

“Frozen Oranges”

Pier Trudy Atkinson

Chapter 0 January 19, 2010

The pendulum swings
in this blue of the
hour.

The funny playground
and the daylight swirling
down.

The little boy. The Wind
caressing his face. And playing
with his blond hair.

The dark beneath
the covers.
Rich Voice yells at
Creaky Voice to
“stop her damn crying
sorry ugly bitch.
Fat candy-eating
lab-rat.”

She dried those tears.

Cup. The sun put the
water droplets on the
outside of it.
Where they can go
back in the clouds.

The little boy bounces
along steppingstones
with shattered eggshells
between them.

The adults scream but
they are just frightened.

Black Birds fly. Blotch
the pale sky.

I only want people to know this side
of myself. The way I see it.
I don't want them to care for it,
since that would weigh them down,
and after all, I don't exist.
I only hope that they should
not feel so alone.

Pier Trudy Atkinson

Chapter 1 January 19, 2023

It was his Nineteenth Birthday, and the candle a warm cigarette.

The pond looked kind at this time of year. He sat looking over it. The gravel had a grip on his shoes. And he blew tufts of smoke. Edward Nolan Bell. A bent-in can sailed on the surface of the water, causing slow ripples. The water basked in the cold light from the apartments next door, and the ripples shined. Behind him, the long plants stuttered. The glowing water's light met the fumes. Hot smoke singed his eyelids. Sharp air wiggled his face.

His body floats now. The blood falling
out of his wrists. And moving softly
along the waves. Like ribbons.

He lit another smoke.

He was running through the halls now.
The white-fluorescent lights were
hitting yellow walls and the lockers.
Jamie's face was doing jumping jacks as
he explained the searing changes of
John Coltrane's Soprano. Or the
mathematic perfection of Clifford
Brown's solos.

The wind had brought him back. It took the smoke away. He didn't like smoking when he couldn't see the smoke while he did his thinking, and his talking practice. He clenched his fist. Put out the cigarette using his arm. Tsss.

It felt like everything and only got hotter. Edward flung the cigarette to the gravel. And shook the sparkly ashes from his forearm. They popped out of shallow dents. He squeezed the blistered, tattered skin tight.

He exhaled a furl of condensation for the wind to lop away. "The air is nice." He thought. He meant it.

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The College Dormitories. Knock Knock. "Come in."

Edward entered the room. The room of drenching blue light and two beds. One bed had always been empty.

Mia held a lighter by the window-fan. Her blonde hair tickling her shoulders. The L.E.D. strips zapped above them.

“What are you doing?” He asked.

“Smo king.”

“Mind if I?”

Mia bent her eyes upward. She wagged her finger as if she’d say, “No. Not at all.”

They blew it over the fan. He hoped the smoke would dry out his lips. His grandmother’s lips were always so sopping wet. He wondered if she would mind being kissed by his grandmother.

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“Two Hours Later.” The MacBook on a desk. They sat on chairs. *SpongeBob* squabbled along the blue screen burning their faces. And their brains have left them.

Edward stood. His chair screeched back. Mia bent herself toward him. He shut the door before she could say, “goodbye.”

The Dorm-Maker placed the doors so precisely, that the hallway looked like an *infinity mirror*. But a boring one. The yellow ceiling lightbulbs spread down onto strips of carpet. He staggered past each one. 9 left 5 left 4 left none. He pushed the door.

The bathroom. Mostly white. The speckled floor. Neither shower in use. The curtains left drawn. The stall doors coated in dark green. A yellow post-it hung stuck to each of the 3 stall doors. Labeled: “Pisser: Yak Here” “Shitter” and “Shitter 2.” He pressed open Shitter 2. Sat without unbuckling his belt.

Exposed his forearm. Click. The blade sprung out. He tapped the blade to his tongue. It tasted clean, shiny. He carefully removed the metal. And ripped into his arm. The skin split on a line. It kind of

itched. He had to run the knife back and forth on the next one. It wouldn't take. There.

The pain felt like everything, but the moment went quickly. He grabbed the running blood. The toilet paper spun. He soaked each sheet red.

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Edward quietly paced the speckled floor. Passing each of the three sinks more than two times. On his iPhone, He pressed the ninth digit to call. Ring Ring Ring Ring

Answered. 00:00. 00:01. 00:02. 00:03.

"Hi I just cut myself and I feel light-headed. Like maybe I lost too much blood."

A rich voice on the other line: "Purposefully?"

"Huh. What? No I was cooking."

"At this hour?"

"I work Nights!"

00:24. 00:25. 00:26.

"Are you still bleeding?" she asked.

"No it scabbed over."

"Look, maybe you should come in."

"Am I going to die?"

00:36. 00:37. 00:38. 00:39. 00:40.

"From what you've told me, I don't think so."

"Then I'm not going to come in."

"Look, I can't make you come in. But you should."

"I don't want to. Goodnight. Thank you."

"Goodbye. Call us anytime."

Deet. Deet. Deet.

...

He fell asleep running his fingers along the scabs.

Chapter 2 January 20, 2023

The alarm clock blared. BEA! BEA! BEA! BEA! He crawled under his bed to shut it off. He slept there a little longer.

He woke up, face pressed to the floor. Brushed his teeth. Spat into a paper cup. Edward put on a jacket. Painted his nails. Grabbed his cigarettes. And Left.

The trees spread their slender branches; He thought that they seemed to have many long, frozen fingers. He stuffed his hands in his pockets. The snow began. Powder tossed in the wind. Fit itself into the lines of the brick pathway. Sharp air wiggled his face. He pushed the door open.

He stepped into the lecture only a few minutes late. The professor did not blink. Edward shook his hair like a wet dog. He struck a yellow notepad from out of his jacket pocket. He drew pictures. The lines intense. Thick. Jagged at times. He hadn't felt elegant that day. He had felt cold. The professor went on about Dustin Hoffman and Mike Nichols and Anne Bancroft and then Mel Brooks and then Gene Wilder. His speeches whirled around the white-fluorescent lights while Edward filled his notepad.

The professor leaned against Edward's desk. He gave the class his final address: "I will see you all in 15 minutes downstairs in the screening room." The professor then wanted to speak privately, but Edward did not.

Edward descended the cement staircase. He opened the door to a vending machine and bathrooms. The class split into two or three groups. He heard some students talk. Shawn Andrews said something to him. Probably something stupid or an unfunny joke. Edward nodded his head looking dopey. Shawn Andrews expected something more, maybe a few words. Edward left.

Went to the bathroom. He sat behind the stall door. He wanted to talk to Jimmy, Mia, or Abby Hendricks.

When he had patched the new cuts with a wad of toilet paper stuffed firmly between his arm and his coat, Edward ventured into the screening room. The professor stood behind the projector. It hissed

out blue light. The title card read: "The Graduate." Edward slumped down in his seat. He wanted to hide. Wanted to no longer have a face.

The film gave him a laugh. It made him forget such nonsense. Watching the frames coalesce made him feel beautiful. He wished he could see his eyes as they bounced up and down each frame. He saw Benjamin and Elaine; he lived somewhere close to them. He saw them on the Bus as they realized that they were now their parents.

The lights flicked on. The carpet, the whole room was brown. The desks had once been gray and had yellowed clearly.

Edward packed his drawings into his coat. Two girls turned around. They seemed short to him, but not very.

"I'm Stella. You're in my other film class today, no?"

"Edward. And yes I think so."

"I'm Guinevere."

"Woah. That makes two of us. I'm just kidding," he said.

Guinevere nodded inquisitively.

"We're making a group chat. If you want to join," Stella gave him her phone, set to the add new contact screen.

"Uh well sure." He said that nervously. 'Well fuck. .E To first impressions, a toast, I guess I'm anxious, .D that's probably scary for her, .D no way she likes me, why the hell am I anxious? .I It's not like she cares. .E' Edward thought. Eddie handed her the phone.

"Ok don't add your last name then," Stella said.

"Fine. God." He took her phone. Pretended to be annoyed. .B.E.L.L

He stared. He wanted to know what lived behind those brown eyes. Stella removed her phone from his hand, delicately.

"We'll like study or something," Stella said.

"Sounds good," He shook his fist, "This is a fist bump."

Fists bumped.

"Booyah." He said.

The trio walked up the cement stairs.

"So the Graduate?" Guinevere asked.

"I like could not. With the first date scene. I would have ran. Cried kicked screamed. Anything but *that.* You don't get a kiss for being an asshole," Stella responded.

Shawn Andrews talked to their backs: "I mean, if we're being honest, I really didn't see what was so bad."

"I mean it was definitely it definitely wasn't so good of a start. Or middle. Or end." Edward said.

Stella mocked Dustin Hoffman: "Could you stop that. The crying. It's just. You're embarrassing me."

Edward giggled. He tried to understand her eyes.

They walked into the snow.

"Are you going this way?" Stella asked.

"No I want to sleep. I live that way." Edward said.

"You're not going this way?" Guinevere asked.

Snow fell. Edward shook his head.

"Oh I'll go back this way too." Shawn Andrews said. And winked.

"Bye Guinevere. I'll see you later Stella." Edward said.

Edward listened to Shawn's musings as he walked home. Eventually, Shawn waved goodbye. Edward had arrived at the dormitories, and he could step out of the cold.

The door cracked open.

Finally. His desk. The cluttered imagination land. He sat before his typewriter. And felt the clicking numb him into a stately trance. A whimsical place in which he no longer existed. A way to kill himself for the time being and live where there were reasons for everything. He stopped clacking. The story came out. About a Cowboy, driven crazy! Shooting his son for standing in front of his new wife. He had believed them to be adulterers. But it wasn't so! He laughed.

"Topical," he thought.

He began clacking again. "South Texas. I am a gunman. A lawman. I shoot people in their guts. I wanna have sex with a woman. But that won't do on these long, long, and lonely plains. The only company I have is this metal star on my chest. I imagine that to be pretty

unsatisfactory fucking. Although, I guess I do have my horse. I wanna touch that old prostitute's legs. That old one down in Mirinda County. God I must be six days a ride out. I wanna touch that old prostitute's legs. They were kind of flabby and I liked to squish 'em. I'm alone now in these plains." He stopped. He put it in the recycle bin. 'That's too far,' He thought. 'Even for me,' 'I can't,' 'I'm never asking anybody to read that.'

He started clack

"Hey, Eddie." Thomas Kimberly. (His roommate.)

"Hey what? Choo choo choo." He made finger guns. "PFT! PFT!"

"Wwwhat?!"

"I'm a cowboy. What you can't tell?.." Edward asked.

A big greasy man stood behind Thomas. He wore a black Metallica t-shirt. He had on a crunched nose and a pale face. Sweat dripping down his neck.

"I want you to meet my friend Hans."

"I'm very pleased to meet you Hans. A friend of Thomas is "

"Tommy told me you were gay. You don't look that gay. I expected you to look different. Of course I don't care if your gay. I just expected it to be your whole personality."

"Well I'm Bi. So. It's only half."

"Pick a side am I right?" Thomas and Hans laughed like two old men on the porch.

Hans resumed, "You don't look that gay to me."

"Uh thanks."

"Did you have to date boys because girls didn't like you?"

"Mmm. Yeah."

Edward clenched his fist. Opened the door. Hans smelled like melting shit. Edward walked into the bathroom. Punched the dark green stall. BAM!

"WHAT THE FUCK!?"

The shower splattered onto fiberglass.

"Just me Norm."

"Don't do that!" shouted the shadow behind the curtain.

"I. Am sorry."

"You sound fucked up. Really fucked up. What'd you take? Was it a Xanax. Can you give me one? Are you fucked up?" Norm asked.

"Sure. I need to find some fucking eyeliner."

"Huh?"

The door banged shut. Abby Hendricks stood in the hallway. Rolling stones T-Shirt. Leather jacket. Glossed puffy lips blowing a gum bubble. Strong curls of brown hair. She put a sarcastic tint on every single word she spoke. Glaring, always glaring eyes... With thick black eyeliner.

"Are you good?" she asked.

"Can I borrow your eyeliner?"

She glared quizzically, "No."

He booped her nose, "Lighten up Abby."

She blinked hard. Taken a-back. The door to the staircase drifted shut.

...

The Dining Hall. Eddie sat with his coffee at a table for four. Jimmy bounced in his chair, hopped up on shit. Jimmy was always hopped up on shit. Tim sat quietly. Held his fork and knife tightly. Applied them to his chicken sternly and methodically. Katie chewed bubble gum. She had very large green eyes. Crossed arms.

"How are you today Eddie?" Katie asked.

"I'm fucking pissed off."

"Like why?"

"I don't know some fucking monkey dipshit asked me if I had to date boys because girls didn't like me."

"He wasn't black was he? You did not just call a black person a monkey."

"Are you fucking stupid?"

"Yo. Not cool," Tim adds. He raised his chin. 'Attaboy Tim.'

"No. He was Aryan or German. He was a pale greaseball with a smelly asshole. I am sorry Katie. I'm upset. I don't like being asked to pick a side."

"Oh that's gross."

"The casual homophobia," Tim adds.

"It's not homophobic. I'm straight-passing. I'm so straight-passing. I don't get to be angry. Bisexual people are not gay. I hate them. I hate everyone."

The three of them raised their eyebrows. Silence.

"You guys don't get it. Don't bring it up. It's ok."

Edward bit his hotdog.

"Elghuh how do you eat that??" Jimmy asked.

Edward squirted mustard from the packet. "It's good."

"What else did you do today, Eddie?" Katie asked.

Edward stared at a silver spoon a few tables down. A glinting silver spoon, "I met a girl."

Jimmy pushed his head way, way in. Jimmy shivered. His sweat poured. He rested his chin on his knuckles: "I want to know everything. Tell me."

Katie said, "Me too. We'll protect you, Eddie."

"What is there to tell? She has my number now. I met her in my film class."

"Oh girl asks you for your number watch out. Men who can't make the first move only attract people preying on them. It's just a fact"

Katie Nichols.

"Well I gave mine to her. In a group chat."

"OK. So what have you said?" She asked.

"Nothing yet." Edward tossed his phone to Katie.

"She Stella? Oh I'm following her."

"That's the one."

Katie types on Edward's phone, "On Instagram she's following Playboi Carti, that's a complete red flag."

"I probably am on Spotify," Jimmy said.

"That's weird." She said.

Tim looked upward. He had something: "You should say, 'forgive me

if this is forward. But. Can. We. Just. Fuck.”

Katie turned the phone screen: “You’re definitely just one on the roster. I mean look at her.”

Edward stuck his hands out. “Maybe I am. Do I care? No.”

Jimmy knocked Edward’s back. “That’s my mannn!”

Tim said, “Have you fucked yet?”

“In front of the whole class.”

“Well. God. You’re not hearing what I’m saying. I’d just fuck her and get out of there. She probably has commitment issues.”

“I remember you saying that about somebody else Timmy.”

“Oh fuck you.” Katie said, “Jesus.”

She slid his phone across the table.

“I’m proud of Edward, I think it’s good. Look at that red face. That’s the face of a man. Who cares. It’s beautiful.” Jimmy always called everything beautiful.

“Shut up you came on your ceiling. You have cum stains on your ceiling Jimmy.” Tim said.

“I’m just very sexually mature for my age.”

“My coffee’s out.” Edward said.

“I’ll get more with you,” Jimmy replied.

Edward pulled the spigot. The coffee drizzled into the cup and steam floated.

“You wanna smoke later?” Edward asked to Jimmy alone.

“Shit sure buddy. Why not right now?”

“I have another class in a minute.”

“Good Luck. I love you buddy.” Jimmy’s neck twitched.

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Edward tossed his smoke outside of the lecture hall...

“Ok. I will start the film.” The old and lanky professor said. Time had bent all his joints and his spine. He had a few spots of crunchy white hair. Dotted skin.

“I will start the film now.”

Edward took his regular seat behind Stella. He shuffled his notecards. His eyelids drooped like a dog. He wanted to take something and fall asleep. He held his head, so it didn't fall to the ground. Stella turned and grabbed his forearm.

"Huh?"

"You can sit if you want." She said.

"Sure."

Edward moved up a row.

"What's on your mind?" He asked.

"The Birth of a Nation."

"Oh boy."

"I just threw my notebook. I was watching it in the library. I could not. Like why did we have to watch that?" She squinted and flicked her eyes left to right.

"I didn't. I just watched A Corner in Wheat and called it a night."

"How was it?"

"Very emotional. But you know. Made by Griffith."

She smelled addictive. He didn't think too hard about that.

"What's on your mind?" she asked.

"My friend lives in L.A. and has been seeing this pornographer. So that's been on my mind."

She grabbed his forearm. "Stop!"

He giggled. "My friend isn't a pornstar, he's just you know, it's casual I think."

The credits started.

"That's crazy. That's crazy. Tell me more about it when the movie's over."

They watched, and the projection made his eyes glow. He hoped she was stealing glances at his eyes. He felt so pretty like this. The strange man crumpled the flower.

T H E

E N D

Stella and Edward walked in the night. The cold air and street lamps revealed their breaths.

Stella said, "Ok so I was watching this movie Licorice Pizza with my dad and I was like okay.. It's told through these vignettes by the way "

"What's a vignette?" Edward asked.

"It's like a little episode. Like small moments strung together to tell a greater story. I didn't know what it was either. I had to ask my dad."

"That's far out."

He really wanted to light a smoke, but he didn't know if she'd mind.

"Anyway, I walk out of the theater, so excited, and then I open TikTok. And it's just like all the hate for this movie wrapped up into a basket and dumped out, onto my feed."

Edward shakes his head. "We don't like hate."

"No we don't. Anyway, The movie's cancelled, P.T.A.'s cancelled. And it's all over the fact that it's a fifteen-year-old boy going for a twenty-six-year-old girl."

"Well I mean if she's seducing him as a joke "

Stella put her hands up. "No. No. Stop. I wrote a whole notes app essay."

"That's crazy. Oh. My. God. You have to let me read it."

She opened her phone, swiped around and handed it to him. She rocked patiently while he read it.

"Makes sense. I like the part about Call Me By Your Name. Okay I get it now. It's the fifteen-year-old going for the girl out of reach. And it's not an endorsement, it's just the subject matter. Like in context of the movie it's a thing that happens not the thing that's supposed to happen."

She tilted her head, "Have you seen it?"

"No."

"We should watch it. I mean "

"No. Yeah. I would love to."

"Okay," she said.

"I have a spiel I want to go on."

"Say less. Go on your spiel?"

Edward started to talk with his hands. "Ok Call Me By Your Name, that situation, Low Key, happens way more than it should and no one talks about it. I mean granted the gay community has this super negative association with pedophilia in like a righteous moral Leonardo Da Vinci oooo they're perverted kind of way, but I'm just saying like when did we start trying to avoid that so much that we forgot about gay teens just being taken advantage of."

"Have you seen the movie?"

"No."

"You should watch the movie. But yeah I see what you're saying. But you should watch the movie," Stella said.

They stood under an orange road light. The red hand flashed on the crosswalk sign. She leaned toward him.

"Maybe you should make the movie. A gay teen recovering from being taken advantage of. Then he can find a healthy expression of his identity, and that'd be it." she said.

"No I don't. I'm not going to make a movie."

"Easier to just complain?"

"Yeah exactly."

The red hand switched to the blue walking man.

She pointed, "are you going this way?"

"No I have to smoke weed." He said it like it was his vocation.

She laughed. He quite liked her kind brown eyes. Inside her gaze, he felt so much like himself. 'That's a stupid thought because she doesn't like me,' he thought, 'oh no I should say something "

"So long Edward Nolan Bell."

He tipped an imaginary cap. "Until next time Stella Regina Buonarroti."

He watched her cross the street. He turned and hopped and clicked his heels together. He heard a giggle but did not look back. He found the empty brick campus. The bushes glowed in fluorescent light.

He walked along the thick dark. His face, stuck in a smile.

Chapter 3 January 20, 2023, January 21, 2023, Midnight.

Jimmy and Edward sat on the big rock that lived next to the pond. The water rippled. It glowed and reflected the stars. The plants rocked forward and then backward. Jimmy exhaled and flapped his lips to taste the smoke. He passed the bowl.

"Dude what are you thinking about?" He asked.

Edward had a hit. He took it deep in his lungs. He spluttered and coughed out the smoke. Jimmy patted his back.

"I'm thinking about how I wish people knew I was chill with who they are. Like I don't really care if they are shy or ugly or whatever, I just don't want people pretending to be something. Like I'm not gonna think you're cool unless you're telling me about you're toy racecar collection or something. I don't know how to remind people of that."

"Maybe just do," Jimmy responded.

"Okay."

Edward passed the bowl. Jimmy had a hit.

"You know what I'm thinking about?" Jimmy asked.

"How the stars are as many as grains of sand on the beach?"

"Bro it's like we're telepathic."

"That thought comes to you a lot."

"It's a good one," Jimmy said, "Wanna smoke tomorrow Eddie?"

"Sure."

Edward wondered if he should make himself seem more unavailable.

"I'm leaving this place. Transferring somewhere else man. I just don't wanna do the teacher bit anymore. I just can't fucking do it. I'm not happy." Edward said.

"Shit man. That makes me sad. Sad that you're not happy. Even sadder that you're leaving."

"We don't have to dwell on it."

Jimmy clicked the lighter. The flame spun around the bowl.

"Shit we're out," He said, "Maybe. No."

"What?"

"Well I was thinking maybe I had some in my room. But I smoked

that earlier.” Jimmy swallowed a pill with no water.

Edward giggled, “Good man.”

Jimmy looked at the stars poking holes in the dark blue sky.

Edward said, “If we’re out I’ll just go buy more.”

Edward squeezed Jimmy’s shoulder. “Wait here my friend.”

Jimmy brought his head forward, “I’m coming with you buddy.”

“Wonderful.”

Jimmy blew the ash glob from the bowl. Their boots tracked gravel onto the dorm hallway floor.

Knock. Knock. Knock. The door opened. Ronald’s eyes were pink. He nodded dumbly.

“Hey guys.”

“We’re here to stock up.”

Ronald laid the shit out on the bed. “Ok what do you want?”

“What’s the one we like?”

“I don’t have that one. I have bubonic plague which is cheap.”

“Whoaaa this one’s leaves are black.”

“Yes, it’s bubonic plague” Ronald said.

“Alright we’ll take that one.”

“Can I get a cart for my girl?”

“One cart and one eighth.”

“I’ll buy the eighth.”

“We can split it buddy.”

“I wanna get this one, you just get the next one.”

“Beautiful.”

“25 for the Eighth, 40 for the cart.”

“I venomd you.”

“Me as well.”

Ronald said, “Hey guys do you want to come to the playground with me. We’re smoking.”

Jimmy and Edward looked at each other. In unison: “Nah not really.”

“Some other time, definitely.”

"C'mon there'll be girls, there'll be drugs. Some music."

"Ah okay. I'm going," Edward said.

"C'mon we can smoke. Norm probably has some liquor. You'll like it."

"I'm going Ronny."

"No there'll be girls, there'll be drugs. Some music."

"Ronny I said I'm fucking going." Edward said, "Jimmy you want to?"

"Uh sure," Jimmy said.

Ronald nodded dumbly. He spaced out. His eyes tilted toward the ceiling. "Fucking cool man."

"You gonna have sex with shy Sophie again? Sophie 2?" He asked.

"That never happened," Edward said.

"Hit this Ronny," Jimmy said.

Ronald coughed out vapor. "It totally fucking did Eddie. She told literally me about it with details."

"I knew my batt was shit."

"You're thinking of Theodore," Edward said.

"We leaving soon?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah let us walk." Ronald said.

They reached the playground. Jimmy saw the girls, and Norm. They sat on the playground equipment, atop the large yellow slide.

Alexandra waved to Jimmy. He looked at the mulch.

Jimmy stopped walking. He said, "I came for the walk. But now I feel unincluded."

Edward said, "Don't."

"I'm gonna go see my girlfriend," Jimmy said.

Edward gave a warm smile. "You do that."

Jimmy walked into the blue black night.

Edward climbed up the large slide with Randy. He almost fell back and tumbled down. But didn't. They passed a joint around in a circle. Edward had a large hit and exhaled for a long time. Everyone sat on the metal. The joint was fiery because it had been smeared in *wax*.

They passed around a handle of vodka. Edward drained it.

"Jesus save some for the rest of us huh?" Alexandra said.

Edward tipped an imaginary cap toward her. "Sure." He had no idea what she had said.

Voices conversed around him. Edward stared at quiet Sophie's face. She had large eyes, but they were shaped quite sharply. He liked how he could see her cheekbones, and he liked how sturdy her eyebrows seemed. Her frame appeared very little to him. But then again, his eyes had been winding kind of inward and kind of outward. He wanted to give her a hug. He thought she seemed in the shelter of a very sad house. Not sad in appearance. A very pretty house, with white paint, and especially pretty at dusk, on a hilltop too. Not sad appearing, but very sad inside.

Edward stole Norm's phone. He changed the song on the Bluetooth speaker.

"What the hell is this?" Loud Sophie said.

Edward sang into her face, "I wonder what I could've did and what I never did. I wonder what you could've hid and what you could've said... I don't search for nothing I'm not one to go and pry. But I leave you backstabbed and leave you blind. A cut across the eyes will leave you blind for life it only takes one time it only takes one night "

Quiet Sophie laughed loudly.

Edward slid down the slide. "I don't know half the shit you did. I'm on a power trip trip trip trip."

The town felt empty save for pools of warm yellow light. (From the streetlamps.) The girls had left. Edward figured he had probably tried to get with one of them. That or Ronald had kissed loud Sophie again.

Edward looked at the nub of his joint. "I feel like I could get more out of this."

He clicked the lighter close to his face. Burnt his nose a little.

"See?"

Norm unleashed his piss on the walls. It sprinkled down the bricks and onto the sidewalk. "You think I should kill myself?" He asked.

"No not really."

"That's a good idea. Hey man you're right."

Ronald's head spun circles around his neck. He wandered into the street. "Hey guys you think I could out run a car in the street?"

Edward pulled him by the arm onto the sidewalk. He stepped in the running piss. 'Of course, that's why my brain woke me up now,' He thought.

He felt the veins in his head spinning. He hoped he didn't bump into someone else, no no. There's no need to frighten somebody else. Or say something stupid.

The three sat by the pond. Edward and Ronald swapping the bong. Taking as large hits as possible. A *Smoke Off*. They sat on Eddie and Jimmy's big rock. Norm watched them sling the bong back and forth. The smoke churned from their lungs and into the air. Edward stuck his fingers out. And coughed.

Ronald laughed loudly and dumbly. "Eddie's tapping out?!" He said. "I figured I'd never see the day," Norm said.

Ronald looked up 30 feet. "It's the sky," he said.

"Say what do you and Jimmy do here all the time? You kiss?" Ronald asked.

"You got it Brett."

"Who the fuck is Brett?"

"It's just my friend Enid's grandfather."

Ronald looked puzzled.

"It's not important big guy."

"Hey you guys wanna go to the pod?"

"No." Edward stood up woozy. He blinked for a minute. The gravel and grass fuzzed up and wobbled.

"Sure," Ronald said.

"Here pop this." Norm offered a little white pill, "Make you feel better."

Edward swallowed it. Nausea wiggled through his belly. He felt the sidewalk turn to sand.

Black!

“I want to go to the pod. Let’s go to the pod.” Norm said.
(The pod was just a drink spot.)

Ronny waved his palm over Edward’s eyelids. Edward felt the sidewalk scratching his ear.

“Let’s wait for him to wake up.”

“But that could take hours!”

“Eddie.”

The grass blades fuzzed into silver TV static. Edward tried to open his eyes but they were open. The dots breathed in their silver haze.

His eyes fell into the back of his head. Where he saw, the blood leaking from his brain.

Black!

The street floated upside down. Black dark. Lights all out. All the lights in the world. Under the Earth dark... “Okay?” “I think I’m good.”

He said. His retinas pulsed. He blinked over the upside-down street, until it was right-side-up.

“Let’s get you back to your room Eddie.”

“But I wanna go to the pod.”

“We’ll go after Eddie lies down.” Ronald said.

“But I wanna go now.”

Ronald held Edward’s back. They trudged into the dorm hallway. Edward fell asleep there. Ronald nudged his side.

“Ah we’ll see him when we get back,” Norm said.

Edward opened his eyes.

“Have you met Darius? The black one on our floor,” she said. Mia blinked a few times.

“No.”

“You should meet him. He was raised right. Not black, I mean,” Mia said.

“Oh. That’s crazy.”

She stared at his face, her head full of thoughts. Questions maybe?
“I can’t hear a word you’re saying. I’m gonna go to bed.”

He swayed mightily. Tried to stay upright and off the carpet. He spun around down there. Moved his body like the hand on a clock. And the yellow square ceiling light sucked him up and he went falling, falling. He waved his arms in the liquid sun. His back burnt behind him. Hair singed. He rolled around in his bed.

Chapter 4 January 21, 2024

Dawn. Abby Hendricks touched his face. It went red. She hit his cheek a couple times.

“Hm?”

She stood over him wearing her bathrobe. “Sorry your alarm was going off for like 20 minutes.” She rolled her eyes. He glanced at her lips.

“Oh. Thanks.” He put his face in his pillow. She bit the apple on his dresser. Glared. Sat next to his legs.

“Where’s your roommate?”

“I don’t fucking know.” He pretended to go back to sleep.

“So you need to be somewhere?”

Edward shut his eyes tight, “Fuck.”

He threw on clothes and ran out the door. She shrugged. Bit the apple.

Outside, Edward hurried to class. The cold struck his jacket. His phone beeped. Stella had texted, “Do NOT tell me you’re missing this class today.” Edward brought his stride to a run.

He stepped into the bathroom to compose himself and fix his hair. He thought he looked like a mess. The mirror had been chipped. He stared at the stall door and pulled his eyes back on himself. Both his hands gripped the sink.

He was running through the halls now.

“Fuck!” He shouted. He wanted to break everything... Blood drops felt the tiles.

He sat in the brown room with yellowed desks. Stella peaked at his eyes. The projection rolled. A Gene Kelly film, “Singin’ in the Rain.”

The doors flung open. Stella Buonarroti, Guinevere Dunn, and Edward Nolan Bell exited onto large steps that led to the campus.

“That was a good movie. New comfort movie,” Stella said. They moved their hips down the steps.

"Who am I?" Stella asked.

"Debbie Reynolds. I mea Obviously. Kathy Selden," Edward said.

"Who do you wanna be?" She asked.

"Let me be Cosmo," Edward said.

"No you're Don Lockwood. I'm Cosmo," Guinevere said.

"Fine I'm Don Lockwood."

"Well?" Stella asked.

He spun them both on his arms. They sung:

"I'm singin' in the rain,"

Stella snapped her fingers at a passerby, and he went into a dance solo. "Just singin' in the rain,"

"What a glorious feeling,"

Edward belted, "I'm happy again."

They all nailed their synchronized choreography. "I'm laughin' at clouds."

*Snap. *Snap.

"So dark up above!

BaDum! Dum!

The sun's in my heart and I'm ready for love."

Guinevere twirled on the grass. Stella swung around the lamppost.

"Let the stormy clouds chase!

Badum!"

Edward slid on his knees. "Everyone from the place!"

"Badum! Bump!"

Edward extended his fingers to the clouds: "Come on with the rain, I've a smile on my face."

He stopped belting. Finished the song gently:

"I walk down the lane. With-a happy refrain,

"I'm singin'. just singin' in
the
rain."

Do de do do. Do do Do de do de. Do.

They all gathered on the grass.

"Well, what do we do now?" Guinevere asked.

"Lunch I guess?"

"Library Cafe?" Stella asked.

"Sure."

The coffee machine tumbled and screeched. The Café had been designed very brown. The tables, the counters, the hardwood floors. The wood paneling. Very Earthy. Like bookshelves. A skilled Craftsman had glued a penny to every inch of the counter's underside. Edward stared at the grid of perfectly placed pennies.

"Eddie."

He looked up at Stella.

"Huh?"

"What do you want?" She asked. Her face stressed.

"No I can get it," he said.

"Just tell them what you want."

Edward saw the line behind them.

"Mocha Latte with Oat Milk," he said.

They walked over to the comfy chairs.

"What's your Venmo?" He asked.

"Just get the next one." She said.

Edward shrugged. "Okay. I will."

He imagined a dark city. Where the buildings could all be cylinders. And they shifted heights. Breathing up and down with steam in the midnight. And everything smelled like fruit.

"You're lost today. Like you are out of it." Stella said.

"I know. I'm sorry." Edward said.

"It's okay." She meant it.

"How was last night?" Guinevere asked.

"Busy."

"What'd you do?" Stella asked.

"I wrote a short story."

"What's the story about?" Guinevere asked.

"It's about a Gambler / Poker Player / turning into a quarter."

"I want to read it."

"Oh me too." Stella added.

"I'll give it to you sometime."

"Oh the weed smoking! Gwen I asked if he was walking home and he dropped everything and was like," Stella went into her Edward impression, "I have to smoke weed."

She made him seem way more suave and cool than he felt he was. Guinevere had laughed.

Edward said, "Oh I did say that."

Stella's brown eyed gaze echoed a warmth that Edward didn't know but felt nostalgic for. "I thought that was hilarious," she said.

"Cold brew with Oat for Stella."

Guinevere tilted her head at Edward, "That should be, you?"

"It's wrong," Stella said.

"They're always wrong," Edward said.

Edward got up. He leaned over the counter. Said to the Barista:

"This was supposed to be a Mocha with Oat."

"What?!"

"Mocha with oat."

"Mocha what?! Mocha with what?! I can't hear you!"

"Mocha Latte with Oat."

"I only got the Coldbrew."

"The order for Stella?"

"Yes."

"I wanted a Mocha Latte with Oat."

The barista pulled the cold brew off the tray.

"Come with me," He said.

The barista took Edward to the register.

“Just tap your card. The cold brew will be refunded. Then I’ll make the Mocha Latte with Oat Milk.”

Edward tapped his card. The Barista sipped the cold brew.

“No, it has to be the same card you paid with.”

Edward rolled his eyes. “One sec,” he said.

He went over to Stella and Guinevere at the comfy chairs.

“Uhm. He needs your card to fix the order. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

Stella tapped her card. Edward wanted to put his arm around her. She seemed very professional and put together. She seemed like she handled things well. He sat back down with her. His Oat Milk Mocha Latte in hand.

“Thank you.” Edward said.

“Don’t mention it.”

Guinevere watched the two look at each other. Her cheeks bumped upward, forming a smile. Guinevere had very soft cheeks.

“Your answers in class, by the way. I just have to hold my face from laughing,” Stella said.

“Oh my god me too,” Guinevere added.

“I never thought about them as that funny.”

“You’re just like ‘have you considered that. Like. “O.K. Rick” is a probably a masochist. Like he just doesn’t seem to wanna be happy. Like he coulda made that thing work with Ilsa. We could all be happy, but noooooo.”

“You forgot resistance schmistance,” Guinevere added.

They laughed.

The barista nudged himself between them. “For your trouble, I present you with a free water. On the house.”

He waved his hands and disappeared into the crowd. The water glistened, held by its cup.

“Yeah Shawn tallies the amount of times I say like in my answers.”

“Ew Shawn.”

"That would piss me off," Stella said.

"I guess so," Edward said. "I don't know. Sometimes I wished I cared a little bit."

Stella's jaw dropped. "Edward taking no prisoners."

Guinevere stared at him.

"Ahhhh." Edward said, "So what'd you do last night?"

"We went to dinner," Guinevere responded.

"With our guy friend Alexander."

"Oh my god he almost threw up."

"No we were talking about period cramps," Stella began.

"Because I get like reallyyyy bad ones. Like it's just a knife to the abdomen," Guinevere added.

"And he was like. Stop. Just stop. I can't," Stella put her hand over her face to pretend vomit, "I'm going to throw up. Like what?"

"This is something we deal with every month. You can hear about it for one dinner," Guinevere said.

"What do you think about that Eddie?" Stella asked, half joking.

"I don't know it's not that gross. It's just like a thing that happens. Not to me. But. You know."

"Indeed," Guinevere said, "Okay I have to work work work this ou-out. Study I mean. I'll see you two later."

Stella said, "I'm going to the general store to buy new shampoo."

They put their dishes in the dish tray.

Edward said, "I can go with you. If you want. As long as I'm not bothering you "

"You are not bothering me," Stella said.

...

They stood outside the general store. Stella's shampoo buying had taken maybe two minutes. Their breaths furred out of their mouths. They moved their heads toward each other. Edward's eyes looked so green in the pale winter light. So glittery. Stella's eyes looked warm. They leaned

"Hiiiiiii Eddie."

Mia wagged a sign in his face. "You wanna donate to breast cancer."

"Mm. No money."

"But 1 in 8 girls suffer from breast cancer Eddie. It's very serious. You have to save our breasts."

"I would but. I don't have money." Edward put on a playful frown.

"Aren't you gonna introduce me to your friend?" Mia asked.

"Stella Buonarroti, Mia Sawyer, Mia Sawyer, Stella Buonarroti. Stella's like the coolest person you'll ever meet."

"Well tell me how you really feel Eddie," Mia Sawyer remarked.

"Mia's like, an okay smoking buddy."

Mia rolled her eyes, "Okay?!" she pouted, "How many times "

"Ahhh," Edward grabbed Stella's shoulder's and turned her the other way, "we don't have to talk anymore."

Stella and Edward made footprints in the snow. Campus looked so pretty with the fluffy drizzle. Powder dripped off a stone revolutionary soldier in the center of the poking grass.

Stella said, "Those people piss me off. Like if I could just give one of them a bunch of money to never talk to me again, I would. But instead. It's stuff like this. Like being annoying doesn't make me wanna buy your shit."

Her cheeks got red in the cold. "You two are friends?" She asked.

"I don't know. She's been annoying me recently."

"She's pretty."

"She's yeah I guess. Is this you?"

"Mhm."

They stood outside her dorm building.

Edward dropped his chin and tilted his eyes upward, "Enjoy your shampoo."

"Movie tonight?" She asked.

"Absolutely." He said.

"Can I bring my study abroad friends?"

"The more the merrier."

She went in and upstairs. He ripped a cigarette and felt faint. He went to get some food. His boots slathered along the ice.

Edward entered the dining hall, and the hot air flushed his face.

“Eddie!” Jimmy said, “My fucking guy sit down.”

Jimmy, Katie, and Tim sat in their usual spot. Edward got his coffee and hotdog. Sat.

“When we smoking tonight Eddie?” Jimmy asked.

Edward extended his words: “I can’t anymore I’m sorry Jimmay.”

Jimmy followed suit: “It’s okayyy Edwardd.”

“I’m watching a movie with that girl.”

“Oh the media whore?” Katie said.

“You’re so fucking stupid.”

“Knock it off pal!” Tim yelled.

“Calm down sweetheart,” Katie said. She rubbed his bicep. Ran her hand through her hair.

“I don’t know, I always want to run into her. Like when I’m walking I always imagine bumping into her.”

“That’s cute!” Katie said. She fanned her face off. “But you know she’s probably making fun of you. Either that or she thinks you’re gay.”

Edward inspected his nails: “I meannnn...”

“It reminds me of when you dated Margaret.”

“That was completely different.”

“How so?”

Edward spoke slowly, “Well that time I was lucky to have her. This time, somebody’ll be lucky to have me.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“Welp. Tim cheated on you. So.”

Edward stood up and left.

“What!?”

“No I . Drunkenness.” Tim sputtered.

Jimmy twitched. The sweat tumbled out of him. He watched the shadows fighting in front of his eyes. Alone.

...

Edward shot pool at the bar. He sipped bourbon from his glass. He snapped his cue at the ball. Grinned when the striped no. 6 fell into the hole. He thought maybe she was making fun of him. Or maybe she thought he was gay. But he knew better. He thought, 'Just friends you know. She definitely doesn't like me like that. Well I wouldn't know, but I feel like understood. When I'm around her.' He left to punish himself for being so lucky.

In his dorm, he folded the belt and struck what parts of himself he could reach. The leather made a snapping sound. He slashed red turned blue bruises into his arm. Somebody knocked on the door.

"Mhm?" Edward asked.

Thomas Kimberly walked in.

"What'd you do today?" He asked.

"I saw a movie, you would like it," Edward said.

"I, we've been through this. I'm not gay. It's cool that you are. I'm not."

"I wasn't hitting on you," Edward said.

Thomas smirked to himself. "Sure," he said. "Package for you," He said.

"Hm?"

Edward opened a brown box that held a pringles can. Labeled:

"To Edward, From Your Special Admirer." He couldn't think of the last person to call him Edward. 'Maybe it was from Stella!' He thought. If it was Stella she'd have to work on her gift-wrapping. Maybe it was from Abby Hendricks. It must have been a year since he'd gotten a gift. He wanted to maybe save it for a special occasion.

He opened it anyway. Inside was a bunch of mustard packets. A Ziplock bag of pubic hair. And a note. Sharpie on white paper.

"Secret Sauce. Saving myself for you faggot. Saving myself for you. You like my secret sauce. I bet you do. Send me a picture of your face covered in my pubic hairs. Maybe then I'll let you taste my secret sauce faggot."

...

Edward stood outside by the park. He looked at train tracks. He hurled the package, the pringles can over the fence and onto the train tracks.

“AHHHHHH!”

He punched the fence. ‘Can’t react.’ ‘Not big deal.’ He punched the fence links. ‘Jackie Robinson got called the N-Word.’ ‘And he was not making a scene’ ‘I can deal with that dumb fuck.’ ‘I can be chill.’

He brought a joint to his lips to be chill. “AHHHHHHHHH!” He kicked the fence, and it rattled. “FUCK!”

He arrived at Stella’s apartment with purple knuckles. He tossed his dart. He felt he needed to punch somebody until their skin warped.

Stella opened the door. She grabbed his knuckles. Inspected them. He quit his trembling. His bones felt weaker and safe.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

“Bad day. Don’t want to talk.”

“Well if you ever do,” she said.

“Sometime later. Not now.”

“You still want to watch the movie?”

“Are you crazy?” He asked.

Her gaze slipped off his knuckles and met her eyes. They walked into the hallway and passed the doors. Stella’s friends waved behind the big glass that sectioned off the communal Room. Stella waved back like a princess. Edward stuffed his knuckles in his pockets.

Stella introduced him to everybody.

“This is Seth we love Seth.”

“Meet James you and him should smoke.”

Edward dapped up James. James tilted his head and slanted his eyebrows.

“Hey listen. If you something... We could..?”

“After. After the movie,” Edward said.

James did a cool guy squint and nodded. “My guy.”

They stopped shaking hands.

“Meet Gia “

“Oh we have smoked together,” Edward said.

Gia put her hands on her head and then pointed. “You’re right!”

“Nice to see you.”

They sat on the couches across from each other. The projector had been set up to watch the movie. Dust speckles floated in a gulf of blue light.

Stella looked to Gia. “Is it time?”

“Yeah. Yeah, we’ll tell him.”

“Basically we went to this sex club in Germany, called Kit Kat, when we studying abroad in Spain,” Stella said.

Seth went, “Jesus Christ it’s all Spain. All I hear about is Spain.”

“Bitch I said Germany.”

Stella and Gia tell the story together:

“We walk in.”

“Our phones are taken.”

“Oh yes. A lot of clubs they give you a sticker but this club was like no. When you check in you hand in your phone. And they like bag it up.”

James started to say, “Was this the night I wore the dress ?”

“We walk sit by the pool and a guy comes up to us and he’s like because we got there early, not many people and he’s like ‘if this were any other day.’ Not Sunday ‘You guys would not have gotten in.’”

“And we’re like huhhh?”

“And he’s like, ‘You’re just wearing too many clothes.’”

“Anyway things start to start and I just look up and fully am looking up a woman’s asshole. And she’s getting some on a sex swing. And gives me a thumbs up like ‘hey girllll,’ and I’m like, “hiiii,” and I’m like I don’t want you to feel judged. But . So I kind of put my head down.”

“Those bathrooms Filth.”

“The floor had Chlamydia so we burned all our clothes afterward.”

“Goddam.” Edward said, “How does the whole floor ”

“Don’t ask. I don’t know,” Stella said.

“I wanna watch Little Miss Sunshine,” Guinevere said.

“That’s not dark enough. I feel like it’d be boring,” Stella said.

“Never seen it,” Edward said.

"Me neither," Gia said.

"You've never seen it. Then we have to watch it," Guinevere stated.

"Up to you," Stella said to Edward.

"Let's Little Miss Sunshine it up. Unless?"

"No that sounds fine," Gia said.

James rolled his eyes at his phone.

"Bro this girl is quitting nic on my floor..." He turned his phone around. The video, shot through an open door, showed a girl hurling vomit into her gray recycling bin. Voices told her it's not that bad Sidney.

"Oh I know that girl," Gia said.

"You know I tried to quit smoking this morning and I just felt like an asshole you know? I think smoking was making me nicer by giving me a. A hint of melancholy."

"You're so right Eddie," Stella said.

Stella laughed at herself. "Me like, 'don't quit.'"

Edward giggled.

"No you don't smell bad so you don't have to," Gia said.

"You're so philosophical." Said James to Edward.

"I guess." Said Edward.

"Me and James smoked a lot of cigarettes one night," Stella said.

"Yeah by a bench," James began.

"Bitch we were on the curb."

"Oh that night!"

"We must have smoked like what?"

"15 cigarettes. Let's here your conspiracy theories Gia," James said.

"I have a lot of ideas," Gia said.

"Go for it."

"What if the world wasn't flat "

"No no." Seth said.

Stella pointed at, "Seth's like, 'not this again!'"

"But what if the world was shaped like a donut."

People laughed. Gia looked like, "what??"

"No it's true. No science is gonna take away you from being yourself," James said.

"That's real. You can't escape yourself. Like you're always gonna be yourself, so you might as well be. yourself."

"Like I said, philosophical."

“But what if there was radio waves and these waves were used for mind control in case you ever got on track to something, that you shouldn’t be getting on track to knowing.”

Seth began, “I’ve actually felt like that...”

Laughter...

Edward felt the waves of light coming off them. And bouncing against one another. And how close they appeared. He had never seen people so close.

His body held a rich, dark intensity of feeling. He felt like a frame in a movie screen. His first song echoed beneath his brain. ‘I think .’ The reel spun out. ‘ I think I’m only bothering her them. Oh fuck me. What does she think? Do I seem anxious. I think I seem anxious. Ew please no don’t fucking touch me.’

“I’m going to use the bathroom,” He said aloud.

Stella moved her hand off his wrist.

“It’s um... It’s labeled down the hall,” she said.

All were still. No biting vampires. Or demons. People. You know people Eddie?

He walked out. They returned to their business as usual. Gia told a very funny story behind the glass.

Edward shut the door and sat. He clicked the knife. He wanted to slide it beneath his nails. Pop each one off. He put the knife away. He stared at the tiles.

Edward clicked open the communal space door. Stella had fiddled with the projector. It sat much closer to the wall, now.

“It’s on HBO Max. Anybody have HBO Max? James? Seth?” She asked.

James and Guinivere shook their heads from the couch. Seth stood up.

He said, “I feel done. I’m going to bed.”

Stella patted the back of his neck, “Ok go to bed then.”

"I can try to get into mine." Edward said. He did not have an HBO Max account.

Edward made a show as his fingers bedazzled the keys.

"Darn. You see I have one of those google passwords that's just random numbers. But it's saved on your computer. So it doesn't matter."

"Mmhm. Mmhm. But did you get in?"

Edward shook his head playing a crushed, defeated farmer, when asked to sell his prized pig during the harsh winter. "No. No."

"Don't fret I got it," Gia said.

Click clack clack. The movie began.

Steve Carell stared out the hospital window. With bandages on his wrists.

"At that point he should just be put down. He wants to die. I mean they should just let him kill himself,"

Edward felt his shadow pinching his whole body at once. 'I don't want to die. Well. I guess I wouldn't mind.'

"I don't think it's as bad a Steve Carell thinks. Like I think his feelings are wrong," Edward said.

Stella tilted her head.

The movie ended. They started another but felt too tired and promised to watch it another time. James left to smoke. Guinevere made Stella promise not to watch the second movie on her own.

"Fine, I promise."

Edward wished Stella goodnight. Guinevere started to walk home alone. In the parking lot, Gia rolled her window down.

"You want a ride Eddie?"

"No it's okay. I'll walk."

"It's far. Are you sure?"

"I like to walk."

"Okay," Gia said. She drove off.

Edward clicked his lighter and then caught up to Guinevere. He pointed forward at the bridge. "Are you going this way?" Guinevere nodded. "Yeah."

They talked about *The Lobster* (the film) as they crossed the bridge. "I lost it when he stuck the needle in his eyes." "That was. A part of it," Guinevere said. He tossed his cigarette. The two stood at the street corner.

"I feel like I should walk you home," Edward said.

"No that's okay it's just right here."

He pointed down a narrow street. "Just there?"

"Yes."

"And you'll be okay?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Bye then."

"Bye Eddie."

He wandered for a long time. Brick buildings. Oh that's quite nice, the moon. He stopped into the Silent Movie Theater on the Ghost Side of town. Caught the "Gold Rush." The ceiling plaster fell into his popcorn. He picked it out. The film was really quite good.

Chapter 5 March 14 2023, through May 17 2023

The clock's hands clicked authoritatively. It was a pissed off clock. Because somebody had glued it to a tower where it looked down at everybody. At night, they walked the main square. Those pathetic fucking ants squabbling.

A clown handed college students balloons. A street apocalyptic preacher shouted, "Ye all be doomed!" "Ye drink yer own blüd and not the blüd of yore GOD!"

Stella tied Edward's balloon to his wrist because he kept forgetting it. The balloon would almost float away, and then he'd reach way up and grab it. This happened several times. Well not anymore, she had tied it.

Several years later. They visited Edward's old middle school. At dusk. The walls that used to carry the fear and the pain. They visited the office. The cafeteria splattered from food fights. It was all empty.

Edward looked at Stella. The Principal, name was Hagan, drudged on about something. Edward grabbed Stella's hand. Principal Hagan's office was empty. Edward found himself smiling.

BEA! BEA! BEA!

Edward awoke with his face close to Abby Hendricks'. He untangled himself from her and stood up. The daylight fell through the window.

"What're you doing Eddie?" she said, covering her eyes in the bed.

Edward pointed at her, "You were supposed to stay asleep. I didn't mean to wake you, so..." Nothing else clicked for him to say.

Her hazel eyes looked dopey. She lit a joint. Edward opened the window.

"Where's your roommate?" She asked.

"No he doesn't like you. You're like a... Dog to protect the chickens. They do that on farms right?"

She handed him the joint.

"I don't know why, but I think I really do like you," Abby Hendricks said.

Edward half shut his eyes. He stared at the mucus-colored dorm floor. Abby smacked him with a pillow. Ashes fell.

"You have to say something back!"

"I hate myself too much to do anything."

Edward brought the joint to his lips.

"Deep down I'm just an attention whore."

Abby crawled closer to him. "I like giving you attention. It feels good."

"No you don't have to talk me out of it."

Her face went deep red. "Out of what?"

Edward stared at the wall, "Uhm," he shook his head, "... transferring."

She pulled up her stockings. "Yeah."

Edward started, "Look I "

She shut the door.

It felt bad, being on the other side of the shut door. Edward also felt quite proud of Abby, his feelings tended to twist that direction.

His emotions strangled him in the dark-green bathroom stall. So he cut them out. He soaked the tissue paper red. Saw stars as he swooned into bed. He thought, half-asleep, about the drunk texts from Mia that he wasn't going to answer. About how much he missed Jimmy. He saw double now, and thought of ways to hang out with Stella without seeming needy. Which his inner critic told him were useless thoughts, a thought he then ignored, 'Maybe just the text, "I want to hangout with you."' 'No, no. Best to wait a few days.' He wondered if he was pathetic or if everyone was. The sandman took him away.

The sun was stretching out. The air felt hot, and Edward's skin turned red. Edward played with the grass; Stella sat in front of him. He thought up ways to tell her he liked her. He imagined that they'd see each other less and less. That one day they'd bonk into one another. "No fucking way!!" "You're in New York now?!" And he, probably high, would say, "I'll always love you." And she would stare

and walk away. And then he would stuff his pockets in the pale light. And walk as the snow fell. He figured that would be the last time he saw her. Something like that. He heard Lucy from Peanuts saying, 'You're hopeless Charlie Brown positively hopeless '

"Eddie?"

"Hm?"

His eyes moved off the grass. She was still there.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Do I ignore your feelings? Because I know I don't or at least I try my hardest not to. But does me being in my own world all the time make you feel like shit?"

"It's not that deep," Stella said.

"That makes sense. I think a lot. But do I ever make you feel like I don't care how you feel?"

"It's really not that deep. Do you want a hug?"

Edward nodded.

He thought he ought to make the days last with her. He somehow knew he couldn't. He was young.

The wind shook the grime from the branches. Today, Persephone brought back the spring. Edward stumbled; his brain still sore because of the night before. He wanted to craft an even effort. That cut like a blade, creatively speaking. He imagined mobsters. It felt like half of a dead end. He wanted to move his literature to somewhere moving. He figured he'd maybe find this in his memories, but then again

"Hey Eddie." Stella bumped into him with Guinevere.

"Eh where you two headed?"

"Nowhere special."

"Can I accompany you to, 'nowhere special.'"

"Sure you can."

They walked along the abandoned train tracks. Stella skipped over the rust. Edward simply lengthened his stride a little. He thought, 'is she like, scared of me? Like does she need another person around

her all the time because she thinks I'm going to like to hurt her? Like am I a threat? Is she scared of me?"

Edward tapped a cigarette out of the pack. "Mind if I ?"

"Sure."

He struck a match.

"Can I have just one hit?" Stella asked.

"Of course."

Her lips furled smoke against the wind. "I like smoking it reminds me of Europe," she said.

"You know," Edward began, "there's a neuroscientist who chews like an obscene amount of nicotine gum."

"Mhm."

"And he's like, 'this improves my brain health, my synapses connect faster and more strongly.' And he said this to another neuroscientist who went, 'why? Well what?! I've never heard of that young man!' And he was like, 'No. It's because I believe it does.'"

"Yes."

"Placebo effect. Real deal," Guinevere added.

Edward tossed his cigarette.

"Or it's just regression to the mean. I mean they can't all stagnate cognitively. Avoid brain plasticity. I'm talking like. People trying to get smarter. They can't all be bad at learning."

"I feel like you are always mentioning regression to the mean just because nobody has any idea what that means," Stella said, "you're not smart."

Edward shrugged. "Someone will get it."

"You know I figure nicotine gum is cheaper and safer. But then my again my jaw would get messed up. And my teeth."

"Oh you're so right Edward," Stella remarked.

Edward dropped into his velvety fireplace tone, "Aren't I."

They both smiled. 'It could be playful, getting to know someone. Huh.' Edward wondered if Guinevere felt left out. There skipping, staring at the rubble. He felt a tap on his shoulder.

"What's "

Edward's cloaked friend Jonathan shook his hand. Edward made sure to stand in front of Stella and Guinevere.

"Hey man you find your wallet?"

"Yeah I did. I had just fucking dropped it. Found it my room,"

Edward responded.

Jonathan did not let go.

"Yeah well I'm glad you got it."

Jonathan danced toward the sun and stumbled on a piece of rail.

Edward watched the man's shadow stretch across the gravel.

Edward stuck his finger out. "The last I saw him. He was doing Ketamine at a house party. On Walnut Street too."

Stella pulled his arm. "C'mon let's go."

"Okay."

Jonathan sat and pulled on his toes. Sharp gravel nudged his butt.

The big hand in the sky flicked off the Sun. Click.

The night outside painted the store windows deep dark blue. Edward pocketed a protein bar from the shelf.

"Do you want anything?" Stella asked.

"Just this," Gia said.

"Edward?"

"Nothing."

"You sure? I have 500 extra points to spend."

"Yes. I'm sure."

They stepped outside and felt the night. Edward bit his protein bar.

"Where'd you get that?" Gia asked.

"Found it," Edward stated.

Stella's vision narrowed.

There was a space on the couch that Edward had not taken. So Stella sat next to nobody on one side. And Gia and then Guinevere on the other side. Edward sat in a high chair. Shivering.

They watched the brutal movie. It ended.

"I don't think that one's gonna age," Edward stated.

Everyone nodded in sullen agreement. Their faces stuck shocked.

Brutal, Brutal film.

Edward told some jokes to cheer them up and they laughed loudly. I, Pier Atkinson, wish I could remember each one, but all I can recall is Edward no longer felt like a creep around them. And that he was very, very high.

“No but like you gotta understand. I usually don’t like being high around you because I want to give you my attention.”

“I understand,” Stella responded.

“But I rolled the perfect skinny!!!”

Gia laughed at that.

Edward rode shotgun. Gia drove.

“Have you ever seen the platform?” She asked.

“No.”

“It’s this really fucked up movie. Like every platform gets lower and lower and progressively more disgusting.”

Edward’s high had not passed.

“Sounds legit,” he replied. “Yeah I um. I like movies.”

“I couldn’t tell.”

“Can you drop me off in town actually?”

“Sure I can.”

“I want to write, by the clocktower.”

Gia nodded.

Edward lit a smoke as soon as he left the car.

On a day in May. The two, Edward and Stella, sat on steps. That lead to a tobacco shop. And were contained by a slanted concrete railing. They sat on these steps, with concrete on either side of them, alone. Edward couldn’t think of what to say.

He stared at her brown eyes. “I leave in 20 days ”

“I don’t think I’ve been kissed in a year.”

“Yeah that’s tough.” Edward pent his intensity of feeling up inside of him: ‘I can’t look at the blood anymore.’ He thought, ‘I think I’m just nervous she doesn’t feel the same way. I guess I’ll never know. Even if she did, I’m not going to be sure. In the, nobody’s ever sure way’

Her cheeks were red.

"Hey guys can you clear out? You are blocking my place of business." The tobacco shop keeper, whose business was up the stairs, stated.

"Oh sorry."

They both stood. Guinevere came out of the bathroom.

"I let you guys go because the conversation seemed really good, but now it's time to go."

"Yeah we understand, thanks man," Edward said.

"Let's walk," Stella said.

"Can I come?" Guinevere asked.

"What are you yes," Edward snarked. (In a kind way)

They left behind the brick buildings that made up Main Street. Stella's friend Annabel came by.

"Annabel Eddie, Eddie Annabel."

"Very nice to meet you," Edward said.

They shook hands.

"What are you bummed out about hon?" she asked Stella.

"Well I asked this boy out and he rejected me."

"You.? By yourself.?"

"No I had Seth do it. He was like 'this girl likes you here's her Instagram,' and then the boy said, 'ok I'll hit her up.' He never hit me up."

"What's he look like?" Annabel asked.

Stella handed Annabel her phone.

"Hon he's wearing pink shorts."

"Yeah fashion wasn't his strong suit."

"Hon this is not a loss. He's just a scared boy. Now if a man. Somebody who'd you take home to meet the family. Who wears nice clothes... Then you get upset. But this.? This is not a loss."

"No but it's just like girls all the time will stop me in the street, and be like, 'you're so pretty,' 'your fit's so cute,' like why can't boys do the same?"

"I think you're just too cool. Like men just need to catch up." Nobody

said anything. So Edward continued, "But you'll find somebody who's as cool as you and gets it. And then. Get this. You'll be cool together."

Stella smiled so wide he could see her gums. He booped her nose. She giggled. Then the moment passed. All three girls stared at him.

Edward shrugged. "That's just my two cents."

"I wanna meet your dad," Stella said

Edward shook his head. Stella looked at the pavement.

"Oh I met your friend Abby Hendricks," Guinevere said.

"Oh fuck."

"No she just wants to get dinner sometime. What's the issue?"

"Uh I didn't know we were still uh," Edward grinned, "You know. Let's do it."

Stella squeezed her side.

They sat inside at a pub that allowed smoking. Or at least didn't get upset about it. Edward held a cigarette with his lips. Gia, Guinevere, and Stella sat across from him. Abby Hendricks next door. Abby Hendricks pulled up his wrist. There was a little hole in his forearm, where an IV had been stuck in.

The drinks came, were moved off their brown tray, and placed onto square coasters.

"He had to go to the hospital yesterday. Briefly," Abby said.

"How are you here?" Guinevere asked.

Edward's smoke fogged up his beer glass. He shrugged.

"I honestly don't know. All he does is drink coffee and do drugs,"

Abby answered.

"I'll have a hot dog every now and then."

"Yeah but most people eat. I don't know. Regularly."

"You're the fun police."

"I mean it's probably to keep you alive," Stella said.

Edward bent his lip and nodded. "No you're. You're right."

Abby Hendricks turned to Gia and held her hand. "If a boy gives you mixed signals, it's a no. Just move on."

"I have a boyfriend," Gia said.

"I know, I'm projecting."

"Eddie what's your dad look like?" Stella swirled her finger around his face, "How did you get like this?"

"He just. Well, he just falls asleep on the couch. And then he talks to me in his sleep. He's like, 'I want chocolate bar. Night Night. You're my kid.' And then I like laugh at him but I try to stifle it because I don't want him to feel like I'm judging him in his dream."

"BRUH WHAT?!"

Edward giggled.

"Are you ever going to be okay?" Abby asked.

Edward knocked on the wood table.

Edward walked home. Wilmington looked so Achy tonight. The buildings split up like wounds. The traffic lights switching to Red. He stuffed his pockets with his hands. Puffed smoke.

He bet that if Stella did like him she was lying to herself. He was a mean and sick child. Even though he knew he did not try to be. 'Maybe a lot of people are or were at some point.' He reached the main street. And then the main square. The large clock beat its rhythm into him.

The next morning, in the same spot, for three hours, Edward ate breakfast with his new two favorite people, being Stella and Guinevere, and Shawn Andrews. Shawn Andrews was also there. Edward wore his same Jacket.

"What would happen if the xbox party transcripts got leaked?" Stella asked.

Edward laughed.

Shawn said, "I'd be cancelled 30 times over."

Edward shook his head, "I think I'd be executed by the state for saying things too heinous."

Edward rubbed his hands together as the waitress brought his hash browns outside and refilled his coffee. "Thank you," he said.

He brought the mug off the white cloth. The morning felt new to him.

"Shawn, I haven't seen you in a minute. Where've you been?" Stella asked.

"My dad killed himself."

Edward spat out his egg.

Stella moved her hand, "OH. I'm. I'm so sorry."

Guinevere grabbed his arm, "Jesus, are you okay?"

"Yeah we weren't close. Great excuse to get out of homework."

"My boy's mom died, he said the same thing."

Stella shook her head at Edward. Mouthed, "No."

Edward's face changed directions, "I'm very sorry to hear that. I hate my dad. But he's still my dad. That must suck."

"No it's really ok. We weren't close."

"Do you need anything from us?" Guinevere asked.

"No I'm really fine."

"It's okay to not be."

Shawn Andrews stood up, "You know. I'm gonna go home."

"Well don't " Edward put his finger down, "Get home safe."

"It's fucking nine in the morning."

They watched Shawn Andrews cross the street and enter the bus.

"You were absolutely about to say something heinous," Guinevere said.

"I was. But I didn't!"

"What was it?" Stella asked.

"Eh uh. I'm not gonna say. I don't like the guy. But I feel bad for him."

Stella nodded.

Edward felt the clock beating.

"The sun looks nice behind the clouds," Edward said.

"You're like a ray of sunshine Eddie," Guinevere said.

"No you're a ray of sunshine Guinevere."

"I wanna be somebody's ray of Sunshine," Stella said.

Guinevere and Edward looked at each other. Edward was stuck between three things to say. And he figured he'd be dead in a few years anyway. At this point. Why could she just not hate him?

Stella was pouting. Edward just wanted to put his face in her lap and cry. She wasn't a ray of sunshine. To him she was a warm kind cloud. Who wouldn't punish him for being who he was.

"What's your dating history like Eddie?" She asked.

"Well officially. I just have the one."

"Oh Margaret."

Edward stared blankly ahead. "Yeah."

"We don't have to get into that."

"You sure? We can."

"No we already got into that story. You're good," Stella said.

"How do you always know what to say?" Edward asked.

"Bitch I don't."

"I want to hear your dating history. Besides the High School stuff I already heard about."

"When me and him were literally children."

"Yeah besides that."

"Well. I went to Spain. Don't know if you knew. There was this boy I liked. I remember one night, we were dancing really close, and I was like, 'Oh. My. God. This is who I want.' But I figured, you know he was probably drunk. Months pass. Last day of the program. Our mutual friends put us in a room. They're like, 'you guys are too shy, figure this out.' And he was like, 'I like you.' And I was like, 'how long?' and he was like, 'I dunno, since we danced at the party.' I was like 'Bitch what? We could have "

"You didn't say anything to him that whole time either," Guinevere said.

"You're right. No you're right." Stella continued, "So we do some things. And then I leave the next day. Haven't seen him. He still texts me sometimes and I'm like:" Stella wiggled her shoulders very giddily.

"After that," she said, "there was this guy who had liked me during the program and I didn't like back. And he would get like butthurt when we'd mention guys we liked, and it was a whole thing. But when I got back home, I realized how much I missed him. So when me and Gia went back to Spain, I told him how I felt, and he said, 'slay cunt.' And like I taught him that, but I still cried the whole train ride to the airport. My heart got torn out and stomped on."

"You have a big one I guess. Heart you know," Edward said.

Stella tiptoed her fingers along his palm. Whispered in his ear, “And then I fell right into you.”

The clock donged twelve times.

Chapter 6 May 18, 2023

Edward shut the door to his dorm room. He spent the day with his head on his desk. He did not know how Stella had spent it.

The day before he had to go to the class where Stella didn't talk to him.

After the class.

He had said, "I have to tell you something, but I can't find the words."

She had said, "Say less."

He had said, "Okay, I will say less."

He texted her, the desk pressing his cheek.

"Can I call you tonight?"

Sure

...

Or is in person better?

In person's better.

Do you have a place you want to meet?

My roommate's studying so not here.

Maybe.

Bench?

I know one.

By the statue on the

North green.

I have a dinner.

I'll text you after.

Good. Good.

Cool.

His phone buzzed. He walked. He watched many couples pass.

I'm sat.

Almost there I think

Not north campus.
North Green.
By main street.

Ohhhhh
That's on me

You're on north aren't you.

Yeah.
But like now I'm almost to the right one.

kk

He spotted her wave. He hugged her. Sat down.

"So what is this all about," Stella asked from the bench.

"I like you." He stuttered.

"You didn't really think this through."

"Guess not."

"Two things."

He watched many couples pass.

"You're leaving and I'm pretty sure Guinevere likes you."

"I just had to tell you to get it off my chest. I was. Going crazy or something like that."

They listened to the bird's wings flap.

"As long as you feel better," Stella said.

He lit a cigarette. They watched the blue sky which was bluer from the lowered sun.

"What are you thinking about right now?" Stella asked.

"The grass. It's like sharp but also alive. I guess it's not that sharp."

"It can be sharp. Tall grass is sharp."

"I guess."

"I meant what are you thinking about Guinevere? I think she likes you because she was absolutely glowing about you doing the bare minimum. Like being like, 'uh I feel like I should walk you home.' Like no, try a little harder."

"Yeah my mom gets mad at me if I don't walk girls home."

"As she should! Okay Eddie. For next time, you wanna do... all of this," she stuck her hand out. "Always get the door. Always walk her home. Open her car door too, never hurts."

"I understand."

"No like my dad will literally run to get the door for me."

"I'll. I'll do that."

"So what are you thinking about Guinevere?"

"I don't like her like that."

Stella scoffed and rolled her eyes.

"No that's not "

She composed herself. Edward watched her lips. They said:

"Well, what should we do about it?"

"I don't know."

"Like what should we tell her? Like you told me you had something to say, but couldn't find the words, in front of her, and now she's already asking me what this was about? I can't tell her *this*."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize."

She put her face in her hand. "Nevermind."

"I have two ideas."

"What?" she asked.

"You know like cutting."

"Yes."

"I do that."

It was the first time Stella hadn't known what to say. It made him not want to ever do it again.

"I guess the next question I have is like why?"

"It feels good. I think it's my bad way to get out my emotions and my writing is my good way."

"A lot of my friends, and especially creatives do it. So like why?"

"I don't know."

"What is something somebody has told you that has helped? Or what would you want somebody to tell you?"

"Frozen oranges helped me. Frozen Oranges. It feels good on your

arms. Not as good as Razors. But good enough to wait for them until tomorrow," He said.

She did not understand his face. He blew smoke. He hoped she would not worry.

"Can I have a little. I like cigarettes they remind me of Europe."
He handed it to her and said, "I know."
She blew the smoke out properly. Like a European. She handed it back. He looked at the pretty sky.

"I feel like I know you well though," she said, "even with this. I knew you'd get lost."

"Yeah you definitely, see me in a way I like."

He looked back at her.

"What do you think of silence?" Edward asked, "I always feel like I have to fill it."

"I think bitches should be comfortable with the silence."

Edward nodded.

She saw the glowing tobacco getting closer to his fingertips. "Can you put that out. It's scaring me."

He flicked the smoke and stepped on it.

"Okay I'm done." He moved his knees to leave.

"You don't want to sit and talk a while longer? It's my favorite hour."

"Sure."

The wind scuffled the grass.

"So why the smoking?"

"Nicotine makes my synapses grow faster."

"Because you believe it does?"

"Exactly!"

She looked off at the blue light. Smiled to herself.

"We'll stay in touch.

The world's getting smaller you know." She said.

"Yeah whatever you say," Edward said.

The memory from there, is a crystalized haze. The two shadows on a bench with the grass-green fuzz around them. Fragile but sticking together. The yellow flashes of pain threaten to crack the frame, but they don't.

T H E.

E N D.

THE APPENDIX THAT AVOIDED THE APPENDECTOMY
He wrote it about a Gambler. And called it:

THE GAMBLER

By Edward Nolan Bell

(2023)

SINCE he was slowed down, he figured he'd peak at his cards twice as fast as usual. And maybe that way, he'd look halfway normal. The man on his left, coated in black, puffing on his cigar; he looked normal. The gambler didn't play like the cigar. He was cheap. Not with money—he threw money around—it was just money, after all. He played cheap:

“Do I bet more or less if I have pocket 2's?”

That got the man on his right sweating. Globes of it, dirtied with salt, fell from his forehead which he pulled on like a rope. The left man, the cigar man, had long since folded. He watched the other two, only breaking his eyes off

them to catch his coin —a silver quarter— which he tossed up periodically. This was a tic of some kind, but not a nervous one.

The sweaty man loosened his tie. His windowpane blazer hung open. A blazer which was tired and not a match for his tanned skin. Two cards – stuck together – clung inside his hand. The stacked cards weren't long enough to reach the end of his palm. He, sweaty man, tossed in a couple of chips—500 dollars. About 10 times that was already on the table.

The gambler had observed all of this. He knew the sweaty man had something worse than trips, which was the only thing on the board (6 of diamonds, 2 of spades, 3 of hearts, King of diamonds, 10 of spades) likely to make the gambler look like an idiot. He knew the smelly plowman was bluffing. He'd be nervous if he had something good, but not that nervous.

The gambler took out his flask and tapped out the last drops of whiskey. And then, making sure to not look at his cards, he shoved in all his chips.

The sweaty man was a thousand dollars short. He shoved all of what he had, and then left to sign a marker. The Gambler could now let himself rub his chin and the stubble that poked out of it. The cigar man tossed his coin up. Neither made anything of the damp splotch on the chair beside them.

The sweaty man returned to his chair as the Gambler pressed his hands back onto the table. The sweaty man rolled the black chip in. The gambler stared at the black, which was slacked with oil.

The Gambler flipped his cards, a king and an ace, pair of kings. The sweaty man shook out a breath. He flipped, a two, and a three, two pair. The cigar man's coin fell onto the table.

A scream hurt inside the gambler's head, but the gambler's tongue was cast in iron. The room faded from fuzzy to blurred. That tinnitus of the eardrums clanked sharply, and the Gambler stared at the quarter. He stared at it until he could touch its grooves, look up at the wall, the head-shaped mountain, which was shining, and he couldn't see the top of. He was flung out the nostril of the head-mountain and into the metal ground. The dust sticking to his back and not letting him go. Those Goddam sticky quarters. He thought. It was like a wailing of words running down his head. The vessel had trickled out enough blood by now that the circulation was all cut off and the brain went limp.