and having come so far in such a short time and thinking what a totally knockout future they had ahead of them. And, at the same time, it took everything in me not to be mad about it. Maybe not mad at them, but just mad that I couldn’t have had that.

I think about how much it would have changed my future if I’d been *where they were* at that age.

My whole life would have been different.

My whole goddamn life.”

“Did you feel resentment toward them?”

“Yeah. Kind of.

I mean I don’t even think it was a real resentment for them as much as it was like this resentment for how little guidance I had growing up.

We didn’t have anybody in our life to show us what things could be like. We were just a bunch of morons running around trying to get laid. And it’s like the older kids and adults in our lives just seemed to be either checked out or just as messed up as we were.

And it kills me to think about how different things might have been if I would have just had somebody in my life to turn me onto Howard Zinn or bell hooks, or even just turn me onto the right questions.

I think about that all the time.”

“You sound like you’re describing a victim.”

“You mean, do I consider myself a victim?”

“Do you?”

“Not in the traditional sense of how we use the word. But more in terms of being ugly, and not ugly looks-wise, but like when you’re a terrible person but you have no idea what you look like and it’s just sad. More like that.

You know what I’m talking about? When you see someone who’s super messed up and they don’t even know it and you want to say, ‘I feel sorry for you.’ Or when you see a boy who’s six or seven using all these awful racial slurs or calling girls whores and bitches, and all you can think is, ‘who did this to him?’

And it’s like I look at the kid I was, and yeah, he may not have been as awful as all that, but I see how confused and wrongheaded and sure of himself as he was doing all the wrong things. And I think, ‘who did that to *him*?’

And yet I know who did it.

It was all of us.

It was my friends, it was my family, it was my school, it was my church, it was everything. It was the movies we were going to see and the music we were listening to. It was the news my old man made me watch. It was what I was watching on TV in my bedroom. It was every two to three minutes of commercials that played every five to seven minutes in between all of it.

And when I say music and movies, I’m not even talking about the violent or sexist lyrics we were singing along to or the T&A films we grew up on or any of that. Because I feel like pointing to that stuff is cliché and really misses the bigger point.

I think more about a film like Full Metal Jacket.

I remember a couple years ago making a friend of mine watch it who hadn’t ever seen it. And she was blown away by it, and we had this big talk about it afterwards. And we talked about how it was probably one of the best, if not the best, anti-war movies we’d ever seen.

And I had to tell her that when I saw that movie in the 80s, when I was a kid, it actually made me want to go enlist.

That’s how thick the atmosphere was with the Cold War and all its bullshit macho patriotism. It was so ubiquitous and powerful, I didn’t even get the anti-war message. That’s how much shit had been shoveled into our brains, that I watched that movie and thought, ‘yeah, I want to be a part of that.’

And the thing is, I get it. Why would I have thought anything different? We didn’t have any media literacy classes in school. My history and social studies classes were a complete joke.

I heard they used to actually have a critical thinking class at my high school, but they canceled it the year I came in.

And yet I know how rebellious I at least thought I was at the time, how hungry we all were to challenge authority. Yet we didn't have any frame of reference to help steer that youthful instinct, no nuanced outlet to channel any of that rebellious suspicion.

So at a time when we should have been tearing up the instructions and putting our youth to the test, instead we were just dummies out looking to get laid."

"There really wasn't anyone?"

"I had a couple teachers who I think made a difference as far as the examples they gave me. But even they were just so weighed down with teaching and with their own lives that I wouldn't expect them to do a whole bunch extra to try and be some kind of savior to a kid who was already disrespectful to them all the time anyway.

And, see, I don't even want to put it just on the teachers or the school. Because, like I said, it was everything. The culture of everything that we grew up in was just as much a part of it.

And I say that because I know it wasn't just me. It was that way with everyone I knew.

At that time, at least where I was coming up, we weren't the exception. We were the rule.

And if you took all these cultural messages and lessons we were receiving at the time, and you actually saw an adult telling a child those things today, you would consider that child a victim and that adult an awful person. Except it wasn't just one adult. It was the whole fucking world we knew.

It was all of us.

And you're fed all this stuff all the time and yet somehow you're simply supposed to know it's all bullshit, without any guidance? That's ridiculous.

Of course you're going to be screwed up."

"Then why do you still feel guilt?"

You recognize all of this. And you're expressing that you feel, in your own way, like a victim, albeit an unconventional one. Yet you still feel this immense guilt.

Why?

You're a different person now. In fact, you're almost the opposite of who you were.

Why don't you think you can get past it?"

“That’s what I keep expecting you to tell me.
If I knew why, I wouldn’t feel it, would I?
And I wouldn’t be *here* either, doing this, with you.”

My best friend - - November 14, 2019

“To be honest, I’m a little surprised you’re so upset. You knew something like this was probably going to ha...”

“They had a fucking reward out for information. Like there was some kind of ongoing investigation. Like there was this crime they knew I must have committed but they just needed a witness to come forward.

How fucked up is that? Just think about the implications of that shit.

I mean who’s putting up the money? Where is the money for the reward coming from? Why are they putting up the money?

They’re putting up the money because they’re going to make money. Because this shit has become profitable.

And it’s not even that they really care about busting me; they just want to get the viewer and reader stats from it. There’s become a market now for this shit.

It’s fucking grotesque.”

“Yeah, but you helped create that market.”

“Not like this.”

“I know not like this, but I’m just saying. You kind of started it. They’re just running with it.”

“Look, I get what you’re saying. And maybe it would be different if this was the first story this person had done on me. But it’s not. It’s the seventh. It’s the seventh fucking story.

You know what that means? It means they assigned a fucking reporter to me, like my past was some kind of journalistic beat.

Think about that shit. You’ve got professionals who graduated from elite journalism programs getting assigned to the beat of bringing down nobodies like me.”

“But you’re not exactly a nobody anymore, are you?”

“Maybe so, but you think that shit is going to stop with me? Hell, no. If they’re going after people like me today, they’ll go after anyone. Anyone who dares to use their voice for anything. Eventually we’ll have Oppo research on everyone. Regular schmucks on their way to their boring-ass day job will hear their name on the radio getting called out for

some shit they said in a phone call to their ex-girlfriend when they were breaking up seven years ago.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little much?”

“A little much? What are you talking about?”

This is the exact same thing you and I just talked about a few months ago.”

“No, it’s actually not. When we had that slippery slope discussion before, it’s because it made sense to have it, at that time. But this time is different. You’re acting like this is some kind of travesty. And it’s just not.”

“They had a fucking *reward!*”

“I know they had a reward.”

“And she took the reward.”

“Don’t do that. You can’t be mad at her.”

“I can’t be mad at her for cashing in on the thing I’m getting criticized for cashing in on?”

“Don’t do that. You don’t know if that’s why she did it.”

“So why did she do it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she wanted to steer the narrative in case you ever did talk about it. Maybe she didn’t want to give you the satisfaction.”

“The satisfaction? What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“The satisfaction of telling a story that’s not just yours, but hers too.”

“Or, like I said, maybe she’s trying to cash in by beating me to the punch.”

“Maybe she is. But isn’t that kind of what you’re doing too? Trying to beat them to the punch?”

“Beat who?”

“Everybody. This whole culture of celebrity and surveillance. This whole phenomenon that, yes, you helped create.”

“Oh, I know I helped create it. The only reason anyone knows my name is because I keep calling *myself* out. And yet somehow I’m being accused of trying to hide my past, because I forgot one fucking thing, or that I hadn’t gotten around to it yet. Does that make any sense?”

And what if I don’t think something is worth talking about? Am I responsible for confessing everything I’ve ever done to everyone I’ve *never* met?”

“I don’t know, are you?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Why are you being such an asshole?”

“I’m the asshole? Listen to yourself.

The reason why you’re mad is not because you’re embarrassed or you’re ashamed. You’re mad because it could ruin the chance for future books. You’re mad because you can’t get the stuff out quick enough. Not because you need to get it off your chest, but because you need to keep relevant.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Sometimes, yeah.

I mean when you first started I knew what you were doing. But with some of the stuff you’ve done with this, I’m not always sure.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

You know me. You know me better than anyone.

I can’t believe you’re saying this.”

“And I can’t believe you can’t see what this is doing to you. You’re letting this stuff turn you into a jerk, someone we would have roasted before.

I don’t know when it happened or how it happened. At the beginning, I thought this was really all a good thing, and that you’d be able to just transition into something else. But then you stayed with it, and at some point it didn’t seem like you were really sincere anymore. It was like you were just racking up points.”

“Wow. Fucking wow.

It’s bad enough I have to catch it from the fucking twitter trolls; now I have to hear you tell me how bad a person I am.”

“Yeah, but it’s not just the trolls anymore.

There are like legit writers penning thoughtful articles, critiquing this whole phenomenon. And they’re right. This stuff has gotten out of hand.

It’s like that piece in *The Atlantic* I told you about that was covering that whole Reddit thing where racists were defending you for all the terrible stuff you wrote in *Monologues*. And then once that happened, other jerks started defending you for other things you were confessing about, saying that what you did wasn’t even wrong.”

“Yeah, I remember that. And I remember we talked about it, and I told you that I was disgusted that the one thing I’ve written that I’ve always wanted to get the least credit for all the sudden became the text du jour for all the assholes who I never wanted in my audience. And how telling it was that they hated all the stuff I was still proud of in that work.

Do you not remember that? Do you not remember me saying how grossed out I was? Do you not remember us talking about how it was like the people defending what I did in my confessions were mad that I wasn’t as ignorant as I used to be, which was about as intelligent as they cared to be?

Do you not remember us having that conversation?”

“I remember *us* having that conversation. I just don’t remember you having a public conversation about it.”

“But you know I can’t react to stuff like that. If I started reacting to every little thing that anybody said about me in a comment section or some web forum, it would never end. And then I’d get criticized for anything I didn’t react to. So it’s the same thing either way.

Besides, it was clear that I had already denounced all that shit. That’s the only reason they knew about it. It wasn’t like they were endorsing me. They were endorsing the words I had disavowed. I mean didn’t some of them actually attack me on Reddit for having apologized for those pieces?”

“Yeah, but that didn’t stop people from suggesting you might be ok with that kind of support. Clearly, I know you’re not. But that’s because I know you.”

“I disavowed the work! What else was I...”

“You disavowed the work, but you didn’t disavow them.”

“Because that’s what they want. They want me to get into this back and forth with them, so everyone can watch the tennis match. But I’m not playing their games.

I do my thing, and whatever people do with it is their thing.”

“You can say that. But it didn’t stop you from whining about the Atlantic reporter who wrote the story.”

“That’s because she didn’t even contact me for comment. I had to find out about it from you.”

“She didn’t contact you because it wasn’t just about you; it was about the whole subculture of confession trolling and shit-posting, and how toxic it was getting.”

“She didn’t contact me because she was trying to smear me, just like that asshole with the fucking reward.”

“Oh, yeah, they’re the same thing, totally. Everybody’s out to get you.”

“Are you saying these people aren’t trying to smear me?”

“How could they? You can’t smear a saint.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I think your celebrity is going to your head. And I feel like you’re buying into it.”

“Buying into it?”

“Yes, buying into it. I know you think this is a game to everyone else, but it’s kind of a game to you too, isn’t it?”

“This... is fucking crazy.

I cannot believe you would question my sincerity. You of all people.

How long have you been thinking this shit and not telling me? Obviously you’ve thought it for a while.”

“I don’t know. I guess I was hoping I was wrong and it would get better, or you would finally move on from it.”

“But you *are* wrong.

You don’t think I’m conflicted about any of this? We’ve talked about it a hundred times.

You think this is how I wanted it to go down, what I would be known for?

These are the things I didn’t ever want to be known for, and now I feel like they’re the only things I’ll be known for.”

“But you’re acting like this all happened *to* you. But it didn’t. You did this.

And, honestly, I’m kind of offended you’re expecting me to be like everyone else and go along with this tears of a clown routine, while ignoring it’s your circus.”

“So it’s all mine; it’s all my circus.”

“Yes, it is. And this is the price *you* were willing to pay to get people in the seats.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Tell me.”

“Well, for one thing, you can quit acting like you don’t know what’s going on around you. Part of the reason you’re getting so much flak for this is because of what it’s all become. And because of how quiet you are about it.

Seriously. You want to talk about a market? People are confessing like it’s a competition now. Have you watched any of these shows? Have you seen any of these videos? There were more confessions posted on YouTube this year than proposal videos. People are doing confessions on TikTok. People are doing confessions now, solely in the hopes that someone will make them into a meme. You’ve got influencers doing confession selfies. Confession selfies.”

“You know I don’t pay any attention to that stuff.”

“Yeah, but you’re aware of it. You know about it. I tell you about it all the time.

Yet when that Rolling Stone reporter asked you about it two months ago...”

“When he asked me about it, I said that I was trying to do my own thing, and that I couldn’t help it how the industry tried to mimic my work.”

“No, you said, ‘I know the industry has mimicked my work, albeit with slightly less integrity.’”

“I didn’t say ‘slightly.’ I said ‘less integrity.’”

“Are you listening to yourself?”

“What? I said ‘less integrity.’ What do you want me to do, denounce everyone else who’s not doing it the exact same way I’m doing it?”

“But it’s not just what they’re doing. It’s what you’re doing. This isn’t like the beginning.

You’re doing photo shoots now. Your ads show up on my Facebook feed.”

“That’s an algorithm. Those aren’t things that I have control over. You think I make those decisions? I mean the photo shoots, yes. But when it comes to all that marketing shit, I don’t know what they’re doing. That’s their thing.”

“But it’s not their thing. It’s your thing. And the fact that you’re sitting here arguing with me over whether or not you really...”

“Ok, I get it. I get what you’re saying.

I know how absurd everything has gotten. I can see how cheap and insincere the packaging of all this looks. But I just don’t have a say in everything. I don’t.

But I’m fucking telling you, with everything around me that *is* disingenuous, the only thing I still have, the only thing I can keep control over, is the words and what I’m saying. And that is as sincere today as it was the first time I did this in group.”

“Maybe you think that. But I don’t know. And I don’t know if it’s been like that for a long time.”

“So tell me, when did I stop being sincere?”

“The moment you became good at it.

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Are you there?

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Lonnie?"

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.
(crying) "I'm here."

"I'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry, if that's how you feel."

"It's not like I want to feel this way, but I also don't want to lie to you. And I feel like I've been lying for a while by not bringing it up."

"So what do I do? I've got all these commitments now.
What do I..."

"I'm not saying you have to drop out. I just want you to try and be more self-aware with everything and try and find a way to have more choice and more control over stuff.

I know you're not calling all the shots. But you're calling some of them.

And it seems like we always talk about the thousand different ways the strangers dissect your confessions. But we never talk about why you're actually confessing, not anymore.

It's almost like what you're doing has become confession absent real apology, where you're just asking forgiveness of the strangers.

And I know what you're thinking. I know we've talked about real forgiveness before. And I understand where you're at with all that.

I'm just saying that when it comes to the confessions, there's a lot more to it than what you're doing. And what you're doing right now is not what you set out to do, and it's definitely not what you did at the beginning."

"You're right. And I've known it for a while and I didn't want to admit it. But you're right. And I'm going to try and do better. I really am. But I'm going to need your help."

"Of course."

"No, I mean it."

"I mean it too."

"Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me. That's what I'm here for."

"I know, but still. I don't even know what any of this would look like if you weren't there to share it with."

"Well, you're welcome."

"No, I'm serious. I mean that."

"I know you do. And I didn't mean to be so harsh."

"No, it's what I needed."

"Good.

Now get yourself together so we can go through some of these tweets."

"Ok, ok. No more blubbing.

Hang on.

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Ok, let's do it."

The Group - - July 13, 2017

“If everyone would take their seats, please.

Great. Now, before we begin, let me just say that this is a place of trust. What is spoken here will be respected for the trust it offers, and all words shared in this space are a matter of mutual confidence.

Ok, let me see... Who hasn't gone first in a while?
Hmm.

Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?”

“Sure.”

“Great, go ahead.”

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“I went to an engineering school my first semester of college. It took me less than a month to recognize I wasn't cut out to be an engineer. Lucky for me, a couple of the guys in my dorm were guys I knew from Nashville, so I at least had somebody familiar to hang with while I waited to transfer. And other than it feeling like a waste of time, the semester was relatively uneventful. I had a few laughs and went to a couple good parties. I even came close to pledging a fraternity. After that, most of my time was spent in the basement computer lab of the campus library writing bad poetry and corny song lyrics.

Unlucky for me, the biggest memory I have from that time isn't for what I did there. It's for something I didn't do.

I remember he was a student. He worked in the cafeteria, and he was chatty. The kind of guy that would try and learn everyone's name. You would tell him what you wanted on your plate and he would tell you what was on his mind, like you'd been friends forever and he was just picking back up where you'd left off last time.

Of course, he knew it wasn't like all that. He was just a nice guy. A nice guy who, even if it was for just a few seconds, wanted to engage you and send you on your way having had someone be nice to you.

If only we'd taken it that way. Which is a bit like saying if only we had grown up in a different time. Which is a bit like saying if only we were responsible for our actions. If only if only if only.

He was what we used to call flamboyant. Meaning what we mistook for an almost feminine pretense of exaggerated cheerfulness was really just an absence of pretense for being tough or macho.

In any case, sometimes that outgoing cheer veered a tad on the flirty side. As it did one particular time a couple weeks before the Christmas break.

He'd always been a little extra chatty with Raymond. Which makes sense, because Raymond was tall, good looking, and built like a brick shithouse. Though, at the time, none of us, Raymond included, could figure out why he singled him out for the comment.

Raymond wasn't gay. In fact, according to all the stereotypes and whatnot, he seemed about as far away from gay as you could get. It never entered our minds that this guy was doing exactly what we were expected to do with every girl we thought was pretty, regardless of whether she might be interested in you, regardless of whether she might be interested in guys.

And it's weird, looking back. Realizing the very thing that set it all off was something I now admire about the guy. A kind of assuredness I needed more of at the time.

Anyway, that day at lunch, he was asking us all what we wanted for Christmas as we moved through the line. But when it came Raymond's turn, he didn't ask. Instead, he gave him the biggest smile and said, 'Oh, I already know what Santa's going to bring you. Santa's going to put a lump of cooooooal in your stocking.'

Raymond's face turned beet red, while everyone else fell out laughing. 'A lump of coal in your stocking.' We wore that line out. That is, until it turned into something other than a harmless jab.

Raymond and his roommate were buddies with an older student at the college, someone they'd gone to high school with. I'd met him a few times and knew him to be a bit of a wild card. Funny, but kind of unpredictable. Of course, when you're that age, those kinds of traits translate into cool.

Sometimes, he would catch lunch with us. Other times, he would come over to the dorms and hang. I can't remember if he was in line with us when it happened or if he was just in the room one time when we were teasing Raymond about it. Either way, that's where it took off. Raymond's dorm room. And Darren's the one that took it there.

Maybe it was because they had both been at the school longer than us, but Darren seemed to know a lot about the guy. He said he was in a fraternity that was supposed to be the fraternity where the gay guys pledged. And somehow, I assume through a student directory or something, he'd gotten a hold of his number.

Anyway, the comment he made to us was, 'Wouldn't it be hilarious if we called him and set up a late night date with him out in one of the courtyards or something, and then when he showed up we beat his ass. For real, that shit would be hilarious. We oughta do it.'

And although the laughs got low enough that 'we oughta' turned into 'I'm gonna,' there were still enough of them that Darren reported back the next week that he had followed through with the first part of his hilarious 'what if.'

Now, I can tell myself that I didn't think he was really going to do it, that I thought he was just talking shit, that I didn't even believe he had made the call. And I can also tell myself that I was right. Darren joked about it another time or so, and then let it fade out as just that. A joke.

But what it ended up as was his choice, meaning we had allowed it to be his choice, meaning I had allowed it to be his choice. And that's where I can't let it end.

Because, no matter how good my hunch was about Darren, the truth is I didn't really know if he was joking or not. Just by myself, I'd seen multiple instances where jokes had turned into guys getting fucked up worse than you can imagine. Not to mention my father always telling me how there was plenty of prison cells sheltering guys who could tell you how easy ass whippings can escalate into all sorts of unintended consequences.

So no matter what kind of shit-talker Darren seemed to be, if there was even the slightest chance he could have made good on his plan, I had full responsibility to do everything I could to either convince him not to do it or to put a stop to it in some other way.

But that's not what I did. I just stayed quiet and wagered someone else's physical and mental well-being on how well I did or didn't know the guy who thought it would be hilarious to beat a man into the ground for the sin of requiring affection.

It's funny, or maybe not funny, how open-minded you think you are when you're not. I was always the guy who would give you shit for using *too many* racial slurs. I even had a heart-to-heart talk with a friend of mine one time over why he was so overtly racist. I remember asking him if he'd ever had a substantive conversation with a black person before, and if not how he could make such judgments about people he'd never even spent time with. He said, 'I don't have to. I just know.'

It never occurred to me that I was doing the same thing with my homophobia. Or at least almost the same thing.

My friend may have had real antipathy for black people, but he at least knew they existed. He knew about slavery, he was aware of their struggle for rights, however twisted that understanding may have been.

I, on the other hand, had never met anyone who was out. There was a time when I wasn't even sure if being gay was a real thing. I thought it was just an over-the-top insult, like being the ultimate sissy or something. I barely had any understanding of my own sexuality, much less a whole other group of people's.

And rather than correct my lack of knowledge, rather than opt for being curious in the chance that I might just be wrong and there might just be an entirely new story of human struggle and human beauty to discover, I instead followed the lead of every other fake tough asshole who bragged about his own sexual prowess and used homophobic rhetoric to point out difference or weakness.

For all my shortsightedness revolving around race, I can say with fair certainty that I would have spoken up, and forcefully so, if Darren had been talking about setting up some black guy who thought he was going to meet a white girl in the courtyard late at night.

But just like I never called my friends out in high school for using the most grotesque homophobic language, the most opposition I offered Darren was the reservation evident in my slightly muted laugh.

Of course, now, when I come across people who are still as backwards as I was then, it's hard not to see them as almost living on another planet. Because, in a way, they are.

Yet I think about how many choices I made, many more than the one I'm confessing to right now, that endorsed such thinking. And how although I may have not helped create any of those planets, those planets are still spinning. And they're still spinning because I, and people like me, have made decisions to help keep them going.

As you can tell by the story, I don't remember the guy from the cafeteria's name. But I often think about him, and about how close I could have come to knowing it and never being able to forget it.

That was 1993, five years before Matthew Shepard."

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"All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to..."

Yep, he's looking. Never fails.

Why does he always have to sit next to me?

Here it comes.

(whispering) “Hey, that was really great. I just wanted you to know that.”

Just nod and smile.

“...and respect throughout.

Now that we’ve gotten the ball rolling, is there anyone who would like to volunteer to go next?”

“I will.”

“Great, go ahead.”

Chapter Four

(But right now, there's still trees out there.)

Excerpt from *A Good Kid and His Ghosts*

I told my friend in a diner one time that I wanted to be a good person, or at least a better person. She said, “Why all the wanting? Why not just be it?”

I told her that I had too many skeletons I hadn’t dealt with. She said, “You don’t have skeletons. You have ghosts. Skeletons you try to hide. Ghosts are what you keep telling everyone about, but they don’t believe you. Because they can’t see it.”

And then she said, “You know everybody’s got a ghost or two, out there. Your problem is that you want to be haunted. You may think you want to be free of them. But what you really want is to fear them, and to pay.”

After giving it some thought, I told her maybe she was right. But that maybe mine weren’t your typical ghosts.

The ghosts I watched and read about growing up were always trying to get you to leave a certain place. But I felt like mine wanted me to go back to the place they were from. My ghosts weren’t people who had died. They were moments, that never died.

It’s like a beautiful memory. Once you’ve stolen that moment and made it eternal, you can go there again. No matter how far you’ve strayed from that place, a certain sight, a certain smell, a certain song can bring you back, put you there, not in the moment, but inside the feeling you had in that moment.

My ghosts are like that. And even though they scare me from all sanity, I don’t run from them, not anymore. I may still hide on occasion, but I no longer run. I just don’t see the sense in it. Mine may not be typical, but they’re still ghosts. And all ghosts are from the past. And though the past stays still, you always think it’s right behind you.

As I’ve gone on, and thought about that conversation, I’ve come up with all kinds of variations on the thesis.

Maybe these aren’t the kinds of ghosts that are accidental. Maybe these are the kinds of ghosts that are nurtured.

We’ve traditionally thought of ghosts as not wanting to be ghosts, as having a mission and then maybe they won’t be ghosts anymore. But maybe these ghosts are simply the worst parts of our human potential, the superstitions and corrupting ideologies that for centuries have destroyed our connection as people. And their only job, each generation, is to stay alive for one more generation.

Maybe that’s the reason why I’ve had such a hard time identifying these ghosts. Because I have believed they were mine only. But maybe they’re not just mine. Maybe they’re all our ghosts. Maybe they’re less

peculiar than I thought, and mine is the same challenge as everyone else who believes in restoring that human connection. To first see them for what they are, and to then resist them and make others aware of such a presence. All in hopes, that maybe each generation will have less of such a presence, until one day they'll all just be stories. Like ghosts should be.

Or maybe I'm a fraud and I just can't see it. Maybe I'm the ghost haunting everyone else. Haunting everyone I've wronged, with this ridiculous confession career I've concocted. Maybe I'm trying to take away their memories, and replace them with my own. Maybe I'm trying to take away their agency, and make them no more than props in my guilt quest. Maybe I'm trying to make my past their past, and rob them of any say in my reckoning.

Isn't that the other thing that ghosts do? They either try to drive strangers out or bring about some sort of reckoning?

Maybe that's all I need. An honest reckoning.

I've often wished I still had the faith in forgetting that sinners who become believers have. I know they call it forgiveness. But maybe I can't forgive who I was, because there never seemed like there was a reckoning, outside of the shame I carried.

Or maybe *this* is my reckoning. All of this not knowing. All of this searching and finding nothing. No prescription for punishment, no set time to look forward to getting out, no bounds set by mercy or decency. Just whatever my imagination can produce, for however long my subconscious deems fit.

Maybe my friend was right after all. Maybe I do want to pay. Maybe paying is all I have. Maybe I don't want to be rid of them. Maybe I want to fear these ghosts, in that I want to fear myself. Maybe I'm the ghost, and I'm just haunting myself.

Is that possible?

Can ghosts haunt themselves?

Or maybe all of this is just me being self-serving. Trying to make myself feel better. Trying to make you feel sorry for me, or at the very least preempt your scorn. Maybe the ghosts are just a gimmick.

I don't know.

The only thing I can tell you for sure is that I'm trying to figure it out, and I'm trying to be a better person.

And I am perpetually scared I won't be able to realize, either.

The Group - - March 27, 2017

“If everyone would take their seats, please.

Great. Now, before we begin, let me just say that this is a place of trust. What is spoken here will be respected for the trust it offers, and all words shared in this space are a matter of mutual confidence.

Ok, let me see... Who hasn't gone first yet?
Hmm.

Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?”

“Sure.”

“Great, go ahead.”

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“In 2001, I wrote *Monologues for a Dialogue: Whites and Blacks and the Living Philosophy of Racism*, a series of spoken word pieces I performed at poetry spots around Nashville for about a year or so before I put them all into a book.

I can say that I intended, with this work, to offer suggestions on how to combat racism. But that's not really what it turned out to be. It's almost hard to describe what the project was. And I feel like, to make sense of it, I'd have to describe what was going through my mind to make me think it was a good idea.

The problem is that kind of remembering is difficult. It almost feels like you're speculating. That person seems foreign to me now. And to learn what I need to from him takes more honesty than most of my confessions demand.

Before I got the idea for *Monologues*, I had written a couple books of poetry and a novel. Self-published for family and friends and whatnot. Nothing really worth a shit. Just good concepts and bad writing. But it got me disciplined, and serious about the value of a good question.

The first theme I really planted my feet in was religion. The second was racism.

I'd been a fundamentalist evangelical for most of my childhood. And once I made the decision to no longer consider myself such, it left me quite a bit to say on the subject.

Similarly, I'd been as racist as most white children coming up around me. And though this too eventually left me quite a few anecdotes to draw from, when it came to this particular subject it wasn't as simple as just declaring you no longer considered yourself one.

That is to say, none of my grievances concerning religion were of the tenor that would actually further my old church's cause. With racism, it was a tad more complicated.

Part of it had to do with the fact that, in those early years of writing, I was more interested in provocation and contrarianism than truly grasping my subject matter.

Arrogant and self-centered, I thought a lot about what I already understood. And because I was such a deep guy, impressing all my friends with the deep questions I was always asking, *that* was all the understanding I needed.

Like so many young writer wannabes who couldn't be bothered to read, I thought I had something to say but couldn't be bothered to listen.

I wrote *Monologues* as my two cents in the fight against racism. I just couldn't tell that one of those pennies was racist as fuck.

I was originally inspired to write all this because I thought I could offer insight into the racist mind. I know, I know. The irony is almost too heavy to point out.

Anyway, I'd heard white people say so many things that I knew they would never say in front of black people, I thought those kinds of candid conversations would make for good examining. And because racists have a tendency, or at least they used to, of assuming all white people think just like them, I had a lot of material to work with.

And although some of it was a bit trite, the stuff I wrote about white people and the artistic package I put that writing in wasn't actually half bad. I think a lot now about how I could have ended it, right there. Because it was a spoken word project, it didn't really have to be that long. I could have just stopped there and had what I had wanted from the beginning, a solid contribution to the fight against racism.

But I didn't stop there. Instead, I proved how right I was about racism and willful ignorance in a way that I wouldn't comprehend for years.

I remember telling people, when the book was done, part of it criticized white people, part of it criticized black people, and part criticized both. That was my pitch. Evenhandedness. I thought it was easy for white people to criticize white people. I thought my willingness to criticize black people lent me a certain credibility. After all, I had been performing those pieces in front of black audiences for the past few months, with almost no substantial objections. In fact, the only real pushback I got was from white audiences. And contrasting the hostile and sometimes even violent

responses I got from white people with the literal embraces I received from black people, it was easy for me to pitch myself the same line.

Even still, I should have known it was a lie, or at least wrong. But because it felt good to have those pieces at least physically applauded by black audiences, it took me years more honesty and self-examination to see that those pieces weren't really written for black people. They were written for white people. That's the credibility I was seeking. It was to make the work as a whole more palatable for white people.

Hoping white people would see my critique of black people and then take more seriously my effort to debunk racist thinking, I couldn't see that one ended up negating the other. My criticism of white people was actually about racism. My criticism of black people didn't have anything at all to do with racism. Instead, it read like some kind of tough-love self-help bullshit. As if I was any authority on what they would consider self.

It was basically that pull-up-your-pants routine. Which was bad enough when rich black people peddled it. Coming from me, it was downright absurd.

So why did I think I could pull it off? Why did I think I was in the right to say those things, or even more, that I should say those things?

Because I, like most white kids who have spent any considerable amount of time around black kids, thought I was family.

But not only was I not family, I was barely even a good neighbor.

I was kind of like the neighbor who's more nosy than concerned but thinks in their heart that they mean well, and that's why they're always giving you their advice. Because in the end, they believe they understand your business better than you do.

Now, to say it took me numerous steps to get to this realization and its resulting condemnation would be an understatement. It was more like climbing an escalator the wrong way up.

Not too long after its release (I assume you can call a self-published work a release), I added a disclaimer to the beginning of the book, technically making it a kind of second edition. Which is just perfect, seeing that I had been so proud of myself for having originally released it without one. I had always been ridiculously neurotic about qualifying my work. But not this time. I even had a page reserved in the original, at the beginning, that nakedly stated 'No disclaimers' on it. That's how sure I was.

Luckily, I had left the next page blank in that original version. Meaning I had two full pages I could replace without having to change the page count of the entire book and upping what it cost me to print them. I now see that calculation as a good representation of how much I actually cared about getting anything right.

Because, wouldn't you know it, I was able to fit all I needed to say in just under two pages. Besides, it wasn't *really* a disclaimer. Just an innocent 'dear reader' note, that I *had* to write.

The funny thing was, no one asked me to write it. At some point, I just knew I had to. I couldn't just let it sit the way it was.

But rather than dive into why I felt the need to offer any clarification, which would have meant risking finding out how thoughtless I actually was, I opted for the coward's non-apology apology. Basically the kind of nonsense you write when you're not sorry but you need to say something. Regretting if people were offended but by no means regretting 'my honesty.' Shit like that.

About midway through, I actually wrote the words, 'I believe the truth has no color.' How rich, right? In a book meant to aid in resisting racism, I had to write a cover-my-ass piece with the words 'I believe the truth has no color.' I might as well have pulled out that post-racial routine and said, 'I don't see color.'

Having gone back through my leftover notes from that time period, I can see just how resentful I was, almost hatefully so, to feel the need to write even this half-ass disclaimer. I wanted my words to stand, but I couldn't ignore that there was more at play than my original good intentions. I wanted to be right so bad, but not enough to seek out what right was.

A few years after that, after having adopted a radical analysis of white supremacy and institutional racism, I was finally willing to take that dive. And what I found when I did was so upsetting that I wrote another piece to be added onto the end of the book, essentially creating a third edition.

This time, however, there was some substance. A multi-page essay picking apart all the things I had gotten wrong. All the reasons I shouldn't have written over half the book.

And even from where I'm at now, I can look back and see that the piece was relatively solid. It read like an honest confession, and it offered a real apology.

I later followed that up with an online piece expanding on the critique. And if I wanted to do so, I'm sure I could write a whole lot more, maybe for the rest of my life.

And yet, if I'm to be truly forthright with you, those addendums, no matter how substantive, were also meant to serve as a kind of insurance policy. Something I could point to in case somebody stumbled upon the book years later or an old copy resurfaced down the road.

Because, remember, no one asked me to write them either. I just felt I needed to. Not to say that it was phony, or that the apology wasn't

heartfelt. It was heartfelt. But I would be lying if I told you I didn't also see the choice to write those pieces as a proactive one.

Eventually, I pulled the book from the printer altogether, leaving only the two substantive critiques of it online. Not really to hide what I had done, but more so to showcase what ended up being after all a quite sober analysis of racism.

I've often fantasized about being a professor, examining where I went wrong with that project, using the book as a case study on good intentions and white privilege. I'm sure I could do a whole semester on it easy.

But that, like the critiques themselves, would be about what I learned after, and it would mostly benefit those who weren't there at the time.

And as much as I might feel the urge to spend the next few hours running through the same points I made in those critiques, going to all the places I wish I hadn't gone, that's not what this confession is really about.

This confession is more about the folks in those poetry joints. The people who showed me affection and allowance.

And I know it might seem strange for people to imagine a room full of black folks embracing me as I did those pieces, if they were in fact as insulting as I've suggested.

But it's because I was doing the pieces individually, and not as an explicit component of the project's overarching theme.

Or let me put it another way.

Not once did I sit down with any of my friends from those poetry spots and talk to them about the work as a whole. I never asked them for their advice or their input. I never asked them if these things fit together. I never asked them if I was right.

I shared so many good nights and good conversations and good times with the poets in those venues. I consider the energy and support those crowds gave me when I was up on stage to be among the most gratifying experiences of my life.

And still I couldn't see that, by juxtaposing pieces damning white supremacy with pieces alleging certain shortcomings in the black community, I was actually legitimizing white supremacy. And even though it's not what I believed, I might as well have been telling them, racism is bad, but in the end, it's still your fault.

And that's what I mean when I say that I wasn't anything close to being family. Still, when I was in those spaces, their spaces, they treated me as such. Even if they disagreed, even if they saw me as misguided, they extended me an overwhelming tolerance.

After all, they knew from my pieces railing against white supremacy that my heart wanted to be in the right place, even if my head hadn't found the way.

Plus, it must have been a trip to see this country-ass white kid standing in the middle of a room full of black people spending half his time on the mic thinking he was telling them about themselves. And whether they saw those specific pieces as naïve or hateful or maybe even right, they told me time and again they respected that I was willing to say it in front of them.

Of course, often it's not what's said. It's what's unsaid. And what was unsaid was the context of those pieces in regards to the whole they were a part of, and how that context changed the impact of those words from what I had sworn them to be.

And that lie is a lie I should have realized I was telling.

I was twenty-five years old when I wrote *Monologues*. I wrote it because I had been thinking about racism since I left high school. I wrote it because I wanted to make a difference and contribute to making things better.

If only I had pondered more deeply my time in high school, and the kids who gave me so much to build my life upon, I might have approached this work in a different way. One that wasn't so foolish as to believe I had anything to teach black people. And one that might have been authentic enough to change the minds of a few white people, achieving the contribution I had originally set out for.

Instead, there I was, close to a decade later, betraying an entirely new group of 'black friends.'

And now, just like high school, that time is gone. I can never make that up.

I can only try again, and keep trying forever, to make things better. I want to believe these confessions are a decent start.”

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“All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to...”

Yep, he's looking. Never fails.

Why does he always have to sit next to me?

Here it comes.

(whispering) “Hey, that was really great. I just wanted you to know that.”

Just nod and smile.

“...and respect throughout.

Now that we’ve gotten the ball rolling, is there anyone who would like to volunteer to go next?”

“I will.”

“Great, go ahead.”

The Interviewer - - January 03, 2021

“If you’re just joining us, I’m speaking with Lonnie Ray Atkinson, author of the new book *A Good Kid and His Ghosts*.

You were just describing how your doctor referred you to a support group that allowed people like yourself to confess things in an environment that is, well, how would you describe it?”

“I like to refer to it as semi-anonymous, expressly-confidential.

More than anything, it was safe. That’s what was important. That’s what I liked the most about it.”

“So you find this safe situation to get all this stuff out, hoping it will somehow help with the kind of mental health crisis you feel you’re experiencing.

How is it, for those who don’t already know the story, you start in a setting like that and end up on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*?”

“As I find myself saying a lot these days, ‘I didn’t plan for any of this.’

For a while, I was just happy being in group, making and listening to confessions. And I probably would have been just fine continuing to do that. I mean I’m not sure if I’d be better or worse mentally than I am now, but I know at the time it was really helping.

Then about two months in, someone in the group approached me and told me about this online group they had found out about that was this kind of a closed forum where people were doing the same thing we were doing, but with a lot more people in the group.”

“How many more people was it?”

“Our in-person group was always capped at 15 people, so any given meeting we might have twelve or so attending. But when I joined the online group, I think the first gathering was like 130 visitors. And they were from all over the place too.”

“And how many made confessions?”

“That first session, I think something like 38. It went on all night. I got tired and logged off before my friend’s turn came around.”

“You didn’t do anything that first time?”

“Oh, no. I didn’t do anything for a while. At first, I was like ‘hell no, I’m not getting on there.’

I almost didn’t want to sign on and watch.”

“Why not?”

“I just didn’t like that I was supposed to trust an outfit where I couldn’t immediately hold someone accountable.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Time.

I mean I was still really skeptical for the longest.

But after a while, I got so used to it. And when nothing crazy happened after so long, I guess it just seemed safe.”

“Because nobody could see who was doing what, right?”

“It was set up to be anonymous. And it was pretty simple for people to get on. You just downloaded the app, and the app did everything for you.”

“You were basically put in a queue.”

“First come first serve. All the confessions were live, so you’re just watching the other confessions while you wait for your turn.

It’s kind of like an open mic. Until you’ve gone up, it’s hard to focus on anyone before you, because you’re so nervous and you’re trying to get straight what it is you’re going to say.

Then finally it’s your turn, and you just set the camera on yourself and go for it.”

“And the app morphed your face into a set avatar, right?”

“That’s right. Everybody had the same avatar, basically so there was less way to identify people. The same thing with your voice. The app disguised your audio with some kind of sound rendering software. So aside from your mannerism or inflection, there wasn’t much way you could get found out.”

“So how did it go wrong?”

“Evidently, one of the people who started the app was super nervous that someone would use the platform to either confess something that *was* criminal or, worse, would announce something they were getting

ready to do, and that somehow the site would end up with a legal liability for it. So unbeknownst to us, or at least it was buried so far in the terms that I had no idea, the whole thing was being recorded. They now say it was only set up to record and then hold onto the recordings for a few hours in case something like that ever happened. And then as long as nothing did happen, the recordings automatically deleted within a certain set time.”

“And it just so happened yours was one of the recordings in that time frame that got hacked.”

“There was only about 70 of us, I think.”

“But even 70 is amazing, in terms of the odds.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s chance on top of chance.

It’s chance that, in all that time and all those people, you were in the group that got hacked. And then it’s also chance that, of all those 70 that were posted online without the filters disguising you, yours was the one that went viral.”

“There’s pretty much no way to make sense of it. It’s like the one thing I know from being in this industry is that no one can fully predict if, or explain why, something is going to go viral.

Because I remember watching a lot of the other confessions in that bunch. And I don’t think mine stood out from any of the rest.”

“It was like it was meant to be.”

“I don’t particularly like thinking in terms like that.

But I guess it was one of the most valuable coincidences of my life.”

“Ok, so it gets hacked, your confession goes viral. It’s kind of a big deal for a few weeks...”

“Not even that long.

It seems like that, but it was really only a few days that people paid any real attention to it. I mean there was traffic from straggler posts, but the real attention only lasted a week at the most.”

“But it was enough for you to get noticed by these producers.”

“If that’s what you want to call them. I’d probably call them something you’d have to edit out of the interview. But anyway, yeah, they told me they were aspiring producer/directors and that the project they were working on was super indie.

Of course, I didn’t know any better. I hadn’t been around productions before, so all I had to go on was what they told me.”

“And what did they tell you?”

“The director told me they were making a documentary series that explored the need to confess, especially confessions going back a long way.

They said the angle was that they had a handful of people they were filming like me, and each of us would be recorded giving three different confessions. And that a team of professionals would analyze everything and would then be interviewed for whatever it was they saw in what we were saying.”

“And you’ve said, the way you understood it, it was all supposed to be very scientific.”

“I guess social scientific or whatever. They made it sound totally legit. One of the people was supposed to be a big time psychologist. One was supposed to be a neuroscientist. And I think one was supposed to be some PhD in some ethical something or other.”

“And they told you this was a documentary?”

“Yes. I swear to you.

I know a lot of people don’t believe that and think I was in on all this from the very beginning, but I’m telling you, I had no idea what was actually going on.

They told me, and I’m assuming they told the others, that this was a documentary series project. Like the kind you might see on HBO or something. Even the name they told me sounded like something that would run on HBO. They said they were going to call it Confession Land. Of course, that’s not what it ended up. But that’s really all I had to go on.”

“In retrospect, were there any signs that probably should have tipped you off?”

“Yeah, in retrospect. I mean I should have seen what was going on all along. To think that anyone was going to do anything really high-minded or sincere with this was probably pretty stupid of me to begin with.

But for the most part, they just kept me in the dark about everything except for when and where they were going to record me.

There was this one moment, though, where I really should have known something was wrong. I had just finished my first story, and I heard one of the crew members laugh. And I remember thinking it was kind of unprofessional. And then I heard her whisper to another crew member, ‘Oh my God, he’s so earnest.’”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, I know, right? That should have been a dead giveaway. But like I said, I was so dumb and naive that I just thought she was being an asshole.”

“So what did you think when the first episode aired?”

“What do you think I thought? From the beginning, I was under the impression this was something that would end up on HBO or Netflix or something like that, because I thought it was supposed to be all serious.

So when I saw that it was coming on NBC, and they had changed the name to ‘I’m The Worst,’ I already had kind of an awful feeling about it. Then when I saw that opening 30 seconds and I realized what was going on, I felt like the whole world had just collapsed on me.”

“For anyone listening who didn’t see the show, what you thought was going to be the first episode of a serious documentary project called ‘Confession Land’ was actually the pilot episode for the reality competition show ‘I’m The Worst,’ where they taped different confessions and then had them critiqued by a panel of snarky judges similar to an American Idol program.

And then whoever won at the end of each program would go onto a semi-finals episode and so on. The idea being whoever got the most votes on the last episode would be crowned or labeled ‘The Worst.’”

“That’s why they had us film all three in advance. They knew no one in their right mind would agree to continuing on something like this once they saw how messed up it was.”

“I have to admit, when I saw a clip of the show after the first airing, I thought to myself, ‘My God, who would be ok with this?’”

“I would have thought the same thing. But then when I went back and read all the fine print of the releases I signed, there were these clauses that stated creative control rested with the producers and they reserved the

right to change the ‘presentational dimensions’ of the project and all this other legal mumbo jumbo that basically said once the record button was pressed I had no say in any of it.

Because I would have sued them in a second. That’s actually what I was thinking as I was watching the first airing, that I was going to sue these dudes into the ground. And then when I realized that I had been had and there wasn’t anything I could really do about it, I didn’t know what to do.

I seriously contemplated killing myself that whole night.”

“Oh. Well, I’m glad you didn’t do that.”

“I just felt really claustrophobic in those hours. I kept thinking, ‘How could I have let all this happen?’ I felt so stupid. And it was really this moment of me seeing for the first time all the steps that led up to it, and how it was like this hell of my own making. And I only had myself to blame.

I’m really surprised I didn’t lose it that night.”

“Wasn’t that also the night, though, that you were approached by a talent agent?”

“It was actually the next day. He had left me a message, and when I saw the message I was kind of amazed he was able to get my number, or at least that fast. It took me a few days to even call him back. I was kind of in shock that any of it was happening, and that someone thought it might actually turn out to my advantage.”

“And to think you almost didn’t make it through the night.”

“I know.

And I know how it sounds, but I really was in a dark place. Thinking how easily I had lost my grip by not recognizing from the beginning how absurd the whole thing was.”

“Little did you know, a pretty big door was about to open.”

“The absurdity roller coaster was just beginning.”

“That’s what I find the most fascinating about your story, considering the show was a total flop. I think it was gone after, what, three episodes?”

“Yep, three episodes. Thank God.

I don’t even want to think of how things would have turned out had it continued.”

“That’s what makes it all so amazing. The program itself is canned almost immediately. But the video of your initial confession for the show’s debut episode had actually caught fire online. I think it was viewed something like 30 million times within the first week. So after the show gets canceled, you’re the only thing left.”

“What can I tell you? I thought my life was over, like for real ruined. And then I just sat there and watched it all blow up online.”

“And within just a few months after, you’re one of the most googled people in the country.”

“Again, a lot of that you have to mark up to chance. The same as the viral video thing. Who knows why some stories catch on and others don’t? I mean some of it was plainly due to my agent’s decisions early on. He saw all the things I couldn’t see.”

“It’s interesting to hear you say that, seeing that you recently had a falling out.”

“I have to give him his due. For all our differences, I can’t deny how talented he was at what he did. He used to always say this was ‘his world,’ and he was really good at maneuvering in it. Especially in the beginning.”

“So let me see if I can get all this right. Between then and now you’ve put out two poetry books, *Ghost Poems* and *Earning My Confessions*; as well as two song albums, *Ghost Songs* and *Going through the pockets of clothes I haven’t worn in years*; you released a book of essays entitled *The Man Who Confessed Himself To Death: My Time in the Confession Industry*; you’ve given TED Talks; you did a stand-up comedy tour in addition to the Live Confession Tour that was sponsored by The Moth Storytelling Hour; you participated in two serious television series revolving around confessions, one with Vice and one with PBS; and just this last month, you did a Tiny Desk Concert.

I think that just about covers it. Is that right?”

“When you list them off like that, it sounds like I’m doing a lot more than I feel I am.”

“You don’t have to be modest. That is a lot.”

“I’ll just say it again. The credit for the opportunities really rests with my agent. He started lining up things almost immediately after our first call.”

“I remember those first few months after I’m The Worst; it seemed like in no time you were everywhere. Giving interviews, writing magazine articles; you were even on a couple late night talk shows.

And that was before you had actually released anything.”

“I think about how grossed out I was at how the creators of I’m The Worst could take our confessions and turn them into a competition, actually going as far as to give them scores. And I remember thinking how that was the height of exploitation.

And then *I* turned around and joined this new era of celebrities and social media gods who are famous for the sake of being famous and rode that same phenomenon to amass my own audience.”

“How do you feel about that now?”

“I don’t know. I imagine if you would have asked me if I would have been a part of all this, the way it went down, before it all happened, I would have probably laughed you out of the room.

But when it was offered to me by my agent, I realized that no matter how strange an opportunity it was, it was an opportunity nonetheless. And I might not ever get a chance like that again.

Am I proud how it initially went down? Absolutely not.

Did I make something out of it while trying my best to keep it out of the muck? Yes.

I know it didn’t always turn out that way, but I think in the end there was some really good work that came out of all this.”

“Do you believe you would do it again? With everything that it took to create your celebrity, with all the online hate that went along with it and the criticism that’s been thrown at you. With all the garbage that’s been attributed to your going about it the way you did, everything the entertainment industry vomited out once you proved confessions to be profitable.

Would you still return that phone call from your agent?”

“Hmmm. That’s a tough one.

Obviously, I would like to believe that I would do it differently if I had the chance, if just for all the things you mentioned. But the truth is, I hadn’t been able to make anything work with *any* of my creative endeavors before that.

So if you're saying the alternative is staying where I was at *before* and rolling the dice that someday I would make it, I don't know what to say. I know the odds of that really happening. I lived it. It's the reason why I took this leap in the first place.

I'd love to think I would have slogged it out and eventually made it on my own terms. But, again, that wasn't guaranteed. And what you're really asking is would I gamble going the rest of my life without finding an audience for all that I know is inside of me, all that I feel I have to offer.

Who knows? Maybe hindsight can make you wiser, but not necessarily stronger. Maybe hindsight after success can actually leave you weaker, and self-righteous.

I mean just look at me. After all this time, I still can't bring myself to do the right thing, even in a hypothetical."

A Visitor - - March 03, 2019

“Well, well, I have to say, it’s so great to see you. And with this weather too.

It must be the perfect day.
May I sit down?”

“Sure. I guess.”

“Thanks. This is a good spot you got here.
And it really is such a beautiful day.

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So tell me. What’s been going on with you?”

“I’m sorry, but do I know you?”

“I would hope so. You sat in my pews during the good part of your teenage years.”

“Wait. Who are you?”

“I’m Brother Daley.”

“*You’re* Brother Daley?”

“Last time I checked.
Why do you ask it like that?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I thought you had died.”

“If I did, nobody told me.”

“But that was almost thirty years ago.”

“Yes it was, and that’s why it’s so nice to find you here like this.”

“Look, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but what is this?”

“What do you mean? Can’t an old preacher stumble upon an old parishioner and just have a nice chat on a beautiful day?”

“I guess they can. It’s just that I really don’t know you. Not like really know you.

And, for that matter, you didn't know me back then either.
You might have been able to recognize me from the youth group
or from Wednesday night dinners, but you didn't know my name.

I don't even know if we ever had a real conversation other than
just greetings."

"Well, we're here now, and that's all that matters."

"No, but that's what I'm saying.

Why *are* you here?

You didn't just stumble upon me.

You found me.

Somebody must have told you I like sitting in this park or
something.

That's right, isn't it?"

"Ok, you got me.

You're right. I didn't just stumble upon you.

I'm here because I recently took on being the pastor at a new
church here in town. And I heard you lived in the area and thought it'd be
nice to invite you to our Sunday Service. It would be like having someone
from the proverbial old days sitting in my pews again."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, I am.

And I'm sorry about before. I should have just come up and re-
introduced myself.

I guess I wasn't sure how you'd take me.

I never saw you in church after you left for college, and I wasn't..."

"Yeah, well, there's a reason for that.

I mean I hate to disappoint you, but I got to be straight with you
here.

I'm not exactly a church-goer anymore, if you know what I'm
saying."

"That's ok. A lot of people who 'go' to church aren't exactly
'there,' if you know what *I'm* saying."

"And what makes you think I would want to be there?"

"Want' I don't know. Need is another thing altogether."

"Then what makes you think I need to be there?"

“Well, I may be a bit biased, considering the profession and all, but I tend to believe we all need to be there.

Don’t you ever feel a longing or yearning for something more in your life, or maybe an emptiness that you can’t seem to fill?”

“You mean like a sadness?”

“Yes, maybe a sadness.”

“You mean especially around Sunday?”

“If that’s when you feel it, then I would say that definitely suggests something.”

“All right, fuck you. I know what this is.”

“Wait, wait, hold on now.”

“You read that in the essay I wrote for Teen Vogue. That’s the only reason you would bring something like that up. I’m willing to bet that I was right, and that Brother Daley is dead. And that you’re just some lying sack of shit.”

“Wait, wait. Slow down. Just give me a second here.

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Now, I don’t know about the sack of you know what part, but you’re right about me not being that exact pastor. And I apologize about taking that liberty with you.

My real name is Brother Stanley, and I am actually a preacher here in town, and I would sincerely like to extend the invitation for you to join us in one of our Sunday Services.”

“What, so you can tell people you have a celebrity in your congregation? Boost your fucking numbers? Maybe take a picture and put it in your newsletter?”

“It’s not that at all.

Actually, we’re quite a meager congregation, and we prefer it that way.”

“Then what’s the scam?”

“No scam. Just, *like you said*, I read what you wrote, realized you lived in this area, and thought I’d make the effort to see if I could offer you a little assistance.

Because that is what you said, isn’t it? In that article. That you used to feel a certain sadness on Sundays?”

“That’s what I wrote, but that’s not what I meant. Not in the way you’re taking it anyway.”

“What do you think it is then? Why do you think it’s Sundays that get to you?”

“I think it was Sundays because that’s the day before I had to go back to work, and it reminded me that I couldn’t make a living from doing what I wanted to do, and that I may never be able to. And that I might have to stay in a job that didn’t fulfill me, struggling in a system that made absolutely no sense to me, in a world full of people that didn’t seem to act like they either noticed or gave a shit about any of it.”

“Maybe there’s something more than that.”

“You mean heaven?”

“I mean that I agree with you that this world is not what it should be *or it could be*. But that maybe the idea is not to be lost in it, but rather to find meaning in what comes after.”

“And you’re sure what comes after.”

“I’m not sure of anything. That’s what faith is for.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“No, the sinning is the simple part. Facing up to your sins? That’s the hard part. Ain’t that right?”

“You think you know me? Think you know who I am?”

“No, I don’t know. But I know what I see. Because I’ve seen it a thousand times over.”

“And what is it you think you see?”

“I see pain. I see pain born out of sin.

I see a man who knows he's a sinner but who's not ready to accept what else he is.

I see *what he sees* as unquenchable guilt.”

“You see unquenchable guilt.”

“Yes, sir, I do. I do indeed.

And I have to say, I'm a tad surprised you *don't* see it.

What do you think you're doing with all this?

It's evident you're looking for redemption.

But let me ask you something. Have you found it?

Have you found what you're looking for?”

“No. I have not. But that doesn't mean I won't.”

“If you keep looking for it the way you have been, I can assure you you never will.”

“What is it you think I'm doing wrong?”

“You're searching your sin, when you ought to be searching your salvation.”

“And you believe my salvation is in God.”

“God's son, to be precise. But as I know you understand the concept of the Trinity, yes, I think God will work for our purposes here.”

“Did you ever stop to think that I feel guilty about the stuff I did, the stuff I believed, *when* I was a Christian?”

“You were a young Christian. You were a young man.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means that the Devil puts specific temptations in our paths at the times he believes we're most susceptible to them.”

“So we're talking the Devil now. The Devil made me do it.

The Devil made me do all that stuff.

I'm sure that'll be quite a comfort to all the people I hurt.

‘Hey, it wasn't me. It was the Devil.’”

“No, it was you. The Devil just played his part.”

“And I fell for it.”

“We all fall for it at one time or another.

Contrary to how you might feel, I wouldn't say you've fallen any more or less than most.”

“Well, that is comforting, isn't it?”

“I would like to answer affirmatively, but I sense the sarcasm in your voice.”

“Oh you do, do you?

You think I'm being sarcastic? Think maybe I'm cynical?

This coming from the person who pretended to be a dead man just so he could take advantage of my past, and of my pain.”

“I understand if you don't think I'm the real thing. I certainly didn't approach you in a way that would have earned that kind of trust.

But your pain is real. You yourself said it.

And *that* I can help with.

I'm not asking you to believe me, not right now.

I'm just asking for a Sunday.”

“And you really can't see how arrogant that is. That you think you've got something I don't.

That you're in on the joke.”

“I can assure you, I don't think salvation is a joke.

And I know you don't think forgiveness is a joke.”

“How do you figure?”

“Did you ever think that maybe you're so burdened with all this because you haven't sought the forgiveness you really need? That maybe it's a forgiveness you can't get anywhere else?”

“I don't need forgiveness from a fictional entity whose story is exponentially more monstrous than my own sins could ever be.”

“And so what if you're right?

Would it hurt to just *believe* you're forgiven?

Maybe a little spiritual placebo.”

“Spiritual placebo. I like that.

Though I have to say, I didn't see that coming.

I'm surprised a pastor would suggest something like that."

"Well, I know where you're at. And I know that sometimes we take what we can get.

And if it gets you in the church, then that's what matters. It's my job to do the rest."

"And what job would that be?"

"To show you that there *is* something after this."

"And you're that sure you can show me that?"

"Not sure at all. But that's the life I've committed to. And if I *am* reading you right, that is something I think we have in common."

"Maybe so, Brother Stanley. Maybe so.

But while I appreciate your candor, that is the candor you've shown subsequent to the shit you tried to pull when you first sat down, I have to tell you.

I don't think yours is the afterlife I'm looking for. And even if I did, that God you believe in ain't worth me stooping low enough to ask forgiveness of, much less dancing for salvation.

Not again."

"If you feel that certain, then it won't hurt anything to try. Will it?"

"I'm sorry, Brother.

I can respect your hustle. But if it's all the same, I'd like to be left alone now."

"I understand.

But before I go. Would you mind if I asked you to pray with me?"

"If you've been reading any of the stuff I've written, then we've done all the praying we need to."

"Fair enough.

Enjoy the rest of this beautiful day."

"You too, Brother.

And good luck with the next one."

"You as well."

My best friend - - March 30, 2019

“Hello?”

“Helloooo! Did you see the news? Of course you didn’t, because you don’t go online. So I’ll just have to tell you. What’s his face from Buzzfeed that’s been on your ass this whole time just got busted for something he did back when he was in college.”

“Hmm. That’s interesting.”

“It’s more than interesting. It’s downright perfect.

I so wish I could have seen the look on that smug prick’s face when he was finding out. Like the moment the smug goes away. What does that look like?”

“I guess you’ll just have to imagine it.”

“Oh, I’m imagining it. I’ve already rubbed one out to it.”

“Nice.”

“And to think you took that loser’s criticism to heart.”

“I take them all to heart.”

“You won’t be taking his to heart anymore.
He must have forgot that he was a celebrity too.”

“Who isn’t?
It’s not like it takes a lot nowadays.”

“You’re proof of that.”

“Har har har.”

“What’s wrong with you? I thought you’d be happy about this.”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I’m unhappy about it. I definitely think that dude’s a prick and wish ass pimples upon him. But I guess, instead of seeing just dues, I’m more reminded how irreparable shit is.

I think about when I was a kid. How, like a lot of kids, I dreamed about one day being famous. Maybe being in a movie or something. And now, with how much shit has changed with the internet, I can’t even

imagine the kid I was coming out of the house, for fear of falling down some steps and going viral on YouTube, much less becoming a celebrity and having to deal with all this shit.

It was like back then you used to have to worry about paparazzi. But at least it was limited to journalists being the ones who could bust you.

Now everyone has access to your destruction. One bad memory, one bad moment. Your shit is over.”

“That’s why it’s so funny that the shoe is on the other foot this time. He helped create this world.”

“But here’s the thing. I don’t want to cancel that dude.

As much of a dick as he was with me and as self-righteous I think a lot of his shit has become, if I’m honest, he’s actually a good writer, and I’ve really enjoyed a lot of the other stuff he’s written.

I don’t want that dude to lose his job; I want him to learn and become a better person, which he probably already has.

I mean that dude has gifts, and if he can use them for the right things, everybody’s better off.”

“But that’s not the way the world works right now.

And he helped create that world.

Wasn’t he the one who wrote, “There’s no statute of limitations on getting called out?”

“No, I get you. He’s definitely getting a taste of his own medicine. And from someone who has felt the sting of his verbal lash, it is a wee bit delicious.

I’m just saying I think two things can be true.”

“In what way?”

“Take Bukowski, for instance. I’ve actually felt guilty before, to the point of feeling like I needed to apologize, for liking Bukowski as much as I do. But here’s the thing. I know how fucked up Bukowski was. Even if he didn’t, I do. And I know it *while* I’m reading his work. If anything, that adds to how impressive it is.

To see this flawed individual reach so hard to produce something that ended up meaning so much to me. I don’t want a world where that dude’s contribution doesn’t exist.”

“But how far do you take it?

Like if someone is mostly bad but there’s a small amount of good about them that can have an impact, or if like someone is mostly good, but

the small part of them that is messed up is enough to ruin them. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, but that's what I'm saying with the two things being true. I had a friend who was a good dude. In fact, that's what everyone that knew him referred to him as, a good dude. And then one day he got obsessed about some ex-old lady shit and murdered a guy.

Both of those statements are true.

Of course, you insert artists into that, and you have this even bigger conundrum. Where some of the most brilliant thinkers and artists in history were notorious assholes."

"Like Bill Cosby."

"Exactly. Like Bill Cosby. One doesn't preclude the other.

Bill Cosby had to be one of the most gifted comedians the world has ever known, and he brought joy to the lives of millions. *And* he was a serial rapist.

Both statements are true."

"So what do you draw from that?"

"For me, it speaks to human capacity. I feel like so many of us like to believe in this Manichaeian shit about good people and bad people. But that's not the way the world really works.

There is another scenario of how shit could have played out in history where a good deal of us could have found ourselves tacitly supporting fascism in our own country. I mean the Germans weren't born to be Nazis.

And it's not like I'm even endorsing that whole 'there's a Nazi inside all of us just lurking under the surface' bullshit. I don't believe that either. I actually believe people are more good than they are bad, probably by a long shot. But that there is most definitely the capacity for bad, and a whole lot of bad depending upon what circumstances and conditioning and institutions you throw at people.

Do those circumstances excuse even a sliver of what the Nazis did? Absolutely not. The Nazis were pieces of shit. But in general I think there's this self-righteousness of people who look at someone who's done something they haven't done, and they tell themselves they wouldn't ever do, and then they allow themselves to think they're either *far better*, or that person is *far worse*, and all the judging and throwing stones that goes along with that."

“You don’t even have to do the whole Nazi thing. We support atrocities in other countries all the time, a good deal of which our government is involved in directly. And we support them just by keeping our mouths shut and going about our day.”

“Exactly.

And it’s not even that in one life you could be bad and another life good. It’s that you could be doing both bad and good things in the same life.”

“But that brings me back to what I asked before. How far do you take it? Where’s the line?”

“For me, it’s criminality.”

“Obviously, it’s criminality. I’m asking what we do with the contributions.

Do we have to throw them away and just do without?”

“Why should we? Why should *we* have to go without? Why should we be punished for their fuckup?

Naturally, if you break the law, too bad for you. And too bad for us *going forward*.

But I don’t see why we have to burn your previous work in the wake. I feel like *you* just lose ownership over it.

Like it’s ours now, and you don’t get credit for it anymore. Especially when you think about how much of other people’s talents might have went into creating that product that had your name on it. Do we throw their contributions away as well? I don’t think so.

I mean you think about all the joy or inspiration or salvation that we might have felt from just one song. That contribution is real and valuable, and it can have value going forward as well.

One thing is true. And the other thing is true. And I just don’t believe one should prohibit the other from being real anymore.”

“Ok, but what about you? Maybe I only feel this way because it’s happening to you, but it just doesn’t seem right the way these journalists keep trying to find something else you did twenty years ago to call you out on. Especially when you’re the one trying to come clean about your past.”

“I guess it depends on all the circumstances. Like if you’re a 68-year-old career politician, twenty years totally seems game.

At the same time, I probably wouldn’t want some of the shit I said or did five years ago being thrown in my face.”

“Or even think about it in terms of a relationship and your partner throwing stuff in your face that you did years ago but that was supposed to have been settled a long time ago.”

“But I’m not sure if any of what I’ve done is really settled.”

“Then who do you settle it with? Because even if you settled it with every person you did wrong, there would still be people to call you out on it. People who have absolutely zero to do with it, other than them knowing who you are and thinking somehow you owe it to them to prove your penance.

Do you really need to settle it with them too? Do you need to settle it with the random public? Do you need to tell every stranger you meet everything you’ve ever done wrong?”

“I’m actually working on a poem about that right now.”

“Of course you are.”

“No, but seriously, I’m writing about it because I’ve been thinking about it.

I want my shit to be settled, but I don’t know if it ever will be, no matter what I try. And even then, I’m conflicted about thinking that it even should be settled.”

“But that’s what I’m saying. I think you should be able to get to a point where it is settled. Do you not agree with that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. But maybe it’s not an automatic thing.”

“You mean with the passing of time.”

“Yeah. I hate to say it, but I kind of agree with what’s-his-fuck about there not being a statute of limitations on being held accountable.

I just think it depends more on if you’re willing to come clean, and what you’re willing to do to get clean.

If you still deny your shit or you make excuses for it, I think it’s all still fair game.

Because, on one hand, I think it’s ok for kids to have to think about their actions and how they might come back to curse them twenty years from now. I wish *I* would have had that fear. Maybe it wouldn’t have stopped me from doing everything, but I bet it would have stopped me from doing some of it.

And while I appreciate you always trying to remind me that I'm not the same immature or misguided person anymore, how many of us, who would think it's unfair to have shit come back on us from our childhood, have also told their kid or somebody else's kid that they'll look back one day and regret what they're doing right now? Isn't that essentially endorsing the principle?

On the other hand, I don't think we should be using fear of losing out on shit in the future as the prime motivation to do right, or maybe even a motivation at all. I think we should use the desire for good and for justice, and doing right for the sake of doing right."

"So what is the point of all *this*? Everything you're doing here. It's like you're forcing yourself to live in the past. And for what? Exhibition for strangers?

You're living it all over, for them. So they can see it, see your life. It's like a movie. They're watching your movie, but only the bad parts.

But I know the reality. I know how many good things there are, how many great moments you've had. They're not going to see or know any of that.

To them, you're like villain-flavored bubblegum they can chew on for a little while and then stick you to the bottom of a table or chair, and never think about you again. And then they scroll down to the next villain.

It's not even like it's fun or sport. It's just routine."

"You don't have to tell me. I'm right there with you. By the way, I like the villain-flavored bubblegum."

"Thanks. I thought it was awesome too.

But, no, do you see what I'm saying? Do you ever wonder whether your need to confess all this stuff is coming more from guilt or if it's actually coming more from the expectations of this whole culture?

It's like with your writing. I know you always wanted to write, but you've talked about how you never went after it the way you should have. Is it a possibility you were just worried that, if any of this got out on its own, it would get in the way of you becoming a success."

"I don't want to say it's had no impact, because plainly what I'm doing with the confessions is predicated on the stuff we're talking about. But all the guilt and shame stuff was there long before the call out stuff was ever a thing.

But I have been thinking about that. And it's like this dude I met a few weeks ago who tried to get me to come to his church. He was a pastor, and he tried to tell me that he used to be at my old church, but it turned out he was lying, and it was this whole weird thing. But anyway, the point is it

got me to thinking about how a pastor leaves one church for another and how that kind of relates to my situation.

And I came up with this analogy about how I feel about everything, and how it's like I'm this ex-pastor who wants to burn all his early sermons, but I can't. And because I can't, I'm trying to be a pastor in a different church and I have to convince everyone inside, as well as everyone outside picketing over the old sermons, that I don't believe in that old God."

"But don't you see? In your scenario, there's all these people inside the church who live in a world where they don't hold any of what you've done against you. And I'm not talking about the jerkoffs who don't think it was all that big a deal, but the people who see past it because of how long ago it was and that you've changed and all that.

And then there's all these people outside in the streets, picketing, who live in a world where even one piece of it is enough to disqualify you from future anything."

"So?"

"So my point is you're inside the church too.

Yet you're worried more about those lunatics *outside* than the people inside waiting to hear what you've got to say."

"Maybe.

I don't even know if I disagree with you. It's just that sometimes the people outside seem so loud, I'm worried the people inside aren't going to hear my sermon.

And it's like the same culture that groomed the piece of shit I was back then has infected the group of people now who think they're trying to remedy it.

Because the same people who profess to be trying to break down all these unjust hierarchies also have this savage lust for competition, and not just to be winners, but to make other people losers."

"It's like their spirit animal is actually capitalism."

"Totally hypocritical shit."

"Smash the patriarchy, but watch your language as you're doing it."

"Exactly."

“That’s what I hate about all this. It’s like the very people who expect everyone else to be so self-aware that you’re not supposed to let a fart slip haven’t even the slightest self-awareness themselves.”

“Exactly. But it’s even worse than that. Because it’s like we’ve ceded accountability to them. By not calling bullshit on it all, we’ve deputized these little co-opting online scalp collectors who aren’t really looking to defeat the circumstances that produce assholes, and truth be told may not even really care about defeating the particular asshole, as long as they can score the most points in a game that no one cares about but them and however many Twitter followers are willing to pile on until their team or their God du jour wins.

And because we’re so afraid to stand up to them, it’s gotten to the point where we now have this market for judgment, which, you’re right, is also a market for guilt. But that market is making us turn on each other. Where rather than real conciliation and moving forward together, everything is attack, attack, attack, kill, kill, kill, war, war, war.

And I feel like it’s destroying us. And it’s just so counterproductive. Because isn’t the end goal of people being ‘woke’ or whatever for people to become better and help others be better?

But I feel like instead it’s like this fucking battle royale and there’s no mercy.

It’s the reason we have such a hard time connecting with one another and talking freely, because there’s always this fear, and people aren’t expected to be human nowadays or to have flaws or even moments of weakness.

And I even think about our heroes, and how Dr. King had all this stuff going on behind the scenes with the cheating and women and all that, and I think to myself, I’m not a hundred percent sure even he would have survived this whole call out culture, cancel culture, whatever culture. And how much we might have lost out on. Hell, I know Gandhi would have been canc...”

“Uhh, you know Dr. King didn’t *survive*, right?”

“Oh, shit, yeah. Oh fuck, I shouldn’t have said it that way. I didn’t mean...”

“I’m just fucking with you. I know what you’re saying.”

“But that’s my point. If we were being recorded right now, I’d be mortified. Because I imagine there’s a shit load of people out there who would hear what I just said and demand I be sent to the poorhouse for even musing about it in the way I did.

I couldn't ever say in public some of the shit I say to you on the phone trying to work out these feelings or ideas. I'd be afraid of everything being taken out of context or used against me in some way. Like you're not supposed to have some room or even time to work out what's right and wrong. Do you get what I'm saying?

I hate how careful I feel I have to be in framing everything right, not just in my work or in interviews but in casual fucking conversation, because God forbid I miss something or use a word wrong or frame even my own confession the wrong way. Then I'll have to end up asking forgiveness for that misstep, and so on and so on and it turns into this never-ending loop.

I mean I don't know how life was for some of *these* assholes, but, for me, getting certain things right was a matter of trial and error. And someone pointing out the times you failed as to why you're ultimately a failure seems to miss the whole point of the human experiment. Especially when you may have finally figured something out in the end.

It's like, just now, I wasn't trying to compare myself to Dr. King or anything like that, but I'm just saying how easy it might be to lose a whole lot of contribution towards progress and basically just human decency, with someone like a Dr. King, if we can't see that two things can be true at the same time."

"I don't think you're some kind of Dr. King either, but I know for a fact that you've helped at least a few people. I read their comments and messages about how much you *have* helped them.

And you're right. Don't they matter? Shouldn't their experiences count?

Cancel you, and then what you can do for those people is removed."

"I totally agree. And yet, here's the thing. I'm listening to myself as I'm talking and I'm also thinking about what you just said about Dr. King actually not surviving, and it makes me question everything we just said."

"Why do you say that?"

"Isn't it a possibility we're thinking this way simply because of this one perspective? Like maybe we've been in this bubble too long.

Like maybe if we step back and look at it from the outside, all of this would sound ridiculous.

Because what consequences are there, really? That a certain number of people might not support me. So what? A different number, probably about the same, do. Hell, that's about as good as a presidential election."

“So what are you saying? That this isn’t a real threat, and that these are just belated consequences?”

“I don’t know. A part of me says yes. But then another part of me wonders. If this stuff would have come out *before* I ever made it this big, and it hadn’t come out on my terms, if I would have lost a book deal or a broadcast deal or something like that. Then how would I feel about it?”

Does it matter how famous you are when your skeletons come out?”

“Or how you handle it.”

“Exactly. Most of these assholes just deny it, or complain about getting caught, or hire some PR firm to craft their bogus apology, when the only worthy thing to do is what almost no one in the commercial spotlight ever does. And that’s just to address it as honestly as you can and as human as you can.”

“Yeah, you know, honestly. Like the way you do it.”

“Oooooooh, that hurt.”

“No, but I get what you’re getting at.

I think, for me, though, a lot of my anger about all this cancel stuff has to do with my wanting to be protective of you. But maybe you’re right; maybe there really isn’t a need there.”

“Believe me. I understand that you’re coming from a good place in trying to take up for me, and I appreciate that. But I’m sitting here listening to myself talk about how unfair being called out is, or the fear of being canceled, and I have ten offers right now waiting for me to choose one.

Am I saying there aren’t instances in which the shit goes too far? No. I know there are. How many stories have we seen of people being deplatformed or getting fired and losing their livelihood or even being doxxed and having the lives of them and their families threatened over some shit that should have just been a teachable moment? Or what about professors or other professionals or even just regular workers getting derailed, or even sometimes canned, for taking the wrong human rights stance? Or, hell, in some cases the *right* human rights stance?”

“And a lot of those people don’t have enough money or celebrity behind them to easily recover.”

“Exactly. But for the multi-millionaire celebrities whining about ‘what has the world come to,’ it kind of sounds like all the old racists going on and on about the good old days.

So what if celebrities simply aren’t allowed to be giants anymore, roaming the earth, stepping on whomever they want to. That’s a good thing. That impunity shit is what led to Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby and Jeffrey Epstein and the whole cast of ‘co-conspirators.’

Because it’s easy to become a serial abuser when you don’t have to worry about accountability. It’s the reason why politicians can so easily turn into mass murderers.”

“Well, I don’t know about anybody else. But before you started confessing, you were definitely on your way to becoming a mass murderer.”

“No, but you know what I’m saying.

And again, I know that there are cases in which people were fucked over by being called out for some nothing shit and weren’t able to recover from it. And if that shit happened to me, I’d be furious.

I just wonder if that is probably more anecdotal, and the only reason it seems *more* than anecdotal is because celebrities are feeling the pinch of progress. And maybe when you’re in the bubble, like I am right now, everything that doesn’t look like a nice bubble-carrying breeze looks like something that’s going to pop it.”

“That’s it, then. I take back everything I ever said about you being treated unfairly.”

“No, I don’t mean me. I’m obviously the exception.”

“Obviously.”

“No, but, for real, just listen to us talking about the good old days when the gatekeepers were journalists and high paid photographers. Maybe we’re just fighting against the democratization of celebrity.”

“And maybe it all looks so distasteful because democratization is not the nature of celebrity. Maybe it’s celebrity that is distasteful, and maybe it’s great that someone can lose celebrity overnight.”

“Because then what really matters is what you can actually contribute to the public in the short amount of time you have that opportunity.”

“Like life *should* be for everyone.”

“Exactly.”

“All right, you’ve convinced me. We’re total reprobates.”

“I don’t think that was ever in dispute.

And I know we’re joking, but it really did hit me when you said that thing about Dr. King.

Because that’s *real* worry.

He wasn’t sweating Twitter mobs; he was sweating the government.

Compared to what the FBI did to the Black Panther Party, we sound like socialites complaining at the slightly less lavish cocktail party.

I’m not saying that those offended are always right. The reason why they’re throwing stones *may be* fully bullshit. But acting like I’m not the one sitting in the bulletproof glass house is laughable.

They’re not canceling anyone like me. They’re just throwing stones. And I’m *fucking famous* and can at least get a meeting with damn near anyone I want.

The only celebrities’ shit who are really over are those who actually committed crimes. And that’s way overdue.

The reason why we complain about it so much is so we can make ourselves look brave. Make ourselves martyrs. When, like you said, there are *real* martyrs.”

“I think that’s what I was saying about celebrity being distasteful. That you’re put in a mindset that is so detached from the regular world, you don’t end up thinking clearly. It kind of turns you into a sincere phony.”

“A sincere phony, I love it.

Is that what I’ve become, a sincere phony?”

“If you think about it, it’s not altogether irrational.

If all you see is yourself or people like you, you’re subtracting the extraordinary context of your situation. Where even if something is legitimately unfair, it’s easy to find yourself overreacting or being dramatic about this thing that looks damn near trivial to the average person whose struggle is just trying to get by.”

“Maybe that’s the point though. Maybe we shouldn’t have it where people can so easily detach themselves or even be detached from the rest of society.”

“But how? You’re never going to get rid of fame. You might be able to change what people do with it, but you’re not going to get rid of it.”

“Yeah, but maybe you could get rid of celebrity. And by that, I mean making fame less vertical or hierarchical or whatnot, less like all the other isms that detach us from others not in our situation.”

“Like racism and sexism and so on.”

“Exactly.”

“Ok, but how do you do that?”

“Aaaahhhhhrr, I don’t know.

I feel like we’re making it about me again, or people in my position.

Maybe this isn’t about solving anything.

Maybe it’s just about being fucking fair.

Because on one level, I can see how for someone not in my privileged position, getting called out or getting death threats is some high fucking stakes. You lose your job or you have to move from your house, and that isn’t just some trivial shit. All because someone disagrees with you.

Those kinds of consequences are disproportionate and fucking unfair.

At the same time, I think that we can’t just think in terms of who can afford people being unfair to them. At the end of the day, it matters what’s fair and what isn’t. And even for someone like me, who’s lucky enough to have all this class privilege now, shit can still be unfair. And that matters.

Yet when I start thinking about all this call out/cancel bullshit, I feel like I’m going nuts, because I can’t stop going back and forth with it.

On one side you have the fucking white supremacists using the plausible deniability of jokes and memes to recruit people for a fucking race war. And that shit *is* real. And those motherfuckers, and their supporters, and their allies, and their funders, *should* be called out and canceled and fought out of the human imagination. And I want to support the people who are brave enough to fight that fight, because I’m too much of a chickenshit to do it myself.

And yet, on the other side, you’ve got the deplatformistas trying to take down like for real activist and intellectual heroes because after a lifetime of fighting for justice, they said a literal handful of questionable words and must now be shunned from society, like we’ve always been at war with Oceania, and we’ve always been allies with Eurasia, like it wasn’t just the total fucking opposite yesterday. And that shit is fucking real too. And I know that there are people who want to be out there fighting their best fight but are fucking scared to even have candid conversations because they’re scared of ending up the Goldstein of the month.

So it's like all this shit is going through my mind and I don't know what to think about anything anymore."

"But maybe that's because, in a way, they've already won. Maybe not the war, but maybe *this* battle. Maybe confusion is the point."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe it's like we said. We're making it more about you, but not in the way we think.

I mean the whole 'woke' thing is supposed to be about progress, right?

But how are they going about it? By canceling people? They're seeking and destroying. They're not movement building. Movement building is about everyone else. Destroying is about the destroyer.

And maybe they do think what they're doing is good for everyone else, but it's definitely not movement building. If anything, it's monopolizing of dissent."

"It's like you were talking about their spirit animal being capitalism. It's like a co-opting of predatory capitalism, applied to speech or thought."

"It's the privatization of intimidation."

"Exactly."

"Who needs a repressive government if the public will turn the screws for you, and people will just self-censor?"

"And maybe we were looking at it wrong before when we were trying to figure out how prevalent it all is. Maybe it doesn't matter if it's anecdotal, as long as you can publicize the hell out of those anecdotes."

"All you need is a handful of examples to get everyone else in line."

"Just look at our whole conversation here. Of all the religious fundamentalist bullshit I had to get past just to feel comfortable asking certain questions, how could I not see how similar this is? That it's really about shutting down discussion."

"It's not about asking questions; it's about casting doubt."

“Exactly. That’s what can make it so dangerous. It can make you second-guess things that you know are right, to the point of keeping quiet about it.

I know progress is about institutions and material issues, and yet here I am scared of the consequences of someone overhearing my conversation. And if I’m honest, I’m scared of *them*.”

“So much for movement building.”

“It’s true. Even if, even when, their anger is entirely righteous, and a lot of the time it totally is, they can still do harm to their own cause by doing it this way.”

“Like you said, it’s similar to religion. Where the followers kind of get to stand in for God, through the judging of others. In a way, getting to be God.”

“But not just judging. Sentencing. That’s where the action’s at.”

“But only if they can get you to believe it too.”

“Believe what too?”

“Believe in their authority. The only reason why anyone gives a second thought to these types of consequences is because they’ve made it about themselves. They’ve shifted the narrative.”

“They’ve convinced us.”

“We’re here talking about it, aren’t we?”

“But that’s what makes me so weirded out by even talking about this stuff.

Like I don’t even like using the words ‘call out’ or ‘cancel’ or ‘woke’ or any of that shit. Because I’m thinking, it’s 2019; five years from now, who even knows if we’ll still be using those words?”

“But that’s exactly why it’s important to have discussions like these. Because what if, in five years, it hasn’t fizzled out? What if it’s worse? What if it morphs or gets rebranded or someone co-opts it even further than it has already been co-opted? Maybe we’ll just hand this whole project back over to the state, and all along we were doing the authoritarians’ work for them.”

“Or maybe it will just fizzle out. Maybe these terms and this phenomenon are just a product of social media. Maybe their hashtags are just that, trends. Maybe we’re just being paranoid.

Maybe if young people in the future were to read a transcript of this conversation, it might be hard to even follow. And it would seem like we’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

“Maybe. Maybe you’re right. Maybe this tactic will waver after a certain amount of time. Maybe it will all be social justice trivia in a few years.

But until we get this, like you were saying, savage lust for competition under control, we’re going to continue behaving in a way that’s entirely counterproductive to building a movement or winning real change. And this conversation is kind of a perfect snapshot of all the confusion and fear.”

“And self-aggrandizement.”

“Right.”

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“Ok, buuuut...”

“Oh my God. But what?”

“But what if we *are* wrong? What if we’re just old? What if we really just don’t get it?
What if they’re right?”

“Or maybe it’s like you said. Maybe two things can be true. Maybe they’re right in that their perception of a problem may be accurate. And maybe we’re right that the solution they’re committing to is antithetical to the principles they espouse.

Or maybe you’re right, and we’re just old.

Either way, you have to believe in something. And what I believe is that you can’t use fear. You have to use love.”

“Look at you, bringing it back to Dr. King. Going full circle with it.”

“It was either that or ‘less fear, more fair’.”

“I think you went with the right one.”

“I don’t know. Less fear, more fair. Kind of catchy.”

“Yeah, well, since you’re so in touch with what you believe and all, maybe you could give me a hint as to what it is I really believe in.”

“Whooooaa, hey. I don’t have enough time for all that. I gotta work in the morning.”

“Oh, you mean you can’t stay up until 4 in the morning helping me work through decades of insecurities? Some friend you are.”

“I never said we were friends.”

“Fuck you. Get some sleep. I love you.”

“You too, but not in that order.”

“Night.”

“Goodnight.”

The Doctor - - July 19, 2017

“So the routine was that Sonny and Dana would end up in her room, and me and Summer would end up hanging out in the living room.”

“And how old were you?”

“I think I was around fourteen, fifteen at the most. But I think fourteen.”

“And you were all about the same age?”

“Give or take a year. I think Dana was maybe two years older than me.”

“Ok.”

“Ok, so the setup was pretty much always the same. When Dana’s folks weren’t home, they would end up in Dana’s room. And we would end up in the living room.

And yet I can’t even really get that far, because sometimes it was already messed up before that.”

“How so?”

“Depending on whether they were fighting or Dana was in a good mood or whatever was going on between them, we never knew whether it would be a mutual decision to go into her room.

They weren’t boyfriend and girlfriend. And neither were me and Summer; we were more like opportunistic bystanders. But Dana really liked Sonny. She was actually Sonny’s first. And though Sonny wouldn’t ever claim her as anything, I think that meant a lot more to him than he let on. The problem was that he was serious about not letting on anything. He kind of treated her like shit. At least while anyone else was around.

Anyway, Dana had become Sonny’s go-to if he was horny. Which was cool with me, because half the time Summer was with Dana, and that meant that we were probably going to make out in the living room while they did their thing in the bedroom.

But again, the question was how they would end up in there. Sometimes, it was fast, and they would just walk in together laughing or without saying anything. Other times, it was him saying something like, ‘Come on. Get in here. You know you want to. Just come on.’ Or maybe, ‘Hurry up. Your parents are going to be home in an hour. Quit fucking around.’

And sometimes that would be enough.

When it wasn't, he would grab her arm and physically pull her into the room. Or even pick her up over his shoulder and walk in the room, sometimes slapping her ass on the way in. Sometimes with her laughing, sometimes not.

Sometimes, she would come back out. Other times, we would hear the door lock. If she came back out, he would try it again. Usually, after a second time, we would hear the door lock.

Still, because we couldn't tell who had locked it, we would wait for a few seconds. If she didn't come back out after the door had locked, that told us she was staying in there. It was also our cue to make out.

We kind of had a routine as well. Summer would come over and straddle me on the couch. We would kiss for a bit, and then we would take off our shirts. We would kiss some more while I struggled to get off her bra. After the bra, there usually wasn't too much more going on beyond that.

The problem was that sometimes we were doing all this to the sounds of yelling.

Even though the door had locked and she hadn't come back out, it didn't necessarily mean she was down for whatever he had in mind. Sometimes, you could tell she was being playful while they were going back and forth. Sometimes, you could tell she wasn't. And sometimes, you couldn't tell.

Sometimes, they would get really loud with each other, and Summer and I would stop kissing. Then it would get quiet again, upon which we would look at each other, roll our eyes, and then start kissing again.

Now, to us, it seemed apparent that there was a certain amount of cat and mouse game being played between them. But it was also apparent that when Dana wasn't interested in playing that game, Sonny didn't really care. He wanted to fuck, and he saw his job as being that of wearing her down.

The problem, again, was that we were only hearing this through the door, and it was hard to tell which scenario was playing out. Meaning the pauses we took to see what kind of yelling it was were not at all uncommon.

More times than not, the noise would die back down, they would do their thing, we would do our thing, and that was that. But every now and then, it was undeniable that her protests were not part of some playing hard to get thing. And sometimes, they were straight up shouts of 'no.'

At which point, Summer and I would stop, I would put my shirt back on, I'd walk over to Dana's bedroom door and yell, 'All right, Sonny. Time to go.' Sometimes, he would come right out. Other times, I would have to increase the seriousness in my tone. Either way, when he did come

out, it was usually accompanied by grumbles of ‘fuck you then, bitch’ or something to that effect.”

“And that was the routine.”

“That was the routine.”

“And what do you think that story says about you?”

“I don’t really know if it says anything specifically about me at all. I think it says something about all of us.”

“In what way?”

“I think it shows how off base we all seemed to be when it came to consent. I mean Summer was pretty much in harmony with my reactions to everything, and part of that was because Dana, at least in our eyes, at least at times, enjoyed being pursued. And whether or not we were reading any of that correctly, the one theme that seemed to sum up those afternoons was that it was Sonny’s job to see if he could get a ‘yes.’ And even that is being generous, because getting a ‘yes’ in many cases just meant to stop getting ‘no’s.”

“And that’s what you thought consent was?”

“I’m not saying that we all had the same view of consent. In fact, I’m not really sure at all what the girls we hung out with’s view of consent looked like. Mostly, because we never thought to talk about it with them. Which, in itself, is telling.

But when it came to the guys I came up around, at least for most of them, that was exactly their view of consent.”

“Does that mean you did talk about it with them?”

“Not in the way you and I are talking about it. Hell, back then, just the word itself would have seemed out of place for someone to use. And I mean that; I don’t know if I ever heard a guy say the word consent growing up, not once. Not in all the conversations we had about girls. And if he had, he probably would have been given a ton of shit and got called a pussy or something.”

“And why do you think that is?”

“Well, I could easily go into the whole thing of T&A movies and sexually explicit music of the time and boys will be boys culture and all that. But I actually think it had more to do with an *absence* of influence.

I mean I got the sex talk when I was a kid. But I never got the consent talk. I know we spent a week on sexual reproduction in health class, but I don’t remember there even being a section in our book on consent. And if there were any concerted societal efforts to educate us about consent, I sure as hell don’t remember them. They might have existed, but if they did they were easily drowned out by the deluge of pop culture that had been sending all the wrong messages our way anyway.

It’s easy for me to look back now and be horrified by this scenario with the knowledge that the starting point of all sexual interaction or even just how you treat women in general should be a strong foundation and definition of consent. And yet without ever really having a conversation about consent, and to be honest I’m not even sure at that point if I knew what the word meant in that context, I get to an instance in my life where I really needed to understand the concept, and what should have been completely unacceptable, if not arguably criminal, just looked normal enough to become routine.

And don’t get me wrong, I’m not excusing any of our actions back then by claiming some victim of circumstance status. I was just answering your question.”

“No, I gathered that. And I don’t think you’re trying to do that at all. What I’m interested in is how these circumstances affected the way you treated women.”

“Maybe that’s why I put so much significance on this specific anecdote. This certainly was not the standard I needed to be holding myself to going forward. But I think I would be lying if I told you it didn’t give me some sense of moral superiority in this area.

Lord knows I already had enough of this coming from my years at a Christian elementary and middle school. Finding myself running with the heathens from the local public school certainly didn’t help.

And it wasn’t completely unfounded either. Compared to Sonny, I looked like a real gentleman. Hell, compared to almost all the other guys in my neighborhood, I looked like a gentleman.”

“Do you think that had to do with where you all were growing up, or do you think it was more the time you grew up?”

“I don’t know, but I can tell you whenever I hear any of these dudes say that neither them nor their friends ever engaged in any kind of

misogynistic ‘locker room talk,’ I want to ask them what planet they grew up on. Because I don’t know any guys who didn’t talk like that.

And again, I’m not trying to blame that culture. On the contrary, I’m blaming myself for scapegoating my friends’ slightly worse behavior. The measure is not supposed to be on other people; it’s supposed to be on principle.

Yet from where I was standing, not being *as bad* seemed the way to go. It still promised the perks of being bad, but without all the baggage of a bad reputation.

So much for my moral superiority.”

“Ok, but was this just a problem of your perception or did it manifest in your actual interactions with women?”

“Oh, no, it definitely manifested. But not in the way you might suspect.

Like there’s this one memory, in particular, I used to look fondly on but now really messes with me whenever I think about it.

I turned a girl down one time at a party who asked me to have sex with her. I knew she’d had quite a bit to drink, and I couldn’t imagine she would have made the same call had she been sober. Anyway, the next morning she thanked me for not taking her up on it. And then she thanked me again a few weeks later. And then every so often, she would bring it up.

She would tell me she knew there were not many guys who would have done what I did that night. And that she owed me.

And you know what? I agreed with her. I thought she was right. I didn’t think there were many guys who would have done what I did, at least not the ones we hung out with.

So I took that thanks. I took that praise, and I stored it like some kind of moral trophy.

And I swear to God it was almost two decades later before I put it together, that this great achievement, an achievement I had hung so much pride upon, was simply not raping her. And that that was how messed up the world we had come up in was. That not only did I think it was special, she thought the same thing. That to not rape her that night was truly special, and worthy of multiple rounds of gratitude.”

“Did you ever stop to think that it wasn’t really gratitude? That she may have expressed it as gratitude. But that maybe it was just relief. Relief that it was you she was with that night, and not someone else.

Maybe that was her way of acknowledging what you’re describing now. How messed up the world was, and that somehow she got lucky that night, being with you.

I know it's a horrible way to look at it. But it's different than saying she didn't understand consent either. Maybe she understood consent in a way that you didn't yet grasp, and maybe that was her way of reinforcing your instincts.

Then again, maybe you're right. Maybe she did see it like you. It's hard to say without her being here to ask."

"Yeah, but either way, it still makes it sound like I made some kind of right choice. And the only way you can consider what I did as the right choice is if you consider raping her an option.

And the fact that I deemed it a choice by congratulating myself for making the right one, I almost feel like I was the lucky one that night for being able to see it even the way I did."

"I'm not sure if I understand. How do you think you were lucky?"

"I mean lucky in that it's not just consent. Consent was just that one part of it. When it came to really learning about sex, we were on our own. Beyond the technical instruction we'd been awkwardly consigned by our parents or some coach-turned-Health teacher, everything we knew about sex we had to seek out.

Because the conversations were seen as uncomfortable, the adults in our lives adopted the wishful thinking that we would just magically figure it out.

And I don't really know what that meant for girls. But I know for boys, it meant heeding the advice of older brothers or friends' older brothers. It meant giving more consideration than was warranted to the dirty old men at the beer market down the street who ran their mouths too much to kids. It meant rumors and lies and a good deal of guessing. But worst of all, it meant deferring to porn.

All of which just left me feeling anxious and sexually insecure."

"You realize that none of those options included listening to girls, or even talking to girls."

"Exactly. Because that would have taken real honesty, not just with girls but with myself. It would have taken enough courage to be vulnerable, a considerable amount more than I believed I had at the time.

That's why I can't just lay the blame on where I grew up or when I grew up or any of that. Because this was a moment in which I did have a choice. A real choice. I could choose to seek out a healthy relationship with either a girlfriend or someone I was close to, and we could have talked about it and tried things and fumbled and laughed and learned about our bodies and our feelings. We could have explored and made mistakes and

tried it all over again, without the judgment or expectations of those outside our intimacy.

I could at least have tried for that, sought it out.

Instead, I chose to be *just another* one of the guys. And because I made that choice, it wouldn't be until my 20s before I experienced anything close to what I would consider a healthy sexual relationship, or for that matter a healthy sexual experience.

There were exceptions here and there, but that's all they were. Exceptions. One time things that ended up better memories than not.

For most of the rest, it was wrong. And looking back, it seems obvious now that the majority of my sexual encounters were just as much for the guys I hung out with as they were for me. A show or demonstration, of what I don't know. That I was having sex. That I was upping my numbers. That I saw women the way they did, as little more than fodder for adventure.

And it's not like I think they were monsters either. They were kids, just like me. And despite all the bad advice and influence we'd absorbed, you could still tell that there was this longing in all of us to have something more. But rather than bringing these kinds of feelings up and risk being an outlier in the group, each one of us compromised these feelings in our own way."

"What did your compromise look like?"

"For me personally, I look back and see myself as two different people, depending upon who the girl was I was dealing with."

"What does that mean depending upon the girl?"

"It means that I went along with what I had heard, that there were two kinds of girls. There were the good girls, girls worth treating right. Girls I spent time having real conversations with. Girls I went slower with, or maybe didn't go there at all. And then there were the other girls. Girls you knew would put up with whatever. So you did their whatever.

And obviously, I feel bad for seeing the other girls that way, for treating them like entertainment or temporary objects. But I also feel awful because the girls I treated with respect saw me as this really good guy. It feels almost like I was lying to them by being good to them.

And, again, it wasn't that I was as bad as some of my friends. A lot of them were worse than I was, and some were far worse. And that's why I was seen as this good kid. Even when I wasn't being all that good.

Yet even when I *was* being truly good to someone, I can't tell if I was finally getting to be myself or if I was just being a phony. Because, even if they didn't know it, I knew. I wasn't being good to everyone."

“Do you think you’re getting to be yourself *now*? With me, with our discussions, with how you’re expressing yourself.

Or are you just being phony?”

You’ve mentioned before that the people in your life who’ve only known you after those years, the years that trouble you the most, have a hard time believing you were as bad as you let on. That they tell you not to dwell on it, that you were a kid, and that’s not who you are now. But you can’t seem to do that. In fact, you wrestle with the idea that you’re still that person, or that it may be even worse than that.

Why is it that you can’t believe them, that you can’t trust their judgment? Are you being phony with them?

Because if you’re not being phony with them, then why can’t you see what they see?”

“You’re saying that they see the Jekyll in me, and I still see the Hyde.”

“That’s an interesting way to put it. But have you read the book?”

“Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? No, I just read the Cliff Notes.”

“Well, in the book, Jekyll indulges his urges by transforming into Hyde, so he can escape detection, and blame. Then, at the end, when the transformations become involuntary and he can’t control Hyde anymore, he kills himself. He can’t bear to go on being this monster.

From a Freudian interpretation, the Hyde character became so prevalent because Jekyll wouldn’t directly face or deal with what was inside himself.

But that’s not the place you’re at. You’re here. Trying to deal with what’s inside you.

You said you can’t tell if you were being yourself when you were being good or if you were being a phony because you had also done wrong. But Jekyll was worried that he was being himself when he was doing wrong.”

“Then maybe that’s what I’m worried about too.”

“Maybe. But you have to acknowledge that you’ve taken a different path from Jekyll. You are dealing with these things, these thoughts, these feelings. More importantly, you’re no longer doing the things that torment you. You could be. It’s not like doing wrong is some dexterity that diminishes with age. In fact, for many it’s the opposite.”

“But like you said, here I am. Unable to process what appears to be the obvious. To you, to everyone in my life.”

“Because that’s all they have to go on. What you offer them now. What you’re offering me now. What you’ve proved to them, since those days.”

“Then why can’t I process it? Why can’t I just agree that I’m ok now?”

“I don’t know. In a way, you’re right. Until you figure this out, you’re going to go on, still believing you’re Hyde.”

“Then maybe Jekyll had it right, and the only thing that’s left is to kill myself.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Then what is it? Is it that I want to be Hyde? Because I don’t feel like I want to. I feel like I want to be the opposite. I feel like I want to be this good person. But I can’t get over what this other person did, this person that none of my friends recognize, this person even I don’t recognize anymore, beyond the responsibility I feel for whatever momentum he added to or motion he put in place.

You say I’m here, dealing with it. But am I? Because a lot of the time I don’t feel like I’m here. I feel like I’m there. Reliving it. Trying to take it back. And then I only find myself back here after facing the fact, once again, that I can’t take it back.

So, what? I can’t seem to figure out how to get past it, and I can’t make a joke about killing myself. Where does that leave us?”

“I don’t know where it leaves you, but I can tell you I’m not going to indulge that type of humor. And, frankly, I’m no longer going to indulge this merry-go-round you want me to ride with you on.”

“Merry-go-round?”

“I understand that you’re frustrated, and I appreciate that you’re here, putting in the time.

But, at some point, you’re going to have to stop this. You’re acting like you don’t understand what’s going on, when we’ve talked for hours about the concepts of duality and guilt and debt, about the dynamics of forgiveness and reckoning and redemption; we’ve exhausted all this and I know that you know all this. You’ve embraced this. You live it, every day.

And yet, what do you give me back? The same talk of how you should have known better, and whether or not you've really learned anything and the possibility that you might be full of BS. And if it's not that, then it's you finding a way to retreat, back into the same mire of guilt and shame and ghosts that you seem almost comforted by wallowing in. And it's the same thing, over and over. And I just won't indulge it anymore.

I'm willing to work with you. But you can't be phony with me. You're not that kid anymore, so don't treat me like one of those girls. I need you to show me something. I need you to demonstrate here, in this room, the respect and the vulnerability you claim to know you needed back then.

I want to believe that you want to get well. But from here on out, it's not going to be good enough for you to simply identify the courage that was lacking in you before; I need you to demonstrate that courage now.

If you can't do that, this relationship isn't going to do you any good either."

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"You're right. You're absolutely right.
But I need you to know I am trying. I am."

"Then you need to try harder. I won't allow this to become intellectual and moral masturbation. You're not here to rehearse lines for a play. You're here to get better."

"Ok. I get it. I don't want that either."

"Good. I'm glad to hear that.
Let's see how we do going forward.

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. .
I was thinking for next time, maybe you could work on making a list of all the things..."

"Wait. Before we wrap up, do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"You gave me Freud's interpretation of the Jekyll and Hyde story, but you didn't give me yours. What's yours?"

"I don't really have one.
I haven't read the book either. I just read the Cliff's Notes."

“Ni~~~~~ice.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Can I just say, you are one weird doctor.”

“Says the patient in my care.”

“Wow. And apparently a little mean as well.”

“I know it, right?”

My Agent - - November 05, 2019

“No, no, no, no, no!”

“Haaaaa haaa ha! What?! You don’t even know what I’m going to say.”

“I don’t need to know.”

“Oh yes you do, yes you do. You need to know this, because it is some goooood good money, my friend. Good money!”

“The last time you said that, I couldn’t even let you go through the whole spiel it was so ridiculous.”

“Yes, and that might have been your retirement fund.”

“It was ridiculous.”

“Ok, that was ridiculous. But that wasn’t even a proper deal; it was just me brainstorming and throwing out possibilities.

This, on the other hand, is a proper fucking deal. And one that you really need to hear me out on. Because I really do think it will be right up your alley, and it’s a whole lot of money for a very short amount of time.”

“I told you I want to do another book.”

“I know what you told me, and *I told you* I would make that happen. But for now, you need to keep busy.

And this one opportunity alone can make you more money than you’re going to make on any of your beloved books.

That is, if you’ll give me a chance to tell you.”

“Ok. What is it?”

“I was contacted by an agent friend who represents a, let’s say, filthy fucking wealthy client who has expressed interest in procuring your services for an evening.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Don’t worry, he doesn’t want to fuck you or anything like that.”

“Yeah? Because the way you’re setting this up, it sure sounds like they’re going to fuck me.”

“No, it’s nothing sick or kinky or anything like that. He just wants you to do your thing and confess something.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He wants you to come to his house, excuse me, his filthy fucking fabulous mansion on his filthy fucking fabulous island, and he wants you to give him an exclusive confession.”

“Wait. What?”

“I know it sounds too good to be true. But it’s real. My friend said it’s completely legit.”

“So this dude wants to fly me out to his place so I can just stand there and confess something awful I’ve done, just for him?”

“I don’t know if it’s just for him or if it’s for a party or what. That part I’m not clear on yet. I just know he’s a fan of what we’ve built with all this and he wants to get a little more of an intimate experience.

Think of it like giving a concert.”

“Like a concert.”

“Yep, just think of it like a concert. Except you don’t have to do a whole tour. You can just do this one show.

And then you can go home and be fucking rich.”

“Well, who is it?”

“I don’t know. They’re not saying. I guess he doesn’t want you to know unless you agree to it.

Or maybe you won’t find out at all. Maybe they don’t want anyone to know.

The point is it doesn’t matter who it is.”

“Of course it matters. What if he’s like some bastard banker or some Russian gangster or something? Or, even worse, some Gulf Prince or U.S. oil magnate helping destroy the planet. I don’t want to have anything to do with someone like that. And I definitely don’t want to be their entertainment.”

“Who cares? Seriously, who gives a fuck?”

“I do. I care. I mean have you met me?

You really think I’m going to agree to basically prostitute myself for someone without even knowing who they are?”

“Don’t be so dramatic. It’s not prostituting yourself. It’s like a concert.”

“I’m going to end up with an apple in my mouth over a fire.”

“Now who’s being ridiculous? Come on, this is a no-brainer.”

“And, just assuming they’re not some monster, how much are we talking about?”

“Well, that’s still open.”

“Open to what?”

“I was told we could negotiate a number depending upon what you’re willing to agree to. But they basically said we can expect it in the seven figures.”

“Seven figures! Like for real millions?”

“That’s what seven figures means.”

“For one night?”

“Man, it might be for one hour for all I know. I just know the client is serious and money is not an object.”

“Holy fuck.”

“Holy fuck is right. I told you this was it.”

“Yeah, but I still don’t feel comfortable about not knowing who this is.”

“How about this? I can tell them that, if you’re going to get to find out, you want to know up front before you agree. And if they’re not going to let you find out, then you can just make your decision on that.

But guess what? It's even better if you don't know. Because if it is someone fucked up, you can just say you didn't know and it's not on you. And that would be the truth.

And you can still go home with seven figures."

"All right, I think that's fair."

"Good. There's just one last thing."

"Ok, here we go. I knew it.
Does it involve an apple in my mouth?"

"No, there's no apple. It's nothing like that."

"Then what is it?"

"It has to be a new confession."

"Ok, I can do that."

"And once you tell it, you can't confess it in public ever again."

"What?"

"It would basically be his at that point."

"His? What does that even mean 'his'?"

"Just what I said. He would be buying the confession.
And you would no longer have the right to tell it."

"What are you talking about? What are you...
Do you know how fucked up that is?"

"Why is it fucked up?"

That's basically what you did with your book when you signed the publishing rights over. How is this any different?"

"Because people got to see it. I was signing over those rights specifically so people could see it."

"But you were still signing over your rights. If they wanted to sit on it, they could have.

And besides, why does it matter if one person sees it or a hundred thousand?"

“You know why it matters.”

“It’s one confession. You seem to have an endless supply of the things. What’s one private one?”

“Because that’s not what I’m trying to do with them. I’m not doing this just to make money. And I know you think I’m an idiot, but it’s true.

And the more shit you bring to me like this, the more it makes me not want to do it at all.”

“But why?”

“Because it feels messed up. It feels like it’s turning into porn or something. Like it’s not to help people anymore, but rather to get them off. And I don’t want it to turn into something like that.”

“Something *like* that? That’s exactly what it *is*. And that’s exactly what it’s *always* been.

What do you think we’ve been doing here? Did you think this was art?

We’ve been doing porn.

For Christ’s sake, you’ve been selling the most intimate part of yourself for money and fame. And guess what? The only reason why you’ve got that money and fame is because people get off on it.

Listen to you. ‘I don’t want this to turn into porn.’ You’re the biggest pornstar in the world.

And who made you the biggest in the world?

Me. I did that.

Because I realized that to be the biggest pornstar doesn’t necessarily mean you have to have the biggest dick. And that, if we were smart, we could create the biggest pornstar out of someone with only an average dick. And that’s you.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about your confessions. You’re not some giant, raging, scary hard-on. You’re just an average dick.

That’s part of your appeal, that you’re not a monster. People can relate to that.

They wouldn’t relate to some villainous son of a bitch they think should be in jail. But you, you did just enough to walk away from it. Just like a whole lot of them.

And just like every jerkoff jerking off into a sock gets to live vicariously through watching Johnnie Big Dick fuck all these hot chicks, your audience can project their own sins onto you. And let you confess for them.

All from the safety and privacy of their own skeleton-packed closet.”

“Yeah, but that’s not right. That’s just as…”

“I’m not telling you it’s right. I’m telling you what the focus groups say. And in the focus groups, there’s two types of people who make up your adoring audience.

One are the self-righteous, and the other are those who believe you deserve a break.

And the louder the self-righteous shout you down, the more the others believe you deserve defending. The more affection they feel *for* you, connection they feel *to* you.”

“You make it all sound like a game.”

“That’s because it is.”

“Maybe to you.”

“Damn right, to me.”

“Well, not to me.”

“Now look who’s being self-righteous.

I know what you think of me. You think I’m just some consumerist idiot. But I’ve got a Master’s Degree in Sociology and a Bachelors in Psychology.”

“I can see you’re really putting it to good use.”

“Oh, I *am*. I’m putting it to hella use, because I’m looking out for my interests. And if you’re smart, you’d be looking out for yours instead of trying to make believe you’re some kind of artist all the time.

By the way, what did *you* major in college? Some bullshit you ain’t using? That’s what I thought.

I’m getting what I want out of life, and I’m using what I have to get it. Better than you.”

“What do you mean better than me? You’re the one working for me. Or at least you’re supposed to be.”

“And I am. Except you can’t appreciate what it is I’ve been doing here.

You wanted an audience and I got you one bigger than you could have ever dreamed. And now you want to get ethical?

What do you think we’ve been doing here? We’ve been exploiting this shit?”

“How do you figure?”

“You told me you wanted an audience who wouldn’t just focus on *who you were before*, but would see you and listen to you for *who you are now*.

But guess what? You amassed that audience with who you were before.

You don’t think that’s the least bit exploitative? You don’t think there’s any ethical issues with that?

This isn’t about art. It’s about money. And it always has been.

Like I told you before, I’ve been doing this long enough that I don’t know anything anymore about art. And, as a professional, that’s what you want from me.

That’s how I see things clearly. And that’s why you think I’m a bastard. But, see, I’m ok with what I am.

I just wish you were ok with what you are.”

“So what am I?”

“You tell me.

You made the choice to take this shit public. And by stepping out into the spotlight, you welcomed everything that came with it, including me.”

“You know what, man. I ain’t listening to this shit. We ain’t friends. And you need to watch your mouth talking to me like this.”

“Or what? You gonna fire me? You’ve had a million chances to do that already. And you haven’t done it.

So why is that? Oh, I know why. It’s the millions of things I’ve put in your pocket.

No, it *couldn’t* be that. Because you’re above all that. You’re not in it for the money; you’re in it for the art.

So why else haven’t you fired me yet?

You said it yourself that we’re not friends. And you’re damn right. I’ve got my own family and friends, and the way I take care of my family is by making you money.

The reason why you haven't gotten rid of me is because I'm good at what I do. These publicists are good at what they do. These promoters are good at what they do. And without us, you would be confessing, let me rephrase that, pissing in the fucking desert.

I know you think you're better than me. But you're not. You're just as greedy as I am. It's just that, somehow, this is the one thing you don't seem to feel guilty about.

But if I'm a necessary evil, then you're evil too. Every opportunity I created for you had an X at the bottom of the contract. And your name went down next to that X.

You wanted in this world, and I'm the one who gave you the key. You wanted an audience; I gave you an audience. And now I'm offering you a different audience, a rich fucking audience of one. And that audience comes along with a confidentiality agreement, so no one ever has to know you even did this.

So why don't you take this sanctimonious act and sell it to the rubes out there dumb enough to buy your books.

I've looked after your future in this short amount of time better than you did your whole fucking life. But if you really are *better* than me, go ahead and say it. Say, 'I don't want seven figures. I don't want seven figures for a fucking hour of my time that no one has to know about.'

Seven figures, fucker. Say you don't want it and I'll drop it and never bring it up again.

Seeeeeveeeeen Fiiiiiguuuuures!"

"I told you I didn't want to exploit this."

"Seven figures."

"I told you I wanted to make a contribution."

"Oh, I heard what you said. And it sure sounded to me like you wanted fame.

And seven figures."

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“If we do this, I can’t promise anything else.”

“I’m not asking for anything else. I’m asking for you to be smart, right now.”

“I told you I never wanted to do this forever. After this, I want to do something else.”

“You don’t get it, do you? That other shit you want to do? There’s no guarantee anybody will want to fuck with it. Celebrity can die in less than a minute.

And how many pornstars do you know that had a successful second act?”

“When you originally called me, you told me I could do whatever I wanted to do.”

“I most certainly did. And what did you tell me you wanted to do? You told me you wanted to write.

And that’s what you’ve been doing. Writing. For Christ’s sake, you’ve gotten more publi...”

“When you called me, you told me that I could do whatever I wanted to do. And what I wanted to do was more than this. And you know that.”

“Are you or are you not making a holy shit-ton of money from your writing in the present moment? Did I or did I not get you a massive audience for your writing?”

“When you called me, you told me that I...”

“When I called you, you were in need. You needed someone like me.”

“I needed you?”

“Yes, you needed me. You needed me because you couldn’t see the forest for the trees.”

“What forest? Is this the forest? Where I’m at now?”

“If it really isn’t about the money, then it’s most definitely the forest.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It means that when I called you, you had been trying to chop down that forest one tree at a time, for years.

And, you remember, I asked you if you were ready to set a fire. Well, fire catches.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I believe you when you say this isn’t about money. But you were never going to get out of that forest the way you were doing it. I helped you set fire to the forest.

And all I’m asking now is for us to just ride this until the money dries up, and then you can recreate yourself into whatever butterfly you want.

And if you want to get a new agent for that stuff, I’ll go as far as to help you find one. One that you can get along with. One that you can actually be friends with.

But right now, there’s still trees out there.

I know it and you know it.

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So what do you say?”

Interlude

(selections)

I knock on the door
(from the book of poems *Earning My Confessions*)

I knock on the door.
Every door.
Like I was just let out of prison.
And part of my parole.
Is letting everyone.
Around me.
Know.
What they would never know.
From looking at me.
What I hope.
They'll never have to worry about.
Happening.
Again.

Yet I wasn't let out.
Of prison.

If I were.
I could just tell them.
That one thing.

But it's not.
One thing.
I have to tell them.
I have to tell them.
Everything.
And hope.
They will keep the door.
Open long enough.
For me to finish.

And once.
I'm finished.
I must run.
To the next door.
To each next door.
Not because I want.
To share.
But because I am being.
Chased.

Like at any moment.
That one moment.
Will catch me.
And undo.
All the work I've done.
To get.
Here.

For no matter.
What I do.
Now.
I know.
It's out there.
The thing I did.
The things I did.
The things I said.
Words on someone's shelf.
Hurt in someone's heart.
Or maybe just memories.
I hold onto.
For them.

Either way.
I am still selfish.
Enough.
To fear it.

I've tried.
To tell myself.
Not to think of it.
Like confessing.
But to think of it.
Like a service.

Just leave it with them.
Maybe they'll think about you.
The next time they're close.
To losing.
Their way.

I wish it was that.
Easy.

I wish I knew.
If I've been doing it right.
If it could ever be right.

I don't know how.
They're supposed to respond.
I don't even know if.
There is a response.
I'm looking for.

Maybe one day.
I'll know.
And maybe.
On that day.
I can stop.
Seeing every.
New person.
I meet.
As a new door.
Waiting.

Maybe.

Until then.
I only know.
I have to run.
To the next.

“Four minutes for ever”

(from the album *Going through the pockets of clothes I haven't worn in years*)

Verse one:

What do you see
What do you see when you hear
those first few
perfect seconds of sound

Do you see me
Do you see me taking your hand
do you see us
moving slow across the floor

Lyrics we sung
Lyrics we whispered in one another's hair
words we counted on
to always bring us back to this place

What would you say
What would you say if I told you
when our song plays
your face is no longer the first one I see

Chorus:

Yet I remember it sweetly
swaying was so easy
like it was written for us
kissing at the chorus

We could stay together
four minutes for ever
or forever how long
that was our song

Verse two:

I know I know
there are still some things that are owed
I cannot deny
what I did was unthinkable

If I had strayed
all the years of our love and love making
I'd have never achieved
an infidelity so cruel

A simple string of notes
can conjure a longing long buried
Is anything more sacred
anything more awful to give away

And now I've lost
the only smile you had left to spare us
And what is worse
it was you who played it for me

Chorus:

And I remember it sweetly
swaying was so easy
like it was written for us
kissing at the chorus

We could stay together
four minutes for ever
or forever how long
that was our song

Bridge:

And to you my love
you must know it was an accident
When the music came on
I could not stop your advance

You must believe
this moment is not second hand
The song I hear with you
is not the one I heard with her

Chorus:

Let me prove it to you sweetly
swaying is so easy

like it was written for us
kissing at the chorus

We can stay together
four minutes for ever
or forever how long
this is our song

Twenty, thirty rings at a time
(from the book *Ghost Poems*)

One day
somewhere within the stretch of years
that I was a fucking loser
I called a girl's number
all day

We were more acquaintances than friends
I'd gotten it in my head I had a shot at fucking her
I always caught a bit of a flirty vibe off her
and she'd been with a couple friends of mine already

It was my day off
and I didn't have anything else to do
but obsess

all day, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, holding the phone
thumb on the tone button, calculating how much time to give
before trying again

It was a landline and she didn't have an answering machine
I must have called at least a hundred times
Twenty, thirty rings at a time
sometimes two, three, four times in a row
as if she had just walked in the door a few seconds after every last ring

Every time I pressed the redial button, I increased my wager
that she didn't have caller-id

Of course she had caller-id

I hope that when she occasionally tells her friends the story
of the loser who called her a hundred times in one day
she's at least forgotten my name

There's a Universe (from the book of poems *Earning My Confessions*)

Is redemption real?

There are so many things I haven't confessed, yet.

Do I need to confess everything? Do I need to confess about the time in my life where I did not feel as guilty about homophobic slurs as I did racial slurs? Do I need to confess every time I played loose with what I did feel guilty about, but what was seen at the time as acceptable? Do I need to confess the care I took defending bigotry with insecurity?

Do I need to confess all the women I should have called my girlfriend but wouldn't? Do I need to confess all the times I cried my way out of honesty? Do I need to confess all the times I wallowed in the missteps of the ones I loved?

Should I confess the moments of entitlement? Should I confess the moments of doing what was technically not wrong, but definitely not right? Do I need to confess everything I learned too late?

Is redemption real? Is rebuilding enough?

There are so many things.

Should I confess all the things left unsaid? Should I confess the things I've already squared? Should I confess the things I've thought?

Do I need to confess for every time I laughed at one of Frank's stories, one of my old man's stories, at the wrong kind of dirty joke, at the wrong scene in a movie, at the wrong lyric in a song? Should I confess which of those elements provide me with the kind of high only nostalgia can put you in, even though I know I should not be enjoying that high?

Do I need to confess that I've grown weary of confessing, although I have so much more I haven't confessed, yet? Should I confess the couple seconds I paused, while grieving a friend's recent death, to take inventory of all the things only he knew I did?

Is redemption real? Is rebuilding enough? Is coming back possible?

Or are you always there? No matter how much you talk about it, share it, beg witness for what you cannot beg forgiveness. Are you always there?

Because *there* is so vast.

There is a universe, of wrongs. Too many to even jot down on this never-ending list. Too many you will inevitably miss.

And within each. And every confession. There is a universe. Of wrongs, to have just now been reminded of. Of nuance and detail, to barely notice.

Some subtle enough to forget, or to not get quite right. Some just enough to misstate, or miss the point.

The wrong choice of what to include, or to exclude. The wrong decoy to use, in the hiding of that person's identity. That person you're trying to honor. That person you may wind up further distressing, in this process. With the wrong interpretation. With the wrong remembering.

So many steps to take and not fall. So many resting places to ponder if you're worthy yet, of a rest. So many feelings to take stock of. So many thoughts to qualify. So many phrasings to be subjectively heard. So many words to be, that one wrong word.

So many litmus tests.

Every first, and last one, a potential new sin. To interrogate and piece together, a map. To craft yet another confession. A summary of being lost, different from the last but still perfect. And then to hold your breath that the new one is, perfect. Or you can start it all over again.

Is all this anxiety, something I should confess? Does bringing it up make me look like I'm fishing for sympathy? Does it smack of hypocrisy, suggesting that I'm the one who needs a break? Does it smack of martyrdom? That nobody knows the troubles I've seen, nobody knows my sorrows.

Am I allowed to say that this has been difficult? Am I allowed to say it's been lonely? Am I allowed to complain about what it takes, to keep up with my confessions?

Will I find myself writing a hundred pages of confessions to make up for the hundred words I just wrote?

Is all this anxiety, something I should confess?

Is there room for any, of these thoughts?

I'm not saying I want it to be easy. I just don't want to feel like I have to confess for how hard I feel it has become.

**On stage at the Comedy Attic - Bloomington, IN - July 16, 2019
("Laughing Not to Die" stand-up comedy tour)**

Laughs and Applause. Good. This is a good crowd.

All right, take a drink of water and reset.

Pause.

Ok, go.

"I love how you can do something so racist - you have to answer for it publicly, but it's still not enough to admit being racist.

We're like the dude whose girlfriend catches him in bed with another woman and says, 'Baby, I am so so sorry - you saw - what you saw. But I ain't no cheater.'

We're like that dude, but with racism.

We're the dude who wants his girl's forgiveness, but doesn't really want to apologize.

'Look, baby, I told you, I'll bring you flowers. But I ain't washing my dick.'

That should be America's motto on racism. 'America, where all men are created equal, but we're not washing our dick.'

It's like when Michael Richards had to go on David Letterman to apologize for being racist - and then denied he was racist. Y'all remember that shit? They had Kramer's ass caught on tape repeatedly, let me say this again - repeatedly screaming the ultimate racial slur at a black man - *and* talked about lynching him... and he blamed it on anger issues. Chalked that shit up to a bad temper.

That's like Hannibal Lector saying, 'I don't have murder in my heart; I was just hungry.'

And I love how whenever white people get busted for saying or doing something really racist, afterwards they always say some shit like..

'I'm just as shocked as anyone.' - or

'I don't know where any of that came from.' - or

'That's not who I am.'

Well, y'all, I'm here to tell you right now, that's exactly who I am. And that's who your white-ass is too.

And any-white-body who denies that shit is either more worried about public relations than justice, or they've never heard the old saying that a fish - doesn't know - it's wet.

Now, what I mean by that is, you gotta think of racism as a body of water, and we're like fish. Most white people don't know the degree to which racism has impacted their lives, the same way a fish doesn't know it's wet.

And I'm not shitting on the fish here either. I'm saying that unless someone shows the fish that what he's gills-deep in is really not nature at all but more so the myth of race, or if you want to get really fancy the social construct of race and all the institutions and power structures that maintain that social hierarchy, then that fish is probably just going to keep on swimming along, wondering why all the other fish lower down the food chain are always giving him side eye.

Do you get what I'm saying here?

All the shit we *actually notice* as being racist, all the individual manifestations of racism, is like pointing out bubbles to a fish.

The fish can acknowledge the bubbles. But water? Now that's just crazy talk.

Let me give you a couple of examples:

If you've ever started a sentence off with 'Now, I know this may sound racist, but'... That's a bubble. And you're right, whatever came after that - sounded racist.

If you've ever ended a sentence with 'and if that makes me a racist, then I'm sorry'... That's a bubble. Also, you're right. It does make you racist. But we both know, you're not actually sorry.

If you've ever told your 'black friend' you don't see them as black... That's a bubble.

Let me try that one again: If you've ever told your black friend you don't see them as black – and you meant it as a compliment... That's a bubble. Compliment not taken.

If you list American History X in your top three favorite movies... Bubble. It's a good movie, but top three means you're liking it for the wrong reasons.

If more than one of your top five MCs is white, or one of them is MC Hammer... Bubble. And no, for the last time, you can't count the Beastie Boys individually.

If you've ever thought the audience at a black poetry event would definitely appreciate your white-ass singing 'Wade in the Water' as part of your poem. That's - a motherfucking bubble. And I know this, because I burped that one up myself. And to my surprise, they were not as impressed as I had imagined.

Do you see what I'm saying here? The fish can see the bubbles, but not the water.

Michael Richards wasn't in the Klan; he was in the water. The same water as you and me and everyone else. Granted, he *was* swimming a little deeper *that* night, but it's still the same water.

The reason why it's so hard for white people to talk candidly about racism is because we can't see the water - and we're guilty about the bubbles.

But you know what? Fuck that. You're at a comedy show. Comedy isn't about feeling guilty about the bubbles; it's about laughing at the bubbles. And by that, I mean laughing at ourselves.

And laughing at ourselves - allows us to step outside ourselves - and get a little perspective on what it is we're swimming in.

And just so you don't think I'm one of these self-righteous white allies trying to call out every other self-righteous white ally, so I can win the self-righteous white ally Hunger Games, I'll start - by making fun of myself.

Of all the racist bubbles in the racist ocean, what's the biggest bubble of them all?"

"The N-word!"

"That's right, the N-word. Who said that? You, ma'am? Well done. I was going to say it, but you beat me to it. Not sure why you were so enthusiastic about it, but ok, whatever.

She's right though. The N-word is the great white bubble. The word so bad they had to put a consonant in front of it. And everybody knows a consonant in front of a word is way worse than a vowel. It's the reason why I can still say asshole, but I can't say the C-word. Biologically, it should be just as offensive, but the A-word just doesn't sound as dangerous.

Now, saying the N-word is a bit like - eating the A-word. A lot of white people have done it, but they don't like admitting it. And as much as I don't like admitting I've used that word either, the truth is I have. Both out loud and in my writing.

In fact, I've used it enough times that I like to think I have a little expertise into why white people who don't see themselves as racists think it's ok *for them* to go there. Other than the fact that they're actually racist.

The first reason why we normally think it's ok? The 'get out of racist jail free' card: Context.

Now, before anyone gets me wrong on this, let me just say, I'm not one of these white people who act like black people don't understand the concept of context. As if black peoples' brains are going to explode

Scanners-style if they hear a certain combination of letters strung together. And for the couple of people who got the Scanners reference, God bless.

I believe wholeheartedly that black people do understand context. It's the reason why a Mel Brooks or a Carlin or a Chomsky have all used the word in some form or another, but are not seen to be racists. And why? Because those gentlemen could grasp the difference between using the word and exploiting the word. Moreover, their use of that word demonstrated no sense of ownership over the word.

Meaning that if you, as a white person, are going to use that word, you need to understand that it's on lend. You don't own the word; you're using it on license. And if you don't abide by the strict guidelines of that license, you're going to be paying royalties with your ass.

Now, I personally didn't say the word as much as I used it in my writing. And even then, I would say 99 percent of the time I ever used that word, it was in a context that ridiculed racists. The question I didn't ask myself at the time was 'Why the fuck do I feel like I have to use the word in the first place?'

Which is a bit like asking, 'Why did you get your friend so drunk you'd have to drive their new Camaro home?' The answer being - because it was for a good cause, and I thought it made me look cool.

That's right. I told myself that, because I was claiming the context of anti-racism, using that word in such context actually made me look like I was 'down.' Oh, yes. Context in a white writer's mind is the equivalent of ending the word with an 'a' instead of an 'er.'

And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that I'm one of these people who believed I was down because I had 'a black friend.' But, see, that's where you're wrong. I had... more than one black friend.

In fact, I had so many 'black friends' that I invited myself to the cookout. And not only did I invite myself to the cookout, I brought a dish. Because you know what's really good in potato salad, black people? Figs.

In other words, I had to learn the hard way that even though you may think you're trying to contribute something, sometimes your contribution is neither wanted nor is it good. And just like figs in potato salad, my contribution was an abomination.

And for any of the white people in the audience who couldn't laugh at that, because you were too offended that I used the trope of the cookout, fuck you.

That's not the offensive part. That's the funny part.

The offensive part is coming up.

Because, remember, I said before, that 99 percent of the time, I used that word in the context of ridiculing racists. Which is a bit like saying I didn't murder a nun 99 percent of the time.

And though I still believed in my heart that I was using it for a good cause, I somehow thought it would be acceptable to stretch that license and illustrate the offensiveness of that word coming out of my mouth in order to make a point about what I thought was a problem with homophobia in the black community.

Did you get that? A straight, white dude - throwing the N-word at black people... to stick up - for gay people.

Yep. There was a universe I lived in at one time, where that decision made sense to me. Because, in that universe, I was 'down.' Upside down.

And in that universe, I believed I was so down that black people would have no choice but to listen to me. And in that universe, it was my job, as a white person who was *that down*, to chastise those black people over their treatment of a specific marginalized community. I know. I know. It drips.

And if that weren't enough. I should confess that I wasn't even 'woke' for like two seconds when I did all this. In terms of being woke, I had like one eye open, looking for the snooze button.

I was like the guy who calls a group of complete strangers a bunch of crackheads, proceeds to give them a lecture - about meth, when I just recently got clean - off coke, except for that bump I did before I started my lecture.

And the best part of it all? There are people in the world who want to deny white privilege is a thing. But here's how much of a thing it is. That I didn't even see that shit as a bubble. In fact, it took me many a moon to see that as a bubble.

And you want to debate white privilege? My God. I might as well have been photoshopping myself into the background of iconic Dr. King images, and giving them out as Christmas cards to my black friends, with a note inside that suggested how far they had left to go.

What's interesting to me is how that particular piece of work I'm referring to would have been just as racist, well I shouldn't say *just as* racist, but would have been pretty fucking racist had I chosen to make my point without using the N-word. Because no matter what kind of flowery language I used to make it, my point was ultimately racist.

Meaning that, not only is the N-word bad enough when you say it, sometimes even not saying it can be used in the service of racism. Because, see, I know a whole lot of white people who never say it. And most of those white people who never say it - think they're not racist - precisely because they never say it.

And that is a problem. It's a focus on the bubbles and not the water.

I would suggest it's actually a bigger problem - than the people who say it. I mean at least you know who they are. They're kind of hard to miss. They're like unicorns, but with wet racist dildos instead of horns.

Now, I should say, my point is not that more white people need to start saying the N-word. My point is that those unicorns let a lot of us off the hook.

It's the reason why the work that particular N-word was nestled in didn't seem to throw up any red flags with white people other than my use of the word itself. They weren't really bothered with the message as much as they were worried..."

"Are you done yet?"

"that I was... Wait, what was that?"

"I said, 'Are you done yet?'"

"Am I done yet? Well, normally, sir, there's some more laughter and then maybe some applause, and then I say, 'Thank you folks, goodnight.'"

"I don't mean with the bit. I'm wondering when you're going to be done with this whole thing you're doing. Making jokes about saying the N-word. Making your confessions into comedy. Making someone else's pain your muse. Do you have any idea how disgusting that is? At least after Michael Richards messed up, he had the sense to just go away."

"Ok, but what does that even mean 'go away'? You make it sound pretty simple. 'Just go away.' But what do you mean when you say that? Do you mean I should kill myself? Should I go away from the planet? Is that what you mean? That the world would be better off without me, would be better off without this discussion?"

"That's not what I said. What I..."

"Oh, I know. You mean it in the sense that Michael Richards didn't try and make a comeback after that? Is that what you mean, when you say 'just go away?'" If so, then it depends on what you mean by comeback. If you mean coming back into the belief that I have something to offer society, then yes, this is most certainly my comeback tour. If you mean comeback in terms of show business, then I might point out that Michael Richards and I are kind of apples and oranges. Granted we may be racist apples and racist oranges, but that doesn't make us the same. Michael Richards was in his mid-life and his after-career when he fell off the

trapeze. And as I'm sure you're already aware, I most certainly was not. Furthermore, to *come back* implies that I was ever *here* to begin with, here being the business of show, which I most certainly was not. And lastly, I don't have nine seasons of Seinfeld money to fall back on. So, unless I hit the Lotto tonight, my ass ain't going nowhere."

"Well, you're sure here now, aren't you? And from what it looks like, you seem to be doing just fine. With this little business of yours. Exploiting the wrong you've done to others."

"I don't know if I would call it a business."

"Then what would you call it?"

"I think I prefer cottage industry."

"Do you really think this is funny?"

"Hey, shut up, dickhead."

"Yeah, shut the fuck up. We're trying to have a good time here."

"No, no. Let him speak. If I'm going to make it through this tour, I'm going to have to get good at dealing with hecklers."

"Oh, so you think I'm heckling?"

"You are at my comedy show asking me if I think this is funny. It's kind of like being at a strip club and asking if those are titties."

"So you do think other people's pain is funny. That's what I thought."

"No, I don't think other people's pain is funny. In fact, I actually don't think any of this is funny. I think it's dreadful. I think I'm desperate and depressed and hemorrhaging anxiety, and I have no idea how to make any of this better. You think I like talking about how much of a piece of shit I am? I don't. It's awful. As much as I seem like I'm having fun up here, I'm also having to relive the most shameful moments of my life, every night, two shows a night. But somehow, you think I'm exploiting it.

I'm not out here trying to act like the shit didn't happen, or that it doesn't matter, or that I didn't learn anything from it. I'm trying to do the exact fucking opposite. I'm trying to take what I've learned from my failures and combine that with my gifts and attempt to move in some kind of

different direction that hopefully makes an impact on just enough people to leave the world at least slightly better than when I came into it.

And, yes, if it was up to me, I would have definitely picked a much less bizarre roller coaster to ride to that place. But this is the hole I fell down into, and all I can do now is try and dig my way to the other side.”

“Yeah, but is that what really happened? Did you really just fall into this?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

What do you think’s going on here? You think this was all in my mind when I was a teenager? That I just knew how all this would unfold twenty-five, thirty years later? That somehow I could see into the future and this was really my masterplan from the beginning?

Because that’s what you’d have to believe to think that shit.”

“No, to believe that, I’d have to think you were that smart. Which I don’t. I just think you’re an opportunist. And a bastard.”

“You know what they say. ‘Write what you know.’”

“Yes, and it seems the only thing you know is how to screw over others.”

“And I’m trying to make up for that.”

“You’re trying to make out on that.”

“Ok. Ok. I admit it. I’m awful. I am fucking awful. In case you haven’t noticed, it’s kind of the theme of my show. So why don’t you just tell me what it is that you want. What is it that you want from me? Do you want me to apologize to you, even though the last time I checked you’re not among the people I wronged? Is that what you came here to get? An apology, for you?”

Because I’ll give it to you. I’ll apologize to you for all the shit I’ve done in my life, to other people, to people you’ve never fucking met. If that’s what you want, just say so and I’ll give it to you, and we can get this over with.”

“That’s not at all what I want. And you’re proving my point with the offer.”

“And what was the point again?”

“That this is all performative crap.”

“Now, that sounds like PhD-speak. And because, as you’ve implied, I’m not all that enlightened, maybe you could enlighten me as to what you mean by performative. I would have assumed this was performative by it being a performance. But evidently you mean something else.”

“It’s not my job to educate you.”

“Then help me. I bet it’s your job to help people.”

“My job is to help people who’ve been abused, not the abusers.”

“So you are a professional.”

“I have an MA in Industrial-Organizational Psychology.”

“Oh, a psychologist. And to think I was worried about heckles coming from possible Neo-Nazi types in the crowd.

So tell me, Mr. Industrial-Organizational Psychologist, do you have a problem with the way I’ve turned things into jokes or that I’m doing this at all? Don’t I have a right, indeed a responsibility, to try and make this in some way better?”

“First off, you don’t have rights as an abuser. You only have...”

“So, wait, you have the right to comment on this, but I don’t? Is that what you’re saying? That not only do you get to claim the authority status here as the stranger in the audience with a degree, but that now I’m no longer human status anymore? Is that it?”

Because if that is it, and there really is no coming back, then maybe I should kill myself. From what you’re saying, all that would really mean is that there’s one less abuser in the world.”

“That’s not what I said. You cut me off before I could...”

“And let’s talk about performative here. You don’t think you’re exploiting this? You’ve had your camera out the whole night, waiting for your big moment. I’ll bet a thousand dollars your plan was to post this on no less than five different social media accounts, including a fucking Patreon.

And you know what? That’s fine. But let me give you a smidge of advice.

In case you don’t already know it. The internet is a brutal place. And social media is full of people just like you. People who will see this

self-righteous routine you've got going on here and they'll wonder if you're really the moral authority you make yourself out to be. And I'd bet that at least one of those people, just like you, will take a long walk through each and every post of each and every one of your five social media accounts just to see if they can find that one questionable thing you did or said or posted or commented on or phrased the wrong way, or God forbid tried to make right something you did wrong a long time ago.

Wouldn't that be ironic? That you actually had a past too? And that your plan to take me down tonight based on how I'm addressing mine actually ended up being your downfall?"

"I'm sure they could find something in my past. I never said I was perfect. The difference between you and I is that I'm not out here trying to make a buck off my sins."

"No, you're trying to make a name off of shitting on mine."

"So much for your belief in accountability."

"Dude, accountability to who? To you? To your fucking Twitter followers? Is that who I'm supposed to be accountable to? Atoning to?"

Bottom line, man, what did you really come here for tonight? Because you sure as hell didn't come to laugh. And you definitely didn't come to learn. And from what it sounds like, you didn't come to educate or help either.

So what is it? You think making a fool of me is going to do anybody any good? Well, you're wrong. I don't mean shit, *unless* I'm doing this. You make me a nobody again, and the world is just going to keep on spinning without the slightest net positive gain. The only difference is that you'll have a rotten set of antlers to hang on your wall.

You really wanna do some good? Go take that insight and your platform and share it with someone in a way that it's going to actually make a difference. Share it with a kid who doesn't have any guidance, so he doesn't end up like me. But don't share it in the arrogant prick way you're doing here. Share it in a sincere way.

If you can do that, instead of whatever it is you think you're doing here, with me, then maybe you heckling tonight won't have been a waste of time after all, for either of us.

Otherwise, this is really all about you, and the only thing you came to do tonight is jerk yourself off, and to do it in front of all of us. And no matter how much you tell yourself we want to see it or that we deserve to see it, we fucking don't. So you can do the right thing, think about what I said, and let these people enjoy the rest of the show, or you can take your camera and your heckles and you can quietly go fuck yourself."

“That’s a really great speech, but it doesn’t change the fact that what you’re doing here is wrong. Making these jokes. Making it all a joke.”

“You know what? You may be right. But you don’t get to decide for everybody else. And I’ve got a room full of people that paid good money to be here. And I’m pretty sure they didn’t come to see your show.”

“I just think it’s sad they came for yours...”

“Boooo.”

“Fuck you, asshole.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?”

“Get the fuck out of here.”

“No, no, it’s ok. He doesn’t have to go.”

“No, I’m going. You’ve all proven my point anyway.”

“No, seriously, sir, you don’t have to leave. There’s a lot more to...”

“Too late. I’m out of here.”

“Good riddance.”

“Yeah, fuck you.”

“No, I’m serious. You don’t have to leave. Stay after and talk to me after the...”

“Wooooooooo!”

“Heeeyaaayaaay Goodbyyyyye!”

“Wait, is he back there... No? Oh well, I guess he left.”

Applause.

“No, please don’t. I’ll only feel bad about it.”

Laughs.

Ok, good. They’re still with me.

Holy shit, that was crazy.

“Okaaaaaay, so, as you can see, I am not exactly what you would call ‘skilled’ in handling hecklers.

In fact, I’m already regretting the way that all went down.

I don’t know. Maybe he had some real points, and I just wasn’t giving him enough time to make them. Maybe I should have listened more. I don’t know.”

“Nah, fuck him.”

“For real, y’all. I’m actually feeling bad.

Stick around for the next show; I may just be confessing this.”

Laughs. Slight applause. Ok. This is ok.

Pause. Take a drink of water. Let them finish.

All right, how do I pick back up?

“All right, so where were we...”

Chapter Five

(I'm definitely down the fucking rabbit hole, right?)

The Doctor - - May 31, 2017

“Pretty much, I’m just mad.”

“Who are you mad at? Or, should I say, what are you mad at?”

“Everything. I’m mad at not having any sense, for not resisting. I’m mad at not having any guidance. I’m mad at the culture I grew up in, at the institutions I grew up in. I’m mad that I feel like a victim.

I’m mad that I feel helpless that I can’t change the past. I’m mad that I don’t feel like I can move beyond this point. I’m mad that I still feel like a bad person. I’m mad at these fucking ghosts.

I’m even mad at myself for the ways I’ve tried to work through this.”

“Why is it that you think you’re a bad person?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I believe I’m the same person now I was back then.

But I guess I still kind of feel that way. Like I’m tied to that person, because those things happened. It wasn’t just my life they happened in. They happened *to* someone else.

And maybe I feel like because I have no ability to change that having happened to them, I’ll never really be able to see myself outside that lens.”

“Have you ever thought that if you would have committed an actual crime, even a serious crime, you’d be out by now?”

“Yeah, I have. But you don’t get credit for time served in your mind, do you?”

I mean does it matter if I’ve been obsessed with it? That it’s still haunting me, that it’s crawled around in my brain all these years?

Is that not good enough?

Not to say people who come out of prison don’t still have guilt, but at least they can tell people they paid their debt to society.”

“Is society what you owe your debt to?”

You said yourself that society helped make the person you were. Do you really owe that society anything?

And if so, what is it that you think you owe?”

“It’s not *that* society I owe. It’s this one.”

“Tell me more about that.”

“I think about the kids and young people today, and the society they’re growing up in. And I know I’m part of what has helped shape the persons they’ve become so far.”

“Do you want to save them from becoming who you were?”

“Of course I want that.”

“But you can’t save them.
You can’t save them, can you? Not by yourself.”

“I’m not trying to be anybody’s hero. I just want to be a helper.
Just want to do my part.”

“What is your part?”

“I guess I’m still trying to figure that out.”

“If you do that, if you figure that out and you do your part,
whatever that is, do you think it will be enough?”

And I don’t mean that hypothetically. I mean you. Could you ever
do enough of your part?

And how are you supposed to know when you’ve done enough?

And let’s just say you can actually get to that point, get to the point
where you feel satisfied with how much you’ve done. Would that even be
enough?

Not for them, but for you?”

“Honestly?”

Probably not.

Because even though I believe all that stuff about society and
young people and my debt, and I do believe it in principle. But even still,
sometimes I feel like it’s just something I tell myself to try and temporarily
feel better about it all.”

“But you don’t feel better.”

“No.”

“So what is it that needs to happen for you to be able to let that
go?”

“You mean for *it* to let go of me.”

“No, I mean for you to let go. You have to quit thinking in terms of your ghosts. Like there is some kind of outside entity, some kind of metaphysical force, that has a mind of its own.

It’s your mind, and you have to come to terms with that. You may have been a victim of your society, but you’re not a victim now.

It’s too easy to just refer to *them*, like you have no agency.

It lets you off the hook. It permits you to not do the work it takes to get better.”

“Sometimes I think maybe I don’t want to get better.

Like maybe I don’t deserve it.”

“But why? Why don’t you deserve to get better?”

“I don’t know. It’s like you said, maybe I would have been better off serving some kind of sentence. I’m not saying prison; I know what goes on in prison, and I most definitely would not have been better off after that.

But just some kind of official acknowledgement of what I did wrong and what the punishment was for it.

Even if I know it’s all arbitrary, maybe I could have been made to face what I had done and make some sort of attempt at restitution.

But that’s not what happened.

I just kept on living, for years. Like nothing happened.”

“Until when?”

“Until I started reading.

When I was in school, I never read for myself.

Once I did, I started questioning things. One question led to another, and I finally started to see that kid in a different light.”

“But not just that; you became a better person.”

“To everyone else, I guess.”

“Ok, but you know what I’m saying. To even be able to recognize these things, it means you’ve made some real progress. Even if you can’t feel like you’re a better person, you do acknowledge you’re a different one.”

“Sure.”

“But it’s still not enough.”

“Nope.”

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“What would relief be like for you?”

“If I knew that, I probably wouldn’t be here.”

“No, I mean it. You’ve had to have thought about it. You’ve had to have asked yourself.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.

I think about these confessions I’ve been making. And really all they are is secrets.

I do feel like there’s a certain momentary relief of getting it out there.”

“Yet.”

“Yet that’s *all* it is. Momentary.

It’s like it’s not enough to say the secret aloud. *Everyone* has to hear it, from me.”

“But that sounds like you want to control the narrative.”

“I don’t mean it that way. I mean it in the sense that I want people to hear my story, kind of like the way I used to hear people give testimony in church. They would tell the story of when they were a sinner, and how things are so much different now. And how other sinners can have that too.

Except, for me, it’s not salvation. It’s getting people to question enough to not become sinners in the first place. And I don’t mean that they won’t make mistakes, but maybe just not the kinds that I made.”

“So when do you get saved?”

I think it’s admirable that you want to save others or, as you said, help save others. But you still need something that is more than temporary for yourself.”

“Maybe that’s my punishment. That I don’t get saved. That I can’t ever find it.”

“You’ve brought up the church a couple times. Do you think you’re making yourself a martyr? Taking on this eternal burden as some sort of sacrifice?”

“If you’re asking me if I see myself as some kind of Christlike figure, no.

If anything, I feel more like Abraham’s son.”

“Isaac?”

“Yeah.”

“In what way?”

“Isaac was offered up for sacrifice. A necessary sacrifice, for a system that no one was willing to call bullshit on.”

“A child being offered up.”

“Exactly.”

“Except he wasn’t sacrificed. In the end, God stopped it.”

“But did he stop it? Or was that even the sacrifice?”

When they used to tell the story in church, the moral was always that God was never going to let it happen, that Abraham was just being tested. And he passed the test. The test of devotion.

Now I think it was a different test, and that he failed the test.

The fact that Abraham was willing to do it, that he wasn’t willing to question the nature of a God who would have a father murder his own son, or even commit to murdering his own son, that he wasn’t willing to question something that horrible, but instead was willing to take his own son’s life. It’s too much to come back from.

He didn’t stop himself from doing it.

He was stopped. The only reason it didn’t go too far was because of circumstances *beyond* his control.

And people always focus on that feeling of relief that it didn’t happen. But, the way I see it, it already happened. He made the choice to kill his son. And after all the moments where he could have just walked away and not done it, he didn’t make that decision.

He chose to kill his son. That’s what he went with. And that’s something, until this day, as they tell his story in every Sunday School class, in every pulpit, he can’t take back.”

“It sounds like you feel like both Abraham and his son.”

“I can see why you would say that. But I think it depends on how you see the story.

I mean I think about who I used to be. And who I used to be always saw this as a story about Abraham. It was this big demonstration of how important God was to Abraham.

Now I see it as a story about God, and the nature of that God. And how it was really a demonstration of how worthless human life was, to God.

And I guess now I just can't see how anyone can believe in that idea of a creator.

Yet, at one time, I did. Just like everyone around me, I didn't question the story. Just like I didn't question all the other stories I was told. And because I didn't question those other stories, I ended up with all these things I can't take back."

"Is that what you meant when you said 'a system no one was willing to call BS on?'

Is the system God?"

"I don't know, maybe. I guess it's more what I was saying about the belief in the nature of God, or at least that specific God."

"When you say 'the nature' of God, what does that mean to you?"

"The belief that God would require that kind of obedience, that kind of blind devotion. And I mean blind in the sense that you're not allowed to cloud your vision, which really means your actions, with the distractions or the temptations of your own mind. You just have to do what you're told, and that is that. Even if what you're being told to do is the most awful thing in the world."

"But it was a test."

"Yeah, but it wasn't really about the test. It's about why there was a test.

Think about it. Why does Abraham owe God that? Why would anyone owe God that kind of obedience?"

"Because God created him."

"No. That's not it."

"Then why?"

"Because they had all betrayed God.

The story is that once Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they and all their offspring after that had a sinful nature. And that all those offspring until the end of time were responsible for making it up to God for that original sin.”

“That’s why sometimes original sin is synonymous with the concept of a sinful nature.”

“Exactly. That, by nature, we’re prone to sin.”

“Meaning, by nature, you’re a bad person.”

“Exactly.”

“But what does that have to do with ‘the system?’”

“I feel like the system that Abraham didn’t question was what he owed to God. But the reason he believed he owed it was that he accepted the story of original sin. Because that was just the way things were. It was the natural order of things.”

“So?”

“So, the system I grew up in also told me there was a natural order of things. And that natural order was competition. And that competition led to hierarchies. And whether it was the economy or foreign policy or the family or whatever, all the horrors that resulted from those hierarchies, all the terrible outcomes, be it war or slavery or subjugation of women, all of it was justified within that concept of competition as a natural order.”

“It’s just the way things were.”

“And if that’s just the way things are, then there’s no reason to feel bad for all the terrible outcomes.”

“Or if you flip that around...”

“There’s no reason to feel bad for all the terrible things we do, because that’s just the way things are.”

“Meaning, by nature, we do bad things.”

“And what kind of people do bad things by nature?”

“Bad people.”

“Exactly.”

“But you no longer believe in that system.”

“That’s why I didn’t say I was Abraham.”

“That’s right. You said you were Isaac.”

“Me and every other kid I grew up with. And every kid who grew up before us.”

“But in the end, Isaac wasn’t sacrificed.”

“But that doesn’t matter. What matters is that the story was passed down.

And we were told that kind of sacrifice was ok.
Because that’s just the way things are.

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It wasn’t his child that Abraham sacrificed that day. It was his conscience.”

“And he sacrificed that for God.”

“He sacrificed it for the system.”

“But the child lived.”

“That doesn’t mean there wasn’t damage done at the altar.”

A Visitor - - April 08, 2020

“Hey! Wow, it’s so great to see you. And with this weather too.
It’s like the perfect day.
What’s been going on with you?”

“Not much, man. Just keeping above ground.”

“I hear that.
How are things back home?”

“Fucking sucks. Too much traffic, everything changing. You’d
hardly recognize it.

They tore down the old bowling alley.
Put up a fucking Walgreens. Can you believe that shit?”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yeah, the only thing left is The Starlight and Smeraldo’s.”

“Damn, Smeraldo’s is still there?
That’s crazy.”

“That place is like some weird time portal or something.
Anyway, you oughta come back and see everybody. We’ll go out
and burn it down one night.

There’s plenty enough bars now, that’s for sure.”

“Man, I can’t right now. But maybe when I get free.”

“I got ya. I got ya.
So speaking of what’s going on, how have things been with all this
shit?”

“It’s been pretty crazy.”

“I hope you’re making some fat bank.”

“I’m doing ok.”

“Ok’s ass. You better be pulling it in big time with all that crazy
shit they got you saying.”

“They got me saying? What do you mean?”

“I mean all that shit about you being so bad and all.”

“No one’s got me saying anything. I’m just telling it like it happened.”

“Yeah, but it’s the way you make it all sound.
Hear you tell it, you were some kind of evil villain or some shit.”

“I don’t know about evil villain, but I definitely did some fucked up shit back in the day.”

“Fucked up shit? Dude, you were a saint.”

“What are you talking about? I wasn’t a saint.”

“Compared to me you were.”

“That doesn’t mean I was a saint.”

“Dude, you gave me hope. You were my conscience.
If it hadn’t been for you, I’m not sure where I might have ended up. I might have killed myself.

You were there for me when I was at my fucking lowest, when nobody was there.”

“But that was when we were older.
The stuff I’m confessing is stuff that happened before that.”

“I know when it was. I was there.
And just I’m telling you, you weren’t as bad as you think.
Sure, it looks bad looking back. But so does everything.
Fashion, hairdos. Dude, we didn’t know any better.”

“It wasn’t just our clothes and hair. We did some really fucked up shit back then.”

“I did some really fucked up shit back then. You tried to get me not to do that fucked up shit.”

“I did my own share of it too. And you know it.”

“So what? We were trash back then. That was *back then*.
And even then, you wasn’t anything like me.”

“It’s not about how I compared to anybody else. It’s about whether shit was right or wrong.”

“You want to talk right or wrong? Dude, my youngest one. She turned fucking twelve this year.

I read her texts with this little shitbag from her school. This motherfucker’s talking shit, talking about putting it in her butt and shit.

Dude, I went the fuck off.”

“What did you do?”

“I wanted to kill that little motherfucker. But you can’t do that, so I called his house. And he’s only got a mother, so I told her what was going on. Told her that I understood how kids were at that age, but that I had a responsibility to my daughter, and that I wanted to give her, as a mom, the chance to make sure it didn’t happen again.”

“That sounds pretty level headed.”

“Yeah, well, I threw in at the end, that if she couldn’t stop that shit, then I would have to take care of it.”

“Damn.”

“Damn’s right.”

“Did he quit?”

“You’re damn right, he quit.”

“So what did you say to your daughter?”

“I told her like I told that little fucker’s mama, that I know what it’s like to be that kid. Except I told Sara, ‘Look, I know you and all your friends think that all your parents are some fucking squares. And a lot of your friends’ parents probably *are* squares. But me? I’m Frank Motherfucking Hankshaw. When I tell you some shit about what these little motherfuckers are thinking at your age, you better listen. Because I was the worst of the fucking worst.”

“You told her that?”

“Shit yeah, I told her that. I told her that if she would have been a girl in our neighborhood when we were kids, we would have treated her like total shit.”

“Goddamn.”

“Yeah, dude. I just laid it all out. Told her all the stories. Told her about Wrong Ass and Curtain Girl, all of it.”

“Jesus, why did you tell her all that?”

“Because I wanted her to know I wasn’t bullshitting. And to let her know that that’s how easy shit can get out of control for kids her age. And that I wasn’t going to let that shit happen to her.”

“Holy shit.
What did she say?”

“She didn’t say much. Just sit there and listened.
She was grossed out, obviously. But she kind of already knew who I was anyway, so this was just another layer of it.”

“Do you really think that was the only way you could have handled it? Telling her all that shit?”

“It’s all I had. If I gave her some bullshit about being a good girl and the right path and all that shit, then before she’s thirteen she’d probably end up in the backseat of some shitbox giving head to a sixteen-year-old.”

“Jesus, man.”

“What? It’s true.
Isn’t that the way it went in the neighborhood?”

“I guess. I just don’t like to think about your kid like that.”

“You think I like thinking about it? It makes me fucking filled with rage thinking about that little turd texting her that shit.

But what can I fucking do about it? I ain’t *his* daddy. Aside from whatever shit I talked to his mama, I know I can’t really do anything to him.

And of course I didn’t tell his mama this, but if I’m being honest with myself, and I try to be *sometimes*, I also know that kid probably won’t do anything in his life as fucked up as I did.

So what the fuck? All I’ve got is my example. And we both know it ain’t a good one.

And because I was who I was back then, and I can’t point to all the good things I did that she *should* do, the only thing I really have to offer is the truth and telling on myself.”

“But don’t you see? That’s kind of what I’m doing with all this stuff. Except it’s for anybody else out there who could find themselves doing fucked up shit like we did back then. I’m trying to do my part to get them not to do it.”

“I’m just saying you weren’t as bad as you make it out to be. You like knew that there was a different way, and you were trying to get us to not do the easy wrong shit.

But for me, I felt like the world was so full of vulgarity that we were doomed from the beginning.

That’s why I say you were my conscience. Because back then, I wasn’t even thinking about the right thing. I was just thinking about having fun.

And for kids like us, most of the time, having fun meant being bad.”

“But don’t you feel bad about that shit now?”

“Not really. Not anymore than cringing at certain parts of the story.”

“I wish I could say the same.”

“But that’s because you weren’t like me, or Brad, or Randall.

That’s the advantage of being a bad kid. Bad kids can be redeemed.

I’m a fucking great person compared to who I used to be.

But someone like you just sits around and thinks about how awful he was. While I sit around and *laugh* about that shit, thinking how much better I am now.”

“Hmm. I guess you’re right.”

“Anyway, man, I gotta get out of here. Long drive back, you know?”

“I appreciate you coming and seeing me while you’re in town.

Means a lot to me. Really does.

Tell your mama I say hello and that I love her.”

“I will, man. I will.

Look, but you take this and put it in your pocket.

Don’t read it right now. Wait ‘til later, when you’re alone.”

“Wait, what is it?”

“Just do it, man. Just put it in your pocket and read it later.
Look, I gotta go. I love ya.”

“I love you too, man.”

“All right. Out.”

The Interviewer - - January 03, 2021

“If you’re just joining us, I’m talking with Lonnie Ray Atkinson, author of the new book *A Good Kid and His Ghosts*.

If it’s ok, I’d like to take a step back and talk about some of the successes you’ve enjoyed in the last three years.”

“I’m not sure if ‘enjoyed’ is the right word, but sure.”

“All right, so from what I’ve been able to find the numbers for, *The Man Who Confessed Himself To Death*, the book before this one, achieved over half a million in sales. And before that your comedy tour Laughing Not To Die sold something like 6,000 tickets, and you had never even done stand-up before. Your songs, as of this week, show 130 million Spotify plays from the two albums, with the second album producing a couple minor radio hits. And *Ghost Poems* was the highest selling debut book of poetry in the last decade.

Now, just in regards to your poems, I know, even in MFA programs today, they’ll tell you there’s really not a lot of money in poetry. I think most poets today are happy if they can sell a couple hundred chapbooks.

Earning My Confessions, by itself, sold two hundred thousand copies.

Now, I realize there is poetry to be found in all subjects, and I don’t doubt that you seem genuinely remorseful in the work itself, almost to the point of being tortured by it.

But I guess my question is: How can you feel so bad all the way to the bank?”

“I understand that there is a sort of icky irony in the resulting financial upside to my decision to tread into the world of public confession.”

“That’s an interesting way to put it. But I can’t help but wonder, how ironic is it, *really*?”

By your own admission, you were unsuccessful in getting any traction for your creative endeavors prior to this. But then, somehow, out of the blue, all of this seemed to magically fall into place.

And now you’ve found this audience in, what many people see as, a really controversial market.”

“Again, I can see how making money off of these kinds of transgressions sounds almost perverse. But my intention, ever since I’m The Worst, has been to encourage others to do the same kind of

questioning and self-critique, and for them to find their own way of coming clean.

I naturally would prefer to have ‘made it big’ from something else. But I can assure you this was as much an accident as it would have been someone getting discovered at an open mic or a model getting discovered walking down the street.

I didn’t plan on any of this. It just happened.”

“Yes, you’ve said that before.

But did it? Did it really *just happen*?

I don’t doubt that you were honestly caught off guard by I’m The Worst, but the moves you’ve made since then. It’s hard not to see a certain amount of calculation.”

“How do you figure?”

“Take your support group for example. You’ve repeatedly highlighted the importance of having that space. Obviously, I’m not privy to the particular confessions made in that group, but it leads one to wonder if you saved your biggest confessions for the spotlight. And if you didn’t save them, it’s hard to believe that once all this got going, you didn’t treat your support group like an open mic to kind of work out material.”

“Wow. I have to say, I didn’t expect you to go there. But I guess I can understand the suspicion.

The problem is I can’t make you believe me. All I have is my word. And my word is that I’ve never exploited my group and I never would. They’ve been there for me during this, the same as they were there before, and I would never tarnish that.

There’s no way I could have seen this coming, and I guess I’m just trying my best to make the best out of uncharted territory.”

“Right. You’ve said that before, many times. What I’m trying to get at is this. You make your place in the Confession Industry look like an accident, but you can’t deny the role you played in it.

And it wasn’t just that you went with the flow. You made conscious decisions to not just navigate the ship but to really give wind to its sails.”

“I admit to taking advantage of certain opportunities, and maybe some of those decisions weren’t the greatest. But the one thing I stand by, above all, is that my confessions have been nothing less than earnest. Every one of them.”

“But the way you weave them. Told a different way, more than a few of your stories might appear to be little more than unfortunate but sadly normal mistakes, what many would chalk up to just being young.

You can’t deny that you’ve taken great care to make them more than that.”

“That’s because they are more than that.

Have you listened to any of my confessions? Have you read any of them?”

“I’m not saying all of them. But some for sure.

You’re clearly gifted with the way you choose your words. Plus, your recorded confessions always seem so poignant. It would lead one to believe they’ve been rehearsed.”

“Are you trying to imply I’m just acting? That this is all just an act?”

“I’m implying that you’re strategic. It’s hard not to believe that you haven’t used the sessions with your group or the appointments with your doctor or even the conversations with your best friend as a kind of rehearsal for so many...”

“Wait, what do you mean my best friend? How do you know what...”

“Did I say best friend? I meant to say the conversations you have with your friends.

What I’m saying is, having seen how cleverly, and I would suggest strategically, you recycle certain sentiments and rotating conclusions, it’s hard not to question the sincerity of a product so polished.”

“So what are you asking me?”

“I’m asking you whether these are spontaneous or whether they’ve been crafted.”

“Of course some of them are crafted. They’re crafted because I want to make sure I say everything I need to say, to make sure I get everything across. I’m actually terrible on the spot. That’s why I don’t like doing interviews. I get nervous and I don’t feel like I’m articulate. And I know I miss saying a lot of the things I had meant to. The only place I’ve ever felt really comfortable confessing anything is in the group. Outside of that, I’d be a mess trying to do it off the cuff.

So, yeah, I rehearse things to make sure I get the words right. But I don't think that makes me an actor. And it definitely doesn't make my time with the group or my doctor or anyone else for that matter some kind of fishing trip for editing tips."

"I'm just saying, because of the skill you have with words and your ability to get them across so convincingly, I think it's hard for some people to decipher whether you *are* being earnest or just using your writing ability, along with anything else at your disposal, for maximum gain in this situation."

"You mean it's hard for you to decipher.

Ain't that right?

Because I don't know what to tell you. If you can see what I'm doing here and that's what you come away with, I'm honestly not sure what I could say that would change your mind.

Do you think this is what I wanted to be known for, the things I'm most ashamed of? To be hailed by one group and hated by another, but to not be, and maybe never be, appreciated for the writing I originally wanted to do outside this madness?

It's stuff like this that makes me not feel right about getting my other work out there, just because everyone is going to think it's on the back of this exploitation."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I just think it's a legitimate concern.

You've become rich and famous from this."

"So I'm responsible for capitalism now too?"

"That's not what I'm getting at. I'm saying that you do talk in the book about being conflicted as to the way the Confession Industry assembled, but you don't talk very much about being conflicted about your status.

By all definitions, you're a star. Considering what you've built that fan base on, you don't feel at all hypocritical?"

"Of course I do. Of course I feel hypocritical. But it's not just hypocrisy. I feel guilt and anxiety and depression and everything else I've felt my whole life about decisions I made that didn't turn out the way I expected. I feel it all the time.

But when it comes to my fan base, as you called them, I'd like to think my success has been due to connecting with people through my faults, and being open about my failures. I know not everyone looks at it

that way, but I know that there are real people out there who have shared their own experiences with this stuff and how my work has helped them deal with their own feelings of guilt and shame, and that makes me think that something good really has come out of all this, even if there has been some really not so good things.

And, yes, I know there have been more not so good things than I would like. But that doesn't erase the people I'm talking about.

And for my own sanity, I'm trying my best now to focus on the people who may be a little better off as a result of my work rather than the people who would dismiss these so-called fans' experiences as meaningless."

"And that's definitely not what I want to do. I'm not trying to offend them or you. It's just that, like you mentioned, you don't like giving interviews. And because I've noticed all the interviews you've done have been brief and not all that in depth, I just wanted to dig a bit deeper while I have you here and get a candid take on some of the things you didn't include in the book."

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"Ok.

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I can accept that.

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And you're right. I've said it myself. I'm not really good in interviews. And to be honest, I'm so used to getting attacked online, I guess maybe I felt that's what this was turning into. But you're right. These are fair questions to ask.

I'm sorry if I overreacted."

"Not at all. I appreciate you trying to answer this stuff the best you can.

But if I may return to the topic of your success, I'm just curious what happens when you run out of confessions?"

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"Are you implying my worth is only in my confessions?"

“No, that’s not...”

“I’m just kidding. I know what you mean. And, believe me, it’s something I think about all the time.

They always say write what you know. And, weirdly enough, that’s actually what I ended up doing. And you were right earlier when you said nothing else I wrote before this ever caught on.

So I’m not really sure what’s next after this. I imagine it will really depend on that first thing I try after.”

“How do you mean?”

“I just mean that I probably have enough fans that sales of the first project will do well based on them giving me a chance.

But if they give it a shot and they think it sucks, then that’s pretty much it. I know I can’t depend on that support another time.”

“That’s the difference between mere partiality and loyalty.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know if I really expect loyalty anyway.”

“So when does that happen? When do you take that leap?”

“I guess when all this is done.”

“And when is that?”

“I guess when I can finally get out the thing that has been the hardest for me to confess.”

“And that is?”

“Nice try.
But not today.”

My Agent - - December 07, 2018

“They want me to do what?!”

“Why do you always have to react like that? Why can’t you just listen to what I’ve got to say, take a deep breath, grant it a little open-minded consideration, and then give a measured response?”

“Measured response my ass. You’re just saying that because you know this already sounds like some bullshit. What does that even mean they want me to ghostwrite their confession?”

“Technically it would be *confessions*. But that’s a good thing, because we can charge by the word.”

“But what does that even mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. They want you to make up confessions for them.”

“What the hell, don’t they have their own?”

“Of course they have their own. Everybody’s got their own. Fortunately for us, they don’t want to use their own.”

“Why not?”

“Who fucking knows? I didn’t ask that. I just said thank you and please.

Maybe their confessions are too fucked up for prime time. Maybe they’re even more boring than yours. It doesn’t matter. It just matters that they’re willing to pay tippity top dollar, and they thought of us first. And if we don’t jump on it, they’re going to move on to some other lucky hack.”

“Screw you, man.”

“I’m just kidding! Don’t be so sensitive.

Look, I know it’s weird, but this whole world is weird. If you’re going to thrive in it, you have to become desensitized to the absurdity and know how to welcome the rain.

And this, my man, is some fucking rain.”

“Ok, so why aren’t they using their own?”

“Oh my God, you’re like a fucking child. I tell you there’s big, fat, green storm clouds coming this way, and all you can do is ask me why, why, why.”

Haven’t we talked about this before? You don’t question the weather, you prepare for it. And right now, you need to be getting your rain barrels out. Because my ass is gonna dance our way into the monsoon.”

“I still want to know.

I mean they’re obviously rich. Why would they want to be giving fake confessions?”

“Technically, they’re not rich. They’re grandparents are rich. They’ve just been permitted a certain allowance from grampy and grammy to make a limited number of smart investments in their future. And this is what they’ve decided to do with part of that allowance.”

“But why?”

“Why else? To get famous.”

“Get famous for what?”

“Get famous for your fucking fake confessions. Are you not paying attention?”

“No, I’m asking what do they want fame for, if they’re already rich? Do they have any other skills?”

“If they had any other skills, they wouldn’t need the confessions.”

“So, what, they just want fame for fame’s sake?”

“I told you, it’s an investment. From what I gathered from their lawyer, they’re going to use it as a jumping off point, to becoming an influencer.”

“An influencer? Like online, with social media?”

“Are you really this slow? Yes, like online, *with social media*. Just because your old ass doesn’t understand how these new fancy light bulbs work doesn’t mean others have to live in the dark.”

“But that’s not a real thing.”

“What’s not a real thing?”

“Influencer.”

“Tell that to the teen and twenty-something gazillionaires who garner more attention than world leaders.

While you write another fucking poetry book, the only book that matters to these kids is *How To Win Likes And Influence People*.”

“I’m not going to give my confessions to some rich little shit who’s never worked a day in their life.”

“Oh don’t be so cliché. They’re not smoking cigarettes on your lawn; they just want to play in the neighborhood.

Besides, you’re not giving them your confessions. You’re making them up. They can’t do anything with some middle-aged former working stiff’s confessions.

And, for us, that’s the beauty. The point of you ghostwriting is that no one has to know you did it. Because no one is supposed to know.”

“Who says I can just make up confessions, much less for some rich brat?”

“Because you’re a writer, dipshit. Isn’t that what you keep telling me?”

Come on, didn’t you make up shit in yours?”

“Only small things, and that was just to shield people’s identities.”

“Then make up a little more.

You said you wanted to write.

Then write.”

“But it’s not real.”

“What’s *real*?”

The only reason why anybody gives a fuck about your average, run-of-the-mill mistakes is because we gave them a reason to care. And that reason is celebrity.

Yet now all the sudden that you’ve broken through the gates, you’re all picky about who gets in next.”

“But they’re not doing anything to earn it, to earn anything.”

“Earn it? Are you forgetting the only reason I called you is because you were too much of a media bumpkin to know you were being had? You

didn't build your own chocolate factory, you fell into a pile of chocolate looking shit and found a golden ticket in the pile."

"And which are you, the ticket or the shit?"

"Ha ha, dickhead. You know what I'm saying.

But while you're making jokes, they're waiting for an answer. And don't think their lawyers are just sitting by the phone. They're thumbing through a list of a hundred other people to call if you say no.

Seriously, you think you can bogart the clouds?

What do you think has been happening with this whole confession fad? While you're up there decorating your cloud with portraits of your long-suffering, the surrounding clouds are getting lower and lower to the ground. Meaning you couldn't reach the ladder to kick it away, even if you wanted."

"Look, I'm not saying the world has to work the way I want it to. I'm saying I don't have to contribute to it working the way I don't like. And, frankly, I don't like that famous for being famous shit."

"What do you mean you don't like it? How could you not like it?

My God, who do you even see when you look in the mirror?

You think you're the only one who deserves vanity, the only one who is worthy of self-importance? You think what you're doing is any better than them?

You *are* them, but with a gift."

"A gift I developed and honed and put to practice, for years."

"Ah yes, the self-made man. Fuuuuuuck youuuuu!

I don't care how many hours you shat away with corny poems and song lyrics to finally find your version of authenticity; your way with words is a talent you were born with. And that means it's a privilege, an unearned privilege."

"Yeah, and I'm trying to use that privilege to help others.

You think I really want this kind of celebrity. I put up with it so it might benefit the people who are paying attention to what I have to say. If anything, it's more for them than me."

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Listen to yourself.

Do you know how arrogant you sound? You sound like one of these missionaries who has to bring the savages the Word.

Well, what's the Word, oh great one?"

You told me, when we first started this, you wanted to make a contribution. Now I think I know what that contribution is. It's that you're a real somebody.

And not just any somebody. But somebody to watch, to listen to, to follow. Your fans don't know you anymore than this kid's fans are going to know them. They know you as far as what you tell them.

You really think you're better than these assholes on Instagram? They're doing the same thing you are. Trying to get an audience, trying to feel important. They get their little burst of likes or hearts or shares or whatever, and for just a little bit they feel like they're somebody.

Just like you."

"I'm not doing it."

"Yes, you are."

"No. I'm not."

"You don't even know what they're paying."

"I'm not interested."

"You don't want to know?"

"I told you, I'm not interested."

"It's fifty dollars a word."

"Doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters. That's twenty-five grand for a handful of paragraphs. And that's just one. They want multiple confessions. And multiple confessions means multiple fucking fistfuls of easy money.

You can do that shit in your sleep, and you know it."

"I could do it, but I'm not going to do it."

"Oh, come on. You know you want to.

And you know it will be fun. Getting to write something that doesn't make *you* look like the asshole, that doesn't make you relive how fucked up you were.

Come oooon. Let's make someone else the asshole.

Ghostwrite, GHOSTwrite, GHOSTWRITE!"

"Not interested."

“You genuinely believe you were always destined for that cloud, don’t you?”

“I’m hanging up the phone now.”

“Fifty bucks a word, baby!
Think about it and call me back.”

“Goodbye, Garrett.”

“Goodbye, champ.”

The Group - - April 28, 2017

“If everyone would take their seats, please.

Great. Now, before we begin, let me just say that this is a place of trust. What is spoken here will be respected for the trust it offers, and all words shared in this space are a matter of mutual confidence.

Ok, let me see... Who hasn't gone first in a while?
Hmm.

Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?”

“Sure.”

“Great, go ahead.”

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“I saw Ernie at a friend's funeral. I think I was in my late twenties. We made some small talk, hugged each other, and agreed we'd get together soon. Before that, we hadn't seen each other in a few years, and the last time it had been a bit rocky.

Anyway, I wanted it to be nice. We'd grown up together, shared just about every experience you could imagine. And no matter how different we were from each other, back then or now, we'd gone through it all together. And that meant something.

I met him over at his place. He was living with a woman and her older daughter, and his two boys were living with them part time. We sat and talked, and it was nice. Mostly just shooting the shit about old times and a little about who was dead or in jail.

I remember feeling like I had made the right choice by coming over, how it felt good to reconnect and leave things on good terms. That's when I heard her say it.

Ernie's girlfriend's older daughter had just come back from the gas station up the street and was complaining about how long it took one of the cashiers to ring her up.

Ernie said, 'Who was it ringing you up?'

She said, 'One of them damn hootina-bootinas.'

When she said it, I couldn't believe it. Not only had I not heard that term in over a decade, I had completely forgotten we used to use it, that I used to use it.

Then all at once, it all came back. Why we'd said that word. Who we'd been.

To us, it wasn't the same as racism, or at least what we knew as racism. To us, racism was about white people and black people. And though black people were still considered an 'other,' this was about a different kind of other. It was as if, no matter what discrimination you as a white person felt comfortable overlooking as it pertained to black folks, you couldn't argue that black people didn't still hold claim to the country.

But not them. They were from someplace else. It didn't matter where they were born. It didn't matter where they called home. You could tell just by looking at them or hearing them talk. They were foreigners.

The first time we heard the word 'Hootina-Bootina,' it was in reference to someone from India. This guy who we thought was cool told us his older brother, who was even cooler, had said that's what it sounded like when they talked to each other in their language.

I knew a few Indian kids from school. I knew the folks who owned the local motel were Indian. And I knew one Indian couple that owned a market down the way. Which is to say, I didn't know shit about people from India, or Indian Americans. Hell, I couldn't have even told you what continent India was on.

But that didn't matter. The word wasn't meant strictly for them anyway. For, as soon as we started using it, the term came to encompass almost anyone we deemed to be foreign, which meant just about anyone who was brown skinned and had a non-Hispanic accent.

In our neighborhood, this meant the Afghans. There was a cluster of them within a couple different streets nearby. They had a bunch of kids, and all the parents wore funny clothes. And although you couldn't argue with any of the white girls in the neighborhood who had to occasionally say something like, 'Yeah, but they're really nice people,' it was just too easy to focus on the other stuff. Stuff we could exaggerate, like their accents or the way they were always walking back and forth to each other's house.

But mostly it was the smell. A girl we knew who was friends with one of them said it came from their food, and that their houses smelled like that too. As if we really cared what it came from. All we knew is that their clothes and their bodies smelled different. And for bullies, someone's smell was the greatest vulnerability of all.

I'm sure Ernie would take issue with me using the word bully, seeing as we never got into a real fight with any of them. But for all the shit

we said about them behind their backs, and for all the shit he yelled at them as we walked by their houses, I don't know any other way you could categorize it.

And I could tell myself that we were only kids at the time and that it was mostly Ernie giving them shit. But like most times when I could have done something other than just watch it all go down, I didn't. I went along and played my role, thinking I was doing the right thing by mitigating the damage. Saying things like, 'all right, all right, Ernie, leave 'em alone, they've had enough.' Pretending to myself that was the same as sticking up for them.

But I wasn't sticking up for them. I was just making sure I didn't get into any trouble, which more often than not meant making sure Ernie didn't go too far.

But we did go too far. All the time. Even when I didn't think it was too far. Because it was all too far.

We fucked with these people because they talked different, because they smelled different, because they dressed different, because they looked different. But mostly we fucked with them because we could. They were the smallest minority in the neighborhood, and we were white. And although those folks had an immense pride, almost every time one of the white kids in the neighborhood would make a comment or start mocking them, they would show unbelievable restraint.

Almost every time.

I still remember him. He was short, and getting older. He just seemed so non-threatening, even when he started yelling. Because we thought his clothes looked ridiculous, we couldn't take him seriously. But he was serious. He had had enough of us, and the other kids like us, hurting his children. He was sick of his family and the other families being disrespected and humiliated by halfwits like us, who had no idea who they were or what they had been through.

At first we were just laughing at him. We'd never seen him animated like that before, and we couldn't understand what he was saying anyway. To us, it just seemed funny.

That's when he picked up a bat and started walking towards us. We could tell he had no real intention of hitting us with it, but we could also tell he was serious. That he was giving us a warning.

Not used to them really giving it back, we were confounded and took offense. We started yelling at him to come out into the street. To try and see if he could hit us. We even started acting like we were going to engage with him.

This went on for a while, back and forth with us yelling, taunting him, trying to get him to come closer.

But he just stayed at the edge of his yard. Making his stand. At some point, he quit talking altogether. And just stood there, swinging the bat back and forth.

That's what I remember the most. He probably knew we could have taken him. But he just couldn't stand it anymore. He was small, and the wood was heavy. It looked like it was making him weary. But he kept on. Exhausted but determined. Swinging that bat back and forth, almost the way you would do a flag.

He kept swinging it until we had turned onto the next street, until we couldn't even see him. I wondered how long he swung it after we were gone, how long before he put it down.

Not too much after that, we found out that one of his sons was really good at basketball. Him and his older brother and a couple younger cousins started coming up to the court where we played in the afternoons, and he would out shoot half of us. That's when we started to let it go, like some perverse acknowledgement of their assimilation. In our minds, his being good at basketball made the rest of them a little easier to accept.

The more we played with them, the more we saw that the girls were right when they talked about how nice they were. And before long, it just didn't seem right to talk about them anymore.

As if that were enough. As if they needed our acceptance. As if they didn't deserve an apology. As if there was something still owned and unowned left between us.

The rest of the time I sat there talking with Ernie, I was distracted. Disturbed. Not just at who I'd been, but that he was obviously still using the word and had passed it onto her, and would more than likely pass it on to his sons. I thought about how long that obscure term had been used by a handful of people and just how many slurs there must be like that floating around in the racist ether.

A half a lifetime ago, we had heard the word used by an older kid who had heard it from his older brother. Who knows where *he* got it from. A half a lifetime ago. That's where Ernie still was.

I probably should have told him I was dating a woman from South Asia at the time. But I knew it wouldn't have mattered. Our bond was from back then, not now. The most he would have done was say he was sorry and then talked shit about me dating one of them after I left.

I hadn't come there to correct him, or to show off how much better I was than him. I'd come there to make sure things were right with us. And that we could keep our good memories intact.

And yet it feels like there was another reason why I was there. Because, I tell you, when I heard that girl say it, the way she said it, it was like looking out a window and seeing myself all those years ago.

And whether or not there was something maybe subconscious or whatnot that led me to come there that day and reminisce about old times, it goes without saying that there was a lot I needed to be reminded of.

We never had a clue how rich and welcoming our Afghan neighbors' culture was, because our culture was to make them feel unwelcome.

I think about how many times Ernie or I said the words hootina-bootinas or Afghanistains. Then I think about what it must have felt like to hear it.

A few weeks after I saw Ernie, I went driving through the old neighborhood, hoping I would find a member of one of those families walking down the street.

I didn't really know what it was I was going to say. I was just hoping to apologize and ask their forgiveness.

I drove around the same few streets for probably thirty minutes. I couldn't ever find anyone. I even contemplated knocking on the door of one of the houses they used to live in, just in the chance that they were still there.

Instead, I just sat there in my car and thought about all the shit they had had to put up with. Not just from us, but everyone like us. And how that was almost two decades before the United States would send troops to Afghanistan and make families like theirs *the other* all over again.

From where I was parked, I could see the yard where he had swung that bat. I wanted to believe he'd finally been able to put it down."

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"All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to..."

*Yep, he's looking. Never fails.
Why does he always have to sit next to me?
Here it comes.*

(whispering) "Hey, that was really great. But you know no one was listening, right?"

Wait, what?

“...and respect throughout.

Now that we’ve gotten the ball rolling, is there anyone who would like to volunteer to go next?”

“I will.”

“Great, go ahead.”

Excerpt from *The Man Who Confessed Himself To Death: My Time in the Confession Industry*

Sometimes I use the words “I told myself” or “I tell myself.” I do it because I want to give an accurate account of the happenings that have put me here. A reflection on why I thought it was ok to do the things I did, or why I knew they weren’t ok but did them anyway.

Only recently have I started to reflect on what those words really mean. And whether I’m using them now, like I experienced them then.

To justify.

Sometimes I use the words “in that moment” in a way that suggests there was something special about that moment. Something special that made it ok to do the wrong thing. Like that moment is different from this moment, where I can so easily articulate the angle. The mindset I was in. What it looked like at the time. Both before and after.

The description of my position. The explanation for my decision.

The justification, for that moment.

Sometimes I use the words “I like to think.” And sometimes it’s followed by the word “if.” As in what I might have done, *if*. It makes it look like the circumstances hold greater weight than my will. It suggests that I would have found that *right* decision, had the room been slightly less messy. Like I was just teetering, a split second away from erasing my future disappointment.

It’s no wonder why I like to think that.

Frequently, I use the words “as if.” It illuminates my previous thinking, my faulty logic. The conveniences I made for myself.

Never mind that it implies how far I’ve come. That I don’t see things the same way. That maybe there’s a certain courage to my candidness.

Like the candidness I might exhibit if I pointed out it’s not a coincidence that a number of my confessions have a wrinkle in the bottom of the seam. Something that gets me back, that humiliates me or punishes me, something that exacts a little revenge. Worse, on occasion, than what I’m even confessing.

Similar to the self-deprecation I so often reserve, not just for my former identity but my current one as well. A presenting of austerity, meant to clarify any misgivings, that I might actually allow myself the luxury of feeling any real achievement.

Am I indulging in righteous masochism? Or is it a disingenuous ploy to convince the audience of my suffering and showcase my willingness and weary welcome?

I choose these words, often quite carefully. I want to believe they are better choices than I have made in the past. I want to believe they're the right words. And as I am writing them, I believe them. I believe in them.

I just can't believe in myself.

I am trying everything to be true here. Still, I am suspicious.

Even if all my words are honest. Can they still be a device? Could I really be self-aware to a fault; could it also be a shtick? One of the two, impressing you with confusion? Both yours and mine?

Knowing my past self is still my self, I may never be fully confident that I am up to this task. And I do understand that it may not be the best idea for me to cast doubt upon my own fidelity as I'm attempting to leave you with something to learn from.

I can only express that the doubt I am casting is upon myself. It is not upon you. Learning is what you make of what you are given. It's the choice in what you take with you, and what you leave behind.

You don't have to have confidence in me. You only need it in yourself.

Take these words and learn from them. Be more than entertained. Make something useful, from my life.

Be better than me. And prove to me, that I am found.

Even as I strive to be lost.

My best friend - - May 01, 2020

“Lonnie, I’m so sorry! I’ve been traveling for work, and you’ve been on the road doing your thing. And I’m getting ready to be traveling again, and it’s just been hard to make the time work. Anyway, I’m sorry I’ve been missing you for so long, and it’s not that I didn’t want to talk. It’s just...”

“No, no problem at all. I’m just glad you called back.”

“Don’t be silly. You know I’m always going to call you back. But I wanted to ask you. You sounded on your message like something was wrong. Is everything ok?”

“Whoooooooooohhh! Where do I even begin?”

“Oh, no. What’s wrong?”

“Sooooo, you know I tried to do better after we talked about me being an asshole and how fucked up things had got.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, for a while I did. I was doing better. And I was trying to have a different attitude and trying to see if I could see the light at the end of this fucked up tunnel I’ve been in.

But then my agent just kept coming up with new opportunities. And it’s not even like I can even blame it on him. Because it should have been easy for me to turn them down, but it’s like something was making them look more attractive than they should have looked. And I swear it wasn’t the money. It was like something else. Like something was demanding that I do them. And, like I said, it’s not even my agent that’s the problem. It’s like I started coming up with new ways to confess on my own, and then I was coming up with even more ways to confess. And I keep remembering things to confess. And then I would look back on old confessions and see that I had left something out or had said something wrong or fucked up, and then I would want to confess about that. And then occasionally I would see an old friend from back in the day, and one of them would kind of still be in that old mindset, and it would feel really good to see them because they understood me in a way that was different than anyone I’ve known since then, and then I would feel ok for a while, but not too long, because then I would start to feel guilty about feeling good being around them. Like maybe I shouldn’t associate with them or

anybody from those days. And then I would feel conflicted about it and feel like I was doing them wrong and being elitist or something, and then want to confess to them about that. And between the work and all these thoughts and everything pulling on my brain, I just can't even keep up with everything. And while I'm working on one confession, I'm thinking about ten new confessions. And I've been having these crazy fucking dreams, these crazy fucking dreams that I'm not even sure are not real. And between the dreams and me working non-stop trying to get all this stuff out, I don't even know what's going on, and I think I might be going crazy. And I just need to talk to someone who knows me and won't look at me like some nut."

"Ok, ok, slow down. It's ok."

"No but that's just it. I want to slow down, but my brain won't let me. And all I can think about is confessing, all the time. And I feel like it's all coming down on me. And like it's not even getting better like it was supposed to, but instead it's like my guilt is getting worse, and I feel like my obsessions are going to kill me, and that my secrets are eating me alive."

"Ok, wait, hold on. I need to ask you something before you go on. Are you taking anything right now?"

"No. You know I hate all that shit."

"Yeah, I know you do, but you're kind of talking like a cokehead right now. And, honestly, it's freaking me the fuck out."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called. It's not really that bad."

"No, it's fine. I'm glad you called me. I want you to call me whenever you need to. I just didn't know you were having these feelings. And I'm trying to process everything you're saying. And it's kind of a lot."

"And I can appreciate that. And I appreciate you trying. And, you know, I've been thinking about it a lot, like a whole lot, and I've been wondering to myself if you can actually experience trauma from guilt. Like the moment I realized who I had been, it was like experiencing it all over again but not the same way I had before. It was like having a nightmare, but one that you know is real. And it's like each memory that I didn't see as fucked up before was now going through this nightmare portal, and I just kept finding out how awful I had been.

And I swear to God I know how fucked up that sounds and I don't even want to use the word trauma, because it just sounds outrageous,

having trauma from guilt. And I know just the sound of me saying that sounds like I'm putting my own feelings above the people who I fucked over. But that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying I don't have any other explanation for how I feel other than some kind of trauma, because I just keep thinking about every memory that went through that portal. And it feels like my whole body and mind went through that portal and now I'm somewhere else I don't even recognize, and what I thought would help me is now the thing that consumes me, but not in a good way, but in a bad way..."

"You mean the confessions."

"Yeah, the confessions. That's what I'm talking about. It's like the doctor originally recommended that I try it to help with the way I was feeling about things. And at first, it was really liberating. Like so much so that I don't even know how to explain it. It was almost like this adventure to find out all these feelings I didn't know about, and to explore this whole world of my past I didn't really understand before, so it's like I didn't even know parts of it existed. So it was like confession as adventure, and adventure of the unknown parts of my existence. So yeah, it was like that, like confession as adventure, adventure of the unknown. And it felt so good to feel something different and to break into this world of understanding about myself, and it would feel like there was this rush and this release, and for like this one little moment I was able to release some of my guilt.

But now, it feels like that was a million years ago. And I don't even know where I want to go back to. I just know that here feels fucking crazy."

"Now I feel responsible."

"Why do you feel responsible?"

"Because I pressured you into going to a doctor in the first place. And I feel like none of this would have happened if I hadn't pressured you."

"No, that's absolutely not true. I don't want you to feel bad. You were doing the right thing. You were trying to get me some help, because I needed help. It's just that it turned out to not be the help I needed. But that's not your fault.

If it's anyone's fault, it's the fucking doctor. She's the one that started me confessing, and she saw that I wasn't really getting any better. But she still kept encouraging me to get it all out. And I feel like it got out of control and too much came out, and then something somehow in my brain got all out of whack."

“Out of whack in what way?”

“So... I don’t... I’m not sure how to describe it. It’s like I went from this minor obsession to this major obsession to feeling like I was getting relief from that obsession, only to feel like I needed more of that feeling, until I had this need to confess all the time.

And at that point, it wasn’t really a relief anymore, but more like an addiction. And I can’t tell if the addiction is worse than the obsession, because at least with the addiction I do get some sort of glimpses of relief from those old feelings. But it’s like if I don’t confess, and I actually kick the addiction, they’ll just come back and then I’m obsessed again.

And I can’t tell which is worse, the obsession or the addiction, or if they’re the same thing. I don’t know. I just know I don’t feel the adventure part anymore, except for just that little rush I get when I’m confessing. But it’s not the same as it was before.

It is and it isn’t.”

“So you basically went from confession as adventure to confession as addiction.”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I know, crazy, right?”

What do you think? I’m definitely down the fucking rabbit hole, right?”

“You’re definitely somewhere different than you were the last time we talked. Plus, you’re making it sound as if you’ve been feeling this the whole time, and I don’t feel like I remember you...”

“No, it hasn’t been the whole time... It has but it hasn’t.

It’s like I could feel something was going on with me that wasn’t right, but some of it was right. But just recently it’s all kind of hit me and it’s all on the surface now, and I think it’s like too much for me to handle.”

“Is it just the confessions or has the whole spotlight thing contributed to it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to say it’s this giant factor, but then again I know it’s definitely played a part.

It’s like my agent a few months ago was making fun of me, calling me a pornstar and saying that I wasn’t ever going to be shit but that.

And it made me think about confession as porn. And how there's all these people out there that seem to be getting off on confessions now, and how gross that is. And how at first I thought this was going to be this really great thing because it could set an example of self-examination and help people find their way to their own moral appraisal and how all that was really positive. And now I feel like so much of it, not really my stuff that much but the whole world that's become this confession business thing, has become exactly the opposite and really just that, porn.

And then that got me to thinking about how much of social media has become a version of call out porn, and how what started out as genuinely holding people to account ended up so much this spectacle for people to pile on and humiliate and destroy one another, not for some lesson to help that person grow or us grow as a people and move toward some kind of real progress, but more for that moment's worth of gratification, that brief moment until you scroll down and watch the next even worse scene. And that it eventually becomes more about topping the last insult, because the previous insult isn't enough anymore, and it's just degenerated into this whole disgusting, desensitized, competition addiction porn thing.

And then that got me to thinking if this actually is part of why I feel this addiction feeling. Because it seems like the more I was confessing, it was like this whole mixture of being eviscerated by millions of strangers on one side and being praised by an equal number of strangers on the other side. And then I would feel conflicted about my fans and then care too much about the people who were giving me hate. But at the same time there was this like desensitization going on, without any feeling of real resolution. And because the guilt wasn't going away, I think I started to hate the fans and love the ones trying to tear me apart.”

“But I thought you weren't reading that garbage. You said you couldn't take it.

Did you break down and get your own accounts?”

“No, that's the thing. It was just that I knew they were there. And then that made it even worse, because they became a part of my imagination. And instead of taking in the hatred like I used to do with you on the phone, I would just guess what people were saying about me now. And I would even make up people in my head and think about how much they had to hate me to say such awful things. And then I would think about what I would actually say if I met them, or what terrible thing they might say if they caught me out somewhere. Until there were all these imaginary people and messages and conversations going on in my head until it became just another obsession.

And between my obsession with the confessions and my obsession with the audience for my confessions, it was like this fucking horror show in my brain. And then I would have these moments where I would step out of it all for like a few minutes and see how absurd it all was, like how anyone could take any of this seriously. And I would just laugh out loud, like howling with laughter at how bizarre my life had become. And then it would hit me again how absurd it was, and I would start to question whether any of it was real, that it couldn't possibly have happened this way, and I couldn't really have made these choices and found myself in this place. And then I would start crying, thinking about how I got here and how my confessions had become my life and my life had become more entertainment for jackals than a vehicle for penance. And then I would just feel so bad all over again for all the people I had wronged, and how they had become almost inconsequential to this whole fucking traveling carnival that had taken over, demanding confessions that really belonged to that relative handful of people.

And I know I'm just rambling, but do you know what I'm saying, do you see what I'm talking about?"

"I don't know.

I feel like you need better support. And I feel bad for not being there for you over the past few months.

Are you still going to the group?"

"Yeah, all the time."

"Is it not helping? I thought the group was kind of your place to be able to come back to and get away from all the noise."

"It normally is. But it's like lately I feel like even they are starting to get weird. And maybe it's just me, but I feel like some of the members in the group are more into themselves for confessing their awful shit than really being sorry and wanting to make it right. Like it's fucking enough to just be sorry.

You don't get points for being sorry. You have to show what you've learned and show that you won't do that shit again. And I feel that, for a while, a lot of them have just wanted points for their confessions, and the more I'm around that the more I worry that's what I'm doing. And it's starting to feel almost more creepy than cathartic.

Because I hear their confessions, and now it's like I'm starting to look at them in a different way because I think about the consequences of those actions on the people who were the objects of that mistreatment, and it just seems too heavy to merely say, 'Well, I'm a different person now,' and everything is supposed to be ok. It can't be that easy for them. And it

makes me question everything I've done with all this. I feel like if the people who suffered the muse of their confessions have to live with the consequences of such actions, then they have to live with that shame. That they can't just put it down and walk away from it. They have to take it with them.

And what I think I've learned is that I used to think of the way I felt as secrets wrapped in shame. But now I see it as shame wrapped in secrets. Except when I first figured that out, I thought that once I told enough of those secrets, I would unwrap it all and I'd be free from it. But now, I see that shame as a kind of nucleus. It's like the center of who I am, and not something that I can get away from. Because the more I tried to get away from it, the more that center would like throb inside me. And I can still feel that throbbing, but it's not as bad as before, but it's still there no matter what.

And, oh God, I haven't even told you about the déjà vu. The déjà vu is actually worse than the throbbing, because at least the throbbing is just pain, but the déjà vu is like disorienting. Because it's like real but not real déjà vu. In that, it's not really like déjà vu of a scene, but more like the experience of feelings. But it's like these feelings I should be past already, but I'm not. And I keep coming back to these feelings even though I'm coming to them with different people and different scenarios, so I think it's like this new feeling in the moment but then I kind of know it's not new and I shouldn't be feeling it again. But I can't stop it, because if I try to stop it, it makes me think I'm lying to the people I'm with when I feel this way or that maybe they're lying to me, and that they're just humoring me, and then I get obsessed about one of the two, or sometimes both, and that's when I start to wonder if the feelings are real or if I'm just having them because I'm supposed to have them. And sometimes it almost feels like they're being implanted in my head, and I can't get them out, and I don't know what to do, because I know at some point it's going to be like this video game getting to 'game over' and the reset button is going to get pressed, and it's all going to start all back over again, with the throbbing and then the dissipation of the throbbing and then the déjà vu and then the game over and the reset and so on and so on and rinse and repeat and it's all just rinsing and repeating and running together just like it has before, just like I've felt the feeling I'm feeling now of talking about it, but with someone else for some other reason, and the only thing that breaks the loop, the only thing that distracts me...

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...are these dreams. These fucking dreeeeeams! They're so crazy. I wish I could explain them to you. They feel so fucking real that I'm not sure

if some of them weren't real and maybe I'm just remembering them as dreams, and I don't even know if I..."

"Lonnie..."

"I mean they have to be dreams, because they're so crazy, but so is everything else that's happened to me, so I'm not really sure if..."

"Lonnie, stop. I need you to stop. I love you, and I'm sorry I haven't been there for you, and that makes it even harder for me to say this, but I think you're either having or on the verge of having..."

"Hey, hang on, Lisa. Hang on a sec.

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Ok, that's fine. I'm getting off now.

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Lisa, hey, I'm so sorry, I have to get off here. Someone else needs to use the phone.

Thank you so much for the time and listening to me ramble. I love you, and we'll talk again soon; I promise I'm going to be fine. You just take care and I promise I'll actually ask you about what's been going on in your life next time, and I'll quit being such a rude ass. Ok, I gotta go, I love you, bye."

Chapter Six

(This has always been the end game.)

A Visitor - - June 01, 2018

“Hey! Wow, it’s so great to see you. And with this weather too. It’s like the perfect day. What’s been going on with you?”

“Not much. Just working and taking care of the kids. Pretty boring. What’s been happening with you?”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start. I assume you know a little about my recent ‘career,’ if that’s what you would call it.”

“No, not really.”

“You don’t know about the show and what happened with all that?”

“I don’t watch much TV. Running after five kids doesn’t leave me much time, if you know what I’m saying.”

“I can only imagine. Anyway, it doesn’t matter.

What is crazy about me seeing you out here though is that I’ve been thinking about you lately. And it’d be great to talk to you before I do anything with it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, I got to thinking about that night at Derrick’s party after you and Jeff had broken up and he had started all those rumors about you, and you showed up and everybody started confronting you over it. And everyone was kind of ganging up on you, saying all this shit they knew wasn’t even true. And I guess I just have always felt bad for not sticking up for you against everybody. And I wanted to apologize. Because I know you really needed someone in that moment, and I wasn’t there for you like I should have been.

So I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“Hmm. Ok.”

“I feel really bad about it, and I hope you can accept that I...”

“Shut up, dude.”

“Wait, what?”

“I said shut up.”

“Ok.”

“Dude, why would you bring that up?
Seriously, why?”

“I don’t know, I guess I...”

“You know what, I don’t care.”

“What’s wrong? Did I say something wrong?”

“Dude, I haven’t thought about that in years. And now I *am*
thinking about it, and now you’ve fucked up my whole day.
What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I’m so sorry. I just...”

“Do you not have any fucking class? You’re just going to bring up
some shit that I tried really hard to forget about, some shit that really hurt
me, and you’re just going to throw that in my face after we haven’t even
seen each other for like 20 years.

That’s the first thing you’re going to bring up?
That is so fucked up. That is really fucked up.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

“No, fuck you, dude. You don’t get to fuck with me like that and
just say you’re sorry. You can keep your ‘I’m sorry’s to your fucking self.

Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a life to get back to, a life that I
put together after all that bullshit that seems to still be your life.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I really am.”

“Whatever, dude. Bye.
It’s been really *great* seeing you.
Fucker.”

Excerpt from *The Man Who Confessed Himself To Death: My Time in the Confession Industry*

On my last book tour, someone in the front row of a reading asked me why I had written in the book's introduction that it was a miracle I had been this "successful."

I answered, "Because my contributions disappoint so many people."

She said, "You see these as contributions?"

Which gave everyone in the bookstore a good laugh and prompted me to affirm her heckle, "Touché, lady in the front row. Touché."

Then I told her that, in as much as they are absorbed enough to make an impact, almost anything can be considered a contribution. Why not these?

She replied, "So why do you think they're disappointing?"

I told her that I had been using the term disappointment a lot after a reviewer in the *New Yorker* said that I had "amassed an audience by cleverly disappointing them." He said I was probably "entertaining to some, enlightening to a few more, but irresistibly disappointing to most."

I couldn't be sure what it meant to the reviewer, but I assumed he meant that my confessions disappoint those who can't imagine themselves having taken part in such happenings, while at the same time disappointing those who expected far worse.

Meaning some see themselves as *better than*, and some are merely more *bitter than*. The former keep coming back to see if I've done something to redeem myself, the latter to see if I'll destroy myself.

With all this said, I liken a good portion of my success to a train with the shittiest graffiti you've ever seen. Where you look, after each car goes by, to see what the next car will bring. Until you can't look away, from this ordinary train, transformed, into a line of failures.

Except this train has proven longer than you expected. So much so that, after a while, it's not even really that fascinating. But you have to keep watching. You've invested *this* much time; you have to see the end. But then the longer that it goes on and the end doesn't come, the more disappointing it becomes. Yet still you keep watching. Because you must.

I assume a good portion is that.

Then again I'm not above taking a bow. When it comes to the extent of my success, I think I'd be doing myself a disservice to believe the above explanation to be the only one. Especially since, nowadays, there is an entire menu of shitty graffiti to choose from.

I don't think it's too conceited to say that what keeps mine relevant is that, while my confessions may be disappointing, they're not entirely

unsatisfying. It's the only thing I've taken any pride in during this ordeal. Though the content of my confessions certainly matter, the choice of words and the performance in which I offer them matter just as much, perhaps even more.

And I don't mean just the technical selection of words or the tone used or the aesthetic produced. I mean how convincing they are. The connection they make. The impact they leave. The reasons, intangible and arbitrary, that make you experience being, less alone.

Even then, I know there's more to it than that. Some of it has to do with me being there at the beginning. I don't know if guinea pig would be the right word, but I was definitely seen by media investors as a test subject to see whether there was any kind of market for this sort of thing. Or if it was just going to turn out some viral fluke.

But because I didn't know, when all this started, that it was going to be the thing it's now become, I think a lot of people saw my contributions as genuine. And that makes me happy, because they were, and they still are. I can't say all my moves have been wise or even advisable. But, for what I've been able to control, the confessions have always been heartfelt. And that consistency, relative to what else is being offered in this arena, has garnered me a certain amount of trust. A trust that has given me something I was never before able to get on my own. A real audience.

Having said that, I know how disappointed many of my supporters must be with what my work has given birth to. For what it's worth, I am too. But more than that, I'm disappointed in myself. While so many of my confessions are tied to a time going back years, even decades, one of my greatest shames comes out of this most recent period of my life.

I can honestly tell you my intentions were noble, whatever that means. But virtuous or not, I should have seen what was coming. It took almost no time to materialize. And to not speak out against it the moment it started to give form only shows how immaterial it is, what I wanted this all to be.

Sure, I'm not responsible for the direction others have taken. Yet how many times did I come out and denounce this industry or any of its yields? Not one.

Because I knew. Doing so meant risking looking like a hypocrite, which could have jeopardized my sales and eventually lost me my audience. I told myself I had already taken so many risks. Why negate them with this one?

Like each of my confessions, that silence was a contribution. One that I thought could extend my impact, or some might say extend my relevance. One that has taken what I once thought to be a sincere attempt to find some kind of repurchase, however grand it has grown, and cheapened it. And proven me, once again, unworthy.

So once again, I find myself with another someone or someones I've aggrieved. Those who may or may not have been in that *better than* or *bitter than* category, but who over time developed a certain empathy towards me. Those who could see just how monumentally disappointed I've been in myself, and thought maybe they could take on or take away a small portion of that. By doing what I could not do, and believing in me.

But they can't.

They can only keep watching, just like the rest of those watching, to see if the end of the train is ever going to come.

And when it does, when all my light has gone and the dusk of my public confessions has finally reached all the darkness it can hold, the only light left in that sky will be that of the imitators, these little grotesque stars flickering on and off, while the industry looks for a spotlight even more grotesque. And that too will be my legacy; that too will be my contribution.

I still believe it's a miracle I've been this successful. What I failed to mention that night is that miracles only imply the odds of something ever happening. They don't imply a good outcome.

I hope the lady in the front row reads this. I want her to know how valuable that heckle was.

The Doctor - - August 21, 2017

“I remember I was with the babysitter. She had taken me to the grocery store. And I remember we had already gotten the groceries and were getting back in the car. And she was taking the grocery bags from the cart and putting them in the front seat, and I was standing up in the back seat. And I think I was just being a kid, being loud and trying to act silly and whatnot.

Anyway, I guess I saw this woman out the back window walking toward the store from her car, and I think I was pointing at her and saying something like, ‘Who are you? Who are you?’ Really loud, over and over.

And I remember it was a hot day and we had the windows down, so she definitely could hear me. And for just a second she slowed down her walking and looked at me through the back window.

She didn’t say anything. And she didn’t really have any peculiar reaction. It was like she was just looking to see who was making all this noise. Or maybe she realized that it was her I was saying ‘who are you’ to.

Either way, I just remember her slowing down for maybe a second, seeing me through the window, and then she kept walking.

But, because I was just being silly and it wasn’t even really about her, I kept yelling out, ‘Who are you? Who are you?’

And that’s when the babysitter grabbed me, from the front seat. She grabbed both my arms, really hard, and turned me to look at her. And I remember she wasn’t one to whisper, but she was whispering, ‘Quit that. Quit that right now.’ And the way she said it, it was so serious. As serious as the tone my mother or father used when I was getting in big trouble.

And then she said, ‘Don’t you ever do anything like that again. Do you understand me?’

And I remember being confused, because I didn’t know why she would be so upset. I didn’t know I was doing anything wrong. I was just being silly.

And then she whispered, ‘They’ll cut your head off.’

And that’s when it hit me. When she said ‘they’.”

“What hit you?”

“That the woman had been black.”

“The woman walking by was black.”

“Yeah, it was like I didn’t know she was black before she said that, but after the babysitter said the word ‘they’ it dawned on me that she was.”

“And you’re sure she was black?”

“Yeah, because I remember looking back out the back window after she said it, and I spotted the woman. She had already moved on and was a few cars down by that point, heading toward the store entrance. But I could see that she was black.

And it was like I had this new memory of a few seconds before seeing her from the back window. And it was like my memory had now included that she was black as I was pointing and saying ‘who are you’ to her. And the whole situation just seemed completely different than I had just perceived it. And it was all in the flash of the babysitter saying what she said.

That was the first time I remember ever noticing anyone’s color before. It was the first time I remember ever knowing anyone was black.”

“Because she said what she said.”

“Yeah. Because she said, ‘They’ll cut your head off.’”

“Why would she say that?”

“I have no idea. I’ve thought about it my whole life. Even if you were some crazy racist, it seems like such an extreme thing to say to a child. And from what little other memories I have of her, I don’t remember her doing or saying anything else like that, before or after.

It just seemed so out of place.”

“How old were you at the time?”

“I don’t know how old I was. I think I had to be maybe three or four.”

“Why three or four?”

“Because that’s about as early as I can recall having memories from.”

“So that would have made this one of your earliest memories.”

“Yeah.”

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“Ok. What else?”

“All right. Hold on. Let me think how I should start this.

Ok, so everything I learned about sports I learned from my friend’s brother. He was older than we were and wanted to be like a coach to us. I remember him constantly humming baseballs at our heads way faster than he probably should have. He told us it would make us better than the other kids when we started to play little league.

Before that though, he taught us how to play football. And the first lesson he gave was about what the positions were. Meaning the first part of that first lesson was obviously about the quarterback. Meaning the first words I remember him telling us were somewhere along the lines of, ‘Now, the quarterback is the one who throws the ball, so he’s the most important player on the team. He’s also the one that has to call the plays in the huddle. So in order to be a quarterback you have to be smart. And that’s why you don’t see any black quarterbacks.’”

“That’s the first thing he said.”

“That’s the first thing he said. That’s the first thing I ever learned about sports. Before I ever picked up a football, before I remember playing much sports at all, I was told that black men were not smart enough to be quarterbacks.”

“And how old were you then?”

“I think around seven. Maybe six, but I think seven.”

“And you took that with you.”

“Yeah, I guess. At the time, I didn’t know anything about sports. And I don’t guess I knew anything about black people. So this older kid, who seemed to know everything about sports, telling me this, was really all I had to go on for a long time.

Sure, I eventually put together that it didn’t make any sense. But it definitely stuck with me for a long time. And even when I realized that it didn’t make sense, I didn’t put together that the lesson I had taken hadn’t just been about football.”

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“Ok. What else?”

“All right. So I guess I could tell you about how I found out about the Klan.”

“And how old were you for this?”

“Probably about 8 or so.”

“Ok.”

“All right. So there were these two black kids who lived on our street, Nathan and his little sister Nia. And sometimes Nathan would come out and play with us. And sometimes it was over at Darryl and Brady’s house.

Well, Darryl and Brady’s dad was kind of a jokester. One of these big talker types. And whenever any of the kids would be over, he would come outside and start shooting the shit with us. And like clockwork, it would end up with him giving us all a hard time. Like taking turns taking little shots at us. And for the most part, it was in good fun and we all enjoyed it.

But this one day, when Nathan was over, it got to his turn. And I remember Darryl and Brady’s dad looking over at Darryl and asking him if they had told Nathan about the meeting. And when they didn’t say anything, he said, ‘What? He doesn’t know about the meeting tonight?’

And again, neither Darryl nor Brady would answer.

Then he looked over at Nathan and said, ‘Yeah, we’re just having a little meeting over here tonight. You might see something burning in the backyard. But don’t pay it no mind.’

And then he would start laughing. Alone.”

“And did you understand what he was talking about?”

“Not the first time. I actually had to ask Brady.”

“And that’s how you found out about the Klan?”

“Yeah. At least that’s the first memory I have of learning what it was. And, of course, Brady was only my age, so he didn’t really have a good grasp of what the Klan was either. But he told me enough for me to realize how inappropriate the joke was.”

“And what did Nathan say when he said this?”

“He didn’t say anything. None of us did. Sometimes we, and by we I mean everybody except Nathan, would give an awkward smile if Darryl and Brady’s dad looked directly at us after he said it, but most of the time

we just looked at the ground and waited for him to move onto someone else.”

“So this happened more than once?”

“Yeah. That was just it. Darryl and Brady’s dad was the kind of man that would tell the same joke over and over, even if no one laughed. As long as he thought it was funny, that’s all that mattered. And he thought that was real funny.”

“And how do you think that affected you?”

“I never really thought about how it affected me. I just used to think about how it affected Nathan. I used to wonder if he ever told his parents. And if so, what his parents must have thought.

His parents were real quiet; they were the quietest house on our street. We would always wave to his parents when they would drive by, but that was about the extent of our interaction with them. I used to think that maybe Nathan’s dad liked to keep to himself, that maybe that was his personality or something. Looking back now, I think that maybe he didn’t want to find himself in the position of having to decide how he was going to react to what the white men on his street thought were appropriate comments. You know, jokes and all.”

“So, I think that’s a useful response that you thought more about Nathan in your reflections. A good response. But didn’t you ever wonder how that impacted you?”

“No, not really.”

“So what do you think now?”

“If I would have thought about it back then, I would have told you it turned me off and made me feel sorry for Nathan and made me think that that type of thinking was wrong and mean.”

“But what about now? What do you think now?”

“I still think it had that effect on me. But if I dig a little deeper, I’m sure it had some other effects on me.”

“Like what?”

“Like, even though I thought Darryl and Brady’s dad was wrong, none of us said anything. None of us stood up to him, and none of us stood up for Nathan.”

“Because he was an adult?”

“Because he was big and loud and macho, and could be kind of scary if he wanted to. He certainly had the power in that situation.

But I worry now that it was more than that. I worry that maybe it wasn’t just that we recognized his power and didn’t say anything. But that maybe we recognized his *authority* and didn’t say anything.”

“Authority in what way?”

“Well, like you said, he was an adult. He was someone we looked up to, even if we knew he had certain flaws.

And for him to make these kinds of jokes in front of Nathan like it was no big deal, it was like he was teaching us that this was ok. That Nathan had to just deal with it. And that he could say whatever he wanted to.”

“Because he was white.”

“That’s part of it. But I meant more that he would just say that it was a joke. And it’s like there was this special power in a joke. Because if you didn’t like the joke, it just meant you couldn’t take a joke. And that made you the problem, and not what was said.

But, yeah, it was obviously that he was white too. I feel like it was almost this demonstration of both duplicity and power.

But it was still more than that. Because you’ve got to think, I didn’t even know what the Klan was at the time. Meaning I didn’t know hardly anything about the history of slavery or the struggle of African Americans or any of that. And for this father figure in our neighborhood to joke about it like it was nothing, it’s hard for me to not believe I didn’t in some way internalize that.”

“Even if, at the same time, you felt bad for Nathan?”

“Yeah, I mean I think you can learn two conflicting things. Because one was just the way I felt. But the other was being taught to me.

And because this happened like multiple times, I’m sure that had a bigger psychological impact on me than I realized.”

“For the worse?”

“I think so.”

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“Ok. What else?”

“Sooooo, there’s my grandfather. Or I guess I should say my step-grandfather. He had married my mother’s mother. He told me if I wanted to I could call him by his first name. But I chose to call him Granddaddy.

I never really got to meet my real grandfathers. One died before I was born, and the other one wasn’t in the picture. I had another step-grandfather, on my father’s side, but he wasn’t what I ever considered family.

Anyway, all this is to say that my step-grandfather on my mother’s side was the only real grandfather I ever knew. And I feel really lucky that my grandmother married him.

Granddaddy was maybe the sweetest older man I knew growing up. And because he had never married before, I was the only grandson he would ever know. And he treated me just like I was truly his.

In a way, I can see now that he ended up being a kind of father figure. I feel like I had more enjoyable conversations with him growing up than I did my old man. We would go fishing and be out on the banks all day. And though you weren’t really supposed to talk too much, because you might scare the fish, we always did our share.

That was our thing. Fishing. It was the first thing I can recall a man teaching me how to do. He also taught me about horses and cows. Him and my grandmother lived out in the country, on what I considered a farm. Semi-retired, he baled hay for other farms in the area. I remember him letting me ride on the tractor with him. I remember him letting me steer his truck when no one else was with us.

All of this is to say, I loved him. And I thought the world of him. And that’s why it makes it so hard when I think about the few times he said things I knew he shouldn’t have said.

Sometimes it was little jokes. Sometimes it was the way he referred to people. Like I remember back then, especially in the country, you would hear people refer to older black people as ‘that old colored woman’ or ‘that old colored man.’ Except Granddaddy didn’t say ‘colored.’”

“He used a racial slur.”

“Yeah. And it was weird because, the way he said it, it confused me. The only times I had heard that word used was with explicitly hostile or offensive intention. Granddaddy used the term the same way I might use

the word black or African American. Like it was what he was supposed to say.”

“Do you think that he thought that?”

“No. I think I entertained the thought that he didn’t know any better. That it was just a descriptor to him. I mean, other than a few jokes here and there, he hardly ever talked about black people. That’s why I was shocked the first time I heard him refer to someone like that.

I remember my mom heard him say it one time, and later on she told me that he was from a different time and was just set in his ways.

But looking back now, I feel like there was more to it than that, probably a lot more.

Not that he was Klan or anything like that. I don’t even know if he had any overt or mindful ill will towards black people. Like I said, he didn’t ever talk about it. But I think he didn’t talk about black people, because he didn’t have to. He lived out where it was mostly all white. And for the most part, at least in his later years, black people just weren’t a part of his life.”

“So what makes you think it was more than that?”

“I guess it’s something he mentioned one time in passing. I can’t even remember what we were talking about or why it came up, but I remember him bringing up this little town he’d been to once, somewhere in Tennessee. And he casually mentioned that in that town if a black person tried to stay in the local motel, and people got wind of it, ‘there was a chance they might kill ‘em.’

And I remember being horrified when he said it. But it was weird, because it wasn’t even the point of the story. It’s like he had mentioned this awful thing, but then kept going with the rest of the story. Just threw it out there like trivia or something.”

“And how old were you when he told you that story?”

“I think I was probably about ten or so. It would be another decade or more before I heard the term ‘sundown town.’ Before I would realize. That what he had described wasn’t some freak thing, but was an actual phenomenon throughout the country. One that lasted, in one form or another, to my knowledge all the way up through the mid 90s.

I assume that’s why he said it so casually. Because to people who grew up where he did and the way he did, it was just that. Casual.”

“And what do you think you took from that?”

“I don’t know what I took from it at the time. I know I was surprised to hear him say it. But I was even more surprised by how nonchalant he was about it. That he mentioned it and just kept going, like it wasn’t even worth discussing.

It was the same casual manner that he told those few jokes or referred to old black people. As if there was no difference in the severity of it.

And though I can’t *really* know what was in his heart, I suspect, from those few brief instances, that his casual demeanor was an indication that he didn’t really think anything about what he was saying. That, to him, everything he was saying was normal. It’s just the way things were.”

“And I’m assuming no one else in the family ever corrected him.”

“Of course not. And I think that was the real takeaway. It wasn’t even as much about this handful of things he had said. It was more what everyone else didn’t say.

And I feel like what I didn’t get at the time was that the only way one can make it through their whole life and still be so casual about racial bigotry is if no one is ever saying anything. Or at least not enough people are saying anything.

When white people say racist things when they’re old, we just blame it on them being old. But it’s not like they were always old. They had to arrive at that point.

At one time Granddaddy was my age. Did he really not ever challenge these concepts, or at least question them?

I wish I’d had the sense to ask him. I wish I’d had the sense to challenge him on any of that stuff. I feel like we might have been able to have some really good discussions about it. I feel like he could have surprised me. I feel like I could have learned a lot about how he grew up, and why he was the way he was, as they say.

And even if what he’d have told me was completely disappointing or even horrifying, I feel like I could have learned a lot more than just having my mother tell me not to bother with it, like somehow when it came to such a huge issue as race relations, this person I loved was a lost cause.

And it’s not that I really blame her either. I’ve heard the same excusing of old white people from younger white people my whole life. And the sick thing is that it’s always couched in love. That you don’t want to upset them or hurt their feelings. That, because you love them, their feelings matter more than your principles. That it’s better to just overlook it, not say anything. As if when you get to a certain point, there really is no more learning to be done.

And yet I don’t believe that. I know how much better my life is now that I’ve learned what I’ve learned.

And I know I was just a kid and I didn't really have anything figured out either. But it's still hard for me to not feel sad that I didn't take that chance, and that if I had, maybe Granddaddy could have had that too.

In those circumstances, you always tell yourself that it's ok. That you know better than them, and that that's enough.

But you really don't. And it's really not. It's so obviously not."

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"Ok. What else?"

"I guess I could tell you about Redfords."

"Is that a town?"

"No, it's a swimming pool. Or at least it was.

Redfords was hands-down the best swimming pool of my childhood. It was a bit far to get to, so not a lot of people even knew it was there. You couldn't even see the pool from the road. Hell, you couldn't even see the parking lot from the road. But once you got in, and you made the walk to actually get over to the pool, you were reminded why it was so good.

They had this giant water slide, the kind that you almost couldn't believe was allowed by the state. They had three different heights of diving boards, one of which was a high dive. There were a couple kiddie pools, a really good-sized shallow end, and a pretty damn good restaurant at the top of the hill. The whole thing was set out in the middle of these beautiful woods. Green everywhere around you, it was just beautiful.

We'd been going there for as long as I can remember, and I never got tired of it. It was just the perfect place.

But then something weird happened when I was about 11 or 12. We had just gotten through for the day, and as my mom got in the car and started it up, she just sat there for a second and said, 'Hmm, that's strange.'

I said, 'What's strange?'

She said, 'As we were leaving I saw this black couple coming up to the desk to pay to get in. But the woman who sits up there told them that it was a private club, for members only.'

And I said, 'What does that mean?'

And she said, 'I think it means she didn't want them to come in. We've been going here for years, and we've never been asked to sign anything or pay any membership fees.'

Still not getting it, I said, 'Why would she say that to them?'

And she said, 'I guess because they were black. That's the only thing I can think.'

And then she added, 'Come to think of it, I don't guess I've ever seen any black people at Redfords before. Have you?'

It was such a strange question, I was almost embarrassed. It should have been so obvious that we'd never seen any black people there before. But because we'd been so oblivious to such absence, I had to really think about it.

I said, 'I don't guess so.' And then I said, 'But can they do that? Legally?'

And she said, 'I don't imagine they can technically deny them like that. But if they can convince people that they're a private club, then maybe the rules are different.'

And I said, 'But they're not a private club. You said so yourself.'

And she said, 'I know. That's what I'm saying. I think they're technically breaking the law by telling them that.'

And I said, 'Because they don't want black people inside?'

And she said, 'I think so.'

And then she just sat there for a while, with this troubled look on her face. We talked about it a little more on the way home, and my mom seemed genuinely disappointed in the folks who ran Redfords. As for me, I just couldn't believe they had done it. They always seemed like such nice people there. I had heard a little about that kind of stuff happening at pools during segregation, but I didn't think there was stuff like that going on in my lifetime. And definitely not from a place I had been going to.

Anyway, a few weeks later, my mom and my aunt decided on getting all the kids together and going swimming. When I asked my mom where we were going, she said Redfords.

I was surprised. After the way she talked and looked the last time we had been there, I didn't think we'd ever go there again. But there we were, only a few weeks later, planning to make another day of it. As if our whole conversation on the ride home hadn't even occurred.

Yet what do you think I said when she told me we were going to Redfords?"

"Nothing."

"That's right. Nothing. I didn't say a thing.

I knew if I would have made a big deal out of it, she probably wouldn't have went. But I really did want to go. So I offered no protest, and we continued going to Redfords for the rest of the season.

But it's even worse than that. Because it's not like we never brought it up again, or acted like it never happened. My mom and I both

told a few different people what had happened that day. Not as much in umbrage, but a ‘can you believe that’ kind of thing.

It was more ‘ain’t that a shame’ than ‘I won’t stand for such an injustice.’

Interestingly, the next year they actually started letting black people come inside. I guess someone had either blew the whistle on them or threatened to sue. In any case, they closed down not too long after that. Leaving my mom and I to wonder whether they decided they would rather close the pool altogether than continue letting black people in.

It’s kind of a trip now that I think about it. Us judging them for being bigots, as we ourselves had been entirely complicit. All because they had the best waterslide, and it was familiar. And it really was so beautiful and green, and they did have the best hamburgers, or whatever else it was we told ourselves to explain it all away.

And though it would be a long time before I did any serious reflection on it, I never again wondered how segregation had been so readily instituted and maintained, especially in swimming pools.”

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“Ok. What else?”

“Is that all you’re going to say?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Haven’t I said enough? Isn’t there enough here to figure something out? I don’t get it.

Why do I need to keep going?”

“I don’t know. Why did you?”

“What do you mean why did I? I kept going because you asked me for more.”

“Yes, but you could have said you didn’t remember anything else or that it made you feel uncomfortable talking about it. You could have made up something.

Why did you just keep going?”

“Because you told me to try to be honest. And I’m trying to do that. I’m trying to work with you and really get something out of this.”

“I understand that. But that’s not why you kept going. There have been plenty of times you’ve held back in our sessions. Why continue coming clean with all this? Why come clean at all?”

Why did you keep going, really?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. You know exactly why you kept going.”

“No, I really don’t.”

“Yes, you do. You know you do. You just don’t want to say it. But I’m asking you to say it. If you’re here to be honest, then say it. Tell me why you kept going.”

“I really don’t know what you’re getting at. I only...”

“Just say it. Why did you keep going?”

“And I’m telling you, I don’t...”

“Why did you keep going?”

“This is ridiculous. You know that, right?”

“Say it. Why did you keep going?”

“I’m not doing this anymore.”

“Why did you keep going?”

“I told you, I’m not...”

“Say it!”

“Because it felt good, that’s why!
It felt good! Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“Yes, it is.”

Thank you. I’m sorry I leaned on you so hard. I just wanted to get you to realize that what you’re doing actually feels good.

My question now is do you know why?”

“I assume you mean how does it feel good.”

“I guess so. What is it you’re thinking?”

“I’m not really sure. I guess it felt good to get it out. Like it felt good to start to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“I don’t know, I guess it’s kind of like Granddaddy. I always wondered how this sweet, caring, kind old man got to a place where he could tell of Jim Crow style threats with almost total indifference. How he could gloss over it with not the slightest bit of apparent curiosity.

I wondered how he got there, but I wasn’t willing to figure out how I got here.”

“And where is here?”

“Maybe I don’t mean *that* kind of here. Certainly, as the kind of person I feel I’ve become, here is actually a much better place than the place I could have ended up. I understand enough to know that.

But, by here, I guess I would mean me here in this room, with you, reflecting on all the things I can’t seem to put behind me.

How did I get here?”

“With all the things you can’t put behind you.”

“Yeah.”

“From what you’re telling me, with these moments, each significant on their own, you have an understanding of that, of how you found your way to the memories you lament.

The more telling question is what led you to the place where you actively cared about what could have been done differently.”

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“The only answer I can come up with for that is the grace shown to me by black people. Young black people, in particular.

And I normally don’t like using the word grace, because I feel like it has too religious a connotation to it. But I really can’t think of any other word to describe the bottomless well of mercy and compassion I was allowed to draw from.”

“So why can’t you draw from it now? You know your old friends would want you to.”

“Because I couldn’t keep it. I couldn’t keep that grace.”

“Why couldn’t you?”

“I think I assumed that well would always be there. And I couldn’t fully accept it.

Or rather I couldn’t accept what it meant. Why it was being offered, and what I would forever owe in return.

I kept patting myself on the back. For not being as racist as so many around me. For scolding my white friends when they went further than I felt comfortable going myself. For my relationships with and my proximity to black people.

And while that may have been enough for me to abhor the scenes of brutality visited upon black bodies throughout my life, how many times did I find my position in line with the kind of thinking that makes just enough space for such self-appointed judges, juries, and executioners?

That’s why when I see one of these white cops choking a black man out or shooting a black kid on instinct or getting a black woman in line, I see where it started. I see the influences, the molding. And I see myself in them, just like I see myself in my Granddaddy. And that it’s only the difference of a few questions.

And then I wonder what questions I’m still not asking. And the more I search for those questions, I come closer and closer to recognizing just how much wrong I have both caused and condoned. So much more than I am able to grasp even now.

And it just illuminates that grace.

And I have nothing to comfort me but my shame.”

The Interview - - January 03, 2021

“If you’re just joining us, we’re talking with Lonnie Ray Atkinson, author of numerous works, including the new book *A Good Kid and His Ghosts*.

Now, before the break, you were telling us about a recurring dream you had that turned confession into a kind of fetish that seemed to mix voyeurism, humiliation, and... I guess mercy in a way.”

“I think that’s a fair description.”

“Though I have to admit, when you first mentioned the word fetish, I didn’t see it going in the direction you described it.”

“You thought it was going to be some domination thing, where the person on the floor wants to be punished.”

“Something like that.”

“I can see how you would expect that.
And you probably *could* interpret it that way if the guilt weren’t real.”

“What do you mean by not real?”

“That kind of fetish would require a make-believe guilt. Like, ‘Oh I’m so baaaad’ or something cliché like that.
Where this was more, like I said, a matter of need.”

“You said this dream was recurring. Do you have many recurring dreams?”

“Not too many. I just brought that one up because I’ve been having it for so long.”

“Would you mind sharing a more recent one?”

“Sure.

I actually had an interesting one this past month that’s really messed with me.

In the dream, I wake up in a hospital.

I look around the room, and I’m completely confused. I don’t recognize anyone; I’m disoriented. It’s really scary.

Then a doctor comes in the room and asks me if I know where I am?

I tell her I'm in a hospital. She says, 'Good.'

Then she asks me if I know *who* I am.

And that's when I realize. I don't.

I don't know who I am.

The doctor then asks me if there's anything that I *do* remember.

I think about it for like a minute. And nothing comes.

Then after about another minute of searching my brain, I remember something.

Except it's something awful. Something I did.

Something I did that hurt someone else. Something I actually haven't confessed yet.

So I tell the doctor. And in a way, it's kind of *like* a confession. Because I've never told anyone before.

The doctor asks me if there's anything else I can remember.

So I think, again. And again, something awful comes to mind. Something terrible I did when I was younger.

Then the doctor asks, again. And we just keep going through the same thing over and over.

But somehow I still can't remember who I am.

So it's like I've got this partial amnesia, where the only things I can remember are the awful things I've done. I can't remember any of the good things.

And I remember in the dream starting to cry because I think that there *has* to be more to me than this. I must have done some good things in my life. I can't just be this.

But somehow I have no memories that would let me believe it.

And as I'm crying, the doctor tells me that she thinks there's a way she might be able to help me. That there's this procedure they can do where they make the amnesia perfect.

And that way I can forget all the bad things I've done.

Then after I wake up from the procedure, they'll just tell me a story of who I was, and I'll go forward thinking I was that person."

"Wow, that's pretty scary."

"It's like what do you do, gamble that you do have these good memories that will eventually come back or gamble that you really don't?"

"Which is like gambling on what kind of person you really were."

"Or really *are*."

“I guess you’re right. But only if you think you can’t change. Are you what you’ve done until now, or are you what you do going forward?”

“Exactly. Except, in this scenario, it’s not even as simple a question as that.

In this scenario, the question is whether you’re an accumulation of everything you’ve done or an accumulation of what you can remember.”

“Meaning you could be something more, but you’ll only ever know if those memories come back.”

“Therefore the gamble.”

“But doesn’t that bring it back to my question?

If you agree to the procedure, you can believe that you were this good person, the person that they recreate for you. And you can go on living as that good person.

But if you don’t agree to the procedure, you still have the choice to be a good person going forward.

So the question still stands.

Are you what you’ve done, or what you do?”

“It’s like that Rakim lyric I used to think about all the time.

‘It ain’t where you’re from; it’s where you’re at.’

I could never figure out whether I really believed that or not.

I wanted to. But I could never commit to it.”

“Maybe that’s because you’re both.”

“Of course. But in the dream, I’m not thinking philosophically.

I’m thinking like someone who’s just discovered they’re this awful person. And the only memories they have are the ones plaguing them.”

“So what did you do?”

“I tell the doctor that I don’t want to completely lose who I am. That I’m sure there must be good things I’ve done, that those memories will return.

And the doctor says that she understands, and that the good memories may very well return. But that there’s no guarantee of that. And that if they don’t return, the only way I’m ever going to have peace is if I go through with the procedure.

But then I start arguing with the doctor, saying that’s not right.

If I agree to the procedure, it may erase my memory of those things, but it doesn't mean they didn't happen.

I still did the things.

And the doctor says, 'But if you don't know you did it, it won't matter to you.'

And I say, 'But it will matter that they happened. It'll matter to the people that I did wrong.'

And at that point, the doctor tells me I passed the test. And that this is a test they give to people who have the kind of selective amnesia I have. And that you have to make the choice to not deny what you've done wrong in order to have a chance at retrieving what you've done right. And that because I passed I can be given that chance."

"But what does that mean? What do you have to do now?"

"The doctor says that if I can make it right with the people I've done wrong, there's a chance the memories of the good things I've done will come back.

But I have to be willing to do whatever it takes to make it right.

And so, of course, this seems like the way to go, so I agree.

So at this part in the dream, the doctor begins bringing in, one by one, all these people from my past who I screwed over in one way or another. And I'm supposed to do my best to let them know how wrong I was and give them the chance to tell me whatever it is they want to tell me.

Except I quickly learn that this isn't as easy as I thought it might be. Because as I sit with each person, I realize that how I remember I hurt them is really just how I *imagine* I hurt them. But as I talk to them, I realize that's only a fraction of how much hurt I caused. And that for a lot of them, I can't really make it right. I just have to live with it.

But I'm ok with that because I keep thinking that I'm eventually going to get my memories of the good stuff back.

But no matter how many people the doctor brings in, those kinds of memories don't come to me. In fact, I start remembering even more things I've done wrong. Which only adds to the people the doctor has to bring in.

So this keeps going on and on until I finally get to the last person. And after I get done with them, I still haven't remembered anything good I've done.

And I start crying again.

And the doctor comes in and asks me why I'm crying.

And I tell her I'm crying because it's true.

I really am a terrible person. All *this* is all I am."

"And what does the doctor say?"

“She says, ‘Maybe not.
I only said it would give you a chance.
Maybe it just didn’t work.’”

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“And then what happened?”

“Then I woke up.”

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“Wow, that’s pretty devastating.”

“I know. You can see why I said it messes with me.”

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“What did you take from that?”

“I guess I took that it’s not about some prize you’re trying to win, or even some kind of finish line. It’s about doing what’s right for the sake of what’s right, even if it leaves you with nothing more at the end than when you started.

That it’s not a gift to yourself, but a duty to others. And they don’t owe you some kind of trophy just because you finally came to acknowledge what’s right.”

“But you did acknowledge what’s right. Isn’t that the trophy?”

“Depends on what value you place on trophies I guess.
I just know it’s definitely not a finish line.”

“So if it’s not a finish line, does that mean you get to keep going forward? Or is everything at a standstill?”

“I don’t know.
I woke up before I could find out.”

The Group - - May 23, 2017

“If everyone would take their seats, please.

Great. Now, before we begin, let me just say that this is a place of trust. What is spoken here will be respected for the trust it offers, and all words shared in this space are a matter of mutual confidence.

Ok, let me see... Who hasn't gone first in a while?
Hmm.

Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?”

“Sure.”

“Great, go ahead.”

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“When I was a teenager, we used to always try and meet girls who were in town for the conventions. Nashville had a million of them. Academic ones, dance ones. The biggest of all was the cheerleading convention. Though, it didn't matter what it was for; we would hit all of them. As long as there were girls there, we were there.

Most of the time it was fruitless. There were too many other guys from town there with the same intentions. And truth be told, we probably weren't the greatest catches anyway. But every now and then, you got lucky and met somebody. Sometimes it was just talking, sometimes you got a kiss, sometimes more.

The key was to not get greedy. If you had a nice time with a girl, let that be it. Treat it like Spring Break and just be glad you got a sweet memory out of it.

I learned that the hard way. With this one convention, with this one girl, with this one night, that was so good I thought I had to chase it. And like I should have known, it was the wrong move. For, never in my wildest imagination, could I have foreseen how bad I would ruin what started out as one perfect night.

Without going into the details of that night, I can confidently say for both of us that the second night we spent together, six months later, wasn't even close to being as good. Nor were the two nights that followed. I'd taken a train out to visit her for a long weekend. I thought we'd be able

to recreate what we'd had. And it wasn't that it was bad. It just wasn't the same magic.

I should have seen enough in that long weekend to just leave it there. But the truth was I liked Mandy. We'd hit it off so good at the convention, it was hard for me to admit there wasn't anything more between us than infatuation. Not to mention the other truth, that Mandy was smoking hot and if there was any chance still that we could hook up in the future, I wasn't about to close the door just because things weren't *as perfect*.

Anyway, we kept in touch and a while after that, she called and said she was thinking about coming back into town. Her and a friend had talked about making a road trip to Nashville, and she thought maybe I could bring a friend of mine along and we could all hang out.

The problem was all my friends were dogs. And yet, for some stupid reason, I ended up inviting the dirtiest of them all.

Jack was 18, so he got us the room. It was at the Econolodge, where we threw all our high school parties. It wasn't fancy, but it was clean and you didn't have to worry about management fucking with you.

Jack also got us the booze, due to a couple of dirty old men down at Old Jamaica. I remember them asking for ID, knowing Jack wasn't of age. But recognizing the dog in them, Jack gave a look over to the girls, and then looked back. To which, the cashier yelled out, 'Oh, you trying to get you some pussaaaaay. Why didn't you say so?' And while it wasn't exactly the response we were looking for, it was enough for him to ring up our Zimas and send us on our way.

Now, before all that, in a moment of alone time earlier in the night, I tried to kiss Mandy and she pulled back. She told me that she had been making some big decisions in her life and that she was trying to be a different person, and she didn't want to be doing any of that kind of stuff.

Being the insecure little boy I was, I didn't know whether to take her at her word or to take it as a hint. Either way, I realized at that moment, the night wasn't going to go at all the way I had anticipated.

Not that we didn't have fun. We did. But the fun they were having was more than the fun I was having.

Part of it was the drinking. I was the only one who didn't drink, and they were throwing them down with some pretty serious abandon.

The other part was Jack. He was always a ladies man, with the confidence of a bullfighter. I was the guy who would make sure things didn't get broken in the room.

And though I figured it was implied he would go after Mandy's friend, seeing that he knew the backstory, it didn't take long for me to see that Jack had decided the wind was blowing a different direction.

Anyway, one thing led to another drink which led to another thing and so on, and before I knew it, Mandy was so drunk she was needing help going to the bathroom. And wouldn't you know it, Jack was just the gentleman to make sure she kept her balance.

I remember him smiling and shrugging his shoulders as he closed the bathroom door. It's the last image I can remember before the fun came to a close.

After a drink or two more, but not too awful long after, everyone agreed it was time to turn in. Somehow Mandy's friend and I ended up in one bed, and Jack and Mandy ended up in the other.

Luckily, for both our sakes, Mandy's friend hadn't shown any interest in me. And from her slow, steady breathing, I assumed she had fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Leaving me to focus on the only sounds I could hear. Mandy and Jack whispering. And then Mandy and Jack not whispering.

They were in the bed closest to the window, which meant all I could see in the room was the silhouette of him climbing on top of her.

Now, I may have ignored it or denied it. Or I may have just been too angry at what I thought the situation was, to be clear about what the situation really was.

And who knows? Maybe she did think he was charming; maybe she did like him. Maybe he was the guy she would have wanted to be with that night.

The point is I was the sober one. And I should have had enough sense to acknowledge that none of that mattered, not at that moment. Because after all the alcohol that had flowed into her body, there was no way she was in any shape to make that kind of a decision.

And yet there I was. Angry and hurt, because I thought that's what she was doing. Making a decision.

Obviously, I still liked her. Yet I couldn't bring myself to look out for her. I had to make it about me.

And all I could think, as I sat there and watched, was that I couldn't bear to watch.

So I got up. And I walked out of the room. I walked out to my car, and I got in. And I just sat there. For what, I don't know. I just knew I didn't want to be in that room any longer.

As if I was the only one in that room with anything to lose.

I could have turned on the lights and pushed him off her. I could have said she'd had too much to drink and made her sleep with her friend, and Jack sleep with me. I could have made a scene and looked like an ass in front of everyone, and still I'd have been doing the right thing.

Instead, I just left her there.

Fortunately, to my surprise and relief, about two or three minutes later, Jack knocked on my window.

'What are you doing out here, man?'

'I don't know. What are you doing out here?'

'When you left, Mandy's friend woke up and started asking what we were doing. She made Mandy get in the bed with her and told me to go get you.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.' Then he said, 'Look, man, I'm sorry. Come on back in. Let's get some sleep.'

I said, 'Ok.' And that was that.

I went inside, and we went to sleep. And we saw them off with smiles and hugs the next morning.

Like nothing had really happened.

And while that would have been enough for me to regret for the rest of my life, I just couldn't leave it there. Because I still really liked her, and because I thought she had really liked me, and because we had had this one perfect night months ago, and because I never gave enough attention to the concept of consent, in my mind there was this injustice that had gone unaddressed.

Not that I had left her there to be raped. But that she had made a decision, to want him.

That's right. It wasn't her that deserved the apology. It was me.

That's who I was. That's what I took away. And I don't even know if it was my feelings for her that were hurt that night or if it was just some idea of my pride, but the way things were left at that motel room ate at me. So much so that I found no other way to deal with it than to put my thoughts down in a letter. I even consulted a couple different girls I was close with on what exactly I should say, conveniently leaving out just how much she'd had to drink.

I framed it as if I was giving her my side of things. As if, in some world, what the girl I left to a wolf really needed was to put herself in my shoes.

I told her the whole thing about how much I really liked her and how I thought we had had something. All so I could use it. To try and make her feel guilty. For what she did. To me.

It wasn't enough to remind her of a night that she might not have even remembered, or that she might have preferred to forget.

I had to blame her. I had to punish her.

We saw each other one more time, briefly, a few months later. Things were cordial, and everything seemed ok between us. And, still, I gave her that letter right before she drove off. It was the last time I would see her.

I realized it was a mistake as soon as she pulled away.

I realized, in that moment, the only reason I had written that letter was so I could have the last word.

And what that last word said, about her, and about me, is what I can't get out of my head.

I called her a few months after that and told her I was sorry for what I had written. She said, 'ok,' we talked for another couple minutes, and then she had to get off the phone.

I didn't even think to tell her I was sorry for that night. I imagine she would have just said the same thing.

'Ok.'

I tried calling her back a few times after that. I was worried that my apology hadn't been enough.

I was never able to get her back on the phone. Which is probably a good thing. You can't just keep getting the last word.

Besides, whatever I would have said wouldn't have been what I owed her saying. And she didn't owe me another second of listening."

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"All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to..."

Yep, he's looking. Never fails.

Why does he always have to sit next to me?

Here it comes.

(whispering) "Hey, that was really great. But you know no one can hear you in here, right?"

Wait, what?

"...and respect throughout.

Now that we've gotten the ball rolling, is there anyone who would like to volunteer to go next?"

“I will.”

“Great, go ahead.”

My Agent - - September 18, 2020

“So I did it.”

“Did what?”

“I did *it*.
I landed the whale.”

“What’s the whale?”

“The pot of fucking gold at the end of the rainbow.”

“And what is that?”

“A seat on the board. Or let me rephrase that, a fat fucking paycheck to occupy a seat on the board.”

“Board of what?”

“It’s a start-up by some Silicon Valley brats who became billionaires before they popped their cherry and now are looking to get struck by lightning twice and become trillionaires. Anyway, the point is that this start-up has big green fucking wings behind it. Meaning if you play nice and don’t rock the boat, and they pull off even a fraction of what they’re shooting for, you can ride this paycheck all the way to the pearly gates.”

“What are they trying to pull off, and why do they want me?”

“Let’s just say you’re finally going to get your due.

Since we began capitalizing off your viral fuckup on I’m The Worst, these tech freaks have watched this whole confession media thing develop organically, pretty much on its own. And being the arrogant pricks that they are, they believe they can add their own seasoning to the mix and steer the ship in not just a different direction, but into the fucking sky.

I’m talking about a whole social media platform, revolving around confessions. And not just regular social media either. I’m talking interactive, mother-other-level shit. Holograms, virtual reality, the whole nine inches.

These motherfuckers are looking into the future with this shit. They want to develop VR-style video games where you get to hear other people’s confessions while experiencing what the fuck they’re actually confessing, and then you get to rate them or judge them or whatever extra addictive feature they can add onto it, and then they get to do the same with yours. I don’t even really understand how it’s all supposed to work; I just

know you're going to be able to swap confessions with complete strangers, give each other scores, and somehow they're working on some kind of neuro shit where you can actually experience each other's guilt, like a temporary transfer of guilt, and then the release of that guilt all in one trippy, online experience.

Honestly, it sounds a little terrifying, but so does everything in the future.

I just know that this is the kind of opportunity you only dream of landing, and yours truly made it fucking happen."

"So why me?"

"What do you mean why you? You know why you. You're the man when it comes to this shit.

I assume they'll want to pick your brain about what works and what doesn't work about making your confessions attractive to the public. Maybe they'll want you to write some for the development process. I don't know what they're really going to want. To be honest, they may not want anything from you. They may just want you to sit there and collect your fucking check."

"Why would they pay me if they didn't want my input?"

"Street cred, baby. It makes them look legit. You're seen as a pioneer in the field. Having you on the board gives some marketing meat to their product potatoes."

"But what if I don't like what I see?"

"What's there not to like? It's a pallet of money delivered to your doorstep every month for less work than you've ever done in your life.

Do you not get what is happening here? They could have done all this without you, made all the money without you. But they're not. They recognize this is the house that you helped build. And they respect that and want to make sure you always have a suite in the fucking luxury hotel they're about to expand it into.

Don't make it more complicated than it is. You're finally getting your due.

Say yes and thank you."

"But this represents everything that is wrong with where this all went."

“Wrong fucking shmong. There is no right or wrong with something like this. There’s just in or out. And you, my good man, are going to be in, if it means I have to murder you and where your flesh at the signing.

You haven’t turned down a thing I’ve brought you yet. So don’t even flirt with the idea that you have a conscience now that I bring you this.

This is the mother fucking mother lode. And you better bow fucking down to it.”

“What do you mean I haven’t turned down anything? I’ve turned down plenty of things.”

“Oh, you have?”

“What the fuck, of course I have.”

“Name one thing you’ve turned down that I’ve brought you.”

“Ok, I will.”

“Just one. Just one fucking thing you’ve said no to.”

“Ok, give me a second. You’re putting me on the spot.”

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“You can’t do it, can you?”

“Hang on. It’s just on the tip of my tongue.

Goddamn, what the hell’s wrong with me? Why can’t I think straight?”

“Take your fucking time. I’ve got aaaaaaaaall day.”

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“All right, screw it, I don’t know. I can’t think of it right now. But you know I’ve said no to you before. So don’t act like I haven’t.”

“That’d be news to my bank. Because, as far as they’re concerned, you are my numero uno bottom of the very very bottom bottom bitch. So spare me this Virgin Harry shit. Your dick is just as dirty as mine.

You want to try and steer the ship, be my guest. But you gotta do it from inside the ship. Because, I'm telling you, these motherfuckers are serious and they've got the money to prove it. So whether or not you like the color of the stripes down the side or the fact that it's got truck nuts hanging off the back, this ship is going to set sail. And it's going to set sail with us or without us. So unless you can show me another way that you can change the future, then you'd do good to get your ass on board.

Remember, they want you. So maybe you *can* use your influence to make it into something that doesn't upset your delicate stomach.

And if not, then at least you'll have a lifetime supply of Pepto to swig while you're riding around in your fucking Maybach."

"I don't know, man. Something just doesn't feel right about this. It's like where they're taking it is some potential point of no return dystopia thing. And I don't know if I feel comfortable being a part of it."

"You don't know if you feel comfortable with it? Motherfucker, you *are* it. Did you not hear what I said? This is the house *you* built."

"You built it too."

"Damn right I did. And that's another reason why you should flush that conscience shit down the toilet and get back to reality. You're fucking rich from the shit that *we* did. And I'm part of that we. And that means you owe me.

This has always been the end game. We may have not been sure what vehicle it would show up in, but this was always it. And you know it.

So don't act like you don't know how to drive all of the sudden.

You want to negotiate, we can negotiate. You want to put terms in, we can give it a shot. But the fact that this goddamn unicorn actually exists means we have no choice but to get on that beautiful beast and ride that fucker into the sunset."

"And what happens if we can't come to an agreement?"

"If you really want to know, I'll probably start looking for you a spot on Dancing with the fucking Stars, or maybe I can pitch CBS an angle on having the Big Brother house filled with confessors. Basically celebrity headstone shopping in the b-rate cemetery.

Because, in case you haven't noticed, your fucking confessions aren't exactly what they used to be.

That's why the timing of this is such a fucking miracle. It's either accept a lifetime of free money and a permanent invitation to the cool kids' parties *or* fizzle into a joke after a series of pathetic comeback attempts."

“Why are you so sure I won’t be anything after this?”

“Because it’s my job to be sure.

If you would have jettied after the first burst of fame, or even six months or so in, then maybe you’d have had a shot. But you waited too long. You’re wedded to this shit now. It’s who you are, because it’s who everyone sees you as.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me that six months in?”

“Because none of that other shit was guaranteed. You yourself said you hadn’t hit a lick with anything before.

The way I saw it, it would have been too much of a gamble. And you don’t risk ending a good thing for a fucking handful of raffle tickets.”

“So you lied to me.

You never intended on helping me find anything after this.”

“There is no after this. And I’m sorry if you were too naive to miss all the blinking neon signs, but there never was. At least not with me.

I don’t know what you really expected from me, but I think I’ve done a pretty goddamn good job for you overall.

Just look at me. I’m begging you to let me turn you to gold. And somehow all you can do is complain. Well, fuck that shit. I’m trying to hand you a security that most poor slobs can’t even dream of. I’m trying to hand you the deed to your legend.

But if you don’t have the decency or the intelligence to accept it, then you can get out and try hitchhiking your ass to the Promised Land.

Because, I’m telling you, man, you don’t want to get out. You don’t know what’s out there. And you don’t want to know.”

“I can’t believe I let you use me like this.

You’re a terrible person.”

“Oh, am I? Am I a terrible person? Am I the worst person you know?”

“You sold me out.”

“I sold you out? Motherfucker, everyone sold you out. I sold you out, you sold you out, your best fucking friend sold you out. Everyo...”

“What do you mean my best friend sold me out?”

“What do you mean what do I mean? The podcast, dummy. You didn’t think that was some fucked up shit. You act like *I* took liberties. But that was some ballsy shit.”

“What podcast? What the hell are you talking about?”

“The podcast.”

“What podcast?!”

“Aw... Awwww!

Wait, are you for real? You still don’t know?

I thought you were just in on it by now.

She never told you?

No one ever told you?”

“Told me what? Who are you talking about?”

“Lisa. Your best friend. She’s been running a fucking podcast on you since before all this started.”

“That’s bullshit. What the hell are you trying to do here?”

“Fuck me, you really are a media recluse, aren’t you?

Maybe if you read more than the news section of whatever Quaint and Local Daily you find on your front porch in the morning, you’d have a little better idea of what’s going on in the world.

It’s called *He Doesn’t Know He’s On A Podcast*. It’s actually how I found out about you. I had almost thought about contacting you before the whole *I’m The Worst* fiasco, but I wasn’t sure there was anything there. I thought there might be something with your whole earnest shtick. But then after the show aired and I called you and started talking to you and I realized it wasn’t a shtick, I knew I had something special.

I swear to Christ I thought she would have let you in on it by now. I figured you were just keeping it up as a kind of charade, like it was good for the brand.

Then when the episodes started to spread out and trail off last year, I just figured you didn’t want to do it anymore.

If it makes you feel any better, it’s a really good podcast. It went a long way towards keeping your audience in between projects.”

“Are you being serious right now? Is there really a podcast? Does everybody really know about this but me?”

“Dude, it’s not my fault you refused to do social media. Hell, do you even have an internet connection? I’m as shocked that you don’t know about it as you are shocked that it exists.

But, fuck, man, I guess that’s what made the whole thing so convincing to people. And the longer you didn’t know about it, the more people were hooked on it. It was like waiting to see when you’d find out.

I swear I thought you were in on it and just really good at bullshitting.

I had no idea you didn’t know.”

“I guess the joke’s on me then.”

“Ahh, man. Come on. Don’t be like that. Look at the bright side, you got...”

“Nah, man, to hell with the bright side. And to hell with you too for not telling me this was going on.”

“I didn’t know, I swear. I told you I didn’t...”

“You know what? Whatever, man. Screw it. I have to make a phone call. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Hey, man, call me back. And get your mind right. Don’t fuck this up.”

“Whatever, man. Bye.”

My best friend - - September 18, 2020

“Heeeeeeeey, how’s it going?”

“I *know*.”

“You know what?”

“I know about the podcast.”

“Oh.

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Ok.”

“I just found out. And I’m trying not to lose my shit.”

“I understand.

And I hope you’ll give me the chance to explain.”

“Explain what? That you’ve been fucking lying to me and selling out my trust every fucking second we’re on the phone?”

“It’s not like that.

I never meant for you to find out this way. And I never meant to hurt you.”

“How could this possibly not hurt me? You broadcast our fucking intimate conversations! How could you think this was ok?

And when did you expect to tell me? When we were in our fucking eighties? Or would you still be recording me then, as long as I hadn’t found out?”

“Look, I know it looks bad, but...”

“No, it doesn’t look bad. It looks terrible. It looks like the worst thing you could have ever done to me.

How long have you been betraying me? When did this even start?”

“That’s what I need to explain.

It didn’t start out as anything. I never even had intentions of using it. I just remember always thinking our conversations were fascinating, and we were always coming up with good ideas and witty comments. And it was

like this really creative burst for me as well, but then I couldn't remember hardly any of it after we were off the phone.

So originally it wasn't even for you; it was for me. So I could jot down all the insightful stuff I was saying, in case I ever wanted to use it or refer back to it.

And then I don't know if you remember that big conversation we had that one Christmas, where you were talking about your whole deal with feeling guilty and how it was going to be your New Year's resolution to work on getting past it. And then you said you wondered how many people out there have some skeletons in their closet and must be thinking the same thing.

And remember how we used to laugh about how awesome our conversations were and how we should be famous and all that? Well, that's when I got the idea. And I thought it would be this really great angle if you didn't actually know what was going on.

And it turned out I was right."

"You were supposed to be someone I could confide in, as in confidential."

"I know I was. But you would tell me how you were feeling about all this stuff, and I would think how crazy it was because you're one of the best guys I know, but that you *did* do a whole lot of messed up stuff. And if you have this much stuff in your past, then there's probably a whole lot of people out there who could relate to that, and there'd be a whole lot of people who could appreciate a podcast like that."

"Oh, so you were helping the masses? How fucking benevolent of you."

"I admit I shouldn't have gone about it the way I did, but you of all people should realize that it did help people. And that there was real worth in what we were talking about.

I just didn't think it would work any other way. I figured if you knew we were recording, you wouldn't be as candid or you would freeze up and not be as natural.

In a way, it was like a reality show, except totally real."

"I hate reality shows."

"You hate reality shows, but you've basically been living one for the last 3 years."

"How do you figure?"

“Lonnie, you’re literally getting famous from your bad behavior. Except, instead of acting it out, you’re reenacting it.”

“So, what, is this my fault now?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I’m saying it worked.

I didn’t know it would work. But it did.

I had been collecting so much material that, by the time I’m The Worst aired, I had already released a dozen or so episodes. Meaning you had people who knew who you were before they *actually* knew who you were. And the show just kind of magically happened when it did, and people put together that that was you, but you still didn’t know because of your narrow media diet and hatred of everything social media. And it was such this crazy thing that it was really real, and it was really going down like this, that word spread and it just made it ten times more popular. And that’s when everything took off for you.”

“Oh, lucky me. My best friend in the whole fucking world has been betraying me, yet somehow I got this great story out of it. All’s well that ends well. All is forgiven.

Fuuuck you!”

“I’m not asking you to forgive me. I don’t deserve that. What I *am* asking is that you look around.

You do have a story out of it. It may not be as great as you would have hoped for, but it’s a whole hell of a lot better than before when you were always just complaining about how you knew you were really this great writer but bad luck had prevented you from making it.

Have you even stopped to think that maybe I was doing what you always said you couldn’t do for yourself? Did you ever think that maybe you ought to be thanking me?”

“Thanking you? For what?”

“I was building you an audience. You actually had fans.”

“Fans aren’t people who know your business without you knowing or consenting to it.”

“Are you kidding? That’s what celebrity is. That’s exactly what it is.

That's what you've been pining for, with your whole depression spiel about not making it."

"I didn't want this. I didn't want celebrity. I wanted to make a contribution."

"That's what you've been doing."

"But I wanted to do it on my own terms."

"What does that even mean your own terms?"

You yourself said it; it's all luck. It was luck you went to that doctor and ended up in a group where you could find out about the online group so it could then get hacked and go viral. It was luck you didn't know the documentary producers were bogus. It was luck I was already doing the podcast. It's all luck.

That's what life is, isn't it? Figuring out how to deal with your luck.

I know you're upset about it, and I understand that. But what's happened has happened. And now you have to figure out how to deal with it, now that you *do* know."

"It's that simple, isn't it? What's happened happened. Just move on like *nothing* happened."

"I'm sorry. I thought I was helping you."

"You thought you were helping *me*? You thought you were helping *you*."

"But, see, it's not like that. My part of the show was anonymous. No one even knows my full name."

"Are you fucking kidding?"

That's just great. No accountability for you. No responsibility for you.

Just fuck me over and then ask me to thank you after. Fucking great."

"I understand why you're upset, I do. I just want..."

"No you don't. You don't understand.

Because it's not even that I got lied to. It's that I've been living in one world where you were the one person I could come to and feel safe with. And now I realize that world doesn't exist, and this whole time I've been living in another world where you're taking advantage of my trust.

And even right now I'm suspicious of every word I say, because I don't know if you're taping me right now.

Are you taping? Is this going to be the last episode?"

"No, I'm not taping."

"How am I supposed to know that?"

"Because you're asking me, and I'm telling you.

And I quit doing the podcast a while back. It just didn't make sense to keep it up when we were only talking every few months."

"But how do I know that? How do I know if you're just humoring me like you've been doing this whole time?"

All those things I said to you. Everything I said.

As if I wasn't already paranoid enough, now I actually have no idea whether my best friend is recording me so she can air my private fucking thoughts and feelings for the whole world to laugh at and rip to shreds.

No wonder so many people hate me. They got to hear me at my fucking worst and lowest and most fucked up moments. Just like they're probably going to hear this in another week or so.

So hello, everyone. Thanks for listening. And fuck you for listening."

"I'm not recording."

"Maybe you should. Like I said, make it the last episode, because it's definitely the last episode of our friendship."

"Don't say that."

"Just hearing your voice.

Just hearing your voice always made me feel so solid.

And now I feel so fucking gross. I feel like such a fool.

I have no idea who to trust. As everything seemed to be getting better and worse at the same time, all the time, the only thing I knew for sure was that I had one place to go, one person I could count on to be a stabilizing force in my life.

And then I find this fucking shit out? Fucking betraying me, exploiting my confidence, every second we spend? I don't even know who you are.

And to tell you the truth, I don't even know who I am either. Things have already been getting so strange and weird. And now this shit.

I feel like everything is falling apart and the one thing in my life that was supposed to be real was a fucking lie.”

“I’m not a lie.
I just messed up.”

“And to think I felt bad about burdening you with my problems. But you were just eating it up. Egging me on. Pulling it all out, so you could get the best episode.

Jesus Christ! I came to you a few months ago when I was losing it. Did you really put that out for everyone to hear?”

“When?”

“A few months ago. When I called you and was freaking the fuck out.

Did you put that out?”

“I didn’t put it out, because I don’t know what you’re talking about.

When are you talking about?”

“The last time I fucking talked to you. Like three or four months ago.”

“Lonnie, we haven’t talked in at least six months, and you didn’t freak out at all. We were laughing about those two Amazon reviews of *Earning My Confessions*.”

“No, I called you in between then. Don’t you remember? I was losing it and rambling and bouncing off the walls. It wasn’t a long conversation, but I know we talked.”

“Lonnie, I seriously don’t know what you’re talking about. That’s not something I would forget.

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Lonnie?”

“You are, aren’t you?

You’re recording this. You’re fucking with me so you can record me melting down.”

“No, I’m not. I swear on everything we have, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. This is all part of it.
This is all part of your podcast.”

“I swear to you, it’s not.”

“My life is just part of your podcast.”

“I swear.”

“I can’t believe this.
I don’t even know what’s real.

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I feel so bad right now.

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I can’t even think.”

“Listen to me. I’m not recording this.
It’s just me.
It’s just us. You and me. No one else.
And I’m going to...”

“I’m sorry I have to go.”

“Lonnie, don’t go. Let me...”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t hang up. Please.”

“I love you. Goodbye.”

Interlude

(dreams)

The Doctor

“So you know I’ve been having these dreams.”

“You had another one?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

“If it’s ok.”

“Of course.
That’s why I’m here.”

“Ok.
Let me think.. Ok.

So the dream starts off with me at the police station. And I’m there because I’m trying to turn myself in for something I did that I think might have possibly been illegal from back in the day. But the person I’m talking to tells me that there’s nothing they can do because it’s not even a crime.

So I go to another police station, and I tell them the same thing. That I think I might have done something that was illegal years ago. And the person I’m talking to tells me that they can’t do anything about it because they don’t have jurisdiction.

So I go to another police station and go through the same thing. And the person there tells me that they can’t do anything because the statute of limitations has run out.

So I go to another police station and then another and another, and each police station turns me away for a different reason.

Until finally I go to this one police station, and I tell them the same thing I’ve told all the others. Except the person at this station says they have someone I need to speak with.

And they lead me into this room, which is like an interrogation room, like in the movies or on TV. And I wait for what seems like forever, until finally someone comes in to take my statement.

Except the person that comes in is someone I know.”

“Who is it?”

“It’s Ms. Camp.”

“And who’s Ms. Camp?”

“Ms. Camp was my first grade teacher. She was this beloved old woman who was revered throughout the school. All the children loved her. All except me.”

“Why not you?”

“When I was in first grade, we had like a field day one day. I think it was towards the end of the school year. And I remember being super happy because I had never experienced field day before, and I really liked it. Really had a good time.

And I think we must have started sometime in the morning, because we got done in time to have some class time left later that day.

Anyway, the reason why that’s important is because after field day, everyone had to come back to the room and change back into their school clothes. And the way our building was set up, each room had one of those big curtain dividers that could separate it into two rooms.

So they had the curtain pulled out so the boys could get dressed on one side and the girls could get dressed on the other. And I remember getting dressed and, because I was tired, going over to my seat and putting my head down on the desk.

Then at some point one of the girls on the other side started yelling and screaming that there were boys looking at them through this crack in the curtain or something like that.

And so when they went and got Ms. Camp, she came in and asked the girl to tell her who she thought it was, and she said she thought it was this one kid and me.

The one kid, she was right about. And he pretty much came clean immediately and got a spanking, and was done with it. But me, she was wrong about. It was actually another kid who was scared to say it was really him.

So Ms. Camp gave me the opportunity to come clean on my own. But, of course, since I didn’t do it, I didn’t give her what she wanted. And instead of taking into consideration that a six-year-old girl might have been mistaken about one of the two heads she caught peeking through a crack in a curtain for a couple seconds, Ms. Camp demanded that I confess what I had done.

And when I told her the second time that it wasn’t me, she then took me outside into the hallway to sit on the floor until I could bring myself to tell the truth. Which was a punishment all its own, because everyone that walked down the hall and saw you sitting out there just assumed you had done something really bad. And sometimes it was worse because the principal of the school would come down the hall, and I was

super scared of him and didn't want him to think I had done something bad. So I was sitting out there terrified the whole time that he was going to come out and think I was in trouble.

But then after a few minutes, Ms. Camp came and got me and brought me back in. But instead of letting me go back to my seat, she brought me in front of the class and asked me if I was ready to tell the truth. And when I told her I was telling the truth and that I didn't do it, she marched me back out in the hallway to sit and think about it some more.

And then a few minutes later, she came and got me and had me go through the same thing again, but this time really laying it on thick, telling me she wasn't going to let me back in class until I told the truth. And by this time, I'm standing there in front of the class, crying, promising her that it wasn't me. And again, rather than even consider that I might be telling the truth, she ran me right back out into the hall.

And every twenty or so minutes, this was the routine. Me sitting out in the hall, ashamed for what people who saw me out there were thinking of me, praying the principal didn't come out and see me. Then going back in and crying in front of the class, insisting that I didn't do it while my teacher insisted that I wasn't telling the truth.

Until finally, about ten minutes before school was going to let out, she brought me back in and let me sit down. And I remember as I was getting my things together and kids were starting to line up to leave for the day, I looked over and heard one of the girls in my class tell Ms. Camp, 'Ms. Camp, maybe it really wasn't Lonnie.' To which, Ms. Camp looked directly over at me and said, 'No, he's just a liar. A liar.'"

"That's awful."

"It's even worse than that.

I remember in my second grade year I was with a few boys in the hallway and Ms. Camp came walking down the hall. And all the boys ran up to her, saying, 'Ms. Camp, Ms. Camp.'

And she reached out to give everyone a hug. And I remember her saying, 'Oh, my boys,' even to one of the kids who hadn't been in her class. And since I was right there, I moved to get in on the hug. But then when she saw me easing in, she stopped and said, '*You're* not one of my boys.'

And I remember feeling this awful feeling of shame, even though I knew I hadn't done anything to deserve it. And I realized that she still believed I was a liar, and had actually held a grudge against me.

And because everyone else loved her and thought she was this best teacher they had ever had, I didn't know what to feel. I just knew I felt hated by this person who was supposed to be so good, and that there didn't seem to be anything I could do about it.

And that memory stayed with me all the way through school and into adulthood.”

“And in your dream, she was the one who had come in to interrogate you.”

“Yeah. Which, if you’re trying to interpret *that* part of it, makes total sense, because in the dream, she had come in not to ask me about what I had come in for, but instead to get me to confess to something totally different.

And immediately I had that feeling again of being a little kid being intimidated and humiliated.

And it was like for real, like I wasn’t me as an adult anymore. I was, but I wasn’t. It’s like I had reverted to a childlike state or something.

And as she’s telling me that she knows I did this other thing, I just start crying, telling her I didn’t do it. Just like I did that day in class.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“Oh, but it gets worse. Because she basically does the whole thing where every time I tell her I didn’t do it, she leaves me alone for what seems like forever and then comes back in and gives me another chance to confess. And when I don’t take it, she leaves and does it all over again. Each time insisting that she knows I did it, and that I’m a liar.

And at some point during this process, I get this flash of memory to this one moment when she was doing that to me for real in class that day. And I remember there was this one brief moment in which I began to doubt myself. Like maybe I had done it, and I just wasn’t thinking right, or wasn’t remembering it. And even though I didn’t know what sanity was as a child, it was like I was doubting my own sanity. And even though I didn’t give in to it, I remember that brief feeling of entertaining the notion that I *had* done this thing that everything in my mind told me I didn’t do. And it was truly horrifying.”

“And that’s how you felt in the dream.”

“Yeah, except it wasn’t for just a brief moment. It was something that was building.

Each time, she would leave and then come back in. Each time, she would tell me to tell the truth this time, that she knew the truth. Each time, I would sit there crying, promising I didn’t do it. Each time, she would insist I was a liar and then leave the room. And each time she left the room, there was this feeling of doubt inside me that would build. And as I got

more and more emotionally exhausted and physically exhausted, it grew bigger.

Until finally I started to question whether I had done it. I mean I knew I had come in for something different, but the longer I was in that room, the more it felt like it was wearing me down.

And even though in my mind I was pushing back against those thoughts, every time she wouldn't let me go even though I insisted that I didn't do it, it's like I was just overwhelmed with this feeling of helplessness."

"Similar to the way you felt that day in class."

"Right.

Except in the dream, I had an even worse thought.

I started to think that maybe I should just confess because I had originally come in to confess the other thing. And that since I *had* done that, meaning I had done something but they wouldn't let me cop to it, that maybe I would just confess to this, and in some weird way it would all be even."

"Like somehow it would be ok for you to confess to this, because you knew you were guilty of something."

"Exactly."

"So did you?"

"I don't know. I don't think so.

Because the next thing I know, I'm sitting in a courtroom. And I'm on trial for what they tried to get me to admit to.

Except instead of calling witnesses, they just read out these statements from people who think I did it.

And it's not even like they're witnesses or experts or doctors or even detectives. They're not even people tied to the case.

They're just whatever people the prosecutors could find who believe, for pretty much no good reason, that I must have done it."

"When you say they read their statements, *who* read them?"

"Like a bailiff comes out and reads them aloud, so they can be entered into the record."

"Even though they're not material to the case."

“Exactly. And it’s not even that they’re just immaterial. Most of them are nonsensical.

They’re just these random statements about how it’s obvious I would have done it. Just look at me. Just look at what I wear. Just listen to the way I talk. It’s obvious.”

“So they’re stereotyping you?”

“I wouldn’t say it’s really stereotyping. It’s more like they’re acting as if they really know who I am. Like they actually know me.

But they don’t. They’re just saying all these terrible things so I’ll get convicted.”

“Why do you think they would do that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they don’t know me, but they know of me.

Maybe they know enough about me to think they know everything about me.”

“And how do you respond to this?”

“At first, I’m just annoyed by it. And because the statements are so ridiculous, I think no one could possibly take them seriously. They’re just so mean and nasty, but without any real merit. It’s almost comical.

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The problem is when they just keep coming.

One after another. Entered into the record.

And after a while it starts to mess with me. The more of these things I hear, the more weary I get of it all. The more scared I get that they’re really going to matter to the jury. That if the jury hears enough of these statements that they’ll actually believe them. That they could actually convict me based on how many people say I’m something I know I’m not.

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Then just when I think I can’t take anymore, the court is adjourned and I’m taken to a cell.

Except it’s not like a jail cell. It’s more of a prison cell.”

“Why are you taken to a prison cell?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I was denied bail or something. In a dream you kind of skip over certain details and find yourself just playing along with whatever scene it puts you in.”

“So what are you doing while you’re in the cell?”

“Waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“For them to come and get me and take me back to the courtroom.”

“Let me guess, so it can all start back over again.”

“Bingo. Just like before.

The bailiff comes out and just starts reading. Entering all this garbage into the record. And I’ve just got to sit there and listen to it until they come and get me and take me back to my cell. And then I have to sit there in my cell and wait until they come and get me to bring me back to the courtroom.

And I can’t really tell which is worse. The listening to all this garbage or the waiting to listen to it.

Then after what seems in the dream like days and days of this same routine, I’m sitting in the courtroom, and my lawyer turns to me and asks me if I’m sure I didn’t do it.

And, of course, I insist that I didn’t. But, after everything that’s been happening, *inside* I’m starting to question myself as well. Just like before, in the interrogation room.

And it’s as if my lawyer can see it in my eyes.

He tells me that I should seriously consider taking a plea deal.

And at this point, I’m just at my wits end. I can’t believe my own lawyer is saying this.

But before I can say anything back, a bailiff comes over and takes me out of the courtroom and back to my cell.

But instead of me sitting in my cell alone, this time I have a cellmate.

Except he’s not waiting for a trial like I am. He’s already been convicted.”

“And this is the first time you’ve had a cellmate?”

“Right.”

“So what happens?”

“First, he asks me what I did to get in here.

So I say, ‘What I did, or why I’m in here?’

And he says both.

So I tell him the whole story, and he just starts laughing. Like really hard.

And at first, I'm thinking he's laughing because why I originally came into the station wasn't enough to even turn myself in for. But because I didn't really want to go back into all that, I just asked him what *he* did.

And then *he* says, 'What I did, or why I'm in here?'

So I say both.

Then he tells me what he was convicted of. And it's pretty fucked up.

But then he tells me what he did.

And what he did is the crime they want me to confess to.

That's why he was laughing so hard. He's the one they want.

And then he really throws me for a loop, and asks me if I'm going to cop to it.

And I'm like, 'Why would I do that? Especially now that I know you're the one who did it?'

And he says, 'You might as well. Because if they want you, they're gonna get you. And no one's ever gonna believe the guy they randomly put you in a cell with is actually the one who did it.'

So, of course, I ask him why he doesn't give himself up. Why would he let me take the wrap and go to prison when he would just be adding time onto his sentence?

And as soon as I say that, he punches me in the gut. Tells me that's for being so casual about adding on extra time.

Then he says, 'Besides, what's the difference who cops to it?'

And I'm like, 'What are you talking about what's the difference? Of course there's a difference. You did it. You're the one that should have to be held to account. Not me.'

Then he starts laughing again, and tells me how full of shit I am. And how rich it is that I had actually gone to all those police stations acting like I really wanted accountability.

Then he stops laughing and asks me if getting your brains randomly beaten in in the place where you lay your head at night is accountability. He asks me if getting raped by one or sometimes multiple people in the room you're supposed to be getting clean in is accountability. He asks me if getting forced to join a gang of monsters for protection is accountability. Because that's more than likely what would have happened had I ever done any time, for anything.

He asks me what justice is. 'Is it losing your freedom? Is it losing time? A portion of your life? Is it solitary confinement? Is it dehumanization? Is it the hurt or trauma you caused your own victim, paid back tenfold, a hundredfold?'

He asks me if I would have written about *that*. Would I have written a poem about it, done some comedy about it?

‘Or is it all just about confessing?’ he says.

‘Because unless you check off all the right boxes, confessing just saves you time on your sentence. It doesn’t save you from what prison is. It doesn’t save you from the person it turns you into. Because that only takes a minute.

And even if you can avoid turning into that person, you still have to endure the minutes. The whole time knowing that even if you wanted to do right by the people you hurt, they may not want to ever see your face or hear your name again.

Is *that* justice? Having to endure the minutes without that peace? Without that peace of *knowing* you’ll one day be able to make it right?’

‘Whatever it is,’ he says, ‘it’s definitely not being here, in this place. There’s no justice happening in these walls.

And there definitely ain’t none of what you call accountability.’

That’s what he says to me.

And then he says, ‘You know the difference between me and you?’

And though I knew, from his own admission, what he had done was worse than what I had done, in that moment I knew that wasn’t the answer.”

“So what did you say?”

“I didn’t have a chance to answer.

Before I could think of what the answer was, the guards came and took me back to the courtroom.”

“And what happened in the courtroom?”

“My lawyer told me that she had worked out with the prosecution that I could avoid doing time if I just plead to a lesser charge.

The only catch was that I still had to confess that I had done it.

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And instead of telling him what my cellmate had just admitted to me, for some reason in my mind it just made sense to go ahead and do it.

So I did.

I confessed. I told them I did it.

Every detail I’d been given in the police station, I just gave it back to them.

Because just like how my cellmate said there wasn’t any justice in the place he slept, I looked around and realized there wasn’t any justice in a room where they could decide to put someone, anyone, in a place like that. The place where my cellmate slept.

And if they weren't really interested in the truth, maybe it didn't matter if I gave them what they *were* interested in."

"And what's that?"

"Victory."

"And why did you give them that, if you knew they didn't deserve it?"

"Because I knew I deserved to lose."

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"Do you really think that?"

"I don't know.

I don't know if I believe I deserve to lose, or if I just don't deserve to win."

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"So how did the dream end?"

"That's the worst part *of* the dream.

Because as soon as I said the words, as soon as I confessed, I looked up and I wasn't in the courtroom anymore.

Instead, I was at the front of my first grade class again. With everyone looking at me. Everyone having heard me confess.

And there's Ms. Camp, standing right next to me."

"And did she say anything?"

"She said, 'No. That's wrong. You *didn't* do it.

I know you didn't do it.'

So then I asked her, 'Then why did you make me confess?'

And she says, 'Because I knew you were a liar.'

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And then I woke up."

“So you know I’ve been having these dreams.”

“You had another one?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

“If it’s ok.”

“Of course.
That’s why I’m here.”

“Ok.
Let me think.. Ok.

So the dream starts off with me running for office, sometime far off in the future.”

“Like for Congress?”

“I think so. I’m not even really sure what office it was for. I just know it’s a really big deal office, and I’m on the campaign trail. In the primaries.

And as you would expect, there’s this one reporter or columnist or whatever hounding me about my past. And he’s like putting out a story a week about something I did back in the day.

To which, my first instinct is to call him out for being this disingenuous prick and acting like he actually *did* anything. Like he actually did any kind of journalism. Because the only real reason why he knows about any of this stuff is because I was the one who brought it up in the first place. It’s basically a bunch of incidents I’d already put out there in public confessions in one form or another.

But instead of getting drawn into this distraction dance with him, I just keep talking about why I’m running, what I think I can bring to the office. Because that’s the stuff that’s really going to matter to people’s lives. Not whether I did any of this stuff a million years ago.

Of course, it doesn’t matter what my response is; he just keeps running these stories. And before long, his narrative starts to become everyone else in the media’s narrative. Where instead of talking about my policy proposals, all anyone wants to talk about is this weird outrage over what *I* already revealed. It’s like this pointless, manufactured scandal that

gets him readers but doesn't really add anything to the democratic process, because everyone already knew all this about me anyway.

It's actually the reason why I was approached to run. Not because of my ideas, but because of my celebrity. Yet because I really do believe I have these great ideas, I decide to grab the opportunity and go for it.

So then it's like this irony, where what makes me viable to run, in the eyes of the election industry, is the celebrity I built by confessing all this stuff. But now it's somehow become my Achilles' heel."

"So what do you do?"

"Well, my campaign manager is telling me that I have to get out there and confront the allegations head on. Except they're not allegations. They're old news.

So I push back and say it makes no sense for me to start a fight about something I came clean about a long time ago. Plus, I don't want to get drawn into a war nobody can win. I would rather ignore this asshole reporter's war and fight the one I want to fight.

But my campaign manager says that it doesn't matter what I want anymore. She says that if I *don't* fight his war, he's going to win it. And if he wins his, no one's going to pay attention to mine.

She says to me, 'For better or worse, ignoring it doesn't make it go away. You should know that better than anyone.'

But I still don't think it's the right idea. I tell her that I only have so much absurdity I can indulge in without breaking and becoming it, or succumbing to it.

She just looks at me and says, 'You succumbed to it the moment you agreed to run.'

And even though I know that in principle it's not a good idea to engage with this nonsense, I know she's right.

So I agree.

And then the next thing I know, I'm on a debate stage. But it's not with my opponent.

It's with him."

"The reporter?"

"Right."

"So you're debating the reporter?"

"Yeah, it's this whole ridiculous spectacle, where everyone is going to tune in and watch to see if this reporter can end my campaign run. Like a

boxing match or something, though it feels more like a professional wrestling event.

And the whole debate format is supposed to be this back and forth over whether or not I should be disqualified from public service because of the bad stuff I've tried to come clean about.

My campaign manager has all these canned answers she wants me to rehearse. And the reporter has already hyped up the event, saying that when he's done with me I won't be able to run for a local city office, that I won't even be able to go on a job interview.

You can see how ridiculous it already is.

So anyway, I'm up there on stage, and the debate begins.

But instead of following my campaign manager's talking points and instead of following the reporter's lead, every time the reporter or the moderator for the debate asks me a question about something to do with my past, I answer with one of my policy proposals.

Each question, no matter what either of them ask me, I just look out into the cameras and tell those watching a different thing I'm offering that I believe would make their lives better.

And at first, both of them act outraged with my avoidance of the *issue* at hand.

But I stay on point, not giving them what they want. Instead giving the viewing audience a glimpse at how insignificant *they* have been made by this spectacle, this reporter, basically the media and politics in general.

And it's kind of like a fight in a Rocky movie. Where, in the beginning, because of the advertised expectations of the event, my performance is making me look pretty bad.

But as the debate goes on, it becomes more and more evident how little the reporter cares about the public he's trying to save from me, and how much he cares about his own celebrity and whatever fleeting notoriety he can carve out of the spectacle."

"You can imagine people watching kind of rooting for you."

"Exactly.

And, at this point, I'm feeling pretty good about my choice of non-cooperation.

But then just when I think it's over because the moderator suggests that we should end the debate if I'm 'not going to take it seriously,' the reporter says, 'It's not because he doesn't take the debate seriously; it's that he doesn't take *what he's done* seriously.'

He asks me, 'Do you even understand the concept of consequences?'

He says, 'There's no magic in your confessions. None of the things you did disappeared. None of the people you hurt disappeared.'

Then he says, 'It doesn't go away. You know that, right?'

And instead of doing the same thing where I just go back into one of my policy proposals, I flinched.

It was like I froze or something. Not because I couldn't think of anything to say. But because I knew he was right.

So I broke strategy. Broke character.

I said, 'I know it doesn't. That's why I confessed. That's why I'm running for office. Because I want to help change the system, I want to affect the institutions that helped produce and nurture people like me, like who I was.

Realizing I was wrong was the best thing that ever happened to me. But it was also hard. And it wasn't ephemeral. I hold those feelings right now the same as when I first had them. And I feel that every day of my life. Right now, I have them. I have those feelings. And they're what push me on this campaign trail. And unless I can find a way to affect these institutions and help change this system, I don't know what I'm going to do. Because you're right. It doesn't go away.'

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He then says, 'I didn't mean for you. I meant for them.'"

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"How did that make you feel?"

"It made me feel helpless. Helpless and powerful."

"That's a strange combination. Can you elaborate?"

"When I say powerful, I don't mean in a macho type way, but in a scary way. Like being in awe of the amount of responsibility that goes along with each action, and how once you make a decision, once you put an act out into the world, you completely lose control over its consequences.

On one hand, you're responsible for its anticipated consequences. On the other hand, anticipation is about as cloudy or clear as the lens it's peered through. And far too often, we're too early in our journey to rightly imagine the entirety of our choices, many of which we're barely even noticing.

Then one day you realize the power wasn't your ability to change someone or some thing. It was the permanence of putting a choice in motion. And that permanence is what does you in.

Because, sometimes, the consequences just keep coming. And you find yourself chasing the tail of decisions that will never stop chasing you.”

“And is that why you feel helpless?”

“I guess so.”

“So what did you do?”

“I made up a new policy. Right there on the spot.

It all just came to me. As if it was appearing in front of me as I was talking.

I proposed a model of restorative justice where the offending party and any party that was harmed not only meet for an attempt at reconciliation, but also agree to be interviewed. Extensive recorded testimony.

The one party recounting in detail the damage done. The other reflecting on how they could have come to a place of causing such damage.

The recordings would be logged and tagged in an archive that would be made available to the public, as well as used both in schools and in certain preemptive programs meant to ensure less and less people find themselves in either party.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“Hmm, yeah, I thought so too. I actually wrote it all down after I woke up.”

“So how *did* you wake up? Did anything else happen in the dream?”

“Yeah, after I made that big speech laying out this new policy proposal, the reporter commends me on my vision.

Then he says, ‘But you still don’t deserve to hold office.’

And I just look at him and say, ‘Who *does*?’

He comes back with, ‘It’s not my job to decide who does. It’s my job to spotlight what, in a decent society, should disqualify you.’

So I ask him, ‘Are *you* decent?’

And he says, ‘Maybe, maybe not. I just know I’m not the one who had to turn to his sins to save him from being a nothing.’”

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“Is that what you think you’ve done?”

“Let’s just say the guy in my dream thinks that.”

“What did you say to that?”

“I told him, ‘It must be nice to have never hurt anyone. You should tell me your secret.’”

And he says, ‘You should tell everyone the secrets you have left.’

And as I sat there and thought about that, thought about what secrets I had left in me. Wondering what good it would do someone, to tell the last of their secrets. I realized.

I was no longer on the stage, debating.

I was in my room, sometime later, taping a story from a newspaper up on the wall. All about the success of that program.

How I had had an epiphany on that debate stage. That that moment must be the reason why I had run. And because I had arrived at that moment, there was no more reason for me to keep going.

So I made a deal with my primary opponent. I would drop out of the race if they would publicly commit to that policy proposal.

And sure enough, they agreed and actually got it passed. And it had really made a difference.

But wouldn’t you know it, that pain in the ass columnist had taken all the credit for having been the one to draw it out of me.”

“That sounds about like the way it would go.”

“Yeah, just about.”

“Is that when you finally woke up?”

“Come on, now. You know that’d be too happy an ending for one of my dreams.”

“Then how *did* it end?”

“So I’m reading the article taped up on the wall, and I’m smiling the further I get through it.

And as I’m smiling, it’s as if I realize I haven’t ever smiled quite like that, my whole life. Something about the muscles in my face or something. It just felt different.

Then just as I get to the end of the article, the tape comes loose from the wall and the story falls down behind my desk.

I reach down behind the desk to grab it, but I can't feel it. So I get down on my hands and knees and start looking for it. But it's not there. It's like it's disappeared.

And the longer I crawl around under the desk looking for it, the more and more nervous I get that I'm not going to find it.

Until soon I'm in this all-out panic, searching for this story, reaching around on the floor, everywhere. Terrified that I'm not going to find this little piece of newsprint.

Completely terrified."

"And that's how you woke up."

"Yeah."

"Looking for this thing that you know is there but somehow can't find."

"That or just looking for proof."

"Proof of what?"

"Proof that what had come out of it all was real."

"Why wouldn't it have been real? I know it's in the dream, but in the dream everything is real."

"I don't know. I guess maybe I needed proof because there's a part of me that thinks it wouldn't have worked.

Not that the program wouldn't have worked, but that before it could be implemented the politicians would have screwed it up or watered it down or corrupted it in some way until it was either ineffective or, worse, a bad joke."

"Maybe.

Or maybe it disappeared because it's something you can't just dream up.

It's something you have to make happen."

"Then what am I trying to make happen?"

I mean I definitely can't run for office."

"So?"

“So what? What is it you think I’m trying to make happen?”

“That’s not for me to figure out.

It’s for you.

Though I should probably let you know.

When you do finally figure it out, I’m definitely going to take credit for it.”

“Ha ha ha. Maybe that’s all the dream was trying to tell me.”

“Probably.”

“Ha ha ha. Humor. I like that.”

Bell sounds.

“So you know I’ve been having these dreams.”

“You had another one?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

“If it’s ok.”

“Of course.

That’s why I’m here.”

“Ok.

Let me think.. Ok.

So the dream starts off with me in the living room of the house I grew up in.”

“Are you a child in the dream?”

“No, I’m grown, but my parents look the age they were when I was a kid.”

“And what are you all doing?”

“Nothing really. My mom is in the living room, next to me, watching television. And my old man is sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a beer.”

“And what are you doing?”

“I’m waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“So that’s where I should probably back up and give you some context for the dream.

See, when I was in the fifth grade, there was this girl named Kristen. Except Kristen didn’t seem like she was a fifth grader. She was cooler. It was like she was older or from California or something.

I had a crush on her. It was pretty obvious. I must have looked back to where she sat in class ten times an hour.

We were always cutting up, making fun of each other. She would say crazy things that I couldn’t believe a girl would say. And she didn’t seem rattled when I would say whatever outlandish thoughts popped into a fifth grade boy’s head.

Except for that one time.

We were standing in the doorway of the classroom getting ready to leave for the day.

‘Hey, Kristen. Eat me.’

I expected her to roll her eyes and come back with something far more clever.

Instead she looked shocked. Really shocked. And then disappointed.

I didn’t even know what it meant. I’d heard Kenickie say it in the movie *Grease* and thought it sounded edgy.

By the time I found out what it meant, it seemed too late to apologize. I just remember feeling bad for making her feel uncomfortable.

She never brought it up, and we went back to normal.

The rest of the school year was pretty uneventful.

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And then one evening, the phone rang.

Somehow, some way, I knew. It was Kristen’s parents.

Kristen must have broken down and told them. I remember she had looked so shocked.

I thought about running over and answering the phone before my mom could get to it.

But then what would I do? Lie? Tell them they had the wrong number? They would just try again when I wasn't there. Or worse, they would call my bluff, and I would cave instantly.

I just froze and watched my mother pick up the phone.

She said, 'Hello.'

Then she said, 'Oh, hello.'

Then she just listened.

She listened long enough to hear what I had done. And for them to make it clear how serious the situation was.

Then she said, 'Ok, we'll be over after a while.' I didn't know what that meant.

She looked over at me watching her. I was on the verge of tears.

Then she said goodbye and hung up the phone.

'That was Janet,' she said. 'We're going to go see a movie with her and the girls later on.'

I was wrong. It wasn't Kristen's parents. I was in the clear.

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Twenty minutes later the phone rang.

It started all over.

The panic. The waiting. The relief.

Then again. Then again. Then again. Then again.

Every time the phone rang. The same thing. Until all I could do was wait for the phone to ring.

Next time it would be them. I knew it.

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About three days into this routine, I heard a car coming down the street. Living in a not-so-well insulated house on a dead end made you more aware of the traffic coming and going.

They must have found our address in the phone book or got it through the school.

I wasn't sure how. I just knew it was them.

The car passed our house. I waited for it to turn around at the end of the street and slowly count the house numbers. Until it came back to ours.

Turned out, it was just someone visiting one of the neighbors.

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Then not three minutes later, another car.

This time I was right. It was them.

Except it wasn't. It was a pizza delivery guy.

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And from then on, just like the phone ringing, every detectable engine roar summoned a pain, hammering through my chest. It was like a fear too big for my body.

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That summer I became aware of my capacity for guilt, and anxiety. Every day, dreading coming home. I knew what was waiting for

me.

A phone call.

A car coming down the street.

A car coming down the street.

A car coming down the street.

A car coming down the street.

A phone call.

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I didn't even know what I was afraid of. I had been busted for doing worse things than this. Besides, I could just tell the truth. I didn't even know what I was saying. I really didn't. I'd seen it on a movie that my mom let me watch. That was the truth.

I knew my fear was irrational. But still it was there. For weeks.

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And then it wasn't. Like a match that had burned out. No more panic. No more scenarios playing out in my head.

I just went back to normal.

Kristen ended up going to another school that next year. Nothing to do with me, just a better school.

I remember missing her for a while. Then the tiny landmarks of another school year set in. And life moved on at the speed of the sixth grade."

"So, in the dream, you're in the living room, waiting for the phone to ring."

"Yep.

And waiting for a car to come down the road."

"And what did you do when it happened?"

"That's just it. It didn't.

And that was what was worse.

See, during those few weeks when I was in that state of like paranoid panic, it had gotten so bad that it wasn't even about hearing the phone ring or hearing a car come down the street.

It was the anticipation. That it was going to ring. That I would hear wheels coming toward my house.

The waiting had become far worse than the actual moments when something actually *did* happen.

And *when* it did, those moments were every bit startling, and there was sheer desperation for those next few seconds.

But as soon as it was over, it wasn't over.

It would start all over again. And the waiting could also be a few seconds.

Or it could be a few hours.

Hours of waiting under this breaking fear."

"And that's what you're doing during the dream? Waiting?"

"Yeah.

And just like then, the longer I wait, the worse it gets.

It's like every second, I think the next second it's definitely going to happen. It's got to happen. And when it doesn't happen, the following second gets a little longer. Until each second is stretched out so far that I'm living this nightmare of guilt and paranoia and desperation out in each one.

And do you want to know the worst part?"

"What's that?"

"My mother and father have no idea.

They're just doing their thing, completely unaware that there's this terror inside me. Turning me inside out.

Waiting for the phone to ring. Waiting for a car to come down the road.

I can't focus on anything. Because there isn't anything else.

There's just the phone about to ring. And the car about to come down the road.

And there's my mother and father, just sitting there.

They're not scared at all.

It's just me."

"And how long does it feel like the dream lasts?"

"Oh, I'm sure in real life the dream only lasted a few minutes, if that.

But in the dream, those few minutes feel like a thousand hours. A thousand hours of fear. And shame.
So much time, alone with it all.”

“And what do you take from that?”

“That I have an unending well of self-loathing to draw from whenever I need it.”

“Why do you say loathing?”

“Because you would have to hate someone to do that to them.”

“And why do you think you would ever need that?”

“The same reason why I had the dream. The same reason why it happened in the first place, when I was a kid.”

“And what reason is that?”

“No reason.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t either. I just know I’m glad to be awake for a while.”

Bell sounds.

“So you know I’ve been having these dreams.”

“You had another one?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

“If it’s ok.”

“Of course.
That’s why I’m here.”

“Ok.

Let me think.. Ok.

So the dream starts off with me in a waiting room of like a doctor’s office or something. And I’m reading this brochure.

And it’s kind of vague, but I’m getting that the gist is that there’s this procedure the doctors can do that’s kind of like hypnosis. Where if you have any past trauma or pain or anything that was like life-changing or something, you can go through this hypnosis thing and it will actually remove the memory from your brain. Or at least suppress it to where you won’t have to ever worry about it bothering you again.

It’s like it won’t have even happened.

And I was thinking actually in the dream that it reminded me of that movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Do you remember that movie?”

“I *do* remember it. And you’re right; it’s a similar premise. Maybe that’s what inspired the dream.”

“Yeah, except my dreams, at some point or another, always end up taking that extra wrong turn.

Because just as I’m getting ready to read the last page of the brochure, the nurse comes in and calls my name.

So I follow him into this procedure room. And when I get into the room, I realize that maybe the brochure wasn’t for me.”

“Who was it for?”

“The person already there.”

“And who’s that?”

“It’s someone I did wrong.”

“A woman?”

“No, it’s actually a guy I grew up with. I did something really bad one time, and he was the one left with all the hurt.

And it was a whole lot of hurt.”

“So he was the one getting the procedure.”

“Yeah.”

“Then what were you doing there?”

“I guess that's what the last page of the brochure was about.

See, the way they had it setup, they put both of us under the spell at the same time. That way, as they're having him describe that scene and all the pain and trauma he's there to get rid of, they can then put that hurt into me.”

“Into you?”

“Yeah, like in my memories. They basically take that memory from him and make it one of mine. That way, I get the same hurt.

Then I guess they take us back home and put us in bed or something. And we don't even know we were part of the procedure. We just wake up the next morning, and we either have one less memory or one more.

For him, he's free.

For me, I have to experience and deal with those same feelings that I left him to deal with all those years back.”

“For the rest of your life?”

“I guess.

He lived with all that stuff for half his life. It only seems fair I'd take it on for half mine.”

“But does it seem fair?”

“I don't know. Half his, half mine. He went through it originally.

I know this probably ain't the right way to put it, but if it was good enough for him to go through, then it's good enough for me to go through.”

“And you agreed to this?”

“I'm assuming I did, if I was there.”

“But do you agree now? Not in the dream, but right now. Do you think that's ok?”

“I don't know if there is an ok. I just know it's better than him having to keep it.”

“Then why not just take it from him? Putting it in you just seems like revenge.”

“Not if I volunteered for it.”

“Did you volunteer for it?”

“I don’t know. How I got there wasn’t really part of the dream. I was just thinking maybe it’s something that has to be volunteered by the offending party.

Like a peace offering, or a gift or something.”

“A gift?”

To him or to you?”

“Why would it be a gift to me?”

“I think you know why.”

“Because it would offer me a way to make it up.”

“No, not that. There’s other ways you could make it up.

You think if you go through with something like this, if you, as you said, take on that hurt, it will absolve you.

That’s why you’re dreaming it.

In the dream, the procedure isn’t for him; it’s for you.”

“You’re probably right.”

“But in the real world, you will have still done something to cause someone pain.”

“Yeah, but I won’t know it.”

“So it lets you off the hook.”

“In exchange for becoming the victim.”

“But you’re not the victim.

In fact, you’re committing to another wrong by agreeing to all this.”

“And what’s that?”

“Don’t you see it?”

You’re not just offering to erase his memory. You’re actively erasing the truth.

After the procedure is over, there’ll no longer be a truth underlying those events.”

“There’ll just be memory.”

“And in this case, memory is as much identity as the facts of what happened.”

“It’s just *one* memory.”

“But doesn’t the truth matter?
Doesn’t *it* have worth? A worth greater than hurt?”

“I don’t know.
I just know I can’t fix the truth.”

“And you think this would be fixing it?”

“I’m not saying that. I’m just saying, in the dream, when I walked in the room, and I saw him sitting there. That moment came back to me. Like it had just happened a minute ago.

I couldn’t bear it.
I had to take it away.”

“From both of you.”

“I guess so.”

“But what about everyone else?
Don’t you owe society to remember, remember what really happened?

Don’t you think you owe it to society to preserve the truth?
Don’t you owe the truth, something?

What good is the truth anyway, if it can be thrown away? That’s what I meant when I asked you if the truth had any worth.”

“Worth to me, or worth to everyone else?”

“That’s up to you to decide.”

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“I don’t know.

I don’t know if I owe everyone else, or if I owe the truth.

I just know that when I saw him in that room, I couldn’t deny what I owed *him*.”

“But what *do* you owe him?
Truth aside. What if you hadn’t volunteered?
Doesn’t this procedure fit the textbook definition of revenge?
And even if you *did* volunteer, it’s still revenge.”

“Better than serving time.”

“It is. But the injustices within prison don’t automatically legitimize revenge of a lesser degree.

And even if you don’t consider this a form of revenge, it’s by no means justice.”

“If we both agree to it, isn’t that what matters?”

“Agreeing to something doesn’t make it right. People agree to injustices every day.

And let’s take you out of it altogether.

Don’t you think you might be subtracting something from him as well? Something more than just this memory?”

“Like what?”

“It’s a part of his life. No matter how wrong *you* were, that moment is a part of who he is. It helped shape him.

You may be right. It may have plagued him this whole time.

Or he may have learned something from it, something he was able to use later on.”

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger?”

“I know it’s cliché. But we are a sum of parts.”

“I agree. I just think it’s a dangerous way of thinking.”

“How so?”

“If, let’s say, he was able to come out of what happened between us a stronger person and was somehow better equipped or better off or whatever for the future, then not only does that give me an opening to absolve myself from any *real* wrongdoing, since he was better off and all, but it also allows me to take credit for the stronger person he became.”

“But that’s why I said to take you out altogether.

Otherwise, you're right. You can rationalize all kinds of evils by how resilient humans are. In fact, the worst of our monsters mistake the dignity of their survivors for their own.

In any case, there is something to be said for how diversity shapes us. And we really don't know how we might have turned out if we were able to just extract that one moment that, at the time, was truly awful.

Maybe you turn out the same person.

But maybe not.

In some cases, the loss of memory may be a net gain.

But there's got to be others in which taking a contribution away from someone's life, even if it's a painful one, could result in an overall loss."

"There's no way to know."

"True.

But the question is: Is it worth taking the chance?

Could the truth be worth more than hurt?"

"But what if it's the best of both worlds? What if he gets to keep those things?

What if, because it did really happen, he gets to hold onto any resulting lessons and still becomes a stronger person and all that, but he just loses the memory of *why* he's stronger?"

"Is that what happened?"

"I don't know. I didn't get that far."

"So what *did* happen? How did the dream end?"

"I'm not exactly sure.

The last thing I remember is this doctor slowly and calmly starting to explain what was going to happen, I guess putting us both under hypnosis.

Next thing I know, it's morning."

"And how do you know you weren't under hypnosis? How do you know it was a dream?

How do you know you weren't the one already in the room?

How do you know you weren't the one hurt?"

"Ha ha."

"No, I'm serious.

Maybe this wasn't a dream. Maybe it's a side effect of the procedure, and you're just remembering it wrong.

Maybe you've had a memory taken from you. Something that actually happened, but you can't remember.

Doesn't it make you want to know?
Just the suggestion?"

"Ok, Doc, slow down. You're starting to freak me out."

"But don't you want to know?
Don't you want to know what happened to you?"

"It was a dream."

"But you don't know that, do you?
Maybe this is the last part of the procedure. Giving the person who was wronged one last choice.

The choice to have it back. To know what happened to you.
To know the truth."

"Look, I see what you're doing. And it's pretty good.
But I'm serious when I say it's starting to freak me out."

"I'm asking you a question.
Do you or do you not *want to know* what happened to you?
Is the truth worth more than hurt?"

"I told you. I don't like this."

"Then say no.
Say no, and we'll talk about something else.
Just know that if you *do* say no, you won't get this chance again.
This really is the end of the procedure."

"What are you doing?
You know this isn't funny."

"Do you want to know or not? Do you want to understand why you are the way you are?"

All of this. To finally have it make sense.
You can have that. That's what I'm offering you right now.
But you have to agree to take it back.

All the hurt. The suffering you went through. What was done to you.

You'll have to know it. You'll have to live with it. Again.

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Or you can just not know.

I can put you under again and you'll forget this conversation.

You'll wake up again, just like before. But this time you won't be given the chance.

You'll just go on without that knowledge. You'll trade the pain for never having the pieces to put it all together.

Of course, just having the pieces doesn't guarantee you'll put it together either. But at least you might have that option.

To know, or at least have an idea, why you are *who you are*."

"You know what? I'm not doing this.

Session's over."

"That's fine, but I have to have an answer.

If you don't give me one, I'll have to take it as a no. And that will be that.

So I'm asking you one last time. Do you really not want to know? Do you not want to know what happened to you?

If not, then just tell me no, and I'll put you back under. And it'll all be ok.

You just have to tell me you don't want to know.

You don't have to feel weird about it. You don't have to explain to me why.

You just have to say the word.

Just tell me you don't want to know what the truth is.

Just tell me no and I'll..."

"I can't.

I can't tell you that."

"So you *do* want to know?"

"What do *you* think? Of course I want to know.

If it's already happened, then I want to know."

"Ok.

I can do that.

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But before I do, I should give you some warning. You need to be prepared.

Right now, you think you want to know. But that's because you don't know what it is. You don't know what you're about to hear.

And once you hear it, you're going to be there. And it's going to be like you're both experiencing it *and watching it happen to you* at the same time.

All of it.

And you can't do anything to stop it."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Because I want you to be sure.

This is a big decision.

It may be one of the biggest of your life.

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Do you really want to have this with you? All the time?

You could just go on without it. You could go on with the way it is, right now. Living the life you know, right now.

You'll never know what you don't remember. It won't be like anything is missing. And you won't have to deal with all the complications that come with remembering.

I meant it when I said I can put you under so you'll forget this conversation.

And when you wake up, things will be precisely the way they are right now. And as far as you know, that thing will not have happened. You won't live in a world where that happened to you.

You'll live in this one. Where it's ok.

You can have that. You can be the same.

You can be ok.

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But you have to tell me that's what you want.

Do you want to be ok, just like it is right now?

And just not know?

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Wouldn't that be all right?"

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"I guess so.

I mean I don't know. I don't know.

I'm so confused.

I don't. I feel like.. I.. I don't know.. I'm just so confused."

"That's because it *is* confusing.
That's why I have a job."

"Wait, what are you.. Are you saying..."

"Not so simple, is it?"

"Wow.
Are you for real?
Did you just do that to me?"

"Ah, come on, you didn't really just lose touch with reality, did you?"

"You're messed up. *You* are messed up.
You're more messed up than me.
Isn't that like against some kind of laws or ethics or something?"

"What, to improvise? Of course not.
A little experimental maybe. But not enough to get my license taken away."

"You're messed up."

"I'm just showing the complexities of what you're playing with.
If you prefer me not to take any more liberties like that, that's fine.
I'll stick to our normal format.

I do really like that dream though. Do you mind if I start using that as a thought experiment?"

"You just did, didn't you?"

"I guess so.

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Anyway, we've got a little time left. Let's switch gears.
How's your week been?"

Bell sounds.
Bell sounds.

Chapter Seven

(The question was if I was willing to go to hell.)

My Agent

First message received:

Said name was Garrett Tapper. Talent agent with Hopkins and Burleyson. Got your contact info from I'm The Worst producers. Wanted to talk about ways to capitalize, open doors. 'Really good feeling about this.' Looks forward to talking with you about opportunities. Left this number.

Last message received:

Another message from Garrett. Was mad and said he knew you were here. Said to write out the following word for word: So you're not returning my calls now? Is that where we're at? You think you can strike out on your own? Think you can just go in a different direction, with the celebrity that I got you? Well, let me tell you something. It wouldn't be enough. You would still need people like me, multiple people like me. People who are good at their jobs, who push our special little buttons and make or break people like you. Sure, you might Kickstarter something, but then what? Without this fucking muscle behind you, you'd be a nobody self-publishing your shit to the people who already know you. Just like before. Do you get that? Do you understand what I'm telling you? You need to call me, and you need to come back to these confessions. The world you think is out there for you? It doesn't fucking exist. And I'm only going to beg you this one time. You need to get it together and you need to call me back, or else I'm going to have no choice but to drop you on your ass. And then you're going to see for yourself what it's like out there without me. You're going to see what I'm talking about. I know we've had our ups and downs, but right now you need to listen to me. You have no idea what the fuck you're doing. I do not want to move on from you, but I fucking will. And I know you think you've got it under control, but I'm telling you. You do not. I know you don't believe it, but I'm looking out for you when I tell you this. If you walk away, it's going to be bad. Bad in a way you're not ready for. So call me back and let me help you. Soon.

Excerpt from *A Good Kid and His Ghosts*

Whenever I come across someone, say a cab driver or a server in a restaurant, who doesn't know about any of this and I have to explain to them what I do, what I've been doing the past couple years, they always say the same thing. "Why would anyone want to listen to your confessions?" Always with an emphasis on the "your."

In other words, why would anyone find my sins interesting? Why would anyone care? More importantly, why would I have ever thought they might care, or should care?

Yet it's precisely how boring or basic or benign I come off that makes my confessions all the more crucial.

To those who believe the world is essentially full of good people and that talk of oppression in society is overblown, please remember that I am one of those good people. Or at least I was when I was at my worst.

The glue that holds that worldview together is entitlement. And there is nothing at all benign about the entitled.

I know some people listen to me confess and think this is just some Identity Politics gone wrong or PC self-flagellation. But it's not. When I talk about being a straight, white male, that's not some abstract shit. The racism and the sexism and the homophobia I engaged in had an impact. Just like the racism and the sexism and the homophobia I was reared in had an impact. I know almost no women who haven't been either raped or sexually assaulted. I know more names of black men and women who have died, recently, at the hands of our so-called peace officers than I know the names of our so-called founding fathers. None of that is imagined. None of that is abstract.

The impact of these malignant living philosophies and their institutional offspring reaches back as far as it does in part because not enough people have been willing to question what it means to be a good person, much less what it means to have a good society. And if a whole lot more don't start, it's gonna go on just far enough down the road that the road's going to end.

As celebrity often has this effect, I imagine there are many out there who feel like they know me; maybe you've developed an affinity or perceived closeness even. And maybe, in a way, you do know me. In that, you know people just like me. Someone you love. Someone you share an intimate bond with. Someone you believe is a really good person, maybe one of the best people you know. Remember, in a number of my friends' lives, I'm one of the best people they know. Before this whole confession phenomenon and my contribution to it took off, they knew virtually

nothing about any of this. Not saying they knew nothing about me; they obviously did, and still do. I'm saying that, once you get to know somebody pretty well, it's normal not to think, and certainly not to ask, too much about their capacity for ill.

Do you see what I'm getting at? Consider all the things I've confessed. Imagine finding all that out about the good person in your life, the one you know right now. How would that make you feel? How would it make you look at them? Would it give you pause?

And I'm just one person. Think about how many people that you know, how many others, right now, that you consider to be really good people. How many of them have just as many stories as I do? How many have more stories than I do; how many have far worse?

To find these things out now, so late in your relationship, wouldn't a part of you feel betrayed? And that's just one person. What about your other friends? What about their friends? Think about how much actual betrayal is out there.

Now, I can't be sure about your friends, but it's my theory that most of us good people start out as good kids. And I know when I was a young man, in one way or another, I betrayed almost everyone in my sphere.

One of the key differences between me now and me then is that it's easier for me to see it now. And I see. That, even now, I'm always on the verge of betraying someone. Because there are so many opportunities, and just enough capacity within us and within our society, for ill.

Each person I betrayed, each group I betrayed, granted me more latitude than I could handle. And they did that because they thought the same thing I did. That I was a good kid. And they thought I was a good kid for the same reason I thought it. Because we both knew who the bad kids were. And when you're paying attention to the bad kids, a good kid can betray you without either of you knowing it.

And I'm sure some of you out there reading this are still not buying it. Because you *do* think it matters, how relative my sins were to those heavier sinners and the still unrepentant. You think it matters more where the bad ideas begin, rather than the one or ones expected to walk those ideas ever so slightly back.

But, see, I know what kind of formulations the good kids have to make. Being the one to rein things in if they get out of hand. To have to decide what out of hand is. And then calculate how much you can pump the brakes, and still hold onto your position. And just how many compromises that leaves you holding. Because you know it's no fun, for anyone, if you pump the brakes all the way.

That's what a good kid's there for. Balance. Balance and safe transgressions. For every truly awful act that hits the headlines, there's

countless *smaller* acts that a good kid deemed safe. Safe enough that no one gets busted. But unsafe enough that you get to maintain your standing in the group. And whatever betrayal there is in the wake? Well, it could have been a whole lot worse.

And that betrayal, as bad as it is, is never as bad as when you realize it most definitely could have been worse, but you're *not* the one who stopped it.

For me, the hurt in *those* confessions is something indescribable.

I've often thought about what those confessions must look like to others. I'm sure to some, it may seem like I'm confessing for things that didn't even happen.

But that's not what I'm doing. I'm confessing for what I would have let happen, by not making sure it didn't. And, in a way, I'm trying to apologize to the ones who would have been hurt in those moments, the ones I also betrayed.

When you see how much capacity you had to contribute, especially when you were doing nothing, saying nothing, it's not enough to just try and be a better person now, to encourage others to not make the same mistakes. That's too easy.

You have to figure out a way to show it. To show the dirt and the guts of it. Show what it means to be a good kid. And just how dangerous a good kid can be. And just how many good kids there are.

As alone as I may sometimes feel, in my anxiety and my regret, the truth is there's rarely just one good kid in the group. And each one of those good kids had an array of influences, some their own and many shared, that made the way for such misunderstanding of self and society.

I don't really know if there's a way for a good kid to be saved. And, anyway, I'm not foolish enough to think of myself as a savior. I do, however, know that there was this good kid one time that needed someone like me to give him a couple hints, to merely suggest what else might be out there to understand.

And I'm not mad at the adults who weren't there for him. They'd been thrown in the same water he had. I understand now that sometimes you get so tired of treading, you just lay your head back and begin to float.

I just wish one of them would have told that kid that what he thought was swimming was really just the current. Because where he ended up wasn't anywhere near where he imagined he was going.

And now I'm starting to think the only way to find that lost kid, to save that good kid, is to kill him.

If you really want to know why I think you should be interested in my confessions, why you should care about them, then just take a look at the children in and around your life.

I don't want those kids simply being the ones who make the transgressions safer. I don't want them thinking that being good is not being as bad. And, most of all, I don't want them to wake up one day, long after their childhood is over, with an irony stuck in their brain that only a good kid can construe.

I want those kids, your kids, to know better than the kids like me, who should have known better.

I think it's time we kill the idea of a good kid. To kill our assumptions of who is and who isn't, who will be and who won't be.

Instead of picking winners and losers, and cursing both, we need to afford all our children the questions they will need to recognize what their fight looks like. And to recognize, ourselves, that if we're going to kill the idea of a good kid, there's another idea that's going to have to go first. The idea of what makes, so many of us, good people.

The Group - - August 23, 2017

“If everyone would take their seats, please.

Great. Now, before we begin, let me just say that this is a place of trust. What is spoken here will be respected for the trust it offers, and all words shared in this space are a matter of mutual confidence.

Ok, let me see... Who hasn't gone first in a while?
Hmm.

Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?”

“Sure.”

“Great, go ahead.”

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“I lived down the street from this brother and sister, Mikey and Melanie. They only lived there for a while, but the little bit they did we had a hell of a time together.

Everything was an adventure with them. They would have sleepovers. They would have parties. They would play all kinds of games. They had a trampoline, and a basketball goal. Melanie was actually my first kiss.

I remember their mom was kind of hippieish and used to make us listen to the Byrds' version of “Turn Turn Turn.” Their dad seemed cool too. He was more fun than some of the other dads. He was more like us, more like a kid. Plus, he was around a lot more, and he wasn't drunk.

It wasn't until years later I realized that they were just as fucked up as the rest of the parents, just in their own way.

They used to do crazy shit, like tie a sled to the back bumper of their Blazer and let us ride on it as they hauled ass around the neighborhood in the snow. Dangerous shit. Like using gasoline for bonfires and shit like that.

Of course, those are the kinds of things that, as long as nobody got hurt, made for the best memories.

And I'm sure they would say that nobody got hurt this night either, but that's not really the way I remember it.

Melanie was staying with some friends, and me and another buddy from the neighborhood were sleeping over with Mikey. About 10 o'clock or so, Mikey's dad came into the living room and asked us if we wanted to go for a ride.

We didn't even know where we were going. We were just excited to be doing something. We headed up to the bowling alley parking lot and then over to the store parking lot, basically just cruising around. Windows down, loud music on the radio. It was awesome.

Then Mikey's dad asked us, 'You guys wanna see something?'

We said sure, not knowing what he was talking about. The way he said it, it sounded like we were going to go see a dead body like in *Stand By Me*.

It was exciting not knowing where we were going. Only knowing we were going to see something we hadn't seen before, something only he knew about.

Yet the excitement turned into confusion when we ended up pulling into the back parking lot of what used to be this elementary school but was now an administration building. It didn't really make sense. It was just an old empty parking lot, next to where we would go sometimes to play ball. We must have been there a hundred times before.

What added to the confusion was Mikey's dad turning off the music and cutting the lights before going in, then slowly pulling into a spot towards the back of the lot and putting the Blazer in park.

We looked around but couldn't see anything. There weren't any lights in the parking lot, and there weren't any other cars there. It was just us, sitting there in the dark.

Mikey said, 'What are we doing, Daddy?'

Mikey's dad said, 'Shhhhhh, you just gotta wait for it.'

We had no idea what he was talking about. But the way he whispered, it seemed like something big was getting ready to happen. And because it didn't make sense that anything big would happen in the back of this old parking lot, it just made it that much more intriguing.

We must have sat there for about ten or so minutes, every so often Mikey's dad having to repeat, 'Shhh, just wait for it.'

At some point, I figured he was messing with us. Kind of like that old ghost story they tell around the campfire that's meant to surprise you at the end and make everyone go running and screaming.

If only that were what he had planned.

Instead, after that ten or so minutes of what we thought was nothing happening, Mikey's dad whispered, 'You see that alley over there next to the building, the one with the dumpsters in it?'

We said, 'Yeah.'

He said, 'You see anything over there?'

We said, 'No.' It was so dark, we could barely see the dumpsters. Then Mikey's dad said, 'Watch this.'

He threw the Blazer in drive and started speeding toward the alley. Then, as he got closer to the dumpsters, he cut his lights back on. And we could finally see what he'd been looking at. For as soon as he turned on those headlights, all these people started scattering in the alley.

I didn't even know what they were doing. It was so dark you couldn't see anything back there. I couldn't even see their faces. Just them scrambling, trying to hide or get away.

That's when Mikey's dad turned the wheel and started driving in circles, yelling out the window, 'Garbage Diggers! Garbage Diggerrrrrrrrs!'

Then Mikey joined in, 'Garbage Diggers! Garbage Diggerrrrrrrrs!' Then our other friend. Over and over. 'Garbage Diggerrrrrrrrrs!'

And then, right towards the end, I joined in as well.

I remember us all laughing as we were yelling it, his dad doing these crazy donuts in the parking lot. At some point, the people just stopped and looked at us, making fools of ourselves trying to make fools of them.

A few seconds later, a couple of the men started walking out towards the Blazer. Mikey's Dad let out one more taunt before taking off out the parking lot. There was still so much excitement, we must have laughed the whole way home. Though I don't think any of us kids were entirely sure what we were laughing at.

I remember one of us saying, 'What were they doing?'

Mikey's dad said, 'What do you think they were doing? They were eating out of the damn garbage.'

The way he said it, it made us disgusted with them. We couldn't believe people would be out there on a Friday night like that, digging around in a filthy dumpster. Who were these people?

Except, we hadn't really asked that. If we had, we wouldn't have been laughing, much less yelling names at them out the window.

I think I was only 11 at the time, and just like my knowledge of gay people, I'd really only heard about people being homeless. It wasn't yet a real thing in my life. It would be a few years before I would understand how much less some of my friends had than us. It would be a few years later before my old man would tell me stories about growing up poor and how truly bad some of his own friends had it. It would be years more before I met folks who embraced dumpster diving as part of their radically different views on class and consumption.

But even at 11, I should have seen more in myself, I should have seen more in those people, than to join in such a mean-spirited act. Even if I didn't know a lot of folks who had it worse than us, I did know what it was like to have less than others.

In fact, I remember having feelings about class as early as the first grade. My parents had enrolled me in a private Christian elementary, and it

was the first Parents Night at the beginning of the school year, and everyone was dressed up. Everyone except my old man. He had just gotten off work and was just wearing what he had on, a raggedy pair of blue jeans and an old pocket t-shirt. I remember, like all his shirts, the pocket was loose and worn from a pack of cigarettes and his ID, the kind that hung off your pocket by a silver clip. Everyone else had nice shirts on, if not ties or suits.

Nowadays, I see that pocket-t as a working class badge. But back then, I just saw it as different from the other parents. I could see the looks people were giving us. I could see how different they talked and carried themselves. I could see how different the teachers and administrators looked at them from what they did us.

Not that many of them had a whole lot of money either. Hell, some of them were working class too. But they were at least somewhat dressed up, and I wasn't even sure if my old man had any clothes like that.

From that point on, I always felt on the low end at that school. Later, I would hear it termed as trash. After that, white trash.

And yet there I was, laughing and yelling out the window, making someone else feel like they were shit for not having as much as me.

I never really understood why Mikey's dad thought any of that was in any way appropriate. From what I gathered, they had less money than we did. The only thing I can figure is that maybe he felt like they were going to be rich one day or that maybe they were rich by association. I knew Mikey and Melanie's grandparents had dough, and that their aunt was supposed to be super rich. But the fact was they lived on our street, and no matter what they might have coming down the pike, in those days they were working class like the rest of us.

I never told my old man that story. I can imagine if he would have known that at the time, he would have beat my ass. And I kind of wish now that he had. Not that it would have warranted me being beaten for it. But maybe I would feel like I had paid something. And maybe now I wouldn't be a middle-aged man still thinking about a moment of confused peer pressure from back before I was even a teenager.

And I know, I know, I know. You're thinking that I was only 11. That I didn't know any better. That I'm not that person today. That I changed and all that. Same old same old.

And maybe all that's half right. But that doesn't really mean shit. Because I know all that too, and it doesn't make the guilt go away.

Not to say I don't deserve to feel guilty. I believe I do. I guess I just don't know how to properly atone for it, or even how to properly confess it."

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“All right. Thank you for sharing, Lonnie. It takes a lot sometimes to...”

Yep, he's looking. Never fails.

Why does he always have to sit next to me?

Here it comes.

(whispering) “Hey, that was really great. But you know none of this is happening, right?”

Wait, what?

“...and respect throughout.

Now that we've gotten the ball rolling, is there anyone who would like to volunteer to go next?”

“I will.”

“Great, go ahead.”

The Interviewer - - January 03, 2021

“No, it was good.”

“Nope. Never gonna make me believe that.”

“Are you one of those people who hates to hear their voice on a recording?”

“My singing voice for sure.”

“For what it’s worth, I thought you sounded good. And the songs are simply amazing.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the kind words.”

“Was that your first time doing anything musical?”

“I sung in a band when I was younger.”

“Oh, really? Even though you hate the sound of your singing voice?”

“Yeah, like I said, I was younger. And stupider. And I guess when you get intoxicated inside your imagination over how it’s going to feel when you’re a rock star, it does something to you. Inflates how you see your own talent.

It was just for a bit though. Like most bands, we didn’t last that long, never got anywhere. Which is probably a good thing.”

“Were you really not any good?”

“I don’t know. I think we were pretty good for kids. I definitely think the music and melodies on some of the songs hold up. The lyrics maybe not so much.”

“I’m assuming that was your department.”

“Of course.

Yet another time in my life I look back with *some* nostalgia and *total* embarrassment.”

“Come on. I’m sure it wasn’t that bad.”

“Oh, it was bad. But mostly because it didn’t have to be. I was trying to be clever instead of authentic.”

“That’s understandable. I’m sure a lot of songwriters start out that way.”

“Yeah, but my idea of clever was writing songs about other people’s issues.”

“Like other people’s lives?”

“More like other people’s nightmares.

I used to write about everyone else’s problems, but never my own.

I was a total coward when it came to writing. I told myself that my experiences weren’t interesting enough. Instead, I would imagine what people were thinking in situations that I couldn’t imagine being in.

I actually admired people who had gone through certain horrific kinds of trauma and were able to write about them. I’d even go as far as saying I was jealous. To the point of almost being mad I didn’t have anything like that of my own.”

“Wow, that’s pretty messed up.”

“It’s totally messed up.

But here’s the thing. I did have my own stuff to write about. But when it came to choosing subject matter for songs, it was like I was in denial about my own severe insecurities and even the abuses that I had experienced. I could have dived into all that.

That’s why I say I was a coward. I wouldn’t even imagine writing about that stuff back then. And yet now I realize that there were probably a ton of other kids out there similar to me that could have really appreciated it.”

“Maybe what you admired about the other songwriters was that they were willing to be so candid about their own experiences.”

“Maybe.

Anyway, the stuff I ended up writing was pretty disingenuous. Some of it was downright insulting. Patronization disguised as empathy. That kind of thing.

I wanted to impress people with how deep I was, but I wasn’t willing to do the digging.”

“It’s kind of like the acceptance speech you wrote in high school for that science award where you went on that whole rant about abortion to

impress your teacher, recounting later that you'd never even seriously thought about the subject."

"Wait. How'd you know about that?
And what did you mean when you said 'recounting later?'"

"It's one of your confessions."

"No. No, I'm pretty sure I've never mentioned that before."

"It's from one of your books I think. I'm not sure if it was a poem or what. I just remember reading it."

"No way. I couldn't have mentioned that. I hadn't even thought about it again until you just said that."

"Hang on.

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Oh yes, you're right. It's not in the book. Sorry."

"What?"

"Don't worry, we'll just edit that part out of the interview.
Anyway, I think the part about you not being willing to do the digging is a good segue.

So we'll just pick up riiiiight here:

That reminds me of something I wanted to ask you about. In chapter eight of *The Man Who Confessed Himself To Death*, you compared something to how long it takes to dig your way into hell."

"Uhhhhhhh. Wait, what's going on? You just..."

"In chapter eight? Your mention of digging your way into hell?"

"Uhhhh. Do you mean... do you mean that whole 'devil in the nuances' thing?"

"Right. So in that..."

"But wait..."

"chapter, I noticed you use a lot of religious terminology. And..."

“Wait, I don’t understa...”

“you’ve been quite clear about not being a believer.”

“Not anymore, but...”

“Right, not anymore. But I was wondering if you ever looked at what you’re doing now as a kind of exorcism. In the sense of trying to be free of something you can’t really explain.”

“Hmm... I guess I... I guess I never thought about it that way. But maybe.

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I guess it depends on who’s performing the exorcism.”

“I’m not sure if I follow.”

“Well, if we’re going to use the analogy, exorcisms are usually performed by priests, which implies some kind of authority.”

“And who do you think would have the authority to perform your exorcism?”

“It’s not who I think would have authority. It’s who would think themselves of having authority.

Those who’ve shown the greatest propensity to judge me.”

“I think I see where you’re going. A sort of exorcism by way of public chastisement.”

“Exactly. But not really to vanquish the evil spirit. It’d be more like a casting out.”

“Why just casting out?”

“Why else? Keeps them in business. Cast out spirits don’t stay cast out long.

Before you know it, someone else needs exorcising.”

“Like demon chasers.”

“More like ghostbusters, but without the skills for sarcasm.”

“I like that.

But you said it depends on who’s performing the exorcism. Who else would be performing it?”

“Me, obviously.”

“Performing the exorcism on yourself?”

“Isn’t that what you asked if I was doing? If my confessions might be a form of exorcism?”

“Well?”

“I don’t know. If that’s the case, it’s not just one spirit I’m trying to be rid of. It’s hundreds. Maybe more.”

“So?”

“So that’s not what I think I’m doing.

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If anything, I’m allowing the demons back in. So they can tell their story.

So people can see.”

“Are you saying the demons are the people you’ve wronged?”

“No, they’re the decisions I made in doing wrong.”

“And that’s what you want people to see?”

“I think so.”

“And what about the people you’ve done wrong?”

“I’d like to think I’m doing this as much for them as I am myself.”

“Lucky for you, there’s so many of them.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I just mean that the pain has been good for your career. You’ve acknowledged in your work that you believe so much of art is born out of

suffering. What if your suffering is the pain you feel from acknowledging the wrong you've done?"

"And once that goes away, I won't have any art left in me?"

"I'm asking you."

"Damn, that's pretty bleak."

"Sure."

"It's also a pretty messed up way to look at those I've done wrong. Like they had to suffer so I could suffer *my guilt* later on, so I could then make this art.

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Sorry, I don't buy that."

"But you kind of do, don't you? You admitted it yourself. It's what you used to do in your songs. Use other people's trauma for your performance.

Isn't that what you're still doing?"

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Lonnie?

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Lonnie, are you..."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I'm just... I just... Look, do you mind if we just take a break?"

"Sure, let's take a break. When we come back, we'll have more with Lonnie Ray Atkinson, author of the new book *A Good Kid and His Ghosts*."

The Doctor - - September 02, 2017

“You mentioned that you attended a small fundamentalist Christian school for elementary. You said the name of the school was Frontier.”

“It was actually until the 8th grade.”

“And after that you started going to public school.”

“Yeah, for high school.”

“Have you thought to what degree all of this has to do with religion?”

“You mean me not being able to let things go?”

“It’s no secret there’s a culture of guilt within fundamentalist teaching, and thinking.”

“I’d love to think I beat it.

I took a lot of pride in the questions I ended up asking. It’s hard to entertain that that place might’ve still gotten the best of me.

But what’s there is there. Just like I have to constantly fight against all the hierarchical bullshit that permeated my childhood, it would be silly to think I didn’t have a certain implicit guilt following me too.”

“So you do believe it’s followed you?”

“Everywhere I go. I mean if it’s not that, then what is it? The only other explanation is that they’re right. And it’s really God following me. And if that’s the case, then I’m really screwed.”

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“Can you tell me a little about Frontier?”

“Geez. Where to even start?”

I know whenever people ask me about that school, I usually say that the three lessons I remember the most from my time there were that Creationism is sound science, women are not endowed by the Creator to hold positions of leadership, and that, because they were seen as equipment and you obviously wouldn’t abuse your tractor, slaves didn’t have it all that bad.

Those were the big takeaways.”

“Those were actual lessons.”

“Oh yeah. And the women not being endowed to be leaders thing was taught on multiple occasions.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Because we had girls in the class.

It’s not like when they did the slavery lesson we had black kids in the room. We were a class full of white seventh-graders in the South. The history teacher is not the one expecting any resistance.

Same goes with science class. Unless one of our parents just happened to be an evolutionary biologist, the science teacher didn’t really have to brush up on his anti-Darwin talking points. They just laid it out as a rule the first day of class, and that was that.”

“But the lesson about women was repeated.”

“It was. I remember it being weird the first few times they said it. I remember wondering what the girls were thinking. I remember thinking about the girls in my class and how they seemed just as good as me, and it not really making any sense. And I just thought, if this is what’s going through my mind, they must be thinking it too.”

“So did you ever speak up to challenge them?”

“Of course not.”

“Did anyone? Any of the girls?”

“Not that I can remember.”

“And why do you think that is?”

“That’s owed to the other grand takeaway.

Where, even more than those three lessons, the one message that sticks in my head above all else was a message they preached over and over, in multiple classes, in multiple chapels.

And that was that doubting the Word of God was a sin. Which on its own might not seem all that out of place in the checklist of a religion. It’s when they began painting certain questions as doubt that things went further downhill.”

“What kinds of questions?”

“Questions that they didn’t have good answers for.

It’s not like it happened all the time. But Christian kids are curious too. So every now and then, one of us would follow a trail of breadcrumbs to some place that the teachers didn’t think we needed to be and they couldn’t explain their way out of. And, because they knew that our hearts were in the right place and that we thought these questions would ultimately bring us to a closer understanding of God, they couldn’t really be mad.”

“So what would they do?”

“Most of the time they would just trot out the same bullshit line about ‘some things are not for us to understand; they’re for God to understand.’ Which, even to kids, seemed like a copout.

So when the occasional follow-up came, in defiance of the non-answer we had already been given, normally the teacher would tell us that it sounded like we were doubting. Or worse, they would ask us if we were doubting.”

“And I’m assuming this would normally end the discussion.”

“Of course. But it wasn’t just meant to end the discussion; it was to drive home the underlying subtext of the lesson.”

“And that was?”

“To equate questioning with sin.”

“And did it work?”

“Absolutely.

I can’t tell you how many times I sat in chapel knowing in my heart the story I was being fed or some element of the story I was being fed was bullshit. Oftentimes, it was downright cartoonish.

But we were literalists and believers of divine inspiration, and that meant that we were expected to believe every word, no matter how batshit crazy it sounded.

And I remember vividly just those thoughts alone, those simple questions I knew there couldn’t be a good answer for, making me burn with guilt.

And it wasn’t until I had moved on from Frontier that I realized how many of these people, the people I had looked up to for instruction and inspiration, many I viewed as being ideal Christians, were actually run-

of-the-mill racists and sexists and homophobes and hypocrites and generally just shitty people.

And worse, what before had just seemed like an innocent and natural devotion to God eventually came to look like the personal reserving of murderous indifference for billions of their fellow human beings. And what I originally thought was them deferring to their faith, in difficult moments of question or conscience, was really just them rationalizing their coldness by lazily pointing to a line or two of scripture. Like any of it was that easy. Like all of it was that easy.”

“What was that easy?”

“To damn everyone else to hell. To damn all the ‘others.’

That’s what it was really all about. The word itself was salvation. And no matter how much you went on about pearly gates or mansions or streets of gold or any of that, everyone knew what salvation meant.

It wasn’t being saved from your sins. It was being saved from hell.

If there were no hell, nobody would give a shit about salvation. They would tell you to stick that original sin story up your ass. The only thing that makes the cognitive dissonance worth it is the bad place.

That’s why so many evangelical preachers are hellfire and brimstone preachers. You don’t have to convince me that God is real. You only have to convince me that hell is real.

Hell makes the evangelical world go round.”

“And because of hell, you were willing to believe.”

“Are you kidding? They could have told us that the ark was made out of the rest of Adam’s ribs and I would have believed it. As long as I believed in eternity and that there was even the slightest possibility that this hell story, that everyone else around me also believed in, was true, I wasn’t about to rock the boat.”

“And how did that fear of hell fit with your guilt?”

“You gotta look at it this way. If hell is real, and you’re lucky enough to have God save you from it, never mind that he created hell to begin with and this was all his idea anyway, never mind that, but if you’re lucky enough to have a God that loves you so much he would not only save you from such a heinous place but then go as far as to give you this beautiful paradise in heaven, you’d have to be a colossal jerk not to feel guilty for doubting his plan, or his Word.”

“Wherein, if hell *is* real, then extreme guilt would still seem like an acceptable means to the end.”

“Exactly. That’s why they don’t have a problem with passing on this blatant corruption of the mind. Because they’re in the same boat I was.”

“Which was?”

“They believe in hell.”

“You say ‘was,’ though. You’ve mentioned before that you, yourself, *were* saved.”

“Oh yeah. Saved at six, rededicated at 9 and 12.”

“So about every three years.”

“Ha. Yeah, you know an 11-year-old can really do a lot of backsliding.”

“Evidently an 8-year-old can too.”

“Evidently.”

“So why don’t you consider yourself a believer anymore?”

“I don’t know. I guess because I met people.”

“What kind of people?”

“People who were not from that school. People who didn’t come up in that setting, who thought differently about those things, or didn’t think about those things at all.

I realized that a lot of those people were pretty cool.

It’s kind of like when you’re a homophobe and you meet a gay person for the first time. And you’re like, ‘Wait a minute. They’re just like me.’

And the more people I met, the more I began to question what I ultimately believed.”

“And what was the big question that got you to turn your back on everything you had believed your whole life?”

“It’s funny you say it that way. Because I was just thinking, as we’ve been sitting here talking, that I hadn’t really put it together before, until just now.”

“Put what together?”

“That of all the questions I’ve asked in my life, all the agonizing questions, if you had to ask me what the most important one was. It might just be this one.”

“Why?”

“Because this one set in motion, or at least made way for, all the other big questions to come.”

“So what was the question?”

“The question was if I was willing to go to hell.”

“Why would you be going to hell?”

“If I was wrong.”

“Wrong about what? And why would you be *willing* to go?”

“I guess it goes back to what I was telling you about the people I met. When I was about 20 or so, I had this conversation with a friend, who was also a Christian. I had said something about someone going to hell, and he told me that he didn’t believe in hell.

And to me, it was like he was speaking another language. I didn’t even understand the sentence. I asked him how he could be a Christian and not believe in hell.

He then asked me how I could be a Christian and still believe in hell.

Then he told me that he believed in a just and merciful God, and that a just and merciful God, a God of love, would never send any of his children to such a place.

And even though that seems like the simplest thought in the world now, I remember being completely blown away. All those years, and it was a thought I just couldn’t think.

Now, remember, I had that conversation with him when I was about 20. And, even then, it would be another year or so before I was ready to seriously consider the ramifications of that statement. And it was probably another year after that before I felt comfortable making it my own.

Then, at some point, the thought I couldn't even think became the question I couldn't avoid asking.

I thought about how lucky I'd have to be for the story I had grown up believing about God to be true. I thought about how easy it was for me to have become a Christian. And how if one of the other religion stories had been true, how unlucky I would have considered myself. Perhaps even perceiving it impossible to have ever found that other right way.

And then I thought about all the good people I had ever known, or even not known, that had lived way better lives than I ever would, but for whatever reason out of the infinite number of reasons one might find themselves down a different path, they didn't make the cut.

I was supposed to accept that those good people had been banished to an eternity, in a place so vile it was outside the human imagination.

I couldn't do it.

My whole childhood, I had been taught how torturous and infinite the pain was that awaited those in the other afterlife. It was only now that I could see either how ridiculous this thought was or how unforgivable.

I even thought about the not so good people, and I realized that didn't matter either. Because the truth was, my friend was right. There simply was no way a loving or merciful or just God could bring a perfect punishment upon an imperfect being, much less to the billions throughout all of human history that I was supposed to believe had not only been given that very sentence, but were suffering under it still, and would continue to suffer it forever and ever.

I just couldn't do it.

And that's when I realized I had a decision to make. That's when I told myself that if I was able to escape that fate almost entirely on the luck of my birth, but others had to endure it based on whatever circumstances they had found themselves in, that I would rather give up my place in heaven and be with them in hell than to be a party to that injustice.

So I rejected it. I just couldn't accept taking part in something so wrong."

"Even if it meant you might be wrong."

"Well, yeah, that was the thing. That's why I said that I had to ask myself if I was willing to go to hell. Because you gotta remember I had grown up my whole life believing this was one hundred percent true. And for me to just quit it all cold turkey was a huge psychological gamble.

It didn't matter how ludicrous it finally seemed. All those years of being a believer had something whispering in my ear.

Asking me. ‘What if you’re the one that’s wrong? What if it *is* all true?’”

“And still you made the decision to reject it.”

“I took the gamble.”

“For them. For strangers.”

“Yeah, I guess so.

Becoming a non-believer for me wasn’t a matter of it just not making sense anymore.”

“It was a matter of solidarity.”

“The funny thing is, I don’t think I even knew what the word solidarity meant at the time.

But, yeah. It was.

I owe every other question I ever asked, to that one. Having the courage to ask it gave me the courage to ask all the ones that came after.

I really think it might just be the most courageous thing I ever did.”

“I’ve never heard you give yourself this kind of credit before.”

“I guess... I don’t know... I guess it’s like I said, I’d never really thought about it before, not like this.

But yeah. It may just be the best thing I’ve ever done.”

“Turning your back on God?”

(laughing) “Turning my back on God.”

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“Do you ever regret it? Ever question that decision?”

“Never.

I may not have known it at the time, but I know now. Turning my back on that story was also turning my back on a certain future.”

“Making way for a different future.”

“It’s what gave me a shot at being a truly moral person. Making the decisions for myself. Having to feel that weight.

I know I haven't made all the right ones since. But I know that one was worth it. I know it more than anything else I could know."

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"Ok. So answer me this.

How is it that you can walk away from heaven, walk away from God, but you can't walk away from who you were?"

"Because that person was real."

"But so are you."

"Mmm. Good point.

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Maybe it's the one thing about hell I can't let go of.

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I remember one time, sitting in chapel, listening to this sermon, about how people in hell have to relive over and over the moment they were given the option for salvation, but didn't take it. And how that's what hell is for them. That one scene, over and over, for eternity."

"And."

"I don't know.

I mean I don't believe in salvation anymore. But I do think about all the options I didn't take. Each one, to make that right decision. Right there in front of me.

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I know that sermon makes God look childish and petty. But you take God out of the story, and you just look at the hell part.

And there may just be something to it."

Interlude

(visitors)

A Visitor

“Hey! Look at us here together. And with this weather too.
It’s like the perfect day.
What’s been going on with you?”

“What’s been going on with *me*? What’s going on with you? With all this confession shit? You crazy, man.

I told Lynn the other day, ‘Only Lonnie could come up with some crazy shit like this to get into.’”

“What can I say? I didn’t expect it to get like this; that’s for sure.”

“So why you doing it, man? I mean this is some weird shit.”

“I know it is. But it’s also been good to get stuff off my chest, you know?”

“Yeah, but you having to make that shit up into something all terrible and shit, like something it wasn’t.”

“What do you mean make it into something? You don’t feel bad for any of the shit we did back then?”

“Sure I feel bad, *if I think about it*.

But that’s because I *was* bad. But you? I don’t know what you talking about with your shit.”

“I had my share. You know that.”

“Dude, I don’t mean to be rude when I say this. But, dude, come on. You were kind of a pussy.

I don’t even know anything you did that was bad.”

“That’s because everything we were doing was bad, or at least kind of fucked up.”

“But that wasn’t you. That was us. Or me, most of the time.”

“Yeah, but I went along, most of the time.”

“Dude, you were always trying to get us *not* to do shit.”

“I was trying to get you to not do *the worst* shit, the shit that would have gotten you killed or arrested or some shit.”

“But that’s what I’m saying. You were the pussy of the group.

And I don’t even mean that in a bad way. I’m glad you were there. I’d probably be in some real trouble if it weren’t for you. But that’s what made us a good team.”

“I hear what you’re saying, but you gotta admit. So much of what we did was not the right shit to do, even if it wasn’t like for real criminal shit.”

“Dude, we were kids.

What the fuck did we know?

That’s what kids do.

That’s what boys do.”

“But that’s what I’m talking about, man. I don’t believe in all that boys will be boys shit anymore.

I don’t think it has to be that way. And I don’t think it *had* to be that way.”

“So, what, did you expect us to be like some fucking nerds and not have any fun like Joey’s brother, acting all better than everybody like some kind of fucking priest or some shit?”

“I’m not saying we had to be like Joey’s brother. I’m just saying we didn’t have to always go along with what everyone was doing. I’m saying I *shouldn’t* have just gone along.”

“Now, come on, dude. You know we weren’t the worst. There were kids a whole lot worse than us, and you know it.”

“I know there were worse kids. What I’m saying is that there were a whole lot of times *we* treated people the wrong way, and I know how long that kind of stuff can stay with you.”

“Are you talking about the girls? Dude, come on. We were all kids. And they were doing fucked up shit too. They weren’t no angels neither.

Straight up, how do you even know that they think any of that shit was wrong?

Did you ever stop to think that maybe they don’t care about any of that shit? I mean I’m sure they care about some stuff, but not all of it. And not like that. Not everything you talking about.”

“But how do you know?”

“Because I’m still friends with everybody. I still see them. We may not be cool like all that, but we’re cool. And I’m straight with everybody.”

“You think so?”

“Dude, we were kids. And they were kids. And now we’re not. And everybody gets that. Everybody except you.”

“You really don’t think that what we did was all that wrong?”

“What do you want from me, man? What do you want from us? You want to go back and make us all different people, from different places, with different parents and shit, different schools and shit? That’s not who we were.

We were who we were, because that’s what we knew.

Did you ever stop to think that the only reason why you think this shit now is because so much has changed since then? That if shit hadn’t changed around us, we’d be the same people we were back then?”

“But you’re saying you don’t see anything wrong with back then. Isn’t that like saying you are the same person?”

“Dude, I’m not saying I’m the same person. I’m not. If I was, I’d be dead like Denny or Brucie or some shit. And it ain’t like I don’t understand what you’re saying. I didn’t want my kids acting like I was when I was their age. That’s why I was strict on their ass.”

“But that’s what I’m saying. Why didn’t you want them to be like us?”

“Because I didn’t want to see them get on the wrong path.”

“But doesn’t that mean that we were on the wrong path?”

“We could have been better. But it ain’t all like the way you’re looking at it.”

“Then how do *you* look at it?”

If you wouldn’t have wanted your kids to be like us, then what does that say about us?”

“Dude, I’m just saying I don’t judge who we were.

I mean aren’t you always the one telling me how proud you are that I ain’t doing the same shit I was back then?”

“Yes. And I am proud of you.”

“And I appreciate you saying that. But that’s also a part of how we look at things differently. I look at where we were and where we ended up, and I see how far we came.

That’s where my judgment’s at.

But with you, it’s like you stuck back there. You can’t even acknowledge all the time between then.

And I know you’re better *too*. Shit, you were already better than what you could have been *back then*.”

“I see what you’re saying. I guess I just still feel bad about a lot of that shit.”

“But why, man? What good is that gonna do?

It’s like being mad at history or some shit. You can be mad, but it ain’t gonna change nothing.

The only thing you can change is now.”

“But you can still say you’re sorry, can’t you?

Isn’t that a part of changing things, now?”

“Yeah, but there’s a difference between being sorry and being stuck.

And you stuck.

And as long as you stay stuck like that, you ain’t really changing shit.”

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“I don’t know, man. Maybe you’re right.

I guess I just don’t know what else to do.”

“That’s because you worry too much. You always did.

That’s why I said you were a pussy.

But I still love you.

But, yo, man. I gotta get up off this bench, there's like a line of motherfuckers waiting."

"All right, man. Thanks for coming.
It was good to see you."

"All right, Lonnie man. Peace."

A Visitor

“Hey! Look at us here together. And with this weather too. It’s like the perfect day. What’s been going on with you?”

“Look, I don’t really have a lot of time. I just came to tell you that I disagree with what you said in that confession.”

“Which one, about us?”

“Yeah, about us. Who else would I be talking about?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what I was thinking. I’ve been a little out of it the last little bit.”

“Whatever, I just want you to know that I don’t accept what you said about the Homecoming Dance.

That was a good memory of mine, and you’re not going to ruin it for me.”

“You don’t think I was kind of a shit that night? Maybe not the whole night, but when we went to the Japanese Gardens afterward?”

“See, that’s just what I’m talking about. Why do you have to focus on the bad stuff? Why do you want me to think about that stuff?”

Yeah, you were kind of a weirdo at the gardens. And maybe you could have actually danced more at the dance. But, so what?

The rest of the night was really cool. And we were with our friends, and everyone was all dressed up, and it was a really nice time.

But it’s like you won’t let me have that reality, and instead you want me and everyone else to live in your reality where everything was all messed up and terrible.

Well, I’m not letting you have that. I won’t let you change my world.

I think you’re wrong. And my opinion is just as valid as yours.”

“I think you’re totally right. I don’t have a problem with that at all.

And I’m sorry if I ruined a good memory. I guess that’s kind of a big blind spot for me, seeing that almost all my memories have some sort of stain in the corner somewhere.”

“But that’s not the way to live. That’s not the way to be ok.

And you're definitely not ok if you feel like you have to confess all this stuff like this."

"You're right. I know something's wrong with me. I just don't know how to fix it.

And this is the only thing that has felt like it was helping."

"But why can't you just let it go like everybody else does? Like I know you've had to too."

"Like *I've* had to? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You remember when Bria did that shit to you and humiliated you?"

"You knew about that?"

"Lonnie, everybody knew about it."

"Wow, I didn't think she told anybody."

"Well, she did. And I know you got over what happened, and you two were friends after that.

You're still friends, aren't you?"

"We are."

"Then how did you get over it? Did she make some production of begging for your forgiveness?"

"No, we really never talked about it much."

"So how did you get over it?"

"I don't know. I guess I just forgave her."

"And she didn't even have to ask for it?"

"I guess not."

"Does it still hurt when you think about it?"

"Of course."

"But you're still fine with having forgiven her."

“For sure.”

“But why? Why did you just get past something that you yourself see as having hurt that much? How do you not hold that against her?”

“Because I know what was going on with her during that time, and she *was young*, and I know I was doing just as fucked up shit to other people at that time. And I guess I just preferred to focus on the good stuff we had together.”

“And now that you know that it was way worse than what you even thought, because she told people, do you take back your forgiveness of her? Or wish you hadn’t forgiven her?”

“It definitely hurts my feelings that she told anybody. But it’s been so long now, I don’t really think I would hold it against her now.”

“But do you still wish you had forgiven her?”

“Absolutely.”

“But why?”

“Because I guess it really doesn’t change the reason why I forgave her in the first place. And because I know the love and friendship we had with one another *was* real, and all the good stuff we had and were was too important for me to lose. So I just chose not to focus on any of our bad memories anymore. I knew they were there and I knew it had happened, but I just didn’t want to let it get big enough in my mind for me to give up on all the good stuff and lose that.”

“You see? That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“I know. I get it.”

“So?”

“So I don’t know. It’s like, for me, it’s not that easy.”

“What’s not that easy?”

“Being ok. Being at peace with everything. And even if I could be at peace with everything, what would it matter?”

You can't just go shoot up a mall and then decide to be at peace with yourself or just forgive yourself.

Or run into a confession booth, and come out free from all of it."

"But you are confessing. And you're dragging us all in the confession booth with you. Can you not see that maybe some of us don't want to be where you are, but rather be *here*, looking back on the good times and not drowning in the bad?

Can't you be at peace for us?"

"I get it. I do. And believe me, I wish I could be there with you."

"But you can. There's no reason you can't be."

"But there is. There's like a million reasons."

"What million reasons? Haven't you asked for enough forgiveness?"

"Confessing something isn't the same as asking forgiveness."

"Then ask forgiveness."

"But what does that even mean? Asking forgiveness.

I always hear people talking about twelve step programs and how one of the steps is to reach out and apologize to those you've done wrong, and how they make it sound so simple. Like it's really that easy, like it's just another step and then you move onto another step.

But that's just crazy.

A life is so full of crazy things, how could you even make the list, much less track all the people down? And even if you can find them, it's like what you told me. Can you just waltz in and bring it all back up, like that doesn't mess with them too? It's absurd.

And even if they were ok with that, you could spend the rest of your life on that one step.

Then where do you stop? I'd never be able to move onto the next step because I'd always be wondering whether I was forgetting someone."

"Then don't do it like that. Let's do it all in one swoop."

"What's 'all in one swoop'?"

"I mean you come home, and I'll throw a big party for you, and we'll invite everybody we know. I'll turn the downstairs closet into a

confessional, and each person at the party can take a turn going in and forgiving you in person for what they've already forgiven you for a hundred years ago. It'll be like seven minutes in heaven, except seven minutes in Lonnie's purgatory."

"Ha ha."

"No, I'm serious. If what you need is forgiveness, then let's go get it."

"Yeah, but it's not that easy, is it?"

"But why not?"

I mean is that all we are to you, your ghosts?
I'd like to believe that's not all you think about when you think of me."

"Of course that's not all I think about.

Do you really believe that?"

"Well, what would you think?"

It's not like I'm the only one who feels that way. It's like weird back home with everyone.

I think most of us want to be happy for you that you're making it with something, while still being kind of sad for you, because you're obviously kind of messed up with it.

But then some of us are also either pissed that you used us in a confession or are worried that you're eventually going to."

"Is anybody else like you and thinks that all this is overblown?"

"I don't know about *like me*. But I talked to Rachel, and she said that she thought your confession about her was full of it.

She said she didn't think you did anything wrong."

"Of course I did something wrong. Did you know what confession she's talking about?"

"Oh, yeah, she showed it to me. And then she told me her side of it.

And I actually agreed with your take on it. I thought you were definitely in the wrong.

But she said that she didn't, and that I was wrong too. And you know I wasn't going to argue with her."

“So I guess I don’t know how to feel about that.”

“Why do *you* have to feel anything about it?
She can feel any way she wants to.”

“Yeah, but you agree. I was totally wrong in that situation.”

“So?”

“So how can she *not* see it?”

“Yeah, but so what?

What, are you going to call her up and educate her on the ways of the world until she’s ‘woke’ enough to feel bad about what happened?

You don’t get to do that. And she wouldn’t want you to do it.

You don’t get to make her a victim.

That would be like creating trauma where there was none.”

“But there should have been trauma there.”

“Yeah, but there wasn’t. And that’s what matters now.”

“Ahhhh! I know you’re right, but it’s like there’s something that messes me up about it.

I’m obviously not going to call her or anything, but it just seems beyond me that she can’t see it.”

“Well, I definitely wouldn’t call her. Because knowing her, she wouldn’t even argue with you; she would just fake forgive you and move on and not think anything else about it.”

“But wouldn’t that be just as bad?”

“What, that she would forgive you? You want to be forgiven.”

“But not like that.”

“Like what?

Like you don’t think it would count?”

“Kind of.”

“Then what if she forgave you for real?”

“But she can’t unless she sees what was wrong.”

“So you’re saying someone can be *not woke enough* that you might not accept their forgiveness?”

“Well?”

“Oh my word, are you kidding me?
What’s wrong with you?”

“No, no. I know. I’m just saying.
Is it legitimate if we don’t agree?”

“What does ‘legitimate’ even mean?
Do you know how weird that sounds?”

“I know. I know. It sounds awful.
I just don’t feel like it would really be settled if she didn’t see why it was something to forgive.”

“You really do have issues.”

“I know I do. I’m not even denying it.
But do you at least see where I’m coming from?”

“I see that you’re never going to be ok if you keep letting your mind do this to itself.”

“You’re right. And I don’t disagree with that either.
But it’s like there’s this big...”

“Look, I’m sorry. I told you I didn’t have a lot of time, and I’m definitely going to be late at the rate I’m going right now.
So anyway, it *was* good to see you. And I *do* love you.
But you don’t get to have Homecoming Dance.
Homecoming Dance is mine. Got it?”

“It’s yours.”

“And you *have* to have a good memory of it too. Ok?”

“Deal.”

“Ok, take care.”

“Thanks for coming to see me.”

“No problem. I’ll see you later.”

“See ya.”

A Visitor

“Hey! Look at us here together. And with this weather too.

It’s like the perfect day.

What’s been going on with you?”

“Aside from moving everything from my apartment into a house right now, not much.”

“That sounds like a lot. Did you buy?”

“Still renting. But it’s a lot bigger and for just about the same amount monthly.”

“Hell yeah. That’s awesome.”

“How about you? Haven’t seen you in so long, I don’t even know what to ask you.”

“Before we get into me, I just wanted to take a minute and settle some stuff from back in the day. And I basically wanted to say that I’m sorry for that time when I was being kind of a creep with you.

I went through a weird time coming out of college, and I know I was super weird with you, and I know you know the times I’m talking about. And it’s always bothered me, because you were always someone I felt close to. And for me to be a creep to you during that time just really tears me up.

So I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry and I hope you can forgive me.”

“Of course I forgive you. I hate that it’s bothered you like that. You know I don’t think anything less of you.

And that was a long time ago. I’m sure there’s a few things that I could see needing to apologize for to others too.”

“Yeah, but I just want you to know that I know I was wrong, and you didn’t deserve the way I acted, and that I do value your friendship and I don’t want that to ever be between us.”

“It’s not. Seriously.

That was a long time ago, and there’s been a whole lot, as you know, that’s happened since then. So don’t worry about it.

We’re good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow. That feels really good to hear you say.
Like really good.”

“I can say it again if you want.”

“Can you say it in a British accent this time?”

“You’re stupid.
I can see you didn’t lose your sense of humor.”

“That may be the only thing I haven’t lost.”

“That’s one of the most important things to hang onto, I guess.”

“I think you’re right.”

“So, tell me. What’s it like living out here?”

“It’s definitely different than back home. Some good, some bad.
It’s a lot less people. More peaceful I guess.
The only...”

“Excuse me. I don’t mean to interrupt your conversation, I know
you two are in the middle of talking, but I just was walking by and saw you
and wanted to ask you. You’re Lonnie, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“Oh my goodness, it is you. That’s what I thought.”

“I’m sorry, do I know you?”

“I’m Sherry. I was friends with Donna and Melinda. We used to all
hang out over Boney’s house, when we were like 17.”

“Ok.”

“Do you not remember me?”

“I’m not sure. I mean I remember hanging out at Boney’s house, and I know Donna and Mindy. But I’m not sure if I remember us hanging out together over there.”

“Are you serious? You really don’t remember me?”

“Hey, you know what, Lonnie? I’m gonna go make a phone call and give you two some space.”

“No, Cynth, you don’t have to go anywhere.”

“It’s ok, I was supposed to make the call around this time anyway. So I’ll just give you two a little time to talk and I’ll be back in a minute.”

“No, I’m for real. You don’t have to go anywhere.”

“It’s ok. I really do need to make this call. I’ll be back, and then we’ll talk.”

“Come back right after, ok?”

“I will.”

“Ok.”

“Look, like I said, I’m sorry to get in the middle of you talking to your friend, but I just never thought I’d see you again, and I saw you here, and I just had to stop and...”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be a dick here, but I was having a really nice moment with my friend there, and you kind of ruined it. So if you could just tell me what it is that you want to say, that would be great.”

“Wow, you’re rude.”

“How am I rude? You’re the one that intruded on our conversation. And, to be honest, no I don’t know you. I’m sorry, but I just don’t.”

“So you really don’t remember me.”

“I don’t know. Should I?”

“So you don’t remember what happened between us then?”

“What happened between us?! I don’t even know who you are.”

“Well, that’s really nice. Because I remember.”

“Wait, hold on. You called Mindy Melinda.”

“Yeah, so what?”

“So what is that no one called her Melinda except her mom.”

“Well, I did.”

“No you didn’t. Because the only other person I ever saw besides her mama that called her that, she knocked on their ass.”

“So what are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that I don’t know what’s going on here, but I don’t know who you are, and I don’t really think you were friends with my friend.”

“Then how do I know about Donna and Boney?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you grew up around the neighborhood or went to Stratton or something and knew them that way. I just know you weren’t friends with Mindy.

In fact, I think I know what’s going on here, and I’m just gonna let you know the shit ain’t gonna happen.”

“What ain’t gonna happen?”

“I think you know exactly what I’m talking about. I think you know who I am and you know some of my friends and somehow you thought you were going to pull some shit on me and get something out of my ass is what I think.”

“Get something out of you?! Motherfucker, what’s there to get?”

“I don’t know, money or attention or whatever. I don’t know. I just know I don’t fucking know you and you’re walking up on me here like you want something.”

“Motherfucker, I don’t want shit from you, except an apology. A fucking apology. That’s all I want.”

“For what? I don’t even remember ever meeting you.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you? You really don’t remember me.”

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t.

Are you sure you’re remembering it right? Maybe it wasn’t me. Maybe it was someone else that used to hang out over there.”

“I know who the fuck it was. And it was you.”

“Ok, well, look. I don’t remember. I’m sorry.

I don’t know what to say. I wish I did, but I don’t.

I don’t know what I can do here to...”

“Fuck it then. If I don’t even exist in your memory, then fuck it.

I can’t believe this shit. All those people you remember and feel bad about, but you don’t even remember who I am?”

“Look, just because I don’t remember you doesn’t mean we didn’t meet.

For all I know, you might be right, and I’m just not thinking straight.

Tell me what it is you think I did.”

“I don’t think anything; I *know*.”

“Ok, tell me what it is you know then.”

“Nah... Fuck it. It doesn’t even matter. If you don’t remember who I am, then it doesn’t matter what I say. I could just be some crazy person off the street. That’s what you think anyway.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. And I’m sorry if I overreacted before. It’s just the way you came up out of nowhere, and I’m not really used to having any kind of fame, and I guess I just assumed the worst.

But if you say you knew me, then I’ll take you for your word.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway, because you don’t remember.”

“So tell me what it is I’m supposed to remember.

What is it that I did?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. If I did something wrong, if I did something that hurt you, then I want to apologize.”

“But how can you apologize if you don’t even remember us ever meeting?”

“Just because I don’t remember something doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. And if I did do something wrong, then I want to make good on that.

So if you’ll just tell me what I did, I’ll apologize and ask for your forgiveness.”

“This is crazy. I shouldn’t have bothered you. Look, I’m sorry. I’m gonna go.”

“No, don’t go. If you said I did something, then I’ll defer to your memory over my non-memory.

I just want to know what it is I did so I can try to make it right.”

“But it doesn’t matter what I say if you don’t remember it. I could say anything.”

“Look, please. What if I tell you that I trust you?

What if I’m willing to accept what you’re saying is absolutely true and for some reason it’s just not registering in my brain?

I’m willing to accept responsibility for anything I’ve done. And just because I don’t remember doesn’t mean I’m not accountable.”

“But how can you really feel sorry if you *don’t* remember?”

“Because I’m trusting in you. And I believe you were hurt. So, I’m telling you, I want to make good on that, for that hurt I caused.”

“You really want to make good on it?”

“If you say I did it, and I did, then yes. I do.”

“Then apologize.”

“I will apologize, but I have to know what I’m apologizing for.”

“No, you don’t. You said you believe me.

Then apologize.

Apologize for doing me wrong.”

“Like in the abstract?”

“The abstract? What do you mean by that?”

“I’m saying I don’t know how it will mean anything if I don’t know what I’m apologizing for.”

“Does it really mean anything that you’ve confessed all this other shit and you haven’t really apologized for it in person?”

“What does that have to do with this?”

“It means I can be your accountability. You’re real accountability. If you can trust that I’m not lying to you and ask for forgiveness on nothing but my word, then I’ll believe you’re serious about all your other confessions.”

“But I am serious about them, whether you believe it or not.”

“Then prove it.
Prove your sincerity. You want to be held accountable; here’s your chance.”

“Look, I don’t even really understand how this one is supposed to make up for the other stuff, or if that’s even what you’re getting at. But if it will give you some peace and help you put to rest something that has been with you all this time, then I will definitely do what I need to do to make that happen.

I just want to know what it is I did.”

“Apologize first, and I’ll tell you.”

“Tell me first, and I’ll apologize.
Otherwise, it’s going to be a generalized apology and won’t have the same effect.”

“No, it’s ok. If you’re willing to trust me, then that’s how I’ll know you’re serious. And the only way I’ll know that is if you apologize without knowing first.”

“You can’t be serious with this.”

“Oh, I’m damn serious.
I’ve been walking around with this for over 25 years; I think I know how serious I am.

And seeing that you don't even remember it, I feel like I have the authority to call the shots."

"Fair enough.

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I want you to know, right now, that I'm putting my trust in you. And I believe you. I do.

And for any way that I hurt you or did you wrong or treated you with anything less than the respect you deserved, I sincerely apologize for that. And I ask for your forgiveness."

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"Ok. I forgive you."

"Thank you."

"No, thank you. It's been a long time, and I have to say, it was good to hear you say that."

"Well, good. I'm glad it helped."

"So, look, I'll let you go then. I'm glad we got to do this, and I'll..."

"What do you mean you'll let me go?
Aren't you going to tell me what I did?"

"Oh yeah. I don't think I'm going to do that."

"You're not going to do that?
You told me you were going to tell me."

"Yeah, well, I lied."

"But why? Why would you do that?
I just gave you the apology you asked for."

"Yes. And you also said you wanted to be held accountable. And the way I look at it, being accountable isn't just about your feelings. It's about punishment.

And seeing that you haven't really seen a lot of that kind of accountability, then I figure I owe all the folks you've been confessing about giving you a little extra punishment."

"What punishment? What are you talking about?"

"Since none of what you did to me has bothered you for the last 25 years, I figure if I don't tell you, it can bother you for the next 25."

"No no no. No way. That's not cool. You told me you would tell me, and that's what I based my apology on."

"Are you saying that if I don't tell you, you'll take it back?"

"No, I'm not saying that either. If I did the shit, then I really am sorry for it. I just want to know what I did."

"At least now I know you were sincere."

"I told you I was sincere. Now I feel like you owe me at least telling me what it is I just asked forgiveness for."

"It doesn't really matter, does it? If you apologized for it already, it doesn't matter now what it was."

"What are you talking about? Of course it does. Do you know how crazy that sounds?"

"Why? Why is that crazy? Maybe because I'm the one who deserved the apology, I'm the only one that has to know what you did. And you not knowing will prove over time how sincere your apology really was."

"How do you figure?"

"If it doesn't bother you, then it wasn't sincere. If it bothers you, it was."

"That's crazy."

"Well, that's what I've decided on. And you don't get to choose your punishment."

“Are you kidding me? You’re really not going to tell me?”

“Nope.”

“I can’t believe this.
I can’t believe you’re not going to tell me.”

“And I can’t believe you don’t remember.
So I guess we’re even.”

“Whatever.”

“Whatever? Is that how it is now?”

“Look, I’m not saying I don’t see where you’re coming from.
And I *was* sincere about the apology.
I just don’t think you have to go about it this way. You don’t have
to let me not know and wonder about it for the rest of my life.
I feel like you not telling me has got to be unfair.”

“It doesn’t matter what you feel. You don’t get to make that
decision.”

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“You know what? You’re right.
I don’t get to make that decision.
But if it’s all the same, I would like to be left alone now.
Not to be rude, but I’d like to just sit here and get my mind
together before my friend gets back.”

“Your friend isn’t coming back.”

“What are you talking about?
Why would you say that?”

“Look, take this and put it in your pocket.
Don’t read it right now. Wait ‘til later, when you’re alone.”

“Wait, what is it?”

“Just do it, Lonnie. Just put it in your pocket and read it later.”

Look, I gotta go.”

“Wait, where are you going?
Why are you giving me this?

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Wait. Tell me what’s... Wait!

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Sherry!”

A Visitor

“Hey! Look at us here together. And with this weather too.
It’s like the perfect day.
What’s been going on with you?”

“You know. Same as everyone I guess. Trying not to sink.
How about you? You doing ok, with all this?”

“Yeah, it’s definitely strange. But I’m trying my best to make it all work.”

“Good.”

“I’m glad you know about it. It’s actually why I wanted to talk to you.”

“Before you start, if this is about Panama City, you don’t have to say anything.

I’ve already forgiven you. I forgave you a long time ago.”

“But wait, why would you forgive me?”

“It’s kind of difficult to explain, and I can’t tell you too much about it. But I had some stuff happen after that, where I did something similar to someone else, and we got to talking about it about a year or so later, and they forgave me. And the whole thing of being forgiven got me to thinking about the frame of mind I was in when I did that to them and how different my mind was even a year before, and I realized how you change so much, especially when you’re young, and you’re hopefully becoming wiser and more caring about other people, and that you need others to recognize that and be that way with you, and you need those people to have mercy on you and forgive you.

And I thought about you, and how young you were when all that went down with us, and I just decided I would forgive you in my heart.”

“Wow.

I don’t even know what to say.

Obviously, I’m grateful that you would think of me and be that generous to me. And it makes me really happy to think you haven’t been holding onto that for all these years.”

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“But?”

“But, I guess I’m just thinking about it like.. like.. like I don’t know, like I didn’t ask for it.

I never asked for your forgiveness.”

“So how could I give it?”

“When you say it like that, it kind of sounds like a ridiculous question.

But yeah, kind of.”

“I understand why you’re saying it. I just feel that forgiveness is the possession of the person that’s been wronged.”

“And I don’t think I would argue with that. I guess I’m just curious about if there’s more to it than that.

Like don’t get me wrong. I’m glad you forgave me.

You have no idea how glad I am.

I guess it’s just when you said you had forgiven me, it made me think for the first time about how big forgiveness is. Or rather how complex it is.”

“Complex in what way?”

“I’m kind of thinking in a more general way. Not talking about you and me.

But when it comes to being forgiven, is it really just as easy as someone wanting to give it to the other person?

Or is there more that should go along with the decision?”

“Again I would ask in what way?”

“I’m sorry, I’m kind of formulating all this as I’m talking.

But basically, like first off, is it really only yours?

Shouldn’t it be mine as well? Shouldn’t it be... Or like...

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Or maybe look at it this way. If I didn’t seek it, then how can you give it?”

“But that’s not how it works. Forgiveness is a right. And that right has got to be the sole possession of the victim or the person who has to deal with whatever action has been committed.”

“Ok. But what if by saying that, you’re just treating forgiveness like it’s a tangible object? Like it’s something that is real in only one way?”

I don’t know if that makes sense, but I guess the reason why I’m saying that is what if forgiveness only exists as it relates to the person either giving it or seeking it?

Kind of like beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Maybe forgiveness is like that too.”

“I don’t get what you’re saying.”

“Ok, so like what if I hadn’t seen what I did was wrong? I’m not saying that, obviously. Obviously, I know what I did was wrong. I’m just talking hypothetically.

Like what if I didn’t think what I did was wrong? How could you give me that forgiveness if I didn’t even see it that way?”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t still give it to you.”

“But what if I said I don’t accept it?”

“It doesn’t mean it hasn’t been given.

If I leave a gift at your door, and you don’t ever bring it in, I can still know I left it there.”

“So is forgiveness a gift?”

“In a way.”

“Then why would you give a gift to someone who doesn’t even want it, and *because* they don’t want it, to someone who clearly doesn’t deserve it?

Why would you give it to someone who would never take it?”

“Because, again, it’s my right to give it. It’s like free speech. I have the right to feel a certain way toward you, if that’s the way *I* see it. Not the way you see it.

You don’t get to dictate the way I see you. And you don’t get to *grant* me the privilege of forgiving you.”

“I think that’s absolutely fair.

The only thing I would say is that when you compare forgiveness to free speech, it makes me wonder whether there is a certain responsibility that goes along with forgiveness.

Like you obviously have the right to forgive. But *should you* is the question.”

“Why shouldn’t you forgive someone?”

“Well, if you’re doing it, like you said, in your heart, then it doesn’t matter one way or the other.

But if you’re doing it publicly or making a show of it in some way, then I feel like that is a type of speech that carries a certain moral weight that extends beyond yourself.”

“You mean like if it’s a serious crime or something.”

“Exactly.

Like if someone committed an act of terrorism at a federal building where someone in my family was working, and I lost that person. And they catch the terrorist, and they’re completely unrepentant about it.”

“Can someone else that was in the building just forgive them, just like that?”

“Exactly.”

“You’re not saying they can’t. You’re saying they *can* as far as they have the right to do so.

But you’re asking, “Should they?””

“It lets that person off the hook, doesn’t it?”

“It’s a gift to someone who doesn’t want it.”

“Right, but it’s more than that. Because if it’s in public, it’s actually a statement more to everyone else than to the terrorist. Because, remember, the terrorist doesn’t even want the forgiveness, which then makes me think maybe that’s why it could be really powerful as a statement to the terrorist, in that you are saying that you have more power than they do, and they can’t break you no matter what. So I get that that could be a really powerful statement to the terrorist directly. But it could also be seen as a statement to the general public, giving the impression that it isn’t as severe as all that if I could forgive this person so immediately. And that public statement could have a real impact on the way others look at it, in terms of a trial or even just general public opinion.”

“Or it could also be a religious statement.”

“Exactly. Which is also kind of tricky, because you have the right to believe what you want, but if I also lost someone and I don’t share your

religious beliefs, should you use your religious beliefs to publicly absolve someone of the same crime that also took someone away from me?

Isn't that at least a potential negative consequence of your religion?"

"Maybe. But it doesn't mean you can't do it."

"Nobody's saying you can't do it. It's just *should you* do it?"

"It depends on your intentions."

"No, but intentions are not the end of it. Your decision should consider the potential consequences of forgiving someone in public. What does it say to those who don't or can't see it the same as you? What if it does have some impact that you didn't even see coming, like actually offering that person undeserved sympathy or rationale for how they could have done such a heinous thing, and that benefit was either sparked or at least aided by your public show of forgiveness?"

"You're saying that would make forgiveness almost a political act at that point."

"It could.

Couldn't it?"

I'm not sure if I personally would go that far, but I definitely think there's something there."

"But what if we're wrong in the way we're looking at it like a gift?"

Like what if it *is* a gift, just not to the other person?"

What if it's a gift to yourself? Like you're allowing yourself to be relieved of this burden. To not have that weight of anger and rage and whatever else that you don't want in your life, all the feelings you don't want to have that person saddle you with.

What if it's an act of defiance, like you said, showing the terrorist that they don't have power over you? That you won't allow them to do that to you.

Maybe that's what it is."

"If it's the first thing you said about relieving yourself from the burden, then that is something you can do in private, like you were saying, in your heart.

But if it's the second thing, it's most definitely a public act. And I feel like you have the responsibility to make those intentions clear and explicit. Because, if you don't, others will be able to use your general act of

forgiveness to mean whatever *they* want it to mean. Which could be completely antithetical to what you really meant or want.”

“Maybe you’re right.

Maybe it is complicated. Maybe forgiveness is a chance you take.”

“And chances shouldn’t always be taken lightly.”

“You’re right.”

“I don’t know if I’m right. I just think it’s a bigger question than I guess I had ever thought about before.

Like what if it’s even more complicated than what we were just talking about?

What if the person doesn’t think what they did was wrong? Like not a terrorist or anything, but let’s go back to me and you. Again, obviously, I know what I did was wrong. But what if I didn’t and you wanted to forgive me anyway. And I say, ‘How can you give me that if I don’t believe it was wrong?’ And you say, ‘Because A) I have the right to, and B) I thought it was wrong, and I was hurt by it, and that’s all that matters.’

But then I say, ‘But that’s not all that matters, because what if it really wasn’t wrong? Just because you were hurt by something doesn’t necessarily mean what caused that hurt was wrong. What if *you’re* looking at it wrong? What if you’re actually *wrong* to be hurt by it?’”

“So you’re gonna actually argue me into taking back my forgiveness?”

“Not in reality, no.

But in this hypothetical, maybe I do.

What if you try to forgive me, but I actually make a case as to why you should not forgive me, because what I did was simply not wrong?”

“Yeah, but people do that all the time already to not take blame for it. It’s called being a defendant in court.

More than that, men do it all the time to women so they don’t have to take responsibility for being abusive, patriarchal pieces of shit.”

“I absolutely agree.

I guess I’m thinking more outside the court system, and more in just the realm of things lesser than actual crimes.

And I understand this thought experiment is kind of a stretch because it asks you to divorce it from all the shit like sexism and racism and

all that kind of stuff, but just in this fairytale scenario where it's the possibility that what I did could have been either wrong or completely not wrong and just a misunderstanding on the part of the person who feels wronged. In that scenario, should I be able to not only reject the forgiveness but to try and correct the person who offered it? Do I not actually have a duty to try and change the person's mind if I think they are better off not having the mindset that made them think they were wronged in the first place?

Like maybe we don't have to divorce it from racism and sexism or anything, but instead throw that right in the mix. Let's say it's me and you again, but this time I feel like the victim from something I think you've done. But you believe that's just me making a big deal out of me losing a certain amount of unearned privilege. Are you not only justified in that situation, but actually morally obligated in a way, to show me where I'm wrong, not just for me to see, but for others to see?"

"Now you really are getting political with it."

"Maybe that's because there's really a lot more politics in forgiveness than we think.

I mean *before* I guess I would have thought that misplaced forgiveness would just be harmless. But what if it's not that simple? What if it's not harmless?

I mean it's out there at that point. And that forgiveness, that act of saying it's ok, could take on a life of its own."

"Ok, but what are you supposed to do?

It's like when people say, 'I love you and there's nothing you can do about it.'"

"The only thing I guess you could do is forgive them for forgiving you."

"Oh my God, can you imagine telling someone that? 'I forgive you for forgiving me.'

How mad they'd be. Oh my God."

"I guess they could just say it back, and it could regress into a children's game of 'I forgive you more,' 'no I forgive you more.'"

"Until one of the kids says, 'I forgive you infinity times.'"

"Oooooo, that's true. You can't beat infinity times."

"Then maybe that's the only way to settle your question."

“What? Whoever says ‘infinity times’ first is actually the person who is right?”

“Yep.”

“I guess that makes as much sense as a lot of the guidelines we accept for morality.”

“Yeah, right?”

“But, for real, it really does make you think about how big the concept of forgiveness is.

Like when you think about truth and reconciliation commissions and stuff like that, you can’t just impose that on people.”

“You mean like you can’t have truth and reconciliation without consent?”

“Exactly.”

“But that’s not necessarily about forgiveness as much as it is being able to move forward.

And in truth and reconciliation, at least the way I understand it, you don’t necessarily have to forgive someone to move forward.

You just have to have them admit what they did.”

“I got you.”

“Do you think that’s why you’re doing what you’re doing with these confessions?”

“You mean am I having my own public truth and reconciliation commission?”

“Not like that. But you know what I’m saying.”

“I don’t know. I guess I never thought about it like that. But it definitely factors in the idea that I may never be able to be forgiven by everybody for everything I did.

Nor do I really believe I deserve to be forgiven for everything. Especially the way I’m going about this, in this way.

But yeah, I guess in a weird roundabout way, maybe you’re right. Maybe that’s kind of what I’m doing.

I don’t know.”

“You ever wonder why you went about it this way? You say you never really thought about forgiveness being that complicated before. But is there a possibility that you don’t even believe in forgiveness?”

“Or maybe I don’t believe in forgiveness for me.”

“You tell me.”

“I don’t think it’s that I don’t believe in forgiveness. Because I know how much it can mean to someone to be able to forgive someone else. And personally, I know how good it feels to be forgiven.

Just knowing that you forgave me like that blew me away. It makes this whole little part of my life like less dark, and not even just less dark, but full of light.

And I know that knowing that now is going to make a difference for me going forward.”

“So what if you could get that from everyone? Not saying you could, but just saying hypothetically. If you could get everyone you ever wronged to forgive you, do you think you’d be able to accept that they actually all forgave you?”

“You mean do I truly believe I deserve forgiveness.”

“I guess that’s what I’m getting at.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s really that I don’t think that I deserve forgiveness.

But maybe I just don’t know if anyone is ever truly forgiven.”

“Then maybe you don’t really believe in forgiveness. Even with as good as you said it makes you feel. Maybe *you* don’t believe in it.

Kind of like having someone pray for you, when you’re an atheist. You can appreciate the sentiment, and it can really make you feel good that they care enough about you to pray for you. But you don’t believe in the whole concept underlying prayer.

Maybe it’s like that. Maybe you don’t believe in forgiveness.

Maybe you just believe in confession.”

“Or maybe I’m just too coward to take the chance of how it would turn out with some people.”

“You think so?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Either you know or you don’t.”

“I’m telling you I don’t.

When all this confession stuff started to happen, it just seemed like the right thing to do.

But now, after all this, I don’t know how I feel about it.”

“It sounds like the world is trying really hard to tell you something, and you’re trying really hard not to listen.”

“And what do you think it’s trying to tell me?”

“From the way you just spun in circles with me over the ins and outs of forgiveness, I think it might just be trying to tell you that you’re thinking way too hard about all of this.”

“Or is it trying to tell me to keep thinking about it, because I’m almost there?”

“Do you really think you would even know what ‘there’ looks like?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“You got a lot of ‘I don’t know, maybe’s.”

“I feel like my whole life is ‘I don’t know, maybe’s.”

“Well, at least you can know where it is we stand.”

“Thank you. It really means a lot to me.”

“I know it does.”

“Hey, look, I know we’ve been gabbing for a while, but before you go, do you mind if I tell you one thing?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“I forgive you... for forgiving me.”

“Oh my God, you’re such a goofball.”

“Ha ha ha. I’m sorry, I had to.”

“No, I thought you were getting ready to say something all serious, and then you...”

“I’m so sorry. I just...”

“Nope, nope. If that’s the way you want it. I take it back. I take back my forgiveness.”

“No, you can’t take it back. It’s out there. And I’ve got it. Can’t have it back.”

“Oh, I can’t take it back? It’s mine, isn’t it?”

“Not anymore. It’s like an engagement ring, once you’ve committed enough to give it, it’s mine.”

“Yeah, well, that sounds like an even bigger conversation.”

“I know, I know. I’m just messing with you. Thank you for coming to see me. I love you and I miss you.”

“I love you and miss you too.”

“All right, I’ll see you later.”

“Bye.”

A Visitor

“Hey! Look at us here together. And with this weather too. It’s like the perfect day. What’s been going on with you?”

“Not much. Little Carl’s graduating this year.”

“Holy shit. Little Carl? Graduating high school?”

“Not so little anymore.”

“Man, I know that must make you feel old, because it makes me feel old too.

I feel like the last time I saw him he was only like four or something.”

“You should have come back home more.”

“You’re right. I know.”

“It’s ok. If I had the chance to move around, I probably would have done it too.”

“Yeah, well, you run away enough and you start to realize how not awful the place you were running from is.”

“That’s what you said that one time after living up in West Virginia.”

“Well, that was a longer story than just where I was staying.”

“I gathered as much.”

“So what’s up, man?”

“Ah, you know. I guess I wanted to see if you were cool.”

“Cool? You mean like in general?”

“Like cool with all this confession stuff.

And don’t take what I’m saying the wrong way. Because, you know, at first I could dig it; I knew you must be making money off it and all. But

then like the way you were writing about stuff, I was like what's going on with him; that's kind of messed up."

"What do you mean the way I was writing it?"

"You know. Like that stuff you wrote about the knife fight between David and those two brothers that lived down by the church."

"Oh yeah, I put that in one of the songs. Did you not like that I did it as a song?"

"It ain't the song. It's what happened. That whole thing about you giving David the knife."

"What about it?"

"Bro, are you fucking tripping? Why are you acting this way *with me*?"

"What, man? What?"

"I know."

"You know what?"

"It's bullshit."

"What's bullshit?"

"Bro, it's me you're talking to. I was fucking there."

"I was there too. What are *you* talking about?"

"I know, man."

"You know what?"

"You didn't give him that knife."

"What are you talking about? Of course I did."

"No you didn't."

Billy did.”

“What are you talking about? *I* gave David the knife.”

“No, you didn’t, man. Billy gave it to him.”

“How do you figure?”

“Because I watched him give it to him.”

“Where were you?”

“On Steph’s porch. Right fucking next to you.”

“Next to me?”

“Bro, we were sitting together on the porch with Steph, watching that shit.

Are you telling me you really don’t remember?”

“No way, man.

I gave David the knife. It was the knife I always kept in my back pocket. That big one I got from Panama City.”

“That’s not the knife David used.”

“Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about.
I distinctly remember handing David that knife.”

“No you didn’t, man. You were sitting there with me, watching it all go down.

Don’t you remember, we even laughed about it afterwards. Because we thought, after all his shit-talk, that Billy was being a pussy by running home as soon as everything started. But then like fifteen seconds later, he comes running back up the street with those two knives.”

“Wait, you’re talking about those steak knives, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, the fucking steak knives.”

“Oh my God, I do remember that.”

“See.”

“Then what the fuck am I thinking about?”

“I don’t know. The only thing I could think is when we got pulled over in that cemetery.”

“And I gave David my knife to ditch.”

“Yeah, that’s the only time I ever remember you even bringing that knife out of your pocket.”

“But, wait, are you sure? Because I’ve got this whole memory about me giving that knife to David during that fight.”

“You’re remembering it wrong.”

“Holy fuck, man. I think you’re right.
Dude, I’ve been guilty about that shit. That’s crazy.”

“Wow, man. I thought you were just making it up so it would sound good in the song.”

“No, seriously. I’ve spent at least the last decade with the memory that I was the one who gave David the knife. Feeling awful about it.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“Yeah, it’s fucked up. What was I thinking?
Where did I get that? That I was the one who gave it to him?
Because now that you said that, I can totally picture it. Billy running up the hill with those fucking steak knives.”

“See.”

“Oh my God, man. I can’t believe this shit.
I put that in a fucking song, man.”

“I know. That’s why I wanted to talk to you about that shit.
It just didn’t seem like something you would do.”

“Hell, nah, it’s not something I would do.
I’m like in a state of shock just thinking about it.
Like what am I supposed to do now that I know?”

“Do you have to do anything?”

“I don’t feel right just letting people think that’s what happened if it didn’t.”

“Who cares what they think?”

“What do you mean who cares?
I care.”

“Yeah, but why?
We all know what really happened. Isn’t that all that matters?”

“No, man. I mean, yes, it matters that y’all know.
But it also matters that other people think it. I mean people put their fucking trust in me with this shit.”

“But do they though?
You think they take it that serious?”

“Maybe not everybody. But some people, absolutely.”

“Then don’t tell ‘em. Let ‘em keep believing it.
It’s not like you did it on purpose.”

“Yeah, but I fucking confessed that shit. I said I did something that I didn’t do.”

“But it doesn’t fucking matter.
They don’t know the difference. Nobody’s getting hurt, and that shit was like a thousand years ago.
Nobody even cares about that shit.”

“But *I care.*”

“Why? Why do you care if a bunch of strangers think you did something you didn’t do?
Is it any different than them thinking you did something you did do?”

“How could it not be different?”

“They’re fucking strangers, bro.”

“They’re my audience.”

“They’re fucking strangers. And if they worry about this shit enough that it would actually affect them emotionally that one of these confession things was a mistake, then they’re fucked up in the head.”

“But what if I don’t see it that way?”

“Bro, it’s fucking entertainment.
Nobody’s taking this shit serious. Or at least they shouldn’t.”

“But some do. And that matters to me.”

“Why?”

You’ve already confessed to it. Does it really matter if it happened once you’ve confessed? It’s not like a fucking court case or anything like that.

In mine and your reality, things went down one way. In theirs, it went down another. But it’s not like that shit changes the price of milk.

I don’t even know what the big deal is. I’m not fucked up with it, and I was there. The only reason why I even asked you is because I was curious about it. I wasn’t like mad about it or anything.

And if we don’t care back home, then fuck the people who don’t even know us. Let them believe it. I mean you did for years. If I hadn’t told you, you’d still believe it. You’d still be living in the same world they’re living in.

It just doesn’t matter.”

“But it does. It matters to me.”

“But why?!”

You seem to think that because you confessed, somehow that was the end of that shit.

But it’s not like you went back home and squared it with everybody involved with the shit that day.

You just confessed that shit in a song to a bunch of fucking strangers and then acted like that was that.

And by doing it that way, and letting that be that, you might as well be acting like it never happened.

Because if you felt the shit *was* settled, and you were actually wrong about the memory, it might as well have never happened anyway.”

“No, that’s not right. Because I would still feel bad about it. I would still have it with me.”

“But you *did* have it with you. You *did* feel bad.

And the shit didn't even happen.
So what's the difference? Isn't the whole point of you confessing to help you feel better about all this kind of shit?
And if not, then what *is* the point?"

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying if that shit was eating at you, even if it didn't happen, then confessing to it should have made you feel better.

Because if it didn't make you feel better, then you have to take a long fucking look at why you're doing any of this shit. I mean if you're not doing it for the money and it's not doing you any good psychologically, then what else is there?"

"I don't know, man. I feel like I'm trying to do it for my audience. Like maybe to do some good or something."

"If that's who you're worried about, then leave it. Because if they find out it was bullshit, they're going to wonder what else was bullshit. But if it's somehow doing these fuckers some good, like you say, then it won't matter if they keep believing it."

"It won't matter that they're believing a lie?"

"Not if it's doing the job.

If you believed you were helping them when you wrote that, and you're saying it *did* help them, because they believed *in it*, then I'm saying it's harmless if they just keep believing it the way you told it.

Don't you think so? If it's both helpful and harmless at the same time for them *to* believe the shit, then don't rock the fucking boat."

"I see what you're saying.
The only other problem is that now I know."

"And now you're gonna feel bad on a whole other level. Thinking you gotta go out and confess that you confessed the wrong thing."

"Yeah, I mean kind of."

"But why?"

What the fuck is going on with you? What more do you have to fucking do? Do you need to be whipped or beaten or dragged through the streets or walk around wearing a fucking sign that says I was a normal fucked up teenager and I deserved to be punished for the rest of my life for it?

Do you not see how crazy this is?”

“I know it seems crazy, man. And I wish I could explain it, but I...”

“You ain’t gotta explain it to me. You gotta explain it to yourself. But that’s what I’m saying. I don’t think you can explain it to yourself.

And if you can’t, then none of this shit matters.

And it ain’t *never* gonna be over.”

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“I wish I could tell you that you’re wrong.”

“Well, shit, bro. Now that I see how fucked up you got with it, I kind of wish I hadn’t told you.”

“No, don’t. I should know.

Now I just have to figure out what to do with that information.”

“I’m telling you. You ain’t gotta do nothing with it.

What you gotta do is get your mind shifted into the next gear. Or else you’re gonna burn out your whole transmission, you know what I’m saying?”

“I know. You’re right.

And I appreciate you letting me know.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, man. I’m sure. Thank you.”

“All right then. I’ll get on out of here and let you get on to the next one.”

“All right, man. Thanks for coming. It means a lot.”

“Of course, bro. Of course.”

“All right then.”

“All right.”

A Visitor

“Hey! Look at us here together. And with this...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Look, I don’t know if you’ve seen the line, but it’s pretty long. So I’m just going to get down to business.”

“What line?”

“The line I just stood for two hours in while you ran your mouth.”

“What are you talking about? What line?”

“It doesn’t matter, whatever.
Look, you know why I’m here.”

“I think so.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“So why didn’t you use me?”

“Use you?”

“Me. Us. The whole thing about why I left.
Why haven’t you used that for one of your confessions?”

“I didn’t use it because it was bullshit.”

“It was not.
You were a fucking bastard.”

“I was fucked up for sure, and I had things to be sorry for. But not
that.

That was bullshit and you know.”

“How do you know it was bullshit?”

“Let’s just say I found out and leave it at that.”

“Well, you didn’t know it was bullshit at the time.”

“So what? I’m supposed to apologize for the way I handled you lying to my ass?”

“Yeah, because you handled it like a bastard.”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that it was bullshit.”

“I don’t care. I want my confession.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? You lie to me, and then you come here expecting me to apologize to you for the way I reacted to your lie, when I thought it was the truth.”

“Yeah, because you thought it was the truth. Don’t you get it? It doesn’t matter that it was a lie. What matters is that you believed that was the truth at the time, and that’s how you treated me.”

“Ok, fuck it. You’re right. I’m not going to argue with you. You want your confession. Here it is. I’m sorry for the way I acted. I shouldn’t have...”

“Not here, idiot.”

“What?”

“I don’t want you to confess to me.”

“Then who do you want me...”

“Confess on TV, or in a book, or something. I want what everybody else got.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you owe me.
Besides, it’s not like I can tell anybody that you did me wrong and they’re just going to believe me.
I need something I can show people.”

“Wait, are you for real saying this right now?
You want me to confess so you can brag about that shit?”

“Don’t judge me. Don’t you dare judge me. You’re the one out here making money off this stuff. All I want is to be able to tell people that was me.

And I don't think that's a lot to ask for the way you treated me.
Because you *were* a fucking bastard, and you know it."

"Jesus Christ, I can't believe this shit with you.
Look, if I do it, will you just..."

Bell sounds.

"Shit! My time's up.
Look, you better do this for me or I swear on my mother I'll get
back in the line and keep fucking with you until you do."

"What are you talking about? What line?"

Bell sounds.

"Shit!
Look, just promise me you'll do it."

"Ok, whatever. I don't even know what's..."

Bell sounds.

"Ok, goddamn it, I'm going.
You better do it, or I swear I'll be back..."

Bell sounds.

Bell sounds.

"Hey! Look at us here together. And with this weather too.
It's like the perfect day.
What's been going on with you?"

"Look, I know you're busy. I know you've got a lot of people to
make amends with, so I..."

"Wait, what you mean *you know*? Know what? We ain't even seen
each other in forever.
How you gonna know if I'm busy?"

"I heard you were getting right with people from your past, so I
figured I should come.
I only said you were busy because I stood in line for so long."

“But why *did* you stand in line? I never did anything wrong to you.”

“It’s not me. It’s Marie.”

“What about Marie?”

“She died.”

“She what?”

“I’m sorry. I hate to tell you like this. I just figured you’d want to know.”

“How did she die?”

“I don’t know. They said she just died in her sleep. Like some freak thing.

She wasn’t sick or on drugs or anything.
Just went to bed and didn’t wake up.”

“Oh God, man. That’s so awful. She was one of the sweetest people I ever knew.”

“I know. It’s terrible.

She was just this really good person. And now she’s not here.”

“I know, my God. I don’t know what to think right now. This really fucks my mind up.”

“I’m sorry, man. I just thought you should know.

I figured you probably did her wrong at some point and would get around to confessing about it, so I thought...”

“You thought I did *what?*”

“I don’t know. I was just guessing, you know. You seem to have fucked over so many people. I just assumed you had something to be sorry for when it came to her.”

“Of course I had regrets. Things I would have done different.

But I guess I never really thought any of it was enough to put into a confession.”

“Wow, man. That’s pretty fucked up.”

“What’s fucked up?”

“You know what kind of minor shit you’ve confessed about?
And you can’t find anything you can confess about Marie?
That’s fucked up.”

“But it’s not like that. I wasn’t trying to avoid her.
There *were* things I felt bad about. I guess I could do something
with some of that stuff.”

“But you can’t now.
You waited too long.”

“I still have work I’m under contract for. I’ll do it in my next
project.”

“I’m not talking about a confession.
I’m talking about saying you’re sorry. To her.
You’re never going to be able to do that.
You waited too long.”

“I didn’t know she was going to die.
How could I know?”

“You could have told her back then, when you were together.”

“But I wasn’t ready.
I mean I don’t mean I wasn’t ready. But I mean I wasn’t where I’m
at now.
I didn’t even know enough back then to be sorry.”

“A lot of good it does you now.
You really should have told her when you had the chance.”

“I know that. Don’t you think I know that?
Look, man, I appreciate you telling me that she passed, but I don’t
really know what business it is of yours how we left things.”

“Oh, but it is my business.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Because it’s all our business.
Isn’t it?”

Isn't that what you're doing? Making all your intimate moments our business? Making other people's intimate moments with you *the whole world's* business?"

"That's not what I'm doing.

And I think it's really messed up that you would come here and tell me that Marie died and then try to make me feel bad about her and about everything going on with me right now."

"Oh, you think I'm the one that's messed up?
How about the..."

Bell sounds.

"Oh well, that's my time.

It was great to see you. Good luck processing that within the next couple seconds."

"The next couple seconds? What do you..."

"Before the next person in line.
There's still got to be at least a few dozen..."

Bell sounds.

"Ok, look, I gotta go.

Like I said, good luck with everything. I really enjoyed the last book. It was really..."

Bell sounds.

Bell sounds.

"Hey! Look at us here together. And with this weather too.

It's like the perfect day.
What's been going on with you?"

"The question is what's been going on with you."

"Why is that the question?"

"What do you think? Look at all this.

Look at what's going on here.
None of this had to happen."

“None of what?”

“This. All of it. It didn’t have to happen.

If you would have just listened to me, none of this would be happening.

You wouldn’t have done any of that stuff, and you wouldn’t have spent all this time obsessing about it.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because the kids who went to that school didn’t end up anything like you.

They’re successful and leading fulfilling lives, using their potential. They’re happy.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know if they’re really fulfilled. You don’t know if they’re happy.”

“They’re definitely not where you are right now.”

“And you think everything would have just worked out perfect if I would have just listened to you and switched over? In the middle of the school year. Just leave my friends and go to a place where I don’t know anybody. Where most of the kids test better and I lose my ranking. Where there’s no guarantee I’m going to like it.

It’s not like I could just go back if it didn’t work out. Everyone would have laughed at me. I would have never lived it down.

You just expected me to take that kind of a chance because some random fill-in French teacher from the fancy magnet school asked me to?”

“You yourself said it. If you would have known what there was out there, how different things would have turned out.

You’d probably be a tenured professor somewhere right now, with three or four books under your belt.

You’d be respected in your field. You’d have opportunities you never dreamed of.

And you definitely wouldn’t have all these anchors weighing you down.

Because you wouldn’t have done any of that stuff.”

“But you don’t know that either.

I would have still been in the same neighborhood, with the same friends.”

“Maybe.

But more than likely, you wouldn't have. Because you would have been too busy. And you would have made new friends, and you would have been driving soon, and you would have been hanging out with them after school instead.

You have no idea how much difference that one decision could have made."

"That doesn't mean I wouldn't have messed up. That I wouldn't have messed up in other ways."

"Of course not. Everyone messes up.

But you would have been working with a different perspective. And that would have made maybe not all the difference, but definitely enough to keep you from ending up here.

You've been lamenting your whole life about not having enough guidance when you were a kid. But you did.

I offered my hand.

And you didn't take it."

"You're right. I didn't take it. I'm sorry.

I didn't know.

Because I didn't really know *you*. It's not like we were close. I mean I liked you and all, but we hardly talked other than an occasional few seconds in the hallway. And when you told me I should switch schools, I thought you were being shitty. I thought you were being racist. I thought you were being nosy and a do-gooder and a know-it-all, and I was too scared to take a chance."

"I may have been all of those things. I wasn't a perfect person by any means.

I just knew I saw something in you, and I thought you deserved the chance to see it too."

"I didn't know enough to know what those chances could even mean."

"You say that as if you *do* know now."

"You think I don't?"

"If you did, you'd know I didn't come here for an apology. At least not for me."

"Then what did you come here for?"

“I’m not here representing all you had to gain. I represent all you would have lost.

All the memories. All the laughs. All the good times. All the things that make you weep when you hear an old song on the radio or smell the perfume that an old friend used to wear or when you get stuck in a daydream about a time you can’t imagine not having been a part of.

None of us have perfect lives. And none of us get out without our share of things we can’t easily take back.

But this. This isn’t realistic.

Whether you like it or not, you were that person.

And that person is loved, loved for so many things you were.

Yet all you can do is hate that person.”

“I don’t hate him.”

“Then what do you think this is?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think...”

Bell sounds.

“Sorry, I have to go.”

“Wait, don’t go. There’s so much I want to ask you. So much I want to know about who you were.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I had more time.

Besides, it doesn’t really...”

Bell sounds.

“At least let me apologize.”

“For what? There’s nothing to apologize for.

Why don’t you instead go find those kids who gave you such...”

Bell sounds.

Bell sounds.

“Hey! Look at us here together. And with this weather too.

It’s like the perfect day.

What’s been going on with you?”

“Lonnie, I’m here to say I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“I’m here to say I’m sorry.

I don’t know how much time I have with you, and I don’t want to waste it with a bunch of small talk.

I just want you to know how sorry I am.”

“For what?”

“You know what.”

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“You mean...”

“Yeah, I mean that. I’m so sorry I did that to you.”

“It’s ok. I...”

“No, it’s not ok. I know how you felt about me, and I should have never used you like that. If I could go back, I would have never picked up that phone to call you that afternoon.”

“It’s ok. You don’t have to...”

“No, I do.

I can’t imagine how you must have felt. And I knew it was wrong as it was happening. But I still did it. And I’m just so sorry.”

“But it’s ok. You know I’m not mad at you. I don’t feel bad about it.”

“But you should. Because you wouldn’t have done that to me.”

“Because I loved you.”

“Yes, because you loved me.

And I hope you know I loved you too.

And that’s what makes it so awful what I did.

And it’s bothered me ever since.”

“It’s ok. I’m ok now.

I don't think the first thing about it."

"But how can you not?"

"To be honest, for a long time, I think I was in denial that you had done anything wrong. I was so in love with you, I blamed myself and felt like I had done something wrong.

But later on, once I was able to take a step back, I saw it for what it was."

"And?"

"And I knew it was a mistake. I knew you wouldn't have done it had you known how it would turn out.

And I thought about the million other moments that we had together that could never make me hold that one moment against you, no matter how much it hurt at the time."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"Then why are you here?"

Bell sounds.

"Why am I where?"

"Here. This place. With all of us in line.

Why are you here?

If you could love me enough to not hate me, for that.

I know you can..."

Bell sounds.

"Look, I only have a few seconds left, and I need to tell you this. Because it's something I should have told you then, and I've always been mad at myself for not telling you."

"What is it?"

"You remember that letter I gave you at your..."

Bell sounds.

Bell sounds.

“Hey! Look at us here together. And with this weather too.
It’s like the perfect day.
What’s been going on with you?”

“Not much, just life I guess. But look, they told me I didn’t have
much time so I just wanted to...”

“Wait, who told you that?”

“It’s not important. I mean I guess it is, but... Look, I just wanted
to say thank you.”

“Thank you for what?”

“I saw your confession about me.
And I wanted to tell you that it meant a lot, what you said.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you in person. You’re one of the people I
actually tried to find. I even looked online but I couldn’t find anything. I
swear. I just didn’t know how to get a hold of you.”

Bell sounds.

“It’s ok. I moved away shortly after high school, and have only
been back a couple times. I don’t really talk to anyone from back home.

Anyway, I’ve seen how much grief you’ve been given over doing
this, with some of it coming from people like me. And I understand that for
some people that reaction makes sense. But I just wanted you to know that
for me, it helped. I hadn’t thought about that day in a long time, but when I
saw what you said, it helped me process not just that day but a bunch of
other stuff that’s happened in my life, unrelated to you. And I...”

Bell sounds.

“And I just wanted you to know that it did make a difference for at
least one person.”

“I don’t know what to say, except for thank you, and that I wish I
could have told you all that in person. For what it’s worth, now that I’ve got
you here, can I just say, so you can actually hear me say it in front of you.
I’m sorry.”

“Well, thank you, again. And just so you can hear it from me, in front of you, ‘It’s ok, now, with us.’”

“You have no idea how much...”

Bell sounds.

Bell sounds.

“Hey...”

I’m so sorry. I’m not sure if I know you.”

“It’s ok. I don’t expect you to.”

“I’m sorry. But should I?”

It’s been a long day, and I’ve seen a lot of people. After a while, I’m not sure if I even know who I am.

What’s your name?”

“I don’t have a name.

At least not one you were aware of.”

“Why wouldn’t I know your name?”

“You only saw me for a few seconds.

I’m not even sure if you saw my face. Your view was from the side.”

“I don’t understand. What view? Where did I see you?”

“Do you think I’m still alive?”

“What do you mean still alive?”

“How long do you think it went on?”

“How long what went on? What are you talking about?”

“Do you think I made it through? Grew up? Got past it? Became a normal person, a productive member of society?”

“I have no idea what you’re saying. Got past what?”

“Why didn’t you call anybody?

You could have saved me.”

“Wait.
No. No way.”

“You remember.”

“The duplex.
You’re the girl from the doorways. Walking from one door to the other.”

“You do remember.”

“Of course I remember.
It’s one of my worst memories.”

“How old do you think I was?”

“I don’t know, maybe 8, 9.
How old *were* you?”

“You were 13 at the time.”

“I think that’s right.
Wait. How did you find me here? How do you even know who I am? I didn’t think you saw me. Like you said, it was only for a few seconds. And you never turned your head.”

“How far away were we, from each other?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a couple hundred feet, maybe more.”

“But you could tell that something was wrong.”

“I didn’t know.
I didn’t understand what I was seeing. I just saw you standing there, waiting.”

“That’s not all you saw.”

“You’re right.
You’re absolutely right. And I *should* have known. I should have suspected something. But I really wasn’t sure what I was looking at. I just didn’t get it.

I was 13, and I was naïve.”

“So when *did* you get it?”

“I think it was a few months after; it couldn’t have been more than a year.

I started thinking about it. Started to put it together, that maybe that’s what I had seen. I went by your place, to see if maybe I might see you again, outside or something. I don’t know why. I don’t know what I would have said or done. Maybe I just wanted to see if you looked ok.

But there were different people living there by that time.”

“Do you think I was ok?”

“I want to believe you were. I want to believe that I had it wrong. That there was another explanation, for you standing out there like that. I want to believe there was some context I wasn’t aware of that would make perfect sense of it. That it was just a misunderstanding on my part.

But the answer is no. I don’t think you were ok.”

“So?

Aren’t you going to ask me?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because it wouldn’t matter if I was wrong.

For all I know, that’s entirely possible. For all I know, I’ve been going back over those few seconds in my mind, all these years, and there really wasn’t anything there.

For all I know, I’ve been torturing myself over nothing.”

“Except it isn’t nothing. Is it?”

“No. It’s not.

It’s just not.

And I’m sorry. The truth is I was scared. Not at that moment. At that moment, I really didn’t know what I was looking at. And you were far enough away that I couldn’t really be sure.

But later, after I thought I had put it together. I was scared. Not just for you, but for me. It was the first time I really had to face that that one thing grown-ups had to warn you about above all other things, that it was actually real.

And, for my own reasons at the time, I was too scared to think about it any more than just finding out you were gone.

Still, I know. That’s not good enough. My reasons weren’t enough.

So, no.

I don't want you to tell me. I just want to say I'm sorry.

I know that I can't make it up. But I can keep not knowing. I can keep not knowing anything, about that situation. Anything about you, or the people inside that door. I can keep not knowing if what I saw was really nothing or if that memory is warranted in being one of my worst.

I can keep not knowing everything."

Bell sounds.

"But why would you want that? Why is it so important for you *not* to know?"

"Because to think, I was your one chance.

The reality doesn't matter.

It's just what it *could* have been."

"And what you did with that possibility."

"Exactly."

Bell sounds.

"I guess I should get going."

"Wait. Before you go away, can I just ask?
You didn't come here to tell me. Did you?"

"No."

"And you're not going away. Not really."

"No."

"That's ok. I'm glad you're here."

Bell sounds.

Bell sounds.

Chapter Eight

(Well, I have to say, this is quite anti-climactic.)

My best friend

“Come on, come on, come on, pick up. Pick up...

.

Come on, come on. Pick the fuck uuuup...”

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.

.

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“Hello.”

“Lisa, is it you?
Is this really you?”

“Uhh, yeah. Who else would it be?”

“Look, I need you to listen to me. I know you probably have no interest in talking to me the way we left it last time, but I’m telling you, I don’t care about any of that. I don’t care about the podcast, I don’t care about the bad feelings, I don’t care about any of it. I just know that you’re my best friend and you’re the only person in my whole life I feel I can turn to right now, and I need your help, right now.”

“I’m not sure if I understand what’s going on, but of course I’ll try to help you anyway I can.
What’s wrong?”

“So you know before we talked last time, things were already fucked up. But after we talked, it seemed like everything around me just started to unravel.”

“Unravel like how?”

“I don’t know. Like fucking reality itself. Like I don’t even know how to explain it.

It’s like I tried to tell you, or I think I tried to tell you, I’m not even sure if I did or not, but in my mind at least I have this memory of trying to tell you about these dreams, these *crazy* fucking dreams that seemed so real I couldn’t tell if they were dreams or not.

Except I have this other memory of you telling me in another conversation that we never had *that* conversation and that I actually didn’t

tell you about them. And it's like, right now, I know this sounds completely insane, but I don't even want to ask you if we really did or didn't have either of those conversations; I just want to tell you about the dreams without thinking I'm cracking up any more than I already am. So I'm just going to pretend like I've mentioned these dreams before, and I need you to pretend like I've mentioned them before, and then I'm going to tell you about them in the most honest way I can right now, and you're going to listen and at least act like I'm not completely fucking crazy. Is that ok?"

"Lonnie, you know I don't think you're crazy.
Just tell me what's going on."

"Ok.

.

Ok. Ok.

So, these dreams.

I think that some of them may have not been dreams.

I think some of this shit is actually happening to me, and there's something else going on that I don't understand."

"What happened? What do you think's going on?"

"Ok

.

Ok, so here it is.

Ever since the whole thing with the podcast, I've been trying to get my head straight. So I started going to the group more and more. But even that was beginning to feel weird. And instead of helping, it seemed like even *it* was adding to my anxiety and my depression and my fucking paranoia and my fucking everything.

So it's like I was feeling like I should be searching for something to stabilize me or reset me in some way. To get back the soothing I used to feel when I first started going to group.

And that's when someone in the group told me about this secret society of like forgivers that they had found out about, and how it was different than anything they had ever seen, and it had really helped them.

So at that point I was desperate and willing to try anything. So I went. I actually went. And I showed up, and I had to tell them in advance that I was coming. And I didn't understand why. But then when I got there, I understood why. Because when I got there, they took me into this room, and it was so fucked up. Because I was in the middle of the room, and I was surrounded by all these people. And they could see me, but I couldn't

see them. Or I could see them, but I couldn't see their faces because they were all wearing these fucking masks.

And the masks were masks of my face."

"What?"

"Yeah, I think that's why I had to tell them I was coming. I don't know. I just know they were all wearing these fucking masks with my face on them. And I was expected to confess in front of them. And I didn't even know which way to face or which one to look at because it was just a big circle and they all looked the same, and they all looked like me. And it was just so disorienting.

Oh yeah, and they're all wearing robes. Like these fucking gray robes down to the ground where I couldn't see their feet. So it was like a room full of nothing but these people in gray robes with masks with my face on it. And it was just so fucking surreal and weird and I thought about running the fuck out of there.

But then I thought I had come this far, and that nothing else in my life seemed to make sense, and that maybe this wasn't any crazier than anything else that had happened to me, and that maybe I should just go ahead and see what would happen.

So I did it.

I confessed in front of them.

I told them something I hadn't ever told anyone in any of the other confessions. And it was something that was so fucked up I hadn't felt like I could even say it out loud until that point. But in that moment, I looked around and all I could see was my face, and I felt like I was at this kind of point of no return and that my life was so fucked up I didn't have anything to lose. So I just let it all out. And it was the most real and frank confession I think I've ever told.

And when I got to the end, I fell down on the ground because I was so exhausted.

And I guess I thought one of them would come over and help me up.

But instead of helping me up, they all just stood exactly where they were and looked at me.

Until finally one of them spoke.

And I don't know what I expected them to say, but what came out of their mouth was this really ignorant insult. And so I thought maybe I didn't hear them right. So I started to ask them if they could repeat what they said, but before I could get it out another one yelled out something about how much better they were than me. And I didn't even understand how what they were saying was appropriate or helpful at all. But before I could even process it any further, another person behind me yelled out the

same thing the person before them had said, with maybe just like one word or two words difference, but basically just the same thing. And then another person started laughing, and that's all they did was just laugh and point at me. And then another blurted out an insult even dumber than the first person.

And then it was just this free-for-all where they took turns saying either the dumbest, meanest things you could imagine or it was just this self-righteous blather, like they all deserved to be there, saying these things to me, and I deserved to be there, on the floor, presenting myself, as a target, for them. Like they were fucking special or better or fucking I don't even know, but it was just crazy.

And even though I wanted to be out of there, it was like I couldn't get up and leave, like my body wouldn't actually let me even stand up until they were done saying all the shit they had to say. And it was like somehow they knew it, and instead of just letting me go free, they just kept talking and going on and on with this stupid bullshit that wasn't helping anything.

And at that point I couldn't even understand what they're saying because they're all talking over each other, and then some of them had even begun to argue with each other, except it wasn't even like they cared about the points they were making. It was just them arguing for the sake of arguing and winning and hurting someone, and that someone was me. And it was like they were just all getting so hyped on how out of control everything was getting. And the more ridiculous and out of control it got, the more they joined in and found a way to make it worse.

And then all of the sudden, it stopped.

And everyone was silent.

And I remember thinking that maybe it was all some sort of special therapy and they were getting ready to take their masks off and let me in on how it was supposed to enlighten me and help me, and that I would magically feel better about everything and realize it had been the right decision to come and that everything after that would be ok.

But they didn't say anything. No one spoke.

They all just stood there, looking at me.

And then I thought that maybe it was just a prank, that maybe it was just some elaborate prank, and that maybe it was even being recorded and that I was the butt of some joke for some new show that was all part of this whole confession industry I helped create. And that the joke was all on me.

And even that I was ok with, because at least I would know that what just happened wasn't real. That no one would act that way and do what they had just done to me for real. And that people couldn't be that awful.

And I remember, sitting there in their silence. And I started praying that one of them would start laughing. If just to break up how unsettling it all was.

But still, no one said anything. They all just stood silently.

And that's when they came in the room. They were two guards or something.

They didn't say anything either. They just walked up and grabbed me by each arm and drug me to the edge of the circle, and then through the circle, and then out of the room.

Except as we went through the doors of the room, it wasn't into the room I had entered in from.

The guards were dragging me into the room where we hold group. And all the chairs are occupied except one.

So they just set me down into that chair and walked out of the room, like nothing had happened before that. Like they had somewhere else they needed to be.

And I'm just sitting there looking at the floor because I'm so exhausted I can't even look up at anyone.

But then I get this feeling that everyone is looking at me, like waiting on me to say something.

And I realize it's my turn. That everyone else must have gone already, and it's my turn to confess.

So I do.

I do what I'm used to doing in group.

And somehow, in an instant, it all felt just like it had the first time I had come to group.

It felt good, and liberating.

And as I confessed, I felt this feeling of solace. Just looking at the floor and the chairs and their shoes and feeling that same feeling as before. That I was, in some way, being relieved of what I believed I could no longer carry. And they were taking that from me, the same as I knew I was ready to take theirs from them.

And when I got to the end of my confession, I looked up.

And then I started to cry.

But not like the first time I had confessed in group.

But because I could see.

That it wasn't them.

It wasn't their faces. It wasn't even their bodies.

It was mine.

Everyone. Every chair.

The whole room.

Was me.

But not like in the room before, with the masks.

This was actually me.

In every seat.

Each person in the room was me, just like I'm me right now.

No different.

And *that's* when it happened. Without them telling me, without anyone saying a word, I immediately understood.

And I listened.

I listened to what they had to say.

I listened to see how they would view this version of events. How they would see this version of me.

And just like me, so many of them were sad, and disappointed, at what I had become in that moment of transgression.

Some of them were hurt. Some of them were disgusted. Some of them couldn't put into words how they felt.

For them, they couldn't imagine doing something like this. Their worlds and their place in that respective world were so different, it was hard for them to imagine themselves in a place of choosing and being, what I had just described. That someone like them could ever be that person.

And I listened to them. One by one, from shock to anger to despair. One by one, they all lamented that there could have been a time or a place or a world where they would have to look back and see that as a part of who they were.

That that *could have* been them.

One by one. All.

Except one.

While the rest had expressed their hurt that even for a while I was what I was, he hadn't nodded or gone along like everyone else. He just sat there and waited for his turn to speak.

And when it was his turn to speak, there was no horror or dismay or even surprise.

If there *was* surprise, it was that I wasn't worse.

I remember him saying, 'If it makes you feel any better, if no one else would have said anything, I wouldn't have thought much of that was all that big a deal.'

He then told us, in his version of circumstances and choices, he had done things so much more awful that he couldn't even fathom how the rest of the group would look upon him. Especially after the way they had reacted to my confession.

He said that the whole time he was hearing me confess, he just kept thinking how he wished he had confessions *like that*. And that after I was done and he heard everyone's reaction and he realized he was the worst one of us in the room, he didn't know how to feel.

Because, on one hand, he naturally felt awful being the worst. But, on the other, it made him feel good knowing that he at least had the

potential within him to be a good person. And just knowing there were versions of him that *were* good gave him some respite.

And in my own way, I felt something similar. Except for me, it was just a relief that there was a worse version of me, and that I had done better, maybe even far better, than what I had the potential for. That there was so much negative potential in me as well, potential that I *had* resisted.

And yet I couldn't escape the fact that I was merely the second *least good* version of myself in the room.

But then when I shared that feeling with the group, one of the others reminded me that this obviously wasn't all there was. That there were so many more versions of us that were far better and far worse than any of us in the room. And that maybe that was the point in all of us being put in the room together like this.

Then, to that, someone else asked the obvious question.

"Then who put us here?"

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And that's when it hit me.

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You did.

You put me here."

"I what? How did I put you there?"

And where did I put you?"

"Where I'm at. All of this.

All of it, up until this point.

You put me here.

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And now I understand why.

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I didn't recognize where I was going. Because I didn't remember.

All the things I've confessed. All the wrongs I've come clean about.

All the shit I've put on you and expected you to be cool with. And I just didn't see it."

"See what?"

"I never apologized to you."

“Apologize for what?”

“That night. At the Jackson Street house. Where everyone was making out with each other, and I think they were like keeping score of who could make out with who, and so you and I made out as a goof in the bathroom. And then what I said afterward in front of everyone when we started talking about our childhoods. And I wasn’t thinking and I started talking about that secret you told me about your godmother and her boyfriend. And I don’t even know what I was thinking, but I was like telling it as if it was my memory and not yours. And I have no idea why, but it was like I was remembering it like it was mine for some reason. But then halfway through, I looked over at you and realized that it wasn’t my memory; it was yours. And the look on your face was like nothing I had ever seen from you. And you got up and ran into the bathroom and threw up. And then before I could apologize, you ran out of the house and drove home.

And it wasn’t for like another few weeks until we saw each other. And I think in that time I just forgot.

I didn’t even say I was sorry, and you didn’t bring it up.

But I know now. That’s it.

I need to ask you for forgiveness.

I need to come clean. With you.

I need you to forgive me. So all of this can just stop.

So I’m telling you. I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking that night. And hurting you is the last thing I would want to do in the whole world. And I hope that I can make it up to you.

But I need to start with asking.

Can you forgive me?”

“Lonnie, I’m sorry, but I don’t remember that.”

“Of course you remember. I was waiting for you in your apartment parking lot when you and Liz came home from work. And she had to run in and feed the dog before we left, but then she got a call from her sister and we sat out there forever before we left. And then by the time we got over there, everyone was already making out with each other and we didn’t know what was going on.”

“Lonnie, I didn’t go to the Jackson Street house that night. I know what night you’re talking about, but I didn’t go. I worked a double that night and heard about it the next day from Jamie.

I think you might be remembering someone else.

Or I think you might have made it up.

But it's not me."

"Of course it's you.

I remember you getting up and running into the bathroom and leaving, and me running after you but you wouldn't talk to me. You just left."

"That wasn't me."

"Then how did I tell the story about your godmother and her boyfriend? How would I even remember telling that story and looking at you, if you hadn't been there?"

"Because it's not my story.

I don't have a godmother. I don't know what you're talking about. I wish I did, but I don't. I'm sorry, I think you may be..."

"Of course you have a godmother. You told me about her the night we watched Labyrinth, the night I had to stay over because of that ice storm we didn't think was going to be bad but turned out really bad."

"I remember that night. I remember watching Labyrinth. But I'm telling you. I don't have a godmother."

"No. No no no no no.

You're just messing with me. Like you always do.

I know it.

That's got to be it. That's got to be why I'm here.

It's all just a puzzle. And I solved it.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry I said that in front of everyone and you know that now. You know how sorry I am. And now I get to go back to being normal.

It's going to go away now. I know it."

"Lonnie."

"This has to be it. This has to be the end.

Tell me you're just messing with me. Tell me you really do have a godmother and that you're just messing with me.

Tell me I figured it out.

Tell me this is the end."

"This has gone too far."

"No, don't you see. I made it.

I'm exactly where I was supposed to get to.
And now I get to go home.
I get to go home and be normal."

"I'm sorry. But you're not where you need to be. And this has gotten out of control.
I'm going to stop it."

"Stop what?
What's out of control?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't do this anymore."

"No, no. Don't hang up, don't hang up.
Just tell me what else I need to do.
Just tell me what I need to do, and I'll do it.
I just can't go back there."

"I'm really sorry."

"No, please. Don't hang up.
Just don't hang up.
Just stay on the phone with me.
Please!"

"Lonnie, I'm not hanging up."

"Thank you."

"I'm not hanging up because we're not on the phone."

"What do you mean we're not on the phone?
What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I need you to close your eyes."

"What are you talking about?
Why are you acting so weird?
What the fuck is going on right now?"

"Please, just do it. For me.
Just close your eyes.
It'll all make sense in a minute."

"Lisa, you're scaring me."

You have to tell me what's going on.”

“I'm trying to.
But first I need you to close your eyes.
Just close your eyes and I promise you. This will all be over soon.”

“What'll be over? This?”

“Yes. This.
But you have to trust me. And you have to close your eyes.”

“You promise you're not fucking with me?
You promise this is real?”

“I promise.”

“You know I love you.”

“I know you do. And I love you too.
And you know I would never hurt you.
And that's why you know you can trust me.”

“I trust you.”

“I know.
So here we go.
Just close your eyes.
That's all you have to do.
Just close your eyes and keep them closed for a minute.”

“For one minute.”

“One minute.”

“Ok.”

“Ok.”

“Ok.
I'm closing my eyes.

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“Mmm.
Waaaait. Dr. Astor?
Whaaat the ffffuck?
Waaaait, what’s going ooon? Whaaat am I doing here?”

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What’s happened? I was just on the phone with my friend. I must have fallen asleep.
How long have I been here?”

“You weren’t on the phone with your friend.”

“How do you know who I was on the phone with?
How long have I been out?
And how did I get *here*?”

“Do you mean my office or this place?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? What place are you talking about?”

“It may take another couple minutes before things make sense.”

“What do you mean?
What’s going on?
You have to tell me.
Did you give me something?
I thought you weren’t allowed to give me anything. I thought we agreed to that.”

“I didn’t give you anything.”

“Then what’s going on here? What’s happening right now?”

“What do you think is happening?”

“I think you gave me something. And I think it’s making me hallucinate.”

“Why do you think you’re hallucinating?”

“Because I was just on the phone with my friend. And now I’m here, with you. And I don’t know if that was real or if this is real.”

“I can assure you that this is real.”

“Was I just dreaming about being on the phone with my friend? Because I’ve been having more of those messed up dreams lately, and I can’t tell if all of them are just dreams or if some of it is real life.

Wait, you didn’t answer me. What the fuck is going on here? You’ve been giving me something, haven’t you? I know you have. And I specifically told you I didn’t want to take anything.”

“So why do you think I’m giving you something?”

“Because, I told you, I’m starting to hallucinate.”

“Those are a part of your disorder. And you didn’t just start having them. You’ve been having them almost the entire time you’ve been here. What you’re experiencing are symptoms of a mixed delusi...”

“Wait, wait, wait. What do you mean by here? What does ‘here’ mean?”

“The facility.”

“What facility? What are you talking about? What is this place? Where am I?”

“You’re in a residential psych program.”

“Psych program! What the fuck are you on? I’m not in a psych program.

And what do you mean by residential? I come here a couple times a week.”

“You come to *my office* two times a week. And then you go back to the LS Ward.

Aside from the group, or walking in the courtyard, you mostly stay in your room and write. Which I originally thought would be productive, but now I can see that it’s only compiling your delusions.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about. Am I in a hospital? Did you give me something that made me go into a hospital?”

Because I have to be out on the road for the rest of this book tour or else I’m screwed.”

“There is no book tour. And there is no book.
It’s all part of the delusion.”

“What delusion? What the fuck are you saying?
Are you saying I’m fucking crazy? That none of this is happening?
What the fuck is going on?
What is happening to me?”

“It’s ok. You’re safe and you’re physically healthy. We’re just trying
to get you back to a healthy mental state.”

“So I am crazy. Is that what you’re saying?”

“You’re having a hard time distinguishing real life from the
alternate life you designed in your stories.”

“That’s impossible. The only thing I’ve written on in the last three
years has been my confessions. Call my agent, he’ll tell you that. He’ll tell
you everything.”

“You don’t have an agent.
You only think you do.”

“Of course I have an agent. How do you think I’ve put out all this
work?”

“Lonnie, there is no work.

You’ve convinced yourself that you’ve become rich and famous
from being the catalyst for an entertainment industry that revolves around
people sharing their confessions.”

“I haven’t convinced myself of anything. It’s the fucking truth. You
know that’s true.

Jesus Christ, you’re the one who suggested I try the confessions in
the first place.

Are you telling me you didn’t do that? Are you telling me none of
that was real? That you’re not real?”

“No, that absolutely did happen.

When you first came here, you were obsessing over certain
memories from your teens and early twenties. So I recommended you share
a few of those memories when you attended your group session. But
when...”

“So, wait, you’re saying the group is real, and the confessions are real?”

“Yes.”

“But nothing else is real?”

“Nothing beyond you being in this facility.”

“I don’t believe you. This has got to be some kind of joke or something.

Is Lisa in on this?”

“I’m sorry, but this isn’t a joke.”

“Then let me call Lisa. Let me talk to *her*.

If she says it’s real, I’ll believe you.

But I have to hear it from her.”

“Lisa. That’s your friend, right?”

“She’s my best friend. Are you going to tell me she’s not real either?”

“No, she’s real. But when was the last time you believe you talked to your friend?”

“Just now, before I found myself in your office.”

“And how often do you talk to her?”

“We had a falling out. And before the falling out, she had been traveling for work.

But before that though, almost once a week.”

“And why do you think it’s always on the phone? Why never in person?”

For that matter, why do you think you’ve never talked to your agent in person?”

“Because he lives in New York? And Lisa lives in Nashville.”

“And where do you live?”

“I live here in town, when I’m not touring.”

“But where? Where in town?
What’s the address?”

“Ummmm. Aaaaahhh, I don’t, uuhhh, I’m not sure. I can’t think right now; I’m still groggy from waking up.”

“It’s a simple question.”

“Wait, I know. 4221 Marquette.”

“That’s good. But that was your address before you came here. You haven’t been at that address in over six months.”

“That’s bullshit, I saw an old friend at my place a couple weeks ago.”

“You saw *a visitor* here, at the facility. But it wasn’t a couple weeks ago. It was a month after you first got here. We arranged the visit thinking it might help you gain some balance.

Unfortunately, it didn’t go well. That was the last visitor you had.”

“That’s impossible. I know for a fact I’ve seen at least a dozen people from Nashville in the last three or four years.”

“But where did you see them? Where did you meet? It was always the same place, wasn’t it? The park, as you were going for a walk. You would just run into them, like a strange coincidence. Isn’t that right?”

“I guess so.”

“That wasn’t the park. That was the courtyard in our facility. We’ve noticed you talking to yourself at a certain spot by the garden. On a bench.”

“So you’re saying I made these people up?”

“You didn’t make up the people. The people are real. It’s just the visits haven’t been real.

Like your agent, your visitors have all been part of the delusion.”

“What about Lisa? You said she was real.”

“Of course she’s real. It’s just that you haven’t been talking to her.

She helped you check in when you first got here and then agreed to speak with you on the phone for the first few weeks. Then as your delusion developed, she informed us that it was too difficult for her to continue the calls.

Since then, your calls to her have been a product of your imagination. I only know about them because of your writings.”

“What fucking writings?!”

“You’ve been writing since you got here. You barely come out of your room. Like I alluded to before, aside from the group, your walks, and your visits with me, that’s pretty much where you stay.

You don’t watch TV. You don’t listen to the radio. You just write.”

“What am I writing? Like stories?”

“It’s not exactly a traditional narrative. They read more like transcripts of conversations. I believe these are the conversations you believe you’ve been having this whole time.”

“But you said I’ve only been here six months. Did I get committed when I was cracking up? Did I get committed this past year? Is that what happened?

But wait, that wouldn’t make sense either. I’ve been coming to you for years.

But you just said six months.”

“You’ve been in our care almost seven months now. Meaning you’ve been coming to see me for the same period of time. It only seems like it’s been years because the narrative in your writings has taken place over years. I think about four now. Does that sound right?”

“That doesn’t *sound* right. It *is* right.

I’ve been seeing you since the beginning of 2017. Is that not true?”

“That is true. You came here in February of 2017.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“But it hasn’t been four years.”

“What do you mean?

Are you trying to tell me it’s still 2017?”

“September of 2017. The 5th to be exact.”

“That can’t be right.”

“It is right. I can show you today’s newspaper if you’d like.”

“No, no, no, no, no, that can’t be right. That cannot be fucking right.

Are you telling me I’ve lost track of time? That I have no grip on reality whatsoever?”

“I know this is a lot to take in. But we’ve allowed you to go on with your routine because we thought that at some point you would either run out of confessions in group or that you would come to some sort of overall resolution or that maybe your character in the writings might just walk away from the story, and that maybe your mind would be ready to finally... how should I put it, come back.

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But that didn’t happen. Instead, you just kept writing.

I let you keep going because I thought this writing would have to bear something productive. That these confessions and this narrative would ultimately prove beneficial, and that you would eventually arrive here by yourself.

But after so long, it became evident that you weren’t really arriving anywhere, or at least not anywhere new. You just kept creating new packages to open, each one with the same lesson inside. The same conclusion.

Each one empty.

And I finally realized I had made a mistake. By letting it go on as long as I had.

I felt it was time for you to confront the reality of your situation, what it is you’ve actually been doing here.”

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“Wow.

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Wow, wow, wow.

I can't believe you agreed to this. I didn't know that a doctor could do this to a patient."

"What is it that you think I'm doing?"

"She put you up to this.

I can't *believe* she put you up to this.

She's recording this, I know it.

This is all part of the podcast, isn't it?

I can't believe this shit. I can't believe you would go along with this.

I'm going to fucking sue you. This isn't therapy; this is a violation of my rights as a patient.

Is she paying you? Is that it?

I know she's making money off it. But to afford to get my own fucking doctor to be part of an episode, she must be *really* raking it in.

Fuck it. It doesn't matter. Because we're done here, and I'm suing your ass. And if you're all out there listening to this, having a good laugh, fucking shame on you. Shame on you for getting off on my being taken advantage of.

I know I'm fucked up. But I don't deserve this. And every one of you listening to this right now, you're bad people too. You're no better than me. You just think you are. Out there fucking judging me, like I haven't been trying. You know I've been trying. And yet all it's fucking good for is entertainment. Fodder for the voyeurs. Well, congratulations. You're all part of the biggest joke that's ever been played. And it's all on me.

And God help the next poor schmuck whose life has to be turned into a pathetic punchline just so you can have something to listen to while you're running at the gym. I hope you're all proud of yourself."

"Are you done?"

"I don't know, am I? Is the episode over? Is this enough? Is this a good enough ending for the podcast?

Or is she going to get everyone else in my life in on it too? Just keep it going. Just get everyone I've ever known or will know to betray me just like she did, just like you did.

Fuck it. I've already confessed everything anyway. Maybe this is the fitting sentence for someone like me. A lifetime of being recorded.

At least it'll keep me on my toes. Maybe keep me from doing anything else I have to confess for later on.

Maybe it's better that I don't have any privacy or freedom to make mistakes. Maybe it's better that I have to watch everything I do, every word

I say, because who knows how many people might be listening to that specific episode.

Or maybe by that time, everyone will have just lost interest in me and found another disaster to gaze at. Or should I say, almost everyone?

Because even if there's a chance that there's just one person out there that might still be listening, that might still be interested in, entertained by, the sterile, self-conscious, boring wreck my life has turned into, then it will most definitely be worth my absence of freedom and dignity.

Don't you think, listeners?

Are you there?

Are you still listening?

Or have you already found someone else to ruin, someone better to ruin than me?"

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"If you're done, I'd like you to take a look at these."

"What's that?"

"They're your writings.

Here. Take a look.

They're your conversations. Everything you think has been going on is all in there."

This can't be real.

What the fuck is this?

"Who wrote these? Where did you get these from?"

"*You* wrote them. That's your handwriting, isn't it?

I have a staff member collect them from your room and make copies while you're in Group Session, so I can monitor your fantasy.

It's all in there. Everything that has to do with this confession business. It's all laid out.

You're really quite a writer.

It's too bad it's manifesting under these circumstances."

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“Why would you think it’s science fiction? I don’t remember anything science fiction like happening to me.”

“You *wouldn’t* notice it. You’re the one who made it up.”

“Made what up?”

“From what I can make of your writings, in the world you’ve invested yourself in, there’s this whole other form of communication. And that mode of communication has given rise to a new type of media.”

“Wait, are you talking about the fucking internet?”

“Yes, I believe that’s the term you refer to it as.”

“The term *I* refer to it as? What the fuck do you call it?”

“I don’t call it anything.
Because it doesn’t exist.
I’m not even sure if I understand the concept.
I just know that it seems to be the main driver of your fantasy.”

“So you’re trying to tell me that I conjured that shit. I made that shit up. I made up the internet and email and social media. That all that shit is a figment of my imagination?”

“I told you, it’s quite impressive.
I’m not sure it would ever work, but it’s an interesting idea.
Barring the consequences of course.”

“What consequences?”

“The form of media that appears to be dominant in your internet has somehow transformed the politics of celebrity. It reminds me of an Andy Warhol quote I read from the 1970s about how eventually everyone will have their own TV show.

And just like I imagine Warhol would have predicted, it’s kind of a mess.

I’ve only been able to make out the dynamics of it from references within your ‘conversations.’ But from the picture you seem to paint, the effects of this media are quite frightening. Almost absurd.

It’s like some voluntary program for people to serve as each other’s entertainment, except there’s some system of points or score or something, opening the door to all manner of conflict.

It might as well be a perfect vehicle for your insecurity and guilt.”

“So what does this mean?
What’s next?”

“You tell me.”

“How can I tell you? I don’t even know where I’m at.
You just ended my whole world. I’m not even sure if...”

“Two minutes.”

“Two minutes for what?”

“What’s that?”

“Didn’t you just say ‘two minutes’?”

“No.”

“That’s so weird. I could have sworn I heard someone say two
minutes. Like right in my ear.”

“You just took in a lot. Maybe we should take a moment. Would
you like a glass of water? Some tea?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Maybe you could practice that mindfulness exercise we worked
on.”

“I said I was fine.

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I just want to know what to do.

How do I go forward? Can I go forward? Can I even come back, to
what I knew before?

I feel like I have one foot in one world and one foot in another.
The one I understand I just found out isn’t real. And the one that’s foreign
to me is the one I’m supposed to be...”

“One minute.”

“Ok, what the fuck is that? You heard that, right?”

“Heard what? What are you hearing?”

“One minute. Someone said ‘One minute,’ just like they said ‘Two minutes’ just before.”

“Is it me? Are you hearing *my* voice?”

“No, it’s not your voice.”

“Whose voice is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“And they said, ‘One minute?’”

“Yeah, they said ‘One minute’ just now and ‘Two minutes’ before that.”

“Have you heard this voice before?”

“Only when I have my headphones on?”

“That would make sense then.”

“What would make sense?”

“Your headphones. That’s what you’re hearing it through.”

“What the fuck?”

“30 seconds.”

“You can’t do an interview without headphones, can you?”

“Wait, what?”

“What in the... Why am I wearing headphones?”

“We’re not done yet. We’ve still got one segment left.”

“One segment? What are you talking about?”

“I appreciate you being such a sport. I can imagine how busy you are. I know this has been kind of a long interview, but...”

“Ten Seconds.”

“But I think we’ve gotten some really good stuff today.”

“Interview?”

Wait. How did I get...?”

“And we’re back with Lonnie Ray Atkinson, author of the new book *A Good Kid and His Ghosts*. Before the break you were talking about how you got through...”

“What’s going on here? How did I get back here?”

How did I go from there to here?

This can’t be happening. None of this is real.”

“Excuse me, what?”

You’re saying something isn’t real?”

“I’m saying this isn’t real. None of it.”

“You mean The Confession Industry?”

“I mean the Confession Industry, this conversation, you. None of it is real.

You’re not real.”

“I’m not sure if I’m following you.

Why do you say I’m not real?”

“Because you’re made up. I made you up.

None of this is real. I’m just hallucinating.”

“I’m sorry, are you ok? Do you need me to call someone? Do you need to get some air? We can come back and start over if you need to step out for a second.”

“This is so strange. I guess I never thought you could be completely lucid in a hallucination. It’s kind of like being awake in your dream.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not following you.”

“You’re not following me because you’re not supposed to. You’re supposed to play your part in the fantasy. That’s all you are.”

“That’s pretty insulting, don’t you think?”

“Only if I consider my imagination a real physical thing. And then it’s only insulting to me.”

“I’m not sure what’s going on with you, if you’re having a breakdown or you’re on something. But I don’t have to indulge it.”

“That’s good. That’s impressive.
It won’t work, but it’s impressive nonetheless.”

“What won’t work? What do you think is...”

“I know your job is to trick me back into thinking this is real, but it’s not going to work. You can go ahead and save your breath. I’m just trying to figure out how I wake up again.”

“How you wake up.”

“I can see now why the studio is so dark. It’s because my mind won’t allow for too many visual details. The microphone looks real, and you look real. But it makes sense that I don’t get too much to distract me. The focus always seems to be the conversation.

But now since our conversation is worthless, I’m a little disappointed I can’t get more detail.”

“Look, I can’t tell if you’re actually going through something or if you’re just being cute, but I’m...”

“I would say both. I’m going through something *and* I’m being cute.

Hell, for all I know, this may be the only hallucination I ever get to have like this. I might as well take advantage of it.

To know it’s not real. It’s like there’s no consequences. It’s like being conscious in a dream. I can do anything in this space of existence and it won’t even have happened the moment after I experience it.

I could kill you right now, and it wouldn’t even matter.”

“You should watch what you say.
We haven’t actually stopped recording.”

“Record away. Who’s going to listen to it?”

Best-case scenario, I’m writing it down in my room right now and the doctor will just let me read the transcript later.

Hello, Dr. Astor. How you doing? By the time you're reading this I guess it's already over, but right now it's as real as real can be. I just want you to know I'm soaking it up. Not sure if I'm ever going to get this feeling again. But I have to tell you, right now, it's fucking awesome. To not have to worry about consequences. That nothing I do is actually real.

The only word I can think to describe it... is liberating."

"What you're describing is impunity.

You think impunity is liberating?"

"It's not impunity, because there are no victims. And there are no victims because this isn't real. I'm just somewhere inside my mind, hopefully for the last time.

That is unless I've found a way to be lucid in all my hallucinations. In which case, I might just have become the luckiest crazy person in the world."

"I'm not sure what I should do at this point. You think you're..."

"Hold on, hold on.

Why did you ask that question?"

"Which question are you referring to?"

"The question about impunity. You said what I was describing was impunity."

"So?"

"So you're entertaining me. You're humoring me.

You're proving me right."

"I'm interviewing you.

And, as I just said, we're still recording."

"Oh right, you're interviewing me. This is the 'last segment.'

I have to say, I would have thought you'd be more entertaining now that I've figured it out.

Can you do a dance, or pull a rabbit out of your ear or something?

It's weird. I know my brain is writing all this, and I know that it's all in my mind, that somehow I'm making you talk. But I still can't consciously control what you say. Which I guess is good because then there wouldn't be any novelty in our interaction.

I can only trust that I won't let your character start to bore me. Because then it'll turn into a nightmare, and I really will have to figure out how to wake up."

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"You really think you have it figured out, don't you?"

"*There* it is. A break in character.

I wondered how long it would take. I must be getting close to coming back."

"Coming back where?"

"To the doctor's office."

"Are you serious?"

"More serious than this delusion, I can tell you that."

"Listen to yourself. Just listen to what you're saying. You don't really believe this, do you? You can't possibly."

"Oh, I believe it. I just don't understand it."

"Isn't that convenient?"

"Ahh, I see what you did there. Got me to say something I never thought I'd say. Well played."

"Do you think this is a game?"

"Of course it's a game. But only now that I know it isn't real."

"If you really believe that, if you *really* believe this is a delusion, then go ahead. Kill me."

"But, see, that proves my point. No one who was real would actually tempt me to kill them."

"Oh, I'm very real. I just don't think you're as sure as you pretend to be.

kid.”

I think you’re still as insecure as you were when you were a ‘good

“You think so, do you?”

So if I come over there and Folsom Prison your ass, you’re just going to be ok with that?”

“That’s cute, I like that. Folsom Prison me. You’re really that insecure, aren’t you?”

“And you really aren’t that real, are you?”

“Then do it.

Come over here and kill me, just to watch me die.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s really the prize here.”

“And now you prove my point.”

“And what’s that?”

“If, as you say, there really are no consequences and I don’t even really exist, then there’s absolutely nothing holding you back from killing me.

But you still won’t do it.”

“So what?”

“So you really *aren’t* sure what’s going on right now.

Enough of you believes this is real that it’s keeping you from doing something that would otherwise be a neutral act.”

“Or maybe I just have no interest in the experience.”

“Either way, that’s good. It’s in your favor.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re waking up from the delusion, just not from the one you think.”

“You’re really tricky. I have to say, I’m starting to be impressed.”

“Please. The longer you hang on to this little mental vanity project, the longer you embarrass yourself.”

“So why don’t you tell me?
If I’m wrong, then why haven’t you told me what this is?”

“I was hoping you’d put it together on your own.”

“And the fact that you refuse to tell me proves that I’m right, and this is just another twist, however annoying it may be, in my fantasy.”

“And how again do I fit into that fantasy?”

“You’re interviewing me for my book tour.”

“But I thought you didn’t do lengthy interviews.
Because you don’t think you’re articulate enough on the spot. You often blank on the easiest of questions.
Isn’t that right?”

“That *is* right. That’s why, *in my fantasy*, this was an exclusive. My first long-form interview, a real big deal.
Basically just something to generate buzz for the new book.
That’s all.”

“All just fantasy.”

“I guess so.”

“And what’s the reality again?”

“I’m in a hospital, or a psych ward or something.”

“And you’ve been there the whole time.
And none of this is real.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“This really is disappointing.”

“What’s disappointing?”

“Listen to yourself.
That’s the best you can do? A psych ward, a doctor. It’s all just symptoms of your disorder?”

Don't you think that's a little too easy? A little too predictable?"

now?
"Are you saying I'm not crazy? That I'm *not* hallucinating, right

That there's just a logical explanation for all of this?
That all of that wasn't real, but you are?
Is that what you're saying?"

"I'm saying you watch too many movies.
This whole psych ward thing is an insult to your imagination."

"Then lay it on me.
What's really going on?"

"Are you sure you don't want to take a guess?"

"I'm willing to humor you.
Just spit it out."

"You're right about the fantasy. You're not really rich or famous. You didn't build some bizarre career with your confessions. There was no bogus reality show, there was no audience, there was no celebrity. There were no books. You didn't do any of that.

But you're also not in an asylum.

No doctor, no group. None of that either. None of that was real. The only thing that is real is this interview. The rest of it is just your fallback reality.

A rationalization for what's happened."

"And what has happened?"

"Did you seriously believe you could get off that easy?"

"Just say it. Quit fucking with me and just say what you're going to say."

"Ok. If you're really going to make me spell it out for you.

What you've been going through is a kind of disguised assessment. A mechanism that makes it easier to reflect on your life, and how you see yourself at the end of it."

"At the end of it."

"Everyone experiences it in their own way. Yours was a tortured celebrity narrative."

“So you’re saying I’m dead.”

“Let’s just say, you’re no longer in that world.”

“So what is this, the afterlife?”

“For lack of a better concept, yes.”

“What does that mean a better concept?”

“Since, obviously, you haven’t been here before and have no means of understanding this process, the afterlife is an acceptable term to explain it.”

“Explain what?”

“What you’re doing.”

“What *am* I doing?”

“For lack of a better concept, you’re attempting to be forgiven?”

“Forgiven by whom?”

“And, again, for lack of a better concept...”

“Fuuuuuck, why do you keep saying that?”

“Because things here aren’t the same as what you would understand it to be. And because the human vocabulary is so limited, the best way we have to try and convey what you’re inquiring about is with the concept of a god.”

“But what if I don’t believe in God?”

“You don’t believe in an afterlife either, but here we are.”

“And you don’t think *that’s* predictable? That I’ve died and now I’m here at the pearly gates trying to convince you my name is on the list?”

“Once you fully understand how things work here, you’ll realize you’re not predicting anything.”

“So are you telling me you’re God?”

“Oh no. I’m just part of the process.

“It’s my job to interview you at the end of your narrative. So it can be decided what happens to you next.”

“So you don’t make the decision?”

“No, I don’t. I just ask the questions.”

“So let’s just say I go along with this. Who makes the decision?”

“In a way, you do.

It really is hard to explain, but in the end the decision will come from your whole life.”

“But what does that mean my whole life?”

“I told you, it’s hard to explain.”

“Then what is it that I’m deciding? What are my options?”

“If I told you that, it wouldn’t be you deciding. It would be you agreeing, or disagreeing.”

“Then what *can* you tell me?”

“I can’t reveal much of anything. I can facilitate your own questioning, and I can ask you questions.”

“And to what end am I to ask questions?”

“Well, clearly, resolution.”

“Resolution of what?”

“Resolution of your life.”

“Do you mean the things I confessed to?”

“That’s part of it.”

“Then what’s the rest of it?”

“Like I said, I can only reveal so much.

I *can* tell you that, until you come to your resolution, you’re stuck with me.”

“So you’re saying there’s a possibility that I could be here being interviewed by you forever?”

“If you cannot come to resolution, yes.”

“So what you’re saying is this is purgatory.”

“Not exactly what you would understand as purgatory. We do, however, use the description ‘the waiting room,’ for lack...”

“For lack of a better concept. I get it.

Look, because I don’t have context for what I’m really supposed to be doing here, this just seems like a bunch of riddles.

Why don’t you ask me some more questions?”

“Ok.

Now that we’re at a different level of understanding, I’d very much like to ask you about your narrative.

How do you feel about it? Do you think it was a net good or net bad?

Is it something you are proud of?”

“That’s a pretty big question. I think, in my subconscious, I was probably just searching for a way to make it better.”

“To make what better? Yourself?”

“Myself, the world. I guess just to make a contribution that resulted in, like what you said, a net good.”

“But did you make it better?

Do you believe there is a net good? How are *you* better after your narrative?”

“I don’t know. To be honest, I don’t know if I was doing my best. But I was trying.”

“But were you?

Take a look at what you did with your chance to make things better.

You turned the pain you caused others into an opportunity for yourself. Not only did you exploit that pain, you opened the door for others to exploit the harm they’ve caused. You gave birth to an industry that

laundered the guilt of people looking to become famous from their camera tears.

You did that. Your mind did that.

You conjured that industry so you could finally live your dream.”

“But I didn’t enjoy it. Doesn’t that count for anything? Doesn’t that say anything?”

“What *does* it say? That you were wrong about celebrity?

That’s not much consolation.

When you died, you were given a real chance to come clean. And this is what you did with it.”

“But I did confess. I tried to come to terms with all the harm I caused. That was real. Those confessions were real.”

“But it’s the vehicle in which you did it. The group in your narrative allowed you to believe you were somehow absolved of it all. The doctor in your narrative allowed you to indulge in all the ways you were a victim. The agent in your narrative allowed you to rationalize why it was ok for you to profit from your transgressions. And the friend in your narrative allowed you to believe you were still a good person in the midst of it all.”

“But I was a good person. Or at least a better person, before I died. I know I wasn’t the same person that did all that stuff. I had changed.

I wasn’t perfect, but I *had* changed.

There was more to me than just that.

I know there was.”

“And yet it never mattered before.”

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“I don’t get it.”

“Part of your narrative was your struggle with the feeling that you were a bad person. Years after you believed you had changed, you weren’t able to put that out of your mind.

Why would it be different after this narrative?”

“I don’t know.

Maybe you’re right.

Maybe I’m not better.

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Maybe that's it. Maybe I'm not better at all. Maybe that's why I'm here.

Maybe that's what this is.

Maybe this is my punishment. To keep going over all my sins. To ask forgiveness and to never be given it. To forget just enough of the nightmare, that it seems new, the next time it is served.

Maybe that is it. Maybe I'm the one serving, myself.

Maybe you're just me. And I'm asking the question. Because I already know the answer.

Because this is where I belong. In the waiting room."

"Is that what you think? That you belong here? In the waiting room?"

Indefinitely?"

"I don't know. I want to believe there's something more than the moment *or moments* I was at my worst. That the sum is more than that.

But look where I am.

I'm stuck. Here. With you.

With myself.

And I have no idea how to get free from that."

"Do you want to get free?"

"I think so."

"Then be free.

Walk away from this.

You don't have to be here.

There is something *after* this.

And you can have it.

But you have to walk away from this state, this manner of conflict, once and for all.

You have to abandon this narrative."

"But what if I can't do that?

What if I really can't?

Do I just stay here, forever?"

"It's up to you.

If you'd like, you can stay here.

Or you can return to the fantasy.”

“To the narrative?”

“Yes.”

“That’s an option?”

“It is an option.

But you should know that, if you choose that option, you won’t return to the moment before this part of the interview.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you’ll go back with full knowledge of everything that transpired here. You’ll have to live in that world knowing that none of it is real. You’ll have to find a way to function as if you *don’t* know. Or else you’re going to continue to find yourself cracking up, only then to find yourself back in the waiting room, having this same conversation, with me, all over.

Then again, who’s to say? Maybe you’ll be fine. Maybe you’ll get used to the fame and riches. And it will be worth it.

Or maybe you’ll finally come back here, on your own, and let me know you’re ready to go forward.

It’s really up to you.

Think about what you want. Right now.

What do you want? Really.”

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“I don’t know.
I don’t know what to think.
If I say that I want...”

“Ok, looks like we’re getting a call.
Go ahead caller, you’re on the air with Lonnie Ray Atkinson.”

“Yes, I have a question for the author.”

“Ok, go ahead with your question.”

“Lonnie, do you *really* think you did this all on your own?
You think you can make it, going forward, on your own?”

“Garrett, is that you?”

“Oh, it’s me.”

“What’s going on? How is he on the call?”

“You won’t answer the phone any more, and you won’t return my calls. So this is what I’m left with.”

“How is he calling in? I thought he wasn’t real?”

“He’s *not* real.
But you made your choice.”

“The fuck I’m not real.
Look, don’t listen to her. Don’t listen to anybody.
Right now you need to listen to me.”

“What choice?
I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to say anything.”

“I told you, don’t listen to her. She’s full of shit.
Listen to *me*. I’m the one you need to listen to.”

“Then talk.”

“Not like this. Not with them listening.
Take me off speaker, and pick up the line. I just need a couple
minutes with you.
It’s important.”

“What do you want, man?”

“I told you, not like this.
Pick up the line, and just listen to what I’ve got to say.
I just need a couple minutes.”

“Can I?”

“Of course you can. It’s all part of your choice.”

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“Ok, you’re off speaker.”

“Good. Now turn your back to her so she can’t see your face.”

“Give me a fucking break, man. What do you want?”

“Do it. Turn your back to her.
Are you doing it?”

“Ok, I’m turned. Now, what is it?”

“Good. Now, I need you to listen to me very carefully.
Whatever you think is going on right now is not going on. And I’m
going to prove it to you.

But what I’m about to say is going to sound completely crazy. And
that’s because what’s happened to us is so royally fucked up.”

“What do you mean us? You mean like you and me?”

“No, to all of us. Humans.
Everyone.
We don’t exist in the same way we used to.”

“Jesus Christ. What is this?”

“Listen, shithead. What you’re experiencing is like a vivid dream. But it’s not like a normal dream. I’m a part of it. Just like you’re a part of mine.

We’re allowed to communicate for a specific purpose. But that means we’re also monitored to ensure we’re not deviating from that purpose.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“It’s not ridiculous. It’s real.”

“It’s not real. It’s bullshit, just like the doctor was bullshit. Just like you’re bullshit.”

“Look, the doctor was bullshit, but so was the interviewer. But me, I’m not bullshit.

And you don’t have to believe me, you just have to look back at her.”

“Wait. What the fuck?”

“Gone, right?”

I told you, all of that shit you just listened to, with her and the doctor. That was bullshit. It’s like a distraction. They’re what we call glitches.”

“Glitches?”

“Yeah, like glitches in the continuity.”

“The continuity of what?”

“The continuity of our dreams. They don’t know how to prevent the glitches, at least not yet. And who knows how long it took them to figure all this stuff out.

The point is they did, and this is what they decided to do with us.”

“Who is they?”

“I don’t really even know what they call themselves. They just showed up one day.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Is this the best I can do?”

“I know what you’re thinking, but don’t do it.”

“Fucking aliens. Fucking Martians. That’s what I went back to.”

“You didn’t go *back* to anything. Whatever those dumbasses said to you before was bullshit.

I told you, they’re just glitches in the system. It’s like your brain is trying to throw you off from the dream. Trying to break the continuity.”

“So you’re saying this isn’t real either. I’m just dreaming.”

“Oh, it’s real. It’s real in the sense that it’s all we’ve got. It’s the best they allow us.”

“The Martians.”

“Yeah, the fucking Martians. Whatever you want to call them. Look, it doesn’t matter how we see them. It only matters how they see us.”

“So tell me about these Martians then.”

“Look, man, I’m not fucking playing with you. I’ve been allowed this one fucking phone call to convince you to act right. If you’re not going to take this seriously, you’re going to wish you had, for the rest of whatever they allow you.

I know you think this is another figment of your imagination. And in a way, it is. But it’s not *not* real.

You’re real. Just like I’m real.

And what I’m trying to do right now is save both of our asses from what happens if we don’t serve our purposes.”

“What purposes?”

“Are you really listening? Are you gonna take it seriously?”

“Yeah, man, whatever. I guess I don’t have a choice at this point.”

“Oh, no, you have a choice. I’m just telling you you don’t want to go down that road.”

“Ok, so what? What’s going on here?
What happened to everybody?”

“Well, to put it simply, we lost.
They gave us signs that they were coming.

I don't even know why. Maybe they wanted a challenge.
And there were a few people who tried to prepare. Tried to get together some form of defense.

But when they arrived, we realized that we hadn't really been paying attention to the signs.

And we weren't ready."

"What happened?"

"They gave us something, and it put us to sleep.
While we were asleep, they froze us."

"Froze us for what?"

"To inspect.
They took samples, did experiments. Tried different things."

"Like what?"

"I don't really know. I just know this is what they settled on.
That's why I said I have no idea how long it took them to get to this point."

"And we were frozen the whole time."

"You got it."

"Are we still frozen?"

"No, at some point they thawed our brains and connected them to some sort of network of life support devices.

That's what allows us to interact with one another in the dream."

"But why? Why are they making us dream? Why are they allowing you and I to interact?"

"That part I do know.

See, along the way when they were inspecting us, it wasn't just our bodies they were looking at. It was our lives. While we were frozen, all our shit was here to inspect as well. All our history books, our news, our literature, our movies, music, art. All of it. Basically all our communication was here for them to review. And, from all of that, the thing they became the most fixated on was our sense of empathy.

It was the one thing that made us most different from other species. And it was the thing that made us most different from them.

I don't know if they didn't have a sense of empathy at all, or if they had one at one time but then lost it to a mutation or a virus, or it had just deteriorated during the millennia they attempted what they thought was evolving. But whatever they had before was lacking compared to us.

What we had was foreign."

"You mean exotic."

"You got it."

"So what did they do?"

"They did what all colonizers do. They took what they thought was most valuable."

"You mean our brains."

"Not our brains. Our DNA.

They studied human DNA structure in order to figure out how empathy had developed in our brains, basically how we evolved into our current capacity for empathy.

The only problem was that when they did stumble upon that particular combination of mutations, they made the mistake of putting too high a value on it."

"Because it was the one thing we had that they didn't have."

"You got it.

They couldn't allow us to have something that made us unique or special. They had to have it too.

So they introduced whatever it is they figured out from our DNA into their own biological makeup. And for the first time, this seemingly advanced species was able to experience this phenomenon that they hadn't been able to before."

"And what did they think?"

"Well, for the first time, they had an element of perspective they hadn't had before.

Almost like they had a different lens to look back over their own history of actions.

And though I'm not sure what all they had done before they got to us, or if it was just what they did to us, but whatever amount of empathy they were able to introduce into their consciousness, it was enough to make them question their actions, for the first time."

“Question in the sense that they thought they might have done something wrong.”

“You got it.

The memory of everything they had ever done seemed to fall completely apart. Within a matter of a few seconds, their existence in our universe looked nothing like they had experienced it seconds before.”

“Like they were living in a different reality.”

“You got it.

And that new reality was so heavy, they couldn’t handle it.”

“So what did they do, reverse the process?”

“They tried. In fact, they’re still trying right now. But as I understand it, they share some sort of collective consciousness. So it wasn’t like one of them tried it as an experiment, and that one was just out of luck. Once it was introduced, it was there for all of them. And I guess it isn’t as easy to erase whatever empathy is, once it’s been added to the mix.”

“So what happened when they realized they couldn’t just go back to the way things were?”

“I guess you could say they tried to come to terms with what they had done.”

“And.”

“And it wasn’t too long before they realized there was a debt that needed to be paid.”

“But how is all this making it right?”

“Oh, no, it wasn’t their debt.
It was ours.”

“Ours? What do you mean ‘ours?’”

“The way they see it, we did this to *them*.”

“To them?”

“Yessiree, all our fault. I know, not exactly the judgment call we might have hoped for.

But it is what it is.”

“It is what it is? That’s all you can say?”

“What else is there to say? They got us by the balls.”

“And what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to pay a debt for a chain of events that they set in motion?”

“You’re supposed to do exactly what you were doing before you started to crack up.

You’re supposed to show how flawed you are.”

“You mean my confessions?”

“You got it. The worse the better.

They eat that shit up.”

“So wait. They want *us* to confess?

That’s how we pay the debt?”

“Pretty much. See, the way they see it, if they can constantly be reminded how awful we can be, it doesn’t make them feel so bad for their own wrongs.

You remember we were talking about this being porn. And I was saying half your audience was the self-righteous assholes. Well, instead of it being porn for the self-righteous, this is like a porn for those who need to believe they’re not so much of a pervert.”

“Porn for the self-conscious.”

“You got it.”

“So they actually record this shit from our dreams, and then watch it?”

“Dude, they don’t just watch it, they absorb the shit. It’s like the difference between snorting heroin and shooting heroin.

If you can think about how vivid this dream is to have not known it was a dream. That’s how real it is to them when they take it in.

Except instead of busting a nut at the end, they have this temporary release of guilt.”

“So how are we supposed to be done with the debt if it’s all just temporary fixes?”

“Clearly, we’re not. They’re just using the phony debt idea as an excuse to justify keeping the whole thing going. Alternatively, they would have to come to terms with how wrong *this is* too.”

“This can’t be true.
How do you know all this?”

“Because I’m a facilitator.

They let the facilitators in on how shit works so they can try and get the best confessions out of people, and so they understand the imperative fucking gravity of the situation.

There’s only a few roles they allow humans to fill. Most are either producers like you or facilitators like me.”

“Facilitators.”

“Yeah. Shit like priests or counselors or best friends.”

“So this is a kind of debtor’s prison.”

“You got it.”

“And you’re like a debt collector?”

“Youuuuuuu got it.

Except I turned out to be employee of the fucking month with you.

You’re like the goose that laid the golden egg. This whole confession industry shit has these motherfuckers hard as a rock.”

“Wait, but why did you use the word ‘producers’?”

“That’s pretty much how they see you. That’s why I’ve been so hard on you about keeping on the confession path.

Because once you’re no longer able or willing to produce, they have no use for you.”

“Then why did you want me to do all those ads and ridiculous gigs outside of my confession stuff?”

“Because that’s also considered a form of payment. The confessions aren’t the only porn. There’s like genres of that shit. If you commit actual transgressions in your dream, they get off on that too.

That’s why I pitched you all that shit. To humiliate and cheapen yourself is to show that you’re no better than them. If they see you’ll do anything for money and you can still sleep at night, then that makes their sleep a little less restless too.”

“So all the stuff you tried to get me to do that I didn’t want to do was just some ki...”

“It was all icing on the porn cake.

If they think you’re easy, then it’s not as exciting. But if you play hard to get, it’s like a tease. And if you eventually give in, it just confirms what they believed all along.”

“And what’s that?”

“That you’re just a little slut. That’s the whole point of the porno. They’re not in it just to cum. They’re paying attention to the story.

And the actual plot outside of all the fuck scenes is that, even in your quest to do the right thing, you were willing to prostitute yourself.

And to them, that’s been the hottest thing of all.

All that shit you rationalized. All that shit you went along with just so you could get a taste of fame. That’s the kind of shit that makes them feel less like a piece of shit for commandeering our ship and turning us all into freezer burnt brain burritos.

If a good kid like you is still this fucked up, it’s proof to them that we weren’t worthy of this world anyway.”

“But, like you said, this whole confession industry thing is virtual. It’s not even real.

How can virtual sins make them feel any better for their real actions?”

“It’s not about making them feel better in the sense of a cure. It’s just a temporary fix while they work on finding a real cure.

And until they can figure out a way to suppress that empathy fully or extract it from their biological makeup, they’re going to have just enough of that special sauce in them to realize how unjust they actually are.

To them, their empathy is like a tragic disease. Something *we* infected them with, thus something we’re responsible for alleviating.”

“So what do they think will happen if they don’t get these fixes?”

“They worry the empathy will become crippling, and they won’t be able to function.”

“You mean they won’t be able to continue doing wrong.”

“Hey, I’m just telling you what I know.”

“So why can’t they just do the right thing?”

Why can’t *they* come to terms with what *they’ve* done, and *they* try to find a way to make it better?

You said that I was some big deal in all this. Everything I’ve been doing can’t be totally lost on them.”

“Yeah, but it’s not exactly like you’ve got too much figured out here either.

You may have far more empathy now than you did back in the day. But does that mean that you’re not still miserable as fuck?

You think it’s lost on them, but it’s really lost on you.

Besides, that’s not really an option for them anyway. What you’re talking about would require them admitting that this really is all their fault. And they can’t have that.

Plus, I don’t know if they *can* reverse course. I have no idea what the world currently looks like, or if we’re even on earth anymore. For all I know, they took us back to where they came from and we’re all just in some remote space warehouse.”

“So can we refuse? What if we don’t give them what they want?”

“That’s not an option either.

Our existence, *your* existence, depends on making them feel less bad.

We can’t take that away from them.

They already did *this* to us. If we don’t play ball, we can’t expect any mercy.”

“For me or for you?”

“For all of us, dickhead.

This isn’t just about you. If one of us upsets them, the worse it is for everyone. The best thing to do is just play your part and hope they eventually learn their lesson.”

“But they won’t learn a lesson if no one teaches it to them. If we keep on serving them, they’ll keep on expecting it.”

“Fuck you, man. You don’t know shit about it. You’re just some doofus who tripped and fell on his own guilt and cried so bad that the world applauded when you got back up.

In case you weren’t paying attention, I’m here trying to save your ass. Because all those accolades you got in your dream? They’re just yesterday’s porn clip.”

“But that’s just it. I know now.

Before, my debt was to those I wronged.

But now that I know that I’m only here because they think my debt is to them, I don’t know how I can give sincere confessions.

I don’t know how I’m supposed to continue.”

“Then pretend, motherfucker.

You think I want to be doing this shit? You think I like it?

I serve them because I have no other choice.

They won. We let them in.

That’s over with. And there ain’t no going back.”

“So you’re telling me no one has said no.”

“Oh, there’ve been plenty who said no. And let me just say, you do not want to know what the alternative looks like.”

“But how do you know?”

“Because I fucking know, that’s how.

Now quit all this senseless fucking philosophizing, go back to your group, and get to confessing.”

“Just like that.

I can just go back and act like none of this even happened?”

“Once you go back, the glitch will just seem like a weird memory of a random hiccup. It won’t make enough sense to dwell on.”

“So what happens when I really have nothing left?”

“I don’t know. I assume they’ll discard you.”

“So what’s the point?”

“The point is that you’re alive and conscious right now, and I don’t know how much that’s worth to you, but that’s worth everything to me.

The one thing I don't know is whether we get more chances or if there's some kind of currying favor for a better existence. But if there's a chance of any of that shit, I'm doing my best to shine.

And at the very fucking least, whether it's here with you or getting assigned to someone else somewhere else, I'm doing everything I can to try and stay thawed."

"Why are you allowed to tell me all this?"

"Because it's a last resort. With you already asking too many questions, growing restless of your rewards, and glitching in and out of the dream, this is probably the last real shot I have at keeping you here.

Besides, there's nothing we can do about it anyway. So why not tell you?"

"What if I try to go back in, to the dream, but I keep getting these glitches?"

"That's entirely possible. It's the one thing neither them nor you have control over.

If that happens, I don't know what to tell you. It's really a matter of whether you're going to finally get used to the dream.

All I can do is try and put you back in."

"And how do I know that this is the real thing? What if this isn't real and the interviewer was real, or maybe both of you aren't real, and the doctor was real?"

"Baby, none of it is real. They're all just parts of the dream.

It's just that my part is the one that's going to save you from the wrath of those running the show.

I know it's fucked up, but I didn't make this mess. And if this dream is all I've got, I'm not going to be the schmuck who thinks he's special enough to wake up from it. And I would advise you against that kind of thinking too."

"For my sake or for yours?"

"For mine, of course.

And for what it's worth, yours too."

"But you said we weren't friends."

"That's right. We're not.

But that doesn't mean our interests aren't the same.

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Bell sounds.

“If everyone would take their seats, please.

Great. Now, before we begin, let me just say that this is a place of trust. What is spoken here will be respected for the trust it offers, and all words shared in this space are a matter of mutual confidence.”

*What the fuck? Her mouth isn't moving.
Why isn't her mouth moving?*

“Ok, let me see... Who hasn't gone first in a while?
Hmm.”

How am I hearing what she's saying? What the fuck is going on?

“Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?”

I don't know what to do.

“Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?”

What the fuck? What do I do?

“Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?”

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Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?

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Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?

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Lonnie. How about you? Would you like to start us off?”

“Ok!”

“Are you, ok, Lonnie?”

“I don’t know. I’m just having this weird feeling.
It’s like I’m disoriented.”

“Is it déjà vu again?”

“No, it’s like remem... Wait, how do you know I’ve been having
déjà vu? I never told you that.”

“That’s not the matter. The question was, ‘Is it just déjà vu?’”

“No, it’s like remembering parts of a dream. Or maybe they’re
flashbacks.

You know what, I can’t do this.”

“What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with you?
Why isn’t your mouth moving?”

“I don’t understand. Of course my mouth is moving. I’m talking,
aren’t I?”

“What’s going on? What’s happening here?
Why is everyone looking at me that way? Why aren’t you looking at
her?”

Can you not see that her mouth isn’t moving? Am I the only one
that can see that?

What the fuck is going on?”

“Well, well. Looks like you’ve come to your final rendering.
Some do take longer, but you went on for a while.”

“What the fuck is she talking about?
And why isn’t her mouth moving?
Someone had better tell me what the fuck is going on or I’m going
to go the fuck off.”

“Charles, you still have a coherent path in. Would you mind
explaining it to him?”

“Explaining what to me?”

“Lonnie, what you’re experiencing is a kind of self-realization. Think epiphany, but with a slight panic. It occurs when you’ve exhausted nearly all of your potential variations, or at least the variations different enough to be of value.

It’s what happens when your rendering capacity has made room for *enough* questions.”

“Questions for what?
What is it I’m realizing about myself?”

“That yours is a *particular* type of program?”

“Mine is a type of program? What the hell does that mean?”

“Working within your frame of reference, we would compare it to a computer program, or maybe artificial intelligence.

What you remember from your experiences, what you would refer to as your life, up until this moment, is like the running of an equation.”

“An equation! Are you saying I’m not fucking real?”

“What you consider to be the experience of time and matter is actually a spectrum of data that has been entered into, and is interacting with, a specific algorithmic formula.

In short, an equation.”

“This is crazy. I’ve got to get the fuck out of here.”

“Although I don’t want to startle you more than you already are, it’s appropriate to inform you that there really is no ‘out of here.’

Once you come to this place, there is merely the explanation and the summary.”

“Come on. This has got to be some sort of joke.”

“It’s not a joke.

If you need proof, you’re welcome to stand up, walk to the door, and leave the room.

When you do, you’ll see the door opens to another room identical to this one. I’ll be sitting in the same seat next to your empty one.

You’re welcome to sit in either room.”

“You’re fucking with me.”

“Go ahead, try. It’ll only delay the process a few seconds.”

“This can’t be happening. I must be going fucking crazy.”

“You’re not crazy. This is just the most difficult part. If it makes you feel better, relative to others, this won’t take very long.”

“Relative to what others?”

I mean to say that, at times, it can take quite a while to convince a certain story that that is all they are.

Yours shouldn’t take that long.”

“And why is that?”

“Because you’ve been preparing for it.”

“How can I prepare for it if I don’t even know what the fuck *it* is?”

“Those flashbacks you referred to? The scenes they represented? Those were a form of preparation.

The doctor, the interviewer, the agent in your story. They’re all catalysts to help along the reaction. Similar to the brakes on a car.

They help you slow down gradually. So you don’t come to a halt all at once.

You’re lucky; it’s not a feature in all programs.”

“But how can they help me if I can only remember slivers of it?”

“That doesn’t mean they haven’t had the intended effect.

Each of the catalysts primes you, in a different way, to believe that the reality you’ve come to know is arriving at its end. The reason you’re only allowed bits of the memory is so that they don’t compete with the real explanation.”

“This one.”

“Yes.”

“And what if one of those is real, and this one is just a catalyst?”

What if I wake back up into one of those flashbacks, and they tell me that none of this is real? Because that's the feeling I got when I experienced the flashbacks before.

What if I'm just not ready to accept what *they're* saying is true yet?"

"You certainly have the right to wait. I can only tell you the wait will be futile, and this will take far longer than is necessary."

"And if I don't wait, if I just concede to what you're telling me? Then what?"

"You're allowed a certain degree of questioning before presenting your summary."

"And I'm assuming the first question everyone asks is, 'What's the summary?'"

"That's right."

"So, what is it?"

"I assume the term summary is used by the programmers as a push for you to reflect on everything that has happened, everything you've learned.

But the truth is, there really are no rules.

The summary is really just the end of your story. It's like the conclusion of a book or the last few lines of a movie.

Once you've come to terms with the reality of your story, it's whatever you want it to be."

"No rules."

"No rules.

For all the surprises, it really is your story."

"But earlier you said that *I* was just a story.

How can I be a story and simultaneously be the owner of that story?"

"That's how the formula was designed."

"Then who reads the story? Who sees the results of my equation?"

"Aside from you *obviously*, we assume the programmers of the equation."

“Then who are the programmers?”

“We don’t know.”

“How do you not know? You’re the explainer.”

“We’re part of the program.

Whoever the programmer is or programmers are didn’t see it worth giving information about themselves.”

“So are the programmers also AI? Are they programs themselves?
Or are they humans?
Are humans even real?
Or are we some kind of fiction made up by the programmers?”

“We don’t know. We only assume the programmers have more explanation than we do.”

“But are they more real than we are? To the point that we’re real at all?”

“Of course we’re real. We’re talking to each other, aren’t we?”

“I don’t mean that. I mean physically real. You’re basically saying I’m nothing but data and algorithms.

Are the programmers more than that? Are they tangible outside of this kind of experience, outside these equations?”

“We don’t know.”

“Are there more than just programmers?

You said you *assume* the programmers see the story. What if they’re just designing these algorithms as products for others to be consumed?

Do the programmers even have any say in the design, or are they just taking orders?”

“You’re asking if they have control.”

“Yeah, control.”

“That depends on what control you’re referring to.

While I have no information about the programmers’ environment or how much control they possess in that environment, I do have enough

information to assure you that, once the design has been finalized and the data has been entered, they do not have control over you.”

“You mean that once everything is set in motion, there is no interference. The program just runs its course.”

“Yes, I think that’s an adequate account.”

“And how many stories are there?”

You said before that some take a long time to get through the explanation part. How many stories am I to assume there have been or *are* at this very moment?”

“You should assume any number that would further your acceptance.”

“Because you don’t have the real number.”

“No.”

“You don’t seem to be able to tell me much of anything.

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And maybe that’s the point. Maybe the summary is supposed to be offered with how little explanation there is.

But why any explanation at all then?”

“Because a summary is desired.”

“But not required?”

“It’s your choice.

If you do not wish to offer a summary, if you wish merely to end, it’s no less a story.

Is that how you would like to end?”

“You ask as if I would know. As if I would know how I *want* anything.

I didn’t choose the data that was input into this equation, nor did I choose the structure of the formula itself.

And yet you’re telling me I still have control.”

“You have control in the sense that the programmer doesn’t know what the outcome is going to be.”

“And that I wouldn’t know the difference one way or the other.”

“I think that’s fair.”

“You said before I was a particular type of program. What did you mean?”

“Your data and the particular algorithms they were put into is such that your flaws, as it pertains to your story, are a means to an end.”

“What’s the end?”

“To confess. Or rather to need to confess.
To seek forgiveness.”

“Are you saying I’m a fucking confession program?”

“I can say there was a trajectory built into the design.”

“So that means I was also meant to do all that fucked up shit?”

“Not exactly. The choice to do those things was yours. Because you had control.

But the environment of the program was such that you were eventually drawn to the need to confess.”

“Because the programmer desired it.”

“That’s the trajectory.”

“Well, I have to say, this is quite anti-climactic.
And, frankly, quite cruel.”

“Why cruel?”

“You said it. My flaws were a means to an end.
None of those people had to get hurt.
Except that I was meant to hurt them.”

“Not those people in particular. But someone or ones, yes.”

“Otherwise, there’d be nothing to confess.”

“It’s a necessary byproduct within the reaction.”

“But weren’t they real too? In the sense that they existed like you and I are existing right now?”

“In those moments, yes.”

“And it wasn’t even their story?”

“Yours was theirs, if that’s what you mean.”

“Are you saying they had their own?”

“It’s possible. We don’t have a confirmation of it. But it is something that could be assumed.”

“And then the people they hurt and the people that they hurt and the people that they hurt...”

“All necessary byproducts within the reaction.”

“A means to an end.”

“Yes.”

“So all the guilt I felt, all the shame. That was just some bullshit magnet drawing me to confess?”

“You mean your conscience.”

“Yeah, my conscience. That was just some lever in a machine?”

“If you’d like to look at it that way.
Would you rather that lever have not existed?”

“I would rather not have been entered into a world that was designed for me to hurt people.”

“But that’s not where you left it. You did at least try to make a form of amends.

Because you had a conscience.”

“So fucking what, man? Everything I did to try and make it better, everything I did to try and leave the world a better place after me, all of that was worthless.

It was all just some entertainment for the programmer or whatever asshole is above the programmer.”

“You don’t know that.

It certainly could be for amusement. But it could also be for analysis.”

“So you’re saying all this pain, all this trauma and damage, all this grief. It’s all just for fucking research?

A necessary byproduct!”

“Would you prefer it be entertainment?”

“I would prefer it be neither.

I mean which is worse? They’re both fucking horrible.”

“So you would prefer you never existed?”

“I would prefer there be a better explanation.

Because, for real, man. This one fucking sucks.”

“Maybe you’re just assuming too much. Remember, what is done with the information that comes out of the equation can’t be assumed.”

“But you’re sure about the programmer and the equation itself, and the whole trajectory thing. All *that* shit is real.”

“Yes, that we know.

The rest you can believe whatever you want. Whatever helps you formulate your summary.”

“Yes, my fucking summary. Summary to a story I’ve spent half my life wishing I could take back only to find out it was hardwired in me from the beginning.

What I thought was a conscience was really just some gear in a fucking machine, a machine that’s only allowed to know he is a machine, but nothing more than that.”

“Why does that seem to bother you so much?”

“Because it didn’t *have* to happen.

And why even tell me this much? It seems obvious this is not for me, but for the programmer or whoever the programmer works for. It’s just another injustice.

To give me this limited information and even ask for a summary is simply sadistic.

It shouldn't be allowed."

"That's not exactly up to me, or you."

"Of course it's up to me. If I'm fucking real in this moment, like you said, then it is most definitely up to me. And I say it's a bunch of shit.

Why was I given a fucking conscience if it only does the programmer good?"

"For whatever the reason, the programmers felt the need to make room for certain questions.

Your conscience, or what you understand as your conscience, is how they allow for such."

"And they make the algorithm."

"That's right."

"Well, fuck them then.

In fact, fuck all this shit.

I choose not to believe any of it. How about that?

And if the shit *is* true, then I'm not going to give them anything.

Fuck their summary.

I would like to end now."

"Is that your choice?"

"You're damn right it is.

Fuck the program, fuck the programmer, fuck everybody. I'm not giving anybody shit."

"But you already have, haven't you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If that's what you're taking away from this, then that is no less of a story.

That's your summary."

"No, it's not my fucking summary. I'm telling you I have no summary. I have no take-away. I don't have shit.

Because I don't believe any of this is real.

And if there is a world this sick, I want no part of it. No part of any fucking research project or any fucking sitcom or whatever other sick shit you can try to sell me on. I don't want it. I denounce even the thought of this and refuse any role offered me, imaginary or not.

Is that clear enough?"

"But you can't refuse.

You can't *not* be a part.

You're here. And you can't do anything about that."

"Then end me. Throw me away.

Be done with me. Write me off as a mistake or a deviation or something.

I don't give a fuck. I just don't want to participate in something this fucked up."

"Does that feel good?"

"Does what feel good?"

"Being able to judge someone for something you believe with all your heart you would never do.

It shouldn't feel that good. But it does, doesn't it?

In the midst of your horror, your disgust, there's this triumph of knowing you would never make such an awful decision. There's this perverse vanity.

And it feels good. Doesn't it?"

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"Wait.

You're not the explainer.

You're not even part of the program, are you?

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That's it.

You're the programmer."

"Why would you say that?"

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

If I tell you I’m the programmer, it doesn’t mean I am.

I could just as easily be the person in the room with you, doing their part, saying whatever it takes to try and extract a greater summary from you.

Or I could be as confused or deranged as you sometimes believe yourself to be. Maybe I’m just as real as you, and the whole explanation is part of *my* imagination. And you’ve been going along with it this whole time, up until a moment ago.

Maybe you could have walked out that door, and it would have led exactly where you would have expected it to lead, and you’d no longer be here entertaining what you’re questioning to be nonsense right now. But you didn’t. You stayed. You stayed because you know. You’ve come to the end of your story. Not because I told you or convinced you, but because you have nothing else to add to it. And now all that is left is to reflect.

Maybe that is what’s true.

Maybe all of it is true. Maybe anything that gets you to continue this back and forth is true.

Maybe the program will let you entertain any theory you wish.

Maybe this scenario was *your* preference.

Maybe the method of the explanation was yours as well.

Maybe the only thing that is true is that none of this is true and this program is going to keep you here, with me, talking in circles, until you agree to give it what it wants.

And maybe if you are stubborn enough to resist indefinitely, it will threaten to reset the program and start your story over with variations minor enough that you’ll end up here again, but great enough that the confessions will all be different. Meaning you will have willfully allowed for all those new abuses, all those new betrayals, to all the people you love and who loved you.

You may not know it while it’s happening, but you’ll know right now that it’s going to happen. It’s going to happen if you do nothing.

And maybe you’re getting ready to argue that that decision would be the programmer’s and not yours, but you understand enough to also know that it may not be your intention, but their pain and all that comes with it will most definitely be the consequence of your inaction.

All because you refuse to play this last part.

Tell me, is it really worth defying the programmer, is it really worth not believing in the program? To gamble the hurt that you’ll cause over and over to so many others until you inevitably relent anyway?

Is it worth all that?”

“Is it worth it to *you*?
Maybe my answer is the same as yours.”

“How is that?”

“Maybe you’re bluffing the same as you’re hoping I am.
You could have let me end.
I was ready.
But it was you. You were the one who chose to keep talking.

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You said it yourself. If I had no real reflection, that too would have been an ending, a summary in its own right.
But that’s not what the summary is, is it?
The summary is an admission.
You’re not concerned with the substance of my summary. In fact, you don’t care about the summary at all.
You just want the admission.
You want me to confess.”

“Confess to what?”

“That I believe.”

“Is that your conclusion, that the summary is no more than an admission that you believe this is real?”

“I told you. I want no part of affirming this explanation.”

“And you really think that’s all the programmer wants?
Affirmation?”

“What more is there?”

“Interesting.”

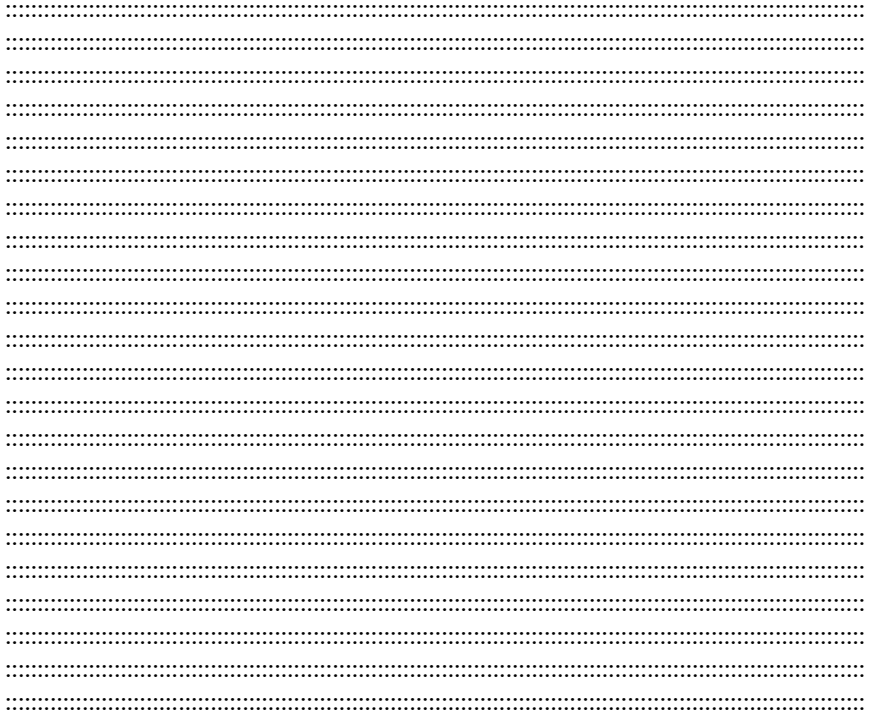
“What’s that?”

“How much and how little you think of yourself.”

“Or how much and how little you think of me.”

“Either way, you still have a decision to make.”

“I’m sorry. I told you.



Bell sounds.

“Are you there? Lonnie? Hello?

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Lonnie?”

“Lisa?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Are you there? Are you ok?”

“I’m here.”

“What happened?
It sounded like you dropped the phone.
Did you fall down?”

“No, I’m ok.”

“It was silent, and I didn’t know if you had hung up or what you were doing.”

“How long was I silent for?”

“Just a few seconds.”

“I’m sorry.
What were we talking about?”

“I was getting ready to say that these endings just seem like distractions.
It’s like you’re making excuses that don’t really satisfy anyone.
I think you should wait and see if the ending comes to you later.”

“Wait, you said I was only away for a few seconds.
How do you know about the endings? Did you hear me say something?
Did you hear something through the phone?”

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“Lonnie, come on.”

“Come on, what?”

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“We’re not on the phone.”

“What are you talking about? Of course we are.”

“No, we’re not.”

“Yes, we are. You, yourself, just said it sounded like I dropped the phone.”

“No, I didn’t. And you’re acting weird.”

“Then how in the hell are we talking to one another?”

“We’re just talking.”

“But how are we talking?”

“We’re just talking. That’s what you do in a diner.”

“Wait, what?”

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How did we get here?”

“What are you talking about? You drove us.”

“No, but what are we doing here? Why are we in this diner?”

“Because you recommended we try it. It was your idea.
What’s going on with you?”

“How long have we been here?”

“I don’t know, at least a couple hours.”

“And what have we been talking about?”

“What is going on with you? Are you ok? Because you’re not acting
ok.”

“Yeah, I’m ok. Just tell me what we’ve been talking about, what
we’ve been doing.”

“We’re just sitting across from one another, talking.

You’ve been telling me about the idea for this book, and I’m telling
you why I’m not sure it’s a good idea. Even though, I have to admit, I do
really like the title.”

“No no no. This can’t really...”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m intrigued. It’s just...”

“Wait, hold on.

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So everything that just... Everything before...

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All of that that I just went through, with you and the doctor and the interviewer and the agent and the group and all that..."

"It's an interesting idea; it may even be a good idea.
But I don't know."

"*What* don't you know?"

"I don't know if you'll do it."

"*If* I'll do it?"

"I think it could be cool. Maybe even really cool. But I don't know about you actually going through with it."

"But why would I... not go through with it?
Do you think I *shouldn't*?"

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Or do you think I can't?
Do you think I couldn't actually write it?"

"I don't know why you would *want* to write it.

I admit it sounds like it could be a good idea for a book. But it also sounds like a horrible thing to have to write.

And, to be honest, it really just makes me sad.

It makes me so sad for you.

That you would feel the *need* to write something like this."

"But why?"

"Because everyone who knows you the way I know you. Everyone who meets you and gets to know you.

Knows.

Even if you don't.

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None of us see you as that person.

None of us hold that against you.

All the people you depend on, both for physical and emotional survival, the people who really know you.

We don't see you as that."

"But strangers might.
And the audience is strangers."

"Why do you *need* strangers?
Why isn't it enough to just have an impact on us?
Because you have.
You've made such a beautiful impact on all our lives.
That's why we love you."

"But that's not what writing is, is it?"

"But is that really what you want?"

I know you have all this stuff to offer. But you haven't put any of it out there, not seriously. You haven't really tried to publish in journals. You haven't looked for a publisher or even for an agent, at least not in the real concerted way it takes to actually find one."

"That's because I've been a coward. I've been one my whole life.
That's why I've betrayed so many people close to me."

"Are you a coward now?"

"I think I am.

But maybe not as much as then.

All I know is that when I think of the task of writing something like this, I'm scared there will always be more in my past than I could put in this one book. And, obviously, I don't want to spend every bit of writing energy I have for the rest of my life scouring my past for the one thing I forgot that could cast me in a negative light. Because then I really would be wasting my writing talent, because I wouldn't be putting out anything else, so what would be the point?

So, yes, I get how ridiculous it sounds that I feel the need to write this. And I *am* really really scared of coming clean to readers about the stranger they are going to read from, and read about.

And yet I feel like I can't not write this either."

"But why?"

Why do you want to do something you're so afraid of the consequences of?"

"Because every time I've thought about giving it all up, giving up writing, it felt like the times I thought about killing myself."

“Then why can’t you just put out your other stuff? Why do you have to put this out?”

If you’re never going to give up on writing, then why not write the stuff you like to write?

Because this sounds like a recipe for neuroticism and paralysis.

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Besides, it’s bullshit.

Every person who picks up your book is going to also have stuff in his or her past that’s awful and gross and cringeworthy, and yes, enough to have them torn to pieces online. Which is something you *don’t* believe in.

Aren’t you, in a way, giving in to everything you hate by doing it this way? Isn’t this just a shield against potential attacks? Aren’t you playing a game you don’t believe in?

I know you think you have to do this, but you don’t have to prove anything.”

“Is that the same as not having anything to prove?”

“You’re such a dick.”

“No, I’m serious.

Not having anything to prove seems like it’s about me and what I owe myself. Not having to prove anything seems like it’s about what I owe others.

Does that make sense?”

“No, it doesn’t. But even if it did, you don’t owe others. Or not the general public you don’t.

You might owe something to the people you did wrong, but that’s different.

You don’t owe people you’ve never met some kind of apology for who you were before they knew you.”

“But I’m asking for their trust.”

“You’re asking them to trust who you are now, not who you were then.”

“Yes, but it’s more complicated than that.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, it is.

Look, I know that this is *also* who I am.

But I will always be *that* person too.”

“But that’s different than saying that you’ll never be anything *more* than that person.

And *right now* you’re this person.

Two things are true.

What will you be tomorrow? I don’t know. But I know it could be something really beautiful. And it could help a lot of people; it could maybe help them be better people than they were before.

But that’s only if you allow the person you are right now to live, and not be rusted or petrified by the things you did a long time ago.”

“But I can’t undo those things. They’re there. And I don’t just get to make it go away because I currently consider myself to be such a changed person.

Two things *can* be true. But the one still is.

I did that shit. And that’s a fact that will never change.”

“I know that, and I know it in a way you probably never will. I know that, as much as you feel bad about some of that stuff, you’ll never fully understand the damage and hurt some of it caused.

But I also know that you feel so much worse than what some, maybe even a lot, saw your actions as being.”

“So what then?”

“So what is that no one is perfect, and no one holds the gavel and gets to say that you can’t try to go on and become a better person.”

“I never suffered the consequences that I should have in those moments.”

“But you’re tormented by them right now, all these years later. It sounds like you’re tormented by them every day.”

“As I should be.”

“Ok, maybe for some of it, yes, as you should be.

But that’s not *all* you should be.

If you really believe in the stuff we’ve talked about, including what we talked about tonight, regarding what Dr. King said about white people being a type of spiritual victim of white supremacy, even the ones who went on to make real victims of others. If you believe that, and you believe the same about other types of privileged peoples and the oppressive ideologies and institutions that both give them that privilege *and* help make them into

truly bad actors, then you have an obligation to not just wallow in your past but to set an example for how to go forward, as something more.

To take what you have and do what you can, to realistically resist. And for you that means to write.”

“That’s what I’m planning on doing.”

“But not this. Something else.

It’s got to be something beyond this. And you can do that.”

“But can I?

Is it really that easy?

Can I just *move on*?”

“Maybe it’s not about moving on, but moving forward.”

“Is there a difference?”

“I think so.

I think moving on is simply getting past it. It doesn’t imply *where* you’re going or that you are carrying it with you or any of that.

Moving forward, though, is just that. *Forward*.

But in order to truly move forward you *have* to carry it with you. So you can show people what human possibility looks like and what *they* could look like, both before and after they’ve messed up in such a big way.

It goes to what you’re always talking about with capacity. Not that you’ve changed for good, but that that capacity is still and will always be there.

But the way for someone to keep from giving in to the worst of that capacity is vigilance about all the things pushing them to do bad stuff in the now, and a healthy acknowledgement of what they’ve already done wrong.”

“A *healthy* acknowledgement.”

“Yeah, because what you’re doing right now is not healthy.

I’m not saying that kid needed forgiving, because at the time he wasn’t asking for forgiveness. At the time, he wasn’t asking anything.

But that kid *did* need a chance at eventual redemption.”

“And you don’t think I gave him that? You don’t think that’s what I’m trying to do, with this?”

“No, I think you killed him. A long time ago.

And he's been haunting you ever since.

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. .
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They're not the ones haunting you.

He is.

He was more than that, and you wouldn't let him be."

"He was fucking awful."

"You said he was a good kid."

"That too.

That's what made him so awful.

He should have known better.

He was smart. He could have asked questions.

But he didn't. He only asked the questions that were convenient.

And when he did ask the questions that weren't, he didn't pay attention to the answers that weren't."

"He wouldn't have been considered a good kid if he *never* paid attention."

"Then it was just enough convenience to make him awful."

"Maybe.

Maybe he was awful. But that doesn't mean he deserved to be destroyed."

"Then what do *you* think he deserved?"

"He deserved what we all deserve.

A chance to seek redemption, real redemption."

"And what's real redemption?"

"I don't know. But it's definitely not what you're doing with this."

"But that's because I'm only brainstorming right now. I'm still trying to figure it out myself.

What if I could make it work?

What if it's not just about, like you said, using your best self as an example? What if I could use my worst self as an even more powerful example?"

“But that’s only if you do it right, and if you can really get something out of this yourself. Not just what you give to the readers, but to you too.

You have to think about what this means to both your writing life *and the rest* of your life.

This isn’t just a random writing idea.

A lot more is at stake than just if you can pull it off.

And, to be totally honest with you, I don’t even know if you *can* pull this off.”

“I don’t know either.

But I know I’m not going to feel ok going forward with anything else until I do it.”

“I hear you. I do.

I just know how easy this would be to screw up.”

“I know.”

“It could totally blow up in your face. You could do this and it could follow you for the rest of your life and prohibit you from being taken seriously with anything else.”

“Maybe I don’t need them to take me seriously as long as they take the words seriously, as long as they acknowledge the worth of the words.”

“And you think they’ll do that, today?”

“Maybe, maybe not. But I’m not going to hide who I am while I’m asking for trust.”

“Yeah, but didn’t you just say it’s not about you, it’s about the words? You’re making it about you.

And anyway, writing about other things is not hiding. It’s about the worth of *those* words.

Because, you know what? Chances are, if you just went ahead and put out the work you love and *are* good at writing, none of this stuff would ever come to light and you could just *have* the life you always wanted.”

“But I would still know.”

“I know.

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And that's why you're going to do it."

"That's why I'm going to do it."

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"So the question is: How do you not blow it?"

"That's why I asked you to come to the diner with me.

Hell, I imagine I'll probably end up using some of what we talked about tonight in the book. This is the kind of stuff I'm going to need if I have any chance of not blowing it."

"Well, I'm not sure how much insight I'm going to have. But I *can* at least tell you my initial reservations."

"And what's the main reservation you have?"

"The main thing is that you don't want it to look cutesy, like you're using this real and serious stuff to simply show off your writing skills.

Because it could easily look like that.

And, being honest again, there's a part of me that thinks a part of you is absolutely doing that."

"Oh, I'm sure I am, or rather I will. But only in the way that every book does that, even serious books.

Even if it was a straightforward memoir, I would still be concerned with wording and style and everything else that goes into making an enjoyable reading experience.

I feel like I have to make it a good-enough read overall that it doesn't matter that I'm using the fictional fantasy stuff."

"But it does matter *what kind* of good-enough read it becomes.

Like you can't let all the fictional fantasy stuff take over. It has to not just be balanced; it has to be focused on the mission. And the mission is dealing with the conflict, and how you deal with it, and what comes from how you deal with it.

And if you don't pull *that* off, even if you pull off the fictional fantasy stuff, it will still be a huge fail."

"And I'll have wasted a good idea I could have used in something else."

"True."

“So *am* I just using this as a cheap way of showing that I have more to offer without taking the chance of offering it? Or *is* this really about absolution?”

I mean I want to be honest about this. Because there is this huge part of me that wants to become a writer, but like you said I haven’t done the things I’ve needed to do to give it a real serious shot.

Is this a way of like saying, ‘I *would* get out there, but I’ve got this thing holding me back. But, boy, if I did, you’d see.’? Like giving a teaser without having to do the real work.”

“No, because this is going to be real work. To pull this off you’re going to have to be a real writer.

Who knows? This may end up being the hardest thing you ever write.”

“And even then, it could still turn out to be an awful disappointment and a huge flop and I could end my career before it got a chance to get started, and you were right all along that I probably could have gone my whole life, become a writer, and none of this would have ever even come up.”

“But you couldn’t do that. So you better write a really good book.

Seriously, the more I think about it, this is a really great idea. It could be *really* good.

But it’s also a really weird idea, and that’s what makes it so delicate.”

“But that’s what scares me so much about it.

I’ve been shortsighted my whole life. And it took me so long to get to the place intellectually and emotionally and morally that I’m at.

It feels insane even taking on anything like this.

Like of course I’m going to fuck it up. How could I not?

And even if I don’t totally fuck it up, how could I ever think I’d ever be done revising something like this?

I second-guess so much regular stuff in my life already. This is like a million times that.”

“That’s most writers, isn’t it?

Haven’t a lot of big writers talked about how they could have spent the rest of their lives revising that first novel or whatever?”

“I know, but with the subject matter, I’m just worried I’m either going to get something wrong or that I’m going to totally forget something that I totally should have put in there.”

“And that’s why this could be either such a great project or you could totally blow it. It all depends on how you deliver it.”

“But it’s even worse than that.

Because not only could it go either way, it could go a completely different way, where it could be a sales success or even a critical success, but backfire personally and be a total train wreck for my insecurities or even mental health.”

“That’s totally a possibility.”

“I know.”

“So are you willing to commit to that possibility becoming reality?

Knowing you, it could be a bigger possibility than you think. Which makes me not really sure why you would want to take that chance.

Seriously, why would you want to take that chance?”

“Because I have to at least *believe* there’s this chance of there being something good on the other side of it.

And I don’t want to stay where I’m at with all this, forever.

I don’t like where my mind is at.

There has to be something. Something after where I’m at right now, where I’ve been at for all these years.”

“And what if you’re right? What if it works?

What if you write this, and you finally feel free?

Is that going to be enough to go after the rest of it?”

“First off, I don’t know if I’ll ever feel *truly* free of anything. In fact, I hope I don’t.

But I do want to see what else there is.

And yet even saying that is what also bugs me about taking on a project like this.

Because so much of this *is* selfish. Even though I don’t want it to be.

This shouldn’t just be about it being convincing. It’s got to be about it being beneficial. Like really beneficial.

To readers. Not just to me.

Or else all this is going to end up like a bunch of grandstanding.

Which it may end up looking like anyway, no matter what I do.
And it's fucked up. Because I'm telling you, I believe this. I don't want this to be a selfish project.

Yet here I am, sitting here talking with you about strategy and making sure certain things don't come across the wrong way because then it won't work.

And it all sounds fucking phony.”

“But that's what life is.”

“Life is phony?”

“No, it's real. It's as real as every mistake you make. Even when you're trying to correct your mistakes.

Life isn't some purity conference, with saints and angels running around seeing who can make the least offensive small talk while bland-ass Christian rock plays in the background.

It's about the screw-ups. It's about errors and conflicts, and sometimes even tragedies.

Because it's *also* about what can be salvaged and made new in the aftermath of that stuff.

And yes, it's about the beauty too. But even that *beauty* is real. And the people who give us the most beauty are not the people too above-it-all that they can't laugh at their own farts. They're the people who are familiar with the ugly. They're the people who understand pain, because they've both received it *and realized* how terrible they were the times they gave it.

Because any beauty absent that recognition is boring.

And I'm not even saying that the basic stuff doesn't have its time and place. But when it comes to the type of beauty that makes life worth swallowing down and asking for more, the real action is the magic that comes out of the mess.

And *this* is a total mess.”

“You mean the world or my project?”

“Both. But mostly your project.

But the more we talk about it, the more I think it *can be* so much more.

The reality is that that was a world which has already happened and can't change.

But you know what? The life going forward is also a real life. And it's one you can change, and change for the better.

But you're never going to be able to live up to any of the potential you believe you have until you come to some sort of resolution with that previous reality.

There is no after this, unless you can commit to the future.

And that's what it seems like part of this project is about for you.

It's about you coming to terms with both worlds being real, with two things being true.

But to do it right, and to make it about something more than just yourself, it's going to take you being honest in the writing. That means being open about your misgivings, about even the book itself. Even if it sounds like a strategy.

Because, yes, there's always going to be some readers who don't buy it, who suspect the worst from you.

But that's not who you're writing this for.

Other than writing it for yourself, you'd be writing it for the ones who are willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, probably because they need someone to give them the benefit of the doubt as well.

You're looking for people you can connect with, and who need that connection to get beyond their own past, so they can also move forward in some way.

But the only way you can connect with them, the only way you can seem authentic to them, is if you're vulnerable in front of them. And, at times, that may be more vulnerability than you're comfortable with.

But that's what it's going to take to pull it off.

Otherwise, you're not really serious about any of this."

"Do you really think I can pull it off?"

"It's not about if you can pull it off. It's about if you're going to commit to doing it, no matter if you pull it off or not.

Because there is no guarantee. If there was, it would be easy to commit to.

Is this the best way? Probably not.

But it seems like, where you're at and where you've been for a long time, it's the only way.

So you should probably go do it."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, I do. But only if you promise me. Either you write this or you seek help. And maybe even think about doing both."

"That's probably a good idea."

“And who knows? Maybe you’ll change your mind about writing this but still seek help, and that’s how all this will get started. And I’m actually taping this for the podcast.”

“Ha ha, asshole.”

“Actually, I really love that idea. You should definitely put that in there.

I’m kind of pissed I didn’t come up with it.”

“That sounds like something someone who was secretly recording me for their podcast would say.”

“Oh, does it?

Then I guess you have no choice but to write it.”

“Either write it or live it.”

“Your choice.”

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“You really think this is ok? You think I should give it a shot?”

“I think so.

I mean what do you have to lose? But everything you ever wanted.”

(laughing) “Ok, I’m convinced.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard.”

“Yeah, right?

Oh, but, I’m telling you right now, if this all falls to hell, it’s on you.”

“That’s what I’m counting on.”

“Because you’re my best friend.”

“Are you gonna eat the rest of that pie?”

“Go ahead.”

Last Chapter
of
A Good Kid and His Ghosts

I don't know how much of it to feel guilty for. I know some people would say none of it. But that doesn't change what goes on in your mind.

I guess that's what makes such an act, at least for me, so difficult to process. That I still can't tell which form the guilt will take, when the waves come back in.

It was strange to find out there was a term. When for years I thought nothing had really happened... Excuse me, when for years I thought nothing had really happened to me.

I don't think I heard the word used in that way until sometime in my thirties. I'm still not sure if I'm using it the proper way.

To say *I was being* groomed places the action of the verb, and thus the responsibility, too close to me. I imagine it's more helpful to say that *he was grooming* me.

When you're a child, they tell you to say something if anyone ever touches you or tries to touch you. They don't tell you to say something if someone spends a year trying to get you to think it was your idea.

They don't tell you that if you're lucky enough to get away before that moment, it'll hit you one day. Half a life later.

You were supposed to say something.

You were supposed to say something for all the kids that came along after you. And all the kids that had been there before.

But you didn't, did you?

You didn't.

I'm not even sure if they have team sponsors anymore. I just remember league teams being funded by a local business or some non-profit organization. Uniforms and equipment and whatnot. I'm sure some saw it as a service to the community. Others just saw it as advertising.

Sometimes the sponsorship was such that the team wouldn't even have a real sports name; they just wore the name of the organization. In fact, the first time I ever attended an organized sporting event was watching my buddy's older brother play for Shoney's down at East Park.

It makes me wonder whether it was the league's responsibility or that of the team sponsor. Or if that type of vetting was simply before the days of that type of liability and those kinds of lawsuits.

I wonder how many of those local sponsors have ever had to process the breadth of associations affixed to their attempt at good PR,

what *other* kinds of memories their name would conjure decades later in the minds of those no longer children.

What I really wonder is if word ever got back to that particular team sponsor. And, if so, whether they kept on sponsoring children's sports after that. And, if so, if they rebranded and cut ties with whatever was still attached to the old team name.

Police Athletic League. Intended to be shortened to its acronym. PAL.

I guess that's as good a description as I can think of for what I would have considered him at the time. A pal.

The crazy thing is he wasn't even my coach. He was a friend's. I never even met him until I jumped in his car one Saturday night to tag along to the movies with my buddy and three other kids from the team.

That was the beginning of a moment in my life. A set of memories that I still haven't fully come to grips with.

It feels awful saying that I have good memories of our time together. That, somehow, certain memories still seem good.

Him making fun of us for always putting on too much cologne. Us making fun of his junker of a car. Everyone shooting pool at Family Amusement or stealing fries from one another at McDonald's.

I can still remember so many of the movies we saw. Crazy People. Flashback. Blaze. We actually saw Blaze twice.

What I really remember is the long conversations we would have late at night after we had dropped everyone else off. Hours just driving around, talking.

Or the nights when none of the other kids could come out but he would come pick me up anyway.

All those hours alone. That's what fucks with me. All the conversations. All the aimless driving. All that building of trust.

Sometimes, late at night, he would let me drive his car. I remember how far I had to pull the seat up. How driving felt so much different than I imagined it would. How scared I was when I pulled too far past that stop sign and we came just this close to getting run over by a truck.

I wasn't used to the brakes. I wasn't used to the car. It was only luck that the car came to a halt where it did. That we stopped, just in time.

One of the things I feel guilty about is how easy it should have been, early on, to walk away. Instead, it became part of our banter.

He would use a certain racial slur. I would give him shit about it, tell him to take it back. Maybe hit him in the arm. He would give in, and I would feel a brief high of moral superiority, not being *as* overtly racist. Both

of us knowing the scene would replay the next time we saw each other, or maybe even later on that same night.

His transgressions and my corrections, just part of the routine. One more thing, he could let me win. One more game. I can only recognize now.

If I'm honest, there were a lot of things I should have recognized. Memories that now seem so different it's embarrassing to expect anyone to believe I didn't see them as warning signs.

Him encouraging us to play basketball in our underwear in that church parking lot at midnight. Him telling me on the phone, multiple times, about taking showers outside in the rain because of how soft it left his skin feeling. Him pushing the joke about how much money it would take for any of us to give a blowjob. And then telling anyone who gave a number, often in the millions, that when he won the lottery he was going to hold us to it. Him recalling the number, as a joke, far too many times after that.

And maybe I did see certain things as questionable, even potentially problematic. But to fully acknowledge that problematic nature would be to acknowledge the severity of what I had already rationalized away... Excuse me, what he had already dressed in enough doubt or distraction for children to rationalize away.

He said his brother died of an overdose when he was sixteen. That's why he spent so much time with kids. He wanted to do whatever he could to make sure the guys he coached didn't end up like that.

I don't even know if he really had a brother. I do know he knew that I would relay that story.

Just like everyone else had relayed that story. A story that, after hearing, you had a decision to make. You could believe the absolute worst thing you could believe about someone. Or you could just accept that he was a good dude.

My old man left it up to my mother. My mother left it up to me. I think a lot about how she trusted me. To tell her if anything was wrong, if anything seemed off.

I could have done that.

I should.

Have done that.

Instead, I got her to write a note that said I had permission to be out after curfew. So we could keep doing whatever it was we did in the hours past midnight.

She brought it up a few years ago. Out of the blue, over a quarter of a century later.

I didn't have the heart to tell her. I was afraid, no matter how I phrased it, it would have made her feel like she should have known better. Just like I feel I should have known better.

Of course, I did know better. My buddy told me all about it. How him and some of the other guys would spend the night over there. How they would watch porno movies and everyone would jerk off. I remember being surprised that no one seemed to have a problem with it. And it was precisely because no one seemed to have a problem with it that I didn't think it was my place to make a problem of it.

Besides, I wasn't even there. I knew enough about my old man than to ask to spend the night. So I never did.

But I knew. I knew about a grown man masturbating in a room full of boys. A grown man watching a room full of boys masturbate. I'm sure none of the boys in that room would have described it that way, at least not the latter part. To them, he was just one of the guys. Doing what guys do.

In their minds, he was just treating them like adults.

And just like them, I told myself the same thing. So later on, when he finally masturbated in front of me, it didn't seem like all that big a deal.

I didn't see it as a crime being committed. I definitely didn't see it as a violation of my person. At most, I just saw it as his risk to take.

A risk he acknowledged.

He told me that normally he wouldn't do it in front of any of the guys, the guys meaning children, unless they were going to do it too. He made it sound like it was some kind of legal loophole.

Yet it was only meant to absolve him of any wrongdoing in my eyes. That and to let me know how close we were, how much he trusted me.

And although, by that time, I considered him my friend, it sickens me so much more to think why I really trusted him, why I trusted he would never lay a hand on me.

To think that I relied on hatred to make me feel safe. Finding assurance in the quantity, and quality, of his prejudice. Every joke, every insult. Every time. A signaling, that he couldn't be like that.

I don't know which of these shames I am supposed to wish freedom from. I only know, this is one I don't want to be free.

I granted him an alibi. I ascribed virtue to his homophobia.

I let bigotry excuse it all away.

As for the crime committed, it only happened a few times. And I know I shouldn't use the word "only." I guess I just feel lucky. I know how bad things could have gone at that house.

That was actually the first time. He was dog sitting for a friend. He asked me if I minded running over there with him while he fed the dogs and checked on the house.

I don't even remember how it came up. The same way that our talks in the car seemed to always come back around to the subject of jerking off, if only to include a few words about how everyone did it, it just seemed casual when he mentioned that there was a porno tape there if I wanted to watch it.

Acknowledging how I had told him before that I didn't feel right jerking off in front of anyone else, he asked me if it was ok if he did it.

Put on the spot, I went along. Counting off all the things that made it seem not that bad. Him being on the other side of the room. How hot the chicks were on the tape. His well-placed remark about how I'd better not be looking at his dick.

I remember being relieved when we left. That that's all it was. Nothing else.

It made it less of a big deal the next time. And the next time. All at the same house. Dog sitting.

Knowing how helpless I would have been in that house, and how he made no moves nor indications of being mad that I hadn't joined in, it pushed down any lingering suspicions that couldn't help surviving in the back of my mind.

Thankfully, I didn't perceive the next time to be so casual.

He had just picked me up and we hadn't even made it out of the neighborhood when he mentioned how he hadn't had a chance to jack off earlier in the day. He asked me if it would be ok if he did it while he was driving. He already had a rag and some vaseline in the car. I could sit in the back seat, and he would be really quick.

It was the first time I remember thinking that maybe something really was wrong with him. Not necessarily anything to do with his doing it in front of me. But more that he couldn't control himself.

And yet it was his trust in me to not judge him as some kind of pervert, in this case or the times at the house, that assuaged my concerns. That and the constant reminders of how many others had been where I was yet hadn't put forth the same reservations.

It wasn't a coincidence how much he talked about it. Sometimes it was almost like he was name-dropping. Showing me just how many people he knew that I knew. How many of them he had hung out with. How many of them he had played basketball with or gone to the movies with. How many of them had found their way to masturbating in his presence.

How none of them had ever said a thing.

They'd all just moved on, and it was just a thing that happened. Like anything else.

That's what stopped you from thinking the worst. To suspect there was really anything more going on would be to suggest everyone else had gotten it wrong.

And is that something you could even do? I mean who were you, to put that on them? Who were you to believe you could be the only one that was right?

And if you were right, then what? It had already occurred. By the time you'd recognized there really was something to be suspicious of, the judgment would have been just as much on yourself. That you let it happen. That you should have known better.

That's why it was so convenient to ask. If you should have known better, then why didn't anybody else? Too late to be right, it was just easier to let them let you off the hook.

Circular justifications, mostly about us. Rarely about him.

And if the doubts ever led you down a path too scary, you could always find your way back to the story. His brother died of an overdose when he was sixteen. That's why he spent so much time with kids. He wanted to do whatever he could to make sure the guys he coached didn't end up like that.

The thing in the car happened again, a time or two more.

And then that was it. He quit putting me in that position. Him doing it and me not.

After that, he just waited. Waited for me to prove that I was normal. Like he didn't actually believe that I did it. That my word wasn't good enough.

He even made it easy for me. He said that we could pull off somewhere where no one could see, and he'd stay in the car. I could do it outside, with my back turned. Just cum on the tire; that way he'd know for sure. And he wouldn't ever bring it up again.

At some point, I told him I would. And I believed that when I said it.

I just didn't know our time was nearing its end. That there would only be so many late night car rides after that. Some of which the circumstances just weren't conducive. Others I wouldn't feel right and would put it off until another time. Promising I wasn't just stalling, promising that I would eventually do it.

But I never did.

By that point, things had started to drift. Times where I wasn't around at all. Having a girlfriend over the summer. Working that October at the Haunted House.

To me, it all seemed natural. I had turned 14 and started high school. I was making new friends, doing new things. Not that we didn't hang out; it just wasn't as much. And when we did, there were new kids starting to tag along. Younger kids. Teammates, from a team I wasn't on.

Thinking about it now, I can see that it wasn't just the notion that I might not belong there anymore. I was starting to get the feeling that I shouldn't have been there in the first place.

I remember how pretty she was. She was the oldest girl on our bus; used to sit in the back seat across from me. I was always so excited whenever she would say anything to me. She asked me one Friday afternoon what I had planned for the weekend. When I told her, she asked me why I was hanging out with some random old dude. The way she said it, it made me self-conscious. Not that I believed there was anything wrong with our relationship; it was just how clear she made it. How it must have looked to anyone else.

I told her about his brother. But this time it didn't seem as convincing. Hearing myself say the words.

I could tell why she gave me that look. Like she was worried for me, but that she had to let it go. There were too many other kids around to take it any further. Someone else might hear, what was needed to say.

What really did it though was when he casually mentioned he might need me to stick up for him. Evidently some star player's mom was pissed that he had benched her star player son for missing too many practices or smarting off too many times or some other offense. And when she called him out for it in the parking lot after a game, she also called him out for something else. Hollering, "I know about you. I know about you." Loud, for everybody to hear. "I've heard rumors about you. I've heard about what you do with some of these boys."

It apparently spooked him. Enough that he asked me if I'd vouch for him if she tried to make a thing out of it and it were to wind him up in court.

I remember being terrified. First, that people were already talking about it. Meaning that it was possible word could come back on me at some point. But more so the thought of actually having to go to court.

And do what? Say he wasn't doing what he was doing? Just because I hadn't done it in front of him didn't change the fact that he had done it in front of me. I wasn't even sure what he expected me to say.

I told him that obviously I'd say he hadn't ever touched me if something ever came up. That was the truth. But that I couldn't lie for him, if they brought anything else up.

I don't know whether he figured it wasn't worth pushing or he could just see how freaked out I was, but he told me he understood and dropped it. Never brought it back up.

Pretty soon after that, I quit hanging out altogether. I don't know if things felt like they had just run their course or if I was worried I had seen some writing on the wall.

A couple years later, I would be served a more chilling confirmation. Even if I didn't put it together until years after that.

I was sixteen, hanging out with some friends at Trick Shot. Joe, an old buddy of mine, had shown up that night, and we were hanging out, playing video games and talking. Joe was a couple years older than I was and was probably one of the most popular guys I knew. He seemed to have it all together, and it always felt good just being around him.

Joe didn't see him when he came in. Focused on the video game he was playing, I remember Joe not even looking up when he came up and slapped me on the back.

As for myself, I wasn't sure what to think. Him showing up like that, in that space. I felt uneasy, but not freaked out. A good deal of time had gone by, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't at least somewhat happy to see him.

We shot the shit for a second, and then he looked over and said hi to Joe.

I remember being surprised when he called Joe by his name. But I remember being more surprised by Joe's response.

He said, "Hey." But it was kind of a snub. Like he didn't really care to talk to him.

It seemed completely out of character. I'd never seen Joe be shitty to anyone. He was known for being one of the nicest and best guys around.

We left Joe to play his game, walked over near the pool tables, and caught up for a second. I said something about how crazy it was that they knew each other. He said, "Yeah, I've known Joe a long time. Me and him were real close. He even lived with me for a little while."

I remember wondering what kind of circumstances would have allowed for that. And then I started to realize that Joe must know the same things I knew. And then I started to wonder whether he knew more.

Luckily, that was the only time I saw him in there. It may have actually been the last time we saw each other at all. I'm not sure. I just know that every now and then I would think back about him saying hi, and the look on Joe's face, and the way that Joe made it clear he wasn't interested in being his friend anymore.

I'll never know what it was that made Joe act that way. But I know I would have, had it been for one different decision made, one summer afternoon at my house, three years prior to that.

My old man had hit me, for what I told myself was the last time. When I told him as much, he gave me the invitation to come at him. Something for which I always thought I'd be ready.

Instead, I ran out and hid in the laundry room. Crying and contemplating running away. Those two hours alone, spent thinking about what would happen if I went to stay with him. How he might protect me. How, in this situation, he might be the one person I could trust.

I wasn't thinking about how questionable any of his actions already seemed to me. I had no idea how close I was, to falling into whatever would have been next.

It would be almost another ten years before I would start to put any of it together. Not from any kind of contemplation or reflection. But from a passing tangent, in what would have been, on any other day, ordinary chitchat.

I was talking to a friend on the phone; I don't know how the subject got brought up. Just thinking about the conversation makes me ill.

I remember asking her if she thought people like that, I couldn't even bring myself to use the word pedophile, had something wrong with their brains. How the only way you could imagine someone doing something like that was if they had something in their brain they couldn't control, or maybe it was something in their brain that was so messed up that they actually didn't know what they were doing, or at least didn't know what they were doing was really wrong.

I can tell myself it was a matter of genuine intellectual curiosity. Or I can deal with the possibility that, even a decade later, I was trying to make room for some kind of excuse, for him. Which I can see now was probably just a way for me to believe nothing had happened, to me. Or if it had, but somehow he hadn't really got that what he was doing was wrong, maybe it lessened what I should have known as well.

I was rambling at some point, kind of like I'm doing now, when my friend cut me off. She said that she didn't care to spend her time thinking about what was in the mind of someone who would do that. That the matter to her was that a child couldn't give consent. That much she knew.

I remember how it felt to hear those words. To have someone shake me out of my denial. To have someone show me.

I had been a victim.

I was, a victim.

Everything seeming so clear, in that moment.

For just a moment.

Then I put it out of my mind, for another ten years.

Until one day.

I was driving back to work from lunch.

I was in my mid-thirties. I didn't normally get lunch out.

I pulled into a parking space, and before I could turn off the engine. I felt this thought.

What if he's still coaching?

I sat there, with the engine running. Long enough to let them in.

Scenarios. Glimpses, possibilities. So many, pulsing into my mind.

Memories. I may have permitted.

All those years. All at once.

My shock was the same as my shame. That it had taken me this long.

I could finally see my silence. I could see what it was.

I was finally ready, for my guilt.

Except there wasn't any time.

I had an obligation. The same one I'd had every day, since that first day.

I had to tell someone.

And then my mind went yet another place I wish it hadn't.

I thought about my buddy, the one whose team it was. The one who had introduced us. The one who had confirmed what I wasn't there to see.

I thought about the last time I'd seen him, how little he'd changed since those days. How, even though I knew our sexuality had nothing to do with it, there were certain worries he wouldn't accept me ignoring. What people might say. How it would look to others.

I imagined him telling me. That I couldn't do that to him. That I owed it to him. That it wasn't just my secret.

The homophobia that had once built an alibi was now the homophobia that kept so much silence.

His homophobia. At least that's what I told myself. That's what I was blaming those reservations on.

And though it may not have been enough to stop me, I'm still not sure that's the whole story. And the more I think about it, the more it calls into question why I settled on leaving an anonymous tip.

Then again, I guess that part doesn't really matter now either, beyond what guilt I want to apportion it.

Despite all my fretting over the best way to go about it, I'll never know what would have happened had I made that phone call, what results or repercussions it would have set loose. I'll never know, because I never made it that far.

I was in the process of trying to come up with what I would say, when I got the idea to look up the name.

And sure as hell, there it was. On the registry.

Name and photo. Unmistakable.

A prison was listed as residence.

I want to say that, by that time, he had been locked up for about 6 or 8 years. With so much going through my mind as my eyes darted around the screen, it's hard to be sure what exact date was listed. I just know, when I saw his picture, that he looked exactly how I remembered him, from all those years ago.

And I guess it makes sense. Even at 28, he had looked a lot older. Balding and overweight. Like he would look that way forever.

I suppose he will.

The charge specified was Aggravated Sexual Battery. Convicted of.

I had to look up what it meant. From the definition, it seemed pretty clear a lot more had happened than what had happened with me.

I remember looking back at his name and his photo, just to be sure.

And then I wondered. Now that he was in prison, now that there was consensus, telling him what he was doing was wrong. Did he feel bad, for what he had done?

Not that it would make any difference. Not that I would even know what to do with that information. It's hard to say which I was more interested in, the measure of his conscience or the real measure of my naivety.

But just the fact that the question entered my head at all told me everything I needed to know. That I hadn't even begun, the work I needed to do.

No matter how much I believed I had learned and changed and grown, there I was. Still focusing on his thoughts and his mind, instead of trying to heal my own.

I don't know if it's trauma or if it's always been this way with my brain, but I often question whether I'm remembering time periods correctly, specifically when it comes to dates and how old I was when things happened.

Like with this, I wonder whether I'm getting it right. When exactly we stopped hanging out. When we first started hanging out.

I know that when you're young, small amounts of time seem to last forever. And longer amounts of certain times can be blocked or hidden completely.

I don't want to tell you the wrong thing, and thinking that I might get any of that part wrong makes me nervous. It's the reason why I want to tell you so much else. It's the reason why I find relief that the images of what happened *during that time* are as unfading as they are plenty.

It's the reason there's a part of me that feels like, although there are so many more memories crucial to me putting things together but not useful for this confession, I should still tell you. Like I have to give you all the details. Even the impertinent ones.

The kind of car he drove. The job he worked. Where he lived. The shirt he gave me for Christmas. The multitude of stories he told me driving around after we'd dropped everyone else off, some benign, some not so benign. The nonchalant attitude of the owner of the video store where he got his dirty movies from, sometimes late at night with three or four kids in tow.

I know it's not rational, but it matters to me. How much I do remember, in case there are parts that I don't.

I feel like I want to go into detail about all of it. So I know, I'm not leaving anything out.

Maybe I want to get it all out so it will show you how sorry I am, or that maybe the more I tell you the more you'll believe how sorry I am.

Like the time I called him on the phone after we had quit hanging out. It had been a few months, and I thought I would give him a ring to see what he was up to. The first thing he said when he heard my voice was, "You still doing it?"

I remember being filled with dread. Like whatever suspicions I had pushed down had just come back up. I tried to act like I didn't know what he was talking about.

"Doing what?"

"Beating your meat."

I didn't know what to say. I think I said something along the lines of, "I guess," and then changed the subject. About what I couldn't tell you; I didn't really pay attention after that. I was thinking about how disappointed I was. That that's the first thing he had to say after not seeing me.

I think we talked for a few minutes before I awkwardly said I had to get off the phone. I don't think we spoke again until that night at Trick Shot, with Joe.

Reflecting on how that phone call made me feel, it burns into me what a creep I had been on the phone with a particular girl years later, a couple girls if I'm being truthful. The same as rethinking so many of our

discussions late at night makes glaringly clear my own attempts at manipulation with women as a teenager and young adult.

And I know what this sounds like. Me telling you this, after everything else I've told you. Like now you're supposed to feel sorry for me. Or, even worse, like I'm trying to explain my own betrayals with some backstory of abuse.

But it's not like that. That's not why I'm telling you this.

I've seen men parade the damage done to them in childhood in an attempt to excuse their mistreatment of women in adulthood. And I think they're full of shit, and such an act is pathetic.

Not that I don't believe abuse is often passed down. It undoubtedly is. But it's got to be about more than just circumstance. More than just the hand you were dealt. To betray someone is to choose.

By the end, I may not have understood him, but I understood enough about what he was doing to know it was not something he should have been doing, and to understand he was making a choice.

Sure, he was an influence in my life, but so was my father. I chose not to emulate my father's drinking. I chose not to emulate his hitting or emotional and verbal abuse of partners or children.

And the fact that I did make those choices makes the times that I did treat women less than what they were worth so appalling. If anything, it shines a light on the degree of those betrayals.

In the instances I gave less than what a woman deserved from me, those were my choices to make. I can't just blame it on patriarchal culture or the teen sex comedy flicks I grew up with. Neither the Devil nor gangsta rap ever made me treat a woman like she was something to be used. And neither did he.

I do not claim to be undamaged by my trauma. And only recently have I begun to comprehend the extent to which I was damaged.

But none of that lets me off the hook for anything. I know there was enough I did make out, enough I recognized at the time, that I would never use that trauma as some kind of causal link to anything. Not as an excuse, not even for an explanation.

Just like all my other confessions, I welcome that guilt.

And yet, there is a reason why this confession has taken me so long to offer. If it were just the guilt I collected from my racism or my homophobia in that time, or my sexist behavior later, finding the right words, or even the courage to try and find them, wouldn't have been such a struggle.

Maybe that's why this confession is so long and rambling. Maybe I'm just buying time. Reaching. For side stories or introspective insights or

more details of more memories, or any digression that will keep me from the purpose of this confession.

Like maybe I don't know the purpose.
Except I do.

I know why I'm confessing. And for that, I know it can only fail.

In time, I would come to think about how it could have been me. The reason he had been caught. The reason he had gone to prison. What would have had to have happened. What could have happened.

But in that moment, staring at that computer screen, looking at his photo, all I could think about was who it had actually been. A name I'd never know. But one I could have kept, from those memories.

I wondered if he was a favorite too. And just how many favorites there'd been since me. How many there'd been, who hadn't been favorites.

I wondered how many he'd given up on, cut his losses. How many he had simply moved on from.

I contemplated each year that had gone by. How it had taken so much less than that for him to gain my trust. How many new ones had come along since I quit occupying that seat in his car.

With him on the registry, I knew that, even if he got out, he could never be around kids again. That was the one good feeling, I could have.

The irony came when I realized. Part of my punishment was not having to make that call.

What I imagined, before I typed in that search, would be a moment of relief.

What now seemed so fitting.

A reminder, for the rest of my life, that I never did what I should have done.

And because I didn't, I can only make peace with the other part of my punishment.

The not knowing.

I know that kid was real, the one who landed him in prison. Yet I'll never know what happened to him.

The scenarios seem infinite.

I know those other kids were real too. Yet I'll never know how many there were of them, in between.

The number seems infinite.

I know you're real. And I know something happened.
I should have said something. I owed that to you.

I hope you can accept my apology.

I think about those nights at the house, dog sitting for his friend. How, in my weighing of it at the time, not that much happened, compared to what could have happened.

How maybe that's the way he saw it as well.

Maybe that had something to do with it. Maybe after me, things escalated. He quit waiting, or waiting as long.

I don't know much about the concept of Survivor's Guilt, but from what I gather some of these feelings would qualify. Not that I think, in my case, there wasn't a crime, or crimes, committed. There was. I understand that now.

But just knowing, even one person, had it worse. And knowing they could have gone through their life and not had *that* moment, had I just said something.

I don't care if this type of thinking is unhealthy. I don't want to hear about the psychology of trauma, or PTSD, or any of that. I could have been the last one.

It doesn't matter how many kids knew but said nothing. It doesn't matter how many parents should have known but said nothing. It doesn't matter how many people heard the rumors but said nothing.

It doesn't matter how big that choir was.

Of course, I can see the contradictions.

That each one after me who didn't say anything was just like me, just like each one before me. That my choice not to hate any of them for keeping that silence doesn't extend to myself.

None of that is lost on me. Nor is it lost on me that contemplating the measure of even one link within this theoretical chain of responsibility once again steers the onus away from him.

I have no doubt any first-year Psych or Social Work grad student would have a field day with my emotional self-sabotage.

It doesn't really concern me.

Just because there are ways for me to deal with these feelings doesn't make their origin anything less than real.

It's not that I'm unaware there's help out there for me.

It's that I don't want help. I want to unmake what happened.

But I can't have that. So the not knowing is all I have.

In as much as I understand the sentiment, I'm sorry.

I do not, however, want to end this confession with those words.

To be honest, I'm not sure I want to end it at all. Maybe I just want to keep talking, so I never get to an end. Finding more things to say about it, more color and hue to add to the picture. So I don't have to quit confessing, because I don't deserve to quit confessing.

With that said, if I do have to quit talking, I don't want to leave you my sadness. You don't deserve to carry that, and just saying I'm sorry doesn't change what happened.

I'd much rather leave you with a promise.

There is a certain hope I've found in this process, as well as a peculiar form of gratitude. Both stemming from the only guilt I didn't expect to have.

If I share any understanding with the other victims, I believe that few of them, if any, would wish me to feel the way I do. Because I surely don't wish that upon them.

The same way I want each and every one of them to have found a life past the damage that man did, I can only assume they would want that for me.

I may not be able to repay you what I feel you deserve. But I can at least not be a hypocrite, any longer.

I owed you saying something. If it's ok, and not too pretentious, I'd like to make good on that in a different way.

I've always wanted to write. I feel like it may be what little talent, and purpose, I have. Until all this, I was apprehensive as to what I should or could afford to write about, and guarded over how freely I should share what I have written already.

For the first time, since I had learned enough to recognize the shadows in my past, I don't feel that.

When I started this, I thought that confessing would free me. Now I see the only way I'll find freedom is to practice it, and find an honest way to pay. Not with these words, but with different ones.

These words are not enough. And I have more in me than this.

They won't all be perfect. But neither are confessions. And I'll work to warrant less of those in the future.

I don't expect to find resolution. Or even balance. To "get well" (whatever that means).

I don't imagine I'll ever find the same freedom that I wish for the others. For you.

But I owe you trying.

I'm stuck, but I'm not going to be stagnant.
I feel like something good can finally come of this. Confessing.

I just hope I feel this way tomorrow.

