

The Men's Weekend

A Debriefing



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The Birds and the Bees

1995

“You were conceived right in that house, the blue one.” he said, pointing to a cramped one-bedroom Victorian. The unit was shadowed by two newer, taller apartments stacked on either side.

“See that window on the left? That was our bedroom.”

Bernal Heights, San Francisco, a moment of passion—July, I reckon from some crude math, 1983. It seemed so important to my father that I absorb this fact, make pilgrimage, pay respect, and see the exact place in which he came and proffered his biological contribution. Before mom took over things, of course, in so many ways. Before he went out for smokes as they say. Before performing all the usual deadbeat tropes with the dedication of a method actor. Before the Freudian cowardice, and his final reckoning with perpetual adolescence.

Credit where it’s due, he eventually came around and got sober. Even tossed the ball with me, took me to Candlestick Park every season, putting in the work. Sometimes he’d even remember my birthday. Far as I’m concerned, that’s father-of-the year material.

I was eleven years old and we were having the “talk,” as we used to say, one of many over the years, parked in front of old apartments with new tenants, or gathered under caucaphonous overpasses, crouching the banks of secret suburban creeks, him always speaking in hushed tones the dark mysteries of our genitals...



Pussy Whipped

2005

I was confused.

Beginning from the front steps of the American Legion hall, a few blocks north of the Sunset Strip, a line of men wrapped around the Art Deco building, leading to the loading bay in the back. There were hundreds of us standing there, chatting and chain-smoking, waiting to register for the Weekend, as my sponsor, Nate, called it.

It all began the night before with a cryptic phone call.

I was sitting in a Round Table Pizza parking lot, literally opening the car door to walk in for a job interview—measly 250 word resume in hand—when my cell rang. Nate said I should come to this seminar, that it would make me a better man, all that. Only six hundred bucks.

“Here’s the thing: we need to leave now. Like within the hour. I’ll drive all night and we’ll make it to LA by sunrise. You can sleep in the bed of my truck.”

For once, I had a solid excuse to get out of another round of psychotic, masochistic recovery bullshit.

“I don’t know man,” I said. “Like, seriously, I need a job like yesterday.”

“Bro, listen to yourself. Do you really think this opportunity,” Nate asked, indulgent with sarcasm, “to deliver pizza, is more important than an opportunity to entirely change your life and become the man you’ve always wanted to be?”

“I mean, like, do you want to be the *Pizza Man*? Is that the kind of man you want your future generations to remember you being?”

Having effectively emasculated me, softening my resistance, he went on to close the pitch. Told me he’d gone himself last year, how it completely changed his life. But he said he couldn’t go into the details. It was a secret. So I said, sure, fuck it, why not...

I wasn’t totally clueless. I knew I had to stay away from the painkillers—they made me such a constipated monster—so at the time I usually just smoked weed during the day, binge drinking

Jägermeister with my fellow loadies at night. I had this idea that if I could find just the right amount, the right dosage, the right molecule—at just the right moment—that I could squeeze out a spiritual experience impactful enough to slap all the self-loathing out of me and finally get my shit together. (A few days before, a friend reluctantly sold me some acid, after he'd protested that I'd just left rehab, after I insisted *just give it to me, come on man, I'll be fine, it's just a little acid*. And when it kicked in, turning out to be some pretty bad stuff, I promptly found myself lost in the woods for several hours.)

A warm morning, the jagged vibrancy of Hollywood was coated in vapor. Excitement was in the air, but I was nervous. Many of the other men seemed to know each other, wearing uniforms of paint-streaked carpenter pants, yellow work boots, standing in circles of three to six, sharing dirty jokes, compulsively spitting.

I didn't recognize anyone but Nate knew a lot of them from the Sonoma County AA circuit—at least the ones wearing those medallions they give out at the meetings, strung on gold chains, hanging from leathery necks, NA keytags on carabiners jangling from beltloops like born-again janitors.

I was nervous because Nate told me the Institute only allowed men over the age of twenty-three to attend, but *don't worry bro*, they probably wouldn't check my ID.

Nervous because I was only twenty-one, living with my mom again and fresh out of my first trip to rehab—already slipping and chipping, getting kicked out of these miserable little half-way shacks (the most recent having been owned and managed by a convicted and state-sanctioned-reformed child molester, if we're to put any faith in the DOJ)—not to mention the subsequent bouts of sleeping in my car, crashing in friends basements, all that kind of stuff.

I had very little interest in what AA was offering, but Nate was my sponsor, was older but not yet old, and seemed to have his shit together.

When the line of men inched towards the back entrance, Nate said to me, “Listen. No matter what—just stay for the entire weekend, okay? Just don't give up.”

“What *is* this, the Marines or something?” I said.

“You'll see,” he said, nodding sagely to a guy with a bushy grey mustache, eavesdropping behind us.

As we approached the end of the line, at last standing in the cool shade of the loading dock, Nate said his good lucks. He'd be back Monday morning. He was going surfing. Leaning in, he awkwardly gave me a bro hug and walked off.

A door creaked, and out came a stern-faced, middle aged man. His bald head, freshly shaved and gleaming, narrow-set eyes bored behind an even more boring set of frames, his eyes subtly bulging through prescription lenses. He was in full *business casual*: a crisp, white-collared shirt, open at the neck and tucked into black slacks. Taking names and scratching notes on a clipboard, he counted twenty men inside and closed the door behind us.

We entered a green room to find rows of folding tables set up in stations, each holding a stack of paper forms, pens planced urgently beside them. There were about a dozen men surrounding us, wearing white shirts and black slacks, some with walkie talkies strapped on their belts and wires going to their ears. Standing like Secret Service agents, their command presence was impeccable—stances wide, arms folded at chests. They wore name tags that simply said *Volunteer*. They weren't smiling.

As we filed in, the man with the shaved head, his vaguely fascist beady eyes magnifying through vaguely fascist frames, boomed,

"Listen up! Find a station and take a waiver. Read the waiver. *Do NOT sign the waiver*. Do it. Now."

So, finding an open station, I picked up a sheet. Skimming through some otherwise expected legalese, a line struck me:

"...[Participants] agree to keep confidential and not disclose to, reveal to, or discuss with anyone, at any time, the events that transpire in the Weekend..."

After a few minutes, the man said, "Now, sign the waiver."

As much as I didn't want to go through with it, as much as I was ready to say fuck it, run out the door, dignity be damned, a shameless retreat—any way to get back home, hitchhike back to the Bay, sleep on the beach, anything but this. But I managed to scribble my name, date, and signature, and handed it dutifully to a volunteer.

The man inspected my sheet and frowned. Crumpling the paper into a ball, he tossed it back to me.

“Handwriting isn’t up to standard,” he said. “Start a new one or get the fuck out of here.”

Uniquely emasculated, I went back to my station and filled out a new sheet, this time with deliberate precision.

A man next to me took his sheet and approached a volunteer. Meekly, he whispered something I couldn't quite hear, pointing to a line in the document.

The volunteer stared coldly, betraying nothing but slight annoyance. He spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“If you don't want to sign the form, then leave. Right now. Really, it’s not that fucking complicated but remember, there are no refunds. So make a decision and make it now, because Jonas begins the weekend at 900 hours. On the fucking dot. And you’re not getting in the way of months of meticulous planning which makes this happen because you suddenly wanna act like an even bigger bitch than my wife,” he smirked, while some other volunteers, including some of the more gung ho recruits, having eagerly signed their NDAs, all offered restrained, yet hearty chuckles of approval, disdain.

But this poor guy, my brother in skepticism, in commitment—he kept trying to negotiate, which eventually led one volunteer to mutter into his headset. Moments later, another door opened as two stocky volunteers entered—the *muscle*—and escorted the guy out.

A few more intimidating interactions later and the rest of the recruits had all signed a waiver.

Summarily we were lined up against the wall, the nineteen of us left. The bald man with the clipboard walked back and forth like a drill sergeant, inspecting our clothes, our postures, squinting as he took stock.

“Well, well. Look at all these fresh piles of shit.” He shook his head. “Nothing but a bunch of fucking jerks.”

He smiled as he caught a few of our startled reactions, the truth sinking in this isn’t your average goopy vibed, sun soaked, California *wellness retreat*. Serious as a heart attack, every step of the process felt more and more like gender identity seppuku.

“Just so you know, I was like you, before I did my Weekend. And it was the best *goddamned* thing I did in my life. But right now, as far as I see, you’re all just a gaggle of slimy fucking jerks.”

Once again he took pause, a clearly rehearsed scene, making sure to hit all the beats.

“But I can promise you this: over the next forty-eight hours, if you commit to giving one hundred and ten percent—*then may you emerge as the man you've always wanted to be*, come Monday morning.”

Half of us stared blankly, the other half smirking at the pomposity of it all. But without further word, he opened a final door and ushered us to the main ballroom.

Humid and noisy, the hall was already half-full of warm bodies. Harshly lit from the fluorescent lights, the windows were blacked-out and covered with large grey moving blankets, faded U-Haul logos and all. A few hundred men sat in rows of folding metal chairs facing the stage, the sounds of deep voices, seats squeaking under restless asses, echoes bouncing off the wooden floors.

There were more white-collared volunteers supervising the crowd, but in contrast were four pairs of women, a pair in each corner of the room. One held a video camera on her shoulder, the other standing by with a spotlight and boom mic. They resembled professional production crews, documentarians silently filming as we settled in. They wore *Volunteer* name tags—again, no names, no smiles.

I took a seat and looked up to the stage. A long table was set front-and-center, a black tablecloth draped across, with a panel of seven other women sitting on the other side. Glum faces staring down and facing the men—they dressed professionally: navy blue and pinstripe blouses, grey skirts, a pantsuit.

In the middle was a young, dark-haired woman, a stiff upper lip and a microphone placed below her. She slowly scanned us, the unruly hoard, and occasionally turned to another woman to mouth something in her ear, then looking back down at us, hinting at a scowl.

As the last group of recruits entered the hall and found their seats, the woman in the center tapped the mic and gestured to the men. We all hushed.

“Welcome to The Men's Weekend.”

She spoke slowly and firmly.

“These are the rules of the Weekend. They are very simple, but they are non-negotiable. The rules are as follows:

“One, you may not leave your chair, unless instructed.

“Two, there is no talking allowed. You will be told when to speak.

“Three, trips to the bathroom are only designated during breaks. You must remain in your chair at all times.

“Four, the Weekend ends when our leader, Jonas, says it is over, and not one minute before. You will not be told when the Weekend ends.

“Five, we won’t accept, nor answer, any questions.”

She pushed the microphone away and leaned back, resting her hands on the table, finger clasping together. Silence spread quickly, two hundred anonymous men, hands in our laps, trying to remain patient and composed. But there was only silence. The occasional squeak of a chair shifting weight. Someone coughing, reverberating across the polished maple floors and up the rafters of the vaulted hall.

After five minutes, pockets of whispering began sprouting in the crowd, followed by some wise-cracking, which led to a few outbreaks of nervous laughter. Not a word from the women though; the male volunteers stood ever silent, lurking in the corners.

After thirty minutes, the women still poised and staring blankly ahead, the men’s whispering had become a full-blown symposium. One younger guy stood up and, walking to the foot of the stage, floored on adrenaline, testosterone, 2-for-1 energy drinks, whatever else, began demanding explanations.

A camera crew instantly flocked him, ensuring extreme close-up coverage of his irritated face, exasperated in monologue. On stage, a 32-inch Sony CRT sat facing the crowd, beaming live footage directly from the production team. Somewhere, a director toggled the feed, displaying whatever camera was highlighting more of the dramatic events unfolding.

This continued for nearly an hour, the men ever-raising their voices, some yelling epithets towards the women on stage, others approaching the male volunteers demanding where the bathroom was. The volunteers would only say to sit down, follow the rules. It was agitating, some feeling more impotent than confused.

After ninety minutes the hostility had fully ripened, with half the men now up off their chairs, defying the volunteers and searching for the bathroom with the fury of a posse. The film crews

kept busy, while the women on stage remained silent, even as men accosted them in increasingly violent tones. A group of half a dozen men suddenly bum-rushed the stage, looming behind the women. One of them grabbed the microphone.

“This is a fucking mutiny!” he screamed, his throat already strained and cracking from the previous hour of animanlistic vocalizing.

“You know, I thought this was supposed to be the fuckin’ *Men’s* Weekend—not the *Pussy Whipped* Weekend!”

The crowd cheered, some up standing on their chairs, clapping and whistling, others cupping their hands to their mouths yelling *bitch, cunt, etc.*

The man said, “Who thinks these *women* need to get the fuck out of here? We don’t want *them* here, do we men?”

The crowd roared back, a resounding “NO!”

“This is *our* weekend, goddammit, and I don’t think we should tolerate this shit!”

A cacophony of approval, the floor humming in bass tones, the men seething in rage towards these *fucking bitches*, salivating over the opportunity for such unbridled chauvinism. Tensions escalated and, rapidly resembling a prison riot, the attractive, dark-haired woman in the middle turned to her left, then her right, and calmly nodded.

At last, she stood up and walked off the stage, the others following behind. She pushed open a disarmed fire-escape door, the men looking on as the women turned their backs (angry yet always eager to gain more visual information), as they, one-by-one, exited the building.

A bright morning light flooded the auditorium as they filed outside—the sounds of birds chirping, the soft roar of traffic, some children playing at recess—as the door slammed shut behind them.

Debriefing No. 1

This isn't something I'm supposed to tell you. For the most part, I've only vaguely mentioned it to friends or acquaintances at parties, just to say it's a long story and laugh it off. And while my tale isn't one to casually bring up on a Tinder date, I'm conflicted for reasons beyond its personal nature, beyond, even, the ethics regarding the signed confidentiality agreement.

I'm conflicted, mostly, because at the end of the Weekend I took part in an exercise where, for five minutes, standing face-to-face with another sweaty-browed man, we stared into each other's eyes repeating for what felt like an hour:

I will never tell anyone what I've seen, what I've heard, or who I've met here.

Jonas told us to call out any man we suspected wasn't trustworthy, and if they didn't seem sincere enough they'd be taken to another room. I remember thinking, staring into the other guy's nervous eyes, how I was sure *he* would be the one to blather.

But I didn't say anything, because I didn't want to make a scene. Because I didn't really trust myself either.



The Last Time

2004

I knew he'd been getting high again. He was in treatment for the hep-C, interferon therapy, which is basically chemo, and started taking Oxycontin for the headaches. He'd eventually become so dependent on the pills that my mom staged an intervention and invited a dozen of his friends over, giving him an ultimatum: he could either go to rehab, or move out.

He was utterly furious. He didn't need rehab, he said, he'd been sober for twenty goddamned years.

While true it'd been decades since his last drink, his sponsor quipped, "Well, if you're sober Kim, why do you look so high right now? You can barely keep your eyes open."

"I'm just taking medicine that's been prescribed," my father said.

Mom sighed. Reaching under her chair, she retrieved a brown paper sack and pulled out one of dad's handkerchiefs. Unrolling the cloth, she presented a tablespoon, its handle slightly bent, with dried balls of cotton and white-powdered residue crusted in the tiny metallic bowl. Flipping it over, the bottom was streaked black—the carbon stains of a lighter. She didn't say anything. Just gestured to the items in her hand.

"Okay, I get it. And I see how that looks, he said. "But the thing is—that's the only way the pills even work anymore. They're not strong enough! And you simply don't understand the pain I'm dealing with. It's, well, insufferable..." He trailed off, looking pitifully to the floor.

We soon took turns going around in a circle, making individual statements, our personally poignant appeals. When it was my turn, I brought up how a few nights before, in the driveway, I'd caught him fixing a shot in the cab of his truck. That gaunt face, his sunken eyes black holes under the dome light—I was trying to articulate the way he was so shady about it, how he clumsily tried to hide it from me, like he was the kid who'd been caught coming home high after school.

But my chest was so heavy I could barely speak, my throat clogging and contracting. I was unable to see through his vapor eyes the person inside who'd raised me, the man who'd for two decades somehow mastered and contained his most destructive impulses (and passed them on to me).

His face twisted in a cruel petulance, eyes blood-shot, his forearms were red and irritated from incessantly scratching the dermis—that pesky histamine release from the opioids. He faked a smile, loaded with sarcasm, and spoke in a languid croak.

“You are so sweet, my boy,” he said, “And I love you very much my young lad—but you really don't know what the fuck you're talking about.”

Within an hour he'd packed a suitcase, called a cab, and was out the door.

But the next day, I came home to see his truck in the driveway. I quietly went in to hear a rustling coming from my parents' bedroom. I guess he'd probably snuck in through a window, as my mom had the locks changed that morning and she was at the office.

I entered the master bathroom to see my father on hands and knees, ravaging through a purse in my mom's decadently-sized walk-in closet, the size of a Bushwick sublet. Her clothes were strewn about, every suitcase and storage box opened, their contents dumped on the floor: decades of taxes, birth certificates and social security cards—it was a real shakedown.

I assumed he was looking for the codeine my mom stashed for her migraines; sometimes I'd take a few when I was bored or depressed (which was happening more and more frequently). As I entered the bathroom he looked up from the floor, eyes narrowing with shock, embarrassment.

I had no idea what to say.

He stood up, awkwardly spouting off more lies—that he's just looking for his passport, that he's headed down to Mexico for a detox. That he was going to fix himself, by himself, and was getting off the painkillers, don't you worry my boy.

“A little hot water and sunshine, I should heal right up. Son, you know she made me go cold fucking turkey off my meds, do you know what that means? Nothing but a bunch of fucking aspirin for the pain,” he said, voice slightly cracking.

“That's right son, your mother's a real fucking cunt, treating me like such a child—she even told my doctors I'm an addict and now, well now I'm cut-off, man.”

He snarled, “Cold fucking turkey,”.

All I could do was put my arms around his cold, bony body and say, “I hope you get help, dad.”

“What do you even know about recovery, boy?” he said.

Reminded of some After School Special from TV, I said, “Well dad, I know the first step is admitting you have a problem,” and walked out the door.

It'd be the last time we'd ever disappoint each other.



I'm a Fucking Jerk

2005

After the women left—the door slamming shut behind them—the seminar had become fully anarchic, the room now raucous with the men celebrating their minor victory.

Feeling free to move around, I went to the back of the auditorium and asked a volunteer where the bathroom was. He just stared through my soul and said to return to my seat. But I noticed other men walking past him unhindered so I followed them to the lobby where we found a plethora of urinals.

As I washed up a guy stood behind me, drying his hands with a paper towel, looking at me through the mirror.

“This is pretty fucking awesome, isn't it?” he said, the classic Positive Mental Attitude shit I can't stand. “Can't wait to see what happens next man.”

In a pitch slightly higher than my normal voice, I wiped my hands and said, “Hell yeah dude.”

Returning to the main hall, a line of men had formed on stage, volunteers still standing by, quietly monitoring us. Meanwhile, one of the camera crews—somehow now swapped to an all-male production—crouched down, pointing a lens up to a man on stage speaking into a microphone, addressing the remaining men below still seated. I found my seat.

His intimate speaking voice, amplified over the P.A., it reminded me of an AA meeting—all these sad guys confessing their sins to the other anonymous losers walked in off the street.

“I need to say this out loud,” his lips pressed to the mic, clipping the EQ, a garbling sonic pathos. “I'm done being a shitty father to my daughter. And even though my baby's-mamma kicked me out two days ago— and I'm sleeping in my work van in the parking lot of our complex. It's a miracle I got visitation rights after everything I put them through but what's fucked up is, I—I can't stop smoking meth and cheating on her, and she's been nothing but faithful, my ride or die bitch.”

I was embarrassed for him. I didn't have kids but was certain I'd turn out an out-for-smokes kind of dad. I was also worried someone would make me go and declare my own sins of masculinity. But suddenly, in the middle of another of his pathetic interjections, the microphone cut out, lights dimmed and, with confused looks, the men on stage scurried off and returned to their chairs.

Next, two volunteers approached from the lobby of the auditorium, one on each side of the reassembled crowd. Walking down the aisles, they carried sage bundles burning, wisps of smoke trailing behind them.

Another cameraman was squatting low, slowly panning across the rows of men in their chairs, catching reactions to the sudden and inexplicable mystical turn.

Reaching the front of the crowd, they stood in formation below the stage. As the men settled in their chairs, a voice boomed over the P.A.: deep, soft, hypnotic:

Men, for the past two hours I've been backstage, watching a live video feed, intently listening to you speak. And it's clear to me there's a theme, a recurring thread. The way you were talking, I call it, 'listening to the chattering monkeys in your head,' and that's exactly what I hear many of you doing. Well, I want you to stop listening to those monkeys, and start listening to me.

Try it out: for the next forty-eight hours, let me be the voice in your head, and, come Monday morning, I guarantee your life will change in ways you couldn't even conceive.

A sense of ease spread over the crowd, our nerves relaxing with the low light, the pacing of the deep and amplified voice, the soothing aroma of sage hung sticky in the air.

My name is Jonas Silver, and I founded the Silver Institute with the sole purpose of helping men experience total freedom, as only a man can—and with that freedom, be the man you've always wanted to be.

I was in a daze, staring up to the darkness of the rafters, when I noticed from the corner of my eye a figure moving down the aisle. I turned, laying my eyes on Jonas himself.

Like the wizard behind the curtain, he'd transformed, from disembodied omnipotence into a squat and stocky, middle-aged man, deep set of beady eyes with a respectable hairline, his salt-and-pepper mane coiffed into a curly mullet. He wasn't dressed like the volunteers, instead wearing a generic Hanes black T and blue jeans his wife might've well as bought from Costco.

Despite the Apache warrior bone choker wrapped around his neck, he otherwise had the vibe of a lucrative and cocky private practice psychotherapist.

Walking down the aisle, he continued speaking. I noticed a wireless microphone attached to a headset wrapping his dome like some cyberpunk crown.

Men, we've found ourselves in a conflict, between modern-day society's expectations, and our most ancient masculine biology.

You see, over the last three generations, since the sexual revolutions of the 1960s and 70's, through the institutionalized political correctness of the 90's, men have been taught to reject, rather than integrate, their most basic masculine instincts—resulting in the wide-scale feminization of men I just witnessed backstage through our CCTV.

Your father, his father, and your great grandfather's generation had it right, you know. This preposterous idea that men can discuss feelings with women is, and I don't hesitate to say, perhaps one of the most harmful ideas in Western society, responsible for the highest divorce rate in the history of this nation.

Some voices erupted from men in the crowd, saying things like, “But my wife’s my best friend,” and, “We share everything with each other.”

Jonas just smiled and shook his head.

You ever heard of a SNAG? he said. It's short for what I like to call a Sensitive New Age Guy.

He thinks a long-term, committed relationship is a fifty-fifty partnership. Well I've got some news men: that is, simply and biologically, incorrect.

Earlier, I heard many of you ask each other, during our first exercise this morning, as you sat there letting a woman tell you what to do—putting pussy on a pedestal as they say—and you ask, 'Jonas, what the fuck did I pay five hundred dollars for?'

Well I'll tell you something. Here you go, here's a fifty dollar piece of wisdom: women are one-hundred percent responsible for the survival of a relationship.

Some guys still protested, while others thought this was good news. A few clapped and whistled, others sitting with arms crossed, skeptical faces, dressed in crumpled, corporate SWAG polo shirts.

Jonas now stood in front of the stage, short in stature but somehow still larger than life, pacing deliberately left to right, right to left, he addressed the men from the floor.

Don't listen to the monkeys, he said.

Listen to me, ok? We, as men, over the last forty years, have gone against thousands of years of genetic programming. You must understand that women are actually smarter than us—they have an inherent emotional superiority, making them experts at managing relationships. Let's be honest, men don't have any emotional needs that couldn't be met by his dog.

He announced there'd be another exercise.

Allow me to explain something as plainly as possible. Men are—at our very core—fucking jerks. Left to our own devices, we're impulsively sleazy, cheating, filthy pigs—and in fact, no one needs to teach us any of this, as, indeed, they're our very instincts.

Now, this next exercise is quite simple. I want you to all get up and start circling the room. Any man you don't know, you will introduce yourself. But instead of swapping names and going through the usual performative greetings, you will shake hands, lock eyes, and simply say, "Hi, I'm a fucking jerk."

At first it was funny, meeting strangers in such an absurd and crude way, smirking and laughing as we went along with the bit. But after a while, the repetition of it all, after shaking the fiftieth hand, repeating the same phrase the fiftieth time, the looks on the men's faces became ever more serious. Eyes turned vapid, our smiles increasingly twisting, soon, no one was laughing any more. Just five hundred men chanting four words, a mantra in unison:

I'm a fucking jerk.

I'm a fucking jerk.

I'm a fucking jerk.



Stories Without Endings

There are two stories in the back of my mind. One about a truly strange death of a distant Mormon relative, the other dealing with a bear and a boy.

I've always considered myself a less-than exceptional story teller—I get too caught up in the ornamentation of syntax and dynamics, tension and release. But moving forward, as they say, I'll begin with an automobile, and end with a dead man in a flying machine.

My dad had good taste in cars. My friends on the block would high-five each other after telling me he drove a “pimp-mobile.” I only vaguely knew what they meant but it felt so fucking cool.

I was about ten or eleven, it was the mid 90's, the car a late-80's Lincoln coup— king's-goblet gold. *Regal* is the word that comes to mind (a trademark within a similar automotive cinematic universe), it was a hunk of metal with the musculature of a cougar. On the driver's door there was a push-button keypad above the exterior handle. Inside, digitized gauges and dials excessively engineered had sloppily been soldered to the dash—LCD's glowing neon green with distinct urban pleasure (no matter only half of them functional as long as the engine turned over every morning).

Dad mostly drove American made, bought used, usually after closing a big deal—an especially charming roofing salesman when the bipolar was in check. On summer twilights we'd wash the car together—buckets of warm soapy water, a garden hose, red fluffy sponges. But this was all when I was a little older.

Years before, when I was about six or seven, dad drove the “Roof Mobile.” A Ford station wagon, it was what you might call a *boat*. It didn't have the classy faux wood paneling, electric windows, or tape deck you'd imagine of a circa 1984 family wagon: it was that clunker on the street that made our neighbors cringe.

This thing wasn't for the nuclear family. It was for his business trips across the Bay to Oakland, Alameda, Fremont—roofing samples in the back, toothbrush and socks in a leather satchel. A work truck in effect, its rugged interior and spacious backseat also allowing for camping trips with his son. And how he loved to talk as he drove. Out on the road, fifty miles north, up and away from the city, on the way to the lake, away from his wife, me away from my mother.

He would begin an on-going story about the bear and the boy, one he'd started during our last trip together—a tale with multiple acts, all to be concluded “next time, on The Bear Story,” as we pulled into the driveway back home on a Sunday night.

I'm sure he just made the whole thing up as he went along, lazily inventing plot twists after next. The boy was supposed to be like me, the same age, my father drumming up suspense every time I'd say, *what happens next, daddy?*

But when I try, I just can't do it. I cannot remember a single damn detail about what happened to the boy, or what the bear did, or who won, or who got hurt, if anyone. If I could, I'd ask him to remind me—and hope, of course, he hadn't forgotten the hazy plot points.



“Oh my god, I just remembered this crazy story my mom told me,” I said, “about a relative who recently died.”

My date sat across from me, over a small table in a busy coffee shop as I felt the trickle of anxiety, preparing for how badly I'd tell it.

“So my dad's side of my family comes from good Mormon stock. Like, my great-great grandparents helped settle the Salt Lake Valley. One of them was actually a well-known polygamist—he's in a museum somewhere. Anyways, I have this distant cousin, who was married with kids, and going to church and doing the whole straight-Mormon thing.

“Well her husband, who's like this really successful contractor, with tons of money, he injures his back and ends up getting addicted to painkillers. What's worse—he starts drinking beer all day, and mixing it with this crazy amount of Percocet.

“So he gets real depressed, like suicidal, and starts saying weird shit. And one day, he's standing in the kitchen, arguing with his wife, and he says 'I can't fucking take it anymore' and storms off to the garage, coming back inside with a shotgun and—oh, this is where things get really messed up.”

She leaned in, engrossed despite my choppy rhythms. I went on.

“So his wife starts chasing him around the kitchen, then out to the back yard, begging him to stop. He's headed towards this little air-strip he's paved for his like, hobby aircraft thing. You know, it's basically like a go-kart with a parachute and a giant fan on the back, to propel it in the air. Yeah, so he takes off, flying up—and his wife is shouting from the ground, pleading him to

come down, and his two teenage boys are out there watching. And while all of this is going on—the neighbor's dogs barking, the high buzz of the engine like a lawn mower in the sky—he shoots himself in the face with the shotgun.”

“Oh my god!” she shrieked.

“I know,” I said, “it's fucking awful, right?”

We sat in a daze. I began thinking about what I'd said, realizing I'd left out an important part of the story, the reason why I remembered it, the reason I succumbed to telling such a horror-show of a tale while the sun was out, blossom petals ruffling in a warm breeze—and she was really cute, her outfit thoughtfully put together, and I was late, and could tell she was ticked about it, and I was pretending I was a non-smoker—all the beautiful potentials of a first date.

“Oh yeah,” I said, “the thing is, his body stayed up there, flying around in circles for like two hours before the thing finally ran out of gas and fell back to the—”

She burst out laughing, leaning in further, her flirty eyes aimed at me. Blushing, she covered her mouth, trying to compose herself.

“I'm really sorry,” she said, “ it's just so. . . funny!”



Misty Conjecture

2004

Three days after the encounter in the walk-in closet, my mom and I drove south of California, crossing the border into Mexico. We had a body to identify, a cremator to hire, a mystery to solve. In the vast desert just south of Mexicali, my father had overdosed on a cocktail of painkillers and tranquilizers.

He was found dead at a rustic hot-springs resort, where the staff reportedly discovered him sitting upright at a picnic table, face blue from blood drained, resting his forehead in his right hand. His left arm hung at his side—a hypodermic needle still stuck in a vein, dangling below the bicep.

Since the local coroner didn't want to deal with a potential narcotics case, let alone one involving a dead *gringo*, they declared the cause of death “internal bleeding,” resulting from a “camping accident.” There was no autopsy, no further investigation.

But we wanted to know—I still do—why were the tires of his truck slashed, parked next to the picnic table? What was that shopping bag full of petite women's clothing doing there? Stuffed behind the passenger seat—whose were they? How was he able to acquire such a large stockpile of all the various ampules of injectable opiates and tranquilizers, needles and tourniquets—tools to end a life so efficiently, intentionally or otherwise?

It's all just a misty conjecture in my mind's eye. A fog enveloping over time, a set of clouds you can look at and say, *well, what do you see?*



The Werewolves of London

2005

This exercise is perhaps the most important for the entire weekend, Jonas says, and I want every single man in this room to give one hundred and ten percent to it.

His voice booms over the P.A.

When men grieve, they hold it deep within. But if you're truly not harboring any pain then I want you to rally around and support the men who are hurting by letting them hurt you—as the only way a man grieves is through what?

“VIO-LENCE,” the men on the floor say, in unison.

And on his cue, I begin my thrashing.

Pacing around in short circles, huffing and puffing, I stomp my feet. But none of the other men notice me. I look out at a sea of five hundred bodies, a few different voices yelling from the other side, but everyone near me stands awkwardly.

I clomp around some more, swearing at the floor under my breath. But I'm not committed, it isn't all I've got, so I reveal a sharp, pitiful shriek—a sea lion being stabbed. An adult tantrum: the frustration of a toddler, the sense of Godlessness acquired as man.

I try stomping my heels through the floor. Clenching a fist, I hammer it into my thigh, another sweaty hand palming my forehead, tugging my brow up over my brain.

I focus on a memory: waiting in the lobby of that Mexican morgue—mom said I shouldn't look—and her shrill, choppy cries ringing down the hallway and through the walls, back into the waiting room and right under my skin. Inescapable, the sound of pure defeat: identified—a body that was my father.

I see a stack of folding metal chairs leaning against the wall. Drunk on adrenaline, I stumble toward them start kicking pushing heavy chairs falling eight feet hits someone I don't care continue raging screaming *why fucking why the fuck did you have to go and fucking die Jesus Christ you son of a goddamned bitch* someone grabs my shoulders pulls me mosh-pit shirtless

sweaty men surround me swirling hurricane I shove moaning throwing elbows cursing dear god
oh please dull this sharp pain.

Someone yells just behind my ear, raspy throated with vocal-fry: *we fucking love you man* and I
release another pathetic yelp to the rafters. I'm so pissed at God; let's take it outside,
motherfucker. There's too much body heat and musk, a thick masculine humidity—I can barely
breathe.

I gasp *water* and someone dumps an entire SOLO cup of it over my head, a second wind to carry
this to completion. But they sense I'm too eager for unconsciousness—muscles gelatinous, weak
as a limbless soldier—they drag drop prop me on wall ass to floor legs spread clothes drenched
salty cheeks neck hangs eyes focus red plastic cup crushed water creeping crowd movement head
rise.

Two volunteers enter, carrying a long wooden pole, somber faces. Standing on opposite ends,
they hold it at their chests, while a third walks underneath, leaning his torso backwards looking
to the ceiling. After some slight adjustments to height, the volunteers nod in agreement and give
the sound guy the thumbs-up.

“Werewolves of London” blasts over the PA, the campy classic-rock hit. A line of men form in
front of the pole, laughing and dancing, as, one-by-one, they do the *Limbo*—the crowd encircled,
cheering and hugging.

I stand walk laugh cry same time.

