CHUCK KLOSTERMAN
READING SAMPLER

CONTAINS EXCERPTS FROM:
FARGO ROCK CITY
SEX, DRUGS, AND COCOA PUDDS
KILLING YOURSELF TO LIVE
CHUCK KLOSTERMAN IV
DOWNTOWN OWL
EXCERPT FROM:

FARGO ROCK CITY
A HEAVY METAL ODYSSEY IN RURAL NORTH DAKOTA
It’s easy for me to recall the morning I was absorbed into the cult of heavy metal. As is so often the case with this sort of thing, it was all my brother’s fault.

As a painfully typical fifth-grader living in the rural Midwest, my life was boring, just like it was supposed to be. I lived five miles south of a tiny town called Wyndmere, where I spent a lot of time drinking Pepsi in the basement and watching syndicated episodes of Laverne & Shirley and Diff’rent Strokes. I killed the rest of my free time listening to Y-94, the lone Top 40 radio station transmitted out of Fargo, sixty-five miles to the north (in the horizontal wasteland of North Dakota, radio waves travel forever). This was 1983, which—at least in Fargo—was the era of mainstream “new wave” pop (although it seems the phrase “new wave” was only used by people who never actually listened to that kind of music). The artists who appear exclusively on today’s “Best of the ’80s” compilations were the dominant attractions: Madness, Culture Club, Falco, the Stray Cats, German songstress Nena, and—of course—Duran Duran (the economic backbone of Friday Night Videos’ cultural economy). The most popular song in my elementary school was Eddy Grant’s “Electric Avenue,” but that was destined to be replaced by Prince’s “Let’s Go Crazy” (which would subsequently be replaced by “Raspberry Beret”).
Obviously, popular music was not in a state of revolution, or turbulence, or even contrived horror. The only exposure anyone in Wyndmere had to punk rock was an episode of *Quincy* that focused on the rising danger of slam dancing (later, we found out that Courtney Love had made a cameo appearance in that particular program, but that kind of trivia wouldn’t be worth knowing until college). There were five hundred people in my hometown, and exactly zero of them knew about Motorhead, Judas Priest, or anything loud and British. Rock historians typically describe this as the period where hard rock moved “underground,” and that’s the perfect metaphor; the magma of heavy metal was thousands of miles below the snow-packed surface of Wyndmere, North Dakota.

Was this some kind of unadulterated tranquillity? Certainly not. As I look back, nothing seems retroactively utopian about Rick Springfield, even though others might try to tell you differently. Whenever people look back on their grammar school days, they inevitably insist that they remember feeling “safe” or “pure” or “hungry for discovery.” Of course, the people who say those things are lying (or stupid, or both). It’s revisionist history; it’s someone trying to describe how it felt to be eleven by comparing it to how it feels to be thirty-one, and it has nothing to do with how things really were. When you actually are eleven, your life always feels exhaustively normal, because your definition of “normal” is whatever is going on at the moment. You view the entire concept of “life” as your life, because you have nothing else to measure it against. Unless your mom dies or you get your foot caught in the family lawn mower, every part of childhood happens exactly as it should. It’s the only way things can happen.

That changed when my older brother returned from the army. He was on leave from Fort Benning in Georgia, and he had two cassettes in his duffel bag (both of which he would forget to take back with him when he returned to his base). The first, *Sports*, by Huey Lewis and the News, was already a known quantity (“I Want a New Drug” happened to be the song of the moment on
Y-94). However, the second cassette would redirect the path of my life: *Shout at the Devil* by Mötley Crüe.

As cliché as it now seems, I was wholly disturbed by the *Shout at the Devil* cover. I clearly remember thinking, Who the fuck are these guys? Who the fuck are these guys? And—more importantly—are these guys even guys? The blond one looked like a chick, and one of the members was named “Nikki.” Fortunately, my sister broached this issue seconds after seeing the album cover, and my brother (eleven years my senior) said, “No, they’re all guys. They’re really twisted, but it’s pretty good music.” When my brother was a senior in high school, he used to drive me to school; I remembered that he always listened to 8-tracks featuring Meat Loaf, Molly Hatchet, and what I later recognized to be old Van Halen. Using that memory as my reference point, I assumed I had a vague idea what Mötley Crüe might sound like.

Still, I didn’t listen to it. I put Huey Lewis into my brother’s trendy Walkman (another first) and fast-forwarded to all the songs I already knew. Meanwhile, I read the liner notes to *Shout at the Devil*. It was like stumbling across a copy of Anton LaVey’s *Satanic Bible* (which—of course—was a book I had never heard of or could even imagine existing). The band insisted that “This album was recorded on Foster’s Lager, Budweiser, Bombay Gin, lots of Jack Daniel’s, Kahlua and Brandy, Quakers and Krell, and Wild Women!” And they even included an advisory: Caution: *This record may contain backwards messages.* What the hell did that mean? Why would anyone do that? I wondered if my brother (or anyone in the world, for that matter) had a tape player that played cassettes backward.

The day before I actually listened to the album, I told my friends about this awesome new band I had discovered. Eleven years later I would become a rock critic and do that sort of thing all the time, so maybe this was like vocational training. Everyone seemed mildly impressed that the Crüe had a song named “Bastard.” “God Bless the Children of the Beast” also seemed promising.

Clearly, this was a cool band. Clearly, I was an idiot and so
were all my friends. It’s incredible to look back and realize how effectively the Mötley image machine operated. It didn’t occur to anyone that we were going to listen to Mötley Crüe for the same reason we all watched KISS Meets the Phantom of the Park in 1978, when we were first-graders who liked Ace Frehley for the same reasons we liked Spider-Man.

Yet I would be lying if I said the only thing we dug about Mötley Crüe was their persona. Without a doubt, their image was the catalyst for the attraction—but that wasn’t the entire equation. I say this because I also remember sitting on my bed on a Sunday afternoon and playing Shout at the Devil for the first time. This may make a sad statement about my generation (or perhaps just myself), but Shout at the Devil was my Sgt. Pepper’s.

The LP opens with a spoken-word piece called “In the Beginning.” The track doesn’t make a whole lot of sense and would seem laughable on any record made after 1992, but I was predictably (and stereotypically) bewitched. The next three songs would forever define my image of what glam metal was supposed to sound like: “Shout at the Devil,” “Looks That Kill,” and the seminal “Bastard.” Although the instrumental “God Bless the Children of the Beast” kind of wasted my precious time, the last song on side one was “Helter Skelter,” which I immediately decided was the catchiest tune on the record (fortunately, I was still a decade away from understanding irony). I was possessed, just as Tipper Gore always feared; I had no choice but to listen to these songs again. And again. And again.

It was three months before I took the time to listen to side two.

It can safely be said that few rock historians consider Shout at the Devil a “concept album.” In fact, few rock historians have ever considered Shout at the Devil in any way whatsoever (the only exception might be when J. D. Considine reviewed it for Rolling Stone and compared it to disco-era KISS). Bassist Nikki Sixx wrote virtually every song on Shout, and he probably didn’t see it as a concept record either. But for someone (read: me) who had never really listened to albums before—I had only been exposed
to singles on the radio—Shout at the Devil took on a conceptual quality that Yes would have castrated themselves to achieve. Like all great ’80s music, it was inadvertently post-modern: The significance of Shout at the Devil had nothing to do with the concepts it introduced; its significance was the concept of what it literally was.

I realize this argument could be made by anyone when they discuss their first favorite album. My sister probably saw epic ideas in the Thompson Twins. That’s the nature of an adolescent’s relationship with rock ’n’ roll. Sixx himself has described Aerosmith as “my Beatles.” Using that logic, Mötley Crüe was “my Aerosmith,” who (along these same lines) would still ultimately be “my Beatles.”

Yet this personal relationship is only half the story, and not even the half that matters. There is another reason to look at the Crüe with slightly more seriousness (the operative word here being “slightly”). As we all know, ’80s glam metal came from predictable sources: the aforementioned Aerosmith (seemingly every glam artist’s favorite band), early and midperiod KISS (duh), Alice Cooper (but not so much musically), Slade (at least according to Quiet Riot), T. Rex (more than logic would dictate), Blue Cheer (supposedly), and—of course—Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin (although those two bands had just as much effect on Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and all the Sasquatch Rockers who would rise from the Pacific Northwest when metal started to flounder). In other words, this wasn’t groundbreaking stuff, and no one is trying to argue otherwise. Sonically and visually, heavy metal was (and is) an unabashedly derivative art form.

But those sonic thefts are only half the equation, and maybe even less than that. We have to consider when this happened. The decade of the 1980s is constantly misrepresented by writers who obviously did not have the typical teen experience. If you believe unofficial Gen X spokesman Douglas Coupland (a title I realize he never asked for), every kid in the 1980s laid awake at night and worried about nuclear war. I don’t recall the fear of nuclear apocalypse being an issue for me, for anyone I knew, or for any kid who
wasn’t trying to win an essay contest. The imprint Ronald Reagan placed on Children of the ’80s had nothing to do with the escalation of the Cold War; it had more to do with the fact that he was the only president any of us could really remember (most of my information on Jimmy Carter had been learned through Real People, and—in retrospect—I suspect a bias in its news reporting).

In the attempt to paint the 1980s as some glossy, capitalistic wasteland, contemporary writers tend to ignore how unremarkable things actually were. John Hughes movies like The Breakfast Club and Sixteen Candles were perfect period pieces for their era—all his characters were obsessed with overwrought, self-centered personal problems, exactly like the rest of us. I suppose all the ’80s films about the raging arms race are culturally relevant, much in the same way that Godzilla films are interesting reflections on the atomic age. But those films certainly weren’t unsettling to anyone who didn’t know better. WarGames and the TV movie The Day After were more plausible than something like Planet of the Apes, but—quite frankly—every new movie seemed a little more plausible than the stuff made before we were born. Anything could happen and probably would (sooner or later), but nothing would really change. Nobody seemed too shocked over the abundance of nuclear warheads the Soviets pointed at us; as far as I could tell, we were supposed to be on the brink of war 24/7. That was part of being an American. I remember when Newsweek ran a cover story introducing a new breed of adults called “Yuppies,” a class of people who wore Nikes to the office and were money-hungry egomaniacs. No fifteen-year-old saw anything unusual about this. I mean, wouldn’t that be normal behavior? The single biggest influence on our lives was the inescapable sameness of everything, which is probably true for most generations.

Jefferson Morley makes a brilliant point about inflation in his 1988 essay “Twentysomething”: “For us, everything seemed normal. I remember wondering why people were surprised that prices were going up. I thought, That’s what prices did.” Consider that those sentiments come from a guy who was already in high
school during Watergate—roughly the same year I was born. To be honest, I don’t know if I’ve ever been legitimately shocked by anything, even as a third-grader in 1981. That was the year John Hinckley shot Ronald Reagan, and I wasn’t surprised at all (in fact, it seemed to me that presidential assassinations didn’t happen nearly as often as one would expect). From what I could tell, the world had always been a deeply underwhelming place; my generation inherited this paradigm, and it was perfectly fine with me (both then and now).

Mötley Crüe was made to live in this kind of world. *Shout at the Devil* injected itself into a social vortex of jaded pragmatism; subsequently, it was the best album my friends and I had ever heard. We never scoffed at the content as “contrived shock rock.” By 1983, that idea was the norm. Elvis Costello has questioned whether or not ‘80s glam metal should even be considered rock ’n’ roll, because he thinks it’s a “facsimile” of what legitimate artists already did in the past. What he fails to realize is that no one born after 1970 can possibly appreciate any creative element in rock ’n’ roll: By 1980, there was no creativity left. The freshest ideas in pop music’s past twenty years have come out of rap, and that genre is totally based on recycled, bastardized riffs. Clever facsimiles are all we really expect.

The problem with the current generation of rock academics is that they remember when rock music seemed new. It’s impossible for them to relate to those of us who have never known a world where rock ’n’ roll wasn’t everywhere, all the time. They remind me of my eleventh-grade history teacher—a guy who simply could not fathom why nobody in my class seemed impressed by the Apollo moon landing. As long as I can remember, all good rock bands told lies about themselves and dressed like freaks; that was part of what defined being a “rock star.” Mötley Crüe was a little more overt about following this criteria, but that only made me like them immediately.

In fact, I loved Mötley Crüe with such reckless abandon that I didn’t waste my time learning much about the band. I consistently mispronounced Sixx’s name wrong (I usually called him
“Nikki Stixx”), and I got Tommy Lee and Mick Mars mixed up for almost a year.

Until 1992, I didn’t even know that the cover art for the vinyl version of *Shout at the Devil* was a singular, bad-ass pentagram that was only visible when the album was held at a forty-five-degree angle. The reason this slipped under my radar was because *Shout at the Devil* was released in 1983, a period when the only people who were still buying vinyl were serious music fans. Obviously, serious music fans weren’t buying Mötley Crüe. I’ve never even seen Mötley Crüe on vinyl; I used to buy most of my music at a Pamida in Wahpeton, ND—the only town within a half hour’s drive that sold rock ’n’ roll—and the last piece of vinyl I recall noticing in the racks was the soundtrack to *Grease*. The rest of us got *Shout at the Devil* on tape. The cassette’s jacket featured the four band members in four different photographs, apparently taken on the set for the “Looks That Kill” video (which is probably the most ridiculous video ever made, unless you count videos made in Canada). By the look of the photographs, the band is supposed to be in either (a) hell, or (b) a realm that is remarkably similar to hell, only less expensive to decorate.

Like a conceptual album of the proper variety, *Shout at the Devil* opens with the aforementioned spoken-word piece “In the Beginning.” It describes an evil force (the devil?) who devastated society, thereby forcing the “youth” to join forces and destroy it (apparently by shouting in its general direction). This intro leads directly into “Shout . . . shout . . . shout . . . shout . . . shout . . . shout . . . shout at the Devil,” a textbook metal anthem if there ever was one.

Humorless Jesus freaks always accused Mötley Crüe of satanism, and mostly because of this record. But—if taken literally (a practice that only seems to happen to rock music when it shouldn’t)—the lyrics actually suggest an anti-Satan sentiment, which means Mötley Crüe released the most popular Christian rock record of the 1980s. They’re not shouting with the devil or for the devil: They’re shouting at the devil. Exactly what they’re shouting remains open to interpretation; a cynic might speculate
Tommy Lee was shouting, “In exchange for letting me sleep with some of the sexiest women in television history, I will act like a goddamn moron in every social situation for the rest of my life.” However, I suspect Sixx had more high-minded ideas. In fact, as I reconsider the mood and message of these songs, I’m starting to think he really did intend this to be a concept album, and I’m merely the first person insane enough to notice.

There are two ways to look at the messages in Shout at the Devil. The first is to say “It’s elementary antiauthority language, like every other rock record that was geared toward a teen audience. Don’t ignore the obvious.” But that kind of dismissive language suggests there’s no reason to look for significance in anything. It’s one thing to realize that something is goofy, but it’s quite another to suggest that goofiness disqualifies its significance. If anything, it expands the significance, because the product becomes accessible to a wider audience (and to the kind of audience who would never look for symbolism on its own). I think it was Brian Eno who said, “Only a thousand people bought the first Velvet Underground album, but every one of them became a musician.” Well, millions of people bought Shout at the Devil, and every single one of them remained a person (excluding the kids who moved on to Judas Priest and decided to shoot themselves in the face).

Fifteen years later, I am not embarrassed by my boyhood idolization of Mötley Crüe. The fact that I once put a Mötley Crüe bumper sticker on the headboard of my bed seems vaguely endearing. And if I hadn’t been so obsessed with shouting at the devil, the cultural context of heavy metal might not seem as clear (or as real) as it does for me today.

Through the circumstances of my profession (and without really trying), I’ve ended up interviewing many of the poofy-haired metal stars I used to mimic against the reflection of my old bedroom windows. But in 1983, the idea of talking with Nikki Sixx or Vince Neil wasn’t my dream or even my fantasy—it was something that never crossed my mind. Nikki and Vince did not seem like people you talked to. I was a myopic white kid
who had never drank, never had sex, had never seen drugs, and had never even been in a fight. Judging from the content of Shout at the Devil, those were apparently the only things the guys in Mötley Crüe did. As far as I could deduce, getting wasted with strippers and beating up cops was their full-time job, so we really had nothing to talk about.
EXCERPT FROM:

SEX, 
DRUGS, AND 
COCOA PUFFS 
A LOW CULTURE MANIFESTO
No woman will ever satisfy me. I know that now, and I would never try to deny it. But this is actually okay, because I will never satisfy a woman, either.

Should I be writing such thoughts? Perhaps not. Perhaps it’s a bad idea. I can definitely foresee a scenario where that first paragraph could come back to haunt me, especially if I somehow became marginally famous. If I become marginally famous, I will undoubtedly be interviewed by someone in the media,1 and the interviewer will inevitably ask, “Fifteen years ago, you wrote that no woman could ever satisfy you. Now that you’ve been married for almost five years, are those words still true?” And I will have to say, “Oh, God no. Those were the words of an entirely different person—a person whom I can’t even relate to anymore. Honestly, I can’t imagine an existence without _____. She satisfies me in ways that I never even considered. She saved my life, really.”

Now, I will be lying. I won’t really feel that way. But I’ll certainly say those words, and I’ll deliver them with the utmost sincerity, even though those sentiments will not be there. So then the interviewer will undoubtedly quote lines from this particular paragraph, thereby reminding me that I swore I would publicly deny my true feelings, and I’ll chuckle and say, “Come on, Mr. Rose. That was a literary device. You know I never really believed that.”

But here’s the thing: I do believe that. It’s the truth now, and it will be in the future. And while I’m not exactly happy about that truth, it doesn’t make me sad, either. I know it’s not my fault.

It’s no one’s fault, really. Or maybe it’s everyone’s fault. It

1. Hopefully Charlie Rose, if he’s still alive.
should be everyone’s fault, because it’s everyone’s problem. Well, okay . . . not everyone. Not boring people, and not the profoundly retarded. But whenever I meet dynamic, nonretarded Americans, I notice that they all seem to share a single unifying characteristic: the inability to experience the kind of mind-blowing, transcendent romantic relationship they perceive to be a normal part of living. And someone needs to take the fall for this. So instead of blaming no one for this (which is kind of cowardly) or blaming everyone (which is kind of meaningless), I’m going to blame John Cusack.

I once loved a girl who almost loved me, but not as much as she loved John Cusack. Under certain circumstances, this would have been fine; Cusack is relatively good-looking, he seems like a pretty cool guy (he likes the Clash and the Who, at least), and he undoubtedly has millions of bones in the bank. If Cusack and I were competing for the same woman, I could easily accept losing. However, I don’t really feel like John and I were “competing” for the girl I’m referring to, inasmuch as her relationship to Cusack was confined to watching him as a two-dimensional projection, pretending to be characters who don’t actually exist. Now, there was a time when I would have thought that detachment would have given me a huge advantage over Johnny C., inasmuch as my relationship with this woman included things like “talking on the phone” and “nuzzling under umbrellas” and “eating pancakes.” However, I have come to realize that I perceived this competition completely backward; it was definitely an unfair battle, but not in my favor. It was unfair in Cusack’s favor. I never had a chance.

It appears that countless women born between the years of 1965 and 1978 are in love with John Cusack. I cannot fathom how he isn’t the number-one box-office star in America, because every straight girl I know would sell her soul to share a milkshake with that motherfucker. For upwardly mobile women in their twenties and thirties, John Cusack is the neo-Elvis. But here’s what none of these upwardly mobile women seem to realize: They don’t love John Cusack. They love Lloyd Dobler. When
they see Mr. Cusack, they are still seeing the optimistic, charmingly loquacious teenager he played in *Say Anything*, a movie that came out more than a decade ago. That’s the guy they think he is; when Cusack played Eddie Thomas in *America’s Sweethearts* or the sensitive hit man in *Grosse Pointe Blank*, all his female fans knew he was only acting . . . but they assume when the camera stopped rolling, he went back to his genuine self . . . which was someone like Lloyd Dobler . . . which was, in fact, someone who is Lloyd Dobler, and someone who continues to have a storybook romance with Diane Court (or with Ione Skye, depending on how you look at it). And these upwardly mobile women are not alone. We all convince ourselves of things like this—not necessarily about *Say Anything*, but about any fictionalized portrayals of romance that happen to hit us in the right place, at the right time. This is why I will never be completely satisfied by a woman, and this is why the kind of woman I tend to find attractive will never be satisfied by me. We will both measure our relationship against the prospect of fake love.

Fake love is a very powerful thing. That girl who adored John Cusack once had the opportunity to spend a weekend with me in New York at the Waldorf-Astoria, but she elected to fly to Portland instead to see the first U.S. appearance by Coldplay, a British pop group whose success derives from their ability to write melodramatic alt-rock songs about fake love. It does not matter that Coldplay is absolutely the shittiest fucking band I’ve ever heard in my entire fucking life, or that they sound like a mediocre photocopy of Travis (who sound like a mediocre photocopy of Radiohead), or that their greatest fucking artistic achievement is a video where their blandly attractive frontman walks on a beach on a cloudy fucking afternoon. None of that matters. What matters is that Coldplay manufactures fake love as frenetically as the Ford fucking Motor Company manufactures Mustangs, and that’s all this woman heard. “For you I bleed myself dry,” sang their blockhead vocalist, brilliantly informing us that stars in the sky are, in fact, yellow. How am I going to compete with that shit? That
sleepy-eyed bozo isn’t even making sense. He’s just pouring fabricated emotions over four gloomy guitar chords, and it ends up sounding like love. And what does that mean? It means she flies to fucking Portland to hear two hours of amateurish U.K. hyperslop, and I sleep alone in a $270 hotel in Manhattan, and I hope Coldplay gets fucking dropped by fucking EMI and ends up like the Stone fucking Roses, who were actually a better fucking band, all things considered.

Not that I’m bitter about this. Oh, I concede that I may be taking this particular example somewhat personally—but I do think it’s a perfect illustration of why almost everyone I know is either overtly or covertly unhappy. Coldplay songs deliver an amorphous, irrefutable interpretation of how being in love is supposed to feel, and people find themselves wanting that feeling for real. They want men to adore them like Lloyd Dobler would, and they want women to think like Aimee Mann, and they expect all their arguments to sound like Sam Malone and Diane Chambers. They think everything will work out perfectly in the end (just like it did for Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones and Nick Hornby’s Rob Fleming), and they don’t stop believing, because Journey’s Steve Perry insists we should never do that. In the nineteenth century, teenagers merely aspired to have a marriage that would be better than that of their parents; personally, I would never be satisfied unless my marriage was as good as Cliff and Clair Huxtable’s (or at least as enigmatic as Jack and Meg White’s).

Pundits are always blaming TV for making people stupid, movies for desensitizing the world to violence, and rock music for making kids take drugs and kill themselves. These things should be the least of our worries. The main problem with mass media is that it makes it impossible to fall in love with any acumen of normalcy. There is no “normal,” because everybody is being twisted by the same sources simultaneously. You can’t compare your relationship with the playful couple who lives next door, because they’re probably modeling themselves after Chandler Bing and Monica Geller. Real people are actively trying to live like
fake people, so real people are no less fake. Every comparison becomes impractical. This is why the impractical has become totally acceptable; impracticality almost seems cool. The best relationship I ever had was with a journalist who was as crazy as me, and some of our coworkers liked to compare us to Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen. At the time, I used to think, “Yeah, that’s completely valid: We fight all the time, our love is self-destructive, and—if she was mysteriously killed—I’m sure I’d be wrongly arrested for second-degree murder before dying from an overdose.” We even watched Sid & Nancy in her parents’ basement and giggled the whole time. “That’s us,” we said gleefully. And like I said—this was the best relationship I ever had. And I suspect it was the best one she ever had, too.

Of course, this media transference is not all bad. It has certainly worked to my advantage, just as it has for all modern men who look and talk and act like me. We all owe our lives to Woody Allen. If Woody Allen had never been born, I’m sure I would be doomed to a life of celibacy. Remember the aforementioned woman who loved Cusack and Coldplay? There is absolutely no way I could have dated this person if Woody Allen didn’t exist. In tangible terms, she was light-years out of my league, along with most of the other women I’ve slept with. But Woody Allen changed everything. Woody Allen made it acceptable for beautiful women to sleep with nerdy, bespectacled goofballs; all we need to do is fabricate the illusion of intellectual humor, and we somehow have a chance. The irony is that many of the women most susceptible to this scam haven’t even seen any of Woody’s movies, nor would they want to touch the actual Woody Allen if they ever had the chance (especially since he’s proven to be an über-pervy clarinet freak). If asked, most of these foxy ladies wouldn’t classify Woody Allen as sexy, or handsome, or even likable. But this is how media devolution works: It creates an archetype that eventually dwarfs its origin. By now, the “Woody Allen Personality Type” has far greater cultural importance than the man himself.
Now, the argument could be made that all this is good for the sexual bloodstream of Americana, and that all these Women Who Want Woody are being unconsciously conditioned to be less shallow than their sociobiology dictates. Self-deprecating cleverness has become a virtue. At least on the surface, movies and television actively promote dating the nonbeautiful: If we have learned anything from the mass media, it’s that the only people who can make us happy are those who don’t strike us as being particularly desirable. Whether it’s Jerry Maguire or Sixteen Candles or Who’s the Boss or Some Kind of Wonderful or Speed Racer, we are constantly reminded that the unattainable icons of perfection we lust after can never fulfill us like the platonic allies who have been there all along. If we all took media messages at their absolute face value, we’d all be sleeping with our best friends. And that does happen, sometimes. But herein lies the trap: We’ve also been trained to think this will always work out over the long term, which dooms us to disappointment. Because when push comes to shove, we really don’t want to have sex with our friends . . . unless they’re sexy. And sometimes we do want to have sex with our blackhearted, soul-sucking enemies . . . assuming they’re sexy. Because that’s all it ever comes down to in real life, regardless of what happened to Michael J. Fox in Teen Wolf.

The mass media causes sexual misdirection: It prompts us to need something deeper than what we want. This is why Woody Allen has made nebbish guys cool; he makes people assume there is something profound about having a relationship based on witty conversation and intellectual discourse. There isn’t. It’s just another gimmick, and it’s no different than wanting to be with someone because they’re thin or rich or the former lead singer of Whiskeytown. And it actually might be worse, because an intel-

2. The notable exceptions being Vertigo (where the softhearted Barbara Bel Geddes gets jammed by sexpot Kim Novak) and My So-Called Life (where poor Brian Krakow never got any play, even though Jordan Catalano couldn’t fucking read).

3. “Sometimes” meaning “during college.”
intellectual relationship isn’t real at all. My witty banter and cerebral discourse is always completely contrived. Right now, I have three and a half dates worth of material, all of which I pretend to deliver spontaneously. This is my strategy: If I can just coerce women into the last half of that fourth date, it’s anyone’s ball game. I’ve beaten the system; I’ve broken the code; I’ve slain the Minotaur. If we part ways on that fourth evening without some kind of conversational disaster, she probably digs me. Or at least she thinks she digs me, because who she digs is not really me. Sadly, our relationship will not last ninety-three minutes (like Annie Hall) or ninety-six minutes (like Manhattan). It will go on for days or weeks or months or years, and I’ve already used everything in my vault. Very soon, I will have nothing more to say, and we will be sitting across from each other at breakfast, completely devoid of banter; she will feel betrayed and foolish, and I will suddenly find myself actively trying to avoid spending time with a woman I didn’t deserve to be with in the first place.

Perhaps this sounds depressing. That is not my intention. This is all normal. There’s not a lot to say during breakfast. I mean, you just woke up, you know? Nothing has happened. If neither person had an especially weird dream and nobody burned the toast, breakfast is just the time for chewing Cocoa Puffs and/or wishing you were still asleep. But we’ve been convinced not to think like that. Silence is only supposed to happen as a manifestation of supreme actualization, where both parties are so at

4. Here’s one example I tend to deploy on second dates, and it’s rewarded with an endearing guffaw at least 90 percent of the time: I ask the woman what religion she is. Inevitably, she will say something like, “Oh, I’m sort of Catholic, but I’m pretty lapsed in my participation,” or “Oh, I’m kind of Jewish, but I don’t really practice anymore.” Virtually everyone under the age of thirty will answer that question in this manner. I then respond by saying, “Yeah, it seems like everybody I meet describes themselves as ‘sort of Catholic’ or ‘sort of Jewish’ or ‘sort of Methodist.’ Do you think all religions have this problem? I mean, do you think there are twenty-five-year-old Amish people who say, ‘Well, I’m sort of Amish. I currently work as a computer programmer, but I still believe pants with metal zippers are the work of Satan.’”
peace with their emotional connection that it cannot be expressed through the rudimentary tools of the lexicon; otherwise, silence is proof that the magic is gone and the relationship is over (hence the phrase “We just don’t talk anymore”). For those of us who grew up in the media age, the only good silence is the kind described by the hair metal band Extreme. “More than words is all I ever needed you to show,” explained Gary Cherone on the Pornograffiti album. “Then you wouldn’t have to say that you love me, cause I’d already know.” This is the difference between art and life: In art, not talking is never an extension of having nothing to say; not talking always means something. And now that art and life have become completely interchangeable, we’re forced to live inside the acoustic power chords of Nuno Bettencourt, even if most of us don’t necessarily know who the fuck Nuno Bettencourt is.

When Harry Met Sally hit theaters in 1989. I didn’t see it until 1997, but it turns out I could have skipped it entirely. The movie itself isn’t bad (which is pretty amazing, since it stars Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal), and there are funny parts and sweet parts and smart dialogue, and—all things considered—it’s a well-executed example of a certain kind of entertainment. Yet watching this film in 1997 was like watching the 1978 one-game playoff between the Yankees and the Red Sox on ESPN Classic: Though I’ve never sat through the pitch sequence that leads to Bucky Dent’s three-run homer, I know exactly what happened. I feel like I remember it, even though I don’t. And—more important—I know what it all means. Knowing about sports means knowing that Bucky Dent is the living, breathing, metaphorical incarnation of the Bo Sox’s undying futility; I didn’t have to see that game to understand the fabric of its existence. I didn’t need to see When Harry Met Sally, either. Within three years of its initial release, classifying any intense friendship as “totally a Harry-Met-Sally situation” had a recognizable meaning to every-

5. “A certain kind” meaning “bad.”
one, regardless of whether or not they’d actually seen the movie. And that meaning remains clear and remarkably consistent: It implies that two platonic acquaintances are refusing to admit that they’re deeply in love with each other. *When Harry Met Sally* cemented the plausibility of that notion, and it gave a lot of desperate people hope. It made it realistic to suspect your best friend may be your soul mate, and it made wanting such a scenario comfortably conventional. The problem is that the *Harry-Met-Sally* situation is almost always tragically unbalanced. Most of the time, the two involved parties are not really “best friends.” Inevitably, one of the people has been in love with the other from the first day they met, while the other person is either (a) wracked with guilt and pressure, or (b) completely oblivious to the espoused attraction. Every relationship is fundamentally a power struggle, and the individual in power is whoever likes the other person less. But *When Harry Met Sally* gives the powerless, unrequited lover a reason to live. When this person gets drunk and tells his friends that he’s in love with a woman who only sees him as a buddy, they will say, “You’re wrong. You’re perfect for each other. This is just like *When Harry Met Sally*! I’m sure she loves you—she just doesn’t realize it yet.” Nora Ephron accidentally ruined a lot of lives.

I remember taking a course in college called “Communication and Society,” and my professor was obsessed by the belief that fairy tales like “Hansel and Gretel” and “Little Red Riding Hood” were evil. She said they were part of a latent social code that hoped to suppress women and minorities. At the time, I was mildly outraged that my tuition money was supporting this kind of crap; years later, I have come to recall those pseudo-savvy lectures as what I loved about college. But I still think they were probably wasteful, and here’s why: Even if those theories are true, they’re barely significant. “The Three Little Pigs” is not the story that is fucking people up. Stories like *Say Anything* are fucking people up. We don’t need to worry about people unconsciously “absorbing” archaic secret messages when they’re six
years old; we need to worry about all the entertaining messages people are consciously accepting when they’re twenty-six. They’re the ones that get us, because they’re the ones we try to turn into life. I mean, Christ: I wish I could believe that bozo in Coldplay when he tells me that stars are yellow. I miss that girl. I wish I was Lloyd Dobler. I don’t want anybody to step on a piece of broken glass. I want fake love. But that’s all I want, and that’s why I can’t have it.
EXCERPT FROM:

**KILLING YOURSELF TO LIVE**

85% OF A TRUE STORY
THE DAY BEFORE THE FIRST DAY

New York ➤ Dead Horses ➤ Looking for Nothing

I am not qualified to live here.

I don’t know what qualifications are necessary to live in any certain place at any given time, but I know I don’t have them.

Ohio. I was qualified to live in Ohio. I like high school football. I enjoy Chinese buffet restaurants. I think the Pretenders’ first record is okay. Living in Ohio was not outside my wheelhouse. But this place they call New York . . . this place that Lou Reed incessantly described to no one in particular . . . this place is more complicated. Everything is a grift, and everyone is a potential grifter. Before moving to Manhattan, I had only been here twice. Two days before I finally packed up my shit and left Akron, I had a phone conversation with the man who would be my immediate supervisor at Spin magazine, and I expressed my relocation insecurities. He tried to explain what my life here would be like; at the time, the only details I could remember about my two trips to New York were that (a) the bars didn’t close until 4 A.M., and (b) there seemed to be an inordinate number of attractive women skulking about the street. “Don’t let that fool you,” my editor said as he (theoretically) stroked his Clapton-like beard. “I grew up in Minnesota, and I initially
thought all the women in New York were beautiful, too. But here’s the thing—a lot of them are just cute girls from the Midwest who get expensive haircuts and spend too much time at the gym.” This confused me, because that seems to be the definition of what a beautiful woman is. However, I have slowly come to understand my bearded editor’s pretzel logic: Sexuality is 15 percent real and 85 percent illusion. The first time I was here, it was February. I kept seeing thin women waiting for taxicabs, and they were all wearing black turtlenecks, black mittens, black scarves, and black stocking caps... but no jackets. None of them wore jackets. It was 28 degrees. That attire (particularly within the context of such climatic conditions) can make any woman electrifying. Most of them were holding cigarettes, too. That always helps. I don’t care what C. Everett Koop thinks. Smoking is usually a good decision.

Spin magazine is on the third floor of an office building on Lexington Avenue, a street often referred to as “Lex” by cast members of Law & Order. It is always the spring of 1996 in the offices of Spin; it will be the spring of 1996 forever. Just about everybody who works there looks like either (a) a member of the band Pavement, or (b) a girl who once dated a member of the band Pavement. The first time I walked into the office, three guys were talking about J Mascis for no apparent reason, and one of them was describing his guitar noodling as “trenchant.” They had just returned from lunch. It was 3:30 P.M. I was the fifth-oldest person in the entire editorial department; I was 29.

I’m working on an untitled death project, and you are reading said project. Today, I will leave the offices of Spin and go to the Chelsea Hotel. Once I arrive there, I will ask people about the 1978 murder of Nancy Spungen, a woman whose ultra-annoying shriek was immortalized in the 1986 film Sid & Nancy. The “Sid” in that equation was (of course) Sid Vicious, the fabulously moronic bass player for the Sex Pistols and the
alleged murderer of Nancy. Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert reviewed Sid & Nancy on their TV show At the Movies the week the film was released, and it was the first time I ever heard of the Sex Pistols. At the time, the Sex Pistols didn’t interest me at all; I liked Van Halen. In 1987, a kid in my school told me I should listen to the Sex Pistols because they had an album called Flogging a Dead Horse, which was the kind of phrase I would have found noteworthy as a sophomore in high school. However, I didn’t follow his advice; I liked Tesla. In 1989, I bought Never Mind the Bollocks on cassette because it was on sale, and it reminded me of Guns N’ Roses. Johnny Rotten had an antiabortion song called “Bodies,” yet he still aspired to be the Antichrist. This struck me as commonsense conservatism.

The chorus of the song “Pretty Vacant” is playing inside my skull as I saunter through the Spin offices, but it sounds as if the vocals are being sung by Gavin Rossdale. I pass the interns in sundresses, and the reformed riot grrrls making flight reservations, and at least three people who wish they were outside, smoking cigarettes. It’s 2:59 P.M., and it’s time for me to start finding some death.

My voyage into darkness has officially started: I am in the lobby, down the stairs, out the street exit, and into the stupefying heat. New York summers are hotter than summers in Atlanta. Now, I realize the temperature is higher in Atlanta and Atlanta has more humidity, and things like temperature and humidity are extensions of science, and science is never wrong. But Manhattan is a hipster kiln, and that makes all the difference; heat is 15 percent real and 85 percent perception. The ground is hot, the brick buildings are hot, the sky is low, people are pissed off, and everything smells like sweat and vomit and liquefied garbage. It’s a full-on horror show, and I have learned to despise July. People at Spin ridicule me for wearing khaki shorts to work, always insisting that I look like a tourist.
I don’t care. We’re all tourists, sort of. Life is tourism, sort of. As far as I’m concerned, the dinosaurs still hold the lease on this godforsaken rock.

It takes me 45 seconds to get a cab on Lex, and now I’m moving west, haltingly. I’ve been to Chelsea, but I don’t really know where it starts and where it ends; I realize I’m there only if (a) someone tells me so, or (b) I find myself in a Thai restaurant and suddenly notice that everyone working there is a pre-op transvestite. This traffic sucks, but we’re getting there; with each progressive block, things look cheaper and older, like B-roll footage from *Sesame Street*. Ten minutes ago, I was drinking Mountain Dew in *Spin*’s self-conscious 1996; now I’m driving through an accidental incarnation of 1976. It’s the summer of 2003. I’ve traveled down three vertical floors, across four horizontal blocks, and through five spheres of reality.

Perhaps you are wondering why I am starting this project at the Chelsea and not the Dakota, the hotel where John Lennon was assassinated in 1980; part of me is wondering that, too. Lennon’s killing is undoubtedly the most famous murder in rock history, and it’s something I actually know about: I know how many Beatles tapes Mark David Chapman had in his jacket when he shot Lennon in the chest (14), and I know the score of that evening’s *NFL Monday Night Football* game, when Howard Cosell announced the assassination on-air (Miami 16, New England 13—in overtime). I know that Chapman slowly came to believe that he actually *was* John Lennon (going so far as to marry a woman of Japanese descent who was four years his senior), and I remember my dad dismissing the murder at supper the following evening, bemoaning the fact that a musician’s death somehow warranted more publicity than the unexpected death of Pope John Paul I. As an eight-year-old, I was confused by Lennon’s death, mostly because I could not understand why everyone was so enamored with a rock band’s rhythm.
guitarist; for some reason, I was under the misguided impression that Paul McCartney was the only member of the Beatles who sang. I felt no sadness about the event. As I get older, the murder seems crazier and crazier but not necessarily more tragic; I don’t think I have ever been moved by the death of a public figure. I do think about what it would have been like if John Lennon had lived, and sometimes I worry that he would have made a terrible MTV Unplugged in 1992. But Lennon is not someone I need to concern myself with today; today, I am totally punk rock. My boss is requiring me to think like a punk. I am tempted to spit on a stranger in protest of the lagging British economy.

My boss at Spin (a striking blonde woman named Sia Michel) strongly suggested that I go to the Chelsea Hotel because “our readers” love punk rock. This fact is hard to refute; I am probably the only employee in the history of Spin magazine who thinks punk rock—in almost every context, and with maybe one exception—is patently ridiculous. Still, the death of Spungen intrigues me; Sid and Nancy’s relationship forever illustrates the worst part of being in love with anyone, which is that people in love can’t be reasoned with.

Sid Vicious was not the original bassist for the Pistols; he joined the band after they fired original member Glen Matlock. The only thing everyone seems to know about Vicious is that he could not play bass at all. Ironically (or perhaps predictably), Sid’s inability to play his instrument is the single most crucial element in the history of punk; he is the example everyone uses (consciously or unconsciously) when advocating the import of any musical entity that is not necessarily musical. The fact that he could not do something correctly—yet still do it significantly—is all that anyone needs to know about punk rock.

Chuck Klosterman

That notion is punk rock, completely defined in one sentence. It’s like that scene in The Breakfast Club, where nerd caricature Anthony Michael Hall explains why he considered suicide after failing to make a fully functioning elephant lamp in shop class, prompting Judd Nelson to call him an idiot. “So I’m a fucking idiot because I can’t make a lamp?” Hall’s character asks. “No,” says Nelson. “You’re a genius because you can’t make a lamp.” Sid Vicious was a musical genius because he couldn’t play music, which is probably an unreasonable foundation to build one’s life on. Which only grew worse when he met a terrible person and decided his love for her was so intense that she needed to die.

Spungen was from Philadelphia, a city whose sports fans throw D batteries at Santa Claus and cheer when opposing wide receivers are temporarily paralyzed. Since Nancy was not a celebrity in the traditional sense (she had no talent, per se, though neither did Sid), Chloe Webb’s portrayal of her in the aforementioned Sid & Nancy is the image most modern people have of her. As such, she is generally remembered as the most annoying human of the late 20th century. She was (at best) a drug-addled groupie. But what matters about her interaction with Vicious is the way they destroyed each other in such an obvious—and social—manner. And what I mean by “social” is that everyone who knew them had to exist inside the walls of their destruction; as far as I can tell, every single one of Sid’s friends despised Nancy Spungen. This, of course, is common. Everybody has had the experience of loathing a friend’s girlfriend. My second year in college, I had a goofy little roommate everyone loved; sadly, he had a girlfriend that everyone hated. Her own friends hated her. Even my roommate seemed to hate her, because all they ever did was fight and attempt to hit each other with half-empty cans of Dr Pepper. She had no redeeming qualities; there was nothing about her that was physically,
intellectually, or ideologically attractive. We all implored my roommate to break up with her. It was a bizarre situation because he would agree with us 99 percent of the time; we would say she was fat and whiny and uninspiring, and he would concede all three points. Sid Vicious was the same way; he once described Spungen as “the kind of girl who licked out toilets.” But Sid wouldn’t break up with Nancy, and my roommate didn’t break up with his potato-sack sweetheart for almost three years. There is something sickeningly attractive about being in a bad relationship; you start feeding off the unhappiness. It becomes darkly interesting. Supposedly, Sid (as a 16-year-old) once told his mother, “Mum, I don’t know what people see in sex. I don’t get anything out of it.” That sentiment explains everything. If you find sex unsatisfying, you need something to take its place. You need a problem. Nancy was a good problem for Sid. Heroin was also a good problem for Sid. The only problem is that good problems are still problems, and Mr. Vicious was just not designed for problem solving. His genius scheme was to move himself and Nancy into Room 100 of the Chelsea in August of ’78, where they could stay high for the rest of their lives. This kind of (but not really) worked for two months, until he (almost certainly) stabbed Nancy, who was wearing only a bra and panties, and watched her bleed to death underneath the bathroom sink. Vicious purposefully OD’d on smack before the case ever went to trial, so I suppose we’ll never really know what happened in that room, though he did tell the police, “I did it because I’m a dirty dog.” This is not a very convincing alibi. He may as well have said, “I got 99 problems, but a bitch ain’t one.”

When I finally walk into the Chelsea, I can’t decide if I’m impressed or underwhelmed; I can’t tell if this place is nicer or crappier than I anticipated (I guess I had no preconceived notion). There are two men behind the reception desk: an
older man with a beard and a younger man who might be Hispanic. I ask the bearded man if anyone is staying in Room 100, and—if it’s unoccupied—if I can see what it looks like.

“There is no Room 100,” he tells me. “They converted it into an apartment 18 years ago. But I know why you’re asking.”

For the next five minutes, these two gentlemen and I have a conversation about Sid Vicious, mostly focused on how he was an idiot. However, there are certainly lots of people who disagree with us: Patrons constantly come to this hotel with the hope of staying in the same flat where an unlikable, opportunistic woman named Nancy was murdered for no valid reason. The staff is not thrilled by this tradition (“We hate it when people ask about this,” says the younger employee. “Be sure you write that down: We hate it when people ask us about this.”). I ask the bearded gentleman what kind of person aspires to stay in a hotel room that was once a crime scene.

“It tends to be younger people—the kind of people with colored hair. But we did have one guy come all the way from Japan, only to discover that Room 100 doesn’t even exist anymore. The thing is, Johnny Rotten was a musician; Sid Vicious was a loser. So maybe his fans want to be losers, too.”

While we are having this discussion, an unabashedly annoyed man interjects himself into the dialogue; this man is named Stanley Bard, and he has been the manager of the Chelsea Hotel for more than 40 years. He does not want me talking to the hotel staff and asks me into his first-floor office. Bard is balding and swarthy and serious, and he sternly tells me I should not include the Chelsea Hotel in this article.

“I understand what you think you are trying to do, but I do not want the Chelsea Hotel associated with this story,” says Bard, his arms crossed as he sits behind a cluttered wooden desk. “Sid Vicious didn’t die here. It was just his girlfriend, and
she was of no consequence. The kind of person who wants to stay in Room 100 is just a cultic follower. These are people who have nothing to do. If you want to understand what someone fascinated by Sid Vicious is looking for, go find those people. You will see that they are not serious-minded people. You will see that they are not trying to understand anything about death. They are looking for nothing.”

At this point, he politely tells me to leave the Chelsea Hotel. And after we shake hands, that is what I do.
EXCERPT FROM:

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN

IV

A DECADE OF CURIOUS PEOPLE AND DANGEROUS IDEAS
“Can I tell you something weird?” he asked. This probably isn’t a valid question, because one can never say no to such an inquiry. But this is what he asked me.

“Of course,” I said in response. “Always.”

“Okay, well . . . great. That’s great.”

He collected his thoughts for fourteen seconds.

“Something is happening to me,” he said. “I keep thinking about something that happened to me a long time ago. Years ago. Like, this thing happened to me in eighth fucking grade. This is a situation I hadn’t even thought about for probably ten or fifteen years. But then I saw a documentary that reexamined the Challenger explosion, and this particular event had happened around that same time. And what’s disturbing is that—now—I find myself thinking about this particular afternoon constantly. I have dreams about it. Every time I get drunk or stoned, I inevitably find myself sitting in a dark room, replaying the sequence of the events in my mind, over and over again. And the details I remember from this 1986 afternoon are unfathomably intense. Nothing is missing and nothing is muddled. And I’m starting to believe—and this, I suppose, is the weird part—that maybe this day was the most important day of my entire life, and that everything significant about my personality was created on this one particular afternoon. I’m starting to suspect that this memory is not merely about a certain day of my life; this memory is about the day, if you get my meaning.”

“I think I do,” I said. “Obviously, I’m intrigued.”

“I thought you would be,” he replied. “In fact, that’s why I specifically wanted to talk to you about this problem. Because the story itself isn’t amazing. It’s not like my best friend died
on this particular day. It’s not like a wolf showed up at my school and mauled a bunch of teachers. It’s not a sad story, and it’s not even a funny story. It’s about a junior-high basketball game.”

“A junior-high basketball game.”

“Yes.”

“The most important day in your life was a junior-high basketball game.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re realizing this now, as a thirty-three-year-old chemical engineer with two children.”

“Yes.”

I attempted to arch my eyebrows to suggest skepticism, but the sentiment did not translate.

“Obviously, this story isn’t really about basketball,” he said. “I suppose it’s kind of about basketball, because I was playing a basketball game on this particular afternoon. However, I have a feeling that the game itself is secondary.”

“It always is,” I said.

“Exactly. So, here’s the situation: when I was in eighth grade, our basketball team was kind of terrible. You only play a ten-game schedule when you’re in eighth grade, and we lost four of our first six games, a few of them by wide margins. I was probably the best player on the team, and I sucked. We were bad. We knew we were bad. And on the specific afternoon I’m recalling, we were playing the Fairmount Pheasants. We had played Fairmount in the first game of the year, and they beat us by twenty-two points. Fairmount only had three hundred people in their whole goddamn town, but they had the best eighth-grade basketball team in rural southeast North Dakota that winter.”

“That’s tremendous,” I said.

“They had a power forward named Tyler RaGoose. He was the single most unstoppable Pheasant. He was wiry and swarthy and strong, and he almost had a mustache; every great eighth-grade basketball player almost has a mustache. The rumor was that he could dunk a volleyball and that he
had already fucked two girls, one of whom was a sophomore. It seemed plausible. They also had a precocious, flashy seventh grader who played point guard—I think his name was Trevor Monroe. He was one of those kids who was just naturally good at everything: he played point guard in the winter, shortstop in the summer, and quarterback in the fall. I’m not sure if Fairmount had a golf course, but I assume he was the best chipper in town if they did. They had this guy named Kenwood Dotzenrod who always looked sleepy, but he could get fouled whenever he felt like it. That was his gift—he knew how to get fouled. Do you remember Adrian Dantley? That stoic dude who played for the Utah Jazz and the Detroit Pistons with a really powerful ass? Kenwood Dotzenrod was like a white, thirteen-year-old Adrian Dantley. It seemed like he shot twelve free throws every night. These were just perfect, flawless Pheasants. And it’s hard to understand how that happened, because—once those kids got into high school—Fairmount defined mediocrity. They were never better than a .500 club. But as junior-high kids, they were a potato sack full of wolverines. They were going to humiliate us, and everybody in my school seemed to know this.

“Because we were junior-high kids, the game started right after school. It was scheduled for 4:15 P.M. That school day was interminable. I was wearing a gray acrylic sweater and cargo pants, because our coach didn’t let us wear jeans on game days. It was a different era, I suppose—no rap music. I remember walking around the school in those idiotic cargo pants, eating corndogs at lunch, pretending to care about earth science, and just longing for 4:15. Because I had this irrefutable, unexplainable premonition that we were going to play great that day. I didn’t think we would necessarily win, because Fairmount was better and they had the mustache dude, and we were lazy, underfed losers. But I still had a vague sense that we would not humiliate ourselves. We would execute and hustle, and the game would be close. This feeling was almost spiritual. And I was not the kind of kid who looked on the bright side of anything; I was never optimistic.
about any element of my eighth-grade life. But something made me certain that good things were on the horizon. We started warming up for the game at 3:55, and I can recall standing in the lay-up line and looking at the Pheasants at the other end of the court. Half of their team had spiky rat-tail haircuts, which was the style of the time. It was a different era, I suppose—Don Johnson and David Lee Roth defined masculinity. The gym felt especially hot and especially dry. I couldn’t make myself sweat. I remember thinking, Our school needs a humidifier. Our cheerleaders weren’t even paying attention to us. They were probably looking at Tyler RaGoose’s potential mustache.”

“So did your team play well?” I asked. “Was your intuition correct?”

“Fuck, yeah,” he responded immediately. “We couldn’t have played any better than we did. I mean, remember: we were junior-high kids. We were just little guys—half our squad weighed less than one hundred pounds. I still didn’t have pubic hair. But we played like basketball geniuses. Fairmount scored on the first possession of the game, we scored on the second possession, and it just went back and forth like that for the entire first half. Nobody on either team seemed to miss. Do you recall when Villanova upset Georgetown in the 1985 NCAA championship game? It was like we were all possessed by the spirit of Villanova. This was unlike any junior-high game I’ve ever witnessed, before or since. It was better than half of the shit they show on ESPN2. That Trevor Monroe kid—this spiky-haired little elf who was maybe five feet tall—knocked down three twenty-one-foot jump shots in a row. My memories of this are all so goddamn vivid. It actually freaks me out, because I barely remember anything else from that winter; I barely remember anything else from that entire school year. But I somehow recall that the score was 35 to 33 in Fairmount’s favor with ten seconds left in the first half, and somebody from our team dribbled the ball off his own foot. Trevor Monroe rushed the rock up the court and threw a blind bounce pass to a kid named Billy Barnaby in the right
corner; Barnaby was a 4.00 student, and he was probably the only fourteen-year-old boy in Fairmount who actively liked poetry. Girls felt safe around him—he looked like Topher Grace. I jumped in his direction, but Barnaby threw in a fadeaway jumper at the buzzer, pushing Fairmount’s halftime lead to four points. When the rock nestled in the net, Barnaby awkwardly clapped his hands and sprinted into the visitors’ locker room with one fist in the air. It was like he had just blown up a federal building with the White Panthers. It was intense.

“Now, the second half was more like a standard junior-high basketball game. There was less scoring, and we behaved like normal eighth graders. Players would fuck up on occasion. But every possession was still akin to the Bataan death march. I don’t think I have ever wanted anything as much as I wanted to win that game. I mean, what else in my life did I care about? I was fourteen. What else mattered to me? Nothing. There was nothing I cared about as much as playing basketball against other eighth graders. I had no perspective. I suppose I liked my bedroom, and I liked girls who owned Def Leppard cassettes, and I liked being Catholic. I liked eating gravy. But this game felt considerably more important than all of those things. If I were to play in a Super Bowl or the World Series tomorrow night, it wouldn’t feel as monumental as this event felt twenty years ago. I could not comprehend any valuable existence beyond this specific basketball game; my eighth-grade worldview was profoundly telescopic. I suspect this depth of emotion can only happen when you’re that particular age.”

“And I assume this realization is what you were referring to earlier,” I said. “I assume this realization is why that afternoon was the most important afternoon of your life: it was the cognition of your deepest desire.”

“No,” he said. “That’s not it. That’s not even close. The thing is, it started to look like this game was going to go into overtime. It was 48 to 48. Fairmount had the ball, and the semi-mustachioed RaGoose drove the baseline and scored with maybe twenty seconds remaining. We could not contain
his machismo. So now we were behind, 50 to 48. Still, I believed we would somehow tie things up. I was certain we would score; for the whole game, we had always managed to score when we truly needed to score. But this time, we didn’t. We turned it over. We were trying to feed our post player, and the ball ricocheted off his paw. So now the Pheasants had the ball with a two-point lead, and I had to intentionally foul Kenwood Dotzenrod with five seconds remaining. It was the only way to stop the clock. It was an act of desperation. I was desperate. It was the most desperate thing I’ve ever done.”

“So . . . you lost,” I said. “And I gather that this must be one of those stories about dealing with heartache: this was when you realized that losing can be more meaningful than winning.”

“No,” he said. “We ended up winning this game. Kenwood Dotzenrod missed his free throw. He shot a line drive at the front of the iron and the ball bounded straight into my hands; I called time-out while I was catching it. Our coach designed a play that didn’t work, but that aforementioned post player—Cubby Jones, a semi-fundamentalist Christian who’s now a high-school math teacher—got fouled at midcourt with one second remaining. One of the lesser Pheasants stupidly went for the steal—remember, we were just eighth graders. We were all stupid. So now Cubby Jones had to make both of these free throws with one second on the clock, which is an insane amount of pressure to put on a fourteen-year-old named Cubby. But he rattled in the first shot and swished the second, and the game went into overtime. And—not to brag or anything, because this is just what happened—I ended up hitting a sixteen-foot jump shot at the buzzer at the end of OT. We won 56 to 54. It was the greatest night of my life, at least up to that point. So I suppose I am technically the hero of this particular anecdote.”

We both finished our beverages.

“Curious,” I said. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m a little disappointed. This story is far more conventional than I anticipated. I would never have assumed that the
biggest moment of your existence would be making a jump
shot before you had pubic hair. To be frank, this is kind of a
rip-off. You’ve made dozens of confessions that were far
more consequential than this.”

“But I still haven’t told you the part that I remember
most,” he said. “Winning the game, making the shot . . . I
remember those things, yes. They made me happy at the time.
They are positive memories. But the moment I remember
more than any other—the moment that is more than just a
nostalgic imprint—is the feeling that came after desperately
fouling Kenwood Dotzenrod. Because when that happened, I
was certain we had lost. Everything felt hopeless. It seemed
unlikely that Kenwood would miss, implausible that we would
get a reasonable opportunity to score if such a miss occurred,
and impossible that such an opportunity would result in any
degree of success. And I had invested so much energy into the
previous twenty-three minutes and fifty-five seconds of this
eighth-grade basketball game. I had—at some point, probably
late in the third quarter—unconsciously decided that losing
this game would be no different than being alone forever. It
would be the same as being buried alive. Everything else
became trivial. So when I desperately slapped Kenwood
Dotzenrod on the wrist and I heard the referee’s whistle, I felt
the life drain from my blood. My bones softened. I felt this . . .
this . . . this kind of predepression. Like, I knew I couldn’t be
depressed yet, because the game was still in progress. I still
had to try to win, because that is what you do whenever you
play any game. You try to win. You aren’t allowed to give up,
even philosophically. I still had to pretend that those final
five seconds had meaning, and I could not outwardly express
fear or sadness or disappointment. But I instantly knew how
terrible I would feel when I went to bed that evening. I could
visualize my future sadness. And because I was an eighth-
grader—because I had no fucking perspective on anything—
I assumed this would bother me for the rest of my life. It
seemed like something that would never go away. So I stood on
the edge of the free-throw lane, tugging on the bottom of my
shorts, vocally reminding my teammates to box out, mentally preparing myself for a sadness that would last forever.”

“Interesting,” I said. “It seems that you are describing how it feels to be doomed.”

“Yes!”

“And this sense of doom is why an eighth-grade basketball game remains the most important moment of your life?”

“Maybe,” he said. “Actually, yes.”

“But you weren’t doomed,” I said. “You won the game. That one guy, the white Adrian Dantley . . . what was his name again?”

“Kenwood Dotzenrod.”

“Right. Kenwood Dotzenrod did, in fact, miss. Your team did, in fact, get an opportunity to score, and Cubby Jones did, in fact, make his free throws. You were never doomed. And even if this scenario had ended differently—even if Kenwood Dotzenrod had made one of his free throws, or if Cubby had missed one of his—your adolescent sadness would have been fleeting. You would have been sad for a week, or a month, or maybe even a year. But those things fade. This is just something specific that you happen to remember, and—because you seem to be actively dwelling upon its alleged significance—you unconsciously re-create all the other details you’ve forgotten. That’s why it seems so vivid: you’re making it vivid, just by talking about it. I mean, come on: everybody has a basketball game they remember, or a girl they kissed during Pretty in Pink, or some alcoholic cousin who died in a hunting accident. Or whatever. You know what I mean? It all seems so arbitrary, and—at least in this case—completely backward. You’re disturbed about something meaningless that worked out exactly the way you wanted. It’s not just that I don’t understand what this metaphor signifies; I honestly don’t know if this story involves any metaphor at all. Where is the conflict? What is the problem? I mean, you said it yourself: technically, you are the hero of this story.”

“Yes,” he said in response. “Technically, I am. But isn’t that always the problem?”
EXCERPT FROM:

**DOWNTOWN OWL**

A NOVEL
AUGUST 15, 1983

(Mitch)

When Mitch Hrlicka heard that his high school football coach had gotten another teenage girl pregnant, he was forty bushels beyond bamboozled. He could not understand what so many females saw in Mr. Laidlaw. He was inhumane, and also sarcastic. Whenever Mitch made the slightest mental error, Laidlaw would rhetorically scream, “Vanna? Vanna? Are you drowsy, Vanna? Wake up! You can sleep when you are dead, Vanna!” Mr. Laidlaw seemed unnaturally proud that he had nicknamed Mitch “Vanna White” last winter, solely based on one semifunny joke about how the surname “Hrlicka” needed more vowels. Mitch did not mind when other kids called him Vanna, because almost everyone he knew had a nickname; as far as he could tell, there was nothing remotely humiliating about being called “Vanna,” assuming everyone understood that the name had been assigned arbitrarily. It symbolized nothing. But Mitch hated when John Laidlaw called him “Vanna,” because Laidlaw assumed it was humiliating. And that, clearly, was his goal.

Christ, it was humid. When Mitch and his teenage associates had practiced that morning at 7:30 a.m., it was almost cool; the ground had been wet with dew and the clouds hovered fourteen feet off the ground. But now—eleven hours later—the sun was burning and falling like the Hindenburg. The air was damp wool. Mitch limped toward the practice field for the evening’s upcoming death session; he could already feel sweat forming on his back and above his nose and under his crotch. His quadriceps stored enough lactic acid to turn a triceratops into limestone.
“God damn,” he thought. “Why do I want this?” In two days the team would begin practicing in full pads. It would feel like being wrapped in cellophane while hauling bricks in a backpack. “God damn,” he thought again. “This must be what it’s like to live in Africa.” Football was not designed for the summer, even if Herschel Walker believed otherwise.

When Mitch made it to the field, the other two Owl quarterbacks were already there, facing each other twelve yards apart, each standing next to a freshman. They were playing catch, but not directly; one QB would rifle the ball to the opposite freshman, who would (in theory) catch it and immediately flip it over to the second QB who was waiting at his side. The other quarterback would then throw the ball back to the other freshman, and the process would continue. This was how NFL quarterbacks warmed up on NFL sidelines. The process would have looked impressive to most objective onlookers, except for the fact that both freshman receivers dropped 30 percent of the passes that struck them in the hands. This detracted from the fake professionalism.

Mitch had no one to throw to, so he served as the holder while the kickers practiced field goals. This duty required him to crouch on one knee and remain motionless, which (of course) is not an ideal way to get one’s throwing arm loose and relaxed. Which (of course) did not really matter, since Coach Laidlaw did not view Mitch’s attempts at quarterbacking with any degree of seriousness. Mitch was not clutch. Nobody said this, but everybody knew. It was the biggest problem in his life.

At 7:01, John Laidlaw blew into a steel whistle and instructed everyone to bring it in. They did so posthaste.

“Okay,” Laidlaw began. “This is the situation. The situation is this: We will not waste any light tonight, because we have a beautiful evening with not many mosquitoes and a first-class opportunity to start implementing some of the offense. I realize this is only the fourth practice, but we’re already way behind on everything. It’s obvious that most of you didn’t put five goddamn
minutes into thinking about football all goddamn summer, so now we’re all behind. And I don’t like being behind. I’ve never been a follower. I’m not that kind of person. Maybe you are, but I am not.

“Classes start in two weeks. Our first game is in three weeks. We need to have the entire offense ready by the day we begin classes, and we need to have all of the defensive sets memorized before we begin classes. And right now, I must be honest: I don’t even know who the hell is going to play for us. So this is the situation. The situation is this: Right now, everybody here is equally useless. This is going to be an important, crucial, important, critical, important two weeks for everyone here, and it’s going to be a real kick in the face to any of you who still want to be home watching The Price Is Right. And I know there’s going to be a lot of people in this town talking about a lot of bull crap that doesn’t have anything to do with football, and you’re going to hear about certain things that happened or didn’t happen or that supposedly happened or that supposedly allegedly didn’t happen to somebody that probably doesn’t even exist. These are what we call distractions. These distractions will come from all the people who don’t want you to think about Owl Lobo football. So if I hear anyone on this team perpetuating those kinds of bull-shit stories, everyone is going to pay for those distractions. Everyone. Because we are here to think about Owl Lobo football. And if you are not thinking exclusively—exclusively—about Owl Lobo football, go home and turn on The Price Is Right. Try to win yourself a washing machine.”

It remains unclear why John Laidlaw carried such a specific, all-encompassing hatred for viewers of The Price Is Right. No one will ever know why this was. Almost as confusing as to why Owl High School was nicknamed the Lobos, particularly since they had been the Owl Owls up until 1964. During the summer of ’64, the citizens of Owl suddenly concluded that being called the Owl Owls was somewhat embarrassing, urging the school board to change the nickname to
something “less repetitive.” This proposal was deeply polarizing to much of the community. The motion didn’t pass until the third vote. And because most of the existing Owl High School athletic gear still featured its long-standing logo of a feathered wing, it was decided that the new nickname should remain ornithological. As such, the program was known as the Owl Eagles for all of the 1964–1965 school year. Contrary to community hopes, this change dramatically increased the degree to which its sports teams were mocked by opposing schools. During the especially oppressive summer of 1969, they decided to change the nickname again, this time becoming the Owl High Screaming Satans. (New uniforms were immediately purchased.) Two games into the ’69 football season, the local Lutheran and Methodist churches jointly petitioned the school board, arguing that the nickname “Satan” glorified the occult and needed to be changed on religious grounds; oddly (or perhaps predictably), the local Catholic church responded by aggressively supporting the new moniker, thereby initiating a bitter feud among the various congregations. (This was punctuated by a now infamous street fight that involved the punching of a horse.) When the Lutheran minister ultimately decreed that all Protestant athletes would have to quit all extracurricular activities if the name “Satan” remained in place, the school was forced to change nicknames midseason. Nobody knew how to handle this unprecedented turn of events. Eventually, one of the cheerleaders noticed that the existing satanic logo actually resembled an angry humanoid wolf, a realization that seemed brilliant at the time. (The cheerleader, Janelle Fluto, is now a lesbian living in Thunder Bay, Ontario.) The Screaming Satans subsequently became the Screaming Lobos, a name that was edited down to Lobos upon the recognition that wolves do not scream. This nickname still causes mild confusion, as strangers sometimes assume the existence of a mythological creature called the “Owl Lobo,” which would (indeed) be a terrifying (and potentially winged) carnivore hailing from western Mexico. But—nonethe-
less, and more importantly—there has not been any major community controversy since the late sixties. Things have been perfect ever since, if by “perfect” you mean “exactly the same.”

Mitch and the rest of the Lobos clapped their hands simultaneously and started to jog one lap around the practice field, ostensibly preparing to perform a variety of calisthenics while thinking exclusively about Owl Lobo football and not fantasizing about The Price Is Right. But such a goal was always impossible. It was still summer. As Mitch loped along the sidelines, his mind drifted to other subjects, most notably a) Gordon Kahl, b) the Georgetown Hoyas, c) how John Laidlaw managed to seduce and impregnate Tina McAndrew, and d) how awful it must feel to be John Laidlaw’s wife.
“You’re going to like it here,” said Walter Valentine. He said this from behind a nine-hundred-pound cherrywood desk, hands interlocked behind his head while his eyes looked toward the ceiling, focusing on nothing. “I have no doubt about that. I mean, it’s not like this is some kind of wonderland. This isn’t anyone’s destination city. It’s not Las Vegas. It’s not Monaco. It’s not like you’ll be phoning your gal pals every night and saying, ‘I’m living in Owl, North Dakota, and it’s a dream come true.’ But you will like it here. It’s a good place to live. The kids are great, in their own way. The people are friendly, by and large. You will be popular. You will be very, very popular.”

Julia did not know what most of those sentences meant.

“I will be popular,” she said, almost as if she was posing a question (but not quite).

“Oh, absolutely,” Valentine continued, now rifling through documents that did not appear particularly official. “I know that you are scheduled to teach seventh-grade history, eighth-grade geography, U.S. History, World History, and something else. Are you teaching Our State? I think you’re scheduled to teach Our State. Yes. Yes, you are. ‘Our State.’ But that’s just an unfancy name for North Dakota history, so that’s simple enough: Teddy Roosevelt, Angie Dickinson, lignite coal, that sort of thing. The Gordon Kahl incident, I suppose. Of course, the fact that you’re not from North Dakota might make that a tad trickier, but only during the first year. After that, history just repeats itself. But I suppose the first thing we should talk about is volleyball.”
DOWNTOWN OWL

“Pardon?”
“What do you know about volleyball?”

Julia had been in downtown Owl for less than forty-eight hours. The land here was so relentlessly flat; it was the flattest place she’d ever seen. She had driven from Madison, Wisconsin, in nine hours, easily packing her entire existence into the hatchback of a Honda Civic. There was only one apartment building in the entire town and it was on the edge of the city limits; it was a two-story four-plex, and the top two apartments were empty. She took the bigger one, which rented for fifty-five dollars a month. When she looked out her bedroom window, she could see for ten miles to the north. Maybe for twenty miles. Maybe she was seeing Manitoba. It was like the earth had been pounded with a rolling pin. The landlord told her that Owl was supposedly getting cable television services next spring, but he admitted some skepticism about the rumor; he had heard such rumors before.

Julia was now sitting in the office of the Owl High principal. He resumed looking at the ceiling, appreciating its flatness.

“I’ve never played volleyball,” Julia replied. “I don’t know the rules. I don’t even know how the players keep score of the volley balling.”

“Oh. Oh. Well, that’s unfortunate,” Valentine said. “No worries, but that’s too bad. I only ask because it looks like we’re going to have to add volleyball to the extracurricular schedule in two years, or maybe even as soon as next year. It’s one of those idiotic Title IX situations—apparently, we can’t offer three boys’ sports unless we offer three girls’ sports. So now we have to figure out who in the hell is going to coach girls’ volleyball, which is proving to be damn near impossible. Are you sure that isn’t something you might eventually be interested in? Just as a thought? You would be paid an additional three hundred dollars per season. You’d have a full year to get familiar with the sport. We’d pay for any books on the subject you might need. I’m sure there are some wonderful books out there on the nature of volleyball.”
"I really, really cannot coach volleyball," Julia said. "I’m not coordinated."

“Oh. Oh! Okay, no problem. I just thought I’d ask.” Mr. Valentine looked at her for a few moments before his pupils returned to the ceiling. “Obviously, it would be appreciated if you thought about it, but—ultimately—volleyball doesn’t matter. We just want you to do all the things that you do, whatever those things may be. I’m sure you bring a lot to the table. Do you have any questions for me?”

Julia had 140,000 questions. She asked only one.

“What’s it like to live here?”

This was not supposed to sound flip, but that’s how it came out. Julia always came across as cocky whenever she felt nervous.

“It’s like living anywhere, I suppose.” Valentine unlocked his fingers and crossed his arms, glancing momentarily at Julia’s face. He then proceeded to stare at the mallard duck that was painted on his coffee cup, half filled with cherry Kool-Aid. “Owls population used to be around twelve hundred during the height of the 1970s, but now it’s more like eight hundred. Maybe eight fifty. I don’t know where all the people went. It’s a down town, Owl. We still have a decent grocery store, which is important, but—these days—it seems like a lot of folks will drive to Jamestown, or even all the way to Valley City, just to do their food shopping. Americans are crazy. There’s a hardware store, but I wonder how much longer that will last. We have a first-rate Chevrolet dealership. We have two gas stations. We have seven bars, although you can hardly count the Oasis Wheel. You probably don’t want to spend your nights at the Oasis Wheel, unless you’re not the kind of woman I think you are. Heh! And you’ve probably heard that the movie theater is going to close, and I’m afraid that’s true: It is closing. But the bowling alley is thriving. It’s probably the best bowling alley in the region. I honestly believe that.”

By chance, Julia did enjoy bowling. However, when the most positive detail about your new home is that the bowling alley is thriving, you have to like bowling a lot in order to stave off
depression. And—right now, in the middle of this conversation—Julia was more depressed than she had ever been in her entire twenty-three-year existence. As she sat in Walter Valentine’s office, she felt herself wanting to take a nap on the floor. But she (of course) did not do this; she just looked at him, nodding and half smiling. She could always sleep later, after she finished crying.

“The thing that you have to realize about a place like Owl is that everyone is aware of all the same things. There’s a lot of shared knowledge,” Valentine said. He was now leaning forward in his chair, looking at Julia and casually pointing at her chest with both his index fingers. “Take this year’s senior class, for example. There are twenty-six kids in that class. Fifteen of them started kindergarten together. That means that a lot of those students have sat next to each other—in just about every single class—for thirteen straight years. They’ve shared every single experience. You said you grew up in Milwaukee, correct?”

“Yes.”

“How big was your graduating class?”

“Oh, man. I have no idea,” Julia said. “Around seven hundred, I think. It was a normal public school.”

“Exactly. Normal. But your normal class was almost as big as our whole town. And the thing is, when those twenty-six seniors graduate, the majority will go to college, at least for two years. But almost all the farm kids—or at least all the farm boys—inevitably come back here when they’re done with school, and they start farming with their fathers. In other words, the same kids who spent thirteen years in class with each other start going to the same bars and they bowl together and they go to the same church and pretty much live an adult version of their high school life. You know, people always say that nothing changes in a small town, but—whenever they say that—they usually mean that nothing changes figuratively. The truth is that nothing changes literally: It’s always all the same people, doing all the same things.”

DOWNTOWN OWL
CHUCK KLOSTERMAN

Upon hearing this description, the one singular phrase that went through Julia’s head was “Jesus fucking Christ.” However, those were not the words that she spoke.


“It is,” Valentine said. Then he chuckled. Then he re-interlocked his fingers behind his skull and refocused his gaze on the ceiling. “Except that it’s not. It’s actually not abnormal at all. Look: I came here as a math teacher twenty years ago, and I thought I would be bored out of my trousers. I had grown up in Minot and I went to college in Grand Forks, so I considered myself urban. I always imagined I’d end up in Minneapolis, or even maybe Chicago; I have a friend from college who lives just outside of Chicago, so I’ve eaten in restaurants in that area and I have an understanding of that life. But once I really settled in Owl, I never tried to leave. I mean . . . sure, sometimes you think, ‘Hey, maybe there’s something else out there.’ But there really isn’t. This is what being alive feels like, you know? The place doesn’t matter. You just live.”

Julia could feel hydrochloric acid inside her tear ducts. There was an especially fuzzy tennis ball in her esophagus, and she wanted to be high.

But she remained cool.

Julia told Mr. Valentine she was extremely excited to be working at Owl High, and she thanked him for giving her the opportunity to start a career in teaching, which she claimed was her lifelong dream. “Everybody only has one first job,” he said in response. “No matter what you do in life, you’ll always remember your first job. So welcome aboard and good luck, although you won’t need it. You’ll be extremely popular here. And if you change your mind about that excellent volleyball opportunity, do not hesitate to call. Keep me in the loop. I’m always here, obviously.”

Julia exited Valentine’s office and walked toward the school’s main entrance, faster and more violent with every step. She was virtually running when she got to the door and sprinted to
her car, which was one of only three vehicles in the parking lot. Ten days from now, school would officially start. This building would be the totality of her life. She already hated it. The overtly idyllic nature of Owl seemed paradoxically menacing; it was like a Burmese tiger trap for apolitical strangers who needed uninteresting jobs. She didn’t know anyone and had no idea how she ever would. Her apartment was on the far side of town, which meant it was a three-minute drive. She passed two cars and two pickup trucks; all four drivers waved hello as she passed. The waving scared her. She soon arrived in her apartment, where she had no furniture (and no idea how to acquire any, as there were apparently no furniture stores within a thirty-mile radius). She cut open the cardboard box that held her cassettes and found a dubbed copy of Foreigner’s 4, which she robotically placed into a boom box sitting on the floor. She fast-forwarded to “Juke Box Hero” and pushed play; the emptiness of the room produced a slight echo behind Lou Gramm’s voice. Her apartment was like a bank vault with a refrigerator. Julia reached into the same cardboard box and found her copy of The Random House Thesaurus (College Edition), which contained drugs. The day before leaving Madison, Julia and her college roommates meticulously rolled four perfect joints and hid them in the thesaurus, operating under the assumption that buying pot would be impossible in small-town North Dakota (which was, in fact, the case). The plan was that Julia could smoke one joint after the first day of class, one on Thanksgiving (which she would have to spend alone), and one after the last day of school in May. The fourth was a spare that could be consumed when (and if) she needed to offset any major unforeseen emergency that might occur over the course of the school year.

Julia sat on her sleeping bag and smoked three of them, all in a row. It was 2:45 p.m.
His life revolved around coffee.
   It was central to his existence.
   He was that kind of person.
   It wasn’t even so much the taste, although he did consider coffee to be delicious; he mostly loved the process of drinking it. Every day at 3:00 p.m. (except on Sundays), he drove three miles into town, sat on the third stool in Harley’s Café, and drank three cups of coffee, each cup with three tablespoons of sugar. This was not because Horace Jones had OCD or a superstitious obsession with the number three; it was just a coincidence. If you were to ask Horace which stool he sat in (or how many spoonfuls of sugar he placed in his coffee), he would have no idea. These were merely things he did. They were not things he considered.

   All of the men in Harley’s played poker dice to see who would pay for each round of coffee; the winner paid for everybody, which (curiously) was the goal. There were usually six players, so an entire round of coffee cost $1.50, plus tip. Horace won 16.6 percent of the time. He considered himself extremely unlucky. But winning or losing at poker dice was only a secondary issue, since the conversation at Harley’s was always worth the trip into town; stimulating conversation was something Horace could look forward to every single afternoon. These are the topics that were primarily discussed:

1) How current meteorological conditions compared to whatever were supposed to be the average meteorological condi-
tions (i.e., temperatures that were higher or lower than usual, rainfall amounts that seemed out of the ordinary, et cetera).

2) The success (or lack thereof) of the local high school athletic teams, and particularly how contemporary teams would have fared against Owl teams from the late 1960s and early ’70s (the conclusion being “not very well”).

3) Walter Mondale’s potential run for the presidency, an undeniably hopeless venture that only served to illustrate how the state of Minnesota had been destroyed by the same kind of naïve Democrats who crashed all those helicopters in the Iranian desert.

4) The North Dakota State University football team, particularly the number of local North Dakota high school players the school was recruiting in comparison to the number of black, out-of-state, potentially criminal athletes who were already on the traveling roster.

5) The implausibility of specific plotlines on the television show Dallas.

6) Acquaintances who had recently died (or were in the process of dying, usually from cancer). This topic was increasing in regularity.

7) Area events they all recalled from the 1950s, generally described as having happened in the relatively recent past.

8) How the market price of hard red spring wheat ($3.51 per bushel) was barely a dollar more than its price during the Dirty Thirties. This made no goddamn sense to anyone.

9) Gordon Kahl.

10) Other people’s problems.

“So . . . more problems with the Dog Lover.” This was Edgar Camaro speaking. Edgar was the youngest of the coffee drinkers; he was sixty-three. “That idiot kid is going to end up sleeping with Jesus. Did you hear what he said the other night?”

“His statement about the rain?” asked Horace.
“Yes,” replied Edgar. “The rain. Just imagine the goddamn scenario: The Dog Lover is tending bar on Saturday night—this is early in the night, maybe seven o’clock—and the idiot is already tight.”

“Somebody needs to inform that kid that a good bartender never drinks before midnight,” interjected Bud Haugen, a man who had briefly owned a bar during the Korean conflict. “Christ. You’d think everybody would know that.”

“Well, sure,” said Edgar. “You’d think someone would have given that idiot some sense, but I guess he only listens to that hound of his. Heh. But here we go: It starts to drizzle Saturday night, and a few of the guys in the bar—this is like Edmund and Kuch and Woo-Chuck and that whole crew of outlaws—they get up and start looking out the windows, because Lord knows we need the rain. And that idiot—that idiot Dog Lover—he turns down the jukebox and says, ‘Haven’t you farmers ever seen rain before?’ Can you believe that? In the middle of the worst drought in forty years, he tells a bunch of paying customers that they’re stupid for looking at the rain.”

“I’m surprised Woo-Chuck didn’t snap his spine,” said eighty-eight-year-old Ollie Pinkerton, his lazy eye drifting around the room like a child looking for the bathroom. “I mean, don’t get me wrong—Woo-Chuck is a nice kid and a hard worker. But let’s shoot straight: The man is a criminal.” This was true. “Woo-Chuck” was an abbreviation of “Woodchuck.” Bob (The Woodchuck) Hodgeman had served in Vietnam, which was something he never talked about. But everyone assumed he must have done (or at least seen) some crazy shit over there, because he drank in this awkward, exceedingly antisocial manner, and he drank all the time, and sometimes he punched his own friends for no reason and couldn’t explain why. People called him Woodchuck (or, more often, Woo-Chuck) because he used to stash Quaaludes in the upholstery of his Monte Carlo. This seemed like something a woodchuck would do. On balance, he was a good person.
“Supposedly, that almost happened,” Edgar continued. “They say Woo-Chuck walked up to the Dog Lover with a really queer look on his face. Remember that night last Christmas, when Woo-Chuck got loaded and threw a pitchfork at his son-in-law? I guess he had those same crazy eyes. But that idiot Dog Lover—probably because he was already seventeen sheets to the wind—he had no fear whatsoever. He just stood there like a concrete shithouse. Words were exchanged. And then the Dog Lover threw everybody out of the bar. Everybody. He emptied the whole place, and it wasn’t even seven thirty. Locked all the doors. And then he just sat there, alone, swilling his own booze, listening to the Twins game on the radio. Have you ever heard of anything more asinine? If he’s not careful, that bar is gonna end up worse than the Oasis Wheel. Some people just can’t stand prosperity.”

The Dog Lover’s real name was Chet. He had lived a dubious life: Chet’s father was (supposedly) one of the most successful bar owners in the Twin Cities; he (supposedly) co-owned five sports bars with Minnesota Vikings quarterback Tommy Kramer. Chet, however, was an irresponsible train wreck: DWIs, dope smoking, girl crazy, gun crazy, car crazy—all the usual interests of the prototypical meathead miscreant. Chet flunked out of St. Cloud State University, was readmitted a year later, and was bounced a second time for selling (fake) pot on campus. His father didn’t know what to do with him, and he certainly didn’t want Chet hanging around Minneapolis with no job and no prospects; if that happened, Chet was destined to get involved with cocaine or gambling or arson. Chet was a twenty-five-year-old dirtbag. Everybody knew this. As such, his father played the only card he could manufacture: He bought his son a life in a place where it was hard to find trouble. He bought his son a bar in a town where nothing happened, moved him into a four-plex apartment complex, and told him to stay away from Minneapolis until he “learned how the world worked.”

That was almost a year ago. Over the subsequent eleven
months, Chet had managed to alienate almost every citizen in town, seemingly on purpose. The first thing he did was change the name of the bar from Teddy’s (after the name of the previous owner) to Yoda’s (a reference completely lost on the overwhelming majority of his clientele). He had a dangerous propensity for hiring Owl High School students as waitresses, getting them drunk on the job, and openly chiding them for dressing too conservatively; this practice was finally stopped after he fed sixteen-year-old Ann Marie Pegseth so many clandestine wine coolers that she removed her blouse and worked an entire shift in her bra. Two days later, Ann Marie’s father threatened to destroy Chet’s Z28 Camaro with dynamite. Chet was a prick and a provocateur, constantly outdrinking his patrons and ridiculing the blandness of their conversation. He told Phil Anderson that his wife needed to eat more salad. He told Cindy Brewer that her voice reminded him of “a cuntier version of Joan Rivers.” One of his running shticks was insisting that he recognized Randy Pemberton’s girlfriend from Hustler magazine’s “Beaver Hunt” section. He charged way too much for booze (sometimes $2.50 a beer, even for Schmidt). But the one quality that truly drove the citizens of Owl bonkers—and particularly the old men who had coffee at Harley’s Café every day at 3:00 p.m.—was Chet’s intimacy with his dog. Chet had a black Labrador retriever, and he kept it inside his apartment. He turned a hunting animal into a house pet. This was less reasonable than talking to a brick wall. He would bring his dog inside the bar, and the dog often sat in the front seat of his Camaro, a vehicle which supposedly cost sixteen thousand dollars.

Just thinking about that dog made Horace furious. What kind of man treats his dog like a wife? You’d have to be mentally retarded. There were inside animals and there were outside animals, and any dog the size of a Labrador was absolutely, irrevocably, indisputably an outside animal. Oh, you might let a dog inside the pantry during a blizzard or a tornado, but kitchens are for humans. It was almost cruel: Dogs need to run.
DOWNTOWN OWL

Dogs need to herd sheep and chase jackrabbits and retain the few grains of nobility that canines are born with. Only a fool couldn’t tell the difference between a man and a beast, and this made Chet a fool; it made him the Dog Lover, which was a deeper insult than that bartender could possibly realize.

Horace wondered how long it had been since he’d set foot inside a tavern. Ten years? Probably ten years. He didn’t like them anymore. The bars had changed: These days, all the young men drank beer. When he was in his thirties, men drank OFC whiskey. Nobody knew what the letters “OFC” technically stood for, but they all assumed it meant Only For Cowboys. Norwegians and Polacks were beer drinkers, but no legitimate white man would go into a bar and slurp sixteen fluid ounces of wheat foam. Beer drinkers were embarrassing. Sometimes Horace felt embarrassed for the totality of culture, and for the role he had played in its creation. “That’s why all these modern men are soft,” he thought to himself as he looked into the brown-black remnants of his sugar-saturated coffee. “They’re all beer-gorged and lazy. They have no grit. They’re scared of whiskey. They’re scared of the world.”

It was time for everyone to roll the dice. Horace rolled a pair of fives. It was not enough to win. His luck was never going to change.