

# The Shampoo Thief

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**Dear Reader,**

Perhaps you should put this down—now. This is a story for free spirits, soulful boys and girls. If you should at any point feel yourself to be less than that, I would suggest you put this down. Immediately. Pick up some pulp and have a nice day. If you are unversed in Italian I would expect you to be at a keen disadvantage. Godspeed.

For my Nonna, Liviana

**Butler Hall.**

Is it the right or left knob that does the hot water? Down in New Orleans? *Shit. Fuck.* Yeah, it was the right-hand knob. *Ah,* a cloud of steam crawls up the cement walls of my shower cubicle. Bone-chilling water warms, running over the yellow bags under my eyes. Dom, my roommate, is in the final bracket of his weeklong *Team Fortress* tournament. Dom is a semi-pro gamer, a citizen of the digital realm. His PC bathes our room in a phosphorescent light. All night, our room smells like Funyons.

“Out!” I want to shout: “Out, brief console.” I want nothing more than to smash it, if only to see the liquid crystals inside (Google says they’re there).

When he is winning my nights are syncopated with his snide quips. When he is losing he utters fragmented curses. Dom is the closest thing I have to a friend. While I’m trying to sleep I hear his banter: “Oh yeah? Keep eating pistachios you fucking chinks. . . . From Cornwall? Isn’t that where grown men consort with their livestock?”

A cannonade of clinging cappuccinos, rather poorly stirred, all through the night: his fingers zap across the f-bar—shortcuts. They save time. And then there’s clicking. Incessant.

Blue shampoo worms through my hair, into my ears. Then I close my eyes. *No tears*, I tell myself. But there are a thousand pebbles packed behind my eyelids; they ricochet madly whenever I close them. I open my eyes, and promptly cry. But then I laugh, eyes red, so it is okay. Some people do not have shampoo. Dom got his stolen. The word in the lounge is that there is a shampoo thief on the loose. A White Plague, for weeks our floor has been with a universal case of just awful dandruff. Is this an apocalypse? *Perhaps*.

*Just what I needed*, I think, *a kleptomaniac on my floor*.

It's night by the time I get out of the shower, but I've tossed on my Ray-Bans anyway. Shutting off the water, I wrap myself in a towel, and head back to my room, snickering, my teeth chattering.

"What's good, Dom? I'm about to be naked over here, man," I say, as I step over a pile of my communication textbooks.

It takes Dom a few minutes to respond. I have been slashing the price of his Concerta more than usual on account of his tourney—the stuff is like juice for the video game junkies. He'll munch down about 116 milligrams per day, and, if he's feelin' spunky, maybe another 54 at night; and I hear him grinding his teeth in his sleep.

"Okay dude, I'm not looking," he finally says cynically, as he munches down another Funyon. But I've already pulled up my black boxer briefs.

I'm hanging up my towel when it hits me. It is not on my shelf. It is not on the floor. My shampoo, I cannot find it in my shower bag.

"Dude have you seen my shampoo?" I ask Dom without looking up from my search.

"Nope," he says.

"Well if you see something," I say, "say something." As Dom pops open his second bag of artificial onions, I race back to the bathroom, still in my briefs; but it is gone.

The shampoo thief has struck again.

I clutch a sink to stabilize myself, cackling—vivid and high-pitched, and yeah, maniacal. Maybe there's still some shampoo in my hair. Rubbing clammy hands now.

*Ha.*

**The sound of me skipping through supposedly shuffled songs** seamlessly. But I know the words to all these songs. They bore me. Fed up, I unplug it.

The wind grinds against me, pushes my blue Huffy bicycle across the trail and back again and again across the thin black asphalt trail along the New Orleans levee. Does my quadricep quiver of its own volition or is't just the radioactivity from my smartphone's chips?

I check my iPhone: no texts. I never get any texts, but I check again anyway—still, not one text. I give a soft sigh of ennui.

It is a chilly, windy Halloween Eve. I wear my usual red jeans with a red muscle-cut jean jacket, a felt Pokémon-style-hair wig with horns, my silver mask, white gloves, and knee-high purple and blue striped Italian Trystero-socks (I am an evil plumber); I'm borne back by an unseen and perpetual tide.

A company of joggers in green short-shorts and high socks pass by. I notice one girl's ass has 1834—the year Tulane was founded—written across it in block letters. She sees me, her eyes inexplicably teary. We notice each other! Then she flips her hair and etches into the night, along with her butt.

I pause so as to better hear my new voicemail, left by some unknown number: twelve minutes of static. This transports me into a random person's pocket for about seven whole minutes. Finally, I fruitlessly churn away at my wheels. My back wheel is loose and its squeals give the distinct impression that there is someone behind me. I look, but there are only telephone poles, hissing down. On the purple horizon I can just make out the wireless tower marking the beach and barges and the Mystery Bonfire.

### **Meyer, Room 104.**

“Now. Can anyone tell me who was the first bluesman to sell his soul to the devil?” Professor Sciavoni, my advisor in the department

of English, asks my Blues TIDES class—a required freshmen orientation seminar.

Some gardener’s hedger hums through the window, forcing Sciavoni to address the class through the podium mike. There are twenty-three of us sprinkled about the lecture hall. I sit beside the Marth, who lives down the hall from me. We’re in the third row. I twiddle the leather grip of my silver pen against my prescription Ray-Bans. They fade in and out, fueled by magic, dependant upon ambient lighting. Do I squint? Well, Nonna Livia did have a word to say about how I was looking at her broccoli funny. But I *hate* broccoli, and everyone knew this.

“Man, that is one sweet pen,” Marth says.

“Thanks, dude.”

I had just nabbed it from my high school guidance counselor, before leaving for college.

Professor Sciavoni has neglected to shut off the projector, so a giantess Aretha Franklin wails mutely over his podium. He wears a tan fedora to class; Sciavoni, as well as teaching several courses on the nature of cool, is also a nocturnal DJ at WWOZ.

Someone says Bob Dylan. Wrong. Another kid, who claims to hail from Brooklyn, makes a knock on Lil’ Wayne. Professor Sciavoni patronizes this one with a halfhearted grunt.

For some reason I think of my Nonna, but I mumble: “Robert Johnson.”

No responses.

B.B. King, Eric Clapton. Tom Waits? Jimi Hendrix, Jack White, etc. No, no, no, no, absolutely not, no, and so on.

Marth’s hand goes up.

“Wasn’t that, uhmm, uh, Robert Johnson?” he says.

“Yes,” says Sciavoni, pleasantly surprised. “Yes it was. Very good, Marth.”

“*What the fuck, dude,*” I say under my breathe.

“What?” Marth says in an outside voice.

“Nothing, sorry.” I say I’m sorry.

I am sure no one heard me over the hum; I need to work on projecting better in class.

Of course not a soul had read our assigned text: *Mumbo Jumbo* (You should read it, if you enjoyed Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* for all the wrong reasons.) Life goes on; Professor Sciavoni has splurged—on Tulane's dime—and brought Brooklyn-style pizza for our entire section.

"It's real, nice," I chew at Marth.

"No thanks. Not hungry," he says, and he pats his stomach two times.

Professor Sciavoni finishes the class by having us all improvise a blues line. Marth asks to borrow my pen, so I give him my silver one, using the spare I keep.

*I got no ...*

*I got no money.*

*I got no money in the box*, I write.

It feels good. It feels familiar, like I'd lifted it without even knowing.

*I got no money in the box*, I write my line a few more times.

Neatly folding my paper, I tuck it into my back pocket, pack my bags, and glance at the clock. Time to prepare to leave.

"Does anyone want to share what they got down?" Professor Sciavoni asks the class.

*No thank you*, I think, *I will be keeping this one for—*

Marth raises his hand. Sciavoni gives him the floor.

"I got no money in the box," Marth says, and he adds that vocal flourish over *box*.

A silence; it persists.

"That was beautiful," says cute row two Tribeca-type girl, with a faint squeal.

"Yeah—that's a good blues line," Sciavoni says. "Keep it, bruh.

Put it in cho pocket, y'heard? . . . Class dismissed."

My eyes are wide, my eyebrows high, with stupefaction.

*Fuck*, I think, *I knew I got that from somewhere else*. Thinking,

*it must be famous, like*—I consider defrauding the line, revealing how in fact it belonged to some legendary bluesman whose name was at the tip of my tongue—not Marth. But no one would care. One by one we all file out anyway. Passing the door I toss my copy of the line into the trash bin.

In the hallway I wait until the crowd has dispersed, then pop a Concerta to ready myself for Elementary Symbolic Logic, my math requirement.

“What’s that there?” says Marth, out of nowhere and I start.

“This?” I say. “Concerta. It’s a study aid, friend.”

“And you just keep it with you?”

“Nah. Usually it’s in my drawer. Top left.”

Halfway to ESL, as I cut the quad, I realize my silver pen is no longer on my person.

I think, *I left it in my dorm*, and press on.

**Okay, so the Halloween bonfire itself is not so great; really, it’s** just a couple of dried-out low tide timbers over embers. René, the deaf president of the Benevolent Society of Jugglers, told me about the Mystery, which I assumed meant orgy. If an orgy transpired, I’ve missed it.

Kitty’s moldy doe eyes dance around the fire with a funky gait, but she had not told me about the event. She’s wearing a Marilyn Monroe wig, and I get the distinct feeling I’m being avoided. A local girl, she sings war-era jazz shamelessly. The breeze sends her hair into its own giggles; she giggles. And Zach, her ex, mimes her every step about the fire, not unlike a little duckling.

*That dude looks way too old to be in college*, I think. *What the heck.*

Kitty’s mother’s turtle keeps up the rear. Kitty and I met last week, dog-sitting for the Good Professor at his duplex; we split an eighth of shrooms and listened to all of Incubus’s *Morning View* album. Then we slept together. Doggie prints up and down the sheets. He’d warned me it would be better if nothing began at all while he

was out. My jaw slack with not understanding, I'd nodded. On his walls were the sorts of masks that could put butterflies into your knees. Sciavoni's bed was hardly raised above the floor. A miasma of plants and stale rum lingered, mossily.

Kitty fed me sexy pop tarts. She brought a bag of carrots too, but those were for her, and for her turtle. She serenaded me with transformation formulas while we played toe-war. At that moment, if I had peeled back her eyelids, I might've glimpsed the chalky residue of overlapping proofs, swirling about green irises, blotted out by a shaky hand. Her clothes came right off, but something went wrong; when I tore open my condom, brownish powder fell onto her stomach. She giggled. Dom had replaced my prophylactics with ramen packets—again.

"I'm sterile," she told my earlobe.

So I bridged the gap in between the arches of her back with my left hand. Meanwhile, with the other I texted sweet nothings into her spine. I utilized my every other nail. Then I ate the chicken substitute out from her bellybutton and we took it from there. *Sweat ignites ramen dust*, I thought. And her lips tasted of pudding.

"Woof," Kitty moaned, unrealistically. My dog impression was much better.

My paper doll tacked to my crucifix, I spat that forever-pillow-talk that a man can never abjure. Her breath had ricocheted around my ear canal like ragtime. I dozed off on her breasts.

I woke up early that morning and caught her pulling up her socks. She pecked my lips (we'd both achieved morning breath). Shutting my eyes, I listened to her weighty footsteps clunk down the spiral staircase. Since then it's been a something of a dry spell for me.

I found one of her filigree earrings under my pillow, and I've kept it on my windowsill since. She, however, jacked my green striped sweater. That or it's been misplaced. Since then, Kitty has not responded to my texts. My thumb seems to have lost its touch.

At the bonfire I meet this ginger. Anastasia's a Pennsylvania

train hippie, and I get her number. I warn her that I had a friend, also named Anastasia, back home with whom I often exchanged Star Wars–themed sexts (it’s an inside joke). This Anastasia, however, does not call or text me, not ever, and I’m fine with that. I already owe Anastasia number 1.

Funny, my texts were Anastasia the former’s favorite thing about me. I’m Poe; I am the Edgar Allen Poe of the touchscreen. Those textual vibrations became synonymous with her voice, which made my heart skip out through my nose at all odd hours. Sometimes just when my phone meant to tell me it was charged. Day and night we’d shoot each other textual poems, riddled with accidental rhymes, unintentionally syllabic—*oops*—a cascade of collateral alliteration:

You. Now I’m jealous of a  
cat. I’m not even a cat  
Person.

That was the last text we ever shared. It is for the best that they never found her phone; Anastasia was a good Catholic. That same night Anastasia ran her red Subaru—she’d painted the Star Trek insignia onto her spare tire—over the separator on I-95. A hemophiliac, Anastasia was so fucking dead it wasn’t even funny.

That was just a week before she would’ve left for college. Not a soul knew of our furtive correspondence, save my Nonna, but she speak no English. I made sure Nonna stayed off the highway all the way to LaGuardia. It took an entire day. It was difficult for Nonna to drive on account of her hunchback, and one leg being slightly longer than the other. She’d balance her platform shoe atop the accelerator. I listened half of the time Nonna talked.

I wore a black hoodie on my redeye to New Orleans. I’d tacked the paper doll Anastasia had cut out for me at our graduation onto the crucifix at my chest. There it remained, always—and there’s nothing to put the fear of God into you like *just a little turbulence*.

*Nothing to be afraid of, folks.* Clutching my nausea bag, I still had a whole hour of jetlag to look forward to; and why were my arm hairs red?

From up there, New Orleans looked like some crappy, shelled-out puzzle. Even the buildings recalled upside-down top hats, just pregnant with trickery. Of course some lots remained vacant. From the air, Instead of renting a shuttle I tiptoed through the twilight hours along the streetcar line to my first class: Blues. And my new glasses still pinched my nose. *Bloody condensation.*

And why won't my glasses sit horizontally on my nose? Perhaps it's just my nose's bridge that's askew. So I down my third of a fifth of Red Label—I have a vague memory of standing, shirtless, by the marsh. Some suspended Ukrainian, it is possible that he is also deaf, struggles, to no avail, astride a unicycle. He finds support on a smallish tree. "I'm not sure what's going on," the midget says, "but I'ma have at least one more cigarette." It has been a furious night, grisly. Grisettes mesh into clouds in between my toes. My bacon belly gleams in the firelight.

### **Marth's room.**

"Yo," Marth barely remembers my name, "Ale. You down to hit up the sauna? Smoke some weed first?" Still wearing a snorkel, he's just getting back from the pool. He was captain of his high school diving team.

The Saints have just kicked off. Mickey, Hieu, and I are listening to Louis Armstrong's *Struttin'* on Marth's record player. We've just returned from our early dinner, where I broke the cafeteria toaster, set it ablaze when I attempted to toast my double-thick-peanut-butter-chocolate-chip-cookie sandwich.

I drop Dom's glass vaporizer that he borrowed from a friend; it shatters.

"The *fuck*, Aly," Mickey cusses me out, saying my name wrong. "I said," he says, "how *in the fuck* do you do it?"

"Still wanna go to the sauna?" I ask.

“Wanna go to the sauna?” says Hieu, “Where do you get off, pal?”

Mickey, our cannabis connoisseur, has to roll a joint now. He does this well, although fractals of bud still cling to his waffle-knit. He leaves with it tucked behind his ear, in a huff. Our pot is not up to par, apparently.

I have been trading my Adderall for Mickey’s Ambien at 2:1. At first, they were definitely 20 milligrams, but I’ve suspected his prescription’s been changed for some time now. There’re etchings where the dosage markers once were. Maybe that’s just the company mark. Either way, I have begun to enjoy more. Last night I took four. At breakfast, Dom mentioned I’d been exhorting him, and since when do I sleep in the nude? Apparently, I had an entire conversation with Jesse, agreed to help him move some boxes too. Although I slept through two alarms (technically one; Dom punched off the second circa 9.50 a.m.) I hadn’t missed a single class. Regardless, I was a pancake throughout Elementary Symbolic Logic. Really, it’s terrific stuff, Ambien. And one a day does override my diving watch’s chromatic ticking. Usually.

Heiu grabs the remains of the vaporizer from my hand, picking shards of glass off his carpet.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” I say, unabashed.

Hieu tells me it’s fine.

I look to Marth as though he had said something more and then say, “for sure, man,” thrilled by the prospect of the milk of human kindness.

I should be working on my Portuguese essay.

We light up and leave.

**She sits in the sand by the fire and I have somehow gotten over into that area.**

“Italian or Irish?” Evylln asks.

We have been talking about our hometown: North Haven, Connecticut.

I tell her I am Italian, and I point to her: “Irish,” I say.

Evylln is the first Connecticut Tulanian I have encountered all semester. Her smile confirms it.

“Irish, okay,” I say. And she laughs, aloud.

She smells like flowers I wouldn’t necessarily know the names of. Evylln has dark eyes, like little planets with moons, too. Her hair’s an obtuse cone of red.

We list off all the middle schools, churches, and hybrids thereof in our neighborhood. Evylln invites Kitty and I back to her boyfriend’s place in the Seventh Ward. So, in the name of love, in the hope that Kitty might someday respond to my texts, I climb into Seth’s green sedan.

### **Reilly Center.**

Cats! I am berated by a volley of mind-numbing meows the instant I leave my dorm. The Department of English insists on feeding the infernal creatures. Little fuckers follow me wherever I go on foot. I kick a few to clear a path for Marth and myself.

It is a nebulous walk to the campus gym. Regardless, my Ray-Bans come on the second I got past the cats. Marth wears a yellow shirt with a smoking, smiling black skeleton on it, waving. Marth also smokes his hand-rolled cigarette.

“You think I can bum one of those?” I say.

“Sorry,” Marth says, as though to say no.

“Do you mind if I have a cigarette?”

“Didn’t know you smoked, Allie.”

“Occasionally. Habitually,” I say, and I hold out my hand.

He looks to his side and exhales a thick cloud of unfiltered smoke.

“Look at this,” Marth says, and he squats down in the middle of the street to pick up a rusty green penny; on his way down, he burns my hand. The ember sticks onto my skin, which stings. It is white after I’ve finally brushed the embers off.

He is always finding shit like this; kid has a knack for it.

“1962,” he says. “Sweet.” And he pockets it.

**My crucifix heats up faster than anything else, searing my chest.** Orange light glows against the wood grain of the walls. It is an electric dry-heat sauna, and we both complain how the wood-fired ones are far superior.

His eyes closed, Marth says: “Just tryin’ to get a sweat going.”

Already my sweat streams across my Ray-Bans.

“Say, what kind of watch is that, Ali?”

“This? Swiss Army.”

“Sweet,” he says, and he clucks his throat twice.

He is always inquiring about various personal effects of mine—printer paper, staples, staplers—and about borrowing my Huffy, which I have not seen in two weeks. Marth sits cross-legged, effortlessly. I bumble about trying to cross my legs over each other, but give up and just sit normally.

“So what do you even study here, man?” he asks the dreaded question.

So I tell him I am an English major.

“Oh,” he says, with a light slap of his knees.

“My brother has a housemate. He’s an English major. He’s real smart.” He opens his eyes and says, “so what do you do? You just read books and shit?”

I consider carefully how I might offer Marth the most insightful response to his, my most loathed, question.

“Yeah, man, we like to think we practice reading. And thinking, I’d say,” I tell him, “and, mind control, you know, man,” I say, and I wink like Paul Muni in *Scarface* (1932).

I hammer shut a fistful of sauna air. Marth laughs it off—meditates, I guess. “There it is,” he says, and, indeed, his sweat has broken.

Just as Marth’s pores open, a professorial gentleman with silver-plumed genitalia steps in, his towel under his arm. The silver-back sits down right between us and sighs the heavy sigh of sagacity.

Since this dinosaur has let out most of the hot air, and because he refuses to don his towel appropriately, we quit the sauna.

**“What’s this?” Marth says, picking up a lanyard that someone hung up on a locker.**

A goatish look sweeps over his face. Fingering the lanyard, he grips it tight. As though noticing me for the first time, Marth straightens himself out. He puts it back.

“Some idiot,” he says, “just left this. Could maybe open up the storage closets after dark, who knows, man.”

“Sure thing man,” I say, as we leave the gym.

It was a plain, green lanyard, yet his expression . . .

*It’s Marth!*

Marth the archeologist: the klepto.

It has to be him.

*Turn him in?*

*No.*

Marth could yet prove useful.

“Hey man,” I say. “I’m about to cook tonight. You down for some, eh, ciambotta?”

“What’s that?”

“Pasta with fish and vegetables,” I tell him. “A sort of gumbo, my friend. You will love it, I know, this is my very own family recipe. . . . The trick is to use a bit more olive oil at each stage! Especially in America, you Americans do—”

“Oh, hell yeah,” Marth interrupts.

You should know my *real* secret ingredient’s about 1,000 milligrams of crushed up Concerta—roughly twenty pills. But, for the Americans, I do add in the auxiliary fats as well, yes I do. Combining Nonna’s relaxing herbs with these ridiculous American study aids in such vast quantities generally allows people to be more agreeable.

*A few bowls of Nonna’s ciambotta will get my mind-fix into this first soul*, I hope. I need it to; I need friends. Dom’s bickering is getting louder every night, more coherent. And I am starting to

wonder if everything he says, or, well, what I hear...

*No it is not.*

Never mind. There are more cats every time I step outside.

“Let’s go back to Butler,” I say, and I grip Marth’s bare shoulder amicably. Marth would be my first really real friend.

**Seth was at the bonfire, pushing cocaine and LSD. Seth wore** a golden, glittering unitard under a black fur coat. The dude has got blonde dreads.

“If anybody needs some LSD,” Seth said and, onebadmothafucka, straddled the bonfire with his lanky frame, “I know where you can get some, just come talk to me.”

So Kitty and I have ended up in Seth’s car. She likes to meet new people too. Her turtle finds its own way home, I guess. Seth has to pull over en route a few times, whenever the road lifts up and twists away into the wine-dark night (because of the acid he’d eaten); moonshine floats like a thousand diamonds across the Mississippi. Deftly, Seth avoids the many potholes, caused, perhaps, by invisible meteor showers that left these veritable dimples every which way. It’s like navigating an asteroid field.

I ask Seth and Eylln for some of the cocaine they are snorting off my bike lock key, while Seth is driving. The coral reef of fuzz that is Seth’s hair scrapes against the roof of his car. His head turns, skeptically.

“Are you a pissed-off mongoose or something?” Seth, who clearly enjoyed neither Pokémon nor Super Mario, asks.

I give him a toothy smile. Eylln gives me the key.

I sniff coke. And it is cocaine, or, at least, it is not Pez—like what Coco would snort off his desk in U.S. History, crushing it up between doodles, snorting for that mythical sugar rush.

Kitty shoots me arched eyebrows.

“Okay, this is the first time I’ve ever done cocaine,” I tell her, softly and hoarsely, as I brush powder from my nose, “I swear.”

And it is true: I’ve only done cocaine once—twice—maybe twice.

I may have done another key at the subsequent red light but I cannot be sure either way, so, yeah, once or twice.

We get there, though, to Seth's shotgun house. It has a radiator and a window fan. Even a refrigerator and a bedroom and a sink—two sinks, if you count the one in the bathroom. The bathroom, by the way, is attached to the kitchen. Seth is a fellow who lives well, but low on the hog.

"Welcome to the house, mate," Seth says, and his jaw lulls to the side as Evylln pours a small mountain of sand out of her shoe and onto the floor.

I puff on an unfiltered Camel. When I exhale, and smoke and saliva both leave my mouth, nobody notices.

Seth and Evylln snort stuff off of each other atop the bed, which consists of yoga pillows scattered over a large pile of dusty hardcovers. Few of the books are uninjured; spines are cracked or pages torn or they've sat in some puddle of God knows what. More-whole novels rest nearest the top. They nudge Seth's dreads. A plume of dust rises from said books as the two grapple, playfully. I turn away when he begins to defile her with his collapsible cattle prod. Sitting on the couch where Kitty is coiled up, sleeping, smiling, I'm not sure whether or not to close the door. I do.

Kitty has high, wide cheek bones and nearly perfect calves. Her eyes peep, pop, muted, toneless yet sultry: Modigliani's own *Reclining Nude*—they close again. With every blink of her quail eggs the room fills its lung with musk. Seth's lights forever tremble. I suspect I still reek of firewood. She presses languidly against her dress like a medium-height jug of aberrantly sensuous month-old milk and she exhales, whether she knows it or not.

Gently, I tug off her wig. I try it on and it fits; I check myself out in Seth's cocaine-runway looking glass. Why not? I try the shades on. Pretty fucking cool. *Ha*.

I cannot sleep; it's against the rules. Whenever I close my eyes a miniature troupe softshoes along my jaw.

Kitty sleeps, dreaming. She flails her arms. And I wish I could

sleep. And I wish I had friends, too. And I wish Anastasia could have stuck around, and I wonder what my Nonna is up to in heaven?

I doze off, still wishing.

My eye feels moist; I awake to Evylln's pug's incessant licking. Seth, with his wild posture, is already in the room leaning against his auxiliary bookshelf—gray skin and blue, blue eyes.

Seth fiddles with his ironic and Faustian facial hair.

### **Marth's room.**

The shouts and murmurs emanate from Marth's room. I turn up *The Clash* on my laptop to tune out the ruckus. Bob Marley's rubbing his chin on my wall while I chew a mandrake root, just because. It's late, but the voices are all jazzed up. It sounds like our little klepto turned himself in. Mickey, a criminology major, once told me how the best criminals really want to get caught, and I agree.

I feel for the dude; Marth just could not stop stealing. Some things you just cannot stop. They nestle right up into your being. Sometimes, all you can do is choose your victims with benevolence.

I spoke with Marth over ciambotta on the afternoon of our trip to the sauna. He's a shiftless eater, and he only became more so as his meal progressed. The eyelids inched closer together with each morsel. I explained to him how he would have to give up his shenanigans, again and again, and he nodded, pasta slithering down his cleft chin. I was trying to help him. Am I really such a bad person? I merely convinced Marth to do the right thing, and give back the shampoo he'd so feverishly stolen—not that night, of course, but in due time (I needed a while to make my own contribution to this, our now communal, shampoo). What better way to coax my floormates into friendship than introducing my broth into their shampoo?

*Ingredient 1: A fishy stew . . .*

*Ingredient 2: Of Concerta, add a few . . .*

*Ingredient 3: Mix broth into shampoo.*

*I've got mixes for fixes for tricks for pricks, for you.*

Tonight the shampoo would flow freely: All shampoo. Everybody wins.

“Ale, you should really see this,” Dom says, poking his porky face through our dorm room door.

“Alright.” I say, snapping shut my laptop, hopping off my bed. I spit my sweetish root into the recycling.

Our whole floor is packed into Marth’s room like silent sardines. Marth stands by his bed. No 33 1/3 vinyls spin tonight; no Sly and the Family Stone; no Steely Dan; only Marth towering above us at 6’7”, yet hunched in shame.

**“Good pants,” Seth says, and he smiles, in reference to my red skinnies.**

I nod. Kitty also smiles, in her own way, in her sleep, still. Falling back to sleep is no longer an option because a small congregation of middle-aged black men chatters vociferously at a table just by the window.

At the bonfire Evylln told me about the sorts of drugs Seth sells.

“Not the commonly available green kind nor the psychedelic. The incredibly expensive incredibly illegal kind.”

“Like designer?” I asked.

“Like,” she answered.

I am admiring Seth’s red Air Force 1s when Kitty wakes, eyes wide, to Evylln’s clarinetesque nose blowing. Popping a few backbones, maybe muscles, finally pimples (which she eats, in a sexual fashion. It’s a thing, now), she reaches for a wine glass of cloudy, icy water. Grabs it. Downs it. Seth had prepared it, and placed it on the oval oak coffee table. Just for Kitty.

“Kitty, my dear. Kat,” Seth says, like a mad villain, “you’ve become quite the heavy sleeper, haven’t you?” Kitty’s eyes water.

“You two know each other?” I ask, stretching my arms too. They slit their eyes.

“You.” Seth means me. “You talk a lot in your sleep,” Seth says.

*Fuck. Shit.*

I realize I am still wearing Kitty's wig. I rip it off; I toss it onto the table and play it off as a joke. Although I vaguely recall briefly waking to his and Evylln's and maybe a third voice's laughter.

"Shit, sorry man if I said anything, sorry," I apologize, profusely.

"So you want friends?" he says, out from the frayed, bulbous wicker chair that seems to grow from his hair. His knees cross. From his unitard Seth plucks a map.

"I can help you out, I think, my friend."

I have had an off year, a lonesome semester, and one bad day. "I'm listening."

**"Look, I'm sorry," Marth says, his head at an angle.**

Marth's dark, beady eyes ricochet about his room. I'm peeling an orange with my thumb; pulp fills my nails.

"This is fucking crazy," says Dom.

"Right?" My eyes are halfway shut behind my shades; I feign a disaffected malcontent.

"I knew it. I knew it was Marth, this whole time," says our ROTC kid.

"Bullshit you did," says Dom. "Bullshit."

Marth crouches beneath his bed and pulls out a red wooden chest with a white cross on it. Its rope handles cannot be comfortable. He made it himself, using rubber cement to cover the inside of the lid with (Mickey's) rolling paper packs. His mother was an art teacher back in Fort Worth, and I would say he got *the gift* in his bag. Sliding the chest across the rug into the center of the room, into the eye of the crowd, he peels back the lid.

Meticulously aligned columns of shampoo fill Marth's red chest to the brim. It appears to be color coded, and my Selsun Blue dandruff shampoo sits on the surface, nudging someone's Head & Shoulders.

"Wow. So, okay..." I say, flabbergasted.

“I know. Yeah. I donno man, take it all back. I donno, know why I—just...” Marth says while I chomp down on my triptych of orange. “I’ll see you around, Ale.”

We do a limp-wristed Fort Worth handshake, his hair mad as wood.

*Friend.*

Eyes fixed on the vomit-colored carpet, he fidgets through the crowd. Slinging his backpack over his shoulders, Marth opens his door. He does not look back. He says, “I got to study some archeology shit. Y’all just, do what you got to.” The door shuts itself.

**Earlier, I sold him a 54-milligram Concerta. Meanwhile, Marth** had stolen three more. If I know my fixes he’ll spend the next twenty-four hours grinding his teeth, utterly focused on absolutely nothing. And he will get a shit-ton of work done too, if I know my fixes, that is.

Concerta’s 100 percent non-addictive. However, cutting off the body’s supply tends to invoke a general spirit of, well, lassitude. The short-term memory goes to shit, comparatively. The morning after that first bowl of amphetamine-enhanced ciambotta, Marth came to me. *He* knocked on *my* door. He could neither study, nor could he focus for more than ten to fifteen minutes at a time. *He* needed *my* help! I told him, selling him his first fix, “I understand.”

**The sardines jolt back to life, murmuring; they grab at their long-**lost shampoo. All fourteen of them file out, clutching their forgotten memories of suds.

I linger.

I peruse through Marth’s vinyl collection—which is to say his uncle’s vinyl collection—and flip on a lovely bit of Chopin: Nocturne Opus 9 No. 2 rolls about my earlobes like a dreidel carved from an opium moon. I crouch over the red chest, close my eyes, and crack open my Selsun Blue. I take a resounding whiff. *Ah*, the scent still carries a trace of something special, something fishy.

Satisfied, I stand and walk to his sink, leaving Chopin to spin away. The record snuffles, no doubt due to some miniscule imperfection inherent in one groove or another—a flawed whistle, this cracked-open aria; the picking of scabs. But it snickers back to life as I pour out my thick goop of shampoo. The sink—our dorm rooms come with sinks, believe it or not—has been clogged with all sorts of miniscule hairs, mosquitoes, lint, and floating whatnot. Shampoo, however, is denser than water. Down the drain it eddies. And I laugh—lightly at first, but soon a hoarse guffaw comes through and I am chortling. I leave dear Marth a perfectly peeled orange. A few tweaks later, I've arranged the skin into a smiley face on his vinyl player.

*None for me, I think.*

*No, no, no, this is Marth's shampoo now. Marth's and, I bite into my hatchet nails, everyone else's.*

My friends.

### **Pellets peg my forehead.**

Seth's map led me right back to the beach. It is still freezing by the levee the night after the Mystery, only without what passed for a fire. Still I sit. Kitty remained at Seth's and slept, I guess—a fair trade. I dig my toe into the dirt through the burnt sand. Dirt packs under my toenails; sand becomes mud. Out from this mud I nudge a translucent orange pill bottle. I pick it up and shake off bits of mud. I hold it close to my face so as to read the label via moonlight: *Concerta—54 mg—extended release.*

The bottle's packed with thick pink pills. And even the moon smiles back at me.

I sit alone at a dock over the fertilizer-brown hue of the lapping Mississippi, pop open the bottle, my cure for loneliness, with my thumb, and then twist it shut, again and again. It's not half bad as an instrument. Through the clouds I can make out the stars' strings. They look fucking fake.

Cicadas hum over the tides, expressionless; the drizzle picks up. Across the water, cranes wail at one another like robot bats in the midst of an orgy-themed rollercoaster. The Ray-Bans I nicked from Seth's coffee table begin to fog. Some nights New Orleans smells like Napoli, and tonight is one of those. My paper doll dampens. My ears start ringing. My nose bloodies. I feel a little bit of pressure in between the hemispheres of my brain. For a moment I go blind, and wake up to a thunderstorm.

Beautiful, clouds, aren't they, in their fleshiest tones. They say you only get to see them thanks to so much light pollution, whatever that may be. I'm grateful.

**But I do miss them badly. I miss Nonna, Anastasia, Kitty. Holy** shit, I miss Kitty. She was bushels of fun. She took it like it was a jaded knife that was not killing her. I'll bring her back. First I'll make these friends, and then, I will win her. I swear it; I'll bring them all back. Why? Because I've nothing better to do. Besides, whatever has a beginning deserves to have an end. No more of this limbo. What began in Sorrento ends in New Orleans—you'll see. Using a flat stone, I crush a couplet of pills, grinding them into it (thunder). I've ground my pills to dust; they make a paste that I snort off the wet sand.

Finally, I shake myself dry and head back to Butler Hall for a soothing shower.

### **Butler Hall, lounge.**

If only I had some peas, I would add those as well. Needless to say, I don't have any peas—"*Mannaggia-Catzo-Santo-Cristoforo--Jesu-Maria—Cristo!*" I holler out as my thick pool of spiced olive oil spurts from my pan and sears my forearm. Because it hurts less if you scream, or sing. So goes Nonna's lore.

I kiss the burn to ease the pain. I add the vegetables. My pot of water and salt comes to a boil. If only I had just one of those Lorelei

lemons, as big as your skull. I add pasta, fettuccine; watching the garlic simmer to evanescence I dice up the fish. Redfish. Add it. Add vegetables. Watch the pasta; stir it; add olive oil, so the aforementioned pasta does not stick to the pot. Killing time, I harmonize with the Italian folk arias emanating from my laptop.

*“Torna So ... rre-en ... to,”* I sing Nonna’s Neapolitan patois litanically, deeply. Conducting a phantom orchestra with my saucy wooden spoon, I’m sending marinara spluttering; the cleaning staff should have the kitchen spotless by Monday, tomorrow, so no worries.

*“Vidi o’ maare ka ...”*

Do you like my song? I’d sing it along with Nonna, cooking, in the kitchen of her hotel—the Lorelei—before those oily mafiosi tore her from our breast; before they’d grown fat from the life of her land, and her gnocchi; before the Hotel Lorelei half-burned off her cliff on the Amalfi coast, sizzling, but not for insurance; before I came to America, where business booms, and souls come cheap—more bang for your buck.

So long, Vesuvius. Goodbye, burning lemon trees.

Now what’s been done must be undone, they say, repaid in full: Soul per soul. They don’t care how long it takes. There can be no vacancy. Find us fifteen friends, replacements, they say, and we’ll let her go, they say, maybe. And I love my Nonna, very much. I had a few things to piece together, but no longer may I dillydally (as they say). And forever did seem like an exaggeration, but nope.

*Take with food,* says my orange daemon, and how *right*. How *true*. The pasta goldens as though it were whorls of hair. These strands I comb, with much love. They twirl along like the poesies left by candles. Strawberry blonde.

Barefoot, I mumble: “Curdle, kindle, boil and niggle: lyre churn, sky turned musky, purple whirlpool!—redeem me and mine, there was never no crime.”

Smell, taste, drain, combine. Mix a bit. Serve, with your preference of red or white wine. Eagerly await soggy mafiosi, dragging clammy feet trailed by algae.

**3:00 A.M.; 3:00 A.M.; 3:00 A.M.; my alarm clock keeps splashing** the time against the wall. My eyes yearn to be rubbed. I am on the mend, I suppose, from an all-nighter hustling Ritalin by the library stoop. It had not been any trouble for me to keep awake. Normally, I wouldn't stoop so low, but Vivance has wrecked the study-aid economy. How's a red-blooded American to compete with these overinsured bastards, pawning their shit by the nickel jar, flooding my freaking market. Meanwhile Uncle Sam foots the bill. Yeah, right; money's negligible. Friends are forever.

I dish out the ciambotta as fast as they shovel it in, eyes ever fixed on the their texts (it's a study party).

"Enjoy," I tell all fourteen of my floor mates. I leave the wines to breathe on my desk extension. Their aromas defy gravity.

I allow the dudes a dollar off Concerta if they study with their friend: me. Marth, Hieu, Mickey, that ROTC kid, Dom, and so on are all present. They have poured themselves over my room like lemurs; they sprawl over both beds, the floor, even the desks. My arm lolls slothfully against my chair.

It's times like these I get to thinking everybody's got a little ADHD.

A few people, whom I will never understand, study with house music blasting through earphones. *Because we are*, lyrics leak through now and then, *you will never be alone again....* But the chattering of teeth, teeth sliding over each other, and the nervous cracking of bones overwhelms the buzz.

Hieu, ever our architecture major, leans over the aforementioned extension, which bends, creaking. He's crushing some Concerta (when you grind down XR finely enough the molecules break down into a fuck-ton of IR. Thusly I have diversified my fixes) with the butt of his black lighter. Hieu divides it into three lines with the edge of his Tulane Splash Card. Snorts the first line and closes his eyes with a resounding grunt. The wine bottles quiver.

"Does it burn?" I cordially ask.

"No. Not nearly as bad as cocaine wakes me up," he says.

Hieu takes a moment to lick the residue from his card, next off my desk extension. *Silly, silly, Hieu*, I want to say. *Atta boy*.

“If I ever tell you to stop selling me this shit,” Hieu says, his eyes bleak like oysters, “please, stop.”

Mickey rolls and unrolls a spliff, experimenting with various tobacco-to-pot proportions, getting his filters just right. Mickey is, his jaw clenched, sweating now. He sprinkles Hieu’s second line into his spliff, which is funny because I’ve been lacing his pot with this fix for approximately seven and a quarter days.

Dom picks at his acne, in his reflection on his PC screen, which illuminates the room, opaline. Marth reads and reads, and furtively nabs my .7 led. Our ROTC kid’s hooked into *Starcraft II*. At the end of the day—day after day—after a few spoonfuls of Concerta, the whole world is lonely, I often think, like me. We’re born alone and we die alone; but when I go, a second-line of loners will follow in tow to the supreme abode.

“Of course.” I tell him. “My friend.”

You snort so as to clear your nostril. And I hit Dom’s final line—why not? Not like I’m getting any sleep anyway. I am my own cipher. The powder leaves a bitter aftertaste in the back of my throat. And I read all 130 pages of an F. Scott Fitzgerald biography in one sitting. It is a library copy, but I underline every word with red ink nonetheless. I annotate illegible Italian notes into the back of my left hand. India ink spills across my pores (I’ve been practicing my signature too, but I’ve done that on my feet).

I scan the room, flecks of Concerta snowing from my nostril. With Concerta, life is like a snowglobe. I adjust my fitted lid—my friends all do, too. *They’ll do nicely*. In an attempt to fall into a vaguely Native American squat I roll back and knock the back of my head against the corner of my desk. Flailing, you bust a toenail against my bedpost.

“Oui!” I cry out, “oui-oui-ouiioioioi.”

These friggin’ glasses are cracked down one lens again. Dom snickers; they laugh. They all laugh and they will not stop. They can’t

stop, and so I join in. What's laughter? And we are all in stiches, really. Blood mats my hair. *It's three a.m.*, you think and I smile to myself, *three a.m. And do you know where your children are?* From across the room Marth suh-says: "Anthony, you okay?"

I howl with laughter, because everyone can see up my nose. As they say, the man who laughs last, he laughs. You would say my friends are here to stay.

You were born yesterday, and the ground is rough for your tender feet.

"Rock and roll," you say. A puff of powder leaves your nose.

Your first and fourth fingers spike up, while your thumb and middle fingers loop.

Cats! they rollick upward, meowing bubbles to freedom. A paper doll ascends; it's already partly dissolved. A sea turtle in a Marilyn Monroe wig glides past your window. You would swear it winked.