 Enjoy!
Emmet

Cleaning
for the
Montreal
Canadiens

& other
things

I Never
Did Before

BY EM CAMERON

"It's like if THE HOCKEY SWEATER had a bunch of fuckwords
& was a gay romance."

-the author explaining this text to a friend

Thursday May 9th, 2013 7:37 PM

Should've just worn the stupid Sens sweater. It all went downhill as soon as I told Dad it was in the wash. I mean, it was in the wash. It's still in the wash. But who washes their sweater the night their sweater's team is playing?

Right, as if that was tonight's biggest mistake.

Fuck me forever. I kept my mouth shut all season, kept my Canadiens boosting to Facebook & select moments between classes within (I hope) earshot of Everett La-Leoni.

Pretty much his fault, really. If he hadn't been so cute or so queer or so bursting with displaced Montreal pride, I wouldn't give a shit about their stupid team. I wouldn't have washed my Sens sweater until they were out of the playoffs, like I never do. I definitely wouldn't have slipped & cheered a Habs goal out loud in front of my parents in our basement festooned with Sens memorabilia.

Telling them why, though, that's all on me. & that's the real reason I'm out here with just the ridiculous shirt on my back.

Jesus Christ, why the sudden bout of honesty, Jonah? You've been faking church youth group meetings to spray paint the town with See for 2 years but suddenly you can't think of any reason you might have screamed "YES!" when Subban scored other than your giant yes-very-much-homo crush on a boy for whom this is excellent news?

Really wish I had that sweater now.

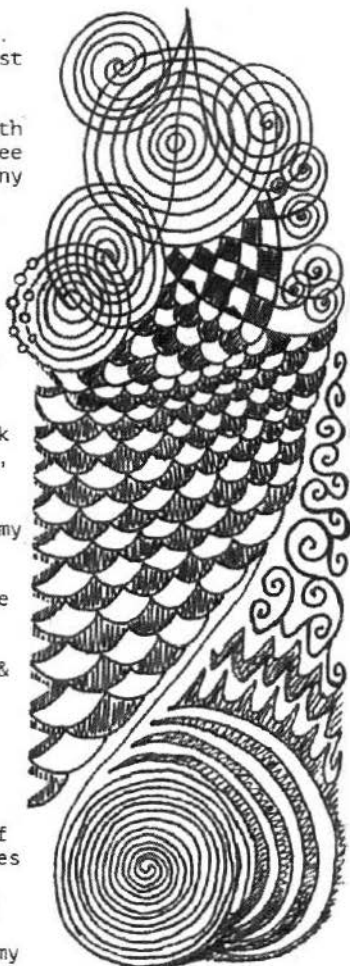
Not that it's cold. Pretty warm for this early in May, & not even dark yet. 1 of those things will change pretty soon, though. Probably take the other down with it.

How long 'til they go to bed? I could sneak back in. Maybe they'll stay up waiting for me, though. Maybe that's okay; maybe they're calming down right now. How long should that take? I can't really know. I don't even have my phone on me in case they want to be direct about it. So whatever, I'll just wait for a sign, like when it gets cold, or the bugs come out, or that 1 neighbour's cat with all the gross toes crosses my path or. I don't know. Something will happen & I'll take my chances & turn around to see if it's fine yet.

& in the meantime..see what See's up to? She's not a huge fan of the drop-by sans warning text but she'd give me a pass for extenuating circumstances.

I'm most of the way there before I decide for sure I can't do that. I pace the length of the bridge between her block & mine a few times for good measure. Sometimes I feel like this town is too small to finish thinking anything through in transit.

What it finally comes down to (aside from my pride): I can't expect her to rescue me when I'm walking around actively hating this shirt she made me.



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Not permanent hate. Just hate that I had to be wearing it tonight. It's not a serious shirt. It's like an aggressively not-serious shirt, which is absolutely why See gave it to me. Once upon a time it was an ordinary blue golf shirt yanked from See's dad's closet until she cast a spell with freezer paper stencils & fabric paint & now it features a wraparound masterpiece of an octopus hugging/throttling a capybara. It's a completely great shirt that suits me so well it doesn't even matter that it's way too big for me. Except it's not a great shirt to be wearing when you're suddenly in a big fight about something where it might be in your best interest to look like a regular person.

I keep thinking about last fall, when See snuck us into the Hallowe'en dance at the high school & I accidentally watched the Mona Lisa break up with a hot dog in the hall outside the 1st floor bathrooms. Now I go to that school & I see the hot dog around pretty often & every time I think about how completely demoralizing it must be to have all these big serious feelings trapped in a stupid costume & have some guy who randomly witnessed that shit reflexively ponder the shame of being a hot dog scorned every time he sees you.

I don't know if the hot dog or I would've been better off with different wardrobe choices but at least 1 of us should've known enough to try. Like for example there's probably some psychological effect I could've read up on about making my parents feel like I was on their team via appropriate sportswear before I dropped the big 1.

& maybe not leading with a declaration of allegiance to the literal other team.

I guess now we know there are crimes worse than cheering for the Habs under the roof of Stew & Brenda Matheson.

I didn't mean to do it this way, but it's also sort of weirdly completely how I always thought of doing it. Not with the Habs; I never thought I'd be a Habs fan. But back in grade 8, the 1st time around, when my marks went from crappy to abysmal, I remember carrying home my D- tests for them to sign & thinking maybe to soften the blow I could say, "By the way, all signs point to gay," at the exact moment I passed over the red-pen-slashed pages. But I always decided against it, like a reasonable person.

I might not be the bottom of the class any more, but judging by tonight, I've clearly dropped a few IQ points in the past 2 years.

Thing is, I had 2 choices: explosion or cancer. Sudden catastrophe or slow, silent infestation of untouchable subjects until they strangle everything that makes us a living, breathing family. Slim chance of walking away whole either way, but the explosion was starting to feel maybe safer. Like I could



maybe walk away alive, just with a cool prosthetic or something & maybe even feel vaguely brave but mostly still moving. Whereas you leave the cancer untreated & it's only a matter of time.

I walk on tiptoes under the bridge, tapping each of the blue graffiti footprints along the ceiling, like See & me always do (except she doesn't have to stand on her toes). Then because I still don't know where I'm going, I walk backwards & tap them again. Then I jump up & slap our tag over the tunnel opening: a whale with one giant eyeball in its belly. This is 1 of the few I did, because to get it up there 1 of us had to perch on the other 1's shoulders & in See's words, "I know you're the whale symbolically, but proportionally, I'm the fucking whale, Jonah." & yeah, See's fairly voluptuous, but not so much that it'd matter if I weren't made of toothpicks & rubber bands. Anyway, I'd know this was mine even if I didn't remember doing it, because it's not as good as any of hers.

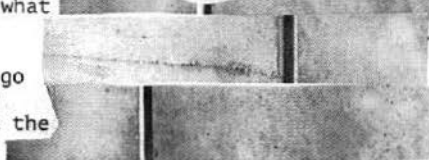
See hates it when I touch them. She says once your creation's outside your body you have to let it go, or it's like touching your shit. But that would mean I'm wearing her shit, so forgive me for rejecting that theory.

I'm hardly ever here without her, especially not with this much light left. I wish I had my camera with me - maybe I didn't have time to grab the real 1, but my phone would at least have enough juice to take a few shots.

See really hates when I take pictures of them, because a) "Mr. Andersen's going to know it's ours if you keep bringing shots of the same tag into his darkroom" & b) "it's cheating to capture a fleeting art form with a permanent 1." Re: a) I already told him I'm doing a series on "recurring man-made symbols in the local environment" & even if he figures out this 1 is us-made, I doubt he'd care. I somewhat agree with b) but unlike her, I can't resist. Some day we will either be big & famous or old & boring, & I want proof that we were once what we are now. & as Clare would oh-so-buddhistly point out, nothing is permanent. Which, as much as I love her, is kind of a useless statement. Like, okay, it's ultimately true, but I'm 15, & even with the best advances in medical technology I'll probably be dead in 100 years, & I can't think of a scenario in which it would be personally relevant to me that a couple millennia later the pyramids are levelled & the sun explodes.

Plus, if I had my camera with me I could at least be doing something right now, other than getting out of Dad's sight & wondering to what extent he meant that.

I should definitely wait until dark to go back. But maybe not too late, in case they think I just ran up to my room & they lock the



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outside doors. Or in case they're just that mad. In which case, I could use a backup plan.

I wish Clare lived in town. I don't feel much better about spilling my guts to her than I do with See, but it wouldn't come from quite as far out of left field, given what we talked about last weekend. It's weird how I've known her about half as long as See, & I'd definitely say, if it was grade school & we were taking the term "best friend" super literally, it goes 1st best friend See, 2nd best friend Clare, but I don't have a particularly good reason why any more. That's just the way it is.

Except that might have to officially flip if I picked Clare to rescue me. Which I could still do. She's a ways out, in the valley of the hippies where the streetlights don't shine, but if I started hiking now I could maybe make it before it got totally dark. Or not.

I break into a run along the river, towards the park. It would be the right direction to run towards Clare's, more-or-less, but I still haven't decided for sure that's what I'm doing. Running just seems like the only productive thing I'm equipped for at the moment.

Or not. By the time I actually get to the park, I'm easily outpaced by 2 dog walkers, the 2nd of whom is about 90 years old. Still, I manage to drag my wheezy ass all the way to the Millennium Gates before collapsing on the cobblestones before them.

I don't know whose idea the Millennium Gates were. It was the Millennium. I was an infant. However, I do know their creator was either very pessimistic or very bad at symbolism, because these Millennium Gates, the gates to the millennium, are welded shut; they do not open, & if they did, they would lead to a dead end road & a filthy river.

I yank my shirt over my head while I'm crossing the road. It gets caught on my glasses at exactly the wrong time. Seems more likely I'll trip on the curb than that an actual car is going to come down this road fast enough to kill me, so I stop in my tracks right on the yellow line to untangle. At least if I get myself killed I'll have a new stupidest thing I did tonight.

There's a sign telling me in no uncertain terms not to jump in where I'm about to, but it won't be my 1st time. 1st this year, though, & 1st time solo. It's the annual custom to pretend it's not a cesspool if you jump in with your clothes on during the music festival, & you can usually even get away with swimming over here where the water is properly deep for a couple minutes before somebody's dad points to the sign & asks you in his I'm-a-cool-guy-but voice to be a better example for his idiot kids. Also, me & See rounded off a couple of our midnight escapades by skinny dipping here



last summer. Clare keeps saying how this summer will be great because we can jump in by her place, out in the sticks & not worry about getting caught. I have a feeling that's the opposite of a selling point for See.

The sky's barely hitting the nightly side of blue, so I decide to keep the underwear on. Probably would've gone with macho grey boxers over Batman briefs if I'd known this was where the night was headed, but that can move right along to the back of the line of things I could've thought out better if I were a different person.

I scrunch my clothes into a defiant bundle under the NO SWIMMING IN THIS AREA AT ANY TIME sign, hold my breath, plug my nose & cannonball.

Thursday May 9th, 2013 8:05 PM

I wasn't planning on getting anywhere, but once I'm in the water, I realize swimming is really the way to travel. How close does the river run to Clare's, anyway? Might have to get out & sprint the last stretch, but it would be through the woods, right? I don't know. Me & Clare are pretty tight, but are we show-up-in-my-underwear-&-ask-to-spend-the-night tight? She did extend the skinny dipping invitation, but I suspect I was not top of the list of people she was looking forward to seeing naked in that scenario. Like, in her ideal scenario, I'd be the 3rd wheel & gracefully roll away at the agreed upon signal. I think as of last weekend she's finally put that dream to bed. Doesn't mean she'd be thrilled if I arrived uninvited, undressed & unaccompanied by our lady fair. Anyway, it's not like there's a signpost along the river bank pointing where to get out & what direction to walk to Clare's, & I couldn't exactly knock on a stranger's door & ask to use their phone in my present (dis)ensemble.

I flip to my back & float for a minute, which reminds me of a song Clare always sings, so I sing it until I think I'm mixing it up with the song she usually sings right after that, & then I switch to a Rocky Horror medley. By the time I'm halfway to the bridge I've got all the aquatic choreography for Time Warp worked out, & -

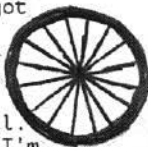
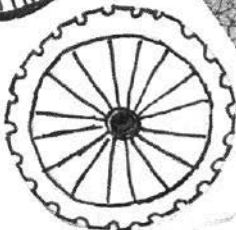
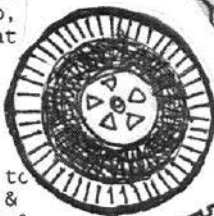
"AH! FUCK ME!

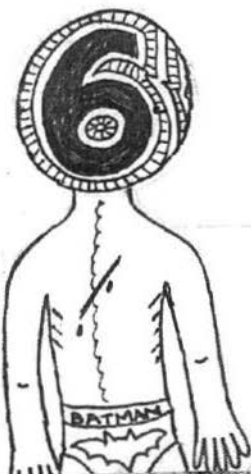
Something scrapes along my back. I don't know what it is, only that it hurts like hell.

I grope my way towards the bank. I think I'm in somebody's backyard, but if they didn't hear me singing or screaming, they won't notice me now, right?

"Jonah? Jonah Matheson?"

I turn. I don't see details too well without my glasses, but there are a limited number of 6 foot tall redheaded women with giant black poodles who know my name in this town, so it's a pretty safe bet I'm looking at Mom's friend Debbie.





"Uh. Hi Mrs. Campbell."

"Are you okay?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm fine."

The poodle sniffs at my back.

"You're bleeding," Debbie observes, bringing the lead in tight.

"Uh, yeah. I'm. That. It's fine. I'm fine."

"You could be finer, sweetie. Let me help. Patsy, stay." She puts the lead down & unzips the fanny pack around her waist. "I'm just going to clean the wound for now. I have some band-aids, but in this case I think that would be a band-aid solution." She unwraps a little wet nap thing & wipes it along the cut. It stings, but it's not like it wasn't already doing that. "What happened, honey?"

"Uh. I was swimming & uh. I don't really know."

"Well, lots of junk in that river. It's no wonder. You up to date with your tetanus shots?"

"Yeah, last summer when I stepped on a rusty nail at - uh, at the cottage." It was actually in an abandoned barn See & I were using as secret headquarters, but the details are unimportant.

"Well, that's good. All right, not as bad as it looked now that we've got you mopped up. No stitches. Now where are your clothes, kiddo?"

It's weird to have somebody else's mom call you "kiddo" the same night your own mom calls you "faggot." (Well, her exact words were "you can't be a faggot," but I am, so.)

"Uh, they're over there. By the wading pool."

"Wading got a little carried away, eh? Okay, you sit tight; I'll grab 'em for ya. Patsy, you keep Jonah company."

She's back fast enough to embarrass me about how far I felt like I'd swum, but I'm still shivering. I keep trying not to, because it doesn't help much with the embarrassment, not to mention it makes it harder to put my clothes back on quickly. Debbie averts her eyes, even though she already got up close & personal with my naked back. My briefs are still soaked, so it's only a matter of time before it looks like I pissed myself. Delightful.

The Campbells' house is barely a block past ours, so it's hard to come up with an excuse for her not to walk me home. Not that I don't want her to exactly.

"I don't s'pose I need to tell you it's pretty stupid to go swimming alone in the dark, do I?"

"It's not the stupidest thing I -" Nope, nuh-uh, cannot get into that with the chairwoman of the Christ in Our Community committee. "I mean, it's not that dark yet."

"& it's only a flesh wound, right Captain Toughpants?"

"I won't do it again, Mrs. Campbell."



"That's what I like to hear. All right kitten, here's your stop."

I freeze.

"You want me to go in with you & explain?"

I shake my head.

"You never struck me as the cat-got-your-tongue type, Jonah."

"Me & my big mouth." I'm not crying, but I'm pretty sure she can tell it's taking some effort, so what's the point? Still, gotta hold onto something.

"What's up, buddy?"

I shrug.

"Wanna come back to our place for a bit?"

There's jello in the fridge."

"I don't need jello." I wipe my nose with the back of my hand. God I'm so utterly revolting.

"Pardon me. Thought your problem might be not enough jello."

"Not exactly."

"Okay. Well. It's cherry."

A mosquito lands on my hand. I watch her draw my blood & fly away with it, to feed her babies or get smooshed on somebody else's shin.

"Whatcha thinking, kiddo?"

I'm thinking about mosquito babies eating cherry blood jello parfait. I'm thinking how excellent it would be if I could've done some made-for-TV-movie body switch with that mosquito just now, so I wouldn't have to choose between kiddo or faggot, pity or wrath.

But here I am, just a boy with soggy underwear & a weakness for cherry anything.

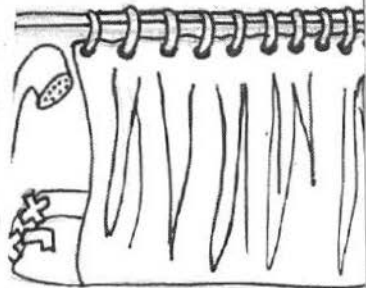
Plus I really have to pee.

Thursday May 9th, 2013 8:38 PM

I've probably been in here way too long. The thing is, having released my junk from its clammy cotton prison, I don't have the heart to shove it back in there, even after wringing them out as much as possible. Going commando is no problem, but then where do the underwear go? My 1st thought was hang them to dry on the side of the tub behind the shower curtain & circle back for them when I leave, but I don't know how long that's going to be & what if Mr. Campbell or 1 of the boys goes to take a shower in the meantime? Who's even home right now? Cash is like a fully married adult now I think, but Nelson still lives at home between semesters or girlfriends or whatever, doesn't he? I just saw Scott at school like 5 hours ago, so obviously he's around. Joy.

Ugh, it's weird enough that I'm here without throwing my underwear around. I could just throw them out, but unless I get all handsy with the Campbell family bathroom trash to bury the briefs, same basic problem: next person to throw something out gets a WTF moment courtesy of me.

If I open the window, I can toss them out there. As far as I can see through the frosted glass, there's a convenient shrubbery out there



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for cover until I get a chance to casually crawl under it in search of my moist panties. As 1 does. Assuming 1 ever gets this window open.

I'm not sure if I hear the door open, but the yelp certainly gets my attention. By the time I turn around, nobody's there, although the door's swung wide, giving the full length mirror in the empty hall the full frontal view. Well, half-frontal. I'm still wearing See's shirt.

"MOM! SOMEBODY'S IN THE BATHROOM WITH HIS PANTS OFF!"

Fuck me. It's Scott. Not that Nelson would be any better. Or Cash. Cash's whole stoic friendly army guy thing pretty my informed me of my own gayness, so yeah, that would've been worse outside the context of a wet dream. Still. Did this day have to end with Scott Campbell catching me with my pants down? Or is it still not over?

Fuck me forever.

"I don't know how you know what anybody has on or off in the bathroom, Monkey, but I suppose that's their own business, isn't it?"

"No, Mom, I'm serious. I went to go to the bathroom & there's a stranger in there. He must've climbed in the window. Where's the phone? I'll call 911; you grab the big knife."

"No knives necessary, Monkey. It's a neighbour, not a stranger & he came in through the front door with me. He has been in there a while, though. YOU ALL RIGHT, JONAH?"

Jesus Christ. If I could get the window open I would be out of here by now, swear to God, pants or no pants, would rather flash the neighbourhood than walk back into that kitchen fully clothed.

But if we're going for speed, my pants are several billion times easier to get up than the window.

So.

Here I am.

"Hi Scott."

"Oh. Hi Jonah. Uh. Sorry I though you were a.. What brings you here?"

"Monkey, don't pry."

Scott gives Mrs. Campbell an are-you-kidding-me-I-just-saw-his-butt-without-warning-&-I-get-no-context look, but I can tell he won't push it. I'm not sure if it's because Scott's such a goody good or because his mom's kind of an Amazon, if there are Amazons with redneck twangs.

The Amazon slides me a bowl of jiggly red. It's in fancy shapes like they show on the package: circles & stars & hearts. I didn't know actual people did that.

"Scott, you're welcome to eat dessert in front of the TV tonight."

Scott raises an eyebrow to show he knows she's trying to get rid of him, but hurries out before his luck changes.



"Any red spots on my gorgeous white couch & you'll be bleaching it with a toothbrush, y'hear?" she calls after him.

My mouth is full of cherry star when she turns back to me.

"Not that I imagine you're any more eager to spill your guts to me in private, but I know you & Scott haven't been that close since you're not in the same grade any more."

We weren't exactly close before, either. I don't remember him saying anything specifically mean to my face, & once I heard him say something like 'come on guys' when everyone was definitely talking shit about me just when I came in the bathroom, but I don't think that means he thought of us as friends so much as he thought of himself as a decent human. Which is fine. He had his girl posse & now I have mine. I thought the days of our moms trying to get us together for playdates were through. & maybe Debbie's trying to reassure me of just that. But if church & my mom are the only ties that bind me to her, this for sure won't be a tell-all gelatin & sympathy sesh. Unless the goal is to snip those ties for good.

I don't know why that's such a bad idea. It's not like I ever think about Mrs. Campbell when she's not right in front of me & that's once or twice a week for 5 minutes at most, before leaving church or disentangling myself from the kitchen table my-how-you've-grown. Jesus, I just told my actual parents that I like a boy so much I want to root for his team & kiss him on the mouth, & that was way more disappointing to them than the fact that they responded in the completely predictable way to that news bulletin was to me.

That's the thing, though. I've filled my disappointing-churchy-parents quota for the day. I kind of figured the 1 advantage was getting it over with for the rest of my life. But maybe it doesn't work like that. Maybe there will always be a mom with big hair who thinks you could do better than to be yourself.

"Look, sweetie, I can tell you don't want to be here. Which makes me wonder what things are like at home right now that this was your choice. I've been friends with your parents a long time. Long enough to know they aren't perfect people."

Jesus, she thinks they hit me. Or worse. I'm sitting here letting her think her old friends the Mathesons are some kind of monsters just so I don't have to replay a shitty conversation. I should just leave. No, that'd be worse; that'd basically confirm it's as bad as the worst thing she can think of. She'd probably call Children's Aid or something. Not the way to smooth things over.

"They didn't do anything wrong. I mean not like - we just had a fight. Like a regular - you know, just words."

"The gospels are just words & they changed the course of human history. Don't know why



emma + scott + emma

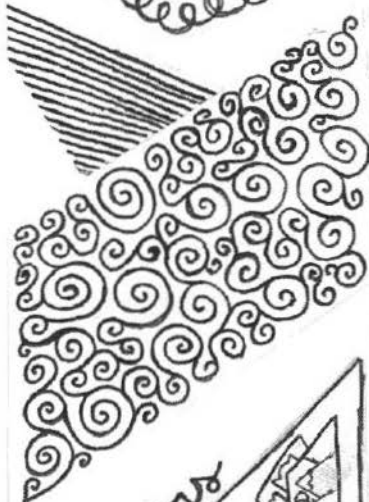
THEN



claire + me + see

NOW





anybody pretends it doesn't work just as well the other way."

"Fair enough."

"Listen, I just need the answer to 1 question: if you leave here, are you out in the cold tonight?"

"It's not really cold."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah. I mean no, it's not like - I mean." It's 2 questions at once: would they let me in & am I ready to go? "I don't know if I know yet?"

"Cash & Nel's room is all set for guests. No skin off my back. Either way I'll be calling your mother. It's the difference between telling her you're safe & sound or volunteering to lead the search party if you're not at her door in 5 minutes. Your call, but the latter would be a real pain in my neck & I'm fully booked at the salon tomorrow. So. Can I interest you in a bunk?"

"Uh. Yeah. I guess that makes - I mean just for - to let things cool down. Sorry."

"Kiddo, you picked the option that gets me the most shut-eye tonight. No complaints here. You want to call them, or shall I?"

On the 1 hand, the wimpy thing is to make the Redneck Amazon handle the tough conversation for me. On the other hand, that way they get a chance to tell her whatever they want about why I'm here. Which is maybe only fair. If I'm going to get kicked, might as well do it while I'm still down.

"No. I mean. Maybe you should."

"Okay then. Go ahead & pick yourself something to sleep in out of the dresser up there. You know which room, don'cha?"

I do. The 1 I've never been in before. But also the 1 I know best.

This house is basically the same layout as ours. There are enough rooms on the 2nd floor for Cash & Nelson to each have their own, but I'm guessing it was their choice to stick together in the big attic room. I chose the same, but probably in a different way. I said I wanted more space, but I really wanted space between me & my parents. Maybe Cash & Nel did too, but at least they didn't have to go for total isolation to get it.

Their palette is more subdued than mine. No orange sheets, no Peter Max posters on the slopy ceiling. Looks like Debbie's in the middle of deciding what to do here, decor-wise. The posters they used to have up are in a dusty pile at the top of the stairs, but the pinhole-cornered rectangles of un-sun-lightened green show she hasn't gotten as far as a new coat of paint. The bunk bed is in the middle of the room, the only place with enough ceiling clearance to climb up top. On 1 side of it there's a small collection of exercise equipment still in the packaging. On the other, the double-wide dresser with CASH stencilled on

the left side & NELSON on the right.

I open the Cash side 1st, even though I don't think I can actually wear anything of his. I mean, he's a bit taller than Nelson, but it's not like either of their clothes are actually going to fit me. It just feels wrong to leverage this as an opportunity to get into the hot 1's pants. Literally.

Cash's drawers are empty anyway. Should've guessed he'd be the type to clean up after his childhood. Nelson, not so much. There's nothing really nice left in there, but plenty of bits & pieces that look like they date back to middle school, or earlier. I put on a pair of Christmassy PJ pants that are barely even too long for me & an old summer camp T-shirt with Sharpie scribbles all over it that, [redacted] were an American Apparel model, I would perhaps call a dress.

Debbie knocks on the door just as I'm pulling the shirt over my head. "Hey champ, I'm about to run a load of laundry. Let me get your underwear in there."

Friday May 10th, 2013 7:57 AM

The 1st thought is not 'where am I?'

I'm used to 'where am I?' Not like I'm some hit-on-the-head-with-a-coconut amnesiac starting from scratch every day. But the bright orange sheets, the huge Yellow Submarine I wake up staring at every day - they're a deliberate tactic to draw me as swiftly as possible back into my real life, because of how I feel like my dreams are this force greater than myself with the power to erase me.

I've always had really good dreams. Happy-go-lucky guy, happy-go-lucky sleep. 100% wish fulfillment, like Freud said. Only I guess he was talking deep twisted incestuous metaphors. Mine are pretty straightforward: eating cakes & drinking bubbly & days on end in bed with Everett La-Leoni & casually half-waving to Yoko Ono at my vernissage like it's no big & we'll catch up later like maybe after I'm done making out with Everett La-Leoni in front of this gorgeous-if-I-do-say-so-myself portrait of selfsame Vietnamese heartthrob shirtlessly making me breakfast.

But then I wake up. & without my carefully orchestrated cues to snap the world as she is into place, I wake up confused. It used to get extra weird at sleepovers before I knew I needed glasses. I'd stumble around until I either found the family photos on the stairs to squint-recognize the host, or tripped over some other kid in a sleeping bag, & then it would be a place with people again & I'd be fine. It got even worse post-glasses. Not because glasses; correlation does not equal causation; because angst. I get it real bad in Grandma's guest room. You go from happy-go-lucky dream space into white where-am-I space & it's hard to hold onto the happy. You become a happiness sieve, straining the facts: no cakes here & you're 15





& look 12 so good luck securing bubbly & Everett La-Leoni barely knows your name & only because you're annoying & Yoko Ono will be very respectably dead of old age before you accomplish anything she'd ever in a million years just casually show up at.

But the 1st thought today is not 'where am I?'

The 1st thought today is 'I slept?'

Not REM sleep, clearly. I've been reading up on dream science lately, trying to figure out if there's a way to quit cold turkey. Because I have this theory that I'm cheating. Dreaming vernissages & Everett La-Leoni kisses to lull my actual self into slacking off on actual picture-taking & move-making. & true-thing-saying.

"JONAH! BREAKFAST!"

"Hi Jonah," says Scott between bites of oatmeal, trying & failing to sound like it's not weird that I slept in his brother's room last night, am in fact still wearing his brother's T-shirt with his brother's friends' names all over it.

"You boys gonna be ready in time to walk, or should I go re-arrange the Tetris situation in the car so we can squeeze you both in?"

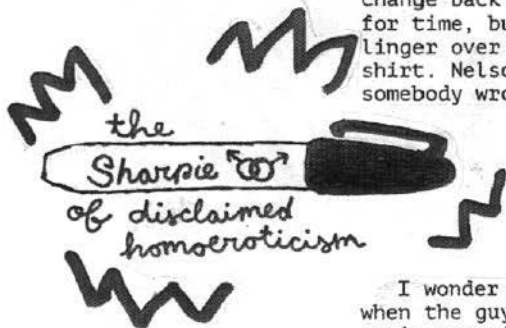
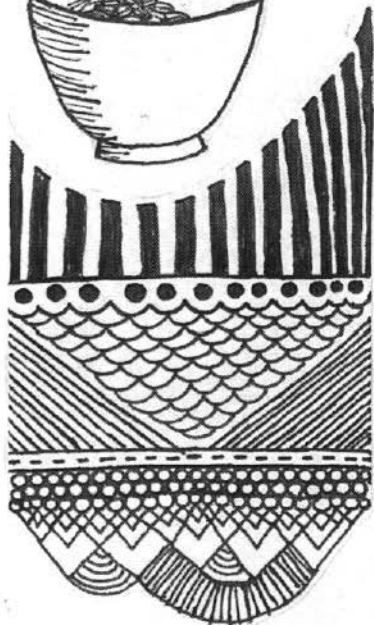
"We'll walk," says Scott. He's still in PJs & I can't even imagine how much wrangling that hair takes between this & School Scott. We have like 5 minutes before walking won't get us there before the bell. Maybe 7 with freaky gangly gingerboy legs, which 1 of us does not have. Which could either be a point he's overlooking or the whole reason to travel by foot. He doesn't want anyone to see us spill out of the same car & he knows if we walk he can always pull ahead of me in the last leg & enter the building without risking association.

Anyway, he's the 1 who's going to hold us up. Not like I packed a change of clothes & a toiletry bag when I stormed out last night. Slash was kicked out. Maybe it was mutual. The Boy Who Mutually Broke Up With His Parents: The Jonah Matheson Story.

I head back up to Cash & Nel's room to change back into my own clothes. We're pressed for time, but Scott's in the shower, so I linger over the shirt for a moment. Not my shirt. Nelson's. For sure Nelson's, because somebody wrote a poem under the left sleeve.

Nobody
Even compares
Like
Soulmates
Only
No homo

I wonder if Nelson was wearing the shirt when the guy wrote it, full on face to pit. I can't even imagine a guy willingly subjecting himself to my armpit, let alone leaving proof



of such a magical event to languish in a drawer in my parents' house after I moved out. Just picture Everett La-Leoni trying to write something under my arm. I bet even on his knees he'd have to hunch his magnificent spine. Nope. Unacceptable. I'd write a poem in his armpit, though. Not a stupid acrostic. A sexy haiku or something. A sonnet if he'd stand long enough. I don't know; I'm not a poet; I can barely spell. But it seems like if you got close enough to inhale the sweat of such a being as Everett La-Leoni, you'd damn well get inspired.

This is the kind of thing that makes me wonder if I'm a pervert. I've seen plenty enough porn & It Gets Better videos to reassure me it's natural to want to blow a guy or ask him to prom, but sitting around fantasizing about huffing hockey player & permanent marker? Kinda sick, dude.

Mrs. Campbell knocks on the door. When I open it, I have to wonder what she knocked with: she's putting her earrings on with her right hand, holding a toothbrush, toothpaste & a spray can of Axe in her left.

"Grabbed you some essentials before Scotty claimed the bathroom. Toothbrush is fresh, I promise; I get 'em in 6 packs just in case."

I take the stuff from her, but drop the deodorant. I do not have mom hands, evidently. When I stand back up, she's nervous. Which is weird, because again: Redneck Amazon.

"When I called your mother last night she was - well, clearly upset, but relieved to know you weren't - that you were safe & all."

"Yeah. Thanks." To be honest, part of me liked the idea of making them worry. Not forever worry. Strategic worry. Power shift worry.

Mrs. Campbell looks past me to the clock at the top of the stairs. "That boy takes unconscionable showers. I'm gonna be late if I stick around. Good thing I'm boss lady. See ya, sweetpea."

I brush my teeth at the kitchen sink, but leave the deodorant on the counter. I'd rather smell like my own BO than like straight boy.

I think about leaving without Scott. I think about it just long enough that he comes bounding down the stairs.

"We ready?" he asks. I toss him his deodorant.

It's weird walking to school without a backpack. Walking anywhere without at least the leather strap of my camera pressing into the side of my neck. I try to remember what books I took home last night, what I'll have to work around. I thought about taking my lino cuts home to work on - did I? No. Mr. Andersen wouldn't let me sign the chisels out. Shit, my English homework. I even did it for once. Oh well, not like it'll be a shocking



~~Earnestly~~
~~Valiant~~
~~Excruciatingly~~
~~Radiant~~
~~Everlastingly~~
~~Triumphantly~~
T...
ODE TO AN ARMPIT
by J. Pervert





disappointment when I show up empty handed.
Just Jonah-as-usual.

"So, uh, I'm sorry that..whatever happened
last night," says Scott.

"Shit happens"

"Yeah. Uh. Guess so."

I realize this is so not within the realm of
shit that can conceivably happen in the
universe of the Campbell household. I can't
even imagine Mrs. Campbell yelling - a real
yell, not a breakfast yell. Maybe Scott can't
imagine my mom yelling either. It's a rare
event, & still quieter than most moms' casual
dinner conversation. She doesn't need a
bullhorn to make you know you really fucked up.

"Glad Mom found you."

"Yeah. Your mom's pretty cool."

"Eh, just wait."

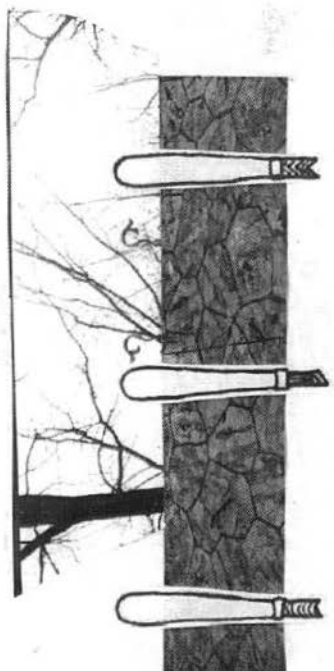
Friday May 10th, 2013 8:41 AM

Mr. Andersen is pretty chill about any rule
that doesn't involve art supplies. Like, he
won't mark you down late as long as you get to
work when you show up. Not to say he doesn't
notice. Eventually he's going to crouch down
next to your table & ask the reason. "Not the
excuse, the reason," is basically his
catchphrase. He's basically like if Santa took
a left turn & became a therapist but then
accidentally got hired to teach high school art
classes. In a movie he'd be the 1 I tell
everything to, the mentor/surrogate father. But
I think in real life you have to pick 1 or the
other & I pick mentor. There's literally 1
adult who can talk about my 'work' & my
'vision' with a straight face & I don't want to
start crying about my little boy problems in
front of him. Or Clare or See or the rest of
the class, for that matter. So when he comes
over, I just say, "Up late watching the hockey
game."

I'm kind of worried he's going to tell me
that's more of an excuse than a reason, but he
just says, "Huh, wouldn't have pegged you for a
hockey man."

The thing I like about art is you really
just have to make it. I mean, in a way I like
photography best because you can pretend it's
not that, that you're just hopping around
blithely snapping up things that already exist,
but if you consider how many shitty vacation
photos have been taken of the most amazing
places on the planet, it's a total lie. You
have to be there with the machine & understand
the machine & talk to it in the secret machine
language of almost imperceptible touches. Maybe
you don't create the things you catch, but you
create the net you catch them with. You are the
net. You hands, your eyes, your secret-machine-
language-knowing mind.

I'm pretty bad at lino cuts, but it does
that thing I need anyway, letting me be more
than a brain floating around having the world
happen to it. & me & Clare & See are kind of



competitive about art class. Like in a ridiculous way, because obviously See's pieces are glorious manifestations of a richly deranged inner life & Clare's are adorable delicate perfection & mine are like 'can you tell it's supposed to be a stop sign?' - but it's kind of our art class thing to swagger & trash talk, which is a pleasant distraction from any real talk that might otherwise interfere with this thing where for the next 6 hours I don't have to think about the fact that I don't really know where I'm going after that.

Friday May 10th, 2013 11:30 AM

I've been avoiding Clare & See at lunch for a while now, because when we don't have a dedicated task to bitch each other about, their whole unresolvable sexual tension deal kind of swallows all hope from the air. But my usual darkroom excuse won't work today, because a) any film I might've developed is stuck at home & b) when it's just me & Mr. Andersen we always end up talking about really serious stuff. Which is fine when the serious stuff on my mind is like, 'can I transcend my unoriginal skinny-kid-with-camera status by creating something the world decides it actually needed to see or only by eventually getting fat?' Less fine when it's 'where's home now?'

The point is, I've apparently missed the ushering in of a new era of cafeteria utopia or something, because as I approach our table, Clare is engaged in a bubbling dialogue with Everett La-Leoni.

Everett La-Leoni is sitting at my lunch table.

Okay, so either my friends are delivering Everett La-Leoni to me on a silver platter or they've been keeping him from me for weeks. Doesn't matter. There's an open seat directly across from Everett La-Leoni which I am permitted - nay, expected - to take.

Thank you, Clare. Let the record show that I owe you big.

"Everett La-Leoni! What's a guy like you doing at a table like this?" That'll sound ridiculous if he's been eating here for a while. Does he even know Clare & See are my friends? Maybe he thinks they're his friends now. Maybe they are. Maybe that's great. Assuming they're willing to share him with me. Seriously though, what is Everett La-Leoni doing hanging out with niner art dorks? Doesn't he know he's Everett La-Leoni?

"Jonah, hi! Clare was just telling me she's doing the open mic at the L & C tonight."

Oh fuck me. Of course Everett La-Leoni is cool enough to call a bar by its initials. Also of course it's so immediately obvious what the big I owe Clare is going to be.

"Open mic, eh? Sweet, you singing, Clare? Or uh...poetry?"

I have 2 hopes with my intonation here. The 1st is that I am subtly promoting the virtues

15



the opportunity
to ingratiate
yourself with
OR
humiliate
yourself in front
of the most
magnificent boy

Also choc. milk \$2



16



of singing over poetry. The 2nd is that Clare doesn't consciously realize what I'm doing but it still works on her. & okay, if I get a 3rd it's that Everett La-Leoni doesn't think I'm being a dick to my friend (our friend?). & 3rd-&-a-half, that he doesn't have to hear Clare's poetry.

"Bit of both, I think," says Clare. "They're pretty strict about keeping sets to 15 minutes, but variety is good, right? I have a new longer piece, but I timed it out & I should be able to bookend it with a couple songs. Short ones."

"Is it the piece I think it is?" asks See. She does not sound pumped.

"I don't know what you think it is. Why don't you come to the Lion & Catfish tonight & then after my set you can tell me if it was or not?"

"Pretty sure I'm your ride, so yeah, I'll be there."

Everett La-Leoni, meet my friends. I introduced them, actually. Yup, I created that monster. Although to be fair, I'm not the 1 who told my asexual friend to kiss my bisexual friend's face & then fail to mention that she was just goofing around until several weeks later when my bisexual friend finally got up the guts to ask if there would be further makeouts.

"So," says Everett, magnanimously changing the subject. Anybody see the game last night?"

"No."

"No."

"Yeah!"

Too up, Jonah. Way too up.

But he smiles. Fuck me forever, Everett La-Leoni smiles at me.

"You a Sens fan?" he asks.

"No, man. Habs all the way." Or at least all the way since I 1st saw Everett La-Leoni in his red white & blue jersey.

"Ah, then condolences, bro."

Bro? Is that good? Prelude to a bromance? I know that's a straight boy thing, but we're not straight boys. So maybe we get bromances with benefits? Would that be brocestuous?

Wait. Condolences? Shit. Really? Now he knows from my 'Yeah!' that I didn't see the whole game last night. & this is so not the context in which I want to explain why not.

"Oh. Yeah. Sad night for us, eh?"

Nice save, Jonah.

Somebody slides onto the end of the bench next to me. Scott.

"Hey Jonah."

"Dr. Scott! says Everett La-Leoni, with way more enthusiasm than he's ever said my name. Oh fuck me. Please don't let me be in love with a straight boy chaser.

"Hey Ev." Ev? Dr. Scott? They're on a nickname basis? Fuck me forever if Scott is secretly into guys & has better Everett La-Leoni game than me. Not acceptable, nope.

"So, uh, how do you 2 know each other?"

Everett La-Leoni looks embarrassed? Fuck me. They have an embarrassing secret whatever together. The world is not just.

"We see each other at board game nights sometimes," says Everett La-Leoni. "At Lilliput."

Okay. So it could just be nerd embarrassment. We're talking game nights in a store full of families & stuff. Probably not a ton of hanky panky going down. Assuming they don't go anywhere together after board games.

"Plus we're in like 3 classes together," says Scott.

"3? Really?" asks Everett.

"Bio, geo, drama."

"Wow, only noticed you in drama. Sorry man."

Okay, so clearly this is going one way at most, & it's the least catastrophic way (for me). Possibly acceptable. Just please don't let Everett La-Leoni have a policy against dating anyone shorter than himself. That would put Scott on a very brief list of eligibles & me at the top of a very long list of absolutely nevers.

Scott leans in closer to me. "So listen, just thought I'd check in about, uh, where you're going after school?"

If this sets off any alarm bells for Everett, he remains stoic. Still. Scott seems to have this ideal that I want to discuss how I'm teetering on the edge of hobodom in front of my friends & Everett La-Leoni. Which I do not. I barely want to discuss it with Scott.

"Clare's playing open mic at the L & C. So. Probably that." Thank you again, Clare.

"That's not until 7, though," says Clare. She has that helpful lilt in her voice like when she's critiquing my Everett La-Leoni approach plans. Oh god, she thinks Scott likes me, & she thinks I should give him a chance. Clearly we're going to have to have a talk about how you don't spend over a year dreaming Everett La-Leoni dreams & then go out with Scott Campbell. Serious standards whiplash would ensue. & that's aside from the fact I'm still 90% sure he's straight.

"I just wanted you to know it's cool with me if you, uh, come over. I mean, I know Mom probably gave you a speech & a half about it, so this is redundant, but like, yeah, it's fine. Mi casa est blah blah blah. Anyway. That's all."

Scott leaves.

See laughs her long, loud, confused laugh. "Fuck the what was that about?"

Everett stands. "I should probably go get food & find my friends. Good talking to you guys. See ya."

See ya? Like a general 'see ya around because we go to the same school so obviously we occasionally come into range of each other's eyeballs whether I like it or not' see ya? Or 'see ya tonight' see ya? As in 'maybe convince your friend not to read her terrible poetry on



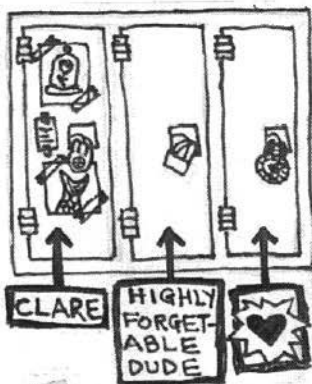
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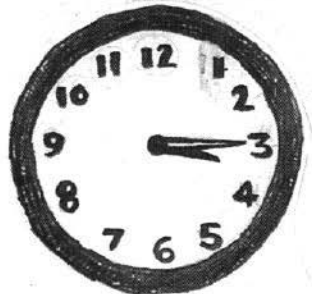
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18



Trouble
on her lips.
could be dangerous.
was not cruel. We'd ask the teacher.
questions later, so she had a bell that
made her change her mind.



tonight of all nights' see ya?

"Okay, how did that just happen? Am I dreaming? No, if I were dreaming I wouldn't be wearing pants right now. Seriously though. You just happen to start talking about your little open mic & he's into it enough to come sit with us? With us. Lowly cretins. Not possible. Explain."

"His locker's right next to mine," says Clare.

This I know. This I have taken advantage of on multiple 'hey Clare shouldn't we swing by your locker before next period?' occasions.

"Okay, but since when does this lead to actual conversations?"

"Since whenever you're not around to make it weird?"

"I don't make it weird! Oh fuck me, I make it totally weird, don't I? I'm such a lechy little weirdo. Fuck."

"Not lechy weird, just...you know. It's less of a thing to be like 'Hi Everett' when I know you're not going to melt into a pool of ecstatic despair beside me if he says 'Hi' back."

"So what, you just say 'Hi' to Everett La-Leoni all the time when I'm not around? It's not like I don't say 'Hi' to him. I fully say 'Hi' to him. I say lots of things to him. I almost definitely say more things to him than he would ideally like to hear from me."

"Whatever. I didn't even start the conversation today. I was practicing the new piece, like muttering to myself, & he asked about it. He actually seemed, like, interested. Which - well, I still think you'd look goofy together, but he wins some points for that."

"So, random guy 1 locker over gets to hear what piece you're performing tonight, just not your best friends?" asks See.

"He didn't hear it hear it. He just heard that I was practicing poetry. Are you capable of chilling?"

"Okay, I'll pester the other 1." See turns to me. "Fuck the what is up with you & the not-so-little redheaded boy & why aren't you eating?"

"I don't know. Scott's weird. I'm not hungry. I should go. Darkroom stuff."

There is no darkroom stuff. & I am hungry. Not so much at lunch, with everything going on, but by the end of the day, Everett La-Leoni himself could ask me to hang out & I'd only agree if he promised sandwiches.

School lets out at 3:15. Mom takes the daycare kids to the park from 3:30 to 4:00. It'll be tight, but if I know exactly what I need I can get in & out without collision.

Friday May 10th, 2013 3:30 PM

From behind the neighbour's hedge, I watch Mom & Nadine corral the line of kids holding the loops on the rope disappear around the



corner, & then I book it for the house.

The clock on the microwave says 3:35 when I get in. Some little bastard wouldn't put their shoes on, I bet. Keeping me on my toes, eh buddy? Fine, I can do this. It's my own house, not like I need to case the joint 1st.

I open the fridge & peel a slice of ham from the open package to chew on while I think. Baby carrots, perfect. I tear the package open & toss 2 in my face, the rest on the counter. I probably shouldn't get too much stuff that has to be refrigerated anyway. Couple of apples. Sweet, yes, those waxy red cheeses. Shiny star sticker on the tag means 'daycare snacks, hands off' but screw that. Let them eat graham crackers. Mm, graham crackers. 1 sleeve of those, 1 sleeve of saltines. Reach to the back of the cupboard for an unopened jar of chunky peanut butter. Alphaggetti? We don't even have a can opener I can steal, just an electric 1 on the wall. Ramen! Holy shit, how long has this been in here? Mom banished MSG from the kingdom like 5 years ago. Whatever, it's ramen: invincible. Yes ramen. All the ramen.

I grab my backpack from my cubby in the front hall & shove all the food in the front compartment. I hear some stuff crunch, but tough titties. I sling the bag over my shoulder & head to my room, unbuttoning my jeans & shaking them off as I climb over the baby gate at the bottom of the stairs. I'll pick them up on my way back.

Pulling my shirt over my head, I remember that I've worn it 2 days in a row without showering or deodorizing anywhere in there. Not the most becoming scent for a potential extracurricular encounter with Everett La-Leoni.

Alarm clock says 3:46. Not ideal, but yeah, I can shower. Army style, 5 minutes tops.

My stomach grumbles confusion that I started obeying its demands & abruptly stopped. I unzip the front of my backpack, pull out an apple & munch my way to the bathroom.

Okay, so it turns out fruity shampoo does not taste as good as it smells, not even when as accidental sud drippings on an otherwise delicious apple, but I'm back in my room with nonheterosexual deodorant & other toiletries in my bag by 3:52. Still doable, still doable. Maybe Li'l Bastard will do me a favour & drag their butt coming back from the park too. Nope, can't count on it, gotta be out before 4:00.

I pull open all my drawers & start throwing stuff on the bed. Change my mind 4 times re: best shirt for the stunning of Everett La-Leoni. Fuck, no time for boy vanity, Jonah. You can change once you're out of here, just put anything on. Anything. Yes, that. Fine. Pants. Pantspants. Pants? Sweatpants for now. Shove the rest in the bag. Okay, not the rest. Shove what fits. Grab camera from the hook on





the door, wallet's already in side pocket of backpack. What else?

Phone. Shit. Phone. Shit where'd I leave my phone?

I was about to go see if Everett was talking about the game on Facebook when things blew up. Fuck, this would all be so much easier if I'd kept my mouth shut about the Habs goal & just virtually high fived him about it in private. Nope, no time for regrets. Where did I leave my fucking phone?

Basement. Charging in the laundry room, so I could go in there & check Facebook at regular intervals when I could conceivably pretend I needed to put in fabric softener or whatever while I was watching the game with my parents in the rec room.

Laundry. Right. Hence the shortage of decent pants in my room. Good. Get phone, get pants, get out.

Except my pants are all damp in the bottom of the washing machine.

Okay, fine, I'll just go out through the kitchen & get the jeans I left on the stairs. Gogogo nownownow Jonah.

Nope. Don't move.

They're back. 8 little kids yanking their shoes off in the front hall, Mom & Nadine talking over their heads about snack prep. Shit, how long before they notice the missing cheese? Before or after they see the jeans flung over the baby gate? I have to get out of here.

I've just started to dash towards the cellar door when I hear Mom say, "Nadine, can you please go get me the..from downstairs?"

The what?

Fuck me. Footsteps, coming down the stairs. Back in the laundry room, Jonah, quickquickquick.

Nadine opens the laundry room door to find me crouched on top of the washing machine trying to pry open a window that hasn't been pried open in a decade.

She yelps. "Jesus, Jonah, you scared the crap out of me. What are you doing?"

"Just, sh, pretend you didn't see me. Go back upstairs."

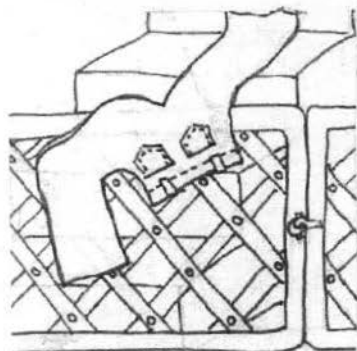
"Okay, I'll admit I snuck out of my parents' house a couple of times in high school, but you're supposed to wait until after dark, buddy. Are those your pants on the stairs? This is all very weird. Boys are weird. You're making me very glad to be gay right now."

"Great. Go tell my mother. She loves stuff like that."

Speak of the devil, Mom's voice pours down the stairs.

"NADINE, WHAT IS THE HOLD UP DOWN THERE? PLEASE, I NEED WIPES!"

I reach over to the shelf above the dryer & toss Nadine a tub of baby wipes & a 'please let's be on the same side even though you don't



know what the sides are' look.

She casts back a 'they ain't pay me enough to get involved in your fam dram' eyeroll & heads upstairs with the wipes under her arm.

Shit, should've asked her to throw my pants down.

Whatever. Getoutgetoutgetout.

Friday May 10th, 2013 4:10 PM

I change my shirt behind the Millennium Gates. The nicest 1 I packed, a black pinstripe button down. Mint green cardigan on top. My go to 'I assure you this is a young man who has his shit together' look.

Okay, so it doesn't quite work with the sweatpants. Or maybe I'm starting a bold new trend. At least the cardigan's long enough to cover the drawstring in front. I roll the pant cuffs to around mid-calf in the hopes of coming up with something in the realm of jaunty. It kind of works. I mean, they're still sweatpants, but..well, it's as cute as I'm going to get for now. Homo hobo chic.

I check my phone. 2 hours & 52 minutes to showtime.

& 11 unread texts.

9 of them from Mom last night.

young man you come back here

this is not what dad meant by get out of my sight

that was not a get out of jail free card

this home is not a jail

jonah you text back or else

jonah where are you

i love you come back and well talk

debbie called glad your safe but this doesnt make it ok to ignore me

don't know what i did to have such an ungrateful son

So weird to think she was probably furiously texting from the couch 3 yards away from my phone. I put it on silent so they wouldn't know I was being suspiciously sneaky phone guy. Not that I wound up doing anything that suspicious, even. Not before I removed all suspicion by confirming (apparently) the worst.

Yeah, let Mom worry. .



The last 2 texts are from See, between afternoon classes.



feel like i'm supposed to stage an intervention or something but don't even know ftw for. you huffing too many photo chems, gf? something clearly fucked do tell.

plz don't not come tonight i shall perish w/o you. she's doing her fmg piece about me so fmg obvs she wouldn't say. come out to the valley w/ me?

I text back:

i aint yer gf n if anyone needs intervention is you n clare omg why do you even hang out anymore @ this pt?

but yeh come pick me up when yer ready. not @ my house tho. park.

A Facebook message comes through as I'm typing.

From Everett La-Leoni.

The message takes a minute to load. Stupid shitty park signal. But I can see he changed his profile pic since last night. A selfie in his Jersey with a construction paper heart hanging out of his mouth, something written on it too small to read in the thumbnail. Fuck me, why is he the cutest about absolutely everything?

Finally, the message appears:

going to the l&c?

I type,

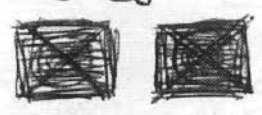
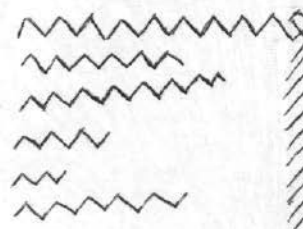
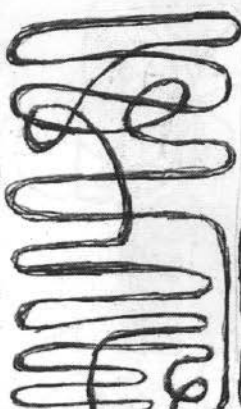
i'm going wherever yer going you beautiful man

just to see what it would be like to have permission to say such things, then amend it to

yeh you?

The 3 dots flicker to show he's typing. I check out his pic as big as I can get it on my phone screen. The heart says

DON'T CRY HABS
JE T'AIME
LA MEME



Fuck me forever of course he has the most perfect sloppy just-this-side-of-readable handwriting.

Every time I notice something new like that, something really basic that makes him even more adorable, it's kind of good & bad at the same time, because I want to have known it sooner. I want to pour all this beautiful basicness over my head until the facts of him are like water to me. I want to move on to Advanced Lessons in Everett La-Leoni. To become the world's leading expert. The world's youngest former flunker of the 8th grade to earn his Ph.D. in Everett La-Leoniology.

His message comes through:

k see ya

Seemed like more typing than that.

I curl on my side in the grass with the backpack as a pillow, 1 hand cradling my camera, the other cupping my phone.

See texts back:

k meet you there nowish. maybe we should pre drink they will def card aggressively tonight.

I text back:

yer driving n. clare won't til after she goes on

See texts back:

so maybe we should just get you drunk until you tell us ftw's up.

I put the phone in my pocket, wondering if it's technically illegal for See to drive drunk, considering what she drives.

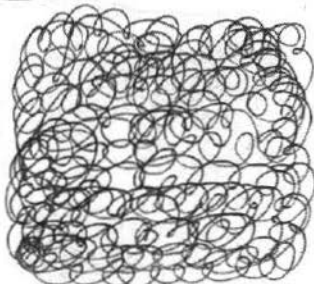
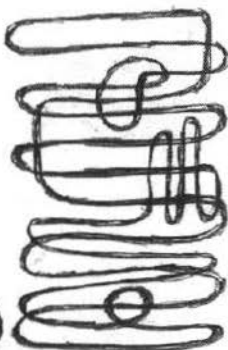
Friday May 10th, 2013 4:28 PM

We still haven't quite gotten the full story of how See came to possess 1 of the 4-person bicycle surreys they rent to tourists. Presumably through not entirely legitimate means, as Clare puts it. She's altered it enough with spray paint & stencils & scrap metal & roadkill bones stitched into the canopy, I don't think they'd want it back. She's careful to make sure her parents don't know she has it anyway, parking it in random spots around the neighbourhood, never within a block of their house.

Not that they don't notice it. Her dad keeps saying stuff like, "I swear to god Alexxi, every time I see that bike I think if that person ever meets you, you'll either be best friends or mortal combatants." Me & Clare get worse at keeping a straight face every time.

I sit beside her on the bench seat & we pedal our way out of the park.

"Are we picking Clare up now, or..?"





"Waiting for her to call."

Waiting for Clare to call is a regular theme of our lives. There's almost no cell service at her place, so you have to call the landline & wait through the absurdly long answering machine message listing the entire menu for her parents' raw vegan catering company, & then when you start saying 'uh hi it's Jonah calling for Clare' 1 of her parents will pick up, & if it's Frances she'll start telling you about whatever she was just reading about on the internet until you agree to her satisfaction that it's sooo cool or sooo corrupt, & if it's Gordon he'll start grilling you about what Clare's been up to because he feels like she never tells him anything (which is weird because how many 9th graders' parents know their child's sexual orientation & recipe for marijuana macaroni?), & then like 5 minutes later they'll finally say 'so you want to talk to Clare, okay, let me find her for you.' & wander out of the office & across the yard, usually getting distracted by one of their rescue chickens doing something 'so cute you just have to see it to believe it' & then they walk up & down around the zillion winding staircases in the crazy Escher-inspired house they thought would be fun to live in, until they finally find Clare making a diorama under the kitchen table with noise-cancelling headphones on, because Clare.



So we mostly wait for her to call us. Even though she is notorious for the last minute unreasonable 'hey do you guys have time to swing by the valley?' ringaling.

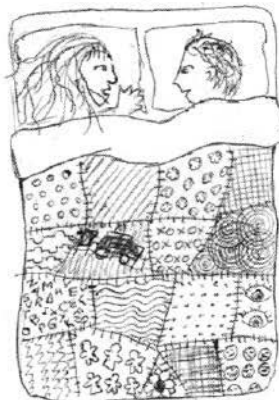
I'm usually the 1 who bites the bullet & calls her anyway when it's like this where we know she needs a ride, because Fran & Gord kind of amuse me when I'm in the mood for it, but I guess right now is not 1 of those times.

Because last night is kind of their fault.

Not in a way where I could actually pick a fight. Just, last Saturday I slept over at Clare's. It was the 1st time in a while that the whole Clare/See thing didn't take centre stage, like I thought maybe it had blown over at last..

We started talking pretty serious, which I usually don't when it's just me & Clare because - well, I know she's not really any younger than See, but it's hard not to think of her as a little girl with her soft little voice & drawing flowers on everything. Obviously I know she watches porn & swears & does more drugs than I do, it's just we generally rely on See to bulldoze polite conversation & get us through to the other side. But we started talking about my parents, how I kind of thought they knew & didn't at the same time, how it was ugly & uncomfortable like an unresolved chord (her metaphor).

She said it was like that for a while before she came out to Fran & Gord, & it took her a weirdly long time, because she didn't want to



make a big speech or anything, just to let them know. & eventually how it happened was they were watching some old movie with Natalie Wood & Warren Beatty & at some point Clare said "They're both crazy but I would smooch either of them," & that was it.

I mean, it wasn't it it. Fran got really teary & huggy, & Gord literally baked a cake. Well, not baked. Raw cashew not-cheesecake, carob-fig swirl. Which: gross, & if you're Clare, totally embarrassing.

"At the time I was kind of like, 'ugh why did I bother?'" She mumbled, just this side of sleep, "But it was a lot better than if I'd had to tell them after those boys started messing with my locker, you know?"

& yeah, I know that part, because that's the part where Clare decided to switch schools & 1 of her older poetry friends from our school invited her to her friend's birthday party which See heard was going to involve hug drugs & I heard was going to involve Everett La-Leoni, the former of which turned out to be true & the latter of which did not, so I was in the basement telling Clare her macaroni was so delicious it was like I was already high when See came down on a whole other wavelength & the rest is the history we are currently stuck inside of.

Anyway, I knew it wouldn't be quite the same with my parents but I thought..I don't know. That if you have to do it (& I think you have to), that would be the way. Not exactly that. But something like that, where you can say it like you'd say anything, just because it fits the conversation.

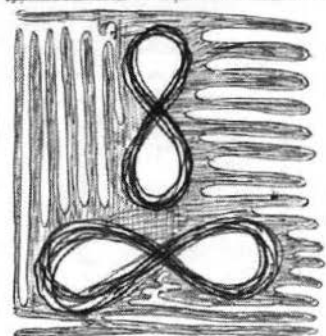
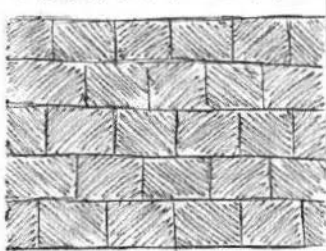
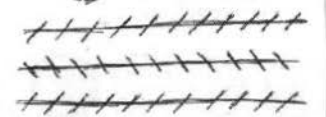
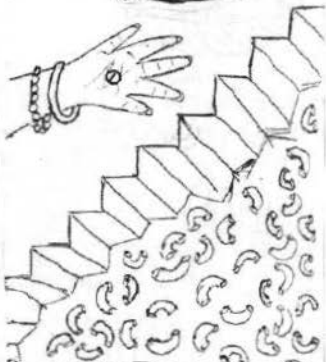
I didn't plan for it to be last night, because the idea was never to plan. Maybe that's the difference between Clare's situation & mine. Whether you get to say what you need to say like it's just a thing to be said, or whether you have to prepare for that shit like the zombie apocalypse.

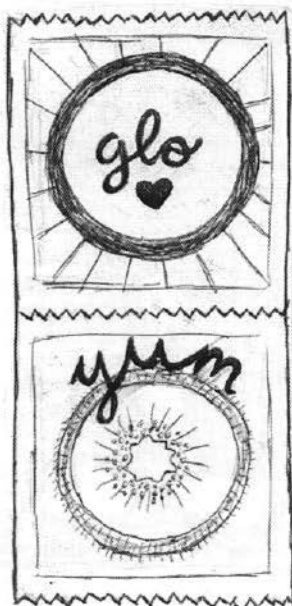
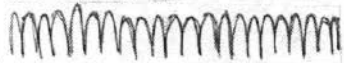
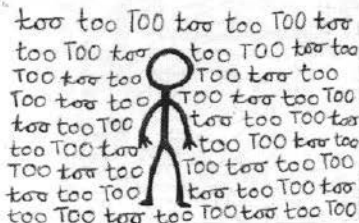
That's why I can't talk about it in front of Clare. I'd get mad at her, & she's the 1 you can't get mad at. Trash talk, okay - but not serious rage. Even if she did something to deserve it. & she didn't this time. She just got lucky in the parents department. It's not like I wish she hadn't.

I just don't know why I didn't.

Or. My whole life I thought I did. Only child, Disneyland summers, took great care to make sure repeating 8th grade wouldn't wreak havoc on my tender pubescent self-esteem. Except by then I'd figured out the deal-breaker thing for sure, so in the meeting with the teacher where they told me I'd need to pull in a lot of slack to graduate with the rest of my class, I said "Okay, I'll try," & try I did. I tried so hard to fail, & I succeeded. Not that it was a huge accomplishment. My actual stupidity gave me a big head start.

I don't know how much of it was based on any





kind of logic at the time, but I've sort of ended up talking reasons into it in the darkroom with Mr. Andersen since. It's just, 8th grade is this year long parade of last times. Everybody catches the feels about like, 'our last class picture' & 'our last time auditioning for the castrated kiddie version of some musical that already lacked balls' & 'our last field trip to the same conservation site we've collected obscure insect bites at every year since kindergarten.' & I guess when everybody's clinging tighter than ever to everyone they're terrified of losing when they get to big school, it gets pretty obvious who's not in the club. Not because I'm gay. I mean, I'm pretty sure everybody knew, but it couldn't be the reason they didn't like me, because it's not like I was doing actual gay stuff anybody could point at & go 'Stop smoking cock in the hallway Jonah, ugh, so distracting to our learning environment!' I was just this kid who seemed too small to be there, & too loud, & too jumpy, & 2 minutes behind on every joke.

So yeah, rebooting seemed like a pretty okay option. & it helped. I was still shorter than most of 8th Grade 2.0, but I was smarter too, & Alexxi thought I was funnier, even when I very bluntly pointed out that she had a total porn star name, so I started calling her See & she started inviting me along on her graffiti & mayhem missions. Like crashing the high school Hallowe'en dance where I discovered the existence of Everett La-Leoni & the fact that I'd made a huge mistake.

But I don't know. Can you really say, when you're with your best friend on a bicycle built for several, that you wish you hadn't been where you befriended her?

Anyway, it's not like pre-See Jonah would've been mad suave in the boy department. Not that I am now.

"Fuck the what's with the backpack?" asks See. "Did you not go home?"

"Yeah, it's just..stuff."

"You totally packed a bag because you thought you were going to see Everett tonight & end up having a big gay sleepover & you wanted to be all boy scout about it, didn't you?"

"Not really," I shrug, which I realize is going to make her think she's right. If that was the case it would be totally presumptuous & weird & not at all sexy, but sexy isn't on See's list of necessary qualities, & her story is at least a little less embarrassing than the real 1.

"Did you get condoms? Are they glow in the dark? Kiwi flavoured?"

"Ew, no."

"THERE'S NOTHING GROSS ABOUT SAFE & SCRUMPTIOUS FELLATIO, JONAH!" she shouts as we pass an old lady on a scooter. Well, if I wasn't out to everyone before.

"I didn't pack condoms. Just like, extra clothes in case it gets cold." & 6 pairs of

boxers in case I soil myself repeatedly over the course of the evening. Never know what can happen, between an open mic & a totally-not-happening tryst.

"No condoms? Jesus Jonah, what kind of boy scout are you? Guess now I know what we're doing to kill time until Clare calls."

"Maybe we should just head out there. I mean we know she's—"

"Nooo, come on, please Jonah? I'll totally buy them for you. It's not like I'll ever have another reason, & I love stuff like that."

It's true. See gets very excited about any retail situation where she can make the retailer uncomfortable by being outrageously comfortable with her awkward purchases. Buying tampons is the highlight of her month. If she gets a male clerk she's over the moon.

Which is how it comes to pass that See is very loudly pointing out the heterosexism of 'ribbed for her pleasure' to our fellow pharmacy patrons when her phone rings.

Friday May 10th, 2010 8:18 PM

It's an all-ages night, but we're still pretty glaringly out-of-place. At the door, a girl with glittery blue eyelids drew Xs on our hands with the fattest of Sharpies so the servers would know what not to serve us — not that there was any risk of fooling them, honestly. See's tongue is grape soda purple & Clare, no joke, ordered chicken nuggets off the kids menu (because she'd never had them before). I'm sticking with water for now, sipping slowly like it's something stronger. Maybe I'll get iced tea & drink it without a straw. Hopefully it would come in a beer glass, but my water & See's soda are in plastic kid cups, so probably not. What exactly is the logic behind giving the breakable dishes to the people who are getting wasted?

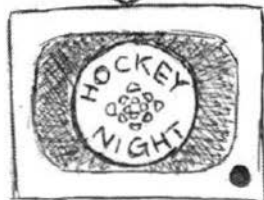
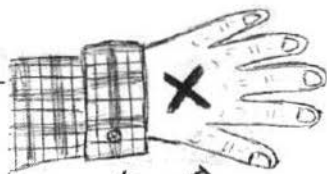
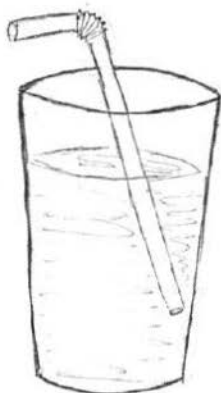
Clare is nervous, which makes me feel bad for thinking her poem is going to suck. Also, I really hope she hasn't noticed they don't appear to be all that strict about the 15 minute rule when it comes to sexy boys with shiny guitars & provocatively ripped jeans. Guess it's only a firm limit for little girls with concertinas & pleated skirts.

When I get up to order my drink, Everett LaLeoni is getting his hand Xed (o! to be that marker).

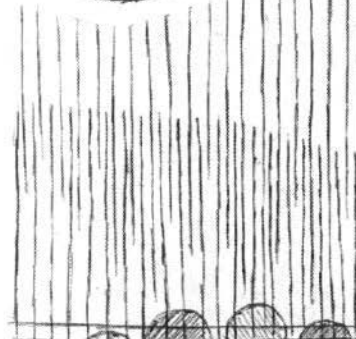
Scott waves to me from just behind him. Simultaneous arrival doesn't necessarily mean they came here together, but it's a little too coincidental for comfort.

The game is on silent on the TV above the bar, a courtesy to the performers I guess, although the mute button doesn't affect everybody crowded around the bar vocalizing their feelings every time something happens on screen.

I used to think it was weird that people could get so emotional about the position of a



28



black disk in a frozen room on TV. Like my Dad - who will very calmly say 'Heaven needed another angel' when a human person he knew & loved departs from their physical body - will lose his shit, manly tears & all, when the Sens lose.

But do you know how magnificent it is when Everett La-Leoni walks the halls broadcasting his adoration? For the Habs or anything else. He's so happy when he thinks they'll win. He's so happy when it gets cold enough to set up the rink in his backyard. He's so happy when he checks the feeds on his phone between classes & something encouraging is happening in the world. He's so happy when his friend finally tells their other friend she wants to kiss him & the other friend replies by kissing her 1st. Quiet happy, mostly, but I bet even people who don't know his name can feel it rumbling through the corridors. I don't understand how there's anyone at our school who doesn't at least sometimes think how lovely it must be to be the Habs or the weather forecast or the good news or the kissing friends. How could anyone not long to be just a little bit responsible for our greatest natural resource: the happiness of Everett La-Leoni?

Whose arm is around my shoulders right now. Fuck me forever.

"Buddy! Good to see you."

Buddy? More promising than bro, at least. There was that chant in middle school: 'friends are friends, pals are pals, but buddies sleep together.' I don't know where it came from, but I hope they said it at Everett La-Leoni's middle school too.

I turn to see if Scott's still behind him. I don't see him, but mostly all I see is Everett La-Leoni's beautiful plaid shoulder. I'm basically nose level with his armpit. He smells like mint & grass & orange juice. Not those things exactly, but that's what he makes me think of.

He squeezes my shoulder before dropping his arm.

"I didn't miss Clare's set, did I? Didn't mean to be late. Scott texted me while I was en route so I did a little detour so we could walk together."

Fuck me, they're on texting & walking together terms? I try not to wince.

"Clare's supposed to be next, but the emcee keeps bumping her whenever his friends walk in."

"Huh, that's kind of a dick move."

I've never heard Everett La-Leoni say anything like that before. It's like when Clare sings a dirty song, how her sweet little mouth somehow sanctifies the filth.

"I was just, uh, getting a drink. Can I, uh, get you anything?"

This sounds much suaver in my head than on the air. The 2 versions crash into each other, feedback in my internal sound system.

But fuck me all over again, he smiles.
"Yeah, if you're sure, I'd love a root
beer."

Holy shit. Jonah Matheson is about to buy a
drink for a boy. A certified gay boy. Is that
even legal? Soda, but still. Fuck me.

I work my way through the hockey-watchers to
the bar. Once I get there, it's not actually
hard to get the bartender's attention.
Everybody's only there for the screen, in which
she's clearly not interested. Maybe she's a
Habs fan.

"Hi, uh, can I please get an iced tea & a
root beer?"

"Sure thing, presh. Root beer in the can, or
on tap?"

"You have root beer on tap? Like you pull 1
of those levers & root beer comes out? Into an
actual glass glass?"

"You got it, cutie." I can't tell if these
are gay/girl-camaraderie endearments or you're-
a-tiny-child endearments, but whatever. Root
beer on tap!

"In that case, may I please have 2 root
beers on tap?"

She grabs the glasses; I open my wallet.
Nononono.

I had \$20 cash & a debit card loaded with
plenty of birthday money from both grandmas.

Now I have a note.

Dear Jonah, 1 step ahead of you, son. I'm
sorry, but I'm cutting you off. Until we
resolve this issue, I cannot keep putting \$ in
your pockets. Tough Love, Dad

Nonononononononononononononono.

"\$6.50, hun."

"Shit. Shit."

"Everything all right, doll?"

"I'm not a doll, okay? I'm actually having a
very real, very adult problem right now." Or at
least the kind of problem you have when you're
not an adult but you live with them & they
think you're still a child.

"It's on me." A long plaid arm reaches past
me & slides \$10 onto the bar.

I slide my face into my hands.

"Not the plan. So not the plan. God, I'm
sorry - you do not have to pay for mine."

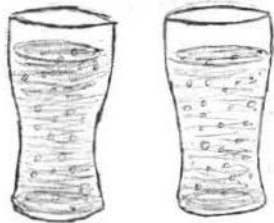
"You were literally about to do the same for
me. It's fine. You'll get me back."

"Okay, so a boy is buying Jonah Matheson a
drink. Either way, it's almost like I have an
actual gay lifestyle for Dad to refuse to
support (even though I earned that \$20
sanitizing the playroom for Mom).

"Cheers." We clink. There's a good couple
seconds of eye contact before he looks
somewhere over my head towards the mic.

"Hey, Clare's up. Do you guys have a table
staked out?"

I lead him to it. It's a ghost town. I guess
See went to the bathroom or something. Great
timing, right when Clare's finally starting. Or
maybe that was the point.



HOMOEROTIC

SODA

PARTY



The Jonah Doll

now with real problems!



pornclink



The emcee mispronounces Clare's name: 'clah-ray.' I think it's supposed to be a joke; I think he's supposed to be a comedian. It's just making Clare more anxious though. She's doing that thing where she wrings & wags her hands like she might forget how they work.

Clare, Clarey, please please please don't get too nervous to play & just launch right into the poem. That is not the way to make friends in this crowd. Plus I'd really like Everett to see how talented she is before he finds out she's kind of the worst.

She pulls a single, shaky chord out of the concertina & starts singing a cappella. "Lady" by Regina Spektor. Mine & See's unanimous fav from her repertoire.

I let out a "Woo!"

Clare stops, glares at me, & starts again from the chord.

Everett laughs, a single loud-but-charming "Ha!"

I almost shush-nudge him, but he's already shushed himself, & she's invincible now anyway.

Maybe it's my imagination, but by the 2nd verse I think the decibel level over by the bar has even dipped a little in awe of her tiny depressing majesty.

She wraps it up with a concertina solo, sets her instrument carefully at her feet & pulls the mic out of the stand.

"So, um, I sing that for a friend of mine.

She pretends to hate me, wipes her raccoon eyes, says 'fuck you, making me feel' & I think 'right back atcha' - or maybe say it, if I've a mind to ruin the night. But I sing the song because if we can both be sad at the same time, well, that's something."

I don't know how long it takes me to realize the poem's already started. I don't know when it did start.

Maybe I should tell Everett it's fine if he wants to just watch the game during this part. Because it really, really is. I don't think Clare would even notice if I just watched the game (not that I'm going to). She's studiously avoiding eye contact with our table. Does she know See's not here any more?

I turn to Everett, lean into whispering range, but he's kind of shockingly focused on Clare.

"...so sadness we can synch. Synchronized sinking. I fancy myself captain of this ship, having advanced knowledge of blues music & kissing people who change their minds, but a better captain would not expect the sea to bend to her will. O Captain! my Captain! rise up & hear the bells..."

She sings this line to a tune that nearly isn't. Just there enough to know it's not quite right.

I have to admit, it's not her usual.

The thing I usually don't like about Clare's poetry is when she comes up to me afterwards & asks 'What'd you think?' the honest answer

(which I never give) is I didn't think anything, because I didn't know what she was talking about. If I'm lucky, I remember there was a line about a bird or something, so I can say 'I liked the bird imagery,' but the thing is, I never really did, because I didn't even pay enough attention to know what kind of bird, or if it was an actual bird she saw or a metaphor or what. I usually just sit there clawing at the edge of my chair, trying not to look bored & skimming the surface for something I can mention when she asks.

This is different. Maybe because See isn't a bird, because the way Clare looks at her & the way See looks back mattered before there was a poem about it. Because you can tell in Clare's voice she knows it might matter more or in worse ways when the poem's done. Because you can tell she wouldn't be saying this unless she absolutely had to.

Because I don't know how much of that Everett is catching, but he's still so sweetly intent on being here to catch it.

A hand crosses in front of us. See's hand, grabbing the ice cubes from the bottom of her cup. She clutches it in her fist, weaving her way to the front, sitting cross-legged right at Clare's feet, cold grapey water dripping through her fingers onto the fraying knee of her jeans.

& Everett La-Leoni grabs my hand.

& maybe it's because I was just thinking how cold See's hand must be, but his hand is the warmest thing I've ever felt. & is this really happening?

"O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done, The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won."

See's the only one who seems to recognize this as the poem's end. She pops up & throws her arms around Clare. Clare squeals, her arms jerking into that baby-says-hi reflex.

See grabs the mic & chirps, "You poem my face, I ice your back - even?"

Clare shudders, giggles, grabs the mic back. "Even. Now get off my stage, bitch. I've still got 3 minutes here."

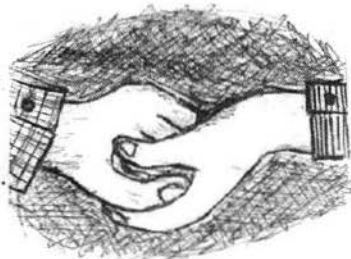
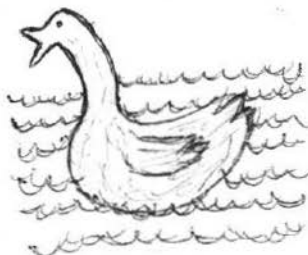
See obliges, taking up the seat next to Everett. Clare puts the mic back in the stand. The uncomedian emcee looks relieved by the slight restoration of order, still totally alienated by what these strange children are doing to his show.

Everett squeezes my hand & smiles so damn hard. I'm still not sure how much he really gets what just happened, but he knows friend love when he sees it & I can catch him up on the details later. Like once I sort them out.

Clare picks up her squeezebox & launches into "Instant Pleasure" by Rufus Wainwright.

From the sidelines, See throws back her head & laughs.

Everett lets go of my hand. Fair enough. We're not there yet. Anyway, contrary to Rufus'



* I don't want
somebody
to love me
just give
me sex
whenever I
want it



lyrics, I do want somebody to love me.

She only sings 1 stanza, then vamps, leaning into the mic.

"A certain hockey fan said he might come out tonight in spite of the playoffs, so I tried to learn this real fast off the internet, just in case. I did not think I would actually be doing this right now, so please forgive my inevitable wrongness, Everett. Also, pretty sure not a goddamn soul in here has an excuse not to sing along with this 1."

She is correct, although Everett's the 1st & most passionate to take her up on it, belting out very loudly & out of key that yes indeed, the good old hockey game is the best game he can name. He throws his arms across mine & See's shoulders, swaying us back & forth. I crane my neck to see how See, general shunner of compelled merriment, is taking to this. Her smile back says 'I'm only pretending to be into this but I wouldn't bother if I did not on some level approve.' After that I don't give a damn what anybody else thinks.

& the song is over & the emcee is chasing Clare off, mispronouncing her name again even bigger, & joking about it being the open mic's 1st lesbian spoken word Stompin' Tom singalong, which makes me think he pretty much just did the same thing I usually do with Clare's poetry, but whatever. We didn't come here to make him understand us. Or if we did, we've found better things to do.

When Clare comes over, Everett kneels backwards on his chair & hugs her so tight it's a good thing she's already flat-chested. When he lets her go, her eyes flit between us. So I guess she noticed the hand-holding action.

"You're a marvel! You're a superhero! You're a swan!" I say, partly because it's what I feel like saying, & partly to stop her from saying anything out loud about the hand-holding. "Not that you were an ugly duckling before," I add.

Clare shrugs her dainty shoulders, like 'of course I'm a fucking swan' & squeezes in to lean on the edge of See's seat.

"I took the swan's chair, didn't I?" says Everett. "Sorry, I'll stop invading the friend bubble. It was really nice hanging out with you guys." He stands up, half tripping over my bag under the table.

"Wait. I, uh, was thinking about going out for some air. You want to, uh, take a walk?"

"I'll come!" says See.

Clare slides fully onto her lap & gives her a look.

"Never mind," says See. "Go. Be gone. Before I say something embarrassing."

"Sure, a walk sounds nice," says Everett.

I don't doubt See's threat to humiliate, but I pause to grapple for my camera & sling it over my shoulder anyway. It's fully dark out & I don't have a flash, but it feels necessary. Maybe just to be able to touch something I for sure already know how to touch.

Friday May 10th, 2013 9:01 PM

We don't hold hands on our way out of the bar. I reach for his & then chicken out. Maybe it wasn't an 'I think we should be people who hold hands' thing before. Maybe it was just a 'this is a lovely moment & your hand is available for holding in mutual recognition of the loveliness' thing.

He gets out ahead of me & leans against the iron patio fence, propped up on his elbows. I step up to perch between 2 slats right next to him. Almost evens us out, height wise.

"Sorry if I made it weird with your friends," says Everett. "I don't know the etiquette for this artsy stuff at all, so I just acted like I was at a game. But I gather from the hipster glares some stuff doesn't translate."

"Or your translation was an improvement." My cardigan is still on the back of my chair inside. I can see the hair on my arms standing up, but I don't feel cold. "So, uh, speaking of being iffy on the etiquette for - I kind of have a question I've wanted to ask you for - I mean I don't want it to sound like a super big deal because it's totally - uh, just while we're the right height for it, do you, uh, can I maybe kiss you?"

Jonah Matheson, maker of smooth moves since 1998.

I lose my footing when he touches my arm. My left foot drops to the sidewalk & he has to hunch after all. So much for the right height thing.

But damn if Everett La-Leoni isn't kissing me anyway.

In terms of wish-fulfillment, my dreams are more perfect. Nobody hunches; nobody says 'uh.' But this is still so much better.

"So. Walk?" He straightens his spine & holds out his hand.

Whenever I've awake-imagined us walking hand in hand, I always worried it'd maybe seem like I was some kid he was babysitting. It doesn't. I can't name everything in his expression right now, but there's none of that.

"Jonah! Wait!"

I look over my shoulder. Scott's holding a purple lunch bag. A butter yellow post-it note tacked to the front, flapping in the evening breeze, broadcasting my name in loopy Amazon Mom writing.

Now I feel cold.

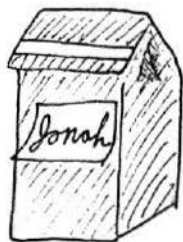
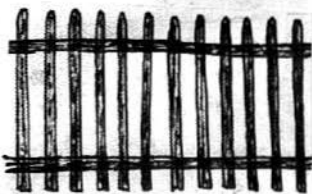
I let go of Everett's hand. For like a second. Then I think maybe if I keep holding it Scott will take the hint.

"What?" I ask.

He's right next to us now. I mean, he seems to get what's happening enough to leave more space between him & us than we have between each other, but not by much.

"Lost track of you - my bad, totally - never mind. This is yours." He holds out the lunch

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bag. When I don't take it, he keeps talking. "I mean, it's not yours, but yeah, it's for you, so it's yours. Dinner. From my mom. She was completely pissed when she found out I didn't make sure you had lunch. Rightly. Sorry. Monkey sucks at taking care of anyone else, apparently."

"I ate. Thanks. We were just going for a walk, so bye."

"No, wait. Are you going home after this? Because - just, you should know - your mom called my mom & she hasn't calmed down. To put it mildly. I'm not sure if - like I said, if you need somewhere to -"

I let go of Everett's hand, close the distance between me & Scott.

"You ever think there are some things I might not want to talk about in front of some people?"

"Jonah. I know."

I twist to face Everett. Fuck me, if that was a pity kiss. I snap back to Scott.

"God, you truly have no fucking concept of privacy, do you? Just told him everything on the walk over, eh?"

"No, I -"

"No, you texted him all the stupid details so he'd detour for you & your lunch bag. What, did you think he'd think you were so sweet for helping me out he'd -"

"He didn't tell me, Jonah," says Everett. "I just... I mean I don't know everything. But when you went to pay for our drinks I saw... you know. The note."

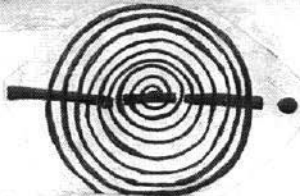
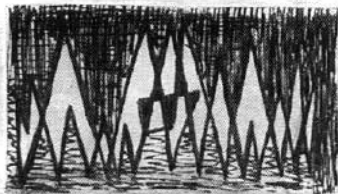
"What note?" asks Scott.

Fuck me forever.

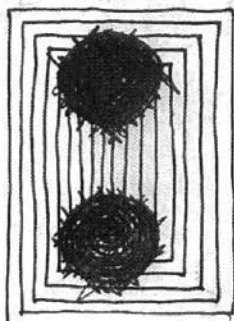
My foot hurts. Probably because I just kicked the wall. Kicked might not be the term. What's it called when you kick with your whole body? My forehead is pressed against the bricks, & I think I heard a sound like my camera coming out worse than my foot.

My phone vibrates in my pocket.

Text. From Mom.



comment dit-oh...?



dad and i have reached a decision if you aren't at the house with an apology by 10 you will not be welcome

While I'm reading that, another comes through. From See.

whenever you take a breather from sucking face, do you happen to know why i just got 3 texts in a row from your dad saying i'm a whore who ruined your opinion of women? ftw??

Friday May 10th, 2013 9:16 PM

There's a lot of "(Fuck the) What?" & almost too many hugs. I'm worried about crying, but once the girls start I completely stop. I may be an only child, but I still have big brother instincts: hush it's fine I'll handle it.

See's taking Clare back to the valley & spending the night. Lack of cell service doesn't sound like such a drawback right now. Worth the extra pedalling, really. They ask if I want to come with. I figure they've got some just-them debriefing to do. I promise to call them tomorrow.

Scott has to get home ASAP. Strict 9:30 curfew on weeknights.

Everett's got another hour. So we get our walk, albeit in the general direction of home. No rush.

We show each other the opposite of shortcuts.

He takes me to the bridge where he used to go fishing, until he saw a documentary about how toxic the river is & then he figured the fish had enough problems.

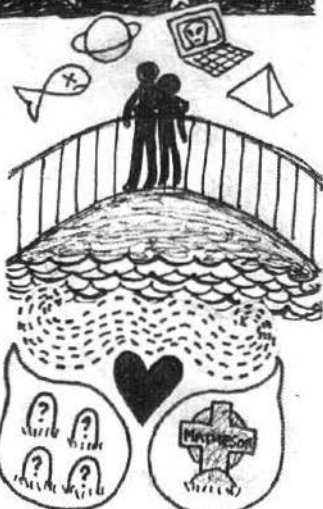
I tell him about a documentary I saw about stonehenge & aliens, how I don't think it was true, but I'm jealous of people who believe extraterrestrial architects go around building weird, useful things on other people's planets just out of the goodness of their little green hearts.

I take him to the old burying ground, introduce him to all the old Matheson stones, demonstrate the moustaches of the ones we have daguerrotypes of.

He tells me about the road trip he took with his dad to find the grave of the Jersey boy soldier who never knew he knocked up Everett's grandmother, who gave his father up for adoption to the illustrious (& only mildly insane) Leonis of Montreal. They found 4 stones with the right name. There was a college girl pulling up weeds around the last 1. She was friendly, talked about the weather & how her grandmother planted this little flower bed years ago & she'd just taken over caring for it since she started going to business school nearby. They didn't tell her what they were doing there, but on the way home Everett's dad said he really hoped that was the 1.

I'm sorry all I have to contribute is moustaches. He twirls my invisible whiskers. I kiss his fingers, which feels like this really romantic gesture when I start to do it, but ends up feeling like I'm a chicken pecking for grain. He doesn't act like it's stupid.

He takes me to the bench in the park where he asked his mom if it was okay to ask a boy to the Valentines dance last year (mom said yes; boy said no).





I take him to the swing set in my backyard.
9:57.

It's mostly dark. Patio twinkle lights on - for me, I guess, for 3 more minutes. Icy flicker of the TV from the basement window. The Sens were doing well when we left the bar. Wonder if that makes this night any better in there.

The way Dad appears, kind of misty through the reflection of lights in the glass, I can't be sure how long we've been staring at each other.

I know Everett sees him too when he lets go of my hand.

I know what I already knew when I reach for his hand again, pull our swings together, twist to brush my lips where cheek meets chin.

I can't see the look on Dad's face when he reaches to kill the lights. but I think I know the 1.

"Everett?"

"Yeah?"

"Take me home?"



The Campbell house is the only porch light left on our street, illuminating the concrete deer on the lawn - & now me & Everett standing on the stoop.

There's 1 light on inside, too. Mrs. Campbell reading in a chair by the bay window. She notices us standing there, waves & gets up before I gather the courage to knock.

Everett wraps his arms around me, backpack & all.

"It's going to be okay," he whispers warmly into my hair.

"I know," I say - although I'm pretty sure we're both making this stuff up.



The End



NOTES:

1. Sometime before 2014 ended, I determined that 2015 would be my year of shamelessly (or at least publicly) doing things I am not great at, but love to do anyway. Like drawing.
2. Another thing I'm hella insecure about is reading my own work out loud. You can hear an audio version of this story at <https://m.soundcloud.com/emmet-lf-caleon/sets/cheering-for-the-montreal>
3. My twitter name is [@ohmynoti](#) & my tumblr name is [@wordwallop](#) & if you enjoyed this nonsense I bet we can be friends.

♥ Emmet

Parti this story has a playlist!
so look for it on Btracks! ♥

