

“Stop now, because it could be a waste of time. I started with a solid idea, and now I’m not sure. I’ve come too far. This is what, the fourth layer? It’s almost done. No, it’s not, but almost. Nearly. It looks good. Yeah, it does. It’ll be great by the time I’m done. Did I eat today? *Starving artist*. Hah. Wait, you did eat today. What did I eat? Apple, that’s it. What happened to the radio? I should take a break; what time is it? His eyes fixed on the canvas flitting into the palette intermittently. The colors: of the walls, canvas, his hands, the brushes soaking in that mug, stained week old copies of the *Times* shuffling underneath shoes and easel and stool, the maple floor; an artist’s brain is more than gray. Drying canvases lean on smaller canvases lean on larger canvases leaning against every wall means that the last remnant of oil squeezed out by the tube wringer is his brain, bubbling out. He uses his bedroom as his studio, his living room as a private showcase, the futon as his bed. The brush meticulously lights her cheek with a muted shade of the tiny blue moon - the focal point of this oeuvre. Mark the painter’s eyebrows assimilated into perpetual prostration. What does this mean --- anything? What did Freud say about self-reflection? Akonian and his quotes. Why Freud? Unfulfilled fantasy, undoubtedly. I’m drifting; what was I thinking? Stomach churns on air. Food, yeah, that’s right. I should get out of here. What time is it? The digital clock on the floor read in a red LED glare, 3:24. *Starving*. An Op-Ed on the altruism of an actress in Africa archly winked at Mark. How do you like the joke so far? “Reads like a screenplay, Dave.” Acknowledgment is nice. Jingle, jingle, jingle. I’ll help you out.

#### MARK

Hello? Oh, Hello. Yes, I’m free. Uh huh. Yeah. Sure, that sounds great. Sure, definitely. Stop by. Uhm, I’m available. I have someone coming tomorrow at four and – Thursday? Yeah, two’s great. You have the address? All right. See you then. Thanks. Yeah.

Mark hangs up the phone and sits on his bed. He tosses the phone aside. He exhales relief. His stomach churns on air.

All right, the rest you’ll have to adapt. You’re lucky. I’ll make it easy.

The door to his bedroom ambled to the frame. A post-it note flip book pasted to a flattened 6"x6" canvas pasted to a 2'x2' pasted to a 4.75'x3' pasted to a 5'x5.5' pasted to a thick 7'x8' plaster slab faced Mark; respectively, black ink doodles of two walls squishing a stick figure (brain pops at the end (Mark's idea)) on a spilled neon lime Campbell's spinach and broccoli cream soup stencil on various swarthy liquid paint sporadic splatters on unbroken short diagonal streaks of an evening landscape unknown to the city on an intricate portrait of a woman in a rigid gown, padded wings, linen ruffs - meticulous gilding - and a boy behind her holding an assortment of fruit standing on a decadent rug in a palace, hanging crimson curtains on an elaborate homage to Ramesses II in Egyptian hieroglyphs, colored with natural pigments. The plaster split at the center to eventually get it out of the apartment. The piece covering a living room wall stares at Mark in respite on the couch - too small, a new idea, an enormous undertaking, a failure. It'll sell. Hopefully. Mark took a lightweight jacket from his closet and locked the door behind him. The elevator is silent. Two boys on the stoop confer. "The sky's blue cuz it's reflecting the ocean." "Then how come the sky's grey?" "Duh, because it's reflecting the cement." Mark's head tilts to a sky under a subterfuge. His tired head swings to the sidewalk. His foot pokes a grimy candy wrapper as a feculent gray path shifts behind him. Pigeon shit on a newspaper dispensary. A channel of buildings stands weak, leaning on the verge of crushing Mark. The summer before his first semester of graduate school, Mark (and a girl and a boy) stood under Pisa's tower, arms outstretched holding masochistic petrification. That day it toppled over him. But before that, they visited David in Florence. Two hours by train of verdure and vale and canal streams and crop rotation and cramped stucco buildings through a train window, "It's so beautiful." "Bellissimo!" Eyes strained wide. Ache at night. "Rimaniamo per sempre." "What?" "Let's never leave." "Is that right?" "Yeah, I think so." "I lost my cigarettes." "Where were they?" "In my pocket. I think someone stole them." "Those kids. I think I felt them going through my pockets. Do you still have your wallet?" "Yeah, everything's in the bag. Shit. Those were really great cigarettes. I gave them a lot of change too. Like 2000 lire." "Don't keep anything in your pockets." "At least you didn't get swindled by a street merchant." Mark and Will laugh. "I was watching that guy - shifty hands. I salute him. It probably took awhile to learn." "How did he do it?" "I think we're too callow for European travel." "France wasn't as bad." "Oh god, France! I want to go back already. Next week, let's go. On our way to Spain." "We'll see. We spent a lot of time there." "All right, I have a good one. Italy: Machiavelli."

“What’s to discuss?” “Wasn’t his work impetus for those protestant massacres?” “Okay, okay, but I’ll play Devil’s Advocate here and posit that ambition and uhm, violence are necessary. And, if one defines morality and recognizes a people that is basically immoral, then . . .” “Like the protestants?” Mark laughs. “Like colonial justification for genocide and slavery?” “Come on, Will. Voltaire was fun, but this? Can’t you think of any other Italian philosophers?” “Well. Machiavelli is a great one. Um.” Mark forgot. Mark’s thoughts vacillated. Too much gray. Maybe I should do a color field. After this fauvist piece, I’ll do a gray color field. Maybe. Everything needs to be bigger.

Urugh. Brugh. Puhtew. Urugh. A spectacled man in a gray tweed blazer flailing out of a window three stories above holds the attention of a few amblers. He retches. He spits at the crowd. Mark nears the group and drags his head back. “What’s wrong,” a woman beside me shouts, inflecting curiosity over concern. “I. Am nauseous!” A man asks, “Why?” “You! What are you doing with those books?” “They’re from the library. I’m studying U.S. history,” he adjusts his protuberant satchel. “Autodidacts make me nauseous!” Incredulous. “Hey! Are you lonely, up there?” I yelled up. “Do you ever *laugh* when you’re alone?” His response muddles between retching. “Abs-urgh-d.” Comic relief! “Not funny, Dave. Quit with the digressions.” Digress *this*. “You’re an idiot.”

..... Bored. Bored. Soooo bored. That audition *sucked*. I didn’t suck, that perv director just wanted me to *blow* him. That or he’s *gay*. Clean shaven. Ha. Perv. Screw him, and *screw* Elvira. John and I were friends way before. She’s just *jealous*. They’re not even *dating* anymore. They’re all jealous; I have another audition. One day I’ll be really rich and famous and then what. And then I’ll be happy and rich and *famous*. I just hate work and I hate working. This job. No, don’t look at the clock. Probably like another *three* hours. Shit, it’s cloudy. I hope it don’t rain. Then it’ll all be just perfect. *Just perfect*. How’d *that* get there? Who the *hell* put a *smiley face* sticker on *the till*? Ronald? Deanna? It’s, like, *mocking* me. Oh, *this* guy again. Staring at the menu like it’s your *first* time. It’s a sandwich shop, dude. He’s probably on his break. A painter, *obviously*. Ha. One day he’ll remember *my* face. My face in a commercial for a *huge* romantic movie tomorrow and he’ll realize how pathetic he is and unaccomplished. Maybe he’s working on that new office building. Probably *not*. Probably just a independent *contractor*. Damn, only 3:45. *Hurry up*. What do you *want*? Yeah, yeah, yeah. And the soup too? *Eww*, I wouldn’t eat it *ever*. Another different bagel sandwich. Probably *gay* too.

Mark ate without haste. He sits parallel to the floor to ceiling window. Disconcerted by the waitress's listless glares his gaze shifts to the window. An emphatic news team films children playing in the street. A Black SUV putts past, obscuring the row of buildings. The macho man's arm dangles out the window, spilling gasoline from a ten-gallon jug as he smokes. For a moment exhaust fills the street and the turbid air darkens the deli. Mark takes a bite. As the smoke clears an upright cat strides by in a mink coat. She licks her paw and brushes her hair back. They make eye contact and the cat hisses her eyes. Mark takes a bite. His stomach is grateful. The waitress wildly scrapes at something on the register. She notices Mark and her incendiary orbs sear him. His eyes drop to a cracker entering the spinach and broccoli cream soup. Mark forgets and wanders from his painting to images of future paintings to a moment in his childhood when his father mandated fasting because his wife divorced him and when Christian father stepped out of the room Mark pried open the refrigerator and shoved more slices of bologna into his bulging mouth to Akonian and his Freudian quotes – Mark's colored hand advancing the spoon – to his paintings to a gallery "Mark the Painter's work!" and there he stands an ill-dressed kid among costumed aristocracy choking ties and hyperbole thread-count button-up unbuttoned at the neck ambles w/opulent dangling jewelry gleaming off coquettes muttering, "Hmm, no" a price a payment rent spent smiling ladies winking and eye-contact contact breaks sneer grimace vomit I mean, who am I? even the waitress. The waitress wildly scrapes at something on the register. Everyone around me is crazy. If life is mimetic, I must be crazy. Right? Where did that come from? 'Mimetic?' How do I remember that? Was it Aconian? Maybe. I don't know. Aconian, Aconian. Stop thinking about Aconian. Who else? S----- for Theory and Criticism. She was great. Lifeless water soothed his throat. "Lifeless, Dave? Water is lifeless, yeah. Like dead? like dead cold? like freezing? Couldn't you just say freezing? Is that what you meant? First of all: pretentious. I don't like it. A hodgepodge of ideas incoherently jumbled together. Unoriginal." You're right!

A pigeon swooped off a street light and circled Mark twittering a melodious song resonating a perfect contingent chord on his heart's Aeolian harp strings, diffusing warm hope from his chest to his finger nails, toes, and nose. Mark breathed deeply and his abdomen extended as an invitation to the city. Parking meters wrapped the sidewalk cars of all colors/shapes/sizes kissed, empty spots fragmentarily lonely (an SUV conquered a wimp pining for one solitary), looping unbroken, only perceived as ending where a traffic light turns green

and a white figure frozen in motion defends civilian right-of-way; Mark off the curb patiently awaiting walks walking slower than the impeccable business woman bounding ahead (and in high-heels!) walking faster than the hoary bald man walking in-line, consciously three steps behind, a dog on a leash. A woman leaning out a window beats a carpet propagating dust lit by a single beam of the hopeful sun managing to break through customary clouds; she turned and shouted something nearly unheard, "I love you, SON!" Two suited men, a gaily-steadfast gait, bifurcated past Mark, "Oh, Sentient stocks" "Stalk stocks" "You know, your wife's stockings . . ." "Stock up!" "Staaawwwkk." Architecture: man-made marvel. Magnificent mountains mayn't march; mankind's manufactured miracles; minarets movep'st maximum measurements; multifarious monuments mark mastery. Money. Ah, the air. The air, oh, air. The city. Mark whistles a tune. What is that? Where'd I hear that? Oh, just from that window. He repeats the measure, repeats, repeats, adds syncopation and composes an accompanying bar. Walking. What is that? He sniffs. Nostrils extend, nose tightly inhales. It smells so familiar. Oh, flowers. That florist's just ahead beside a step past. I should buy some. Still life! Inside, Mark laughs, nose exhales, lips hint. Mark's right shoulder is collided from behind, stumbling him forward. He turns and examines; he turns and examines.

Mark begins again, but "I'mSorryJustOneMomentPlease" from a navy pinstriped suit. Short blonde leftways glued hair, an indefatigable grin, a babyblue shirt and silk black tie; already a portable table is unfolded. As he urgently digs books from his brown leather shoulder bag, sedulously arranging them on the ivory plastic top, his voice projects, echoing across the channel:

"Since I was a child, my teachers always told me, Dave, you've got a knack – a knack for empathy with humanity, and revealing edification. Thus, naturally, I used this inherent talent in my vocation. Don't wonder and don't wander; lend your ears to our serendipitously disturbed saunter. It is well known that humanity suffers, for who has lived without trial? And undoubtedly misery comes by personal blunder, unless you choose to live in denial. And at the end of a harrowing day when all life's vicissitudes coalesce into perturbing incessant thoughts on why, what, or where as one lays dreaming of a night's slumber fraught without nightmare which the red meat before sleep surely will precipitate, one certainly knows that torrid mental dialogues merely lead to another morning without change and one's life may the same subsequent day terminate; but hark, I have a solution to quell all undesirable delusion. Are you intrigued?"

Nonplussed and humored Mark nodded for the pinstriped suit to go on. The pinstripes are a faint gray. Mark's inquisitive brows, furrowed. The man inhaled deeply and continued the portentous sermon.

"You appear an educated man, if not a scholar, forsooth."

"I just finished grad school."

"Then, congratulations! Perhaps prudence has not been lost to youth."

Youth? This guy's a year or two older at most. "Yeah, perhaps." His suit's too big for him. It sags at the pits. Mud-caked shoes. And – what the fuck – he's selling philosophical textbooks. Lucent names in neon colors, pivoting, overlapping, embossed, emblazoned the dust covers. Schopenhauer! Kant! Hegel! Aristotle! Descartes! Motley, but exclusively western. Passer-bys milled. People stop to listen. He smiles. They smile. They smile. He smiles and doesn't stop. "However, what is one's life if its meaning is unclear? Opaque, submerged in a shallow pool in easy reach; without arms this proves an impossible feat." On and on. They're eating it up. His variant facial expressions are unparalleled: solemn, wise, humorous, friendly, captivating. "These ineffable, timeless - " What am I doing? I guess everyone wants an answer. So, we're all the same? No. But look, this scattin salesman has a simple daily goal: sell books. And he's done. Accomplished and content. Simplicity. How did it ever escape me? But why am I unhappy? I feel unaccomplished. You are unaccomplished. No, I'm accomplished. Well, just a master's degree. 'Just?' - Why'd I stop? The loans. The stress. The expectation. It was fun. "Which one's the best one?" "Ah, my good fellow, one is not enough, but *this* collection touches on - " To Mark, each accomplishment and each sell is too ephemeral and quickly transient. Maybe they're grandiose. They should be simple, right? And if my accomplishments are grandiose, and grandiosity is pretentious, then my accomplishments are pretentious. And pretentious art is terrible. Like that guy at our final showing. People laughed. They laughed at his work. What's pretentious? First year, Aconian called my work pretentious and after that he just. What a word. "I have companion texts and concordances available too." "What's that?" This guy has it figured out. All of these people. Aspiration for acknowledgement is fruitless. I should have stayed as assistant professor. It was fine money. I don't want to go back. Why'd I leave? Left the state; moved three thousand miles away. I'm a failure. And this guy just got paid. I'm painting a fauvist piece that in context's supposed to represent something and its meaning is ridiculous. Western art vs. Everything else. *Racy*. What a statement. Trite. So much so, that it's prevalently

accepted. Every other continent pales; Europe was first. You don't have anything else in your arsenal? Find love or something. Pablo had his affairs. Leonardo had his science. Jake Lawrence had our history. An artist. Really? Why? The last man - bought a book - walks away flipping through pages. "And you, sir? Interested?" "No thanks. But - " The pinstriped suit packs the books. " - How'd you get this job? I mean, how do you like this job?"

CUT TO:

Mark and Dave watch TV on Mark's couch. The TV, similar in size, replaced that other piece. Vacant beer bottles on the coffee table. Unsold, it's in someone's studio, that grandiose work. He did manage to sell a few and he did finish his fauvist piece of the woman and the pale blue moon and all that jazz. They watch TV. Now *that's* an escape from reality. And that critic is gone. So I can do anything I like! WRITE anything TYPE anything and no blah blah. Because it don't matter no more. NuhThin matters I can do whatever. *Perhaps it's all been paltry parsley from "stop now" rewrites and corrections and synonyms and syllogisms and symbolisms all that gray you must've noticed.*

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portant things, maybe triviality, but anything, really, to pass the time between working and sleeping. And it's that old existential qualm of "one day I'll die, so it's all meaningless," or that passive, "one man can't make a difference" justification for retreat. And so what if history is skewed in favor of European imperialism; as if America ever commit a genocide or institutionalized racism pervades. I got ahead, right? And there's no change in sight. And I've removed my glasses, I can't see that horizon or even the road of progression. Why care? Because after years of work and effort and slaving away, ingratiating to superiors only superior by how much more pale his skin is or what his credit limit is, I'm tired and smart enough to know that story. Has history changed? Hahaha, yeah. "Greek" architecture. In 1492, Columbus first sailed that ocean blue. And after civil rights, and especially after Obama was elected, America is free free free free free: liberty.

Television is really so entertaining. Dave was shocked I didn't own one, and so we never drank beer at my place before going out. My TV is superior to his. After he went really in depth on his - the exact proportions of the screen and the pixel ratio and his sound system - I knew what I needed to replace that bare wall. When I went to the store the prices shocked me. I almost left because I didn't see the point. But I was sick of his reluctance to go to my apartment and always drinking the same beer. I haven't paid so much for anything in years, beside the couch and plane tickets. Yet, TV has kept me more company than anything else. It's on before sleep, when I awake, while I dress and make food, when Dave's over – all the time! TV is an HD plasma Panasonic Magnolia class 65" widescreen 1080p display 4 full-range in-speaker system connected to an immaculately placed surround sound system and a blue-ray DVD set and cable box, mounted to the wall, protruding like an assemblage piece. A glossy black frame. Why don't those MOMAs or MOCAs have TVs? I mean, they do – as part of some Neo-Dada Video-Installation work, but . . . just TV. Some have reading rooms, libraries, but no TV room or *living* room. And television's shows! What art! Sure, the majority white casts and stereotypes and the shit they pass off as news is sort of PTHHH, but they got some good shit. And in serious consideration, it's great that there aren't any sitcoms or dramas or serious news coverages about poor people on TV. And that the issues they cover are banal and that television's focus is almost exclusively on social aesthetic – not as defined by them, but, you know, the sponsors, the corporation dudes. What was that statistic about the diversity of Fortune 500 CEOs? 'Dudes.' Whatever, Rick Heweld says it in that bad ass show. 'Bad ass.' Where'd I hear that. You couldn't forget. Less than 5% are nonwhite and/or women. I'm tired of it. Maybe I should start reading news again. Annyway. Wow, already? Where'd Dave go? This bar tender. Look at this chick. 'Chick.'

"Yeah. Yeah. One more. Thanks." Ah. Dave. I'll make my way. Off the chair, steady. You got it. Sociable Dave.

"Hello." Weird look. I know Dave. I recommended we come here. Don't give me that look. I don't wanna fuck you. Not my type. Hehe.

"Mark! Have a seat. This is Mark. Mark, Lisa." Mark sits at the round table, acknowledging Lisa with his eyes and a smile. "Hi, Mark," indicating himself. "Lisa," indicating herself, "You know Dave?" "You know Dave?" "Just met." "Whatcha got there, Mark?" "They call this Arrogant Bastard Ale." "You like it?" "Delicious. What're you drinking?" "Usual."



“Nice. Lisa?” “House draft.” “Sounds delicious.” “It sure is.” She being sarcastic? “So Mark, Lisa and I go to the same Church.” “You go to church, Dave? What church?” “The First Christian Church.” “The first one?” They laugh like it’s expected. “No, it’s around the corner from your place. I’ve never even asked you, Mark: Do you go to Church?” “Ah, not recently.” Jukebox. Wonder what she’s gonna play. Can’t beat smooth jazz, hehe. “You should definitely come.” “Well, I’m not, um. Yeah, sometime.” “Me and Mark work together.” “We’re doorly salesmen.” “Selling what?” “Textbooks. I sell World history.” “Wow, sounds hard. How about you, Dave?” Mouth dry. This is good. This is great. Small talk. Pthh. “Oh, really? Wow, philosophy? Sell me.” “Ha, *ha!* Okay. Uh. Since conception, I’ve been plagued with the question of what is life for, and why do I live today? Sure, I’ve learned a lesson or two along the way, but I’ve got here and don’t know it all. So, uh, uh, these authors have been writing since the beginning and provide all the answers. So don’t you want, an, uhm, answer. Something like that.” Lisa’s frozen beaming incessant blinking ingratiating; Dave attempting composure and suavity; Mark’s expectant flitting eyes indulging. Abrupt “Ha!” from Lisa. “It rhymed – That was . . . good.” “Thanks.” “I like your t-shirt, um, Mark.” Mark looks down and up and, “Uh, thanks.” Still paint. Fetters her ascent taking her glass and purse - unfettered stands. “It was nice meeting you both.” Dave tries. “Ugh Yer Frssd CrmHm.” Left. Mingus! The Jukebox plays Better Get It In Your Soul. Nice. Where is she? Oh, sitting right behind. Hello, pretty lady. Mingus? Mingus? Nice. “Damn it, I’m an idiot.” “What?” “Yeah, Mark. An Idiot. I shouldn’t’ve done my shtick.” “Don’t worry about it, Dave.” “I’ll see her at Church now.” “Oh yeah,” Mark laughs. “We were having a great conversation till you got here then she, then I, forget about it.” “Hey. I didn’t do a thing. I’m a ladies man, a smooth sailor, an outstanding operator.” Titter from behind. Mark projects his voice to suffice. “And with Charlie Mingus playing, there’s no stopping me.” Yeah. Super Smooth. “Philosophical text. What a crock. Philosophy’s for crackpots.” She opines, “Hey, I was actually an philosophy major.” Mark turns and Dave inspects. “Yeah? Well I was a neurobiology major and I don’t gripe every time my pituitary inhibits ADH.” “You weren’t really a neurobiology major, were you Dave?” “Med-school drop out. You weren’t really a philosophy major, were you?” “Law-school drop out.” Silent approbation. “Art-school graduate?” She laughs. “Hi, I’m Mark.” “Natalie,” extends her hand. “Nice to meet you, Natalie.” “Hi, Dave,” shakes. “And this is Tom,” fleeting hand wave suppressed smile. “Do you boys come here often?” “First time. Mark recommended it.” “Join us.

Tom's no good for conversation right now," an anguished face whispering: "His ex jilted him." "Sure. Thanks." Amalgamation. "So, you like Charles Mingus, Mark?" "Best Bassist there ever was." "I put this on." "Really? Yeah, I read they have great live Jazz acts here. Guess not tonight." Tom cradling his glass, "Monday's the only night they don't." Mark chuckles. She strikes up, "Where'd you go to school, Dave?" "U--. You?" "No way, same here. Are you a native?" "From up-state." "Ah. Born and raised right here. Neurobiology, huh? That sounds complicated." "Probably less complicated than Law." "Art, by far, the most dense." "Did you go to school here too?" "Uh, no. Just moved here about eight months ago from the other coast." "How do you like it here?" "It's different. There is a lot more here. It's, um, different crowds come to galleries here. Maybe. I don't know, guess it's the same." "What kind of art do you do?" "I try to be as eclectic as possible, but canvas usually." "So, like, painting?" "Yup. Mark the painter." Dave: "Excuse me you three, but I need a cigarette. I'll be back." Tom: "Same here."

Her eyes smile at Mark – a helplessly reciprocated smile. Natalie's eyes stroke his smile. His self-effacing eyes shift beside the door, a red neon bicycle advertisement for Fat Tire ale. Perspiratory overarching halos shining gold – Tiffany pendant lamp, autumnal – decorate the aged dark varnished table her forearms rest upon the edge, right hand's fingers tapping her half full glass. He massages his neck and turns toward a slouched man at the bar – bartender's back turned, fit tight jeans. Reticent eagerness turns back, smiling. Delicate laughter. Damn, should have stayed in the suit. Fuck the suit. Stained paint shirt. 'Mark the painter.' She's casual. Where does she work? Don't bring up work. "Come on, please," a green dress short woman beseeches the slouched man. Lurid pink faux-reptile skin purse embellishes her shoulder. Don't be eager eager eager. A pink buttoned-up male across the room at a booth with three ostentatious guffaws rises toward the bar. Green dress: ". . . your shoes, my man." Slouched man's yellow? Gator skin loafers. "Wait, where is that?" "On 4<sup>th</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup>." "Yeah, Dave goes there too. Everyone goes there." "Everyone?" "Oh, uh, Dave just met someone else who goes there." "Do you go?" "Um. Not in a long time." "You should come." "Yeah, I think I will." "I mean, it gives life real meaning." Tom approaches smirking and cigarette stenching says, "Natalie. Do you know what the law of life is?" "Law of life?" Dave sits, "Not the law of life. Cell theory, man." "Cell theory. Do you know what the law of cell theory is?" "What?" "All cells come from pre-existing cells." Dave's right eyebrow raised, "Well, there are three laws. And it's just cell theory." Equivocal Natalie repeats, "All cells come from pre-existing cells? So? . . ." "I mean,

think about it, Natalie. It completely unifies all life. All cells come from pre-existing cells. So, everything shares its origin. Everything started out as these small microorganisms and after billions of years we're all still here and we're all related. It reasserts the sanctity of our planet.” Natalie giggles. And fleetingly: Mark once studied trees in their quaint sodden sidewalk block squares or in medians on the street or that park dedicated to verdure and thought: beauty. This idea filled him, briefly nostalgically, with a deep appreciation and universal empathy for every living thing. And this varnished table and his barley beer, and the bar peanuts, wheat bread lettuce tomato ham sandwich the man in the booth with the woman eats, his cotton shirt and jeans, Dave's wool pants, Tom's leather shoes, we! All share our ancestry. And we bloomed from simplicity to complexity to this – these diverse innumerable life forms – and shouldn't we nurture Earth? Where not within light years as far as we know can any other planet sustain this: life! It is sacred and more holy than moral laws dictated by God decreed by various prophets or the pleasure of Consumerism or the avarice of American Human. It is life. Paraphrasing Aconian: ‘Do something more than still life, Mark. Not just plants. People! More! Recreate life!’ Mark forgot. Mark's thoughts vacillate and focus.

“Wait, wait. Dave. Did you smoke through med-school?” Dave laughs, “No. Right before I quit [medical school].” “Whoa, really,” surprised Tom, “How old were you when you started?” “Uh, 22. Yeah. I used to imagine my alveoli slowly covering with tar, my lungs growing a black overcoat. I also picked up a bit of weight,” Dave cuddles and flaps his stomach fat, “But, hell, nothing beat's a McDonald's burger. Carbs Shmarbs, I say. We'll all die some day, right?” Tom's endorsement, “Here here.” They toast; Natalie giggles.

“All right, CRETINS! Rise and shine. Move, move! Stand up straight. You're all worthless dogs living to die. And while you live, you WILL listen up. You! What's wrong with you? What were you doing last night that made you look so miserable today? You're a disgrace. Shape up! What the fuck is this? Who the hell is reading this crap? This is evil brainwashing trash. And who went out and wasted their free night watching that new Hollywood movie at the Cineplex? I know a lot of you did! What did I tell you? I have a projector; my slides and presentations ain't enough? That is evil shit. ALLLLL RIGHT! STEP HUT TWO! ONE TWO ONE TWO ONE TWO THREE FOUR! I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'VE BEEN TOLD!”

“I don't know what I've been told.”

“JESUS COME AND SAVE MY SOUL!”

“Jesus come and save my soul.”

“HE COMES.” “He comes.” “SAVES MY SOUL.” “Saves my soul.” “DRAG ALL THE SINNERS TO A FIERY HOLE!” “Ay-men!”

After the worship portion came the regiments. Jesus Christ, who knew praising Jesus Christ would be as painful as a crucifixion. Hello? Come on, that was terrible. Well, don't want to overkill.

“AND they asked for my money,” whined Mark. “It's the law.” “Yeah, the Law.”

“Mark, hun, what's in that room?” I look to the door handle's indelible paint smears. “It creeps me out.” So curious. It's not locked. What do you think, Natalie: the fucking boogeyman? “We could transform it into a nursery,” and I have the common sense to be reticent. Where do people place the accent? reticent. reticenT. She's smiles and giggles. We're ready, our eyes say when everything's consummate/ing. Sex here and there. And Happiness. “No, I liked it. The guy made great points.” “It's good to have set morals,” her eyes scan the ceiling considering the veracity, “Or else the world would go crazy.” “Just go nuts.” Mark unmutes the television, allows it to speak for the both of them. Mark flips between both partisan news channels during commercials. Minds scraped from reality into \_\_\_\_\_. No relationship, just focus on bull shit. I watch it everyday and don't move a step ahead. Our relationship. Spats because it's normal, right? And you look so pretty walking toward me in a dress we chose to reaffirm as orthodoxy in what situation? And stoicism's insane when a studio audience laughs too. Or cries or gasps or boos. No boos. Smiles. But are they real? That just leads to paranoid delusions. Everyone's plugged in to tradition. ‘Here comes the bride, all dressed in white. Do, do, dee do, do dee do, do dee do.’ Her figure's amazing. But I know that she stocks up on fiber intensive yogurt. It just takes away from the beauty when you know how it's created. But nobody else knows, I guess. Or everyone knows. Do they notice my stomach? I worked out for weeks before our holy matrimony at First Christian Church. I ran into Rick Hewald in the street. How could I have been the only one who noticed the celebrity from TV? It's weird seeing them in three dimensions. Maybe one day they'll create hologram channels so they'll be in our expanded living rooms just like in real life so we won't go running when they're in the streets. How could I not say hi? ‘Rick! You're great on your show, man!’ A gruff ‘thanks,’ from the big TV celebrity. It's just weird that he's not on the screen reciting those lines that make him him. I don't watch his show anymore. She extends her fingers and the audience gasps silently; I slip on the diamond ring.

And my ring finger is finally an apt ring finger. That gold band. ‘Husband and wife. KISS the BRIDE.’ There’s something awkwardly sexist about marriage. Why do people show up to these? I’m nuts. Doing too much thinking. Church isn’t helping. And I’ve yet to start on Philosophy. Or world History. Is Church supposed **to help, even? Her dress flows, hides her legs. As if she floats. I looked good. I regret throwing out those paintings. She was so disconcerted by that room. Moved into the fucking suburbs. As white as her dress, the church’s audience. Do suburbs sprawl because the whites are escaping us? What if they stayed in the inner city, would the city look as pruned as this place? All waves and smiles. Steel heavy. Made in America. We glide down the center aisle, the pews looming filled with applause. They didn’t throw rice at us outside because Natalie said it’s not environmentally sound and it’s a waste of rice, right? Natalie still isn’t pregnant. Who knew there’d be an effort at it. My friends from high school didn’t have any trouble. Maybe the paint killed my sperm. Maybe the water’s toxic. It’s my diet. Everything’s the same out here. Every corner’s the same. Shell, McDonald’s, Wal-Mart. I’m not depressed, am I? It’s not me that’s gone crazy. It’s the WORLD. Fuckin’ world. How can everyone smile? I smile. The steel’s heavy. Bought it for protection; Natalie shot it at the shooting place too. Nobody’s home. Maybe I still have a chance to become a great artist. A new idea, an enormous undertaking, a failure. Trite. Nothing new. A silver magnum, a six shooter, just like those cowboys. Bang bang bang. Cowboys for humanity. The mattress is bouncy. Bounce bounce. Our bed. Once upon a time, nothing was expensive and I had money. And we spent so much just on a bed. The gun’s inexpensive. Things were fine. How happy am I? How many times have I sat in the same place conferring with one voice? I haven’t accomplished anything, and it’s easier to just end. We go to a new church now: Second Christian Church. But, come on, an afterlife? Who knows, maybe I’ll continue my narration with the big pie in the sky. The gun’s loaded. It tastes like metal. Ha ha, big surprise, Mark. Mark the Painter. I saw somewhere you aren’t supposed to . . . oh yeah, that prick Damien Hirst, right? His little short about suicide. Don’t shoot through your mouth. Silver gun; grey gun. Aim the gun from the crest of my skull down. Right through the brain; Boom! Will I hear the gun shot? The neighbors will. Will they? Maybe I could’ve been a success. Oh, fuck it. Just do it. This was all a waste of time,”**

said the ex-English major turned comedian.

2009