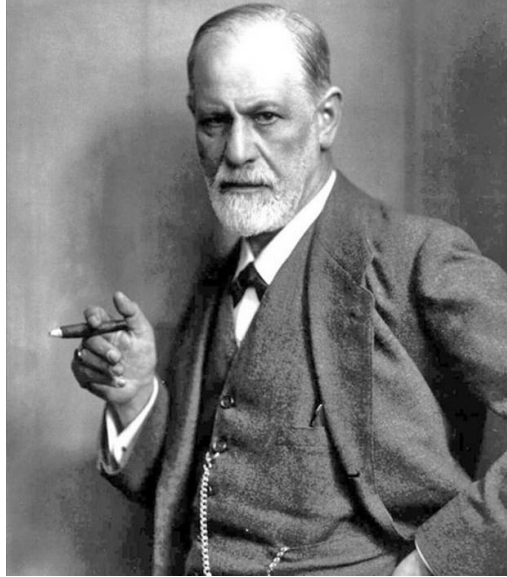


Nicotine

Nicotine is an insidious drug. An addictive stimulant alkaloid, nicotine binds to acetylcholine receptors in the nervous system, leading to increased levels of dopamine in the mesolimbic reward circuit of the brain and resulting in the rapid creation of even more nicotinic acetylcholine receptors. This augmented reward circuit enjoys enhanced and prolonged dopamine response. Nicotine also increases the level of adrenaline released by the sympathetic nervous system, with the benefit of increased memory consolidation, recall, and sharper focus. It paradoxically switches profile from stimulant to sedative at higher doses. It is classified as nootropic—cognitive enhancing—and, despite its well-documented hypertensive, mutagenic and carcinogenic qualities, is the second most widely used performance-enhancing drug in the world.

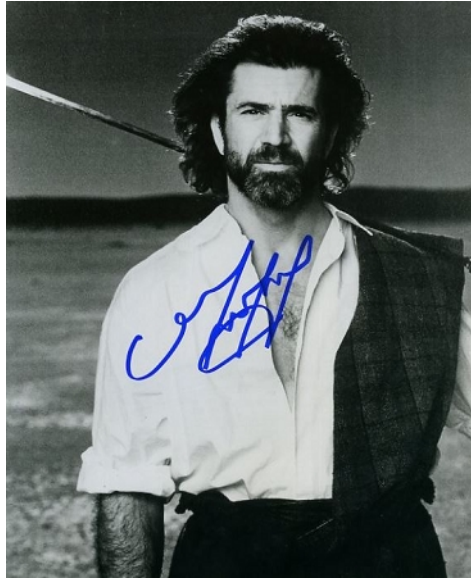
As a young neurology student, Sigmund Freud became fascinated with the nature of nootropic drugs. Already an avid drinker of coffee and black tea and smoker of the occasional chic cigarette, his smoking habit took off when he was introduced to the Cuban cigar around age 20. He buried himself in his research, surrounded, it was said, by a protective haze of smoke from his favorite Soberanos, the strongest, smelliest cigars he could smuggle into Austria. Save a brief two-year flirtation with another nootropic, cocaine, whose efficacy he noted in every application from alleviating chronic nausea to curing morphine addiction, nicotine was Freud's drug of choice. Late in life, Freud recalled that his cigars "served me for precisely fifty years as protection and a weapon in the combat of life...I owe to the cigar a great intensification of my capacity to work and a facilitation of my self-control."



Freud's portrait hangs on the wall of the recreation room in the minimum-security wing of the St. Joseph's Hospital psychiatric ward, between pictures of the Virgin Mary and a blonde and blue-eyed Jesus Christ. This ward functions in part as one of Orange County's more upscale detox centers, where any guest with decent enough medical insurance and mild-to-moderate *delirium tremens* can recover, get their Xanax prescription refilled, and leave with a referral to another rehab or psychiatrist closer to Irvine, or Laguna, or Santa Ana. There are always a handful of psychiatric patients in the ward, too, mostly 5150s and guests who check in for eating disorder treatment or "medication adjustments." The minimum security designation didn't make the constant surveillance and depersonalization more palatable. But the alternative was worse. The nurses told horror stories about the maximum security ward, and since we weren't allowed headphones or earplugs, the silence after lights out and the thin California drywall meant the screams from the other side of the building were hard to ignore.

The recreation room, the hub of the unit, is ringed with small, closet-like offices where the practicing psychiatrists sat with us in succinct, fifteen-minute meetings. The room had a sterile smell—a lack of a smell—and polite mint green walls, and since we were all of us waiting for something, anything, at any given moment, we also took to calling it the waiting room. Alongside Freud and the family Christ are the class photos of hundreds of nameless nuns, the Sisters of Saint Joseph

of Orange, California, and a signed headshot of Mel Gibson. There is a decently sized television on one wall. There is also a piano, untuned, benchless lest a guest attempt to play it and ruffle the nurses' feathers. There are at least 60 different puzzles in the waiting room. There are no windows.



At lunch on my second day I asked a nurse about the possibility of going for a walk outside. “You can walk the halls whenever you want,” she offered, “but the only outside walks we go on are with the priest on Sunday. He leads a prayer walk after Mass.”

Hanna, one of my roommates, overheard me. “The only time we’re allowed outside is the smoke break.” She grinned over the table as we picked at dinner. “I had my boyfriend bring me a pack of cigarettes when he visited and now I smoke to get to hang out outside.” I’d seen a nurse bring out a box full of individually bagged and tagged packs of cigarettes a few times a day and gather the group of guests who smoked—most of the ward. The option hadn’t really occurred to me. During the designated hour for phone calls, I asked my sister to bring a pack of blue American Spirits with her the next day. The only gifts allowed on the ward were cigarettes, books, shampoo, and clothes. The stuffed cat she bought at the gift shop was deemed inappropriate and sent home.

Nicotine withdrawal begins as early as three or four hours after the last cigarette. The three most common and most immediate symptoms of

withdrawal are irritability, anxiety, and difficulty concentrating, all related to the hundreds of newly-grown acetylcholine receptors suddenly simultaneously screaming for dopamine. Even memories forged on nicotine are stronger and more pleasant than memories pre-cigarette. Withdrawal symptoms peak after about a week without nicotine, but a lot of people won't make it that long before they smoke again. The cravings can be overwhelming. I'd made a vow to quit smoking four days before I checked myself in.



The weeks before St. Joseph's had seen my nicotine consumption rise from a shared cigarette on the walk home from work to chain smoking on the balcony every other night. I still considered myself a dilettante, uncommitted, and rejected the idea of nicotine addiction even as I began sneaking midnight cigarettes with alarming frequency. I was already walking a thin line between self-deprecation and genuine self-loathing and smoking just made me feel worse. Smoking can get to feel a bit hopeless, for me. Chasing the initial rush that only leads to a crash and a craving later. Knowing my body's chemical dependence is the only reason it seems to calm me so effectively. I knew when I started really looking forward to *that* cigarette, when I was sure *that* cigarette was all I needed to get through another ten-hour shift, another argument, another disappointment, *that* was when I needed to stop. That day in St. Joseph's I was looking forward to *that* cigarette more than ever and I briefly entertained just holding it in my mouth and tasting it. I even declined a

light from Hanna at first; until one of the burly nurses flanking the door barked that the smoke break was for smoking, not standing.

Normally the nurses ignored us. The enclosed patio is small, no larger than half a basketball court, and the walls are high. There are no trees around, but some ivy and morning glory vines cling to the peeling walls. Despite being in the middle of downtown Orange, the sounds of the freeways didn't reach us. We were all unusually silent on the patio, letting our own little shells of smoke protect us, saving our breath for the cigarettes and the small talk for the waiting room.

On one of my last nights in the ward, after staring at the light in the smoke detector on the ceiling above my bed for hours and trying literally every relaxation and mindfulness technique I'd learned over the last five days, I went to see if I could convince one of the nurses to slip me some Benadryl so I could get to sleep. I felt exhausted. The clock above the nurses' station read 3AM.

"I don't have Benadryl, I'm afraid," Paolo said. He was one of the usual smoke break chaperones. He had a very soothing, accented voice. "But if you're feeling anxious, I can take your vitals and give you an Ativan." He smiled.

The lights in the ward are dimmed from 9pm to 6am, and the blue recessed lights just above the linoleum don't really offer much in the way of visibility. He guided me to the vitals station, something like a portable student's desk, a cold plastic and metal seat with a dainty little table perched on one arm of the chair. It was parked outside the waiting room, and I listened for sounds of life from the other wing of the ward. As Paolo took my blood pressure he glanced up at me. "You know, the nicotine, it's probably not helping with your anxiety."

Yeah, I said. Probably not.



## Jumper

There was a party in the next apartment over; I could feel the bass shake my bed through the flimsy wall. I was trying to sleep, but wasn't getting anywhere on that front anyway. It was so humid I was stuck to my sheets, and watching the ceiling fan spin almost in time to the shitty music next door was hypnotic.

I don't know what time it was when I realized I needed a cigarette, but here's why I picked this place: there's a wide window right in the bedroom, waist-high, that I can actually open all the way. That's a luxury in this city, and I like to hang out of it with my Pall Mall greens and breathe. Especially on nights like that one, nights so hot I have to strip to my bra and panties just to sleep, when the air seems especially thick and sticky and the normal exhaust-heavy breezes from the city don't blow.

When I leaned out my window and blew the first lungful of menthol to my left, like I always do, I saw the kid.

He looked terrified. Your average tragically hip young adult, with a haircut that probably cost more money than my dining room table and jeans he probably bought already half-destroyed. He stood on the steel grating right next to my fire escape, the ledge that's only ten or so inches wide. He was eye level with me, his back pressed rigidly against the brown stone. He must have heard the window open or something, because he was already staring at me when I noticed him. He looked angry, or embarrassed, or both. His voice was high. "Do you mind?"

Yes, I mind, you hip little jerkoff. Get away from my window. "What are you doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" he hissed. "Go away! Leave me alone!"

I didn't move and he glared at me. "I'm going to jump," he said, but he didn't sound as sure of himself as I think someone that close to jumping off a building probably wants to sound. "I'm going to jump, and scream Christine's name on the way down. Then everyone will know how much I loved her."

I blinked at him and he looked away from me, down to the asphalt five stories below us, and shuffled in his dirty Converse sneakers. He was so close I could see the sweat beading on his forehead, and I watched a drop trail slowly from his

temple down his neck, disappearing in the crewneck of his shirt. He looked back at me. "I can't handle any more of this," he said finally. "I just can't."

I hadn't been in this situation before. Well, obviously. Who the hell knows what to do when there's a jumper staring back at you? People go to school for years to deal with that bullshit. "This plan won't work," I said slowly.

I don't think that's the response he expected. His eyebrows shot straight into his dyed-black hair, straightened and combed stylishly forward, before furrowing skeptically. "What do you mean it won't work?"

And I really don't know out of whose ass I pulled my idea. "You won't have time," I took a heavy drag from the cigarette, "to finish her name." The smoke floated out into the stagnant night. "This building's only six or seven stories tall. You'll maybe finish 'Chris.'" I was rambling. "And then everyone will think you were gay. And that your boyfriend dumped you or--"

"No!" he screeched. "I'm fucking jumping and this will fucking work!"

I've seen people close to the edge but he was literally an inch from it. "Why? Who's Christine? Did you guys break up?"

He moved so suddenly that I shut my eyes fast. I thought he was launching himself off and in two seconds I'd have a human pancake fifty feet under my favorite window. But instead he slid down the wall and sat down on the narrow ledge, legs dangling, and kept his eyes straight ahead. You can sort of see the real cityscape from this story and he had a pretty nice view.

"No," he said sadly. "We never went out. I've known her since the sixth grade. We're just friends."

He jerked his head behind him and I remembered the party next door. "She's in there." He swallowed and I heard his throat stick. "With my best friend."

"Oh." Keep talking. "So she's a slut?"

"No!" he said, throwing his arms out. "She's amazing! She's fucking wonderful. That's the problem. She'd never go for a guy like me." His arms dropped again to his sides and he slumped backward, leaning against the dirty building. "She's my soul mate. I can tell. And I'll always watch her with someone else."

How tragic. I felt uncomfortable. How do normal people deal with these

things? “Do you want a cigarette?”

He looked up at me for a minute, and shrugged. “Sure,” he said. “I’m already killing myself.”

“Can I come out?” I’m not sure whether he wanted to object but I had already put out my cigarette and was halfway out the window. I probably should have been embarrassed, climbing onto the fire escape in my underwear, but at my age it’s not unheard of.

I keep my pack of cigarettes in the cup of my bra while I smoke—I don’t exactly fill them out, alright?—and I pulled out two cigarettes. “Kurt Vonnegut said that Pall Malls are the classiest way to commit suicide.”

He eyed me when I mentioned Vonnegut. “You read Kurt Vonnegut?” He looked tired up close like that. Or drunk. Maybe a little of both. “Who the fuck are you, anyway?” There wasn’t any anger behind his question, just apathy. I remember when cursing made me feel like a big shot, too.

“I’m the one you probably would’ve woken up when you jumped and screamed like a maniac.” I handed him a cigarette, and he lit it with a little green Bic he fished out of his jeans.

“Have you thought about therapy or something?” That sounded pretty dumb to me too, but I’m not a guidance counselor, okay? “If you really feel hopeless?”

“Yeah,” he said. “But I know it won’t help. Therapists are just in it for the money.”

“That’s not entirely true.” I chewed on the unlit cigarette. “My parents made me see a therapist for a while when I was in high school, like... twenty years ago.” God, I felt old. “She was pretty cool.”

“That sucks though,” he breathed. The smoke floated over and sank between my knees. He turned toward me and I saw his eyes were brown and watery. “Why did your parents send you to therapy?”

“They thought I was a lesbian, and that therapy would cure me.”

“That really sucks,” he repeated. He coughed a little on his next drag. “Why would they think that? That’s awful.”

I smiled at the memory. I still do. “Probably because I’m a lesbian.”



He burst out laughing, which turned almost as suddenly into a coughing fit. I don't think he's a smoker. "I understand lady trouble," I continued. I felt like I was being ridiculous and in hindsight I absolutely was. "Bitches be crazy."

He laughed again. I held out my cigarette wordlessly and he lit it for me. "Yeah," he agreed. He looked to his left, away from me, and watched the street towards the front of my building. "I was going to wait until she left the party," he said distantly. "That way she'd be sure to hear me." He turned back and I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He beat the back of his head against the wall once and cursed. "I am such a fucking asshole." He looked plaintively at me. His eyes were huge and in that minute he looked so young. "What the hell is wrong with me?"

I didn't answer. He breathed in another drag and exhaled noisily.

"What time is it?" I asked. I don't wear a watch, but I saw the bulge of one under a sleeve of his shirt. "Isn't it past your bedtime?"

He didn't tease me back. His cigarette dangled between his thumb and forefinger. "It's 3 or something." He sighed. "Christine probably went home already."

"Probably," I echoed.

I took another drag and ashed off the window ledge. We both watched the little snowy flakes swirl down to the alley below. He tossed his cig down too, and the cherry glowed far below us for a few seconds before it faded into the gray. The music from the party in the building was still beating against our backs and neither of us said anything for what seemed like forever. Far away I could see New York proper, downtown, the always-burning lights of the city bouncing off the smog and fog and clouds, making the skyline glow like a child's night light. I looked back at the kid.

"Some nights the city doesn't even get dark," he said finally.

I looked down at his hand between us. He was clutching at the bars we sat on, white knuckles, and he might have been shaking, too. There was a lot I could have said, I guess, but I've never been the kind of person who had any luck with that stuff. I wanted to say everything would work out great for him. Someday you'll start a rock band and make a million bucks and live happily ever after or whatever the hell you dream of doing when you're not hanging over a dirty alley ready to die because

some girl next door doesn't like you. But I didn't know. Don't know. And I don't like that kind of a lie. Especially not to someone hurting like that.

I reached over and patted his hand awkwardly, and he seized my fingers and held my hand tight. I wasn't sure what to do. I just let him hold it there for a while.

## Economy

I don't usually feel this hungover—just a lingering pain in my temple, maybe for a few hours, tops—but I think the absinthe hit me harder than I expected. I have a wicked headache. There's a stale licorice taste in my mouth, too, sweet enough to make me a little sick.

I've been awake for a while. I always wake up earlier when I drink too much the night before. Well, it wasn't too much I guess. At least I remember what happened. I feel your legs tangled up with mine. They're slick with sweat and the hairs on yours are itchy, the hotel duvet pulled up and bunched around our waists and far too heavy for a room without any air conditioning.

My vision is bleary when I finally open my eyes. It's still dark, but to be honest I can't tell if it's really early or if the drapes in the room are just thick enough to block out the sun. There isn't any sunlight hitting your shoulders anyway, and those are all I can see, a few inches from my nose. It looks like there are smudges of lipstick all over them, down to the small of your back, and disappearing under the sheets. I'm sure the same color is still smeared around my mouth. Fuchsia Flash, satin finish.

I haven't moved, either, and now my left arm is asleep. I hope you won't wake up. I can move just gently enough to free my arm from behind my head and sort of shift onto my back. The ceiling has that cheap popcorn finish that was popular a few decades ago. The tiny sliver of yellow light splitting the room is coming from the gap between the curtains so it's at least past sunrise. I wonder what time it is. I don't want to risk sitting up, and I know I threw my cell phone onto the floor last night, somewhere between the absinthe and the lipstick.

The bed is tiny. These European hotels all have twin-size beds in their single occupancy rooms and I know that your feet are probably hanging off. The good part is that I can reach down without really moving and feel around with my fingertips. Something pillowed and cotton—one of your socks?—and something silky—

my panties. My phone isn't within reach, wherever it is.

I hurt all over. My lips feel swollen and bruised, and now that my back is resting on the rough linens I can feel a little burn from the scratches from your fingernails. There's even the familiar dull sting on my inner thigh that I always blamed on your unshaven cheeks.

The queasy feeling swelling in the pit of my stomach rises a little. I know on the floor with our clothes are a few torn condom wrappers. The inboxes of our Blackberries—wherever they are—will have records of our back-and-forth, messages getting progressively drunker the longer we waited at the hotel bar with the rest of the firm. They stop at a certain point around eleven—twenty-three o'clock in Amsterdam—when Jan left us alone and we switched from electronic to kinetic communication, and your hand found its way up my dress and I pulled you by your tie into the elevator. Those messages are the sort of memory you cherish and the sort of evidence I delete.

We've been here before. Not Amsterdam and not even on an expenses-paid business trip, but here. In bed, spooning. I know we both remember the best times, both of us glowing, how your hand always fits perfectly on the curve of my hip and how my head finds its way onto your chest. I remember this, too. The hours of uncertainty and staring at the ceiling the morning after, the liters of alcohol it takes to get comfortable enough for either of us to even say hello to one another, the awkward silence as we pull on our rumpled clothes and get back to work and real life.

Still, the nausea is subsiding. My legs are sweaty and cramped and my ankle tickles a little, but it isn't as awkward as I always think it will be. It's nice to be close to someone, skin to skin. Neither of us really have that, years of law school and the cutthroat biting and clawing necessary to make it to the top of the international law food chain eroding our social skills, limiting our intimate human contact to the knees we brush flying economy on British Airways. Sometimes on these mornings I wait to hear your breathing change, and wonder whether you're awake too, maybe

thinking about whatever happened the night before, or that night in Paris a year ago, or that first time in my apartment in Beacon Hill, with the bubble bath and the bottle of Boone's Farm.

I'm almost lulled back to sleep, sinking gratefully into the down pillow, when I feel the mattress shift. You turn over, our legs unlocking. My eyes are closed and I feel like cringing. I'm worried about hearing your voice. I don't know what you'll say. I open one eye and you smile at me, bright pink lipstick staining your lips and cheeks. You open your mouth to say—something, I don't know—and I lean over quickly and press my mouth onto yours, like stopping a bottle of wine to keep it fresh and delicious and real and not stale and tired and alone, forgotten in the back of the fridge. You taste like cheap absinthe, too, but the warmth in my belly isn't nausea this time. Your hand snakes to its familiar place on my hip and you say something that's muffled against my lips, but I pretend not to understand you.

## Names

### I.

Unk's Fairlane is a smooth ride, he says. The front window is down because he and Aunta smoke but even with the breeze the backseat is so, so warm. I'm sitting between Karen and Jeff and all our towels are bunched up back here and it's hard to stay awake.

"John," says Aunta. "We don't have fixings for dinner at home. Can we get the kids a hamburger?"

Unk gives a low whistle. "That'd be delicious. But I ha'n't got more than a few nickles left after Revere Beach." He reaches to the radio and switches it on. It's hard to hear them over Karen's soft snoring and Frank Sinatra. "Your sister home? Does she ever feed him?"

"John," Aunta says again. "Bunny is either out with Bob or they're *both* at home." She unzips her worn leather purse and digs around its depths. "I just don't want him to have to go back to that so soon. After such a nice day."

"I don't need a burger tonight," Unk says, "cause I have beer at home. But you should eat somethin'. Just you and the kids." The car slows down. Frank Sinatra is still singing. The big, red and white sign on the side of the building looms over the idling Fairlane, the sun setting behind it and casting a long, purple shadow.

"McDonalds!" cries Jeff.

Aunta's digging through her handbag again. She turns to the backseat and smiles at us. "Maybe," she tells Jeff. "We need to check the menu some more and see."

Aunta leans over to my uncle and says in a low voice. "It's more than I remember."

"Mmmm," rattles Unk. "They changed it."

I understand. Ma and Bob don't mince words about money with me. "Aunta, I'm not hungry."

She turns around again. Her eyes are shining. She looks sad. "Ronnie," she says kindly. "We want you to have a hamburger, too."

"I'm not hungry," I say again. I slap my belly. We had hotdogs this afternoon at the boardwalk. This is already the best day I can remember and I hate seeing Aunta sad more than anything. "I promise."

"Mam," says Karen, kicking the towels around behind Unk's seat. "I want the meats." She grabs onto my arm. "Ronnie can have my sandwich part." She wrinkles her nose. "And the pickles. I like cheese."

Aunta looks so relieved. She blinks quickly and laughs. "Just eat Karen's bread, Ronnie! What a good idea."

"Be doin' Karen a favor, Ronnie," says Unk. I see his eyes in the rearview mirror. He turns the engine off and winks. "We like havin' you with us for dinner, anyhow."

He and Aunta and Jeff go inside. Unk lets me and Karen guard his car.

"Gee, thanks, Karen," I say. "I really wasn't hungry, Karen. But thanks."

Karen touches my hand. "Ronnie." She giggles. "Silly. We can share. I love you. I don't love the bread."

## II.

Between June and September 1971 I shit you not I grew seven inches. Finally bigger than that mean bastard Bob. Great for my game but bad news for my wardrobe. None of my jeans even touch the tops of my Chucks anymore, but you have to be practically bare-assed to get new clothes out of Ma and I've got more important things to buy with my money. Maybe a new ball.

McDonalds pays good money and you get all the hamburgers you want for free. I can't see how that isn't the squarest deal I've seen in a dog's age. Money *and* food? Cute chicks at the cash register? And Marty and Johnny are pretty cool guys. It helps that I actually pull my own fuckin' weight in the kitchen and don't just scratch my ass flippin' burgers like the last chump they fired. Plus you don't exactly need to be a fashion plate in the kitchen. I don't do much besides shoot hoops, cook damn good burgers and go to that stuck-up technical school.

Marty and John noticed. "Hey," John said one afternoon while we lugged buckets of oil out to the dumpster. "Why don't you ever hang out with us after work? We stink or somethin'?"

"Yeah," Marty added. "We know you go to Wentworth but you're part of the crew here. You're all right, man. You should come hang out on the corner when we get off."

"You don't stink," I said, "any more than we all do."

They laughed.

After our shift we threw together some Big Macs and walked down to Hyde Park Avenue. I'd seen their group on the corner by St. Francis once or twice, as my bus rattled down back to Bob's brownstone. I think I'd honestly seize any fucking excuse to stay out of that house longer. When I'm not being ignored I'm getting my ass kicked just to make that bastard feel better about his miserable life.

Outside the church, Marty and Johnny introduced me to their friends: Mike, Jack, Kevin, his sister Kathy, her friend Laurie. Kathy is hands-down the cutest redhead I've ever seen and she was casually smoking a joint with a girlfriend next to Kevin. Talk about love at first sight.

I'm sure I was staring like the fucking idiot I am because after I shook his hand Kevin immediately sized me up. He was at least six inches shorter than me, but at least fifty pounds heavier. He had a wide, goofy face, the kind that looks wrong without a grin. He grimaced at me, then looked me up and down again. He hooted and pointed at the ground.

"Man, love your shoes, but your pants look fucking ridiculous." He had the dumbest laugh, each heh coming out like a cough, his smile showing off some dirty-ass punchable teeth. Johnny and Marty were silent for the second it took before Kevin giggled again. "You're just so fucking tall. Man, you look like *Big Bird!*"

"*Kevin,*" Kathy said, and socked his arm. "What the *fuck?* We just met this guy and you're already an asshole?"

I had never been in a situation off the court where I worried about seeming cool in front of a group of everyday jerkoffs, but something about how cute



Kathy looked with that fatty between her lips made me want to try. "Yeah, that's me, man," I said slowly. "But you can call me Bird."

## Dog People

### CHARACTERS:

Jennifer, female, late 20s, long black hair, slim

Heather, female, late 20s, short red hair

### SETTING

A public park.

### TIME

The present.

*A park bench. Children are laughing on a playground, an occasional sound of traffic. JENNIFER and HEATHER sit, reading magazines. Starbucks coffee cups sit on the bench next to each woman—one next to HEATHER, two next to JENNIFER. JENNIFER reads Cosmopolitan, with a headline reading "SEX SEX SEX!" She wears a pressed pair of jeans and a big tee shirt, hair in a ponytail. HEATHER is reading Vanity Fair with a picture of President Obama on the cover. She has on a tracksuit of matching separates. They both are wearing relatively new looking sneakers and have sunglasses on. Their bags are at their feet—JENNIFER'S has spilled onto its side, but she isn't interested in righting it.*

Jennifer: I didn't know Patrick Dempsey was married.

Heather: *(Not looking up.)* Mmm, neither did I. That's a shame.

*(A minute or so passes.)*

Jennifer: *(Sips a drink.)* I don't know what these people are thinking with these fashion spreads. I'm not blowing \$400 on a pair of shoes when I can barely make rent every month.

Heather: They're not paying student loans. They get that shit for free. *(She closes the Vanity Fair and holds it toward JENNIFER.)* Let me see. Switch?

*(They switch magazines. HEATHER flips around in the Cosmo for a second, making sounds of approval.)*

Heather: *(Pointing to a page in the.)* Do you think that thing would look good on me?

Jennifer: I... don't think that would look good on anyone.

*(They both snicker.)*

Heather: I would so buy this. I don't think Rob would mind. He buys himself new toys all the time. Did you know he actually talked to me about buying us a house?

The biggest purchase he's ever made is a PlayStation and he wants to go to mortgage hell.

Jennifer: *(Sips.)* I guess it's theoretically a good time to buy.

Heather: That only applies to people who have MONEY. *(Turns a few more pages.)* This is cute. *(A few minutes pass.)* Speaking of houses, are you and whatsisname going to move in together?

Jennifer: Whatsisname? Really.

Heather: *(Laughs.)* Just kidding! You know. Chris! You've been dating him for four years.

Jennifer: Five.

Heather: Whatever. That's a long time in *people* years, Jen. I think it would even help with your rent problems. Roommates are great. *(She waggles her eyebrows at JENNIFER suggestively and laughs.)* Especially those of the *male* persuasion!

Jennifer: *(Laughs.)* I don't know. I think he wants to.

Heather: That's amazing.

Jennifer: The rent thing would really help, but I don't think I'm ready for that kind of commitment.

Heather: What kind of commitment?

Jennifer: Moving in together.

Heather: Oh. *You're* not? Really?

Jennifer: Well no. I don't think so.

Heather: But you're always talking about weddings.

Jennifer: I watch a lot of wedding shows. I wanted to be a wedding planner in college.

Heather: But you guys always talk about when you're married. Rob says so all the time. I know you do, he's always talking about Chris and what color dishes you'll have or whatever.

Jennifer: Chris talks about it sometimes, but we're just having fun. We're in a serious relationship, so that stuff is going to come up.

Heather: Oh. Okay. *(She looks awkward, trying to think of something to say.)*

*(A dog barks faintly. Children laugh.)*

Heather: Awwww, look. A golden retriever and his family's kids. Isn't that a Hallmark card?

Jennifer: *(Smiles.)* That's pretty stupidly cute.

Heather: *(Laughs)* You gonna bring Coco down here and try playing fetch with her?

Jennifer: Coco would scratch my eyes out if I even thought of it. *(Laughs.)* She'd probably make me bring the stick to her.

Heather: Yeah, cats are masters of the universe.

Jennifer: *(Looking thoughtful.)* You know, Chris loves dogs. He has three dachshunds.

Heather: That's so sweet. Little wiener dogs.

Jennifer: Yeah. He doesn't much care for Coco though.

Heather: Ohhh, I see. *(Nods.)* He's a dog person. A lot of men are. Dogs are their best friends and all that shit.

Jennifer: Yeah.

Heather: Rob doesn't like animals. I really lucked out with him. He's just like me: self-centered and happy with it. We don't need any pets to complete the picture.

Jennifer: *(Laughs)* Yeah.

Heather: Do you like his dogs?

Jennifer: Oh. Oh yeah, I really like dogs.

Heather: But?

Jennifer: But... But, I dunno. But nothing.

Heather: But *nothing*.

Jennifer: *(Throws her hands up.)* No, I really love dogs. I used to pet-sit my neighbor's Great Dane all through high school. They're great. Animals are great. Chris' dogs are great. They're just... dogs.

Heather: Yeah?

Jennifer: They're needy. They're yappy and small and always get in the way.

Heather: Yeah, I can see that.

Jennifer: I have Coco. She takes care of herself. She's like a little furry roommate all by herself and that's so much better than a stupid little dog.

*(They sit, both sipping their drinks.)*

Jennifer: I just... (Flops forward, elbows on her knees.) He lives with his dad. Those dogs are technically his dad's dogs, so it's not like he'd bring them with him. (She sighs, leans back and pulls her hair out of her ponytail. She shakes her head around, loosening her hair.)

Heather: Oh. Well that's good.

Jennifer: We've talked about him moving in, you know. I really like him. I love him. A lot. We even talked about the marriage thing more than once.

*(Heather nods.)*

Jennifer: He really wants us to get a dog if we do, though. Live together, get married. I think he wants a dachshund. His dad's dogs aren't even trained. They're sweet but they're not even fucking trained.

Heather: That's... That sucks.

Jennifer: Yeah, it *does* suck. He won't take care of the dogs where he lives now and he wants to get a new puppy right when he moves in with me. What is he expecting?

Heather: That you guys—

Jennifer: That *I, I* will train it, because I can't ignore it like he can.

Heather: Yeah.

Jennifer: What would a dog want with two people who work full-time? I think he thinks because I'm a teacher that I have all this time off to goof off? Does he remember that I have a life?

Heather: Probably not.

Jennifer: Probably not.

Heather: *(Scoots closer to JENNIFER.)* Don't worry about it, Jen.

Jennifer: I — I worry. I really love him. I want to be with him.

Heather: I know.

Jennifer: He expects me to change my mind, I guess. Like he thinks I don't know what I want. *(Sips her drink.)* I want him. But I don't want this life sitting around with dachshunds everywhere.

*(HEATHER puts her arm around JENNIFER's shoulder.)*

Jennifer: I...

Heather: Don't *worry*, Jen. You said you're not ready to commit to something like that and that's *okay*. You don't need to have them. Not everybody needs a dog. You know that's *okay*.

Jennifer: It is *okay*, but it's not *okay* for him. We've been dating so long and he loves me so much but he just—I can't even talk to him about this, he just doesn't get it. He just shuts me down.

*(JENNIFER leans her head on HEATHER's shoulder.)*

Jennifer: I tell him that kind of talking makes me nervous. Our house! Our family! Our dogs! Our *fucking* dishes. He says OKAY and we stop but he just can't help it. He'll bring it up again when he's really happy because he *wants* that with me, Heather. He wants me to feel that way too and he's hoping I'll just up and change my mind. I just *can't*.

Heather: You need to think about how you're feeling, Jen. Maybe, I dunno—maybe you guys just aren't—you know.

*(JENNIFER closes her eyes. HEATHER sits with her for a minute, squints into the sun, and with the hand not wrapped around JENNIFER, she pulls a cell phone out of her bra. Clicks a button to check the time.)*

Heather: The sun's going down, baby. We should get going.

Jennifer: Yeah.

*(JENNIFER sits up and leans over, scooping the fallen things back into her bag. She picks up her drink and shakes it, choosing not to take another drink. She pulls the hair elastic off her wrist and ties her hair up again. HEATHER stands and puts the magazines in her bag. She looks down at JENNIFER.)*

Heather: Jen. I know—I... you really should think about this. You're pretty torn up about this and you don't need to be. You don't need this.

Jennifer: I know, I...

Heather: *(Interrupts)* I'm serious. I know you love him, but this? It's kind of... this is kind of serious. You don't want them... and he does.

Jennifer: I... yeah.

*(JENNIFER stands and puts her sunglasses back on. A dog barks again, and children laugh—a little louder than before. JENNIFER looks out. Screen begins slowly fading to black.)*

Jennifer: I... I guess I just keep hoping he'll change his mind.