

“Now you young twerps want a new name for your generation? Probably not, you just want jobs, right? Well, the media do us all such tremendous favors when they call you Generation X, right? Two clicks from the very end of the alphabet. I hereby declare you Generation A, as much at the beginning of a series of astonishing triumphs and failures as Adam and Eve were so long ago.”

Kurt Vonnegut

Syracuse University commencement address

May 8, 1994

HARJ

TRINCOMALEE, SRI LANKA

How can we be alive and not wonder about the stories we use to knit together this place we call the world? Without stories, our universe is merely rocks and clouds and lava and blackness. It's a village scraped raw by warm waters leaving not a trace of what existed before.

Imagine a tropical sky, ten miles high and a thousand years off on the horizon. Imagine air that feels like honey on your forehead; imagine air that comes out of your lungs cooler than when it entered.

Imagine hearing a dry hiss outside your office building's window. Imagine walking to the window's louvred shutters and looking out and seeing the entire contents of the world you know flow past you in a surprisingly soothing, quiet sluice of grey mud: palm fronds, donkeys, the local Fanta bottler's Jeep, unlocked bicycles, dead dogs, beer crates, shrimper's skiffs, barbed wire fences, garbage, ginger flowers, oil sheds, Mercedes tour buses, chicken delivery vans.

. . . corpses
. . . plywood sheets
. . . dolphins
. . . a moped
. . . a tennis net
. . . laundry baskets
. . . a baby
. . . baseball caps
. . . more dead dogs
. . . corrugated zinc

Imagine a space alien is standing with you there in the room as you read these words. What do you say to him? Her? It? *What was once alive is now dead.* Would aliens even know the difference between life and death? Perhaps aliens experience something else just as unexpected as life. And what would that be? What would they say to themselves to plaster over the unexplainable cracks of everyday existence, let alone a tsunami? What myths or lies do they hold true? How do they tell stories?

Now look back out your window—look at what the gods have barfed out of your subconscious and into the world—the warm, muddy river of dead cats, old women cauled in moist saris, aluminum propane canisters, a dead goat, flies that buzz unharmed just above the fray.

- . . . picnic coolers
- . . . clumps of grass
- . . . a sunburnt Scandinavian pederast
- . . . white plastic stacking chairs
- . . . drowned soldiers tangled in gun straps

And then what do you do—do you pray? What is prayer but a wish for the events in your life to string together to form a story—something that makes some sense of events you know have meaning.

And so I pray.

ZACK

MAHASKA COUNTY, IOWA

Cornfields are the scariest things on the entire fucking face of the planet. I don't mean that in a Joe-Pesci-being-clubbed-to-death-with-an-aluminum-baseball-bat kind of way, and I don't mean it in an alien-crop-circles kind of way, and I don't mean it in a butchering-hitchhikers kind of way. I don't even mean it in an alien-autopsy-remains-used-as-fertilizer kind of way. I mean it in a Big-Corn-Archer Daniels Midland/Cargill/Monsanto-genetically-modified-high-fructose-ethanol kind of way. Corn is a fucking nightmare. A thousand years ago it was a stem of grass with one scuzzy little kernel; now it's a bloated, foot-long, buttery carb dildo. And get this: cornstarch molecules are a mile long. Back in the seventies, Big Corn patented some new enzyme that chops those miles into a trillion discrete blips of fructose. A few years later these newly liberated fructose molecules assault the national food chain. *Blammo!* An entire nation becomes morbidly obese. Fact is, the human body isn't built to withstand high-dose assaults of fructose. It enters your body and your body says, *Hmmm . . . do I turn this into shit or do I turn it into blubber? Blubber it is!* Corn turns off the shit switch. The corn industry's response to this? *Who—us? Contributing to the obesity epidemic? No way, man. People simply started to snack more in the eighties. Now be quiet and keep drinking all that New Formula Coke.*

Man, humans are a nightmare fucking species. We deserve everything we do to ourselves.

But *who* the fuck gets stung by a bee in a combine tractor in the middle of a cornfield in Mahaska County, Iowa? Me, fucking *me*.

By the way, welcome to Oskaloosa and all the many features that make Oskaloosa a terrific place to visit. There's something for everyone here, from the historic city square with its bandstand to the George Daily Auditorium, the award-winning Oskaloosa Public Library, William Penn University and three golf courses.

I stole most of that last paragraph from the Internet. What the town's home page forgot to mention was my father's meth distillery ("lab" makes it sound so Cletus-&-Brandeen), which got busted by the DEA a few years back. Dad and the DEA never got along too well.

Six years ago Dad got wasted and in a moment of paranoia stole the Oskaloosa Library's bookmobile, abandoning its carcass in the 14th hole sand trap of the legendary Edmundson Park and Golf Course. Then, in the delusion that he was destroying DEA monitoring equipment, he torched it, in the process losing his eyebrows, his driver's licence, his freedom and his visitation rights to my two half-sisters, who live in Winnebago County.

Once out of the clink, he went right back to business and when his meth distillery was raided, the back of his head was toasted by a canister of boiling toluene. He spent six weeks in the correctional facility's hospital unit until he got into reasonable enough shape to walk around. My uncle Jay, a lawyer and Freon broker from Palo Alto, was able to post bail and had Dad flown out to California for OCD counselling. Dad picked up drug-resistant staph from a set of improperly cleaned in-flight headsets that infected his burn scar; by the time they touched down at SFO, maybe a quarter of his head was eaten up. So then we buried Dad, and Uncle Jay sold half the farm and bought me the world's most kickass corn harvesting combine, Maizie.

Since then, Uncle Jay has sent me a reasonable paycheque

in return for me not making meth (and following Daddy's path), as well as for me doing a slightly more than half-ass job tending the corn (our family legacy), and for me to piss into an Erlenmeyer flask in front of Iowa's creepiest Romanian lab technician (just in case I forgot the former two conditions). The urine was tested on the spot to see if I'd shaken hands with someone who ate a poppyseed bagel since the previous Tuesday; it's not fun being treated like a disgraced Olympian athlete, but Uncle Jay made cleanliness a condition of keeping Maizie. I mean, everyone I know—hell, the whole country—is baked on drugs, clueless as dirt and morbidly obese. Normally I'd have been the perfect candidate for all three, except, 1) I can't do drugs if I want my cheque, 2) I'm not entirely stupid and am at least curious about the world and 3) I believe corn is the devil. Try finding rice and soy grocery products in Mahaska County. Good luck. They might as well add that fact to Oskaloosa's online civic profile: *Oskaloosa's grocers sell a wide array of products into which manufacturers have invisibly inserted a vast family of corn-derived molecules. Should your child decide to go vegetarian or adapt any other questionable dietary lifestyle choice, our grocers and mini-marts will thwart their teen desires at every corner.*

Okay, here's the thing I didn't mention about the raid: the DEA also found a fake-vintage saltine cracker tin containing two dead men's index fingers. Dad had been using them to loan authenticity to a long-running cheque fraud scheme, but there was a third finger the DEA didn't find, which I traded soon after to a DEA server maintenance girl named Carly who was running some scam of her own. In return for the finger, she gave me a killer blowjob and access to the DEA's real-time geosynchronous surveillance satellite cameras. I could have made something long-term with Carly, except she demanded that I cut off my ponytail and donate it to Locks of Love.

Farewell, Carly. Why did I want access to a real-time satellite camera? For my art, of course. Details to come shortly.

So the day I got stung by that goddam bee I was out in Maizie, a harvester so luxurious it could shame a gay cruise liner. I was naked, and why not! The ergonomically sensible operator's cab was fully pressurized and air-conditioned; unibody cab frame, rubber mounts and sound-absorbing material reduced noise levels to near zero. All-round visibility allowed me ample time to throw on some shorts if I saw a visitor arriving on the farm.

I was also listening to some trendy band from Luxembourg or the Vatican or Lichtenstein or the Falkland Islands, one of those places so small that a distinct pie slice of its GDP derives from the sale of postage stamps to collectors and music sales by nanotrendy indie rock bands.

I had my four plasmas on 1) the NFL, 2) some whacked-out Korean game show where people dress in animal costumes to win prizes that look like inflatable vinyl alphabet letters, 3) the DEA real-time satellite view of my farm and 4) a two-way satellite link to an insomniac freak named Charles, who works in the satellite TV media-buying wing of BBDO in Singapore. Charles pays a hundred bucks an hour to watch me work nude in my cab. Did I forget to mention that? Welcome to the new economy. If I can make an extra buck by getting off some Twinkie in another hemisphere, you know what? I'm *in*. Charles, you unzip your trousers. *Zegna* trousers, and I know that about you because I read your secret online profile: lions-and-tigers-and-bears@labelwhore.org.

In any event, the sexy portion of Charles's day seemed to have been completed, and the two of us were talking. Specifically, Charles was trashing the state of Iowa, branding it "The Rectangle State." I quickly disabused him of this notion, pointing out that *Colorado* is technically the rectangle state.

Charles said, “Yes, its overall shape is rectangular, *but* if you look at a county map of Colorado, it looks like a bunch of ripped paper shreds stacked by preschoolers, whereas Iowa is divvied up into 113 neatly aligned rectangles.”

“Quit mocking my state’s spatial configuration.”

“Wake up, CornDog.”

Okay, maybe, just *maybe* I was high that day. (Have you ever found a Romanian lab technician who couldn’t be bribed?) My personal rule is that I only get high when the weather sets a new record, and, BTW, my name isn’t CornDog. It’s Zack. And I’m not ADD, I’m just Zack. ADD is a face-saving term my parents slapped on me when they figured out I wasn’t Stephen Hawking.

I hear people asking, Where is Zack’s mother? Is Zack a plucky orphan? No, Zack has an age-inappropriate future stepfather-in-the-making named Kyle who breeds genetically defective Jack Russell terriers with his mother in a shack in St. George, Utah.

Charles, meanwhile, was relentless: “CornDog, what the hell were they thinking when they were divvying up your state?”

On the DEA real-time satellite cam I was zooming in and out of a map of Iowa, shifting scale and superimposing geopolitical borders. Charles was right. Iowa is the Rectangle State.

More importantly, I was using the satellite to keep real-time track of that day’s masterpiece, a ten-acre cock and balls I was chopping out of the cornstalks to send as a long overdue thank-you note to God for having me be born into the cultural equivalent of one of those machines they use to shake paint in hardware stores. I didn’t have to please Uncle Jay with harvesting efficiency that year—the whole crop was contaminated with some kind of gene trace that was killing off not bees (a thing of the past) but moths and wasps. In an uncharacteristic

act of citizenship, the corn industry had decided to scrap the crop. I wasn't too pissed about that—look at the bright side: *subsidies!* So even though the corn was in tassel and at its prettiest, I could clear those stalk fuckers whatever way I wanted.

The fateful moment occurred shortly after Charles told me about a lap dance he'd won in a pre-op tranny nightclub the week before. One of Maizie's windows was rattling a bit, so I went and jiggled it on its hinges. I opened and closed it a few times and, *shazaam!*, that's when I got stung.