

P O R T R A I T
O F A N
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A S A
Y O U N G M A N

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A Memoir

B I L L C L E G G



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This book is a work of nonfiction. The names and descriptions of some of the people in it have been changed.

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For everyone still out there

Think of light and how far it falls, to us. To fall, we say,
naming a fundamental way of going to the world—falling.

— WILLIAM KITTREDGE, *A Hole in the Sky*

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P O R T R A I T
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Scrapers

I can't leave and there isn't enough.

Mark is at full tilt, barking hear-it-here-first wisdom from the edge of his black vinyl sofa. He looks like a translator for the deaf moving at triple speed — hands flapping, arms and shoulders jerking. His legs move, too, but only to fold and refold at regular intervals beneath his tall, skeletal frame. The leg crossing is the only thing about Mark with any order. The rest is a riot of sudden movements and spasms — he's a marionette at the mercy of a brutal puppeteer. His eyes, like mine, are dull black marbles.

Mark is squawking about a crack dealer he used to buy from who's been busted — how he saw it coming, how he always does — but I'm not paying attention. All that matters to me is that we've

reached the end of our bag. The thumb-size clear plastic mini zip-lock that once bulged with chunks of crack is now empty. It's day-break and the dealers have turned off their phones.

My two dealers are named Rico and Happy. According to Mark, all crack dealers are named Rico and Happy. Rico hasn't shown up the last few times I've called. Mark, who makes it his business to know the day-to-day movements and shifting status of a handful of dealers, says Rico's Xanax habit has resurfaced and is beginning to slow him down. Last year he didn't leave his apartment in Washington Heights for three months. So for now I call Happy, who shows up after midnight when the \$1,000 limit on my cash card zeroes out and I can start withdrawing again. Happy is the more reliable of the two, but Rico will often deliver at odd hours when the other dealers won't. He'll come in the middle of the day, hours late but when the rest are asleep and closed for business. He'll complain and give you a skimpy bag, but he'll come. With Mark's phone, I dial Rico's number but his voice mail is full and not accepting messages. I dial Happy's and it goes straight to voice mail.

Happy and Rico sell crack. They don't sell cocaine to be inhaled, pot, Ecstasy, or anything else. I buy only bags of precooked crack. Some people will insist on cooking their own—a tricky operation that involves cocaine, baking soda, water, and a stove top—but the few times I tried this, I wasted the coke, burned my hands, and ended up with a wet glob that was barely smokable.

Give me the scraper, Mark barks. His stem—the small glass tube packed on one end with Brillo pad wire—is caked with residue, so after he scrapes it out and packs the end again, we can count on at least a few more hits. He folds his legs in a spidery arrangement and for a moment appears as if he will tip over. He looks like he's in his sixties—gray-faced, wrinkled, jutting bones—but claims he's in his early forties. I've been coming to his apartment for over three years, with increasing frequency, to get high.

I pass him the craggy metal strip that had until last night been the support behind the nylon web of an umbrella. Scrapers come from all sorts of things—wire coat hangers mostly, the ones without paint; but umbrellas have long thin metal strips, sometimes hollow half cylinders, that are particularly effective at cleaning out stems and generating a miracle hit or two when the bag is empty and before the need comes to check the couch and floor for what I call crumbs, what Mark calls bits, but what all crack addicts know is their last resort until they can get another bag.

I reach toward Mark to pass him the scraper and he flinches. The stem slips from his hands, falls in slow motion between us, and shatters on the scuffed parquet floor.

Mark gasps more than speaks. *Oh. Oh no. Oh Jesus, no.* In a flash he's down on all fours picking through the debris. He rescues several of the larger pieces of glass, brings them back to the coffee table,

lays them out, one by one, and begins picking and scratching at them with the scraper. *Let's see. Let's see.* He mumbles to himself as he maneuvers frantically over each shard. Again, his joints and hands and limbs seem animated not by life but by strings pulling and tugging him — furiously, meticulously — through a marionette's pantomime of a fevered prospector scrabbling through his pan for flecks of gold.

Mark finds no gold. He puts down the scraper, the bits of glass, and his movements come to a halt. He collapses back into the couch, where I can practically see the strings that held him aloft now glide down around him. The bag is empty and it's six a.m. We've been at it for six days and five nights and all the other stems are destroyed.

Morning glows behind the drawn blinds. Minutes pass and nothing but the low whine of the garbage trucks outside cuts the quiet. My neck throbs and the muscles in my shoulder feel thick and tight. The throbbing keeps time with my heart, which slams in my chest like an angry fist. I can't stop my body from rocking. I watch Mark get up to begin sweeping the glass and notice how his body rocks with mine, how our sway is synchronized — like two underwater weeds bending to the same current — and am both horrified and comforted to recognize how alike we are in the desolate crash that follows when the drugs run out.

The creeping horror of these past few weeks — relapsing; leaving Noah, my boyfriend, at the Sundance Film Festival nearly a week

early; e-mailing my business partner, Kate, and letting her know that she can do what she wants with our business, that I'm not coming back; checking in and out of a rehab in New Canaan, Connecticut; spending a string of nights at the 60 Thompson hotel and then diving into the gritty crackscape of Mark's apartment with the drifters there who latch onto the free drugs that come with someone on a bender. The awful footage of my near-history flashes behind my eyes, just as the clear future of not having a bag and knowing another won't be had for hours rises up, sharp as the new day.

I don't know yet that I will push through these grim, jittery hours until evening, when Happy will turn his cell phone back on and deliver more. I don't yet know that I will keep this going—here and in other places like it—for over a month. That I will lose almost forty pounds, so that, at thirty-four, I will weigh less than I did in the eighth grade.

It's also too soon to see the new locks on my office door. Kate will change them after she discovers I have come in at night. This will be weeks from now. She'll worry that I might steal things to pay for drugs, but I'll go there only to sit at my desk a few more times. To say good-bye to the part of me that, on the surface anyway, had worked the best. Through the large open window behind my desk, I'll look out at the Empire State Building, with its weary authority and shoulders of colored light. The city will seem different then, less mine, farther away. And Broadway, ten stories below, will be empty, a dark canyon of gray and black stretching north from 26th Street to Times Square.

On one of those nights, before the locks are changed, I'll climb up into the window and dangle my feet, scooch close to the edge and hover there in the cold February air for what seems like hours. I'll crawl down, sit at the desk again and get high. I'll remember how excited everyone was when we opened nearly five years before. Kate, the staff, our families. My clients—novelists, poets, essayists, short story writers—came with me from the old literary agency, the place where I'd started as an assistant when I first came to New York. They came with me, and there was so much faith in what lay ahead, so much faith in me. I'll stare at all the contracts and memos and galleys piled on my desk and marvel that I once had something to do with these things, those people. That I had been counted on.

On Mark's couch I watch my legs shake and wonder if there is a Xanax in his medicine cabinet. I wonder if I should leave and find a hotel. I have with me my passport, the clothes on my back, a cash card, and the black NYC Parks & Rec Department cap I recently found in the back of a cab, the one with the green maple leaf stitched on the front. There is still money in my checking account. Almost forty grand. I wonder how I've made it this far; how by some unwanted miracle my heart hasn't stopped.

Mark is shouting from the kitchen, but I don't hear what he's saying.

My cell phone rings, but it is buried under a pile of blankets and sheets in the next room, and I don't hear that either. I'll find it later,

the voice mail full of terrified calls from friends and family and Noah. I'll listen to the beginning of one and erase it along with the rest.

I won't hear the tumble of the new locks on the door of the apartment where Noah and I have lived for eight years—how the sound has changed from a bright pop to a low click as the bolt flies free while his hand turns the new key for the first time. I can't hear any of this. Cannot feel any of these things that have happened or are about to as the construction that was my life dismantles—lock by lock, client by client, dollar by dollar, trust by trust.

The only thing I hear as Mark angrily sweeps the glass from the floor, and the only thing I feel as the city rustles to life outside, are the barking demands at the end of the marionette strings. Through the endless morning and the crawling afternoon hours, and after, they grow louder, more insistent; tug harder, yank rougher, shake the cash card from my wallet, dollars from my pockets, loose change from my coat, color from my eyes, life out of me.

Cheers

It's January 2001 and Noah's cousin Letty is giving a small dinner at her brownstone in Brooklyn Heights to celebrate the launch of the small literary agency my friend Kate and I are about to open. Letty is a well-bred daughter of Memphis. Wellesley educated, widowed, and much younger-looking and acting than her sixty-something years, she has the bright, smiling, good-hearted eagerness of an underdog. Unlike her supersleek, wife-of-a-former-ambassador sister, Letty has always seemed slightly at odds with her privileged upbringing. She hasn't needed to work a day in her life, but she talks often about her jobs in the design departments of several book publishers and her many years working for foundations. She has two daughters, Ruth and Hannah, and scads of girlhood friends with names like Sissy and Babs whom she often flies back to Memphis to celebrate birthdays or anniversaries with. Letty is one of the kindest people I have ever known.

It is the end of January, one week before the agency officially opens. We don't have phones, stationery, or bank accounts. I'm anxious that we still have to hire an assistant and a bookkeeper, but I'm more anxious that we will not have money to pay either. Noah and I arrive at Letty's ten minutes late, and Kate and her husband are already there. Letty has arranged for someone to take coats, serve drinks, pass hors d'oeuvres, and attend to the dinner table. He's in his mid- to late thirties, Asian, attractive, clearly gay, and a bit too friendly. His name is Stephen and his flamboyance makes me self-conscious in the presence of Kate and her husband, whom we haven't socialized with as a couple much and who seem now, together, very straight.

Stephen asks Noah and me what we'd like to drink and scampers off to the kitchen. He brings us two glasses of white wine, even though I asked for a vodka and Noah a Scotch. He flusters and apologizes and goes back to the kitchen but does not return. Five or so minutes pass and Letty gets up to look for him. A few minutes later he comes out with the drinks. Letty is clearly embarrassed.

The evening is decadent. Caviar, shrimp, and cheeses before dinner, then roast lamb. I have too much of everything and am full long before dessert is served. Noah and Letty both give toasts—both have tears in their eyes as they do. I shift uncomfortably in the beams of their praise and cringe, not for the first time, at how close I am to a cousin of Noah's and barely know any of my own. At how Noah and I will go to weddings and birthdays of cousins

and siblings and nieces of his and I see my family once a year — at Christmas usually — and then for only a day and a night.

On the way to the bathroom, I ask Stephen to bring me another vodka. He forgets and I drink more wine. As I finally catch a gentle buzz, I look around the table and wonder how on earth I ended up here. Nights like these are for other people, people like Kate and Noah who — with their Ivy League degrees and supportive families — seem born for toasts and congratulations. At dessert, instead of drinking the port Letty has Stephen open, I get up and fix another vodka. Stephen sees this, realizes that he never brought me the earlier one, and from then on is very quick to refill my glass.

Noah and I hold hands in the cab ride home. I've had seven or eight vodkas, at least as many glasses of wine, and still feel a few drinks shy of where I'd like to be. I think of all that is left to do in the coming weeks to open the agency, and of the two other parties being thrown to celebrate. One is a cocktail party at the new apartment of a friend of Kate's; the other is a seated dinner for fifty or so clients and publishing colleagues hosted by my friend David, who is also one of the first writers I worked with. I worry that I'll need to address the crowds at both of these parties — say something at least by way of thanking the hosts — and I begin to think about how to make sure I won't have to. I close my eyes and try not to focus on how much I want to call Rico and do a few hits. After four or five drinks, this option usually rises up and floats in front of me until I either call him, call another dealer, or fall asleep.

It's just before midnight, and my mind starts racing with ways that I can break away from Noah and score. A manuscript left at the office? Cash I need to get from the ATM? Nothing seems plausible. As we cross the Brooklyn Bridge back into Manhattan, Noah takes both my hands and tells me how proud he is—of me, of the agency. As he speaks, the lights from the bridge flicker across his scruffy beard, kind eyes, longish sideburns and close-cropped, receding hair. I lean into him and away from the other thoughts. He smells the way he always smells—like Speed Stick deodorant and fresh laundry. I relax a little, think for a moment that there's not so much to worry about, that everything will work out.

Getting into bed that night, I remember Stephen, the guy at Letty's, and how he forgot to bring out several dishes warming in the oven, spilled a glass of wine, and made flirty eyes at me through dinner. I wonder how Letty found him and remember his lingering too long at the table, asking too many questions, and seeming oblivious of his mistakes. I remember that he let us know he went to Princeton and that, when it came up that Noah was a filmmaker, he listed all the famous people he knew—playwrights, activists, actors. I also remember his writing his number down on the back of a napkin and pressing it into my hand when I went into the kitchen for a glass of water; how he held my hand a beat too long when he told me that he'd bartended lots of book parties, that I should call him sometime. And though he'd been a disaster all evening, I know, as I fall asleep that night, that I will.

Over a year later, when Stephen is setting up a small table in our TV room with glasses and ice — something he has now done for us at least half a dozen times — I notice a long burn mark down the side of his thumb. I ask him what happened and he stops what he's doing, looks at me as if he's been waiting for me to ask this question for a long time, and says, *You don't want to know*. But I do know. Addicts have antennae that can sometimes detect the kindred frequency of other addicts, and in this instant I pick up Stephen's. In fact, I've probably been responding to it since the second we met. But it's not until now — when I know exactly how he burned himself — that I fully understand the reason I hired him, why he is now in our apartment working another party, even though he has twice stood us up on the day of an event with some complicated excuse of illness or family trouble. And so I say, *Maybe you need to be more careful what you smoke*, and when he smiles and asks, *Are you?* I know that this will lead to something. That the ball is in play. I'll be amazed later when I remember what I say next. *Not as careful as either of us should be*. And then next: *We should set that up sometime*.

I throw a party at the apartment when Noah is out of town. It's a Thursday night and I've already cleared the decks so I don't need to go into work the next day. All evening I pretend to be tired — yawning and stretching, rubbing my eyes — hoping to encourage people to leave early. I imagine the first hit and the bloom of exquisite calm it will bring and I quietly, invisibly, detest everyone in the apartment for being there. I move through the apartment with my seltzer — what I always drink when I organize anything larger

than a dinner party—and as I'm talking and smiling and hugging congratulations and thank-you-for-comings, I'm running down the list of things left to do. Check in with Noah to give him the sense that the night has wound down and I am heading to bed. Run out to the cash machine to get Stephen \$300—maybe \$400—to go wherever he needs to go to score. I'll also need at least \$300 to pay him for bartending, since he accepts cash only. I decide to tell him not to bother cleaning up, that I'll do it so he can get going.

Stephen leaves around eleven fifteen and returns after one. I've just finished breaking down the bar, washing the glasses, and putting away the sodas and napkins. (He'll include those two hours on his bill.) This night is important. Not because it's the first time I sleep with him. Not because I spend another \$700 I barely have. But because at some point, around four in the morning, when we have smoked nearly through the bag, Stephen calls his friend Mark, who, in a few swift minutes, is at the door with more.

Mark is a restaurant publicist. Tall, neat, angular. I notice right away how he vibrates. As if some electrical charge shocks through his body at a low but steady thrum. I also notice how he speaks to Stephen. Like Fagin to the Artful Dodger, he has some authority over him, and even though it's clear he's on his best behavior, I can see how their dynamic involves some commingling of brutality and care. As Mark holds up our stems and complains how oily and burnt they are, Stephen flutters around him like a nervous

nurse attending a surgeon. Mark gives him a you-should-know-better look and shakes his head. Stephen doesn't tell him that they're burnt because of me. That I have, as I always do, scorched each stem with hits that pull too long and flames that are too high. Everyone I ever smoke with will complain about this. And though I will try, each time, to inhale as gently as I can, it always seems like I'm not pulling hard enough, as if the flame is too low, as if I'm not getting enough.

At some point after Mark arrives, Stephen stops speaking to me directly. There seems to be some new rule that Mark is the only one who can address me, and when he does, he is wildly polite, overly complimentary (the apartment, my looks). It's as if I'm in the forecourt of a long con, and instead of feeling hesitant or cautious, I'm thrilled.

The night grunts on until ten or so the next morning. Stephen and Mark amble out into the day, and by Saturday night I have invited them over again. By Monday morning, my bank account is empty and Mark has suggested he and I get together on our own sometime that week. Noah calls a dozen or so times, and I let the landline ring, turn the cell phone off, and don't call him back. On Monday afternoon, my assistant comes into my office and says Noah is on the line, upset and demanding to speak to me. I close the door, and he cries on the other end of the line and asks me to please stop. Could I just please stop. I feel awful and tell him of course and I'm sorry and that it won't happen again. He presses for

details and I get mad. Amazingly, he apologizes. I throw Stephen's number away. I throw Mark's card away. But it doesn't matter. Both call over the next weeks and months, and at some moment, I can't remember exactly when or which one, I write a number down. And at some other moment, not long after, I call.

First Door

It's time to go. He's had to pee for hours, but it's always the last thing he wants to do. The problem—that's what his parents call it—*the problem* is that if he goes, meaning, to the bathroom, he won't actually be able to go. In the way he describes it to himself then, it hasn't *built up enough* yet. There isn't enough pressure. He will wait a little while. Wait until dinner is over, when no one will notice if he's gone for too long. Sometimes it takes as long as an hour. Sometimes he can't do it at all. And sometimes it only takes a few minutes. He never knows until he's there.

It's after dinner and he's standing in front of the avocado green toilet. Noises happen behind the closed door—a dropped ice tray, cursing, breaking glass, louder cursing, a phone ringing. The house swells with urgency. From somewhere inside these sounds, a voice

that will always remind him of wind chimes calls, *Billy, are you all right?*

Billy..., his mother calls again, but her voice fades.

Nothing for a few moments. Just the green toilet. Hurry, he thinks. Hurry. His hands work furiously over the end of his penis. A loud knock at the door. Then two. A different voice. His father's. *Jesus, Willie, don't make a career out of it in there.*

Little-guy cords—usually navy blue, sometimes green—bunch at his feet. Fruit of the Looms wrinkle just below his knees. He's been in there for over half an hour. He's come close at least three times, but each time it doesn't work. Doesn't happen. He knows it's going to sting—like bits of glass trying to push out—but he just wants it over with. He shuffles in front of the bowl—left, right, left, right—and squeezes the end of his penis. Rubs it with both hands. The pressure builds and his brow is sweating. He has a terrified sense that if his parents find out, there will be trouble. His father has told him that he has to stop taking so long in the bathroom. When he asks his son why he jumps around and makes such a big production of it all, the boy doesn't have an answer. *Cut it out* is what his father tells him, and he wishes he could.

He runs the water in the sink to cover the sound. The shuffle becomes a dance, the kneading becomes a fevered pinching. From

a faraway room he hears his older sister, Kim, crying. His father yells her name. A door slams. His mother calls out. A kettle of boiling water whistles from the kitchen. None of these sounds have to do with him. But someone—he can't tell who—is knocking at the door now. Just knocking, no voice. The boy is a panicked animal—jerking and jumping and pinching before the bowl. He braces for another knock. There is more shouting from down the hall. The sound of something breaking. His hands, his legs—his whole body riots around the pressure at his middle. He's sure his parents can hear him, convinced they will come bursting through the locked door at any moment. He tries to stop the jumping but he can't. It feels as if the whole house—his parents, his sister, the cats, the whistling kettle—has gathered on the other side of the door.

In a moment—the one he's desperate for but can't create—none of it will matter. In that moment, he won't hear the slamming and banging and yelling. As the stinging pressure crests and his body flaps away from him, he won't hear anything. In that streaking moment when he loses control and everything fades out in a flash of pain and relief, he will spray the wall, the floor, the radiator, himself.

He doesn't see any of the mess until the little oblivion passes and he's able to steady himself and direct the pee into the bowl. He aims toward the back to avoid the ruckus of water and it goes on forever. He sees there's a big clean-up job to be done, and he's already anxious about what to say when he's on the other side of

the door. Once he's finally finished peeing, he begins pulling yards of toilet paper from the roll, spools that ribbon around his feet and begin to soak up the pool of urine on the tile. He wipes down the toilet and the walls behind and to the side. He gets on his hands and knees and begins sweeping the damp away in long wide arcs. He pats his pants down with the tissue until it pills and crumbles in his hands. He puts too much toilet paper in the bowl and it clogs and the water rises. He knows to put his hand up the drain and yank the paper free to avoid another mess. He plunges his arm in, tugs frantically at the clog, and, like an answered prayer, the bowl empties. Just as this happens the knocking begins again and now it's both parents at the door. His pants and underwear are still bunched around his ankles. He hasn't pulled them up yet because he knows that beads of blood have sprung up at the tip of his penis and it will take a few dabs of tissue and a minute or two for it to dry before it's safe. Often he rushes through this part and will have to throw his underwear out later as little brown spots of blood bud and dry in the white fabric. He's tried stuffing toilet paper in there, but it usually slips to the side and doesn't work. Sometimes he forgets and tosses the underwear in the hamper and sees the dryer-dried briefs folded and spotty in his dresser drawer days later. His mother never says a word to him about the briefs, about the peeing—about any of it. This has been going on for as long as he can remember. He has no memory of standing at a toilet and peeing when he wants to.

What are you DOING? thunders from the other side of the door. His father again. The boy calls out that he is coming, just a minute. He mutters to himself—*Please God, please*—actually, he's

been muttering this to himself since he locked the bathroom door over forty-five minutes ago. He will never be more specific in his plea. His pants and shirt are soaking with water, with urine. He pats himself down one more time with a wad of toilet paper and puts it in the wastepaper basket under an empty tissue box and a used toilet paper roll. He wipes everything down, again, just one more time—the radiator, the bowl, the toilet seat, the floor. He scans the room again for signs of his time there. He wipes, with his hand, the sweat dripping from his brow and pats his hair carefully into place. He breathes in, murmurs another quiet prayer, turns off the light, and hopes the light in the hall is off so his soak-stained clothes aren't obvious.

He calms his breath, palms the doorknob, and braces for what's on the other side. He is five years old.

Flight

Snow is falling outside the Holland Tunnel. Cars aren't moving. Horns sound and drivers yell. My flight to Berlin is scheduled to take off in less than an hour, and there is no way I'm going to make it. Noah is already there, having arrived at the Berlin Film Festival directly from Sundance to show his film two days ago. I call my assistant, who booked a four-o'clock car for a five thirty flight, which I only now realize isn't enough time, particularly with the snow. It is, of course, not his fault, but I tell him it is and that my life is about to change, and not for the better, as a result. I hang up. These will be my last words to him, to anyone in my office.

I have nearly a full bag—three medium-size rocks and a scattering of crumbs—in my pocket. A clean stem and lighter, wrapped in a kitchen towel, are wedged somewhere in my L.L. Bean duffel bag, between manuscripts, a pair of jeans, a sweater,

and a pile of Kiehl's products. The driver is a young, deep-voiced Eastern European woman, and I've already sung her my if-you-only-knew-how-important-it-is-that-I-get-there-on-time song to persuade her to work some kind of magic and levitate us past the traffic. She just stares at me through the rearview mirror. I wonder if she can see how strung out I am, how far over the line.

I know this is going to be the last straw. Even if Noah forgives me again, despite the fact that he knows I've been using since I left him at Sundance, Kate will not. I've been out for almost two weeks and canceled three meetings with her to go over our long-avoided partnership agreement and finances. I have told everyone—friends, clients, employees—that I have thrown my back out and am going to doctors, acupuncturists, and masseurs. But the truth is that since I got back from Sundance five days early, I've been rattling around the apartment in a thick cloud of crack smoke. I've left the building only a few times, to run across 8th Street to the cash machine and next door to the deli for lighters and Brillo wire. The liquor store has made daily deliveries of Ketel One, and I've called the housekeeper to tell her I'm home sick and not to come.

At some point before getting in the car, I send Kate an e-mail telling her to do what she needs to do, that I've relapsed and that she should protect herself in whatever way is necessary. Before I press Send, I look out the window at the thick flakes of snow coming down in slow motion between the buildings and think I am doing her a favor. Giving her permission to get out and move on. But

I feel next to nothing as I end our partnership, our business, my career. I regard that nothing the same way you observe a cut on your finger just after accidentally slicing it with a knife but seconds before the blood appears. For a moment it's like looking at someone else's finger, as if the cut you made has not broken your skin, the blood about to flow not your own.

I finally get to the airport and race ahead of the line to the first-class counter. The woman there tells me right away that I've missed my flight. I ask her if there is another and she tells me there is one that goes through Amsterdam in three hours. Without hesitating I buy a first-class, full-fare ticket. I have over \$70,000 in my checking account at this point, and I think, barely think, that five or so thousand is nothing. I ask her if there is a hotel at the airport, because I want to lie down and rest before my flight. She looks at me and pauses before telling me there is a Marriott a short cab ride away. I thank her, check my bag through for the seven-o'clock flight, and take my ticket. In the cab, I call Noah and leave him a message that I missed my flight — *The traffic was terrible*, I say in mock frustration — but I'm booked on the next one out.

The cabdriver is a handsome, dark-eyed Hispanic guy, and I immediately strike up a conversation. How I get to the moment when I ask him if he parties, I don't know, but I get there. He says yes and I say, *With what?* and he answers, *Beer and pot*. He asks me with what and I come right out and tell him. He pauses and asks me if I have any on me and I say yes. He asks if he can see it and, without hesitating, I reach into my pocket, pull out a

rock, and hold it up between the two front seats. He slows the cab, eyes the drug seriously, but says nothing. When I pull it back, he laughs and tells me he's never seen it before, and I ask if he wants to hang out. He tells me sure, later, after his shift, and gives me his cell phone number. I take it, even though I know my flight will take off before he's done. He doesn't say his name so I look at the driver's ID framed in Plexiglas behind the passenger seat and notice that it's obscured by a piece of newspaper. I ask him his name and he mumbles something inaudible. I ask him again and he says what I think is Rick.

Something in his manner shifts as we pull up to the Marriott. He suddenly cools, and I'll remember, later, that he barely asks for the fare, that when I hand it to him, it seems irrelevant. I hardly register this, since I'm preoccupied with how lucky it is that I missed the flight, that I now have a few hours to get high.

I get to the room and shut the door behind me as if I'm closing the curtain on a great, terrifying stage where I've had to perform a grueling part, the skin of which I can now finally shed. I take off my coat and pack a big hit. Crumbs scatter on the bedspread as I hold the stem up to light, but I don't care. I pull hard and hold the smoke in for as long as I can. When I exhale, the stress of the last few hours disappears and in its place swells a pearly bliss.

I soon become aware of my body and feel restless in my clothes. I take my sweater off between the first and second hits. They seem

like part of a constricting costume for the performance on the other side of the door and of no use now. By the third hit I'm naked, though I grab a towel from the bathroom and tie it low around my hips. I will always do this when I get high. I will always think my torso looks lean and muscled and sexy. I will always, many times, clock myself in the mirror and think, Not bad. I will remember some version of the lines from Ben Neihart's novel *Hey Joe*, when the narrator checks himself out in the mirror and thinks smugly that he's *keeping his shit tight*. I will, to be perfectly honest, turn myself on.

I scooch the towel lower down my hips, cinch it a little tighter, and begin to get restless for company. I call the number of the taxi driver but no one answers and it doesn't click to voice mail. I do this thirty or so times in the next hour. I put what's left of the bag in an ashtray and thrill to what seems like an endless amount. I'm sloppy as I pack these hits. The bedspread and floor are soon speckled with crumbs. I know that at some point I will be on my knees picking them up, trying to tell the difference between crack crumbs and other debris. There will never be a time when I smoke crack that doesn't end with me on my knees, sometimes for hours—hunched over carpets, rugs, linoleum, tile—sifting desperately through lint and cat litter and dirt, fingering the floor, like a madman, for crumbs. I know this is where it will end up. As I pack those lazy crumb-scattering hits in the beginning, I will, each time, think of the floor like a retirement account. Little bits neglected into a place where I will seek them out later. It will comfort me to know there is somewhere to go when the bag empties, something to do while I'm waiting for the next delivery. But in

the beginning, in the abundant beginning, this will always seem a long way off.

In the room at the Newark Airport Marriott, as in most rooms where there is crack, porn flickers on the television. This time it's straight and soft and on Pay-per-view. I pay for all six movies and flip between them as one scene disappoints or dulls. I have drunk the small bottle of white wine, the two beers, and both small bottles of vodka from the minibar by the time I realize I need to get back to the airport and onto the plane. Since there is still a large pile of drugs left in the ashtray, I wonder whether I should go at all.

But I do. I let my stem cool and wrap it in a wad of tissue paper. I gather the two rocks and the remaining crumbs from the ashtray and put them back in the mini zip-lock they came in. I ditch the towel, scramble into my clothes, and shove the pipe, bag, and lighter into the front pocket of my jeans. I scan the room a dozen times. Clean every surface and pick up whatever crumbs I can from the floor. I unpack the bag and pipe and lighter at least three times to smoke just-one-more-hit before leaving, to get just the right high to face the lobby and the airport. I leave less than an hour to check in and get on the plane. Noah has called three or four times, but I have not picked up, nor have I listened to his messages.

I don't bother checking out. I go straight to the taxi stand and get in the only cab there. The driver is a big black guy—fat but

muscular, linebacker-style. Forty, maybe fifty. The stem, still hot from heavy use in the room minutes before, burns in my jeans pocket like a little oven. Of course I ask him if he parties. He says he does, and I ask him if he ever smokes rock. *Sure do*, he says, and right then, within the first minute of getting into the cab, I know that I am not getting on the plane. That I will probably never make it to Berlin.

So let's hang out, I say to the linebacker behind the wheel, and he says, *Sure thing*. As we edge up to the Continental departures drop-off, I tell him to head back to the hotel, that I'll catch a later flight. He doesn't question or hesitate, just pulls away from the terminal and says, again, *Sure thing*. I call Continental's 800 number and tell them I'm sick and can't make the flight and could they transfer the ticket to the next night. Unbelievably, they can and they do. I am booked in a first-class seat the next night at eight. Acres of time, a bag of crack, company lined up, and a hotel less than a minute away. I've just missed two flights, e-mailed Kate and relinquished any say or stake in our agency, tossed my career down the chute, and stood up my beloved and no doubt frantic boyfriend. I've done all these things and I couldn't be happier.

I leave a message on Noah's cell phone saying they canceled the second flight and that I will be flying out tomorrow. I speak slowly and calmly, with just a little can-you-believe-it annoyance so as to seem normal and not high. Once I've left the message, I turn the phone off so that I don't have to hear it ring when he calls back.

Later, the taxi driver and I sit in his cab behind a 7-Eleven somewhere in Newark. He's anxious about being seen in the hotel because he picks people up and drops them off there every day. I pack his hit—small because there is precious little left—and as he lights up, I tell him how horny I get when I smoke. He nods in agreement as he exhales, and soon zippers come down—mine first, then his. I take a hit and he holds himself and talks about his wife, how she blows him but never wants to fuck. I inhale so hard that I burn my forefinger and thumb. I should be over the Atlantic right now, I think, but instead I'm behind a 7-Eleven, in the shadow of a Newark, New Jersey, overpass. What I want is the blurry oblivion of body-crashing sex, and instead I get a gloomy jerk-off session without enough drugs to get either of us high. As the bag empties, I start to feel shaky and it occurs to me that I've gone nearly a week without sleep. It's ten thirty p.m. and my flight tomorrow evening isn't until eight. I ask the taxi driver if he knows where to score more and of course he doesn't. I hide one last rock in the small front pocket of my jeans so there will be something when I get to the hotel room. I start thinking about whether I should go back to the city—to Mark's, or to a hotel somewhere in Manhattan where I can call Happy. But the city seems time zones away. And if I go there, I know there will be no turning back, no chance of making it to Berlin.

The taxi driver drops me off at the Marriott, and I call Happy the second I get to the room. After much haggling, he agrees to drive out to the hotel, but only if I will spend at least \$800 to make it worthwhile. I say no problem.

It is just after eleven when Happy and I speak. At eleven fifty he calls me from the parking lot to say he's there. I can't remember his ever delivering this quickly in Manhattan. I leave the room, take the elevator down to get cash from the ATM in the empty lobby, walk as slowly and calmly as I can, past the check-in desk and out into the parking lot, where his red minivan idles. My heart slams in my chest and my throat is so thick with fear I can barely speak as I hop into the front seat. Happy, as usual, is wearing his white sweatpants and plain black hooded sweatshirt. The only thing missing are the large earphones that usually ring his neck. He's Dominican, in his early thirties, and we never say much to each other beyond amounts, addresses, and number of stems. He is always calm, and even though he's driven all the way out to an airport hotel from Manhattan, tonight he's no different. His movements are slow and patient as he counts out the sixteen bags, and he asks no questions as he hands me two clean stems. I shove it all in my front two pockets, thank him for coming out so fast, and head back to the hotel.

If anyone had stopped to watch me go to the cash machine and withdraw stacks of bills, several times because of the \$200 transaction limit, then head out to an idling van with tinted windows, and return minutes later with bulging pockets, it wouldn't take much imagination to understand what had just transpired. As obvious and sloppy as I know the whole operation is, I know that once I get back to the room and take a big hit off one of the crystal-clear new stems, everything will be okay. That all the grim and alarming truths barking loudly around me will vanish in a blast of smoke.

And so they do. It's one o'clock and I have a spectacular pile of crack in the little ashtray on the nightstand. This is the most I have ever had on my own, and I know I will smoke every last bit of it. I wonder if somewhere in that pile is the crumb that will bring on a heart attack or stroke or seizure. The cardiac event that will deliver all this to an abrupt and welcome halt. My chest pounds, my fingers are singed, I fill my lungs with smoke.