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What Comes Next

Mario Podeschi

Eastern Illinois University

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What Comes Next

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Mario Podeschi

THESIS

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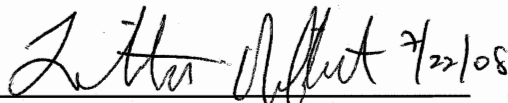
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Abstract

A narrator named Mario Podeschi watches a character named Mario Podeschi be sent back in time from graduate school to his freshman year of high school. A twenty-four year old in a fifteen year-old body, the Mario character retains all of his old memories leading up to Spring of 2008 and tries to use them to his own benefit at his small town Illinois high school. Fifteen year-old Mario readdicts himself to cigarettes, chases high school crushes, and distances himself from his old friends. Not that his second chance at high school is a complete failure—he finds his soulmate in Saturday detention, enjoys an unexpected notoriety among his peers, and manages a fairly mature relationship with his mother. Both his successes and failures tend to happen by accident, and by the end of the novella, his narrator can barely recognize him.

To my mother.

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Introduction

“What Comes Next” is a story about identity—how it is formed, how it is challenged, and how it is changed. In it, a narrator named Mario Podeschi watches a character named Mario Podeschi be sent back in time from graduate school to his freshman year of high school. A twenty-four year old in a fifteen year-old body, the Mario character retains all of his old memories leading up to Spring of 2008 and tries to use them to his own benefit at his small town Illinois high school.

The premise is a familiar one: what if you had it to do over again? For most of us, our answers are a combination of fantasies and regrets. The narrator of this story, for example, thinks his protagonist should warn the government about the September 11th attacks, publish academic articles under a pen name, better his relationship with his father, and keep a classmate from committing suicide.

None of this happens in “What Comes Next.” Fifteen year-old Mario instead readdicts himself to cigarettes, chases high school crushes, and distances himself from his old friends. Not that his second chance at high school is a complete failure—he finds his soulmate in Saturday detention, enjoys an unexpected notoriety among his peers, and manages a fairly mature relationship with his mother. Both his successes and failures tend to happen by accident, and by the end of the novella, his narrator can barely recognize him.

This difference between narrator and protagonist stands in stark contrast to the traditional autobiography or bildungsroman. Traditionally, a narrator telling his life story does so from the perspective of one who has endured the trials of growing up to become a validated and complete adult. But this tradition is painfully deterministic—that is, it follows the idea that every event can be traced to previous events. And this is an idea that I do not trust.

Consider this: anyone reading Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* knows beforehand that Mandela is going to grow up to be an influential political figure, and his stories of how he became politicized fit into a pattern that we have an easy time accepting as factual. Mandela, in writing his autobiography, also understood this, and he selected details that fit in with his grand story of becoming a political leader. It would be impossible for Mandela to describe every detail of his life, so he privileges events that coincide with the story he is trying to tell.

In forming our own concepts of identity, it is tempting to apply the same deterministic outlook on ourselves that we see others doing in their autobiographies. The narrator of "What Comes Next" provides steady historical context for his alter-ego's actions, but he often interrupts the flow of narrative to critique his protagonist when he is behaving in a juvenile, unexpected, or unethical way. The narrator struggles to maintain his sense of self, unwilling to let his readers assume that he and his protagonist are one and the same.

Fifteen year-old Mario also finds his identity in flux. Informed by a college interest in psychoanalysis, he believes that he has a unique advantage in his high school by already having a firm sense of his own identity. At the lunchroom and the homecoming dance, he watches how his peers are constantly looking to one another for cues on how to behave. Similarly, he often observes his own moments of crisis through the lens of how his earlier self would have seen them, a self which was terrified of public ridicule. His theories parallel those of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, which claims that all identity is found in how one imagines others perceiving oneself.

But Mario's psychological defenses are not as ironclad as he believes them to be. He is frustrated at several points by a sense that he cannot earn "adult" consideration from those he wants it from. When respected adults such as Principal Campbell and his mother are reluctant to treat him the way he perceives himself as deserving to be treated, he replaces them with his "soulmate," the fifteen year-old Veronica whom he meets at Saturday detention. As Mario worries about her friends' approval and carefully revises the instant messages he is sending her, we see that he has slipped back into that younger sense of identity where he relies on other confused adolescents to give him an avenue for his sense of self.

Through it all, we can still hear the deterministic leanings of fifteen year-old Mario. His internal monologue consists of constant planning, so that every decision he makes has some kind of rational justification to him. Though most of these plans tend to backfire, he still approaches every new situation with a false conviction that he can divine the right answer with a combination of critical thinking and foreknowledge.

It is up to the narrator to learn his alter-ego's lesson on determinism. Faced with the reality that his protagonist has not acted in any way like he had expected and with concrete evidence that Mario's plans fail more often than not, he eventually accepts that life cannot be so easily predicted. He concludes the

novella with a brief aside where he peeks into the future beyond the text, and immediately backpedals with the assertion that “these things are hard to predict.”

I

Sleepwalk

Mario woke up in high school. This was particularly odd, as high school had ended six years ago. He distinctly remembered having gone to bed with a bachelor's degree, a beard, and a spinal injury.

He was sitting in the back right corner of a small classroom. For most of college, he had been a front-and-center style student. The corner seat felt alien by comparison.

In front of him sat *The Odyssey*. He had liked the epic poem, though he had always felt bad for the not one but two crews who had perished trying to get Odysseus home. In a nearby notebook, he appeared to have drawn a dueling pair of Greek soldiers with swords and dramatically flourishing capes.

Around the room were nostalgically familiar faces: Jamie before she had breasts, Nate before he grew facial hair, Evan before he got thin. Based on these details, it couldn't even be the year 2000 yet.

But what year was it? Mario picked through his notebook, eventually finding a heading that read September 2nd, 1998: his freshman year of high school. Clearly, thought Mario, he was dreaming.

Please forgive him this mistake.

The classroom had eerily familiar posters. "Procrastination: What WERE You Doing in the Meantime?" offered one, complete with a sighing, handsome boy looking disappointedly out a window. Another simply read "SUCCESS" with an eagle soaring in front of an American flag. Had he read these posters so much that they had burned into his subconscious?

"Mario?" asked the teacher.

"Huh?"

"Are you looking for something?"

The class turned to look at him, and Mario tried to wake himself up in the face of the embarrassing stares. At least he was wearing clothes.

"Um, no."

The classroom chuckled faintly as the tension dissolved. The days of rulers on wrists had passed—teachers were happy so long as you didn't distract from the class. The pages and pages of doodles in Mario's notebook were proof enough of that.

“Got Jesus?” asked one girl’s t-shirt. “Newfound Glory” advertised her neighbor. These religious messages also matched Mario’s memories. Taylorville, as the seat of Christian County, was rarely subtle with its religious convictions. It had almost as many churches as it had bars, and the numerous Youth Groups were a dominant social power for local teens. Numerous fledgling musicians got their starts playing power chords for Praise Teams, constructing images that combined grunge with piety in a blatant contradiction of conventions. The youth pastors ate it up.

“Mario?” asked the teacher.

“Huh?”

“It’s your turn to read.”

“Oh.” Mario looked in vain at his book. The answer wasn’t there. After a few loud seconds ticked by, she frowned melodramatically and addressed another student.

Mario glanced around to gauge the class reaction. Most were paying so little attention that the entire exchange was already forgotten, but a few were looking at him with an arrogant kind of concern. In addition to these, he was startled to see George giving him a thumbs-up from the opposite corner of the room.

In 2001, three years from this moment, George would slit his wrists in a five gallon bucket.

This finalized Mario’s decision that he did not like this dream. When he couldn’t will himself awake, he tried pinching, and when pinching didn’t work, he walked out the door.

“Mario?” asked the teacher.

He kept seeing too-familiar sights on his way to the bathroom. He heard his old geometry teacher asking “what did the acorn say when it grew up?” and heard his mind involuntarily answering “gee, om-a-tree.” He caught the scent of fishsticks wafting down from the cafeteria. By the time he reached the bathroom, he was sprinting.

No amount of water would wake him. He glared at his beardless reflection in the mirror, annoyed at the bags not under his eyes and the flab not under his chin. He wanted a cigarette. Though he was remembering a time well before he’d started smoking, his brain was telling him that this stress would only build until he got a few drags in him. He had to get out of the high school. And if he was remembering high school correctly, it wouldn’t be hard for him to get cigarettes.

Mario exited near the science wing, well known for being the best escape plan from the joint. He had only used it a few times, but these had been the few times he hadn't been caught. So too with this memory, or whatever it was.

Across the street was a large, concrete warehouse. It would have been unremarkable if not for the fact that, in 2006, eight years from this moment, the warehouse would collapse on him. He stretched his back in instinctive response, but it didn't crack and twist and grind the way it usually did. Bending at his waist, he found it easy to straighten again. Bending at his waist again, he did something he could barely remember having ever been able to do.

He touched his toes.

It took two gas stations before Mario didn't get carded, though none seemed particularly concerned that a fifteen year-old was trying to buy Marlboro Lights on a school day. The walk had been surprisingly easy, reminding him that he had actually run track that year. And the cigarette was not nearly as rewarding as he expected it to be, burning his throat and bringing him into a fit of coughing. What kind of dream was this?

At least the town hadn't changed much in nine years. The only big change that had ever come to Taylorville was the closing of the coal mines, which marked the end of Christian County's prosperity. From the late 20th century on, locals tended to either farm or work in the factories, and both of those jobs got less rewarding every year. The town was not without its disappointments.

The biggest of these had come in 2007, while he was student teaching in South Africa. It had been a tremendous experience, a whirlwind month of being slapped in the face with a new culture and the relevance of politics outside the US. Halfway through, he had gotten a disturbing e-mail from a friend back home.

While Mario was helping lead a group of eight students in an exploration of apartheid's brutal history, his home town had hosted a KKK rally. This rally was held in response to the black drug dealers who had been making the half hour drive from Decatur to ply their trade at the Taylorville square. Rumor had it that they'd also been making plays for local white women. The day after the rally, one of these drug dealers was shot, and it only made twenty words in the police blotter.

Mario's dad hated blacks too. He loved Puerto Ricans, believing that all Spanish-speakers possessed a fine work ethic, but he thought that blacks were lazy criminals who were using slavery as a wedge to force the government to give them handouts. "We Italians had it rough too," his dad would say, "but we pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps. Why do the blacks want a free ride?"

Mario's parents had separated when he was in fourth grade. It would take until early college before he and his dad were ready to talk about it. And even then, it would start slowly, requiring a lot of alcohol laced with nostalgia. "Remember when we used to read *Robinson Crusoe* together in those British accents?" he would repeat. "Your mother used to think we were crazy."

This explanation of Mario's relationship with his dad is the closest you'll get to a justification of Mario ignoring his father for the rest of this novella. It's enough for his conscience, though not really enough for mine. The thing is, he's not thinking about the other complications that he still feels uncomfortable facing. As he gets adjusted to his new age, he'll actually take it as a relief that he doesn't have to maintain his uphill struggle to get to know his father.

But he really shouldn't be dismissing this aspect of his life. This trip through time is a rare opportunity for him, a chance to maybe build something more tangible than the inexplicable years of silence between him and his dad.

That line--*Mario's dad hated blacks too*—I don't trust it. Though he will not be making an appearance in these pages to defend himself, Mario's dad is hardly as simple as our protagonist's state of mind is making him appear.

And I wish also to distance myself from Mario's self-righteous views on racism. I mean, yeah, as an educator, Mario has had to address the white background he was brought up in, and yeah, the story about the KKK rally while he was in South Africa is unfortunately true, but Taylorville also gave him a damn good education. Could it really be held up to the same standards that even college towns like the one he'd been twenty-four in struggled to satisfy?

Compared to many small towns, Taylorville was remarkable. It had an arts council, dozens of dedicated teachers who have tried their hardest to keep education valuable despite perpetually shrinking

funding. And Mario was damn lucky to have been raised in it. The first of his immediate family to get his degree, he was an uncommon miracle of the working class.

But let us try to forgive him. He may yet surprise us.

Mario lived with his mother in a small house on the corner of Shawnee and Elm streets. Theirs was a neighborhood that named all its streets after the natives and trees that they had cut down to move there: Shawnee, Cherokee, and Pawnee; Elm, Oak, and Ash.

His home would change much in nine years, and he took pride in knowing how much of that change would come from his own sweat. He approached through the back yard, spying the many changes he had not yet made. The hundred year-old barn was still standing. The bathtub was still buried by the alley. The back patio was still just a slab of misshapen concrete. Before the accident, he had been quite the worker.

The doors were locked, and Mario had probably left his keys with his notebook at the school. Squinting at his palm, he tried to lucidly conjure them, but they refused to appear in his hand. By now, his belief that this was a dream was starting to falter. As he had many times before, he slipped in through the kitchen window instead.

His mother's collection of knickknacks was very incomplete in 1998. She had only a few ceramic angels, only one kerosene lantern, no cabinet of collectible Wes Moorland glasses, and no seashell-covered lightswitch from her friend in North Carolina. Her proud collection of photos were similarly incomplete, as her son had not yet performed in four musicals, her daughter had not yet had her second son, and she had not yet adopted that God Damned Chihuahua. She would not acquire that yipey rodent until after Mario went to college.

His room was frightfully barren. His presidential map of the United States still hung in one corner, showing the birthplace of every U.S. president up to Ronald Reagan. That certainly made Mario feel old. On the same wall hung a poster for Green Day's *Dookie* album, and that was it for decoration. Even his bookshelf was barren, occupied by fantasy genre fiction, *Nintendo Power* magazines, and a few random titles he had picked up at garage sales. A few of these random titles would later make for good reading, like *Tuck Everlasting* and *Lincoln: The Unknown*. Most, though, were absolutely ridiculous: *The*

Psychic Power of Pyramids, complete with the Masonic symbol of the floating eye; *Shen Ku*, a bizarre travel guide “dedicated to all life in any galaxy suffering from illness, persecution, circumstance or despair – this work is for you – don’t give up”; and *Italian Without Words*, a satirical dictionary for dramatic hand gestures. Below all these, in a pile on the floor, was a small collection of *Dungeons and Dragons* manuals that were just beginning to become his adolescent hobby of choice.

The phone rang. Mario answered.

“Hello, is Mrs. Podeschi available?” asked an older woman on the other line.

“No,” Mario replied, “can I take a message?”

“Is this Mr. Podeschi?”

“No, she’s divorced.”

“Wait—is this Mario?”

“Yes, can I ask who’s calling?”

“It’s the High School. Why did you just walk out of your English class?”

“Oh, um... hm.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a little confused.”

“*You’re* confused?”

“Well, I thought I was dreaming.”

“You mean you were sleepwalking?”

Mario considered the possibility but was fairly convinced he wasn’t sleepwalking. “No, I just thought I was dreaming.”

“That’s an excuse I’ve never heard before. You do know you’re going to get a detention for leaving school, right?”

“Um, yeah, that’s fine. But can we talk about this tomorrow?”

“I’m just the secretary. You’ll probably have to talk to the dean. Wait, you *seriously* thought you were dreaming?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Do you still think you’re dreaming?”

"No."

"Are you on any... medication?"

"Not that I know of."

"Have you been taking drugs?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you need to see a doctor?"

"No, that's all right."

"Okay. Just have your mother call the school when she gets home. It'll make things easier on you."

"Can do. Thanks."

"You're... welcome."

No, Mario was pretty sure he wasn't dreaming. Drugs actually sounded far more likely. Maybe some hidden enemy had slipped twenty hits of acid into his drink at a bar somewhere, and now he was babbling incoherently at some psyche ward. The thought gave him a chill.

II

Loved Ones

Mario tried to focus on his thoughts. He could remember the previous day vividly, and it had been mostly unremarkable.

He had woken at seven, as he did every Thursday. He had showered and packed up his laptop, taking it with him to the coffee shop. He had eaten a bagel and drank two cups of coffee while preparing his lesson for the day. He had driven to campus and tried to teach twenty-one freshmen how to write an effective thesis. Two of these students had fallen asleep, ten had blinked slowly, and nine had more-or-less gotten it.

He had gone back to his office, where he graded papers and checked his email. He had gone out for a smoke break with one of his coworkers. He had read a few articles for a class on evaluating student writing. He had gone to that class, where he had spoken eloquently on adapting to the needs of individual students.

He had driven home and tried to work on a paper. Failing that, he had read Marilyn Monroe's FBI dossier, read some internet comics, and illegally downloaded some music. He had gone to the bar at nine o'clock as he did most Thursdays. He had tried to talk a friend out of marriage, flirted with a stoned art major, and walked home at one a.m. Then he had eaten a sandwich, set his alarm clock, and slept.

Now he was fifteen again.

Perhaps he was dead. He had seen a movie once where a young man could not wake up from a dream until he realized he had been killed in a car accident. Maybe the x-rays had missed something, and the collapsing warehouse had left a crack in his skull that had started bleeding into his brain while he slept. In the movie, the main character had spent his last seven seconds of brain activity compacted into a dreamlike state, patiently waiting for him to accept that it was time to stop living.

But no matter how much he thought about possibly being dead, he failed to finish dying.

Perhaps this was purgatory. This seemed particularly feasible, as he had abandoned religion around this time. It would have happened a few weeks ago, while he had been sitting on his best friend

Quinton's roof. "Quinton," he had told him, "I think I'm not going to give God the benefit of the doubt anymore. I'll keep an eye out for miracles, but I don't think I count as Christian anymore."

"So are you an atheist now?" Quinton had asked him.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Growing up an atheist had been hell in Christian County. For the first year, he mentioned his faithlessness to no one—he simply went to church with his mother and tried to see if there was a divine spark he'd missed somewhere. He read the Bible, and when that didn't work, he found a new one in the high school library: *Opposing Viewpoints on Philosophy*. He took notes. He wrote God's dossier.

Not that it was all research and unbridled reason, of course. Mario had, after all, been fifteen. He had gotten in the habit of following girls he liked to church youth groups and Bible studies. "Have you been saved?" they'd ask him. "Heaven will be a lonely place without you," they'd tell him.

"I don't want to be your brownie points in heaven," he had never managed to say.

Mario was still considering purgatory when his mother returned from work. When he saw the Cub Foods logo on her vest, he realized he had forgotten that she would not start working at Wal-Mart for another few years. He wandered back to the kitchen to greet her.

Mario had forgotten how much younger his mother looked. She had not yet had her intestine explode and almost kill her, nor had fallen down the basement steps to knock out three of her front teeth. She was rather pretty, really, in the round and earthy way that he was now remembering her. He was surprised to remember that she would not have a boyfriend until he went to college.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

This threw him off guard. Over the past six years, he had gotten used to his visits being these major events to her, but she was talking to him like she had just seen him this morning. She probably had.

His stomach rumbled in response. In his many musings about his condition, he had not considered lunch. "Actually yes."

His mother opened the fridge and pulled out a cast iron skillet full of, well, whatever she had made earlier. She began heating it with the practiced efficiency that made him uncomfortable when he visited. He had been introduced to feminism in fall of 2003, and had claimed the mantle for himself two years later.

He had also, upon getting his bachelor's degree, began trying to do more for himself around the house in terms of laundry and cooking. Given his odd state of mind, though, he was happy to let himself be spoiled.

"Do you want a soda?"

"Sure."

"Pepsi ok?"

"Yeah."

The Pepsi tasted great. He wondered if Pepsi had really tasted that good when he was fifteen. Perhaps, he pondered, it tasted better because his pristine fifteen year-old body was untouched by alcohol, cigarettes, and even marijuana. Perhaps he had killed what made Pepsi taste so good.

He drank his Pepsi and ate a snack of homemade chicken and noodles while his mother cleaned up from her day at work. She left her work vest hanging over a chair, and tossed her "Katie Podeschi" nametag on the table. Rarely prone to teenage rebellion, he had never called her Katie in her life. He had even found it hard to introduce her by name to his friends. Half of Taylorville knew her as "Mario's mom."

She changed into some softer clothes and joined him at the table, where she cracked open a beer and lit a cigarette. It smelled wonderful, but Mario, being uncertain about how real his reality was at that moment, thought it a bad idea to light up one himself.

"How was school?" she asked.

Mario held back a laugh as he thought about lying to her. What would be the point? "I got a detention."

Katie's beer can froze halfway to her lips. "What did you do?"

"I walked out of English."

She put down the beer, frowned, blinked twice, and shook her head like she was trying to get water out of her ears. "What?"

"I... thought I was dreaming."

"You were sleeping in class?"

"I'm not sure. I mean, yeah, I guess I was. And I thought I was dreaming I was in class, and I went to the bathroom to wake myself up, and then I walked home. The school called—you're supposed to call them back."

Katie paled. He knew this look of motherly worry well—she gave it to him every time they talked about his back injury. He had even gotten to the point where he could hear it over the phone. She leaned over the table and pressed the back of her hand to his forehead.

"You feel a little warm. Are you getting sick?"

"No, I just got a little confused. It's fine, really."

"You should lie down."

"No, it's fine. I'm not crazy, I just got a little confused."

"I don't want you going out tonight."

"I wasn't planning on it. Seriously, I'm fine."

"I should call the doctor."

"Mom."

"This isn't normal. What if there's something wrong with you?"

"Mom."

"We should call Mandy. She's a nurse—she'll know what to do."

"Mom!"

"What is it honey?"

"Just give it a day. I promise I'll let you know if something else happens."

"Fine, fine. I just worry about you, that's all."

"I know you do, and I love you for it. Just let it go for now, please?"

"Well, I can't exactly let it go. I'm your mother."

"I know, I know. Like I said, I'll let you know if I start feeling funny again."

"Well, I guess I better call the school. Were they pissed?"

Mario laughed. "I think they were as confused as I was."

Mario saw his mother flinch as though she was consciously resisting the urge to express her worry. If he wasn't so worried himself, he'd have found it quite endearing.

III

Principal's Office

When Mario walked into Taylorville High the next morning, he stopped more than a few conversations. People he didn't even remember eyed him suspiciously, and lockers slammed loudly in the absence of words. He knew he would have melted under this attention the first time he was fifteen, but now the suspicious hostility seemed more like generic high school drama.

Quinton was the first to talk to him. When Mario saw him, he was surrounded by the usual crowd of friends, but he left them behind to approach his best friend alone.

"I heard you walked out of English yesterday."

"Yeah, that's the rumor."

"What the fuck, man?"

"I thought I was dreaming."

Quinton was always talking, even when he wasn't speaking. His face and arms were in constant communication, pulling in attention and exuding charisma. This rhythm of nonverbal speech froze instantaneously as Mario finished his sentence, and then he burst into wild laughter.

"That boring, huh?"

"Yeah. Fucking nightmare, man."

"Everyone's talking like you're crazy."

"I'm not crazy," Mario said. "I'm just big boned."

Quinton laughed again and gave him a quick hug. "You get a detention?"

"No, but I might miss first period. They want to talk to me in the office."

"How did you not get a detention?"

"Mom talked to the dean. Called me in sick."

"Damn, I should try that."

"Yeah, I can see it now. 'My son is mentally ill and can't come to school today'."

"I can't believe you can get away with this. I wish I got straight As."

"Keep studying, bro. I've got to go to the office."

Quinton gave him another hug, and Mario found an extra bounce in his step. College had distanced him from his best friend, who failed out three times as Mario pushed through his bachelor's degree and almost finished his master's. They hadn't lived in the same town since high school, and he missed Quinton's physical manner of communication. He'd tried to keep it up himself, to be one of the "huggy people" his group of friends was known for, but he lacked the physical confidence without his friend to back him up.

Principal Campbell and a counselor were waiting for him in the office.

"Mario," began the Principal, "this is Mrs. Warner."

The counselor smiled, the wrinkles in her flabby face spreading like shattered glass. Extending her hand, she clarified, "you can call me Sara, if you want."

Mario shook the hand skeptically, glancing back and forth between the woman and his principal. "I guess this is about yesterday?"

"Please," said Campbell, "have a seat."

Mario respected Mr. Campbell. The relatively young principal had won him over his junior year, when he'd asked him to put together a PowerPoint presentation on the history of the school for the millennial celebration. He'd liked how the head of the school was celebrating Y2K instead of dreading it. And with the latest technology, no less.

"Mario," Warner began, "adjusting to high school is hard for everyone, especially an exceptional student like yourself."

"Just a second," Mario interrupted. "You're a psychologist, right?"

"I have a degree in psychology with a specialty in child counseling, yes."

"Then should Mr. Campbell be here? It seems to violate confidentiality."

The principal smiled with an odd kind of pride. He appeared to like hearing one of his freshmen say "confidentiality."

"That would be true if this was an official medical meeting, and if you feel uncomfortable, I'm sure he'd be happy to let us borrow his office. But we don't think you're sick; we just think that you may be having trouble adapting to this new stage of your life."

Mario looked to Campbell. The Principal seemed ready to walk out the door if given a signal.

"No, it's cool. He can stay."

"Yes," Warner repeated, "it's cool."

The word sounded like poison coming from those lips. Though Mario had never seen a counselor in high school, enough of his friends had that he was very nervous. He had caught the business end of a great wave of mood-altering prescription medications, prescribed to entire groups of friends at a time. Ritalin, one of the biggest, was kept in check by its active street trade—a prescription was more like writing a part-time job. But Zoloft, now that was a brain killer. The quintessential "happy pill" with a signature facial expression of calm confusion, it had been prescribed to some of his favorite maniacs. When medicated, yes they would calm, but they would all say the same thing, that they felt like they were missing a part of themselves. And Mario saw promises of such death in the name Counselor Warner.

"Would you like to tell us, in your own words, what happened in English yesterday?"

Mario thought it best not to be candid with the school shrink. "I think I fell asleep in class, and I had a weird dream. Then, when I woke up, I thought I was still dreaming, but I couldn't wake myself up. I went to the bathroom to see if I could splash water on my face, and somewhere along the line I ended up at home."

"That's very unusual, Mario. What kind of dream were you having?"

Unable to come up with a lie, Mario stretched the truth. "I dreamt that I was in college."

"Did that dream make you uncomfortable?"

"Not really. I liked it a lot."

"Do you remember anything else about it?"

"Tons. It was like I'd lived through the next nine years of my life." Mario found his explanation more convincing than most of the ones he'd experimented with. Perhaps he really *had* been dreaming.

"So these nine years you dreamt about, they were a positive experience?"

"Not entirely. I was in a major accident, I had a few relationships that didn't turn out, and both my mom and sister almost died due to health problems. But nine years is a long time. I also got my degree."

Mario did not like the smile Campbell and Warner exchanged just then.

"What did you study?" the principal asked.

“English major, philosophy minor. I was almost done with the master’s degree before my teacher interrupted.”

All three of them laughed at this.

“You must think a lot about your future,” Campbell offered.

“Yeah, especially now.”

“What is it that you want to do with your dream degree?” Campbell was being remarkably cheerful. It was hard to believe that this was replacing a detention.

“I want to be a professor. My plan in the dream was to do some temporary teaching for awhile, then go for my Ph.D.”

“Ever considered creative writing?” Campbell asked with a touch irony.

“With dreams like these, I probably ought to, eh?”

They laughed again, and then Warner started reeling them in.

“It’s great that you care so much about your future, but you seriously disrupted class yesterday. As someone who wants to be a teacher, surely you can respect how you made yours feel.”

“Wait, I’m confused. Isn’t that the lecture that the principal should be giving me?”

Campbell shrunk at that remark. As a teenager, he had never thought to notice that element of humanity in the most powerful administrator at the school. He found it... charming.

“Young man,” said Warner darkly, “you’re not a professor yet.”

The silence fell so heavily that it might have lasted forever. When the bell for first period rang a few moments later, they all practically jumped from their seats.

“Should I go to class?” Mario asked.

“Why don’t you wait outside for a second,” Campbell said more than asked. “We have to talk about this.”

Mario watched his classmates through a pair of clear windowpanes and wondered what they were discussing. Mario knew that Warner was the original source of his prejudice against psychologists. She had medicated more than a few of his friends into near-oblivion as Ritalin became the first teenage designer drug. He remembered one week in which three of his friends had received “intervention” ambushes similar to the one taking place this morning.

If they tried to put him on Ritalin, he promised himself, he'd chop it up and sell it as cocaine.

Campbell opened his door. "Mario," he said, "can you come in here?" Mario passed Warner on his way in, who glared slightly as she went back to her own office.

"Seeing as how this is the first month of school, I don't feel comfortable giving you a detention. Sara has advised me that you may continue having trouble adjusting to school, though, and has asked that I keep an eye on you. So, Professor, can I count on you to not wander away from your classes anymore?"

Mario smiled with relief. "Absolutely."

Campbell handed him a hall pass he'd already dated and signed. "That's what I like to hear. Now get to class."

By lunch, Mario hated school again. Geometry was teaching him about right angles and quadrilaterals, biology was teaching him about cells and tissues, and he had completely forgotten how to play the viola in orchestra. He wondered if he'd ever actually known how to play it, as his teacher only accused him of having not practiced since yesterday as compared to nine years ago.

What he paid more attention to, he found, were the girls. He had once had crushes on most of them, shuffling them constantly through his list of potential loves. His memories of the future did nothing to help this, as he had once spent much of his time wondering how many of them would ethically consider making out with him. Knowing that in nine years almost all of them would lose their virginity hit his adolescent body like a mach truck. He watched them pass notes and chew bubblegum, compare charm bracelets and trade CDs. There was a frantic sincerity to them that had once utterly confused him but now seemed painfully endearing.

The boys escaped his notice. When it came to his own gender, he preferred mature men over teenagers. He was particularly partial to tattoos, a turn-on that no student at Taylorville High School could then provide. Besides, he knew his home town well. No one in their right mind came out in high school in his generation, and it would require some serious seduction to speed someone along in that process.

I am both troubled by and understanding of Mario's perspective. First, let me explain his heterosexual pursuits. Mario was what we might call a two on the Kinsey Scale. Developed in the 1970s to help avoid the false binary of gayness or straightness, the Kinsey Scale measured from zero to seven and

placed sexuality on a continuum rather than the gross oversimplification of gay, straight, or bi. As a two, Mario identified as being sexually attracted to some men and willing to explore this attraction, but primarily interested in women. So his choice of interest in only the girls of Taylorville High fits with his personality.

But why has he not considered his other options in terms of age? With his twenty-four year-old mind, shouldn't he at least consider pursuing older women? Or, to take the moral high road, should he instead remain celibate until his body more closely matches his mind? As an educator, Mario is familiar with the stages of adolescent growth. What risk might he be running by trying to bring his adult desires to the teenage girls of his high school?

For this oversight, I can offer no defense.

Mario entered the cafeteria with a rigorous hard-on that he did little to conceal. He was fifteen, after all, and figured that anyone who was looking either wouldn't be surprised or wouldn't particularly mind. And if this new experience was to end, he wanted to enjoy this moment of prime sensitivity. Since the accident, a numbness had been creeping to the extremities of his body: toes, fingers, penis. As one can imagine, the third symptom had been particularly troubling to him. It had killed much of his pleasure in oral sex, and even masturbation had lost some of its fun. Now, his fingers toes and penis were noticing sensations he had nearly forgotten—the smooth finish of schooldesks, the stale wet cotton of socks in use, and the violent scraping of cock shoving past elastic to scrape on denim.

He almost didn't respond to Quinton's beckoning to the old lunch table. The room was full of the girls who had carried him through puberty—his first crushes, his first masturbatory fantasies. As he joined the table, he became conscious of how over half the tables were segregated according to gender, and he could not help but see each all-girl table as an untapped opportunity.

The questioning began as soon as Mario sat down.

"What'd you do to make Mrs. Warner so pissed off? Are you getting suspended? I heard you were getting suspended. Were you really on drugs in class yesterday? What's a straight A student doing on drugs? Was your mom pissed? I bet she was pissed. What were you thinking? You're totally going to get laid out of this. How much trouble did you get in—come on, you can tell us."

And so on, and so on, and so on, until Mario interrupted:

"Back. The. Fuck. Off."

He felt no need to explain himself to these bit characters who may or may not have been hallucinations, demons, or dreams. Even Quinton was part of the chorus, chiming in with more of the same. His first time at fifteen, all this invasive attention would have brought him to a feverish panic, and *fuck them* for the pain that they would have brought that earlier version of himself.

Rather than endure more of their scrutiny, Mario walked across the room to the table where the girls basketball team sat. He knew his friends wouldn't follow him there, because they all thought that girls basketball players were far too normal for any of them.

He was in on the great lie, however. Lindsay was one of the many homosexuals who would come out shortly after graduation. Courtney was going to have a kid her senior year. He even knew that Amanda was going to cut class with him their senior year and smoke cigars in Saint Louis.

They turned as one to stare when Mario put his tray down on their lunch table.

Sherri, the meanest of the group, was the first to speak. "What are *you* doing here?" she asked.

Again, Mario imagined his younger self. That alone would have been enough to chase him back to his lunch table, maybe even to the bathroom so he could tell his reflection how stupid he had been. Now, his inner monologue roared with defiance. *Fuck her.*

"It's early in the year. I figured it's a good time to make friends."

Half the table looked to the lead speaker for cues on how they should act. "Aren't you a nerd, though?"

Mario smiled as sweetly as he could fake. "I don't see how that should matter."

"Well," interrupted Lindsay, who would later come out of the closet, "I suppose you can hang out with us if you want to."

"Thanks. It's Lindsay, right? I'm Mario."

"Yeah, I remember you from junior high," she said. "You worked concessions for the art club."

"That's right. I was part of the team," he boasted, not fully knowing if the girls had done well the past few years.

"You weren't part of the team," Sherri interrupted. "*You* just sold popcorn."

The girls quieted while they waited for his response. He felt like a gladiator: cheered for his victories, he knew that the audience would be just as entertained to see him killed. "Yeah," he said, smirking slyly, "we sold popcorn, and we used it to buy your jerseys. You could always have played topless if you didn't want me sitting at your lunch table."

Amanda, who would smoke cigars, laughed loudly while a few others chuckled. Most of them, though, had no idea that he had made a joke.

"You're weird," Sherri concluded.

Fuck her.

"Fuck you."

That shut her up. But it also shut up the whole table. And the next table over. Combined with the table of Mario's friends who were already quieted by their eavesdropping, it nearly shut up the whole cafeteria.

And then, Sherri began to cry.

The girls, including Lindsay who would come out and Amanda who would smoke cigars, immediately came to her defense. When a lunch lady came over to investigate, fingers were pointed and Mario was escorted from the room. Within two minutes, he was back in Campbell's office.

"Mario," he said at length, "I'm really disappointed to see you in here again."

IV

The Biggest Back Seat in Town

Mario didn't tell his mother about his first detention. Despite Campbell's disappointment, he was still a fair man, staying true to his earlier agreements and treating Mario as he would any other student. This meant that he was allowed to simply stay after school in the study hall with his fellow delinquents.

When Mario walked out a half hour later, he saw that Quinton was waiting for him next to the Biggest Back Seat in Town.

The Biggest Back Seat was a baby-blue Cadillac that Quinton had earned with a summer of fierce mowing. The sweat he put into buying it was an accurate measurement of the sweat he was willing to put into any of his friends. Sure, a Honda Civic would have been cheaper, but the Biggest Back Seat was a wondrous chariot that had carried his friends through high school. There was no better vehicle for ramping railroad tracks, driving fast, or making out.

Quinton opened the door for him with a gentlemanly swagger. "You've had a long day, sir," he announced.

"You're telling me," Mario acknowledged as he stepped in and had the door shut for him.

Mario watched Quinton walk around the front of the car. He was skinnier than he remembered, but then again, he had been heavily involved in the swim team and had only recently quit football. It made sense that he was fit. He also looked strange without his signature curly long hair and full beard—both traits that he would not be able to adopt until college.

Quinton started the car and took the first road out of town, adding twenty miles per hour to every speed limit sign he saw on the way. As he hit the country roads, he ignored the concept of speed limits entirely, pushing the gas-guzzling Cadillac up to one hundred and thirty miles an hour past a blurry background of cornfields and pig farms.

This had been a staple of their entertainment for much of high school, and it made Mario feel old. He kept thinking of how gas prices were going to quadruple within nine years while worrying about crashing. That Quinton seemed to have his mind on other things only added to Mario's concern. He was

talking about some girl that Mario could barely remember, one he had never really liked and that Quinton would quickly get over.

“Quinton,” Mario interrupted, “why Megan?”

“She’s a special girl.”

“Why?”

“She plays volleyball.”

“She plays volleyball?”

“Among other things,” he added, nodding his head approvingly to his mysterious sounding answer.

“*What* other things?”

“Look, I just like her okay?”

“That’s not an answer, Q.”

“Why do you need an answer so bad?”

“Because I want only the best for you.”

Quinton’s laugh roared almost as loudly as the Cadillac while he blew yet another stop sign.

“Well, now that you mention it...”

“Yeah?”

“I heard she sucked Clint’s dick.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Totally.”

“Five minutes ago, you called her ‘an angel,’” Mario said sarcastically.

“Since when are you bothered by me trying to get some action?”

“It’s not that. I just—shit man, are you going to blow every stop sign?”

“Relax. I have magical powers,” his friend said with confidence.

“Well I can see the future,” Mario said, looking more and more frustrated.

“What happens?”

Mario sunk back into his seat. He knew that Quinton was being disarming. He tried to let it work.

“Terrorists fly hijacked planes into the Pentagon and the Twin Towers. Politics afterwards are polluted with fear and misguided patriotism. New Orleans gets wiped out by a hurricane and we screw it up because we’re too busy pretending to hunt terrorists.”

“Sounds rough.”

“It gets a little better. We’re so pissed off at the Republican Party at the end of all this that the Democrats have to decide whether they want to run a black guy or a woman for President.”

Quinton laughed. “You’re so full of shit dude.”

“Which would you pick—warmonger, black guy, or woman?”

“Probably the black guy. Periods scare me.”

Mario knew better. Nine years from now, they would be political opposites. Quinton would vote for Bush twice and try to convince everyone that supporting the Commander-in-Chief was necessary to protect America’s interests. He would give up on college in favor of a business job. He would remain very, very far away.

Feeling red in the face and drained from his panic over the car ride, Mario dug his cigarettes out of his backpack.

“Wait—when did you start smoking?”

“A few weeks ago.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was more of a private thing. You want one?”

“No... that’s okay. What about, you know, choir?”

“It’s not a long-term goal for me.” Mario lit his cigarette.

“Yes it is.” Quinton slowed down considerably.

“Nah—it’s fun and all, but I more did it to be around my friends than as a career.”

Quinton tossed him a confused, somewhat angry frown. “I thought you were going to do the musicals with me.”

“I can still do them if I’m smoking.”

“You won’t have the same tone. That shit fucks your voicebox.”

“What the hell man? You’re going to be a smoker too.”

“Bull shit.” Quinton lifted his chin and looked sternly at the road back into Taylorville, signifying that the conversation was over.

Mario smoked unhappily, feeling both treacherous and betrayed.

What had he expected? Believe me, it would be hard enough talking through those political differences in 2008. Resenting Quinton for these differences a decade before he held them was hardly a fair move by any friendship’s standards. Did Mario just want companionship in his isolated state? Did he overestimate his childhood’s ability to stand up to rigorous examination?

And why is he so frustrated by Quinton wanting to get his dick sucked by Megan? Mario would pride himself in his open sexuality as an adult, and coming back he had wasted no time in adapting his lusts to his peer group. It doesn’t make sense. Mario should be celebrating Quinton’s sexuality.

After all, Mario had followed after Quinton through most of his young life the first time around. Quinton had been the first to drink, the first to be naked with a woman, the first to sell weed, the first to throw parties. Mario had often identified himself as Quinton’s lieutenant—Quinton would be the one to scrounge up the alcohol or befriend the girls, while Mario would be there predicting his moves every step of the way. Together, they had filled garages with revelry, introduced couples, and led the Taylorville counterculture through its greatest days.

Through it all, Quinton had not been nearly as strong as Mario pretended he was. He needed Mario’s enthusiastic support as much as Mario needed his. They needed one another—as sounding boards, as fellow thinkers. Maybe that’s what Mario was missing this second time around. Maybe Mario needed to need Quinton more for their friendship to work.

“Sorry bro,” Quinton said at length. “You can smoke in here as much as you want. I was just surprised, that’s all.”

“No problem, man. Sorry about the Megan thing.”

“What Megan thing?”

“You know—how I didn’t get why you called her an angel because she plays volleyball and might suck your dick?”

“Oh yeah. Um, I forgive you?”

“Thanks.”

“You know, you could come to Homecoming with us if you want.”

“You’re going to Homecoming with her?” Mario realized he was still managing to sound disapproving, and struggled to change his tone “That’s cool. When is it?”

“Tomorrow.”

V

Seductions

Mario felt more handsome while smoking his cigarette. His first time at the freshman homecoming dance, he had worn black slacks, a black button-up shirt, and a black corduroy hat. He had never been a Goth, but he had also never understood fashion, and black had seemed safe. Tonight, his premonitions had informed him that grunge Salvation Army was or would soon be the style of the pseudo-intellectual charm which had become his deliberate identity. That in mind, he felt cutting-edge in his faded blue jeans, red bowling shoes, and red-green plaid blazer.

From his vantage point in the Biggest Back Seat, Mario watched the girls file into the gymnasium. Many of them looked ridiculous. The ridiculousness, he found, centered on the breasts. Girls who needed bras less than he needed tampons wore rigid dresses designed to fit around their padded chests, and the final result was outfits that seemed to always be moving in the opposite direction of their wearers. Many wore flowers around their wrists, the large red blooms making their scrawny arms look even smaller. It was not an altogether unpleasant effect, but certainly a foreign one.

Finishing his cigarette, Mario wedged his pack under Quinton's seat and popped a fistful of tic-tacs into his mouth. He knew he had to play the cigarette card carefully at this age. For some girls in his dating pool, he knew it would have the desired, somewhat cliché rebellion appeal, but many of the others would feel compelled to intervene if for no better reason than to reaffirm their overinflated sense of their own goodness. Granted, those might be even more attracted to the smoking, but he had to keep his defenses up. Thus, mints.

The gym entrance was packed so full of girls that Mario imagined the boys must be playing basketball instead of dancing. He inspected them as he pushed past, evaluating his prospects. The five by the trophy case were members of the same church youth group, and he knew at least three of them would be saving themselves for marriage until at least their senior prom. Quinton was already flirting with Megan's friends off to the side, and Mario made a conscious decision to stay out of his way.

He considered trying the gym proper until he spotted Lindsey and Molly coming out of the bathroom. They were the classic debilitating female pair. Lindsey was the outgoing one: painfully energetic and attractive by most standards, she went out of her way to be approachable to every corner of Taylorville High School. In this way, she served as a lure for her angry, darker sidekick. Boys in love with Lindsey would try to hang out with the two, and eventually Molly would get a crush on them as they used her to try to get closer to her more conventionally attractive friend. Due to the tunnel vision of adolescence, these crushes were doomed to failure, and each left Molly more resentful of her best friend than the one before.

“Hey, Molly,” Mario said.

Molly froze while Lindsey shot Mario a dirty look. “Nice of you to say hi to me,” Lindsey replied for her.

“You get enough people saying hi to you. Hey, Molly,” he repeated.

“Hey Mario,” Molly finally replied. She looked away, and for a moment Mario thought he had faltered. It wouldn’t matter, really—there were one-hundred and eleven girls in the school. Unlike the first time around, he knew that promiscuity was pretty simple math. But as her eyes settled back on him, he was still looking at her, and she hid her smile behind a chuckle.

“What do you want?” Lindsey asked, physically stepping in front of her in an act of mock chivalry.

“The usual: girls, pizza, Diet Coke.” That at least got a laugh from them. “And a dance later. If you’re up to it, Molly.”

The girls giggled, and Mario knew that protocol demanded a gossip and consideration period. He flashed his best smile, tried carefully not to exhale a blast of tobacco-flavored tic-tac, and walked into the gym.

The decorations were awful, but he distantly remembered them being something special his first time around. Coiled purple and gold ribbons circled the brick half-walls that separated the basketball court from the stadium seating, with a canopy of more paper ribbons leading up to a vaguely rose-shaped ribbon chandelier at the top of the whole mess. A local DJ service had brought along a few disco balls and

spotlights that spun in random patterns around the room, and the sensory overload was made complete by the competing stench of too much cologne and too much perfume.

The girls dominated the dance floor. They had formed a circle to dance to a one-hit wonder Mario could not remember. The guys were sitting off to the side. They and their conversations were divided according to grade: the freshmen did not talk. The sophomores talked about breasts. The juniors talked about music. The seniors talked about sex.

Mario was distantly aware of the arrogance surrounding his observations. He didn't actually hear the juniors and seniors talking, but his assumptions served their purpose of dismissing his potential rivals as unenlightened children as he made his way to the girls' dancing circle, where he found himself more focused on a girl named Jamie.

Mario remembered meeting Jamie at that dance and having a crush on her for half a year. During this time, the two of them would become something like friends. They would talk on the phone three times a week, and his desire for her would fuel his sympathies for her difficult life to the point where he was ready to canonize her for her struggles. Her story, though common enough, was deserving of some sympathy at least. Her parents had divorced in junior high, and custody had been awarded to her mother. Of their two children, Loni would be the mother's favorite, while the elder Jamie would never be able to leave behind the joy of being the Daddy's Girl. Buried in her main family's collective hate for her father, she would spend much of high school being told to hate him, trying not to, and feeling guilty for coming close.

As Mario danced, he pondered how he could turn his biographical insights to his advantage. They had bonded over the divorce issue, sharing insights on the twisted loyalties of a divorce family. Yet, they had also fallen into the chronic Just Friends trap that had plagued so many of his other friendships. This time, he decided, he would keep his distance. Rather than let them use each other to help figure out their bizarre filial situations, he would portray himself as an empathic observer, a guy who understood her difficulties without having to ask.

If you're having trouble empathizing with Mario's struggle at this point, you are not alone. When I look at the arrogant, manipulative, and ultimately *juvenile* way in which our protagonist is trying to get

laid at his homecoming dance, I can't help but be embarrassed. I have no reason for lying about his actions. It is actually my hope that this will support your faith in my description of these events.

It isn't easy. When Mario first woke up in high school, I had the highest of hopes. I wanted him to be troubled by his classes, coming up with ways to stay in school by learning about entirely different subjects. Perhaps he could have mastered calculus this time around, or excelled in the history classes he had previously only tolerated.

And there were mistakes I wanted him to avoid. His first time through high school, though "successful" by many standards, had its share of regrets. Like many boys, Mario had impressed his own anxieties of identity on those around him. He had betrayed friends, broken hearts, and opposed his family. The more I see of Mario at homecoming, though, the more I fear that he will be fostering all the same regrets, only with different names. It saddens me.

"Hi!" said Jamie. "Don't I have art with you?"

Mario was surprised that Jamie had greeted him first. "Yeah." He almost said "yeah, my name's Mario—aren't you Jamie?" but pulled back in favor of letting her say whatever it was she wanted to say.

"Yeah, you draw really well," she said.

Mario grinned, pleasantly surprised at the compliment. "You too," he guessed.

A new song had started, and Jamie was raising her voice to compensate. "Do you want to be an artist?"

Mario weighed his options. "No" was the true answer, given that he still planned on resuming his English studies as soon as he caught up to them. But "yes" seemed to fit his outfit better, and her interest seemed like it would benefit more from the illusion.

"That's the dream," he lied.

"That's awesome!" she yelled.

"What?" Mario had heard her, but he wanted to feign ignorance to draw her closer. Every person, he knew, had a personal space that marked where strangers were not allowed. The sooner he could get her into his intimacy zone, the sooner he could invite her back.

She leaned in to his ear and yelled again. "That's! Awesome!"

The gambit had been worth it. Her breath hit his ear with the intimacy of a whisper, sending warm tremblings deep into his cartilage. It raced down his earlobe and onto his neck, where it dispersed into a sweet-smelling mist. Yes, he thought. Jamie would be worth the effort.

At last, a song came on that Mario recognized: Savage Garden, "Truly, Madly, Deeply." Quinton and the other men dutifully stood from their tables to join their girlfriends. Had Mario not possessed his privileged information, he would have stood awkwardly for a painfully long few seconds, wondering if Jamie had a boyfriend. When she and Clint would begin slow-dancing, he would have assumed the worst and gone dejectedly to the bathroom to berate himself for his horrible luck and ugliness. Fortunately, Mario knew beforehand that Jamie was not just available, but lonely.

"Dance with me," he said.

Mario pulled her in close, closer than he knew was appropriate. His first time around, he had kept her strictly at arms' length, desperately hoping that the erection sliding through the side of his briefs was not noticeable and hoping that she would not hug him too tightly afterwards. This time, it would be different. Jamie and everyone else in that room knew as little about social truths as he once had, and that any show of confidence would impose itself on the identities of those observing him. Their doubts were his blank canvases on which to rewrite the rules according to his vision.

Jamie pushed him a little bit away. Of course, Mario thought. She was doing the classic getting-to-know-you slow dance conversation. Though this would perhaps lead him down that feared Just Friends course, it seemed a necessary evil at this juncture compared to the potential embarrassment of a known erection on the first dance.

"Your name's Mario, right?"

"Yeah."

And your name is Jamie, he didn't say. Funny how in these small towns you can assume friendship with somebody without ever mentioning names. Actually, since I happen to have the same name as a popular Nintendo character, I'm surprised that you actually needed to check. I thought the jokes were a built-in mnemonic.

"Jamie, right?"

"That's right. I moved here in Junior High."

Oh yeah, I'd forgotten that detail. The court couldn't make her dad leave town, so her mom had left instead and brought her to Taylorville. They had some kind of family there—yes, a grandmother.

“What for?”

“My parents split up. It's okay, though,” she lied.

“Siblings?”

“Yeah. Loni. She's in our grade too.”

“How's she handle it?”

“Pretty well, I guess. Her and Mom are real close, so it didn't change much in her life.”

“But it changed a lot in yours.”

“Yeah, I guess. It's okay though.”

“Can't be easy.”

“Seriously, it's fine.”

Mario felt a growing tension between him and Jamie. He knew he was hitting a defense mechanism, but he wanted her to be bold enough to own up to the truth of her own situation. But he supposed also that there was something charming to the stoicism she was putting forward in the face of this new person she was meeting.

If nothing else, her response revealed a punchline to gender stereotypes. Here Mario was, desiring Jamie to be open and honest about her feelings (though I'll grant his motives were hardly admirable), and here she was, blocking off his empathy with a façade of disinterest. Had he not known better, and had he been fifteen for the first time, Mario would have assumed that she was telling the truth and taken it as a hint that his bitterness over his parents' divorce was a symptom of his being a weak person. To hide this, he would have downplayed his own sense of vulnerabilities as well, promoting the same nonsense in her.

The song ended, and they dropped arms. Mario kept his eyes on her for a little bit longer, forgoing his plans of seduction in favor of the challenge between their souls. His eyes lingered so that he could show her that she was being measured, that he had called her bluff and thought less of her for the lie. If there had been a way to express it, he would have stared at her in such a way that she would have known that she was not living up to his idealized memories of her. That, of course, was impossible.

Mario wandered off without explanation, slipping past the growing crowd and back out the gym entrance. This was not going as he had planned. Not only had he begun to question his ability to successfully manipulate his old crushes, but the maneuvering had become surprisingly dull.

One can even hope that Mario was noticing how little these games mattered in the overall scheme of things. Here he was, armed with prophecies of everything from September 11th to the success of the internet, and his primary concern was to master his childhood fantasies and readdict himself to cigarettes.

After a smoke and another fistful of Tic-Tacs, Mario returned to the dance. Another slow song was playing, K-Ci and JoJo's "All My Life." Molly was doing a terrible job looking uninterested by the entrance, her arms folded and her legs crossed, blowing a loose strand of hair from one side of her nose to the other. He asked her to dance.

Molly set the pace, tying her arms firmly around his neck and putting her head on his shoulder. Following her cue, he folded his hands across the small of her back and pulled her waist in close to his. The erection followed soon after, but she either did not notice or didn't care as they swayed and spun in a slow orbit of one another. Her perfume was powerful, nearly overwhelming, but he focused instead on the way her slow breathing was squishing her breasts against his chest. Granted, much of those breasts were the result of her attire, but the artifice was effective. So pleasant was the experience that Mario felt a growing wetness clinging to the thin hairs of his thigh, an electric eagerness that was at once both surprising and encouraging. Perhaps there were rewards to this lifestyle yet.

He spied Jamie over Molly's shoulder. She was absorbed in a conversation with one of her friends, but Mario held out hope that perhaps she had observed his dance, felt a tinge of jealousy, and purposefully distracted herself. Though a first-round Mario would assume this was counterproductive, this second-round Mario knew that such feelings would only solidify his presence in her mind; letting herself decide not to care was one step removed from her thinking that she cared all along.

With the arrival of Backstreet Boys' "Everybody," Mario's dancing was at an end. Tactics aside, there was only so much embarrassing late 90s pop culture he could take at once. By now, the trip to the Biggest Back Seat had become comfortable enough that he did not check as closely to see if he had been noticed by one of the chaperones.

But Mario had been observed. It was Mrs. Baker who noticed him, a math teacher who he would have another year down the road. He had once sat at the front of her classroom, an ideal student with a good mind for algebra. This dance was her first impression of him.

Lighting another cigarette, Mario let his mind drift to other things, such as his old friends, none aside from Quinton who were at this gathering. They were nerds, yes, but never outcasts. A few years before Bill Gates and *Spider Man* would usher in the age of the sexy geek, they had been pioneering the field, blending beer and video games, pot and obscure fantasy films, girls and good grades. Though they were not at the dance, they would surely be having a good time playing board games and pretending not to fight over the three girls from our inner circle. Feigning social protest, they were probably staying in someone's living room, watching *Star Wars* and sculpting their encyclopedic knowledge of its associated trivia.

There was nostalgia and longing in these memories. Though Mario feared that he might get bored with his old life, he could not escape a certain degree of loyalty to his old friends. Yet, he also could barely imagine trying to grow up with them again. Even his relationship with Quinton was strained; it required more energy than it ever had back when they were figuring themselves out their first time around.

Still thinking heavily on the matter, Mario flicked his cigarette and headed back to the prom. He didn't notice the death glare Mrs. Baker was giving him as he walked through the door, making it halfway to the gymnasium before he was stopped by a firm hand on his arm.

"Mario Podeschi, what have you been doing?"

Mario was confused. He had been a very conservative smoker his first time through high school and would have balked at what his later self was then doing. But there in that gym for the second time, the wrongness of his action wasn't even registering.

"What?"

"This is your second time outside. What have you been doing?"

Mrs. Baker was barely containing her rage. The sixty-something year old math teacher had her lips puckered so tightly and her eyes narrowed so thinly that her entire face looked like it was being sucked inside out. With her fists ramming into her bulky hips and her foot cocked sharply to one side, she was so obviously scolding that Mario would have called it bad acting on a television show.

Mario weighed his options. If he owned up to his misstep, the worst that could happen would be his getting sent home. It was Taylorville, after all; some kids got alcohol poisoning at his age. A lie, though, might be a hard sell, especially given how obvious he was being.

The angry teacher interrupted his thoughts with a more direct accusation. "You smell like cigarettes."

Mario realized his interrogation had drawn a silence throughout the front entrance. His peers stared openly at him, and he knew this would be a life-changing embarrassment for a first round Mario. And how vicious of Mrs. Baker, as well, disciplining him at so public an event. The idea of her doing this to an actual child was repulsive.

Unveiling his genuine look of loathing at the teacher, Mario glanced once more at his audience. "I've been smoking cigarettes, Mrs. Baker."

That shocked everyone, including her. Mario felt twenty pairs of eyes on him, and he knew that each observer was a dutiful informant for the other two hundred eyes of Taylorville High School. This was not good, he thought. Every girl who had bought the hype that smoking was for dirty, stupid people (or, even worse, who had a grandparent with emphysema) would become untouchable. But it was a gamble, as well. Perhaps this is just what his red-green blazer called for.

"Why don't you come with me to the office so we can call your parents?"

"Sure."

Mario followed Mrs. Baker past the frozen, anxious stares of his peers, pleased at how little it all mattered to him. With his sense of self not challenged by embarrassment, discipline had become an absurdist approach to controlling him. The chains of childhood punishments were nothing when applied to a boy already confident in his identity. If he was faced with a punishment, he would take it in stride, knowing that his pre-existent higher learning would do more to get him in college than any amount of good behavior marks could. Hell, the background of a troubled youth would fit into any scholarship committee's wet dreams: he would be their Albert Einstein, a young prodigy driven to deviant behavior by a system that couldn't allow for his insights. His application essay alone would be worthy of an anthology.

Mario's mother was at the high school within fifteen minutes. She did not look angry. She looked sad.

VI

A Good Talking To

Mario's mother did not drive straight home. She took one of the back roads out of town, the same kind of road that the Biggest Back Seat would soar down at ninety miles per hour. The detour seemed out of character for her—was this a disciplinary tactic?

"How long have you been smoking?"

Mario held back his laughter. If he had said the usual answer of six years, that would place him as a smoker at age 9. He went with a half truth instead.

"Two months."

"How much are you smoking?"

"Not much. A pack a week."

She turned away from the road to face him directly. *For fuck's sake*, he thought, *she's crying*.

"Why?" was all she could ask him.

Mario glanced at the road to make sure they didn't sail into a ditch or one of his friends' cars. He measured another series of possible lies—peer pressure, stress at school. Not entirely untrue, probably, but hardly what he had in mind when he smoked.

"Well?" she asked, sounding angry for the first time.

"I'm thinking about it."

"Okay. Fine."

Thirty seconds of silence passed before Mario found an answer he was satisfied with.

"You know how I bite my nails?" he began.

"Yeah," she said.

"Well, that's one reason. I have an oral fixation—I bite my nails, chew the tops of my pens, sucked my thumb, and all that sort of thing. Smoking felt very natural to me, and it stepped in as one of my new habits."

Mario thought this was a very good answer. It was psychologically accurate and referenced several true details of his character. What was better was that he had spoken to his mother like an adult, presenting a considerate theory with sound logic.

“Bull shit.” She looked angry again.

“What do you mean, ‘bull shit’?”

“That’s not why you started smoking, and you know it.”

She had a point, but Mario felt off-put by the hostility she was bringing to the conversation. Why couldn’t she address him with the same level of academic discourse that he had brought to her? He presented a rational theory, and she had found a potential hole in it. If only there were a way to convince her that he was the adult that she had become so close with those past couple years.

“I guess I also like smoking because it gives me a chance to be alone. You know, I’ve got to sneak off to smoke, so it gives me a chance to be alone with my thoughts.” This was also true. Perhaps more true than his first theory.

“So you’re smoking because you want to be alone?” she asked with savage skepticism.

“Sometimes. But I like to smoke in conversation too. Cigarettes are kind of like a prop—you know, something to do with my hands?”

“And how many of your friends smoke?”

Fuck. “Not many.”

“Quinton?” No. “Jason?” No. “Jake?” No. “Not Phil?” No! “Then who?”

“No one!” (this was truth) “None of my friends smoke right now. I’m the only one. Most of them actually think it’s pretty gross. I’m the token smoker of the group, I won’t tell you who I buy them from, and it’s something I really enjoy, okay?”

“I can’t believe this. You had asthma so bad when you were a kid that I used to rock you to sleep in grandma’s rocking chair. You were so thrilled when you found out you could join track. What, do you not *like* being able to breathe?”

“I can breathe just fine, Mom.”

“Not for long you can’t. You’ll smoke more as you get older, you’ll exercise less, your throat will get sore, you’ll forget what it was like to have clean lungs. Grandma June was in so much pain while she was dying—don’t you remember? I thought you were *smart*, Mario.”

“You fucking smoke too, Mom.”

Her eyes bulged. “You are so grounded, young man.” With that, she took a sharp turn down another country road, so sharp that Mario had to grab the dashboard to steady himself.

“Okay. I understand.”

“You *think* you understand.”

“Yes, Mom, I *think* I understand. So how long?”

“We’ll talk about that later.”

“I have a right to know, don’t I?” he asked, knowing full-well that the Bill of Rights did not apply to childrearing.

Surprisingly, her voice softened a little. “Can’t you tell I’m angry with you right now?”

“You were sad earlier.”

“Yeah, I was. But I’m angry now, so you probably don’t want me to decide how long you’re grounded for.” But she no longer sounded angry.

Mario laughed and looked at his mother until she noticed him smiling. “What the hell are you smiling about?” she asked, trying not to laugh again.

“That was really funny, Mom. And you’re absolutely right—if I were a smart kid, I’d wait for you to cool down before I asked how long I was grounded for. And if I were a smart kid, I’d never have started smoking in the first place. Sorry I’m not as smart as you want me to be.”

“You are a very smart boy—I mean *young man*. We all make mistakes. Aw hell, I’ve been smoking for years and years. I just don’t want you to make the same mistakes I do.”

“Hey, if it weren’t for your mistakes, I wouldn’t be here, right?”

“You weren’t a mistake, Mario.”

“Did you plan to have me with Dad?”

“Well, no, but... okay fine. But you’d better shut up, or I’ll ground you until you’re eighteen.”

Mario, grinning, pulled his thumb and forefinger across his lips to close an imaginary zipper.

VII

Grounded

The final sentence was one month of restricted freedoms. He was not allowed to ride around with his friends, could not have company, and could not attend any parties. Mario was not injured at all by these restrictions, and was fairly excited to have such a good excuse to avoid his old friends. He was already imagining what he could do on his little social vacation.

The school was even more lenient. Mario almost succeeded in arguing his way out of punishment entirely, but Campbell had informed Mario that he had violated a very specific section of the Student Conduct Code which stated that all school functions are treated as class periods for terms of discipline and conduct. For his abuse of a controlled substance, Mario was sentenced with a Saturday detention, lasting from nine a.m. until noon. Mario had one week to kill before this would take place.

At home, Mario sank his teeth into the internet of 1998. The crackling of the 56k modem was as bizarrely familiar as the songs at homecoming and similarly embarrassing. No wonder he hadn't been addicted to the internet until college—it was too damn inefficient. One minute, two minutes, five minutes—he found himself flitting to another site out of impatience alone. When Mario's mother asked him to get off the internet so she could use the phone, he happily complied.

He did not, however, comply with her desire to go to church.

"Well, I'll pray for you," she said.

The quiet Sunday morning was enjoyable. Mario dug through his books, tossing aside his old genre fiction in favor of something more substantial. Eventually, he stumbled upon Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which he vaguely remembered having gotten as a birthday gift around this time.

Guns, Germs, and Steel was a layman's history of the world that provided cause-and-effect explanations of the rise and fall of cultures. He delighted in its explanation of cannibalism. On islands where meat was scarce, the tribes that were willing to eat other people got significantly more protein than their competitors. This protein made them physically stronger and thus more able to conquer their neighbors. Eventually, the non-cannibal tribes were devoured or enslaved.

The book explained how the conquistadors dominated South America and how the Mongolian raiders were chased out of Europe by the advent of gunpowder. Written in a simple, accessible tone, this book managed to blend science and history in a way that Mario found utterly convincing.

Mario did not consider how Diamond's hindsight made his science considerably easier. As convincing as the historical science may have been, it did not have to stand the test of experimentation. Given the near-infinite number of variables the text had to sift through, there's no guarantee that one cause-effect explanation was any more true than another. If he had considered this, then maybe he would evaluate his own obsession with cause and effect.

As it stands, I think reading this book did him more harm than good.

When Mario's mother returned from church, he was scrubbing a pot.

"What are you doing?" Katie asked.

"Dishes," Mario replied, distracted by a stubborn piece of gristle.

"Why are you doing dishes?"

"I wanted to make spaghetti."

A few seconds slipped by, and Mario was made conscious of his mother standing behind him.

Looking back, he saw that she was both frowning in confusion and smiling broadly.

"Well don't let me stop you," she said, putting her purse on the table.

"I won't."

"And don't think this will get you ungrounded," she continued.

"I won't."

Mario finished the dishes and filled a pot with water to put on the stove.

"How are your friends?" Katie asked.

Mario flinched slightly. There was no good answer to this one. "Pretty good, I guess."

"I haven't seen Quinton around much lately. Are you two fighting?"

"Yeah Mom," Mario joked, "he won't let me make out with his sister."

"Seriously?"

“No, not seriously.” Mario retrieved a cutting board, garlic, onions, a knife. “I guess we haven’t been hanging out as much. He called yesterday—wanted to know if he could come over even though I was grounded.”

“So why didn’t he?”

“What?”

“Well, of course Quinton is welcome to come over. He’s like family.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” Mario lied.

“You can invite him over. Just don’t throw a party or anything.”

“Okay, I’ll keep it in mind.”

Mario sat at the table to start preparing the vegetables. His mother was staring at him, trying to figure out what was so different about her son. He enjoyed her futile curiosity—there was no way she would figure out his bizarre secret.

“Well, you have fun cooking, I’m going to go water the garden.”

Mario kept cooking quietly, getting the garlic and onions sizzling in a fresh pot. When he glanced out the window, he saw his mother in the shadow of the old garage, doing a laughable job of smoking a cigarette in secret. He waved, but she did not see him.

In time, she really was working on the yard, and Mario took the opportunity to make his lunch into a true meal. He put some sloppy garlic bread (just garlic powder and butter, really) in the microwave and set the table for two. He mixed up some simple salad, jazzing it up with some shredded cheddar and asparagus. When his mother came in, her jaw dropped. He wished he was wearing an apron to complete the image. “Now I *know* you’re trying to get out of trouble.”

“You better wash your hands. It’s almost ready.”

Katie continued to look surprised through the salad and did not regain her composure until the spaghetti. “This is really good Mario,” she said, “I’m so glad your father taught you how to cook.”

“I learned more from you, really,” Mario said, idly twisting a forkful of noodles. “Dad tries to be a gourmet chef, but it’s more for fun than for feeding a family. You actually know how to cook with realistic things in mind, like money and time.”

“But your father taught me a lot about cooking.”

“Eh, your lessons are more useful in the long run. I’ll need to know how to feed myself when I go to college, right?”

“You’re already thinking about college?”

“Yeah. I can’t wait to go.”

“Well, don’t rush through your childhood. You have a lot of time.”

“Shouldn’t you be encouraging me?”

“I am, and I know you’ll do great at whatever you choose to do, but you’ve got to stop and smell the roses sometimes.”

This was odd for Mario. He had almost taken a year off after finishing high school to work and simply not be in school for awhile. His mother had sternly opposed this, insisting that he go on to college and be the first member of his immediate family to get a degree. He knew she would still want this for him, but it was jarring to see how much difference a few years made.

“Don’t let it bother you,” she continued, “I’m sure you’ll do great at college.”

“At least I’ll eat well, huh?”

“You sure will. You’re so smart and hard-working, any college would be lucky to have you.”

“Thanks Mom. I’ll make you proud.”

“I’m already proud.”

She stayed cheerful through the rest of dinner. He knew she’d be wanting a cigarette right about now, and he agreed—his meal had been delightful. “Mom,” he said, “you want to smoke a few cigarettes for dessert?”

Katie panicked slightly, looking from the fridge to the back door to the bathroom in rapid succession. “Aren’t you grounded?”

“Yep.”

“Well, let me think about it.” She went to the bathroom while Mario cleaned the table. Scowling slightly, she pulled out her pack of Marlboro Lights and offered him one. “Let’s not make a habit of this.”

Though Mario knew it was unlikely, he agreed to her terms and smoked a cigarette with his mother around their kitchen table.

Katie insisted on handling the dishes and suggested that Mario watch television. He had not turned the thing on since the twenty-first century, and he did not expect to find much.

An "all-new" episode of *Dawson's Creek* showed Dawson Leary about to hook up with Joey Potter for the first time. This had been interesting the first time around, but Mario found it hard to care when he knew how many times Leary would wander off into less fulfilling romances. *Click.*

The Price Is Right only reminded him of how much more things were going to cost in the next nine years. *Click.*

Comedy Central was playing a *South Park* marathon, but the show had not yet become a phenomenon of free speech and political commentary. He would write a lengthy essay on it in college, and he made a mental note to follow its birth more closely this time around. *Click.*

And on a rerun of *Dinosaurs*, Robbie Sinclair, the "cool teen" dinosaur, overheard his parents talking about the date: 60,000,003 BC.

"What are we counting down to?" he asked them.

VIII

A Soulmate

The next week, Mario walked to school for his Saturday detention. Katie had tried to insist on getting his sister to drive him, but he had talked her out of it. "It's better punishment if I sweat a little," he had argued.

But it had turned out to be a beautiful day, that perfect kind of warm that lets you choose between long sleeve shirts and light jackets. And he was not terribly afraid of his detention, either. He had three more chapters of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* to read, some geometry to catch up on, and a notebook hungry for more sketches and rants.

He accidentally arrived early. A bored PE teacher directed him to a seat, mumbling something about bathroom breaks and water fountains. He was already deep into his book when the other detainees came drifting in, and the first two hours of the detention passed in a productive blur.

They were corralled into the hallway for a short break, and it was here that Mario noticed his fellow inmates for the first time. One boy was sporting an exaggerated gothic look, complete with black eyeliner and a trench coat. He was trying very hard to look absolutely miserable. Mario waved at him and smiled, getting a dead stare and a half-sneer in return.

And then, a girl in Sketchers said:

"Veronica." No hello, no what's your name, just a concise transmission of information in case it should be required: Veronica. She formally offered a handshake as part of the greeting.

Mario wanted in on whatever game she was trying to play. "Mario."

"Smoker."

"Me too."

"I heard. Beatles?"

"Certainly."

And that was it: Mario had found his soulmate. Wikipedia currently defines "soulmate" as "a term used to designate someone with whom one has a feeling of deep and natural affinity, friendship, love,

intimacy, sexuality, spirituality, and/or compatibility.” It complicates this idea with the New Age definition of soulmate, which argues that “souls are literally made and/or fated to be the mates of each other, or to play certain other important roles in each other’s lives,” and that “following this concept, one can have many soulmates.” This was her. Or at least a her.

Veronica spoke: “I’ve always liked ‘Hey Jude’. Fuck, Mario, I like every song about caring intervention. Yeah, there’s love songs and hate songs and so on, but songs like ‘Hey Jude’ go above that and say ‘hey, I get what you’re going through and yeah it sucks’. You know, not just ‘Hey Jude’, but ‘Jumper’... ‘Santeria’ too.”

“I wonder, do all of these subgenres, er, this type of song have male singers?”

Mario, being used to teaching about subgenres in freshman composition, had gotten in the habit of not using English jargon in front of people. He had carried over his reluctance to use words that would be on the final until he had written them on the board in class.

Five seconds passed until Veronica spoke: “Kurt Cobain. It’s all because of Kurt Cobain. He made heroin cool while making every real musician sad. The problem with real musicians is that they always drag their fake musician friends along for the ride who can’t come up with any more creative form of expression than burning out.”

Mario spoke: “I like you.” Note the three spaces between I and like. This is the only textual way to indicate that Mario imperceptibly changed his wording from “love” at the last minute. He remembered this as one of the cardinal linguistic rules of high school, that “love” was a sacred word never used to describe people whom you were not dating. An ellipsis (you know...the three dots?) would have been too bold a pause for this moment, as would a dash, or a hyphenated st-stutter. No, Mario spoke only two extra spaces between his words.

Veronica spoke: “I like you too.”

And with that, they were ushered back into detention.

Mario was sitting two seats back and one seat to the left of Veronica. He imagined at first that this coincidence in seating arrangements made him a knight about to take his queen, but he re-worked his inner

monologue to suggest that she was a knight about to take a pawn. This, he decided, would be how he would phrase it after they made love.

He studied her left leg first. Her feet were long, this much was obvious, and the effect was exaggerated by a meatless, bony shin slipping out of her sockless canvas shoes. Just below the knee, her skirt began, a faded plaid thing that he fantasized was sewn of old work shirts. It settled lightly on her flesh, drawing an elegantly straight outline of her upper thigh before draping over her chair and pelvis.

His eyes drifted to her torso. She wore a completely plain black t-shirt, worn enough that it looked like it was getting gray hairs with age. The shirt fit well, but not so well that it did not reveal a tiny sliver of skin between her waist and the ninth vertebrae of her thoracic spine. And yes, Mario did actually think to himself *ninth vertebrae of the thoracic spine* as he was checking out Veronica.

Her hair, which he had noticed at first glance by the water fountain, was black with red highlights. Or, he now considered, perhaps it was red with black highlights, or perhaps it was blonde. (He hoped for the second possibility.) It was long and unkempt, as well. Random curls shot out from in all directions, grabbing onto strangely intimate places like her armpits, her chin, and the seventh vertebrae of her cervical spine.

Black fingernails gripped a pencil. At first, she appeared to be writing, but after watching the third flourish Mario suspected that she was either drawing a picture or practicing her signature. Either would be fine.

Mario wrote this over the last two hours of detention:

Veronica, this is a story I've always wanted to write: two people meet on a dark road in the city. Ordinarily, if a man meets a woman on a dark road in the city, the experience is unpleasant. The woman thinks "he might be a bad man" and the man thinks "she probably thinks I'm a bad man" and they both walk away in fear.

Of course, this pair of paranoid delusions are rarely said out loud in the couples' heads. They are usually worded more as "smart women don't get themselves raped" and "I wish I wasn't so lonely." Or

sometimes as “I’d fuck him” and “why do all women want to do me?”. Or sometimes as “I wish I wasn’t so lonely” and “does God really hate me because I’m gay?”

But this is not the only outcome to this battle of souls! Just as monkeys with typewriters will eventually create Shakespeare, so too is there a perfect set of variables to allow for a man and a woman to see each other on a dark road in the city and kiss.

And I mean really kissing. None of those peck-on-the-cheek-welcome-to-the-family kisses or noncommittal-I-guess-I’ll-kiss-him-just-to-see-how-it-goes kisses—no, this would be a lover’s loving kiss, with tongue and fireworks and maybe a bit of blood.

And after the kiss—this is the best part—they just walk away. Perhaps back to other lovers, or empty apartments, or the bridge one or the other was planning to jump off of—the story is actually kind of unimportant. What is important is that people recognize that this kind of miracle might be seconds away from happening.

And then, as he was packing up his things, he added:

So whatchya think?

And as the room was almost empty:

--Mario

Veronica was already walking home when Mario made it outside, the story/letter safely in his back pocket. He considered letting her go, but jogged up to her instead.

“Veronica.”

“Mario.”

“What were you in for?”

“Murder,” she said in all seriousness.

“Yeah,” Mario said with similar gravity, “me too. I was framed though.”

“That’s what they all say.”

“Sign of the times,” Mario said with grim playfulness. “Sign of the times.”

They were walking in the general direction of Mario’s house—close enough that he could craft a fairly believable “I was headed this way anyway” excuse if she grew suspicious. Veronica led them along the main highway instead of the back routes, following an imaginary sidewalk that led from parking lot to parking lot on Taylorville’s biggest road.

The silence was terrifying, and Mario always filled such silences.

“So how’d you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Kill the guy. Or the girl.”

“Oh,” she said. “The guy. Of course the guy. I’m straight.”

“How does being straight--?”

Veronica interrupted him with a melodramatic sigh. “Don’t you know anything about serial killers?”

“No. This was my first time.”

“Liar.”

“Serial killers?” he prompted.

“Yeah. Serial killers. If you knew anything about serial killers, you’d know that they only kill what they’re attracted to. They’ve usually got some authority issue, a voice that has convinced them that it’s disgusting to love their victim group. That’s why they always have those patterns: black people, prostitutes, children.”

“So who do you kill?” Mario asked.

“People like you.”

“Prove it.”

“I will, when you’re sleeping.”

“You don’t know where I live.”

“That’s part of the fun.”

They approached Dairy Queen. “Milkshake?” Mario asked, his fingers crossed.

“Do you want to smoke first?” she asked in return.

“Um, sure.”

“We should go behind the Radio Shack. No one can see us there, even from the highway.”

Mario followed her to a forgotten stretch of parking lot. It was surrounded by a peculiar little grove of pine trees, and the ground there was a stark contrast of fallen needles and tired asphalt. His heart jumped a little as he fished out his cigarettes from his backpack. He lit his own cigarette first, then handed her an unlit one along with his lighter.

“Okay, how do I do this?”

Mario was so surprised by this question that his cigarette fell into the needles.

“Well—first—you have to—fuck.” The cigarette was retrieved. “First, you have to—is this really your first cigarette?”

“Well, I tried to smoke one of my dad’s once, but I was so scared I didn’t even get it lit. He’d be pissed. I had a drag with my friends once too, but they said I didn’t do it right.”

“You probably didn’t inhale. When you first pull in the smoke, it collects only inside your mouth. You have to take a real breath after that to get it in.”

She clumsily got the cigarette lit, took a deep breath, and managed to get out half a “thank you” before she erupted into the usual fit of coughing.

Mario watched her bend over painfully while he gauged his pleasure at being almost called “a great teacher.”

“Does—“ she hacked “—it ever get easier?”

“Yeah, the first time always hurts. You get used to it pretty quickly.”

She coughed one last time, stood upright, and pulled a bit of smoke into her mouth. She tried to blow a smoke ring, failed, and giggled. Mario smiled back and inhaled.

IX

Quality Time with Other Boys and Girls

When Veronica invited Mario to a party at her house the following weekend, he let himself feel considerably younger. The giddiness of new romance was an emotional holiday for him, and he celebrated accordingly. He combed his hair, flossed his teeth, and would even have shaved had he been capable of growing facial hair at that time.

But he could not decide which shirt to wear. In the four days since declaring Veronica as his soul mate, Mario had only seen her in faded skirts and black tees. But black was such a rare choice for favorite colors. And if it were her favorite color, then she struck him as being far more boring than he had initially believed. Perhaps she had simply not given the question much thought, and was in need of a good argument to convince her.

Eventually, Mario chose his own favorite color: red. Red, he believed, was the most vivid color of human experience. It was rare in nature, in the sky appearing mostly in the first and last hour of the day. Few plants were red in and of themselves, but red was the color of the tastiest fruits, inviting itself to be bitten. Fruit flies, being vermin and not people, had trouble seeing the color red, making apples and strawberries perfectly evolved to be plucked and eaten only by the intelligent omnivores of the world. Not just a color of desire, red was also the color of humanity's most interesting emotions: it was the blush of both anger and embarrassment, it was the blood of pain, it was the hidden naughtiness in the areas deemed too private to expose publicly.

After properly reddening himself, Mario considered his communicative strategy. He had not physically touched his soul mate at this point, and tonight seemed like an opportunity to cross that barrier. He would begin with the usual foreplay of a hug, measuring her willingness to be held, the firmness of her grip, and the steadiness of her breathing. From there, the strategy became more complicated. Should he try to lure her into accepting a backrub, perhaps by beginning with another party-goer? Should he accentuate some key point by lightly grabbing her forearm? Or should he be particularly bold, sneaking a hand onto her knee during an intimate moment? These questions were unanswerable until the party began, but he

enjoyed laying out his options ahead of time so that he could be fully conscious of his decisions as he had them.

While Mario's mom drives him to the party, consider this: Mario was not planning. He was fantasizing. He had not even scratched the surface of the infinite number of variables at work this night, nor could he. You see, the pleasure of this fantasy comes not from successful planning but from the illusion that Mario has the intelligence and willpower to seize the opportunities that lesser people cannot recognize. If pressed, he might even admit as much, but the clever bastard would shift effortlessly into a new excuse. "These fantasies are very empowering," he might say. "By building up my confidence and self-esteem before a party, I am insulating myself from my insecurities. For as honest as low self-esteem may be, it doesn't make you that cool in a party setting."

But let us not forget that Mario only wants to be cool so that he can fuck a fifteen year-old.

"Mario," his mother told him before he got out of the car, "I want you to be responsible tonight. Call me when you need a ride. Please."

His mother would not have given this lecture if Veronica did not live in Huitville. Huitville had once been one of many small coal mining towns in central Illinois, but that industry had faded long ago. What was left was a tiny neighborhood that had once had its own post office, school, and tavern. Today, only the tavern was left, along with a few dozen houses that had been cheap at the beginning of the century and that were positively decrepit in 1998. This was where the meth busts and violence and bad families were. It was even on the clichéd "other side of the tracks," the tracks in this case being an old railway that was now used as often as the mines were. Upper class parents wouldn't let their children go to parties in Huitville, but Mario's family had long been considerably closer to the Huitville tax bracket than the rich kids who lived on the lake.

Nonetheless, his mother had sounded worried.

Mario walked through a screenless screen door into something that resembled a porch. As for its actual function, it more closely resembled a garage, containing an assortment of random and decaying objects: a shattered wicker chair, an impossibly dusty stereo, a dismantled bicycle, four beer coolers, a bucket of used nails, and various other scraps.

A cheerful sign on the next door read: "Come on in! We're in the basement." Letting himself in, he walked through a similarly tattered kitchen and down a set of stairs.

What he entered was the coolest basement he had ever seen.

A ten foot long piece of plywood leaned against one wall, and it was covered with all sorts of graffiti-styled artwork in marker and spraypaint. Hanging from the rafters were a half dozen more bicycles, many missing a part or three. Across from the stairwell was a door with a biohazard symbol painted on it, and tucked into the corner was a beat up oaken coffee table surrounded by an assortment of mismatched furniture, upon which sat a group of five kids that would have scared Mario shitless his first time through high school.

Sublime's "Santeria" had masked his approach up until now, but Mario was noticed immediately by a large, dark-haired woman in jeans and a massive Green Day t-shirt. "Hey V," she said dryly, "your genius is here."

Mario went from giddy to frustrated in two seconds. He'd forgotten that his entire reputation up until his return had consisted of math contests and honor rolls.

Veronica twisted around from her seat in a faded pink sofa to look at her guest. "Hey, did you bring cigarettes?" she asked.

Mario thumbed his pocket—yeah, he'd brought some, but with a greeting like this, he wasn't feeling up to sharing just yet.

"So hey," he offered, "I'm Mario."

They laughed, and Green Day explained, "yeah, we go to school together."

A boy wearing a bandanna and a denim shirt with the sleeves ripped off spoke next. "He doesn't have a fucking clue who any of us are."

Mario blushed under the scrutiny. A tiny memory of himself felt like crying. But he had gone through this kind of smart-kid hazing once before. He'd take it in stride, deflect it with a joke.

He spoke to Green Day: "Veronica, nice place you got here."

Veronica laughed for a long time at that one, forcing her friends to join in. The little kindness bolstered Mario enough to take the remaining few steps to the coffee table. He took a seat next to Veronica on the couch. Spying an ash tray, he took out two cigarettes, lit one, and offered it to his hostess.

She giggled feverishly and took it. The others were staring at him.

Green Day said, "Mario fucking Podeschi. Wow."

Bandanna said, "No shit."

A petite girl with braided brunette pigtails and a tube top spoke: "Fuck."

Mario spoke: "Would you all just chill the hell out? I'm here to hang out, not to get stared at."

Veronica coughed while Braids said, "Sorry man, it's just that you're so smart. We didn't think you, you know, partied and stuff."

"Did any of you guys see him get kicked out of homecoming?" They shook their heads no, and Veronica continued. "It was fucking amazing. He's sneaking out, smoking cigarettes and drinking vodka all night and *everyone* can tell how fucked up he's getting. Finally Mrs. Baker calls him out on it, and he tells her, straight up, 'I've been smoking cigarettes.' So she tries to send him to the office, and he says 'sure thing' like he doesn't even care."

"Sweet," said Braids.

"Not bad," said Green Day.

"Why's a straight A kid like you getting drunk at homecoming?" asked Bandanna.

To this, Mario answered: "Because it's a ritual. I hate rituals."

"What do you mean, 'rituals'?" asked Braids.

"Rituals. They're just symbolic actions handed down by our priests and parents that shove values down our throats."

"Whoa. That sounded smart," said Braids.

Mario paused. He didn't want to continue his rant unless he had genuine interest from the room. Bandanna was chewing his lip and looking at a hanging bicycle. Braids was choking back a laugh. Green Day was frowning. And Veronica was looking at the rest of them. *Fuck it*, Mario figured.

"You know what this conversation needs?" asked Veronica. "Some weed."

Mario's heart skipped a beat. He hadn't smoked pot since about ten years in the future, and it sounded like a great way to escape the awkwardness of this party. "Fuck yes," he announced.

Conversation eased as Veronica pulled out a metal Domino box containing her pipes and weed. Mario listened carefully for names, but the group was so casual that they didn't mention anyone by

anything more specific than a “you.” Forgotten was Mario’s awkward entrance—they’d already renamed him a “you” like the rest of them.

Veronica handed Mario her yellow-and-black pipe for the honorary first hit. “What’s its name?” asked Mario.

“It doesn’t have one yet,” she answered.

Mario thumbed the pipe thoughtfully, doing his best to look both sly and dignified. “I hope you plan on naming it. If it breaks before you name it, it doesn’t go to bowl heaven.” Everyone laughed as Mario flicked his lighter and took the hit. He somehow managed to smile and smoke at the same time, pursing his lips while also turning up the corners of his mouth.

Bandanna hit it like an old pro, putting on a too-serious face to show that he was the hardest-core smoker in the room. Green Day smoked heavily, puffing to the point of indulgence. Braids took hers with a girlish brevity, one quick puff and an even quicker pass. Veronica, Mario was pleased to notice, took hers slowly, finishing her sentence before a modest exhale. She had style.

“Did you get high your first time?” asked Veronica.

“No,” he replied. “Not many people do, as I understand it.”

“Yeah, you just don’t get high your first time. Everyone knows that,” said Braids.

“I wonder why?” said Veronica.

To this, Mario answered: “I think I know why.” They looked at him expectantly. “Well, do you know how the brain works, like on a microscopic level?”

“It’s made of electricity, isn’t it?” suggested Veronica.

“It’s not *made* of electricity,” interrupted Bandanna, “it just uses it to send signals to your hands and shit.”

“Yeah, that’s true, but I’m talking about actual thoughts here. Like how your brain remembers stuff.”

“I have no idea,” said Bandanna.

“I don’t really care,” said Braids.

Mario continued while Braids and Green Day drifted into their own conversation. He was excited to be sharing this thought—it had been one of his favorites back when he was twenty-four.

“Well, your brain works through its connections. As you gain information, it get sorted into different parts of your mind, but the information isn’t immediately important to you. But as you think about these things, your brain builds roads to connect thoughts from one place to another. The more frequent a thought or series of thoughts, the better the road. That’s how things get easier the more you do them—you’re forcing your brain to build a better road.”

“Cool,” said Bandanna.

“Yeah, cool,” said Veronica.

“For as fun as being high is, your brain isn’t really used to thinking that way. Being high fucks with your roads—it encourages the brain to think less efficiently. It thinks that it’s being invaded, and it works around the THC you’re sending up there. It takes a couple of tries before the brain accepts that it’s not supposed to fight the high.”

“You make it sound like we’re killing our brains, man,” said Bandanna.

“No, it’s not poison—it’s just... not normal. You see, we are always throwing out information that we don’t need. Like, when you walked into Veronica’s place tonight, you probably didn’t notice the stuff on her porch. That’s efficient thinking—you’ve already seen it, so you don’t need to see it again. But when you’re stoned, you’re less efficient—you’ll notice the same thing again and again if you let yourself. It’s why so many stoners are artists as well—they don’t force their brain to efficiently discard how beautiful their four thousandth sunset is.”

They were silent for a moment, so silent that Mario didn’t know if they were lost or stunned.

“That is fucking incredible,” said Veronica.

“So that’s what happens when you get a smart kid stoned, huh?” said Bandanna.

“You know what,” said Veronica, “you kind of sound like a teacher.”

I’m not sure about this Veronica. Mario seems thrilled to be getting involved with her, and he’s clearly falling into her hands. “You kind of sound like a teacher”? It’s like she was from the future too, on some sort of time-travelling mission of seduction. She knew exactly the right words to melt his heart.

I want to be happy for him, I really do, but Veronica really is just a big waste of time. This can’t end well, given Mario’s bizarre experience and Veronica’s being fresh into high school with a lot of

growing to do. Yeah, I want my protagonist to be happy, but come on—what good is this going to bring to his universe?

X

Instant Messages

Mario had promised Veronica that he would get on his computer the next afternoon. She had given him her AOL Instant Messenger screen name, "Running In Circles", three words. This was their conversation.

Kinda Ambiguous: Veronica?

Running In Circles: Mario?

Kinda Ambiguous: in the flesh

Running In Circles: you have fun last night?

Mario typed several things at this moment. He first typed "absolutely!", but thought that the exclamation point was too juvenile. He then tried "yes.", but he was afraid that she would hear the simple statement as a measure of nonchalance rather than certainty. He tried an ironic "no, it was absolutely awful and we must never speak again", an overspoken "best party that ever happened", an underspoken "it was alright" (designed to lure her into a state of uncertainty as a seduction tactic), and a flirtatious "my arm was around you for an hour, so what do you think?" All these potential answers were deleted in various stages of typing. Eventually, he decided on:

Kinda Ambiguous: yeah—great atmosphere, great company

and he quickly added:

Kinda Ambiguous: great time, all around

Running in Circles: I'm glad

Running in Circles: I was afraid you wouldn't get along with my friends. They're kind of mean sometimes

Mario quietly agreed, but in retrospect he shouldn't have been surprised. It was pretty typical fifteen year-old behavior. Veronica seemed resistant to it, though, and he vaguely settled on a line of conversation that could lead to him commending her for it:

Kinda Ambiguous: sometimes, yeah. why are you different?

Running In Circles: what do you mean?

Kinda Ambiguous: you weren't mean at all.

Running in Circles: well, you weren't as new to me as you were to them. I guess I was just more comfortable

Kinda Ambiguous: it's not like we go way back. Not yet anyway

Running in Circles: true true.

Mario was mildly annoyed at the phrase "true true", as it seemed a way of shutting down a line of conversation without committing to any tangible thoughts. She interrupted his doubts.

Running in Circles: the honey was delicious too

Kinda Ambiguous: are you an LOL kind of girl?

Running in Circles: like laughing out loud?

Kinda Ambiguous: yeah. do you like "hahaha" or "lol" better when someone is laughing.

Running in Circles: actually, i like to only say lol when im really lol. The rest the time I usually just type that's funny. You know, so I'm being more honest

Kinda Ambiguous: I appreciate that. You're being responsible with your words

Running in Circles: responsible with my words. i like that

They paused collectively. Had they been speaking in person, this would have been a rich moment of non-verbal communication—they would have smiled, perhaps touched. Something, at least, would have been said in their non-saying. It was Mario who broke the silence:

Kinda Ambiguous: have you always lived in huitville?

Running in Circles: no, my mom and me moved there when her and dad split up. i was five though, so it kind of feels like always

Kinda Ambiguous: I know what you mean. My parents split up when I was (Mario paused his typing to do some mental calculations) eleven, and it's hard to remember what life was like before that

Running in Circles: yeah, I don't even see my dad anymore. he lives in iowa with some girlfriend now

Kinda Ambiguous: you ever talk?

Running in Circles: mom makes me call him on my birthday. He usually just apologizes for not sending me anything and asks how school's going. kind of a pain really.

Kinda Ambiguous: yeah, my mom pulls the same stunt with me

Mario winced as he saw the words on his monitor. "Stunt" sounded horribly old-fashioned.

Running in Circles: that's funny. guess that's something else we have in common

Mario smiled.

Kinda Ambiguous: we probably have a lot more in common too. do you keep a journal?

Running in Circles: yeah, but it has more pictures in it than words. and you like to draw too, so i guess that's another thing we've got

Running in Circles: in common

Kinda Ambiguous: what about Breakfast at Tiffany's?

Running in Circles: lol

Running in Circles: i think i remember that film. kinda liked it

Kinda Ambiguous: yeah. me too. and i think this joke just ran out

Running in Circles: don't be shy. it was a good one

Kinda Ambiguous: aw shucks

Mario had another fit of almost typings. He felt like the conversation had to move again, but he couldn't come up with a natural enough segue from song reference to another topic of substance. Veronica may or may not have been going through the same process before typing:

Running in Circles: do you really hate homecoming?

Kinda Ambiguous: i wouldn't say i hate it. it's more that i'm very, very skeptical of all the dresses and limos and shit

Running in Circles: yeah me too

Kinda Ambiguous: you remember what i said about rituals?

Running in Circles: sort of. i was kind of lost though.

Amidst a carefully edited flurry of typing and erasing, Mario tried again to explain his problem with rituals:

Kinda Ambiguous: i don't trust rituals. people feel like they have this great spiritual power, like it makes them part of something bigger. but they only have as much power as we're willing to give them. if we try our hardest to believe that homecoming is the best part about being young, then yes, it becomes the best part about being young, but if we somehow don't succeed at it, then we feel like we're somehow failing. but we're not. a rational human being who doesn't have fun at homecoming will say to himself

Kinda Ambiguous: “well, at least i tried.” but some people put so much emphasis on it that they’ll rent limos, break hearts, have irresponsible sex, and anything else it takes to try to convince themselves that they’re having the good time that they’re supposed to have in order to be happy. it’s just so fucking misleading, y’know? i feel the same way about religion—if you don’t fit the mold, they try to make you feel like you’re failing your community, your race, and your savior.

Kinda Ambiguous: it’s bullshit.

Mario waited a few minutes for that to settle in, hoping that the short sentence in his last IM had properly signaled that he was done typing and waiting for her response. During this minute, he kept rereading the area where he brought in religion, nervous that Veronica may have been offended by his irreverence.

Running in Circles: i know what you mean. i just went to homecoming with trista and anne as a girl’s night kind of thing. we had fun, but it wasn’t that much fun. and trista keeps talking about it like it was the best thing we’ve ever done together. i don’t remember her having so much fun

Kinda Ambiguous: are you familiar with revisionist history?

Running in Circles: what’s that?

Mario combed his brain for an example. He still had four more years until he could use the term “post-9/11”.

Kinda Ambiguous: revisionist history is what happens when historians and politicians rewrite the past. when Christopher Columbus became the first European to visit the Americas, the history books immediately started claiming that he “discovered” it, when actually it was “discovered” long, long before he got there by its indigenous people. by writing the history in this way, though, it fueled

European ego and let us feel justified in civilizing/slaughtering the native tribes
with little consideration to their thoughts on the matter

Running in Circles: so have we un-revised that history? i kind of know that indians were
already here before columbus arrived

Kinda Ambiguous: have you taken american history?

Running in Circles: yeah, we took it last year.

Kinda Ambiguous: oh yeah—anyway, when did the story of america begin in it?

Running in Circles: oooohhhhhhhh yeah. 1492. wow, that's extra fucked up

Kinda Ambiguous: exactly. native americans didn't have much of a hand in writing our
textbooks, even though they seem to have more authority than we do.

Running in Circles: so was 1984 about revisionist history?

Kinda Ambiguous: :) it sure was

Running in Circles: i bet you read a lot of books

Kinda Ambiguous: yep

Running in Circles: that's really cool. i wish i read more

Kinda Ambiguous: don't worry. you still have lots of time to read. you going to college?

Running in Circles: maybe. we don't have much money though, so i'm not sure if i'll be
able to go

Kinda Ambiguous: well, how're your grades?

Running in Circles: *well dad, now that you mention it...*

Kinda Ambiguous: huh?

Running in Circles: that's my sarcastic font

Kinda Ambiguous: cool

Running in Circles: yeah, i kind of hate emoticons

Kinda Ambiguous: oh, sorry about that :) back there

Running in Circles: well i don't mind if you do it. it's just that they seem cheesy to me. i
hate winks too

Kinda Ambiguous: so you use italics instead of winking, since sarcasm is lost in text?

Running in Circles: exactly! i have a really dry sense of humor, but i've never winked
once in my life

Kinda Ambiguous: wow, that makes a lot more sense than what i do

Running in Circles: *and what do you do?*

Kinda Ambiguous: lol... i started winking more in real life to justify my use of winking
emoticons

Running in Circles: lol

Running in Circles: *you're too smart for your own good sometimes*

Kinda Ambiguous: *you're sexy when your insulting*

Running in Circles: *you should see me when i'm abusive*

Kinda Ambiguous: *i'm looking forward to it*

Running in Circles: *i'll fuck you gently with a chainsaw*

Kinda Ambiguous: *and i'll be begging for more*

Mario got an erection.

Running in Circles: hard to beg when your dead

Kinda Ambiguous: watch me

Running in Circles: watch you bleed

Kinda Ambiguous: you a biter?

Running in Circles: totally

Kinda Ambiguous: bummer. i like biters

Running in Circles: i could bite you if you wanted me to

Kinda Ambiguous: damn your italics

Running in Circles: lol

A knock on his door interrupted Mario from his flirtations. "Mario, are you still on that
computer?" she shouted through the door, acknowledging his privacy but still sounding stern.

“Yeah.”

“Well, you’re still grounded, and that means you need to get off your computer.”

Kinda Ambiguous: hang on a sec

“Was I still grounded last night?”

“Well, that was different.”

“So I can go to a party, but I can’t chat online?”

Running in Circles: k

“Listen, kiddo, you’re lucky I let you go to that girl’s house last night. Don’t push it.”

Mario stood up and opened his door. His mother was wearing her blue bandanna, and the house smelled faintly of Lysol. She must have wanted his help cleaning. A younger Mario would have continued fighting her. This Mario knew that she had a soft spot for romance.

“Can I propose an itty bitty compromise?” he said.

She scowled in response.

“Well, I’m chatting with Veronica—you know, the host of last night’s party—and I think we might end up going out this year. Can I have just five minutes to say goodbye to her, and then I’ll help you clean for the rest of the day?”

“Oooh... *VeRONica*...” she teased, with a high-pitched squeal on the second syllable.

“Yeah. *VeRONica*.”

“Okay, fine. But then you’re mowing the damn yard.”

Mario smirked and saluted. His mother huffed, hid her smile, and playfully slammed his door.

Kinda Ambiguous: back

Running in Circles: k

Kinda Ambiguous: i’m getting off in five minutes. mom wants some help cleaning

Running in Circles: awww.....

Kinda Ambiguous: sorry. i'm still in trouble from the smoking, so i'm trying to be a
good kid

Running in Circles: wait a sec

Running in Circles: you smoke, drink, and mouth off to your teachers, but you help your
mom clean?

Kinda Ambiguous: sure.

Feeling impulsively truthful, he added:

Kinda Ambiguous: i love my mom

Running in Circles: wow

Kinda Ambiguous: i really like being alive

Running in Circles: you're a weird kid

Kinda Ambiguous: don't you mean *you're a weird kid*

Running in Circles: nope. you're a weird kid.

Kinda Ambiguous: you like weird kids?

Running in Circles: *hate em*

Kinda Ambiguous: good. hey, you want to call me later?

Running in Circles: i guess

Kinda Ambiguous: you don't have to. but if you get the urge, it's 824-9173.

Running in Circles: k. later?

Kinda Ambiguous: yeah, i should get going. good talking to you

Running in Circles: you too

Kinda Ambiguous: bye

Running in Circles: bye bye

XI

Behaviors

Mario continued to get into more and more trouble. He had gotten better at hiding his cigarettes, but he was getting worse at hiding his outbursts.

When Mario heard that he was being forced to attend a D.A.R.E. meeting at the school gym, he gleefully assembled a packet of alternative information. He hoped to lead something like a teen movie revolution, forcing the speaker to surrender more and more intellectual ground until his new friends pelted him with their free t-shirts.

The meeting was held by Officer Bob Kindermann. Mario's default choice for many "who is your hero?" essays, he would become Sheriff Bob Kindermann within a few years. The quintessential gentle giant, he stood closer to seven feet than six, and spoke in compassionate, quiet tones. Mario knew his voice well, as the Sheriff had often been called on to read Bible passages aloud at church. Had he not been such a caring man, he would never have been selected for this duty, as he spoke with the vigor of a wet mop.

His public speaking skills were not improved on the topic of drugs. You could hear the line breaks at the end of his notecards, and he kept smiling at inappropriate times as he turned them. "Last year over 40% of high school... seniors admitted to having used marijuana. (smile) But this drug can sabotage... a teen's future."

How had this man, Mario asked himself, ever been my hero?

When asked for questions, Mario stood with poise and determination. "Didn't the National Institute of Justice recently find that D.A.R.E. graduates were *more* likely than others to drink, smoke, and swallow?"

Kindermann looked genuinely hurt by the question, and stood briefly in absolute silence. This quiet was interrupted by Veronica's friend Bandanna, now known to Mario as Anthony, who was the first to laugh.

It was an odd laugh. Most laughs at Taylorville High were all-or-nothing events; either enough peers laughed to justify joining, or it died out with a few people feeling alienated. But this laugh was a tiny

miracle. As the laughter turned to light chuckling, a new laugh would burst forth, challenging the other laughers to keep the good humor going.

They were still in the midst of this call and response when Mario was escorted out of the meeting.

Counselor Warner volunteered to look after the troublemaker while Principal Campbell kept an eye on the meeting. She marched him to her office, where she sat him down on an uncomfortable chair. "You're staying here," she commanded before going into the main office.

Warner's room was adjacent to the main school office and separated by a big glass window and some plastic blinds. Mario, still livid at having not been allowed to participate in what he saw as a valiant exercise of free speech, maneuvered his head so that he could peak around the blinds at whatever Warner was up to.

She retrieved a file from a cabinet behind the main desk. Mario imagined that she was looking up his mother's phone number, particularly since he had not violated any student conduct codes with which he was familiar. Only his mother could discipline him for referencing an academic study.

When Warner walked past the phone and back into the hallway, he began to suspect her of having a different plan.

For the first two minutes of sitting alone in Warner's office, Mario thought that she might just be going to the restroom. Then, his mind started toying with other possibilities: had she returned to the assembly, perhaps to consult with Campbell? Was she taking a walk to cool down in a rare moment of inspiration? But she had gone the wrong direction to be going to the gym. What, then—

My locker, thought Mario. She's probably searching my fucking locker.

He managed to sit on his rage for twenty more seconds before walking out the door.

Mario took the steps up to the third floor freshman lockers two at a time. Along the way, he heard the distinctive sound of books being thrown on tile. He muttered fiercely to himself about invasions of privacy and the importance of his notebooks, and his heart was pounding when he reached the top of the stairs.

"Aren't you supposed to be in my office, young man?"

He had caught her in what he knew to be an illegal search and seizure, but still she looked sure of herself.

“Get away from my locker.”

“Excuse me?”

“You have no right to—“

“—you have no right to be talking to me with—“

“—violate my privacy in this—“

“—that tone in this school I’ll have you know—“

“—blatant disregard of—“

The yelling continued as teachers peaked their heads out of classrooms. It did not take long for a burly history teacher to step between them and insist that Mario—not both of them—calm down.

Mario caught his breath, and asked through still trembling lips, “is she going to pick up my books?”

“In a moment. First, I’m going to continue this locker search. I need to see why you know so much about drugs.”

Mario let her continue. *She’ll get hers*, he promised himself, *in court*.

In an act of twisted irony, she only looked in the pockets of his folders for drugs, tossing them to the ground when finding nothing. Had she bothered to read the printed articles in the red one, she would have seen the other facts which Mario had carefully memorized to insert into his other questions that day. *Did you know*, Mario mentally recited, *that the D.A.R.E. program has actually increased teen usage of hallucinogens?*

Unwilling to read, though, Mrs. Warner found nothing.

Principal Campbell pointed

“Mario,” Quinton asked him the next day at lunch, “did you really try to date-rape Veronica?”

Looking around, Mario saw that day’s stares in a different light. He’d been getting used to being a high-profile member of the Taylorville High School rumor mill—so used to it that he no longer inspected the sidelong glances with the same rigor he once had. On second glance, he noted a definite hostility.

“Do you think I date-raped Veronica?” Mario asked evenly.

“No, not really. You’d tell me if you had, right?”

“I’m going to ask you one more question, Quinton, and then I want you to shut the hell up, okay?”

“Shit man, I was just asking—“

“Quinton.”

“Okay, okay. Shoot.”

“Where did you get this information?”

“Jamie.”

Mario walked over to Jamie’s lunch table.

“Jamie,” he said.

His old crush had never looked so ugly to him. “Jamie, you told Quinton that I tried to date-rape Veronica.”

“No I didn’t,” she said with a look of ultimate innocence.

“Quinton!” Mario yelled across the lunch room. “Did or did not Jamie tell you that I tried to date-rape Veronica?”

Quinton looked around nervously, shrugging and half-smiling to no one in particular.

“Quinton!” Mario yelled, louder this time.

The room had gone quiet. Lunch ladies were whispering wildly. Veronica’s friends were gathered in a protective huddle around her.

Jamie, gaze fixed firmly on a pile of green beans, said, “fine, I told him, okay?”

The ambient clatter of forks and trays started to pick up again, but it quieted immediately when Mario continued his interrogation.

“Did someone tell you this rumor,” Mario said with bitingly sarcastic civility, “or did you hear it from someone else?”

“Someone else,” she said meekly.

Mario stood straight and looked around. He felt strangely powerful, proud of himself for not letting this rumor take the usual course. Teachers were on the way. He didn’t have much time.

“It’s not true,” he announced loudly. He wanted to say more, but the authorities had already arrived. He did not put up a fight.

“Something bothering you, buddy?” asked one teacher.

“Why don’t you just calm down?” asked another.

Mario said nothing. It seemed like every time he tried to reason with his educators, they spoke to him like he was a speedbump in their workday. Out of respect for members of the work force, he chose to stay silent and get his latest punishment over quickly.

XII

To Write About Anxiety

Mario wished he'd gone back through time a few weeks more so that he could try to switch his classes around. Now, he was stuck in the same geometry class, the same English class, the same choir class, the same art class, the same physical science class, even the same gym class. The classes weren't difficult, and his math skills sorely needed the refresher course, but the pacing was driving him insane. He wished he could have been taking French so that he could have an entirely new class to wrap his head around.

He drew stick figures in his notebooks. He drew them in intricate poses: sitting on roofs, running up slides, having sex. Many of them received little captions that added to the artfulness of the otherwise simple artwork, often in reference to life he hadn't lived yet and probably wouldn't live again. They said things like "no one gets away from back pain" and "odd, I don't feel grown up" and "it's not really that scary."

Mario's many detentions were making Mario more aware of his free time. He told himself that, any day now, he would be finding some way to take advantage of his master's degree in English. Other factors were conspiring against his productivity as well: his exasperated mother was limiting him to a few hours on the internet, and those tended to be devoted to his pleasant chats with Veronica.

It was not until he was accused of plagiarism that he renewed his writing in earnest.

"Mario, could you explain your use of the word 'internalize' to describe Jim?"

"Yeah, I was talking about his racial identity. He isn't bothered when white people call him 'Nigger Jim' because that's been his identity his entire life. He has internalized their attitudes toward him and taken them in as his own. And Twain feels that he's been made to feel that way instead of being some kind of a natural-born slave."

"Not bad," said Mrs. Copper, frowning. "I guess you've read a lot about race."

Mario saw the skepticism in her eyes. She had already decided he had plagiarized his essay. It would have been easier if he'd been writing it in college, where he would have been forced to cite sources and weave together different thinkers. This high school paper, which required no research whatsoever, had barely required any effort at all. He had just applied his own opinions on race to Twain's novel and let the two pages write themselves.

But now he was in trouble, because both he and Mrs. Copper knew that you didn't learn about race while growing up in Taylorville.

"Yeah, I guess I have."

"Like what?"

This was a difficult question. If only he had a few of his old syllabi, he could reference a dozen thinkers that had helped him understand his whiteness.

"Well, let's see. Hughes, Larsen, and Carter come to mind. Then there's King and Malcolm X, of course, and Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*."

"Mandela? That's almost a thousand pages. I'm impressed." She still sounded dubious.

"I figure it's something I ought to know about. I'm not going to be living in Taylorville forever, you know."

"But you *have* always lived in Taylorville, right?"

"I lived in Missouri for a little bit, back in fourth grade."

"When did you read Mandela's work?"

"Um, let's see... Last summer. A little over a year ago."

"How old were you then?"

"Fourteen."

"Fourteen," she echoed thoughtfully. "Well, good work then. This is one of the most insightful papers I've read from someone your age."

She reached for a slip of paper to write him a hall pass. He seemed to have survived his inspection, but Mrs. Copper still looked a little flustered. He supposed he would have been too, but he wasn't about to pretend to be just another dumb white kid in the Midwest no matter how old he wasn't.

The next day, she kept him after class again.

“Mario, I’ve read your paper a few more times, and I still can’t get over how advanced it is. This is some quality writing.”

Mario tried to hold back his grin. *Of course it was.*

“So I dug up a couple of writing contests to see if there was anything you might be able to participate in. Most of the good ones are meant for upper classmen, but I think you might be able to compete. You could get some pretty big scholarships with your talent.”

Mario wondered how a kid of his age should react to this kind of information. In actuality, he was hit with an incredible sense of ambition—a full scholarship to an Ivy League school perhaps, or maybe even skipping high school entirely. He had been one of thousands of voices at age twenty-four—but as a child prodigy, he could be a renowned celebrity, an academic icon of his generation. His mother would be thrilled.

“How many contests are there?” he asked.

Mrs. Copper beamed. “So, you’re interested then?”

“Of course I’m interested. How many contests, though?”

“Well, I’ve got ten here. Most of them are sponsored by real colleges, too, and they’ll look great on your applications.”

“Are those it?”

“Yeah. I could get more too, if you’re really that interested.”

“Okay, I’ll try them out. Can I take these home?”

“Of course. I’ll see what else I can find out.”

“Hey, um, thanks. I really appreciate this.”

“I’m glad to help. I want to make sure you get as much out of my class as possible.”

She handed him a stack of papers and started writing him another hall pass. He found it hard to believe that she’d given him a C his first time through her class.

I still find it hard to like Mrs. Copper, even if she is giving Mario a helping hand. I suspect that she tasted a bit of ambition as well, and even if Mario isn’t above benefitting from it, I can’t help but be a

little offended. You see, Mrs. Copper represents the worst of No Child Left Behind. Teaching solely to the standardized tests of high school, she kept giving me Cs and Bs on my old essays, offering nothing more helpful than “complete sentences” and “five paragraphs, Mario.” Granted, I was writing four paragraph essays as a modest form of rebellion, but I still condemn her for not having nurtured me more productively.

See? Trying to write about her still pollutes my writing. After ten chapters of carefully distancing myself from my protagonist, I have now claimed Mario’s past as my own.

When I first came to college, I knew that I wanted to become a teacher, and Mrs. Copper was one of the foremost thoughts in my mind. Even now, the memory of her is a constant challenge to do the best possible job I can do as an educator. Sure, I wasn’t a truly proficient writer when I first arrived in her class, but she never came close to giving me what I needed to grow. These days, I tell student after student that the “five paragraph essay” was just scaffolding that their teachers used to introduce the idea of structure to them. And how I wish someone had told me that in high school.

Mario had not participated in many high school essay contests, and he was thus surprised at who was asking him to write what. The Federation of Illinois Young Republicans in cooperation with MTV, for example, wanted him to write an essay for the topic “Stand Up and Holla!” to be read at the Republican National Convention. The Pregnancy Care Center was offering fifty dollars if he could write “an educated response to an unborn child’s right to live.”

Not all of them were this ridiculous, though. The Ayn Rand Institute was offering ten thousand dollars for an essay on *The Fountainhead*. This lucrative offer landed in his “maybe” pile, and this was not the first time he had ever almost read Rand. He told himself it was because he didn’t agree with objectivism, but it was more because things hadn’t turned out well with the girl who had introduced him to it.

Apparently, ten thousand dollars is the cost of denial.

Most of the fiction contests were ridiculous. A group calling itself Fantastic Kids! was offering a two hundred dollar scholarship for the topic “my summer vacation to SPACE”, while KidPub was offering fifty dollars for a fictional “Abraham Lincoln tribute” of no more than five hundred words.

The more contests Mario read, the more frustrated he got, and the more savagely he threw the wadded up balls of paper at his wall. He knew with absolute certainty that not all writing contests were so inane. Universities, international organizations, the ACLU, publishing companies promoting their image—surely organizations like these were offering contests that would interest a high school student with half a brain.

Mario was almost ready to throw the entire pile away when he came upon this:

The Illinois Writers' Alliance Second Annual Creative Writing Contest

The Illinois Writers' Alliance welcomes any junior high or high school writer between age 13 and 18 to submit a short creative work to our second annual creative writing contest. Scholarships will be offered to the three best entries: First Prize: \$1000, second prize: \$250, third prize: \$100. All entries will also be published in *The Savant*, a small, student-only publication sponsored by the IWA.

Topic: Anxiety.

Length: Unspecified

Genre: Creative fiction, creative non-fiction, or poetry

Due Date: November 11th, 1998.

It was the topic that really grabbed him. No prompt, no voiced agenda, no frills whatsoever: just a single, intriguing noun: *anxiety*. Mario knew that tens of thousands of American children were addressing that topic in their journals that day, and that their parents were whispering about it to their friends. A brilliant choice of topic, really, and one that Mario could not ignore.

Being perpetually grounded afforded Mario ample time to work on his project, but actually beginning proved to be the hardest part. Mario wrote at least a dozen first paragraphs, each one deleted more quickly than the last. He wanted his protagonist to be both fat and scrawny, male and female, funny and depressed. Each attempted combination worked on a strictly narrative level, but none felt like real people.

Eventually, Mario decided to base his story on a real person. He'd always had trouble doing this, afraid that the person might not like how they were presented, and this fear was absent when writing about people he had not yet met.

Mario had just written "Barry woke up invisible on a Friday morning" when his mother abruptly opened his door.

"Mario," she said, "get off the internet. We need to talk."

He thought at first she was angry. When he turned to face her, though, he saw that she had been crying again. He was on his feet immediately, hugging her while she wept.

She backed away after a minute or so, awkwardly wiping tears off the sides of her nose. "Some mother I am," she sniffled, "I'm supposed to be yelling at you right now."

"What'd your damn son do this time?" Mario asked gently.

"You know what I'm talking about. You've been lashing out at school, you don't respect your teachers, and Quinton says you never even talk anymore."

"I'm sorry, Mom. I guess I haven't been adjusting to high school that well."

"It's okay, it's okay." She faked a smile, then starting rubbing tears again. "I know school's hard, especially for you. I could tell that junior high was a problem, but I knew that you were a tough kid and that you'd do just fine. Did you do fine?"

"Yeah Mom, I did fine."

"Are you depressed?"

Mario's heart sank a little. There was a very specific tone that his mother's voice took when it borrowed words from other mouths, and she was using that tone when she said "depressed." She'd been talking to someone, probably Counselor Warner.

"No," he said firmly, "I am not depressed."

"Are you sure? I know you started smoking, and I've heard that sudden changes like that can mean that—"

"—heard from who, Mom?"

"What do you mean?"

"Heard from who? Who's been talking to you about depression?"

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

“This isn’t about anyone but you, Mario. It’s you that I’m worried about.”

“But Mom, it is about people other than me. It’s about you too—what’s got you so choked up?”

“No, I’m your mother. I know being a mother’s hard. But as mature as you are for your age, you’re still just a boy. You don’t know how hard life can be yet.”

The conversation was spinning rapidly out of control, and Mario still didn’t know what ugly truth was at the heart of it. “Why are you crying?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, doing better at her fake smile and trying to retreat back toward the kitchen. “I just worry about you.”

Mario followed her halfway to the kitchen, but gave up when he saw her shutting her bedroom door behind her. He stepped slowly back to his room, where he sat back down to his computer.

He tried typing more of his story, but all he managed was to tap the “m” key a few dozen times. He heard the flick of her lighter and knew she was smoking away some of this mysterious stress. In acknowledgment of her pain, he lit one in his room as well, cracking his window to keep the smell from lingering.

An Instant Message popped up in front of his one-sentence short story.

Running in Circles: sup?

Kinda Ambiguous: running in circles

Running in Circles: heh, that’s kinda ambiguous

Kinda Ambiguous: my mom’s crying

Running in Circles: oh?

Kinda Ambiguous: yeah. i gotta go

Running in Circles: wait

Kinda Ambiguous: what?

Running in Circles: what are you doing tonight?

Mario rubbed his temples and blew smoke onto his monitor. This happened far too frequently when he was trying to write.

Kinda Ambiguous: why?

Running in Circles: what do you mean, why?

Running in Circles: i just want to hang out with you

Kinda Ambiguous: i told you i was grounded

Running in Circles: yeah, but this is a special occasion

Kinda Ambiguous: try telling my mom that

Running in Circles: you told me just the other day that your mom loves all your girlfriends

Kinda Ambiguous: you're my girlfriend now?

Running in Circles: *nah, i'm you're dirty little whore*

Kinda Ambiguous: wow.

Running in Circles: *if you come over tonight, i'll suck your dick*

Kinda Ambiguous: say that without the italics, and i'll see what i can do

Running in Circles: if you come over tonight, i'll suck your dick

"Mario?" Katie called from the other side of the door.

"Yeah Mom?" he said, minimizing the window.

"They want you to see a child psychologist."

Mario's voice rose considerably. "What?!"

"I think it might be a good idea."

"How could that possibly be a good idea?"

"You know I love you more than anything. But I'm so afraid that I'm going to ruin your life by not giving you the opportunities you need." She was crying again. Maybe she hadn't stopped.

"You did a great job raising me," he said with absolute conviction. "You gave me more opportunities than most parents do, and I'm damn lucky to have had you as a mother."

Mario was repeating himself. He would tell her that exact same thing nine years in the future, less than a week before he became fifteen again. It had been a powerful moment for them, and she had responded by telling him how proud she was.

“You’re just a kid, Mario. I can’t be done raising you yet.”

“Why not? What if you just did that good of a job?”

“There’s no way. You haven’t even been in high school for a year yet. You might not even finish if you don’t get your act together.”

“Like they’re going to kick me out for smoking. Half the school smokes.”

“I know you’ve been smoking weed.”

Mario sighed. She was three years early on this revelation. “Why don’t you just ground me then?”

“The Principal knows too.”

“How?”

“This is Taylorville. Word gets around. You have no idea how much people talk about you.”

“I don’t have any. They can’t kick me out on a rumor.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“I am. I have rights.”

“Kids don’t have as many rights as you think they do.”

“But the law—“

“—Mario,” she interrupted sternly, “you’re set to get in a lot more trouble if you don’t agree to see a doctor.”

He weighed his options and found himself wishing he could have predicted this. Was he really in a position to get in that much trouble over some pot and cigarettes? And who had been saying what to his mother?

“Mom, do *you* think I’m crazy?”

“Oh honey, of course I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“But you want me to see a psychologist.”

“Would you do it for me?”

Why did she have to put it that way?

"Yeah," he said quietly. "I'd do it for you. One condition, though."

"What is it?"

"Under no circumstances, even if it means getting kicked out of school or put into juvie or burned by an angry mob, will I take pills."

"I thought you liked drugs."

Mario laughed despite himself, pulling Katie along for the joke. "I don't do anything harsher than weed, and I'm not planning to. Those pills they hand out will kill me."

"What pills are you talking about?"

"Come on, you know what I'm talking about. Zoloft. Ritalin. Adderall. Those designer drugs that they're giving all the kids now for ADD and ADHD and depression and all that. Surely you know someone whose kids are doped up on them."

"But what if you really had ADD?"

She had that tone again. ADD had been mentioned to her, and she was considering the possibility.

"That's my condition. I understand that you're worried about me, and even if they diagnose me with ADD, I want you to support my decision to not take any medicine for it."

"Why does it matter so much?"

"Because, even if you don't believe me, I really like who I've become because of you. If they put me on meds, it will change who I am. I've seen it happening to a lot of people at school, and I refuse to be sedated into behaving. I'd rather go to detention. Or jail. Or hell."

Katie stood in his doorway for awhile, thinking carefully about what he'd just said.

"Okay. No pills."

"Thanks. Just let me know when it's time for me to see the shrink."

"Do you want me to be there with you?"

"It's okay, I'll be fine alone. I'll let you know how it goes."

She started to back away from his door, clearly exhausted from their conversation. He felt terrible for her, and worse still for how powerless he was to comfort her. This was new territory for him: never, in his entire life, had his mother tried to send him to a psychologist.

He turned back to the computer, where a flashing box showed that Veronica had been talking to him.

Running in Circles: can you sneak out at 9?

Running in Circles: *quit playing hard to get*

Running in Circles: Mario?

Running in Circles: you there?

Running in Circles: lol

Running in Circles: Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario

Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario

Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario

Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario Mario

Mario Mario Mario

Running in Circles: fuck you

An Instant Messenger notification was written in blue below her last message.

Running in Circles has logged off.

I think maybe it was for the best.

XIII

The Blow Job

Veronica was in her basement, drawing pictures in her sketchbook on the couch.

“What the fuck happened?” she asked.

“My mom wants me to see a shrink,” he answered.

Veronica stood up, wove her way past the hanging bicycles, and kissed him. Her lips were wetter than he expected, leaving a trail of sweet-smelling saliva around his mouth. Her hands held his shoulders awkwardly, keeping him just far enough away that the tips of her breasts only slightly brushed his chest.

“No tongue this time?,” Mario asked playfully.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I liked it.”

“About your Mom.”

“Oh. It’s okay. It’s not her fault.”

“How is it not her fault?”

“She doesn’t know any better. She’s scared—I’m growing up too fast for her.”

“It’s her job to deal with it, not some shrink’s.”

“It’s not her job. Her job is working at Cub Food’s. This is something she chooses to do, and failing it would hurt her much more than losing her job would.”

“Why do you like her so much?”

“I like who I am. She’s a part of that.”

Veronica bit her lower lip while smiling.

“I don’t get you at all,” she said.

“We’ll get there.”

Mario felt strange using the future tense. *We'll get there.* Short for *we will get there.* *Will*, as in it hadn't happened yet. Free will to choose which mistakes he'd rather make. It was as terrifying as he remembered, saying *will* without certainty.

"How do you know?" Veronica asked.

"We're good communicators."

"But I just said I *don't* get you."

"You don't get me *yet*. Have you noticed how quickly we talk?"

"Absolutely."

"How we feed off our gestures and eye contact?"

"And how you appreciate it when I come up with new gestures when we chat?"

"The italics."

"*The italics.*"

Mario sat on the couch. Her weed was on the table, as well as her black-and-yellow pipe. She packed it while they spoke of friends on pills. Names were dropped, names of little interest to those outside of Taylorville High.

"Zolof is the worst of them," Mario said. "It's bad science. They found out that people who are depressed have low levels of serotonin. So they pump them full of the stuff. They didn't even stop to ask if maybe serotonin is what you make when you're happy, not what *makes* you happy."

"Shhhh," she whispered, handing him the pipe.

As they smoked, Mario thought more and more about their last internet conversation. He had slipped out of his house to be with her, and she had promised something in return. The thought began when he watched her lips settle around the pipe, and they travelled from his eyes to his twenty-four year-old brain down his uninjured spine to press up against the inside of his underwear.

He kissed her when that happened, waiting mere seconds before bringing a hand to her breasts. He loved how awkwardly his back was positioned, twisted in a way that would have brought him to tears in his older body. But his fifteen year-old form could bend and writhe, with one knee on the concrete floor and one pressing between Veronica's legs, with his back twisting serpentine to let him nuzzle stomach and breasts and neck and lips and hair and ear and eyelash.

Veronica slowed him down as he slipped his hand under her shirt. "How many people have you done this with?" she asked.

"None yet," he said with a sly smile.

"Oh. You've got instincts."

"It's because we communicate," he lied.

Her shirt landed on one of the many bikes hanging from the ceiling, looking powerfully erotic to Mario's sidelong glance. She wore no bra, and though her breasts were small they responded well to his fingers and tongue. He liked how he could actually feel the texture of areolas again, how his undamaged nerves let him trace every goosebump and drop of sweat.

She liked when he bit her ear. "Jesus," she told him.

He growled back to her, "the late J.C. has nothing to do with it."

She laughed until he kissed her again.

His spine was responding well to his dry thrusts into her crotch. He had been holding up his torso with it for five minutes and it showed no signs of giving out.

She kissed his neck, but they were tiny kisses that didn't particularly arouse him. His mind wandered to his bizarre situation, and he thought of how this would be the single most horrible time to wake up, if he turned out to still be dreaming. The thought led to a vague panic, which in turn led to him pushing her back down on the couch to make sure she was still there.

She was, and she pulled him back down to her.

Mario remembered a time when he could make out with a girl for hours. He imagined he still could, but he also yearned for the uncanny intimacy that sex could bring. That degree of acceptance from another person was incredibly intoxicating—it was the ultimate compliment, the most believable "yes" you could say to another person.

He settled his hand onto the top of her blue jeans, twisting the button with mock difficulty.

She put his hands on his wrists. He feared he had gone too far, as he recognized this as a universal gesture for no. With bitter resentment, he wondered if she was afraid that he might rape her.

"Have you asked me out yet?" she asked.

"I can," he answered, pulling his hands away from her pants to place on her forearms.

“Not if I do first.”

“Go ahead.”

“You’re my boyfriend now.”

She bent forward at the waist and kissed him again. This time, she coiled her arms around his neck, catching his nape inside her elbow. Her body moved with passionate certainty, as though to comfort him in the face of her sexual rejection.

“Take off your pants,” she said.

“Was that italicized?”

“Fine. Don’t take off your pants.”

He slid off the couch, and she joined him in standing. He felt awkward and more than a little embarrassed.

“You don’t need to do this,” he said.

“It’s okay, she answered, kissing him on the shoulder and smiling up through her eyelashes.

Veronica crouched nimbly, grabbing him with one hand and a bicycle with the other. He reached up to steady himself, finding a handlebar for one hand and a rafter for the other. The sounds of her wet mouth were offset by the pretty tinkling of bicycle chains.

He almost lasted a minute. He muttered “it’s happening” a few seconds before, but she did not back away. As he came, he wondered what reasoning went into the decision to swallow or not. He’d swallowed for his one successful college blow job, more out of curiosity than desire. Ultimately, he’d decided that it didn’t matter to him in the slightest, and that he’d give his partner what he wanted since it didn’t really matter.

Did Veronica reach the same conclusion, perhaps, and assumed that all men wanted her to swallow?

But it had been her decision to begin this blow job, and that raised similar questions.

But he knew that she had been influenced by dozens of social pressures before he had even entered the picture.

And when she was done swallowing, she stoop and kissed him lightly, more lightly than most girls who had kissed him after oral sex. He enjoyed the texture of her kiss—simple and probing, she was giving him the option of how to return it.

“Your turn?” he offered.

“That’s okay. Can we sit down on the couch?”

Mario hesitated before saying, “sure.”

He pulled his pants on and settled onto the couch. She curled up to him, still topless, and ran a finger along the top of his thigh.

“I wasn’t sure you were serious on the computer earlier,” he said.

“I don’t lie.”

“What?”

She leaned up to look him in the eye. “I don’t lie,” she repeated. “I told you that I’d suck your dick if you came over, and I did.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to. I decided that when I typed to you.”

Mario wasn’t sure whether her convictions were naive or inspirational. Regardless, he didn’t measure up to them.

“You know, I lie sometimes. Is that okay?”

“Not really.”

“Why do you hate lying so much?”

“My parents lied to me about pretty much everything.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you compare that to me and my mom?”

“I’d rather not answer that question.”

“I thought I was your boyfriend now. Don’t I have a right to know?”

She sat straight, taking her hands completely off him. "Fine. I think it's ridiculous. You're fifteen. You shouldn't like your mom so much. I think you're lying to yourself about her, and that's the only reason I let you lie to me about it too."

"You don't even know my mom."

"She thinks you're crazy. I *know* you're not crazy. You're the sanest person I've ever met."

Mario thought to deflect the compliment with a joke, but he already knew that it would be insulting. It would be like accusing her of lying, that thing she somehow didn't do.

"You're not going to let them put you on pills are you?"

The question made his heart skip. She was so much more empathetic than he was. She didn't even know the future, yet still she seemed like a prophet.

"No... I told her that was my one condition for seeing the shrink—that she had to support my decision to not do pills."

"What'd she say?"

"'I thought you liked drugs.' "

Veronica laughed, and leaned back to rest her head on his chest.

"Do you believe her?"

"Yeah. I feel that if she senses my trust, she'll be less likely to change her mind."

"And if you're wrong?"

"I don't know what I'd do then."

They soon dropped the subject.

Was it criminal? To what degree was he a boy, and to what degree was he a man? Had you asked me before Mario went back, I might not have been so conflicted. I would have told you yes, it's criminal—as criminal as Humbert Humbert but requiring much less guile. But even the narrator of Nabakov's novel had his redeeming values, and most of my friends who have read him found at least some empathy for him.

But now, I have trouble calling Mario an adult. For all intents and purposes, he seems to have become a boy again, albeit an educated and manipulative one. Perhaps we can blame the hormones on his

failure—even if he does have the same physical brain as when he was twenty-four, it may not have been exposed to the same levels of testosterone and adrenaline.

But this is bad science; I *want* it to be hormones. The alternative is that this twisted doppelganger I call Mario is acting only as he is built to act, that he is progressing through a series of choices that, on some level, make perfect sense to anyone who knows me well enough. I wanted so hard to admire him, to revel in his victories while whispering unheard through my keyboard that, dear self, you didn't think it'd be that easy?

But what use would my comfort be when my only advantage is the ability to reflect upon my own stupidity?

XIV

A Diagnosis

“Did my mother tell you the conditions of my visit, Dr. Fitzpatrick?”

“What exactly do you mean, Mario?”

“The pills—did she tell you about the pills?”

“She told me that you were reluctant to take any—“

“—no. Not just reluctant. I absolutely will not take any pills. I like my brain.”

“Well, we do not prescribe medicines lightly, but I will keep your wishes in mind.”

Fitzpatrick couldn't have been more than five years older than Mario had once been. He was clearly going for the “approachable older brother” look—longish hair, light beard, pierced ear. His office sent the same message: band posters on the walls, baseball on the shelf, and a comedic Magic 8-Ball and other toys on his desk.

His face, at least, was sincerely unresponsive. Mario had expected half grins and knowing nods, but for the moment he was actually looking at his patient like he was someone he had first met.

He was handsome, too, with a solid neck and groomed nails. The earring added a nice touch, and Mario imagined that he might even have a tattoo hidden professionally on his back or leg.

Mario found it unfortunate that this man was obviously his enemy.

“If you don't mind me asking, why do pills bother you so much?”

“My mind's really important to me. I've spent years pumping information into it so I could make educated decisions, and I don't want to force it into a false pattern of thought.”

“You've clearly thought about this a lot.”

“You have to these days. Parents have always been worried that their kids were acting up too much and ruining their futures, and then these designer drugs come along to offer them complacent kids at a cost.”

“Where did you get all this information? Do you have a friend or family member—“

“—like I said,” Mario interrupted, “you have to know this information. It’s irresponsible not to, and it’s not like the drug companies don’t *want* us to spend money on their product.”

Fitzpatrick chewed his lip thoughtfully. Mario liked that he wasn’t trying to steer him back on course after his little rant.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“You just did,” Mario said, “one more shouldn’t hurt.”

“I see that you care a lot about this subject. Has anyone you know been affected by these ‘designer drugs’?”

“They’re working on it. I think they’ve got another few years before their world falls out from under them, though.”

“You sound very certain.”

“The signs are there, if you know how to look for them.”

“Do you think your friends are mentally unstable?”

“No.”

“But others do?”

“Yes.”

Fitzpatrick jotted something down in a notebook. Mario thought about jumping up to snatch it from him, to see what about their recent exchange warranted a line in his case history. His attitude fell somewhere between angry and curious.

“Do you have any other thoughts on designer drugs that you’d like to share with me?” Fitzpatrick asked.

Mario glanced at the clock.

“We still have plenty of time,” Fitzpatrick assured him.

“Yeah, it must suck that they only give you one hour sessions.”

“Why would it suck?”

“Do they make you guys read Jacques Lacan?”

“Have you read about Lacan?”

“I’ve read Lacan. And stop answering everything I say with a question.”

"That's fine. Just a warning, though: I'll probably slip up and ask a question."

"Go ahead. Just don't be such a shrink about it."

"I'll try."

Mario smiled and nodded, feeling like he'd gained some kind of an upper hand.

"Your school seems worried about you," Fitzpatrick said. "You've gotten in trouble for smoking, cutting class, and getting in some pretty serious arguments with teachers and students. If you'd allow it, I'd like to talk about these incidents and how you feel about them."

"Damn," Mario said, "not bad. You really know your way around a question mark."

"Thank you."

"I'm going to ask you a few more questions before I start talking about these incidents, though."

"That's fine."

"Question one: are you legally allowed to tell other people about these sessions?"

"Not unless you are an immediate danger to yourself or others."

"And what do I have to do to be labeled an 'immediate danger'?"

"There's several criteria. Mostly, it's my choice."

Mario leaned back in his chair. He figured that he'd have to do something pretty serious to become an 'immediate danger', but he remembered also that one of his friends had endured an intervention from his mother and teachers where they sent him straight from the school to the psyche ward.

"Question two: what is your policy on sex and drugs?"

"Sex and drugs... well, this is your time here. You can talk about whatever you want. Experimenting with sex and drugs is a fairly common part of growing up, too."

"Yeah, but sometimes the establishment gets to believing some pretty ridiculous things."

"Psychological medicine has gone a long way since then."

"And if it hadn't, you'd still be telling me that."

"I suppose that'd be true. Also, I can't force you to trust me anymore than I can force you to speak to me."

"You ever had someone sit through an entire session without talking?"

“Well, I’m ordinarily not supposed to talk about other patients, but yes, it’s happened quite a few times. You’re actually one of the more talkative young men I’ve met with.”

“It’s because I’m not afraid of you.”

“You’re not afraid of me?”

“Yeah. I’m sure most kids come in here absolutely terrified, thinking that you hold their fate in your hands just because you have a doctorate. I know my rights, though, and I know that there’s only so much you can force me to do. You’re like a cop without a warrant—you can’t search my trunk.”

“That’s very interesting. So interesting that I had to try very hard not to ask you a question about it.”

“Was it a probing question, Doctor?”

“Oh, very much so.”

Mario sighed playfully—he was beginning to enjoy this. “Go ahead.”

“What are your thoughts on authority? You seem to be mistrustful of both your school and me.”

“I’m not answering that.”

“That’s fine. I hope that you plan on telling me why, though.”

“I’m not answering that because you’re just humoring me. You wouldn’t be asking me if I had a problem with authority if I was an adult protecting his rights instead of a kid who ‘lashes out’ at school.”

“You don’t really know that, Mario.”

“Don’t adults also ask about confidentiality?”

“I’m not answering that,” echoed Fitzpatrick.

“Guess we’re at a stand-off then. What else do you want to know about me?”

“Whatever you feel like telling me.”

Mario waved his finger at the psychologist with a half-smile. “You’re a sneaky fucker, man.”

“Fucker?”

“Oh come on. It’s good that I’m talking to you with my natural language, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

“You’re going to have to ask me about something. I’ve led an interesting life.”

“Then tell me something interesting about your life.”

"Well, I got a blow job last night."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. From my new girlfriend."

"What's her name?"

"Veronica. I met her in Saturday detention."

"That must have been interesting."

"Yeah, it was. We smoked a cigarette afterwards. I guess she heard that I'd been caught smoking and wanted to get in on the action."

"So she likes that you smoke?"

"Yeah. She's got *problems* with authority too."

"A good match, then?"

"You're doing that question thing again."

"Sorry. She must be a good match for you?"

"I can still hear the question mark."

"She must be a good match for you."

"She is."

"That's good to hear."

Mario leaned away from the conversation again. Fitzpatrick was good, he gave him that. The psychologist probably also understood that he might get several more chances to crack his new patient's shell. And, for all his professional questioning, he was still showing a pleasant amount of wit.

"Can you tell me a bit about yourself, Doctor?"

"Sure. I don't have any kids, but I hope to have some after I get married next year. I got my undergraduate at Western, then transferred to the University of Illinois for my doctorate. I've been practicing here for about two years now."

"You always want to be a shrink?"

"Not until college. I was a theatre major first, but I changed my mind sophomore year."

"Sounds like a good career move. Hard to support kids on most actors' salaries."

"That wasn't why I switched."

“Why then?”

“Like you said, I wanted to help people.”

“Go figure.”

“You sound skeptical.”

“Not really. Now that you mention it, you do seem like the kind of guy who’d be into acting.”

“I can’t tell if that was meant as an insult.”

“A little bit. I mean, you seem pretty aware of how I’m seeing you right now, and that kind of awareness can make a difference on a stage.”

“Yeah, I was pretty good.”

They shared a laugh at his subtle arrogance. Even if he was acting, Mario figured he was doing good enough to deserve getting somewhere.

“I think I’m too old,” Mario said.

Fitzpatrick immediately eased his face into a look of calm observance, nodding his head slightly to prompt his patient to keep talking.

“When I got caught smoking, I didn’t even worry about getting in trouble. I just took it in perspective. I thought about how many other kids smoked in the school, and I thought about how detentions wouldn’t really affect my grades or my chances to get into college, and I just couldn’t care.”

“And you think that is an adult perspective on things?”

“Yeah, yeah I do. Most of the kids in my class can’t see more than a few inches past their noses. Their problems get magnified because they haven’t survived enough of them yet—they haven’t learned that getting dumped or missing a party isn’t going to destroy their lives.”

Fitzpatrick listened carefully to make sure Mario was done talking. “Is Veronica one of these kids?”

Mario had to think about that one. “I’m not sure. I hope not.”

“You hope not?”

“Yeah. I mean, in the very least, I feel like I might be able to help her through the process.”

“Interesting. So your new relationship is pretty special?”

"It doesn't have to be. I'm not the center of the universe."

"Ah ha. Another 'adult' perspective, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah. Adult."

Mario glanced around the office. He was feeling uncomfortable again.

"Any chance I can smoke a cigarette in here?"

"I'm afraid not. My colleagues might see it as unprofessional."

"Fair enough."

Fitzpatrick was looking out at nothingness, apparently reaching for the proper phrasing for his next question.

"I know what you're thinking," Mario interrupted. "You're thinking that the cigarettes probably have something to do with my whole wanting to be an adult thing. And as for how I feel about that, I feel that you're absolutely right."

"How did you know that was what I was thinking?"

"Elementary, my dear Fitzpatrick."

"You read a lot of books, don't you?"

"You have no idea."

"Yes I do. Your Principal told me that you were an exceptionally well-read student."

"That's flattering."

"And I can already tell that you enjoy talking about what you read."

"I can't tell if that's supposed to be an insult."

"It's not."

Mario nodded and glanced at the clock. He'd passed the halfway mark—only twenty-five minutes to go.

"So what do I have, Doctor?"

"I rarely hand out diagnoses. Most of the time I just try to listen and help where I can."

"That's sweet of you."

The psychologist smiled to show that he accepted the compliment. He scribbled down a few notes as well, and Mario imagined that he was recording Mario's concern with his diagnosis. That, he imagined, was probably relevant.

"I notice that you keep looking at the clock. Do you want this session to be over?"

"Eh, I figure it'll look better for me if I stay the whole time."

"Do you really think that?"

"I see what you're doing. If you can get me to say that I don't really want to leave yet, then I'll be in a more positive state of mind regarding this session. You're trying to trick me into thinking that I actually want to be here."

"You seem very certain of yourself."

Back on his computer, Mario toyed with his story some more. "The Day Barry Turned Invisible" had drifted to the backburner in the midst of child psychology and a new girlfriend. He thought about scrapping the project, but he knew that was a slippery slope that a twenty-four year-old like him knew how to avoid.

Leaving his instant messenger off, he began to type. As he got further into the story, Mario found that the scenes practically wrote themselves. To write about social anxiety, all Mario had to do was juxtapose his current life at Taylorville High School with his old personality. Turning invisible would naturally give him the ability to watch people without the fear of being watched. So Mario just painted pictures of the people he could most easily imagine hating from across the room: conspicuously sexy girls, rednecks, drunk frat boys.

Quinton interrupted his writing briefly, wanting to know how the meeting with Dr. Fitzpatrick went. Mario was purposefully evasive, not really wanting to lose his momentum. The story was already at four pages, and he was already fantasizing about how great it'd be if it somehow landed in Barry's hands before he had a chance to get so afraid of people.

Mario was smoking and typing furiously when his Mom got home. She peeked in his room, did not mention the cigarette, and asked if he was hungry.

"Nah, I'm on a roll," he said.

"That's fine. Don't let me interrupt your homework."

Mario turned to face her, smiling proudly.

"It's not homework. I'm writing a story."

"Oh, what's it about?"

"It's about a guy who doesn't like people until he turns invisible."

"That sounds really creative."

She was humoring him, and he knew it, but she still managed to sound proud.

"I'm entering it into a writing contest. They're offering scholarships for the best ones—pretty cool huh?"

"That's wonderful, Mario."

"You okay, Mom?"

"Yeah, I'm fine honey. You think you'll be hungry for spaghetti later?"

"Sure. Whenever you're hungry, though."

"I had a pretty big lunch. Is seven okay?"

"Yeah, seven's fine."

She shut his door and called back to him through it. "I just hope my sauce turns out as good as yours!" she shouted.

"Keep dreaming, Mom!" he teased back.

Mario finished the story later that night, reading through it several times to tweak his scenes and double-check his grammar. For a mostly one-day writing, it looked great.

"Do you want to be a writer?" Fitzpatrick asked him the next week.

"Yeah, but mostly I want to be an English professor."

"What is it about being an English professor that appeals to you?"

"I guess we both want to help people."

"Why not psychology, then?"

"Do I have to answer that?"

"No, not really."

Mario considered avoiding the subject, but he figured that Fitzpatrick had heard more biting insults from some of the other kids he counseled.

“Okay, I’ll cave,” Mario said. “I really don’t like psychologists. I don’t like where the business is going, with all these new medicines and so many patients that the old practice of years-long sessions is practically impossible.

“And what’s worse, I don’t really like most people I meet who are in to psychology. Most of them just seem to like it because they want to figure themselves out, not because they want to really explore the mind for the betterment of others.”

“How many people have you met who are into psychology?”

Mario stalled on this one. It would have been easy enough to explain if he had officially been to college, but it was admittedly uncommon for someone of his age.

“The internet,” he answered.

“You chat much?” Fitzpatrick asked.

“Yeah. My buddy list is full of college psyche majors and ex-girlfriends.”

“Sound exhausting.”

Mario faked a laugh, knowing that the joke would have been much more funny if it had referred to an actual truth. He flinched when he noticed that he’d laughed more than Fitzpatrick had.

“So what’s the school’s attitude on me right now?” Mario asked. “They still think I’m crazy?”

“I don’t think they ever thought you were ‘crazy,’ per se. And all I’ve heard this week is that you’ve expressed more interest in college.”

“Which is why you were asking me about my writing.”

“That’s correct.”

“Go figure. Yeah, I’m interested in college. And yeah, it’s because of my whole wanting to be an adult problem. I want to expose myself to more educated people so that I can have more educated conversations.”

“That’s understandable. I went to college for the same reason.”

“Good for you. Glad to know we’re on the same page.”

“Same page, same paragraph.”

"You know, you're really good at manipulating my desire to be an adult."

"I'm not trying to be manipulative."

"Bullshit, but I'm sure you're not supposed to show the crowd how your magic tricks work."

"You can choose not to believe me if you want."

"Abracadabra," Mario said dryly.

Fitzpatrick muted the conversation by turning his attention to his notebook, where he wrote for roughly a minute. Mario felt the psychologist was exerting his power over their situation, forcing the conversation closed with his position of authority.

"Hey, write this down: Mario thinks he can see the future."

The psychologist cocked an eyebrow, set down his notebook, and crossed his hands over the table.

"Go on. I'll write it shorthand after we've talked."

"Glad to see I've gotten your interest."

"What happens in the future, Mario?"

"Well, on September 11th, 2001, terrorists will fly hijacked planes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. This will lead to a drastic, 1984-level of backlash where the government uses our fears as an excuse for illegal wiretapping and the promotion of an expensive war that makes the rich much richer and the poor either poorer or dead in the Middle East."

"And how do you know all this?"

Mario detected a thin skepticism behind his innocent-appearing question. He'd overstepped his bounds, he knew—there's no way he could tell his psychologist that he came from the future.

"Well, I've just got a feeling on the dates, but I think we're about due to really act like idiots. We've been quietly trying to control Middle Eastern oil for a long time now, and there's bound to be a backlash in, say, the next four years."

"Interesting. Do you have any other predictions?"

"Are you writing this down? I want someone to record that I was right about these things."

Fitzpatrick started a new page on his notebook and scribbled something down. Generously, he showed Mario what he'd written. At the top, he'd written and double underlined "PREDICTIONS."

Beneath, he wrote "Terrorist attacks: 9/11/01."

“After about seven years of that bullshit, we get so pissed off at old white people that the two main contenders for the democratic party are a black guy and a white woman. And—get this—the white woman is Hilary Rodham Clinton.”

“Revenge for the Lewinsky scandal, I suppose?”

“Don’t be a dick, Doctor. We’ll remember the Clinton administration as one of the last times this country was working properly.” Mario hoped he didn’t sound genuinely displeased, as he thought Fitzpatrick had answered his joke far more satisfactorily than Quinton had.

“Sorry—I guess I don’t keep as close an eye on the news as you do.”

“Don’t be facetious. You’re supposed to be a professional.”

“I’m sorry. I suppose I’m just confused about these predictions of yours. They seem out of character.”

“What, too crazy for you?”

“You don’t usually sound this confident about things you don’t know.”

“Little do you know that I’m the next Nostradamus.”

“Can you prove this? Perhaps you could predict what will happen in the news tomorrow?”

“Maybe not tomorrow, but I can tell you that a guy named George Busen is going to kill himself next week.”

“And how do you know that?”

Mario knew that because George was a friend of the family, and because he had killed himself two days before his birthday. This had been especially troubling for Mario, not only because it had stolen the energy out of his birthday, but because he had actually been friends with George his first time through high school. This time, he hadn’t bothered, and not bothering was one of his precious few mistakes he could identify with some regret.

“It’s not too hard to predict. George is a junkie whose already pawned most of his stuff off. He’s into all the heavy stuff—coke, heroine, probably some meth. You can tell he hates being on this planet.”

“I’ll be interested to see if you’re right.”

Mario read Veronica his short story out loud that night. The Fitzpatrick sessions were starting to gnaw at him, and he realized that he'd just made things a lot more complicated with his latest prophecies. He knew it had been immature of him, but he really wanted to show his shrink that he wasn't dealing with an ordinary fifteen year-old. And he knew it'd be fine. Maybe it'd even work out for him when a mental health professional came forward with a genuine prophet.

"I don't see why he calls his mother at the end," Veronica told him.

"Why is that?"

"Well, you wrote that he had prayed to be invisible, and that his prayer was answered. That seems like it'd really change his life, but it sounds like he's having a pretty normal conversation there at the end."

"No—see, it's because he already knows what she thinks about him. He hasn't conquered his fears yet, either. He hasn't instantly figured out why being invisible makes him like people more."

"But this is proof that God exists. I think he'd pray."

"Yeah, you probably have a point. Maybe in the sequel."

Two weeks into their relationship, Mario and Veronica had already slowed down. He figured that it was his fault, considering how he'd been the one who'd forced their sexual relationship. In retrospect, taking it slow probably would have been a better idea. He hoped that letting her make the next move would repair whatever he'd broken.

They still kissed when they saw each other, and word had gotten back to him that the school knew they were together. Quinton had attempted a kind warning that Veronica might not be the right girl for him, but he knew that Quinton's future track record wasn't going to show the best taste with women. No, he wasn't going to let the rumor mill kill this relationship as it had so many others, no matter how hard it tried. If it was going to fail, he thought, it would fail on his terms.

It probably would, anyway. Soulmates or not, high school relationships tended not to work out.

Mario offered Veronica an autographed copy of his short story, assuring her that it was going to be the first of many scholarship-winners.

"I kept an eye on the papers. George didn't kill himself this week."

"How does that make you feel?" Mario asked coldly.

“Somewhat relieved, actually.”

Yeah, Mario thought, that made sense.

“I must have missed something. I was practically certain.”

“I wouldn’t beat yourself up over it. Even with a doctorate in psychology, I’ve never successfully predicted a suicide.”

“That’s morbid, Doctor.”

“My work tends to get morbid from time to time.”

“I suppose it would.”

Fitzpatrick scribbled in that notebook of his while Mario sat embarrassed. Yes, he’d been wrong, but then again, there were new variables that he hadn’t considered. It bothered him quite a bit to think that not knowing him had helped George not kill himself. He guiltily found a part of himself hoping that it had only delayed the process.

The terrorist attacks would vindicate him, he knew, but by then they might have had him locked up.

“So, do you think I’m crazy now?” Mario asked.

“No, I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“What do you think I am then?”

“I think you’re very thoughtful and creative.”

“Figures.”

Mario didn’t know this at the time, but George would still kill himself, though it took him another two weeks. For whatever reason, he would also choose to suffocate himself in carbon monoxide rather than slit his wrists.

No matter how close of attention Mario had paid to him, he would not have been able to predict this.

“The Day Barry Turned Invisible” would win third place in the contest. For this, his mother would be thrilled, but Mario would still feel cheated for having failed at cheating.

Veronica would cheat on him, lie to him about why, and he’d believe her.

Or maybe not. It's rather hard to predict these things.