

# Michael Gieger's Writing Portfolio

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### Abstract

Academic critics and casual readers of David Foster Wallace's 1,079-page novel, *Infinite Jest*, have long ruminated over the book's daunting physical size and wide narrative scope. This paper offers an argumentative interpretation of the novel's immensity through an exploration of Wallace's thematic preoccupation with solipsism and human loneliness. Building primarily from the critical works of Frank Cioffi and Casey Michael Henry, this essay makes the contention that the length of *Infinite Jest* behaves mimetically, simulating for its attentive readership a sense of perpetual emotional isolation—an isolation reflective of the epic's untold lonesome characters. The argument further suggests that length of the novel is necessitated by Wallace's creative want to depict a broad spectrum of solipsistic characters with profound detail. This essay ultimately establishes the gradient of loneliness in *Infinite Jest* through the character analyses of two antipodal Wallacean figures: Hal Incandenza and Randy Lenz.

*Keywords:* solipsism, loneliness, addiction, *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace

### **“Into the Womb of Solipsism”: The Spectrum of Loneliness in Wallace’s *Infinite Jest***

David Foster Wallace once said to interviewer David Lipsky regarding the astonishing length of his novel, *Infinite Jest*, that “I wanted to do something with a whole lot of different characters that had kind of queer, broad, slow movements. I didn’t set a goal of a thousand pages [...] I wanted something that had kind of the texture of what mental life was like in America right now. Which meant, sort of an enormous tsunami of stuff coming at you” (Lipsky 270). Lipsky’s direction of inquiry, specifically his preoccupation with Wallace’s creative decision to make *Infinite Jest* over a thousand pages, is quite reflective of the general public discourse and initial academic criticism which engulfed *Infinite Jest* following the novel’s 1996 publication (Lipsky 270). Frustrated readers attributed the hulking volume’s size to Wallace’s indulgence in a turgid linguistic style and his deployment of superfluous endnotes. Many of these sentiments have held true among *Jest* readership still today, years after Wallace’s death. Despite their reverence for the piece, prominent scholars of Wallace’s work including Frank Cioffi classify *Infinite Jest* as a “pleasurable novel to read—full of narrative action, excitement, local delights—and at the same time a trying, annoying, difficult novel that is constantly interrupting itself, breaking comfortable routines it has set up, and, in many cases, syntactically reinventing the English language” (Cioffi 162). Readers like Cioffi maintain that the length of Wallace’s novel is necessitated by its preoccupation with compelling and emotionally painful observations on human loneliness. The novel’s desire to explore these melancholic themes across a wide spectrum of characters, is dually imbued by a persistent authorial urge to entertain and stun the reader with dense absurdly comedic language. Wallace’s work and its massive breadth might be considered a result of these ambitious creative decisions.

The broad reception of *Infinite Jest* and its physical enormity was, at the time, divisive enough to arrest the attention of both the literary community and media landscape. In a 1997 television interview with Charlie Rose, Wallace, bemused by the public's fixation on his novel's length, jested (although perhaps stereotypically) on the feminist notion that white males who endeavor to write long works of fiction are in some way seeking to "impose [their] phallus on the consciousness of the world" and that if he was following suit in this tradition, "it was going on at a level of awareness that [he] would not want to have access to." Despite Wallace shrugging off pleas from academia and popular media to provide an explanation for his novel's immense size, the question remains: why is *Infinite Jest* so long? A fairly simple, if not disheartening answer to this question is reiterated by the novel's author throughout several recorded interviews.

In *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, Wallace captures in concise phrasing the essence of *Jest*'s thematic purpose by telling Lipsky he "think[s] it's a fairly nerdy book, about loneliness" (Lipsky 273). For Wallace, *Jest*'s core literary functions—namely its cyclical structure, dystopian future setting, and thematic emphasis on addictive behavior—culminate in a simulative effect whereby the reader is mainlined with the solipsistic dread of the novel's characters. Although reading is itself an inherently isolating activity, *Infinite Jest* implores its readership to live vicariously through the sadness of its characters. The physical space contained within his 1,079-page novel which allows for a simulated sense of loneliness to grip Wallace's readers. Not unlike James Incandenza's lethal film of the same title, the compelling prose of *Infinite Jest* grips its readers to the point of dependency. Regardless of the horror, violence, or profound sadness of a given scene, Wallace's ideal reader (which included a

wide array of readers considering the novel's status as a best seller) is hypnotically entertained by the words on the page.<sup>1</sup>

As the reader progresses through *Infinite Jest*, the wonder of Wallace's unique language becomes a principal source of the novel's entertainment value. Capitalizing on his vast lexicon and stylistic phrasing, Wallace structures his epic novel so that readers get their fix of the book's entertainment only by bearing witness to the "death in life" of its innumerable lonely characters. Wallace infuses *Jest* with a "mixture of slang and literary language, of sense-imagery and figures of speech, of the trite and poetic, [which] gives his work an energy, an incandescent sparkle, that entertains and delights" its readership (Cioffi 167). According to Cioffi, Wallace's language succeeds in making "the novel a kind of addiction," for its readers by "modify[ing] ordinary reading behavior" in a manner emulative of its addicted characters (Cioffi 170). This narrative approach results in "a work that is extraordinarily disturbing," and which evokes "that feeling of being 'stitched in' to a narrative" (Cioffi 170, 168). The book's ambitious dedication to total reader immersion notwithstanding, *Infinite Jest*'s exorbitant length seems a byproduct of Wallace's desire to achieve a "stitched in" narrative effect. The novel's length allows enough narrative space for the reader to realize this effect taking place. Wallace's absorbing language makes the lonely desperation and brutal violence littering the pages of *Infinite Jest* quite enjoyable to read. Therefore, the average *Infinite Jest* reader according to Cioffi, is one who endures the innumerable difficulties of the text to extract further enjoyment from the author's inimitable linguistic style and comedic voice.

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<sup>1</sup> In a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace identifies the audience he generally writes for, claiming they are "more or less like me, in their twenties and thirties, maybe, with enough experience or good education [...] who've been raised with U.S. commercial culture and are engaged with it and informed by it and fascinated with it but still hungry for something commercial art can't provide" (*Conversations with David Foster Wallace* 22).

The sprawling breadth of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative interlinks the lives of untold characters in such a way that its pages and physical space seem to contain or collectively comprise a life in itself—a life Wallace invites his readers to enter and subsequently exit from 1,079 pages later, feeling simultaneously overstimulated and unfulfilled. Culminating in an ambiguous fashion indicative of the book's own cyclical structure, the ending of *Infinite Jest* leaves most readers puzzled. After dedicating a great deal of time “stitched” into the novel, at its conclusion, many readers feel inclined to tear back to the beginning in search of closure that they cannot access. Wallace's hypnotic language and cadence significantly augment *Infinite Jest*'s “stitched in” effect and lend the novel a higher level of re-readability. In fact, the novel's re-readability exacerbates Wallace's linguistic simulation of loneliness, subjecting the reader to further isolation through the act of reading.

James Dorson concurs with Cioffi, agreeing that Wallace's narrative voice is vital to the “stitched in” nature of the text. Dorson claims that, “[l]ike J.D. Salinger's ingenuous narrative voice, Wallace's voice often employs a highly informal tone that brings about a degree of intimacy with the reader that a more formal prose style could not do” (Dorson 70). The intimate idiomatic tone consistently set by Wallace in *Infinite Jest* becomes its reader's ultimate comfort even as they weather the novel's most dense sections. For Paul M. Curtis, even in the portions of the novel that are oversaturated with detail, “*Infinite Jest*'s prose is addictive, due, no doubt, to the thrilling excess of the aesthetic freedom it invokes in the reader” (Curtis 49). Wallace's prose certainly has an effect on his audience's reading behavior, providing readers freedom to occasionally step back from the plot and admire the author's syntactical achievement. Cioffi, Curtis, and Dorson's respective readers, addicted to Wallace's word soup, might find themselves “stitched” into the work over and over again, riding the closed circuit of the novel's plot,

combing the pages for hints to lingering questions the author may have intentionally left unanswered.

In this paper I propose that the length and complexity of Wallace's novel serve together as a mimetic tool—one which, for dedicated readers, simulates the sensation of experiencing the loneliness of its characters. In congress with Cioffi's reading of *Infinite Jest* as a novel mimetic of the solipsistic experience, I intend to further explore the specific varieties of loneliness evident in Wallace's work. By analyzing two divergent anhedonic Wallacean figures, Hal Incandenza and Randy Lenz, through their respective Sisyphean toils against isolation, I will argue that the boundless density of *Infinite Jest* is a purposeful function of a novel whose author sought to mimic the perpetual cycle of human loneliness. Wallace makes the unique choice to analyze this grim cycle as it would emerge across an enormous spectrum of solipsists residing in a dystopic and hyper-consumerist future United States.

The culture of loneliness in *Infinite Jest* is eerily similar to the present day where disruptive world events and dependencies on entertainment technology have guided Americans further into isolation, deeper into “the womb of solipsism” (Wallace 839). A scale of loneliness and social disconnection containing infinite variations of isolated individuals exists both within and beyond the pages of *Infinite Jest*. In 2023, the *Surgeon General's Advisory on Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation* claimed that “[T]oo often, indicators of social connection or social disconnection are considered in dichotomous ways (e.g., someone is lonely or they're not), but the evidence points more to a gradient. Everyone falls somewhere on the continuum of social connection” (*Our Epidemic* 12). This is precisely the gradient of social disconnection, the continuum of loneliness, which I contend Wallace had sought to capture in his novel. After considering Wallace's fractal thematic emphasis on solipsism and his affinity for page-long

sentences, explanations for the daunting length of *Infinite Jest* become more apparent for exasperated readers.

The particularly sad and solipsistic variety of loneliness experienced by Hal Incandenza, members of his own family, and ancillary characters like Bruce Green and Kate Gompert, emerges in the text as a fundamental Wallacean theme. Several of these characters are tormented by an inability to find substance in their interior and exterior worlds. Kate Gompert describes this sort of “anhedonic state as a kind of radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content” (Wallace 693). The reader becomes acquainted with these same anhedonic feelings as they billow within protagonist Hal Incandenza over the course of the book. True to Wallace’s intricately envisioned spectrum of lonesomeness, Hal inhabits a niche locus on this gradient. Despite being highly intelligent, athletically gifted, and having several meaningful companionships (with his tennis mates and two older brothers) all while hailing from a financially stable background, Hal still grapples with depressive and addictive tendencies. Hal’s inescapable melancholy coupled with his boundless talent in the realms of academia and sport allow his character to become a reflection of the novel’s author.

Similar to Hal, in his youth David Foster Wallace was a “regionally ranked junior tennis player”<sup>2</sup> who also “did a lot of [drugs] in [his] teenage years” (*Conversations with David Foster Wallace* 79). Hal might therefore be read as Wallace’s vessel for inserting more of himself into the narrative. The comedic veneer that shrouds Hal’s underlying sadness is an example of Wallace’s self-perception bleeding into the text. Wallace, known for writing with “not quite black humor, but [...] a kind of creepy humor” uses comedic relief as a front before diving into deeper and more painful underlying thematic elements (Lipsky 272). Hal and his colorful E.T.A.

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<sup>2</sup> From *Infinite Jest* “About the Author” section.

teammates are primary sources for *Jest*'s absurdity and wit—i.e. drug-dealing-math-wiz Michael Pemulis, aspiring-sports-commentator Jim Troeltsch, and blindfolded-Pakistani-exchange-student Idris Arslanian. Wallace has maintained that before *Infinite Jest*, he had written “some funny stuff and some heavy, intellectual stuff, but [he'd] never done anything sad” (*Conversations* 58-9). *Infinite Jest*, Wallace's stab at a “sad” novel often reads like the mind of a secretly depressed person who uses humor as a crutch.

According to the narrator of the novel, “Classic unipolars [are] usually tormented by the conviction that no one else [can] hear or understand them when they tried to communicate. Hence jokes, sarcasm, the psychopathology of unconscious arm-rubbing” (Wallace 75). David Foster Wallace whose suicide looms over a catalogue of work rife with biting sarcasm and outrageous comedy, was clearly guilty of the same comedic unipolar coping mechanism. For example, during a 2003 interview with German television station, ZDF, regarding his “wickedly comic” epic novel, Wallace revealed he had “set out to write a sad book. And when people liked it and told me that [what] they liked about it was that it was so funny, was just very surprising.”<sup>3</sup> Wallace believed his true intention for *Infinite Jest* was to express a general sadness and to investigate themes of loneliness through the filter of a characteristic narrative voice. Miscommunication in intent between Wallace and his audience therefore occurs when readers allow the entertainment value of *Jest*'s captivating narrative tone to eclipse the importance of its solipsistic meditation. Similar then to Hal whose late father “had this delusion of silence when [Hal] spoke,” Wallace also believed, despite his affinity for prolixity, that he was frequently unheard or misunderstood by others, especially in regard to his literary intentions (Wallace 899).

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<sup>3</sup> *Infinite Jest* cover endorsement from Greg Burkman, *Seattle Times*.

Although critics like Andrew Bennett have maintained that “[b]eing alone, loneliness, solitude, and its attendant solipsistic dangers are major themes in David Foster Wallace’s novels and short stories,” it can be easy for casual *Jest* readership to become preoccupied with Wallace’s humor and overlook the fact that his “narratives typically explore what Don DeLillo calls a ‘spiraling sense of isolation’” (Bennett 69). This focal disconnect between reader and author only adds to the solipsism of *Infinite Jest*. Even after hundreds of pages and endnotes, in Wallace’s mind he still could not fully express the extent of his or his novel’s sadness to the public. The word-saturated pages of *Infinite Jest*, which have drawn “many comparisons to computer hypertext,” mimic the verbal divide in Hal’s relationship with his father (*Conversations* 78). Before his suicide, Hal’s father convinced became convinced that whenever Hal spoke, “he believed [Hal] was not speaking” (Wallace 899). The extreme verbosity of *Infinite Jest* is on the part of Wallace a reflection of how Hal is perceived as voiceless to his father. Wallace’s novel since its publication has garnered public infamy as containing one of literature’s most incomprehensible styles of prose. Consequently, the public plays the role of J.O. Incandenza— someone who believes nothing has been said, when in fact, multitudes have been fervently expressed but to deaf ears. For many readers, Wallace’s melancholic thematic purpose becomes lost in the sea of his own comedic verbosity, just as Hal’s true voice is lost on J.O. Incandenza. This relationship between author and audience bolsters the notion that *Jest*’s author can be viewed as another sad reflection of the book’s protagonist.

In mimicry of the author’s own struggle against anhedonia, Hal relies heavily on humor to shroud his own emptiness. Hal making an athletic event of “clipping his nails into a wastebasket that sat several meters away” while on the phone his eldest brother Orin is an early example in the novel of Hal’s comedic façade. As Orin questions Hal about the day of their

father's suicide, Hal keeps score of how many clippings he makes into the basket, "shooting seventy-plus percent" overall at the beginning of their conversation (Wallace 242). When Orin asks, "who it was who found" their father with his head exploded in the kitchen microwave, Hal replies with an odd tone of dry wit that he was "[f]ound by one Harold James Incandenza, thirteen going on really old" (Wallace 248). These remarks and others from Hal align perfectly with the novel's own examples of anhedonic tendencies. Hal's word play and sarcasm can seem out of place in situations where it is clear he is uncomfortable, further revealing to the reader the extent of his sadness.

Lying dormant beneath every witty allusion, detailed characterization, and meticulously envisioned scene in *Infinite Jest* is a profound sense of eternal loneliness. Set in a dystopic future United States whose government and populace have submitted to their most unsavory and slothful qualities, *Infinite Jest* depicts a society at the peak of its technological and socio-communicative dependency. Wallace's futuristic self-isolating Americans are ravaged by drug addiction or confined to the ceaseless droll of structured institutional routines. Preferring quick solutions to enormous issues, Wallace's American politicians absurdly relinquish swaths of polluted New England territory to Canadian control and allow corporations to subsidize the name of each calendar year in the new millennium. The future decline of the United States envisioned by *Infinite Jest* is brought on by the public's own apathy and their eagerness to trade autonomy for instant self-gratification. This psychological tendency in Wallace's hands breeds further loneliness and is enabled by a dependency for escapist entertainment technology.

The various functions of the teleputer (Wallace's vision of a futuristic home entertainment system) echo in chilling aesthetic fashion the glowing, wall-mounted, advertisement-laden-streaming-service technologies of the 2020s, which serve as social media

platforms, video-chat services, Smart TVs, all rolled into one. The subsidized era's psychological addiction to technology cannot be overlooked when discussing the ubiquitous theme of loneliness in *Infinite Jest*. Physical objects like the teleputer and its congress with J.O. Incandenza's mind-melting "Entertainment" cartridge become malevolent representations of humanity's technological dependence in the novel. The simulated-serotonin-inducing allure of such escapist technologies fades when readers confront scenes where the lives of characters are absorbed into the empty glow of the teleputer's white light. Wallace considers modern loneliness and its direct correlation to TV overconsumption in his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.":

If it's true that many Americans are lonely, and if it's true that many lonely people are prodigious TV-watchers, and if it's true that lonely people find in television's 2D images relief from the pain of their reluctance to be around real humans, then it's also obvious that the more time spent watching TV, the less time spent in the real human world, and the less time spent in the real human world, the harder it becomes not to feel alienated from real humans solipsistic, lonely. (Wallace 163)

Isolated among hordes of other isolated people, all experiencing a sense of collective solipsism induced by an addiction to virtual escapism, *Infinite Jest*'s characters often find emotional communication and gratification both completely unattainable. The overall solipsistic dread which haunts the book's essential characters is compounded by the isolating effects of technology. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace becomes highly interested in exploring isolated moments of character inaction and motionless, setting several such scenes with characters slumped and vegetating in front of the teleputer.

One such scene occurs in the wake of a disastrous campus event, when Hal is suddenly forced to “Abandon all Hope” and abstain from marijuana due to an impending urine-screening. His mother’s position as Headmaster at E.T.A., would allow Hal, unlike Michael Pemulis, to be spared expulsion in the event of a dirty urine test. According to Hal however, his true concern is that a failed urine test would besmirch the name of the tennis academy and therefore the name of Hal’s father, the academy founder (Wallace 784). Hal turns to sobriety not to save himself, but the honor of his late father’s memory. After 850 pages of nightly Pump-Room one-hitters, the novel’s narration suddenly adopts Hal’s first-person perspective. In sobriety, Hal’s character assumes the personal “I,” suggesting that his current predicament made it seem as if “I was in a zoo. There were no animals or cages, but it was still a zoo” (Wallace 851). As an early-morning blizzard rattles the windows of E.T.A.’s sub-dormitories, Hal is overcome by anxiety and depression and lies down horizontally “on the carpet of Viewing Room 5, still on the second floor, fighting the sense that I’d either never been here before or had spent lifetimes just here” (Wallace 897). From his position of horizontal paralysis, Hal views one of his father’s films, *Good-Looking Men in Small Clever Rooms That Utilize Every Centimeter of Available Space with Mind-Boggling Efficiency*, while Michael Pemulis attempts unsuccessfully to have “some really important interfacing” with Hal (Wallace 907). Hal’s variety of solipsism stems from a tendency towards “Marijuana Thinking,” a pattern of thought often (but not always) experienced by Wallace’s characters while under the influence of marijuana. According to the novel, this occurs when someone “thinks themselves into labyrinths of reflexive abstraction that seem to cast doubt on the very possibility of practical functioning” (Wallace 1048n269). Hal’s motionlessness while lying on the floor of the viewing room is then not truly brought on by physical lethargy or stress, but by the inescapable maze of thought his mind occasionally

imprisons him in. Alone with his thoughts, looking up at the ceiling, Hal explains that “There seemed to be so many implications even to thinking about sitting up and standing up and exiting V.R. 5 and taking a certain variable-according-to-stride-length number of steps to the stairwell door, on and on, that just the thought of getting up made me glad I was lying on the floor” (Wallace 900). The prison of thought Hal finds himself in at the end of the novel raises the question of whether the “zoo” he’s trapped in refers to the exterior world or the one inside his skull. However, much like the novel’s unresolved Joelle van Dyne-facial-deformity question, it is perhaps most likely that Wallace wants his reader to see the lack of difference from the afflicted person’s perspective. For Wallace, it does not matter if Hal is actually alone in the world or if he creates his own isolation. The net result either way is inescapable loneliness.

Hal Incandenza’s perpetual inner crisis seems brought on by an anhedonic inability to experience pleasure or satisfaction. Especially after witnessing the gruesome aftermath of his father’s suicide, Hal claims to have not “had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny,” but nonetheless manages to “satisfy everyone but himself that he’s in there, inside his own hull, as a human being” (Wallace 694). Hal’s father was one of the few figures in the novel who attempted to address or solve his son’s struggle to overcome plaguing solipsistic thoughts, even if his methods were unsound. After all, according to Incandenza’s ghostlike wraith who haunts a delirious hospital-ridden Don Gately, it was Hal who inspired the hypnotic effect of Incandenza’s deadly *IJ* film.<sup>4</sup> The senior Incandenza, coming to the rueful realization that he had mimicked the failures of his own father by ostracizing his brightest son, sought a cinematic remedy to Hal’s mounting emotional decay. By producing a film like *IJ*, Incandenza believed he

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<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of clarity, this essay will refer to Wallace’s novel as *Infinite Jest* and the character J.O. Incandenza’s lethal film which shares the novel’s title, as *IJ*.

could “[m]ake something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him ‘out of himself,’ as they say. The womb could be used both ways. A way to say I AM SO VERY VERY SORRY and have it *heard*” (Wallace 839). This of course was not a viable solution to his son’s emotional distress. Additionally, the film, which ironically was designed to be Hal’s lifeline out of a sea of loneliness, becomes one of the most dangerous objects on the planet. Those in possession of Incandenza’s film have the power to capture and destroy the minds of anyone within ocular range of a teleputer screen. Certain Canadian terrorist organizations in the novel understand the devastating power of such a weapon—especially if unleashed on the TP screens of America’s “Joe Briefcase” solipsistic-type couch potatoes.<sup>5</sup> The narcotizing qualities of entertainment are too familiar for characters like Hal, who spends hours soaking in lamentation rewatching cartridges of J.O. Incandenza’s work to remember his father since his suicide.

Coming to terms with living a life burdened by unipolar depression becomes the central conflict of Hal’s young adult life. He consistently struggles with the notion that very few, if any people, can actually hear or understand the words that leave his mouth. This frustration in his inability to be heard, especially by those who love him, contributes to the self-medication with marijuana he has to quit later in the book. Hal acknowledges that being high does not fulfill his want for feeling. The ritualistic act of getting high “and obsession with having nobody [...] know he’s high” provides him a vague sense of worth (Wallace 54). Wallace emphasizes this thought

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<sup>5</sup> Dissatisfied with their government’s incorporation of polluted New England land, a variety of Canadian terrorist organizations in the novel are formed in protest to the unfavorable rearrangement of U.S.-Canadian borders.

pattern in Hal's marijuana abuse from the instant the reader is clued in on the protagonist's secret addiction:

Here's Hal Incandenza, age seventeen, with his little brass one-hitter, getting covertly high in the Enfield Tennis Academy's underground Pump Room and exhaling palely into an industrial exhaust fan. It's the sad little interval after afternoon matches and conditioning but before the Academy's communal supper. Hal is by himself down here and nobody knows where he is or what he's doing. Hal likes to get high in secret, but a bigger secret is that he's as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high. (Wallace 49)

That Hal's favorite activity involves fleeing the presence of others only informs his fear of slipping further into the grasp of an isolated world. Wallace uses the cycle and procedure of Hal's marijuana consumption to provide a context later in the book for just how hollow and performative Hal has allowed his life to become.

True to *Jest's* inclination for all things circular, marijuana dependency becomes for Hal both the solution to and the cause of his inescapable anhedonia. Hal's usage reaches such a stage by The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, that marijuana consumption becomes requisite to the navigation of his social and athletic performances. As a top-ranking player in Boy's 18's tennis at Boston's prestigious Enfield Tennis Academy, a facility founded by his late father and operated by his mother Avril Incandenza, Hal uses cannabis as a performance enhancing drug and as a relaxing incentive to keep trudging through his dissatisfied life. Hal's reliance on "Bob Hope" (marijuana's Bostonian street name in *Infinite Jest*) is designed to combat his depression and dull the rigor of exhausting, near-professional athletic training. Although marijuana abuse is generally shrugged off by harder ex-addicts like Don Gately who used to treat weed "like tobacco," from cannabinoid addict Ken Erdedy's experience, it is "the obsessive analyzing,

finally the paralytic stasis that results from the obsessive analysis of all possible implications of both getting up from the couch and not getting up from the couch,” which makes having an issue with “Bob Hope” a living nightmare for certain users (Wallace 503). Hal’s propensity for indecisiveness and “analysis-paralysis” is an indication of his addictive behavior. Combined with his general psychological decline, the side effects of Hal’s dependency contribute significantly to his downfall, particularly as previously covered in the book’s second half when Hal’s streak of usage is interrupted by a looming urine test.

In the novel’s final scene, a group of assailants inject Gene Fackelmann, a drug addicted former criminal associate of co-protagonist Don Gately, with an anti-narcotic serum that counteracts the effects of his opiate high “so he’d feel the needle as they sewed his eyes open” (Wallace 980). Casey uses this scene to contextualize Hal’s forced cannabinoid withdrawal, likening his excruciating stint in sobriety to wide-awake torture. Henry explores Hal’s doomed relationship with marijuana, claiming that “Hal becomes painfully aware of his problems (namely, how or whether to continue to abstain from marijuana, the withdrawal from which may potentially compromise his performance at the career-defining WhataBurger tournament), as if he, like [Gene] Fackelmann, had been injected with the ‘anti-narc’” (Henry 494). The reader watches Hal come to the realization that his cycle of marijuana abuse has taken an annular form<sup>6</sup>—helping Hal dull the pain of his anhedonia, while simultaneously deepening his fall into the solipsistic existence he seeks release from. Hal’s affinity for concealing ugliness and vice in his character from others (i.e., his drug habit and growing emotional vacancy) develops into the ultimate motive for his continued dependency. For Hal, “the amount of organization and toiletry-

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<sup>6</sup> A chemistry term adopted by Wallace in *Infinite Jest* to demonstrate “a type of fusion that can produce waste that’s fuel for a process whose waste is fuel for the fusion” (Wallace 572). By transference, Hal’s marijuana abuse is a byproduct of his depression, which ironically is also the fuel for his abuse.

lugging he has to do to get secretly high in front of a subterranean outtake vent [...] would make a lesser man quail” (Wallace 54). In this way, the ritual of secrecy resulting from Hal’s shame about his usage perpetuates a habit Hal finds “hard to say for sure whether [it] is exceptionally bad, this tendency” to get high alone without being able to quit or feel unashamed about his usage (Wallace 54).

Hal’s goal of maintaining utter secrecy vis-à-vis his nightly Pump Room rendezvous ultimately proves unsuccessful. It is clear several of Hal’s closer friends at E.T.A. are aware of his affinity for “Bob Hope”—Michael Pemulis (who is Hal’s supplier), Trevor Axford, Jim Troeltsch, and Ted Schacht for instance. A few of these friends, however, foresee an implosion heading Hal’s way involving his weakness for marijuana and its relationship to his on-court performance. According to the Crohn’s afflicted Teddy Schacht, “deep down [he] believes that the substance-compulsion’s strange apparent contribution to Hal’s erumpent explosion up the rankings has got to be a temporary thing, that there’s like a psychic credit-card bill for Hal in the mail, somewhere, coming, and is sad for him in advance about whatever’s surely got to give, eventually” (Wallace 270). Schacht’s premonition of Hal’s reckoning comes true in the wake of the Interdependence Day Eschaton debacle. During a rare holiday day-off at E.T.A and while taking in a “homemade academy game called Eschaton” from the sideline of a tennis court, “Hal finds himself taking the proffered duBois and smoking dope in public without even thinking about it or having consciously decided to go ahead” (Wallace 322, 332). This incident shows that Hal’s relationship with marijuana is clearly one he no longer has control of. As the narrative of *Infinite Jest* progresses, the loneliness plaguing Hal’s psyche is increasingly amplified so that his habit usurps the importance of his own self-worth. This trend is consistent with most of the depressed or addicted characters in the novel. Most characters in *Infinite Jest* curse their

addictions and are aware of how thoroughly their pursuits for relief have destroyed their lives. Conversely, to balance out the repentant lonely figures on his spectrum of loneliness, Wallace also infuses *Infinite Jest* with the voices of characters who have utterly disappeared within their addictions and self-delusions. These characters are unable to recognize their own state of solipsism.

Although Hal and other characters like Kate Gompert and Joelle van Dyne are mortified by the solipsistic devolution of their lives, Wallace also focuses his expansive narrative on characters content with embracing “the womb of solipsism.” These characters too, are usually addicts in some fashion, but are unapologetic about their usage—unashamed, jaded, and angry at the exterior world for impeding their ability to satisfy their addictive pursuits. Ennet House resident and cat-bagging-dog-murdering-coke-fiend Randy Lenz, is perhaps the greatest example of such a Wallacean archetype in *Infinite Jest*. Although it is common for rehab patients and half-way house residents to have absolutely no intention of staying clean, Lenz’s determination to stay high and to disobey authority is strong enough to suggest that his frustration and rage is directed somewhere far beyond the lowly influence of Don Gately, Ennet House staff, or even the police or government. Lenz’s solipsistic rage against the realm external to his own poisoned mind derives from a psychotic need to embody the antithesis of banal modern American life. Lenz is arguably the darkest case of loneliness cited by Wallace in *Infinite Jest* largely because he is powerless to perceive the depths of his own mental isolation and unable to realize how brazenly checked-out from society others understand him to be. Clearly suffering from mental illness or psychosis, Lenz convinces himself without a smidgen of self-reflection to pity every “poor son of an urban bitch [he’s] on the same street with” (Wallace 718). He pities the

“common man,” and laughs at their drone-like obedience to authority, their enthusiasm to assimilate with the crowd.

Although his deranged self-perception prohibits him from recognizing his own loneliness, Randy Lenz surely inhabits a point of extremity on the spectrum of solipsists examined in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace pours his readers into the empty “husks” and sad lives of several characters, but none so self-destructive and sadistic as Lenz. According to Henry, Wallace’s work is often “marked by a certain precociousness and projected good will, a willingness to co-opt darker and more spiritually nihilistic states in order to find absent character interiority” (Henry 485). Lenz therefore becomes a portal for Wallace’s audience into the manic depths of American loneliness. He is a glimpse at just how bad it can get. Wallace’s narrative emphasis on Lenz, a byproduct the author’s meticulous cataloguing of loneliness and his artistic vision “not to have a single main character,” therefore contributes significantly to *Infinite Jest*’s imposing length (*Conversations* 58-9). When the narrative spotlights characters like Hal Incandenza, Joelle van Dyne, or Don Gately, Wallace investigates depression and anhedonia as it would exist under more ordinary conditions. The opposite is true for Randy Lenz. Equally crucial to the completion of *Infinite Jest*’s solipsistic mosaic, Lenz embodies American loneliness at its polar limits—an existence guided exclusively by vice and violent compulsion.

Lenz differs again from Hal’s solipsistic model in that his shame does not compel him to commit crime and take substances in isolated secrecy. As revealed by the narrator, Lenz had “gotten high on organic cocaine two or three, maybe half a dozen times tops, secretly, since he came into Ennet House in the summer, just enough times to keep him from going totally out of his fucking mind” (Wallace 543). Similar to Hal and his Pump-Room one-hitters, Lenz also requires secrecy to imbibe. Distinct however from Hal who is deeply ashamed by his urges, Lenz

is unapologetic in his drug usage. Lenz produces a clear reason for his cocaine usage: to keep “from going totally out of his fucking mind.” Hal, however, cannot provide a legitimate explanation for his private abuse, claiming he “has no idea why this is, or whence, this obsession with the secrecy” of his marijuana usage (Wallace 49). Lenz eventually convinces himself of the preposterous notion—in the interest of keeping “him from going totally out of his fucking mind”—that he “will use cocaine in the very interests of sobriety and growth itself” (Wallace 555). The following excerpt explains the rationale behind Randy Lenz’s rather untraditional method of self-rehabilitation:

cocaine-ingestion this occasional and last-resort is such a marked reduction of Use & Abuse for Lenz that it’s a bonerfied<sup>7</sup> miracle and clearly constitutes as much miraculous sobriety as total abstinence would be for another person without Lenz’s unique sensitivities and psychological makeup and fucking intolerable daily stresses and difficulty unwinding, and he accepts his monthly chips with a clear conscience and a head unmuddled by doubting: he knows he’s sober. (Wallace 543)

Lenz’s adamantness about his “unique sensitivities and psychological makeup,” permits him to rationalize the absurd and paradoxical act of getting high in order to stay sober. Glaring delusions like this clue the reader in on the extent of Lenz’s loneliness—a blabbering-street-walking aloneness he is powerless himself to recognize. Lenz’s delusions go unchecked and run rampant because his nihilistic state of solipsism prohibits letting anyone close enough to challenge the insane ideas he finds comfort in.

The secrecy of Lenz’s cocaine use is a function of an outrageous self-image which he endeavors preserve: the slick mysterious type; someone not to be messed with and totally in

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<sup>7</sup> *Sic.*

control of their own destiny. Since his arrival at Ennet House after stealing cocaine from “what Lenz didn’t know was supposed to have been a D.E.A. sting operation in the South End,” Lenz has pretended to be in the process of recovery (Wallace 276). But for adept ex-cons like staffer Don Gately, it becomes “obvious that Lenz is [at the facility] mostly to hide out” from the law and vengeful dealers (Wallace 276). The resulting success of Lenz’s slippery maneuvers in Boston’s drug underworld floods his psyche with a massive dose of hubris. With no intention of getting sober like the other “suckers” at Ennet House and having been convinced of his invincibility to consequence, a partial reason for Lenz’s secret cocaine ingestion is simply because the ingestion of any chemical substance is forbidden while residing at the half-way house. Furthermore, as simply someone “hiding out” at Ennet House under the guise of being a patient, Lenz feels absolutely no obligation to comply with the rules of sobriety as long as he can keep staying there.

Lenz’s cocaine use while at Ennet House, unlike his proclivity for suffocating cats and blood-letting canines, follows no set routine; nor is the usage confined to a fixed location. Readers might note that Hal’s addictive rituals are performed out of sight and underground in the rarely visited E.T.A. Pump Room, while Lenz rips lines in rather stereotypical seclusion “through a rolled dollar bill off the back of the john in the men’s can” (Wallace 545). Although the secrecy of Lenz’s usage remains paramount throughout his narrative arch, the poor concealment of his imbibement may indicate a subconscious desire to be caught. To the careful reader, Lenz’s careless methods of vice concealment reveal a deeper desire: to be given the go ahead by an exterior force to fall blissfully and alone into the bottomless addictive trench he’s dug for himself. Giving in to his every compulsion becomes Lenz’s ideal form of rehabilitation.

Randy Lenz, unabashed in his strangeness, allows others to think what they will about his impulses and bizarre conduct. At Ennet House, he builds a reputation around his peculiarities which “include the need to be north, a fear of disks, a tendency to constantly take his own pulse, a fear of all forms of timepieces, and a need to always know the time with great precision” (Wallace 279). For some time, Lenz is able to hide his substance abuse and propensity for violence in plain sight, letting his eccentricities run wild in public settings. His “panoply of strange compulsive habits” and repute as “that creepy Randy guy” around Ennet House reaches such an extent “that a request for SteelSaks barely raises a brow on anybody” (Wallace 533, 542).<sup>8</sup> The want for secrecy in the act of consumption or fulfillment actually unites otherwise dissimilar characters like Hal and Lenz along the spectrum of lonely addicts in *Infinite Jest*. Again however, what distinguishes Lenz in his want for seclusion is that this urge is not rooted in shame. Instead, Lenz expresses a genuine desire to be away from others, especially while completing a compulsive act—cocaine ingestion, the killing of animals. Lenz flies solo in his nightly pet-killing-sprees not because he is ashamed, but because he knows that if anyone discovered his horrifying vice, their immediate reaction would be to force him to quit his behavior. Hal feels empty and is compelled to convince others he is real; Lenz sees himself the only sane man in a world of robots and air-heads.

Lenz spits on authority and shoves aside addicts and recoverees. Repulsed by the emptiness he finds in everyone around him, Lenz jumps at any opportunity to self-isolate. But, certain entities who inhabit his exterior world make it difficult for Lenz to achieve his precious seclusion. Few characters are as antithetical to Lenz’s dream of deranged escapism than Geoffrey Day. An Ennet House bunk mate and intellectual nemesis of Lenz, Day becomes the rambling

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<sup>8</sup> SteelSaks are the extra strength garbage bags Lenz has fellow residents procure for him on cigarette runs to a local grocer. Lenz uses the bags to asphyxiate stray cats for his personal pleasure.

embodiment of every moral and social precedent Lenz reels from. According to a narrator who adopts the free indirect speech of Don Gately, “Geoffrey (not Geoff, Geoffrey) Day” was a “red-wine-and-Quaalude man [...] Who taught something horseshit-sounding like social historicity or historical sociality at some jr. college up the Expressway in Medford” (Wallace 272). Although both share a mutual aversion to “the system of clichés” and banal platitudes adopted by rehabilitation communities like Alcoholics Anonymous, Day and Lenz differ significantly concerning class and intellect. The narrator explains, for instance, that “Randy Lenz has issues with Geoffrey Day because Day is glib and a teacher at a Scholarly Journal’s helm. This threatens the self-concept of a Randy Lenz that thinks of himself as a kind of hiply sexy artist-intellectual [...] For occupation on his Intake form Lenz had put *free lance script writer*” (Wallace 279). Randy Lenz is a character whose solipsism is perpetuated by the promotion of an unrealistic “self-concept.” He loathes Geoffrey Day because Day’s presence at Ennet House is a threat to the false reality Lenz projects for himself.

Although Geoffrey Day is pretentious and largely disliked among Ennet House residents, Lenz understands that Day, the antithesis of a “hiply sexy artist-intellectual,” possesses the sort of scholastically gained knowledge capable of undermining the academic-of-the-streets-type persona Lenz had sought to cultivate. The incompatibility of Day’s personality with Lenz’s reaches as far down as their respective preferences in chemical relief—Day preferring depressants like red wine and Quaaludes over Lenz’s cocaine-based stimulants. Wallace positions Day as Lenz’s cerebral foil to demonstrate the psychological machinations behind Lenz’s self-imposed dive into violent isolation.<sup>9</sup> His interactions with certain characters,

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<sup>9</sup> Wallace manifests Day and Lenz’s antipodal relationship immediately in *Infinite Jest*. Lenz’s first appearance in the novel is an offhanded aside in response to a blabbering Geoffrey Day: “Day is not done talking [...] Randy Lenz says, ‘I ain’t got time for this shit’” (Wallace 271).

specifically with Day, are a way for Wallace to reveal the delusion in Lenz's egocentric notion that he occupies a state of metaphysical solipsism.<sup>10</sup> Lenz maintains a sense of fabricated superiority that feeds his disturbed self-image and belief system. For instance, Lenz claims to have once regenerated a severed pointer-finger like a "lizard tail," an event which taught him to accept "that he was somehow not like the run of common men, and [...] to accept his uniqueness and all that it entailed" (Wallace 557). Lenz acts as if his life force was deliberately bestowed for a divine purpose. For Lenz, fantasy and delusion replace shame as the root cause for the want for isolation typically found among the addicts in *Infinite Jest*.

Lenz achieves status as the sole coke-blasting captain of his own tooth-grinding universe by constructing his reality around an intricate web of lies. He is a man so utterly ravaged by addiction and consumed by obsessive compulsion that he is powerless to confront his ostracized existence, psychopathic thoughts, and delusions of grandeur. Lenz's false intellectual self-image is one of the many fabrications he has constructed to provide his solipsistic existence with meaning. Early in Lenz's introduction to the novel as a resident at Ennet House, the reader learns "he makes a show of what he reads. For the first week [at Ennet House] in July he'd held the books upside-down in the northeast corner of whatever room" (Wallace 279). This quote in particular highlights the falsity in Lenz's hallucinatory existence. While Lenz believes himself to be successfully projecting a persona of mysterious intelligence, everyone else can see he's holding the book upside down and not reading. However, it is while maintaining this charade of public reading that Lenz accidentally stumbles on a piece of literature whose significance inadvertently cuts to the core of his psychological distress.

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<sup>10</sup> The variety of solipsism where one's mind comprises all the universe and nothing is said to exist externally to it. Ludwig Wittgenstein refined this philosophy in his "*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* which Wallace regards as underlying the neoliberal worldview" (Steinhilber 104).

A book by philosopher and psychologist William James entitled *Principles of Psychology and The Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*, becomes inseparable from Lenz's person after he accidentally reads a passage he finds personally significant. True to Wallace's knack for subtle character exposition, the book's symbolic nature and literal text help the reader contextualize Lenz's character as his narrative role in *Infinite Jest* expands. Besides the "gargantuan Large-Print" doubling as his "private emergency stash" of coke concealed "in a kind of rectangular bunker razor-bladed out of three hundred or so pages," *The Gifford Lectures* provides Lenz with perhaps his only genuine moment of clarity and self-reflection in the novel (Wallace 543). While "lying on Day's mattress with his shoes on and trying to fart into the mattress as much as possible," Lenz uncovers an illuminating passage from James' book (Wallace 546). At this point having already dipped his toes into the realm of nocturnal mammalian disembowelment, Lenz reads "some line in the book [...] about the more basically Powerless an individual feels, the more the likelihood for the propensity for violent acting out—and Lenz found the observation to be sound" (Wallace 546). For the reader, *The Gifford Lectures* become Wallace's key to the depths of Lenz's psychology. The profundity Lenz extracts from the text supersedes his usual aversions to academic thought. Lenz holds the book sacred because it illuminates a basic motivation behind his violent actions. This revelation allows Lenz to paint himself a victim whose powerlessness, not unlike that of the drug addict or recoveree, is the sole reason for his neglect. Lenz finds comfort in the words of William James whose message he misconstrues thinking that because he feels powerless, his violence is now somehow scientifically justified. Nevertheless, he deems James' revelatory remark as simply a "sound observation" before resuming with a certain cold reptilian propulsion, his abuse of cocaine-based stimulants and household pets.

Alexander Moran reads *Infinite Jest* as a text “replete with attempts to numb or escape from psychic anguish, whether through opiates, tennis, entertainment or other means” (Moran 286). There is certainly a numbness to how the reader observes Lenz perceiving his world. Lenz’s misguided meditation on James’ work and his immediate instinctive return to depravity serve as examples of this numbness. Wallace may have intentionally desired this effect to be mimetic of the narcotizing effects of cocaine, Lenz’s drug of choice. Some common side-effects of cocaine use include but are not limited to “compulsive tooth-grinding, megalomania, [...] delusions of persecution and/or homicidal envy” (Wallace 1037n232). Wallace forces his readers under the skin of his characters, often the ones he knows readers will find the most disturbing. From heavy cocaine ingestion and kleptomania to the bloodletting of urban pets, Wallace’s readers are forced to be present for every horrifying moment. Another excerpt from James’ *The Gifford Lectures* provides relevant context to Lenz’s violent compulsions, as stated in this endnote:

‘that latent process of unconscious preparation often preceding a sudden awakening to the fact that the mischief is irretrievably done,’ the line that actually snapped Lenz to what he was up to when he chanced to read it in [...] something called *Principles of Psychology and The Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*, by William James [...] a volume that’s come to mean a great deal to Lenz. (Wallace 1037n224)

Seeing his own mischief also become “irretrievably done,” Lenz interprets this line as an invitation to lean further into his deranged nightly activities. Besides being written in compelling prose, the true intention of Wallace’s inordinate focus on Lenz’s violent hobby is to address a certain psychosis plaguing late 20<sup>th</sup> century America’s collective unconscious. Henry believes “we are meant to elevate Lenz’s trouble, both his addiction and seemingly sociopathic

compulsion to harm, to the angst of a more cosmically beleaguered ‘sick soul’” (Henry 487). Just as Hal could represent the cosmically sad “empty soul” haunting modern America’s youth, Lenz epitomizes a diminutive but dangerous portion of the America’s dark subconscious. He is a warning for the contently addicted and cheerfully wanton.

Randy Lenz’s blood-and-cat-hair-soaked nightly walks through the cold streets of metro-Boston become a reaction to his perceived helplessness and want for isolation. Although he appears perfectly capable of graduating from the demapping of dogs and cats to the murder of a larger hairless bipedal quarry, the following passage marks the highest surge of that diabolical craving in Lenz:

Then once near Halloween in an alley behind Blanchard’s Liquors off Allston’s Union Square Lenz comes across a street drunk in a chewed-looking old topcoat in the deserted alley taking a public leak against the side of a dumpster, and Lenz envisualizes the old guy both cut and on fire and dancing jaggedly around hitting at himself while Lenz goes ‘There,’ but that’s as close as Lenz comes to that kind of level of resolution. (Wallace 546)

Whether with drugs or acts of violence, Lenz’s need to release certain impulses must be fulfilled. Henry claims “it is relevant to notice Lenz’s craven compulsion, if not to consume drugs, then to feel ‘resolution’ through violence. His ‘catharsis of resolving’ is marked by his choice [...] to resolve himself by means of pain or sadism” (Henry 489). Henry touches an important caveat to Lenz’s troubling behavior by mentioning his reverence for “choice” as it relates to his vile catharsis. The desire for choice is a pervasive theme throughout *Infinite Jest* and is understood by the book’s Canadian terrorist cells as the most highly exploitative weakness in the American subconscious. Americans in the novel have the ability to choose from an infinite selection of

cerebral and bodily pleasures. Canadian terror groups like the A.F.R. are right, in Wallace's estimation, to assume many Americans will choose immediate pleasure in the face of certain death. Randy Lenz's choice to seek catharsis either through chemical relief or physical violence is evident of this flawed and uniquely American obsession with choice.

The United States' Office of Unspecified Services, *Infinite Jest's* O.N.A.N.ite version of the C.I.A., is equally concerned with the pliability of the American collective unconscious. Working closely with confidential informants in various Canadian terrorist cells to uncover a master cartridge of Incandenza's deadly "Entertainment" before an epidemic of mental annihilation befalls the U.S.A., Unspecified Services agent Helen/Hugh Steeply acts as Wallace's vessel for clarifying these cavities in the U.S.'s greater subconscious. Steeply explains a key trend in American culture to his Québécois informant Rémy Marathe, an inclination which seems to perpetuate the creation of deranged solipsists like Randy Lenz. Steeply argues that "in our U.S. values system, anybody who derives an increase in pleasure from somebody else's pain is a deviant, a sadistic sicko, and is thereby excluded from the community of everybody's right to pursue their own best pleasure-to-pain ratio. Sickos deserve compassion and the best treatment feasible. But they're not part of the big picture" (Wallace 424-5). According to Steeply then, persons such as Lenz who derive pleasure from inflicting pain are automatically ostracized by common Americans as "sickos" and "deviants." Lenz continues on his "sick" path to gratification because his abhorrent predilections have barred him by ordinary society from the pursuit of a normal pleasure-to-pain ratio.

Lenz's venomous contempt for others is best exemplified at the fever pitch of his own delusion following his expulsion from Ennet House. After robbing two small Chinese women of their shopping bags in the streets of South Boston, Lenz finds himself running through a back-

alley-hellscape of crack-smoking children and festering homelessness. Looking every bit as deranged and disheveled as the riff-raff around him, Lenz still “kept them in peripheral view,” somehow mentally justifying his place above this street-urchin class of people (Wallace 729). Strolling briskly through the alley “carrying his bags, spine straight and extruding<sup>11</sup> dignified purpose,” Lenz comes across “a sexless figure lying back against a maybe duffel bag or pack against a dumpster [...] its shoes two different shoes, its hair a clotted mass around its face, looking up over at Lenz going past in the faint start of light” (Wallace 729). Reacting with repugnance to the scene, Lenz, a man whose favorite pastime involves the ingestion of toxic chemicals and the murder of domestic pets, “whispered to himself ‘Jesus what a lot of fucked-up ass-eating fucking *losers*’” (Wallace 729). To the reader, this excerpt confirms Lenz’s unwavering content to exist in an empty universe. Lenz’s lack of empathy and self-awareness distinguishes him from the other solipsists in *Infinite Jest*. That of all his characters, Wallace chooses to focus so keenly on Lenz’s scattered thoughts and sadistic nightly walks, serves only to bolster the notion that *Infinite Jest* acts as a study in various forms of and responses to human loneliness. Wallace cultivates a wide range of characters upon which to demonstrate the symptoms of loneliness and how they vary between different people.

In 1996 during the publication process for *Infinite Jest*, Wallace wrote “David Lynch Keeps His Head,” a piece for *Premier* about David Lynch and the director’s then new film, *Lost Highway*. Lynch had been a creative inspiration for Wallace, with whose filmic work Wallace was intimately acquainted. As Wallace argues what he believes defines the director’s work as “Lynchian,” readers familiar with Wallace’s fiction may find themselves drawing parallels between Lynchian and Wallacean themes. For instance, Wallace claims “Lynch’s characters are

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<sup>11</sup> *Sic*.

essentially alone (Alone): they're alienated from pretty much everything except the particular obsessions they've developed to help ease their alienation (...or is their alienation in fact a consequence of their obsessions?)” (Wallace 190). This precise arrangement of words could also be used to describe consistencies among the characters in *Infinite Jest*. Although Hal Incandenza and Randy Lenz never meet and occupy opposing points on Wallace's gradient of American loneliness, both are “essentially alone” except for the company of their respective dependencies “they've developed to” stave off the malignant thoughts corroding their solipsistic lives. It can also be argued that the loneliness of Wallace's characters derives from the same addictive behaviors they have developed to cope with emptiness of their lives. Like the unending circuit of the novel's plot, or the cyclic self-sustaining process of “annulation” in *Infinite Jest* “whose waste is fuel for the fusion,” the loneliness in Wallacean characters, like those of Lynch's films, is fueled by obsessive behavior, which itself is also the cause of their aloneness. By transferring this cyclical creative tradition into *Infinite Jest*, Wallace creates a stunning portrait of the contemporary human condition and its overwhelming absurdity. The imposing size of the novel and its overwhelming scope is then itself symbolic of humanity's unsuccessful yet perpetual search for meaning in the current era. The impressive space provided by the novel's massive structure is further necessitated by Wallace's detailed exploration of the modern world's slide towards mass loneliness and isolation. Readers ambitious enough to inhabit the reality Wallace fashions from his own words, may find *Infinite Jest's* fractal plot configuration mimetic of the isolation experienced by the book's solipsistic characters. For Wallace then, the inability for his characters to achieve happiness in a world brimming with detail and multitude, wholly embodies the absurdity of life's perpetual joke.

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## Don't Think Twice, It's Alright

If anyone had been sitting on the Derrick family's front porch, they would have seen Alan's taxi coming down the road from almost a mile away. Like some yellow termite crawling out from its lair atop a tiny mound of dirt, the taxi peered over a distant hill and descended, leaving plumes of red dust in its wake. The cab drew closer to the Derrick ranch, its driver side mirror glinting in the sun beneath an August sky of azure. About four minutes into the hour-long car ride from the train station, Alan Derrick had succumbed to one of those rare dreamless, drool-dripping-type snoozes while he lay crumpled in a stupor across all three of the taxi's cracked black leather seats. He had his head crammed against the rear passenger door and nestled atop the rough olive canvas of a Marine Corps seabag. The backseat was small, and Alan was about a foot and a quarter too tall to lay comfortably across it in any sort of way that would not—to any onlooker—bear a striking resemblance to the crooked form of a lifeless fetus. But he was too tired to care.

Alan had called for the cab at a payphone only seconds after stepping off the train in Cherry Lake. When the yellow coupe sputtered up to the curb below Platform-C, Alan tossed in his seabag and handed the cab's balding mustachioed driver a green wad of miscellaneous crinkled bills. He managed to say, "47 Cassidy Hill Road in Blithe, if you would," before collapsing in slumberous bliss across the car's backseat. The cabbie took the Thruway up to Blithe out from the station. They passed through the Catskills just after sunrise, twisted up through hills of balsam and maple, and sped past green meadows speckled with dandelions and grazing dairy cows.

This was Alan's home. It was the land he had not seen in nine months. It was the land that any whiskey swilling Colonel would say the Corps was sworn to defend. It was that same land which every malarial jungle-rotten Marine in the field would say they'd only glimpse again from the inside of a wooden box. It was America—and from sea to shining sea, Alan had snored it all away. For him, the beauty of the world was now best beheld from behind closed eyes. Alan's body craved sleep and his mind, escape. Except he'd left his mind somewhere back in the jungle—writhing in the mud with the worms and the rats. And in Vietnam, there was no sleep for the living.

The taxi lurched over the dusty carcass of a possum. Alan's sleeping head rose from his seabag and spiked down against the door's metal handle. He awoke from hollow blank space and gazed out the window, checking the back of his head for blood. Thick patches of tall grass and white tufts of wild carrot rose on either side of the dirt road. Alan saw that the ranch was not far ahead. When he looked on it, the house seemed lonely—nestled atop an awkward incline and isolated amid an open field of bluegrass. The ranch had a yellow door and was wrapped in a peeling coat of eggshell paint. The ancient oak in the front yard rose like a titan against the sun, drowning the house beneath its branches in a cool pool of shade.

Alan had not expected his whole family to be there awaiting his arrival with fireworks and a keg of Pabst Blue Ribbon, but when the taxi parked itself beside the porch, only the birds were there to greet him—chirping a heralding call from up in the oak tree. Alan slung his seabag over his shoulder and closed the taxi door behind him. He fished a pair of steel-grey aviators out from the baggy left pocket of his shabby dungarees and laid them over the bridge of his nose. He leaned through the passenger window, shook the driver's kielbasa-fingered-right hand, smiled, and told the man to keep the change.

Alan trudged through the grass around the side of the ranch, looking more like an unkempt scarecrow than a decorated Marine. He wore an untucked and improperly buttoned khaki Marine uniform top and green combat trousers with fraying pockets. The boots he had on were brand new, black, and sparkling with polish. Alan had stolen them from a supply dump in Quang Tri a few days before he qualified for rotation home and hopped on a bird bound for a troop ship steaming for San Diego. Alan would never forget the jungle of that forsaken country being swallowed up by the clouds below him for the last time. But, after a few days of wearing the boots, their leather began to fold and rip into the skin of his Achilles tendon—every step now brought a nip of pain.

A breeze whispered over the hills and Alan stopped to feel it's breath. He squinted over his sunglasses and saw his mother far out in the middle of the backyard. She was plucking bed sheets and linens from a wicker basket and hanging them to dry on a close line. Alan dropped his seabag in the grass and approached her. The breeze rippled her purple floral dress. She turned, and with a hand blocking her forehead from the late morning sun, she pondered the man walking to her through the grass. He stopped and smiled.

"I'm home, Mom."

She kept her hand over her eyes. Alan spread out his arms.

"I said, I'm home, Mom."

He wrapped them around her the way a child might wrap newspaper around a mug they'd painted as a Christmas present for their mother in art class. She reciprocated the embrace, resting an arm lightly on her son's back.

"Oh, it's you. It's you, Alan."

Alan let go. His mother looked up at him. With her black hair tied back tightly, he noticed roots of gray germinating from her scalp. She touched his sleeve.

"You must be hungry. Let me get something together for you—"

"That's alright. I'm okay."

"But you must be starving. It was an awful ride, was it?"

"It was alright. I'm okay. Just a little beat I guess."

She nodded to him.

"It must have been just awful."

"I'm all here though."

"You had to come back—I knew you would. Lord forgive me, I thought it was a ghost walking though the grass."

She picked a towel from the wicker basket and draped it over the line.

"You're all your father, Alan. You know that?"

He ground his boot heel against a dry patch of red dirt and kicked up a bit of dust.

"Think I'll head in for a while and get some sleep."

She nodded again and secured the towel with a clothes pin.

"Have you seen Anna yet? She's almost ready I think—practically bursting at the seams."

"Later. I'll go later. I need some sleep first."

Alan's former room was at the end of a long dim hallway that passed by the kitchen, the bathroom, and two other bedrooms. Its door was cracked open slightly. A golden knife of light emanating from the room's open windows sliced through the crack and spilled out onto the hallway carpet. Alan creaked open the door and threw his seabag next to his bed. His mother appeared to have converted the room into a storage closet in his absence. Stacks of old magazines and newspapers rose from his desk, an ironing board—laden with folded coats and

shirts—had been erected at the foot of his bed. But in the same spot it had always hung, mounted on the wall beside the window, was his old Martin acoustic guitar. Alan wondered if the G string on the seventh fret still buzzed.

He grabbed the guitar by its dark maple neck, eased himself into the orange vinyl chair by his desk, and positioned the instrument horizontally over his lap. The nickel plating on the guitar's lower strings had grown brittle over the months and oxidized into a filthy copper green. The strings let out a thin scratch when he ran his fingers down them. Alan plucked the open strings, twisting the tuning knobs to adjust their pitch. As each string grew taught, their jagged notes of dissonance rose from out of key and fell perfectly into smooth tonal spheres of accord. Before the war, Alan had blown through entire weekends just strumming his guitar alone in his bed. Now, as he awkwardly molded his left hand to the shape of E major, he realized it how long it had been since he'd last touched a guitar. His fingertips went pale as he bore them down against the fretboard. The instant he strummed the guitar with the edge of his thumb, the G string snapped. Its recoil whipped the flesh under his right eye, barely missing his cornea. Alan mounted the guitar back on its hanger.

Under a paint-spattered tarp in the corner of his room, he found a record player standing next to a milk crate filled with albums. He walked the middle and index fingers of his right hand, like the legs of a tiny man, across the tops of the albums. He flipped through their weathered covers in search of Bob Dylan, or anything that wasn't the twangy gospel bullshit his mother liked to listen to. Alan settled on a record from the very back of the pile. It was the newest looking album in the crate—one with a green cover and a photo of five bowl-cutted hippies feeding petting zoo goats from their hands. He slipped the black disk from its jacket, placed "Side-A" facing up on the turntable, and lowered the needle to its outer edge. Soon the sunny vibrations and lush harmonies of summer on the Southern Californian coast, came swimming thorough the bedroom. Alan shut the blinds on both of his windows. He closed the door.

He upended his seabag onto his bed and examined its contents: *one flashlight, metal, black—three shirts, cotton, white—two pairs combat trousers, sateen, light green—four pairs socks, cotton, white—one quart-sized canteen, aluminum, silver—one Kabar knife in leather sheath, brown—one Colt M1911 semi-automatic pistol with wooden hand grip, fully loaded—one child's blanket, wool, light-blue—one zippered pouch, leather, brown.*

Alan placed the pistol on his nightstand and pushed everything, except for the leather pouch, into a heap on the floor. He stood still for a moment and allowed the music to wash over him. Alan stared at the pouch resting atop the bed's jade quilt. He sat next to it on the edge of the bed, hunched over like a gargoyle. Alan reached over and unzipped the pouch. The syringe inside beckoned him, its voice like candy and warm cinnamon. It sang a sweet siren song of release and told him of a voyage over shifting dunes to a land of China-white nirvana. The needle commanded him to flick the lighter, heat up the spoon, and release the colors in his mind—to bury its spike deep beneath his skin and let it drink of his blood. Alan obeyed.

The needle dropped to the floor, and he fell through the plush clouds of his mattress. In the corner of his room, the record was singing peace and love—but all Alan could hear were the sounds of crickets and bats chirping out in the bush, thunder rolling over the misty hills, and rain beating down on the jungle canopy. He closed his eyes, and in the darkness, he could see palm fronds swaying in the wind against the stars.

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The hill smelt like shit and human entrails, and without any trees left standing on it, there was almost no shade. Alan and a few of the guys from 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad were sitting against the lip of an

enormous crater, which earlier that morning, had been blasted into the earth by friendly artillery. The lip of the blast area slanted upward enough to shield the sun. The men sat in its precious shade, catching their breath from the previous night's assault up the hill. Carson and Flag-Man smoked furiously while oiling their M-16s. The two Marines had The Whistler's backpack open between them, poised for ransacking. Orwell sat apart from them with his beady green eyes glazed over, hungrily scanning the pages of a '66 summer issue of *Playboy*. The communal magazine—which all the Marines in 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad referred to as “Susan”—was over two years old by then, sticky, and beaten near to hell. But it was 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad's only source of combat-jack material, making it their most sacred possession. Orwell oversaw the *Playboy*'s scheduled rotation through the ranks. His allotted time encompassed the next few hours, and he did not intend to share Susan until after he got a chance to slip away with her into the bush.

Flag-Man had his helmet over his eyes and a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He kept gesturing his rifle, scowling his eyes, and quoting lines from Clint Eastwood movies.

*“There are those with loaded guns, and those who dig... you dig!”*

Carson thought Flag-Man's impression was the tits. Each time he laughed, the smoke from the grass he'd rolled up escaped in blue puffs through the gap in his front teeth.

“Aye do Brando! No, wait...who's that cat...Charles Bronson! Hey, Flag-Man do Bronson, man. He's that Nazi-cappin motherfucker.”

“Told you Carson, I never seen *The Dirty Dozen*. Uncle Sam dropped my ass in the jungle 'fore I could cop myself a ticket.”

Alan's machine-gun and helmet were posted up against the wall of mud beside him. His left foot was bare and slung over his right knee. He was using the point of his Kabar to pick at the puss leaking from underneath the busted black nail on his big toe. He looked down at the bottom of the crater between pokes from his blade. It was filled with black rainwater and choked with the bloated maggot-infested bodies of nine North Vietnamese soldiers. The maggots feasted, swelled with sweet decay, and metamorphosized into green carnivorous blowflies the size of bumblebees. Even from where he sat, Alan could hear a swarm of them buzzing around the bodies. Several yards out past the end of the crater, some engineers were using a few small bulldozers to move debris and clear space for an LZ. Alan studied his commanding officer, Captain Dreadnought, who stood beside the LZ smoking from a rather MacArthurian corn-cob pipe, admiring the quick work of the engineers.

“Fine work, that is damn fine work gentlemen. A job well done, goddamnit.”

Dreadnought was a man of perpetual redundancy, but his long career in the Corps had nonetheless assured him with profound admiration from his men. He was a man in his forties now, but Alan knew that as a teenager he had rooted out the Japanese from the muddy trenches and twisting caves of Okinawa. Captain Dreadnought always made sure the .44 magnum he kept strapped to his belt was in his men's line of sight. Alan figured the piece was useful only for exploding the skull of charging triceratops at close range.

For nearly a day and a half, The Marines on Hill 425 had no way to let birds land safely for casualty evacuation. That morning however, a pair of CH-47 Chinook 'copters took off from Battalion OP and airlifted the dozers to the hill. Now that an LZ had nearly been cleared away, Alan's company would finally be able to get The Whistler's body lifted out of the bush. But until the engineers finished their work, the men had no choice but to leave him mutilated and boiling—tucked under a poncho and tossed upon a forgotten hill in some awful land.

Flag-Man kept up his impression, and Carson his cackling.

*“The dead can be very useful sometimes...”*

Alan slipped a wet sock over his foot. He looked at The Whistler's body lying in the sun, rigid against the uneven earth beside Orwell. He laced up his boot, and shuffled over to Carson and Flag-Man. His boots slapped and sucked against the hill's red mud as he approached the men. Carson was mid laugh when Alan snatched the roach from his hand. He took a heroic pull before flicking it into the putrid water below them. Alan exhaled and pointed at what remained of The Whistler.

"Maybe we should quit fuckin' around, yeah?"

"Hey that shit ain't cheap Rooster, man. Fuck is wrong with you?"

"It's just that I don't know what there is to laugh about. Tell me—why don't you tell me what the fuck there is to laugh about?"

Alan had Carson by the dog tags and was about to send him a right hook to the chin, when Captain Dreadnought bellowed from across the pit. The CO flew up to the lip of the crater, his teeth gritted, and his face ablaze with anger.

"What the fuck is this, Derrick?"

"Nothing, sir."

Alan shoved Carson back against the muddy lip and stared down at his shoes.

"What? They ain't enough?"

Captain Dreadnought pointed to the heap of NVA soldiers decaying in the crater.

"They *ain't* enough? You want more?"

Dreadnought spat, looked Alan up and down

"No. No, you don't."

Dreadnought marched back to the LZ. Alan focused down on his boots, where his toe still ached. His left lace was too long and had curled down into the red muck under his foot. Carson rustled a hand through The Whistler's pack and produced a brown leather pouch. The marine unzipped it and smiled before sealing it back up again. He tossed it over to Alan.

"Better take it easy, Rooster. You a bona fide Ice-Man, we all know that—a hell of a fuckin' Marine. But if you can't find a way to zen out when it counts, yo ass'll be boxed up and draped in Old Glory before you can say French Indochina."

Alan unclenched his fist and rubbed the worn leather with his thumb. He unzipped the pouch and looked inside.

The men watched Captain Dreadnought in silence as he trudged down the lip through the corpses and squalid water at the base of the pit. As he passed by, one of the bodies in the water began to crawl away. It was a young Vietnamese soldier who was missing a leg. His breath escaped in faint wheezes from what must have been a collapsed lung. Captain Dreadnought lit his pipe, casually unholstered his .44, and raised it to the boy's head.

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Alan opened his eyes while the sun was lowering outside his windows. The record player in the corner of his room crackled gently. He rose from his bed and threw on one of his white undershirts and a pair of green dungarees. He shuffled down the hall and into the kitchen where his mother was assembling a BLT for him. She placed the sandwich on a plate and set it on the counter next to a tall glass of milk. Alan took the half he thought had the most bacon and shoved a corner of it into his mouth. He went out of the kitchen and walked up to the flag and the framed photograph resting on the living room fireplace mantle. Alan looked at the man in the picture—into the eyes of the man his mother had always told him was his father. Alan had never met him, but he thought the man's short black hair and dimpled chin bore a certain resemblance. He took another bite of his sandwich.

“He would have loved to see you in that uniform you were wearing this morning,” his mother called back from the kitchen over the sound of the running sink.

“Yeah, I guess.”

Arnold Christopher Derrick had been killed in action in the morning hours of February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1945. He’d been a part of the second wave of landings at Iwo Jima, almost a month before Alan came fatherless and screaming from his mother’s womb. The Marine Corps had written Alan’s mother claiming he had died honorably, but Alan knew now that his father most likely had been killed in some hopeless fashion—cut to pieces on a volcanic beach of black sand by shrapnel and machine-gun fire.

“You’re a hero just like your father.”

When the Army draft notice had come in the mail a year and a half ago, Alan figured he would volunteer for the Marines in the hopes of one day hearing those very words spoken to him. But there were no Iwo Jimas in Vietnam. There was no land to be gained, or flags to be planted. There were only bodies that needed stacking—and there were plenty of them.

“No, I’m not. Not yet at least.”

Alan walked back into the kitchen. He took one bite out of the other half of the sandwich.

“I guess I should go see Anna—see how she’s holding up.”

“Well, she’s like I said, nearly bursting at the seams now.”

Alan grabbed the set of keys dangling below a mirror by the ranch’s front door. He returned down the hall to his room and slipped his leather pouch into his side pocket. He hustled outside and pulled up the garage door on the side of the house. It had been ages since Alan had driven the old sea-blue ’58 Apache pickup his mother kept stored away in the garage. When he pressed down on the clutch and turned the ignition, he felt like he was in high school again—cruising down the main drag at past midnight with Chuck Berry screaming over the radio, chucking empty beer cans at elderly people.

The pickup coughed and roared alive. Alan eased it out of the garage and headed eastward down Cassidy Hill Road. The evening had turned muggy and still, which gave Alan cause to roll the truck’s windows all the way down. The dirt road led a few miles out towards the highway on the outskirts of Blithe, past the white mailboxes of farming families whom Alan had known since he’d been a boy. When the road forked left for the highway and right towards the town, Alan steered hard to starboard.

He found Anna at the end of a cul-de-sac, swinging lazily on the front porch swing of a beige two story home. When she saw Alan walk up the driveway, she rose from the swing and stood still atop the stairs. The smile that spread across her freckled cheeks had grown almost as large and fast as her belly had in the last few months. Alan ran up the stairs and kissed her lips as tears streamed down her cheeks.

“I’m home, baby.”

He brushed aside a golden curl from her right eye.

“I know.”

They sat down together on the porch swing. He gazed into the blue of her eyes, feeling her stomach and the kicks from the life they had recklessly created nine months ago. She held onto Alan as the sun set and the robins in the trees hushed their songs. Anna’s golden hair smelt like lavender and fresh linens. He could feel warmth radiating from the touch of her pale skin—but he could not find any words for her. Anna did not mind his being quiet, she only needed him beside her.

Alan had held her like this before, in bed, naked in his arms beneath a heap of soft flannel sheets. The night before he shipped off to Parris Island, he snuck her through his bedroom window. The two of them drowned beneath the covers and touched each other in the dark. He remembered the way Anna giggled when he felt her breasts and how she whispered his name when she rode him. He remembered the tang of Canadian whiskey on her tongue that night and the way she exhaled softly in her sleep. Six weeks into basic training, Anna wrote Alan with the news. Alan liked to think they made their baby in his bed that night. Or maybe she'd already known by then and just couldn't figure out what to say to him.

When he was in Vietnam, Alan had slept outside in pelting rain and dreamt of a moment like with Anna that coming again. Now that it had, all he wanted was to leave—to chase the white dragon and fly away forever. He began to fidget and scratch the side of his neck. Anna kissed him there.

“We’ll have our little boy soon.”

“How do you know it will be a boy? What did the doctor tell you? I didn’t know they could do that.”

“No. I just know, Alan Derrick. I have a feeling and sometimes that’s all you need.”

“Well, that spoils the surprise, doesn’t it?”

He smiled at her.

“Soon, you think?”

She rubbed her palms against her beachball belly and nodded.

“Do you still have the little blue blanket I gave to you before you left?”

“Of course, it’s on my bed. It was my good-luck charm over there.”

“Well, when I have him, I want you to bring it with you to wrap him in. Then he’ll be *our* little good-luck charm.”

Alan scratched at his neck again.

“Maybe I should run and get it now—bring it to you so we don’t forget it in the rush to the hospital.”

“No, that’s alright, just stay with me for a while. You’ll get it when we need it.”

Her hold on him tightened. But it melted away when Alan stood up from the swing.

“No, I think I’ll just run and get it now. That way you’ll have the thing for later.”

Anna rubbed her forehead and looked away from Alan at the sun receding behind the hills across the street.

“Your dad’s gotta be on his way home soon anyway, and he hates me enough as it is.” He stooped to kiss the beachball.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“Alright.”

He waited until the pick-up reached the highway entrance past the fork before he pulled behind a Coca-Cola billboard and shot up. After sitting for a while slumped over in the driver’s seat, he rubbed his eyes, slapped his cheeks, and zipped up his pouch before storing it in the glove compartment. Alan took the entrance ramp and drove the next two miles down the one-lane highway with the radio on and a familiar warmth coursing through his veins. He stared past the windshield out at the sunset, where the twilight sky had been painted a wounded shade of plum and crimson. Black clouds and rumbling thunderheads gathered in the east. There was nowhere Alan could think to go, but he kept on.

Somewhere by the exit for Chesterfield, traffic began to pile up. Alan downshifted and slowed the pick-up to a crawl behind an endless line of beat-up sedans and multicolored

Volkswagen vans. Roving bands of hippie kids sprouted from cars parked crookedly about the shoulder. They carried guitars and coolers. They laughed and stumbled about wearing beaded necklaces and shirts dyed with bright paint. The girls put flowers in their wild mops and the men let their hair grow long and greasy over their ears. The traffic had stopped dead, and the flower children began crowding the road, walking up the highway through an ocean of stationary vehicles.

Alan thought the sun felt particularly soothing today—radiating through the Apache’s windshield, dousing his skin in a warm orange glow. Alan began to nod off and his foot slipped momentarily from the brake. Before he could press it back down, the front of his pickup rolled into the half-naked side of one of the flower girls. She was tall and skinny, and the bump was enough to knock her off her feet. The girl rose from the pavement and flashed him the bird. The red nail polish on her middle finger accentuated the insult.

“Hey fuck you, man!”

Alan laughed as if it were instinct. It must have been the way she looked at him—like some fuzzy raccoon who’d just been pelted by a BB gun. She had on a buckskin jacket over a loose white tank top—under which there was no bra to be spoken of. Her cut-off denim shorts rode several inches up past her thigh. Her long legs stalked towards Alan’s car door in brown suede cowboy boots. She had sunflowers and carnations woven into her long black matted hair. Alan stuck his head and arm out of his window and peered at her through his aviators. She came close to him, leaning her elbows against the pick-up, with her deep brown eyes squinted and her mouth twisted to the side in a grimace. Alan calmly raised his hands in a shrug.

“Sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it, Jack.”

“Jack? Who do you mean, Jack? Jack MeHoff? He’s a good friend of mine.”

She maintained her frown before breaking into a smile. Her pupils grew wide with excitement.

“Idiot, now you owe me a ride!”

She took out one of her sunflowers and slipped it behind Alan’s ear before slinking around the side of the truck into the passenger seat.

“Is this what you people do? Just get into strange men’s trucks when they smash into you?”

“It’s the summer of love, honey, everyone’s gotta live a little.”

“I thought that was ’67? When was Sgt. Pepper?”

“Whatever you say, man. Life’s just one big trip around the sun year after year, baby—you gotta just learn how to keep riding the wave...”

“What?”

She closed her eyes and stretched her arms out behind her, grabbing the head rest with her hands. Alan was puzzled by the tufts of black hair sprouting from under her armpits—Anna’s were always seal-skin-smooth like her legs. Suzie’s pink nipples hardened beneath her thin white top. Her eyes flicked open and saw the way Alan was looking at her.

“I’m Dakota Suzie, that’s what they call me at least.”

“How’s that spelled, S-I-O-U-X-E-Y? Like the Indians?”

“No cowboy, like S-U-Z-I-E, like normal.”

“Right on, kid. They call me Alan, I’m—”

Suzie kissed Alan on the cheek. He could feel her lipstick moist against his skin.

“Hi, Alan.”

Alan scratched his neck.

“Lemme ask you, what’s all this shit up here you hippies are jamming up?”

Suzie leaned over and rested her head on Alan’s shoulder.

“Oh, don’t be a square man, it’s the festival—Janis, Creedence, and Jimi—everybody’s playing there.”

“Jimi, as in, Hendrix?”

“Yeah, Hendrix.”

“Voodoo Child, Bold as Love, Jimi Hendrix?”

“Yeah cutie, you dig him too? He was supposed to play later tonight, but it looks like the rain’s gonna fuck up the show. Maybe it’ll get canceled. It sucks a fat one because tonight’s the last night of the whole shebang. Me, Banjo, and the family went to the festival yesterday, though—it was some far-out shit.”

“Well, if that’s where I’m taking you, it looks like we got a lot of waiting ahead of us—”

“No, you can swing around, I was headed back for the bus tonight anyway. You should drop by and tune out with us. They’ll dig you I know it.”

She stole his aviators and put them over her eyes.

Alan guided the pickup over the dotted yellow line and sped down the road in the opposite lane, leaving the convoy of cars and flower-haired youth behind them. They drove down the highway for a few miles while Suzie scrolled through the radio stations.

“Turn off here. We have the bus parked behind that group of trees.”

Alan turned the Apache into an open field and headed for a campfire blazing up ahead behind an outcropping of pines. The sun had nearly disappeared, and the truck’s headlights cut white cylinders of light through the gathering darkness. Alan parked the Apache on the edge of the hippie’s campsite. The first droplets of the night’s rain crowded the air in a white brume. The glow of the campfire licked against the side of a rusted 1950s school bus. The bus was painted in a hypnotic collage of psychedelic colors and patterns. Dolphins, whales, schools of herring splattered in deep cerulean, burst from orange rays of sun painted beneath the bus’s windows. The name of the school on its side had been blotted out by a hundred smudged hands traced with cyan and ripples of periwinkle.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? I painted all the blue parts.” Suzie closed the truck’s door behind her. She took Alan’s hand and led him toward the fire. Two men and four women sat on logs beside the blaze. Behind them in the fading firelight were two beige canvas tents propped up with dead tree branches. One of the men with a cave-mannish blond beard and thinning yellow hair strummed a guitar, while the woman next to him sang along to the chords in a high yodeling tone. The other man, short and dark around the eyes, was passing around a joint with the other girls. He stood up and inhaled deeply when Alan entered the ring around the fire.

“This is Alan, he hit me with his car and gave me a ride. Alan, this is the family.”

Alan obliged them with an awkward mix between a bow and a nod.

“Welcome, Alan.”

The caveman grinned a smile of blackening, yellow teeth.

“Hey Banjo, he should’ve backed over her too and done us all a favor, right?”

Suzie and a few of the other women snickered.

“Watch it now, Terry. Don’t listen to his crap—thinks he’s a comedian. Between you and me, he’s too stoned to notice he ain’t funny. Now come on and share our fire on this misty summer evening.”

“Thank you.”

He sat down with Suzie on the log next to the short man. Suzie put her legs across Alan's and squirmed her way over into his lap. The short man handed Suzie the joint. He offered Alan his hand.

"Please allow me to introduce myself, I'm Banjo. A man of wealth and taste."

"Alan."

"Do you smoke grass, Alan?"

Suzie took a hit and blew a gentle barrage of smoke rings into Alan's face. She leaned in and kissed him on the lips. Her tongue tasted like a forest fire—warm ash, burnt pine needles and wild mint.

"Of course, he does."

Alan saw Banjo gawking at him from over Suzie's shoulder. He had narrow, twitching, hazel-green eyes that reminded Alan of Orwell. Banjo gave Alan an unsolicited ocular pat down, studying him from foot to head, taking notice of his black leather boots and dog tags.

"Looks like you picked a kid-killer out from a field of flowers, Suzie."

"He's cute though, isn't he? I love his eyes."

Suzie ran a finger down Alan's neck. She got up to dance and passed the joint to Alan, who Banjo kept staring at with a peculiar smile. Alan thought his eyes were far too similar to Orwell's. When he looked at Banjo, he saw Orwell slitting the throat of a fifteen-year-old girl who'd been sniping Marines for the Vietcong. Alan gazed into the fire.

"Shit, man you look like you just hopped off the last chopper out of Nam huh?"

"Maybe I did."

"I got a younger cousin's been killed in that fuckin' war. Goddamn pigs in Washington go us mixed up in all kinds of bullshit we shouldn't be involved in. You been over there, man?"

Alan let the smoke flow from his nostrils.

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From high up in the chopper, Hill 425 seemed a holocaust. It was the only patch of brown in a sea of jagged green hills—battered by artillery and immolated by napalm. The 7<sup>th</sup> Marines had been bleeding for every inch of that terrible ridge since the early morning hours. Now as the sun sank low over the jungle, Alan and companies from the 5<sup>th</sup> were being dropped on an LZ at the base of the hill. They were tasked with reenforcing the 7<sup>th</sup> who had become bogged down against a heavily fortified enemy encampment at the top of the ridge.

The chopper came in low and landed. Alan dashed off into position with the other men, his M-60 machine-gun, and two extra belts of ammunition slung over his right shoulder. He saw Flag-Man and Carson to his right, their rifles pointed up at the jungle. The hill fell mute minutes after the hum of the last chopper had dissipated over the horizon. No sound remained except for The Whistler, who privately whistled a country-western waltz and fidgeted with the zipper of his flak-jacket. The men's eyes made spastic movements left and right, surveying the destruction around them. An entire forest had been denuded by war—made into kindling from fire and bursting shells. In the dusk, the Marines appeared to be the only living things still standing. Captain Dreadnought gave the order to move out.

They moved single file up the hill and into the jungle. Rainwater from earlier that day dripped down onto the men's helmets from high in the canopy. Leeches slid off leaves and wriggled beneath socks and underwear to feast on the warm bodies of Marines who had only a short time to live. Alan and The Whistler marched at the back of the column, listening to the pulse of their heartbeats drum against their chests.

"Eight more days."

Alan's heart kept pounding viciously at his Adam's apple. He was surprised he managed to squeak out any words at all.

"Eight days till what, Whistler?"

"Till I can see Airi again."

Airi was a girl with whom The Whistler had fallen deeply in love. Airi was a prostitute, and The Whistler was a teenager who thought fucking meant love. He met her months ago on a brief medical evac to Tokyo, where he had minor surgery for a shrapnel wound. A Gook grenade fragment had clipped his thigh about an inch and a quarter below his left nut. He liked to tell people that Airi broke his stitches more than once in those few weeks.

"I got eight days till I qualify for R&R. Eight days till I'm back in Tokyo and back inside Airi."

"Shut your mouth and watch the trees."

"Eight more days."

The Whistler smiled and fixed the iron sights of his M-16 to the bush.

The advance halted momentarily to allow for a substitution on point. By then, the moon had commandeered the sky above the jungle and cast its white glow upon the palms. It was The Whistler's turn to walk point and Dreadnought called back for him. The Whistler took his rifle by the barrel in one hand and looked back at Alan as he passed by. The Whistler's helmet covered his eyes, but Alan could see a smirk creeping across his face, pushing up tiny pink ridges at the corners of his mouth.

"Smell you later, Rooster."

The Whistler disappeared into the dense underbrush ahead.

The bush became tighter and more overgrown, squeezing in on the column from all sides. A putrefying stench came wafting down the hill through the foliage. It was the smell of the dead. Up ahead a Marine whispered.

*"Body."*

The corpse was headless and splattered against the trunk of a twisted tree. Another one was face down in the mud.

*"Body."*

*"Body."*

There were more, but the Marines humped past them up the hill, stepping over their bloated corpses and signaling their location back to the men in the rear. Safeties clicked off in the blackness. Soon the Marines' procession became a singular ghostly clamor, whispering back:

*"Body, body, body, body"*

Alan's breathing grew heavier. Sweat streamed from his brow and burned his eyes. He heard a twig snap and a scream from up the hill. Then the jungle ripped apart. The trees ahead of him erupted into a blazing cacophony of deadly light.

Machine-guns raked the Marines' positions, kicking up mud and vaporizing limbs. Small arms fire snapped over their heads and whizzed past their ears. Mortars whistled down from the hill's summit and obliterated the earth. Alan hit the deck screaming and fed a belt into his machine-gun.

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He took a final hit from the joint and passed it back to Banjo.

"Nah man, never been. I just like the way these boots look."

"Right on, man, they're way cool."

The rain became heavier, sizzling the coals in the fire. Banjo and the other hippies scurried out of the shower beneath the shelter of their canvas tents. The Caveman kept on strumming from somewhere inside one of them. Out in the deluge, Dakota Suzie was in a trance—dancing in the waning fire light, swaying her hips to the rhythm of the guitar. The rain had soaked her shirt see-through. Slick strands of black hair clung against her long neck and dripped down her face. She locked eyes with Alan and came to him. She slipped her fingers between his and led him towards the bus. He followed.

The inside smelt like stale pot and wet leaves. Most of the seats had been torn out and replaced with stained mattresses, ratty armchairs, and junk-day couches. Piles of discarded clothing and empty cans were stacked on the bus seats that remained. Alan almost laughed at the thought of kids like him in the nifty 50s sitting there and staring out the windows on their morning rides to elementary school. Suzie picked up a half-full handle of Canadian whiskey from one of the couches, upended it to her red lips, and handed it to Alan. He took a swig and kissed her—she tasted different.

“Got a light?”

Half melted wax candles were placed on every other windowsill. When Suzie lit them, they illuminated the aisle like old fashioned streetlamps. She urged Alan down the aisle to the back of the bus where a curtain of multi-colored beads hung from the ceiling. He listened to the clank of fat rain drops pummel against the bus’s metal roof. Their cumulative clamor swelled to a liquid raucous like static crackling over a detuned radio station. Suzie disappeared behind the beads. Seconds later a hand emerged and dropped a sopping white top on the floor. The hand retracted and appeared once more holding a tiny pair of tattered jean shorts. Alan pushed back the beads.

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Dawn sweltered over hills of Blithe, evaporating the midnight rain, and turning the air into an opaque morass of humidity. Alan awoke atop a damp mattress cluttered with polychrome throw pillows and scratchy Afghan blankets. Suzie had fallen asleep with her naked torso and arms clinging to Alan’s bare chest. Overnight, the bus had turned into a dank greenhouse of stifling summer air, ripe with the aroma of sweat and sloppy sex. Their mutual perspiration had fused the flower-girl’s skin with his own. He peeled her off his chest gently and flopped her onto her side.

“Hey.”

He poked at her stomach. She rolled over grumbling and nestled into an Afghan without waking. Alan found his clothes, put them on, and headed for his pickup. The sun was still very low in the east, but it made Alan’s eyes squint enough to break out his aviators. Not a soul stirred about the hippie campsite. The bonfire had been extinguished by the rain and reduced to a smeared pile of white soot. Before he turned the Apache’s ignition, Alan looked back at the bus, only at the blue parts, and shook his head.

He took the highway back home again. Despite the early hour, he came across several more crowds of stoned longhaired kids. They skipped along in the direction of the festival by the Chesterfield exit. There was even more of them congesting the highway lanes than the night before. Alan rolled past a press van parked along the shoulder. A few men dressed in clean white dress shirts and red ties stood about the vehicle, questioning the flower children with notepads and tape recorders. Alan made eye contact with a reporter who wore a pair of impossibly thick black rimmed glasses.

“I thought the rain canceled the show.”

“No, just postponed some of the performances to this morning. Jimi goes on in five.”

“Thanks.”

“Right on. Hey now that I’ve got you here, could I get a statement from you about the festival’s impact on the local comm—”

Alan pressed on the gas and sped away. He pulled down a dirt road off the highway, to a grassy knoll he thought might provide a good view of the show. Alan rolled down his windows as the truck putted down the path. Somewhere in the west, he could hear the muffled wail of an electric guitar, the thump of a bass, and the trashing battery of rock and roll drums. The road ended, pouring out onto the peak of a verdant ridge. A few other cars and hippie vans seemed to have a similar idea. They parked their vehicles on the edge of the slope. Their passengers climbed atop the roofs of their cars and sat in the sun to watch the show. Alan stepped out of the Apache and walked to the edge of the hill. He followed its downward gradient with his eyes, watching the grass turn into thick brown mud. Before him stretched a near-infinite gulf of bustling humanity. The human sea met its shore over a hundred yards ahead at the edge of a colossal stage. The people sat, stood, cheered, vomited, smoked, and danced along with the music, which came screaming out from the stage amplifiers and speaker towers. The guitar called to Alan in a deafening whisper over a wasteland of delusional kids. He soon found himself sliding down the hill and pushing his way through the crowd. His boots clopped in the mud, spraying the lower portion of his dungarees with foul earth.

The man on stage played a chrome-white Fender Stratocaster left-handed. He had a bushy charcoal afro and a red bandana tied around his forehead. The tassels on his pale deerskin jacket seemed to twist and flow through the air as though blown about by the feedback roaring from his amplifier. The drummer and bassist rested momentarily. The guitar player closed his eyes and leaned his head back towards the gray sky, erupting the stage with a blistering solo. The long black fingers of his right hand tore up and down the fretboard, bending the strings into the stratosphere. Alan took off his aviators and watched in amazement, unable to move. A chubby shirtless man covered in either shit or mud tapped Alan on the shoulder and pointed at the stage.

“I hope that guitar is eighteen.”

The drummer flourished his sticks about the symbols and the guitar howled the opening notes of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” The band followed the anthem’s melody for a while before the music devolved into a blazing pandemonium of violent color.

*“And the rocket’s red glare,”* the guitar wept, *“the bombs bursting in the air.”*

The music burrowed like a vibrating worm into Alan’s ears. It tunneled to the darkest reservoirs of his mind and secreted a poisonous discharge of images and memories. He saw napalm shells from Navy fighters supernova over the jungle. He saw the smoldering thatched roofs of a hilltop village billow smoke into a star-clustered night sky. He saw Anna’s blue eyes look back at him from the front row of a high school classroom and watched them turn red before a pit in the ground. He watched The Whistler smile back at him and melt into the jungle. He watched the Marine’s teeth gleam white and the pink ridges near the corners of his mouth curl upwards.

Alan looked down at his boots. A long loose lace was stuck in the muck.

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They told him her room was on the fourth floor. Alan followed a series of fluorescent overhead lights down the corridor, their reflections shimmering on polished tile. He walked past a nurse pushing a decrepit old man in a wheelchair before he reached Anna’s room.

He found her lying in a hospital bed, humming “Row Row Row Your Boat” to a bundle of white blankets in her arms. She’d tied her honey blond hair back into a bun. A pair of tiny pink hands reached out from the bundle and touched her freckles. When she saw Alan standing in the doorway, she looked sharply back at the bundle.

“It’s a boy?”

She did not look at him.

“A girl.”

When Alan took a step forward, the newborn began to shriek. He took the blue handkerchief from his pocket and placed it in Anna’s lap.

“I guess we’ll have to find a pink one, then.”

“I will.”

Anna held their baby girl and hushed her, but her torrent of cries would not subside.

“Do you need—I mean, is there anything I can do?”

She looked at Alan, within him, and he saw her eyes turn to ice.

“There is.”

He listened.

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Alan bummed a cigarette from a policeman outside under the hospital’s front entrance awning. He lingered beside a wooden bench and watched ambulances and cars come and go and go and come again. He let the ash of his smoke grow long, gray, and sagging. Workers rushed patients in and out of the entrance on stretchers and wheelchairs. Out past the entrance circle, in the parking lot’s first row of spaces, Alan noticed a yellow taxicab. He squinted his eyes, took a final pull, and flicked the cigarette into a patch of bushes. The cab started up and turned on its lights the moment Alan walked towards it, as if the driver had been waiting there just for him.

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The bipod of his M-60 dug into his right shoulder, chafing the skin raw, pinching a nerve to the point of numbness. It was a familiar agony. 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad were out on patrol again, with orders to seek and destroy an NVA ammo dump two clicks east from an offshoot of the Mekong River. The scuttlebutt was that a few miles back, they’d crossed the border into Cambodia. The Marines had been slogging through the jungle since sundown, hoping to take the enemy at night unawares. Alan was at the back of the column again, listening to the chirps of frogs and monkeys sound off in the bush. To Alan’s left, Carson kept flinching at every sound. The hilt of his Kabar clanked against his hollow canteen with every flinch. Carson’s place was now forever in the rear of the column. He refused to ever go on point again after Flag-Man stepped on a landmine last month.

“Stay cool, Carson.”

Carson rubbed sweat from his eyes.

“Can’t stay cool Rooster, man. It’s Vietnam—too damn fuckin’ hot.”

“Cambodia.”

Captain Dreadnought called back for Alan on point.

Carson watched Alan hustle forward, his M-60 over one shoulder, his helmet darkening his eyes. A sneer slithered across Alan’s face when he looked back at Carson.

“Check you later, Ice-Man.”

Alan turned and vanished into the midnight green of an impenetrable jungle.

### Norris and Steinbeck's "Monsters" of the American West

John Steinbeck's vision of the Dust Bowl is apocalyptic. The famine, murder, floods, and droughts, which litter the pages of *The Grapes of Wrath*, all contribute to Steinbeck's biblical reimagining of a corrupted and failed American West. The novel's very title is derived from The Book of Revelation where in "the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God" (*King James Bible*, Rev.14.19). For Steinbeck, during the Great Depression the West became a region whose dreams of prosperity were wrung dry for the common man at the behest of the rich and powerful. The novel's starving hoards of "Okies" whose ungainly chariots leak and sputter over the border into California, are not only victims of change—they are a desperate byproduct of the terrible hoax that is the American dream. Other twentieth-century American authors have also written about the failed experiment of the American West. Frank Norris' *The Octopus: A Story of California*, explores the social and economic calamities inflicted on ranching communities by unregulated railroad trusts. Unlike the impoverished Joad family from *The Grapes of Wrath*, Norris poses successful, property owning ranchers as the victims of oppressive economic circumstances. But even with their superior finances, the ranchers of the San Joaquin Valley ultimately succumb to the same brutal fate as the Joads. Daniel J. Mrozowski postures that although "Norris, and Steinbeck might not be clearly indexed to some stable and coherent genre, they share a compositional impulse to mimetically represent a social world being radically revised by changes to ownership and control" (Mrozowski 163). These radical changes in the social world cause Norris and Steinbeck to challenge the legitimacy of the American dream in their novels. Furthermore the drastic social changes of their respective eras, forced these authors to question whether the American dream was ever truly attainable in the West.

Several of Norris and Steinbeck's novels focus on life in the various regions of California. Norris' early years revolved around the San Francisco area, while Steinbeck was raised in California's Salinas Valley. By living in the west (although about a generation apart from one another) these authors were able to glean unique insight into the issues surrounding the American west's promise of prosperity. Even before the turn of the century, California's flourishing markets and agricultural communities harbored great potential. Many Americans viewed California as the land of milk and honey—for them it was the embodiment of hope and the American dream. But to Norris and Steinbeck, the fortune promised in the public's idealization of the American west was a farce. To obtain prosperity in this land of hope, was a task which for many seemed just out of reach. The novels *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Octopus* both deal with the frustration of Americans who realize the American dream is a lie. The characters in these novels become aware that their lives are meaningless to those who occupy positions of power. The seemingly tragic ends met by the Joad family and the ranchers of the San Joaquin, are from a broader perspective but minor impediments on the American elite's war path to economic domination. It would seem the destiny of these characters is to be bulldozed by the unrelenting machine of modern American progress.

Both Steinbeck and Norris alike demonstrate the degeneration of the American dream into a commodity. In *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Octopus*, this idea is bought by capitalist entities and repurposed for the exploitation of the working class and the ambitious. However, these novels are most similar because of how their ill-fated protagonists attribute the destruction of their lives to an uncontrollable monolithic force. In Frank Norris' *The Octopus*, the railroad is the ravenous leviathan whose tentacles prove impossible for the ranchers of the San Joaquin Valley to escape from. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck represents the bank as an

inhuman "monster" whose voracious appetite for land and wealth, drives thousands of poverty-stricken sharecroppers from their Oklahoma farms amidst the Dust Bowl crisis of the 1930's. By conjuring a ruthless invisible villain, Steinbeck and Norris accurately recreate the anguish and frustration felt by real Americans who fell prey to powers beyond their control. This commonality between texts published decades apart from one another, begs the question which I will attempt to answer in this paper—how do the authors of *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath* use the image of a “monster” to explain the death of the American dream in the west?

The “monsters” in these novels, “breathe profits; they eat the interest on money” (Steinbeck 32). They are able to do so because of their reliance on technology. The Pacific & Southwestern Railroad Company from *The Octopus* extends its reach and influence on the American west both because of their corrupt ties with Washington, and their strategic implementation of technology. The basis of their business and the heart of the “monster” they have created is the railroad itself—a revolutionary and irreplaceable apparatus of modern transportation technology. Similarly in *The Grapes of Wrath* the banks who foreclose on the farmers, use tractors to till the land and demolish newly vacant homes. Steinbeck shows how banks and wealthy landowners are in the process of mechanizing agriculture. In one scene a land owner explains to his sharecropping tenants that “The tenant system won't work anymore. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop. We have to do it. We don't like to do it. But the monster's sick. Something's happened to the monster” (Steinbeck 33). Many technological advancements between 1901 and 1939 (the respective years in which *The Octopus* and *The Grapes of Wrath* were published) would render old methods of work totally obsolete. In their novels, Frank Norris and John Steinbeck evaluate

the accessibility of the American dream in a world where new technology was helping to tighten the “monster’s” stranglehold.

Mechanization transformed once strenuous agricultural practices into simple tasks. This method resulted in optimal profit for large landowning corporations, on a greater scale than ever before. Even so, railroads, automobiles, and tractors still provided new economic opportunities for farmers and ranchers living in the pastoral West. The completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, established a web of interconnected railways which would eventually contribute to a tremendous rise in the exportation of wheat from the West. With John Froelich’s invention of the gas-powered tractor in 1892, farmers were able to cultivate larger areas and harvest more crops. These technological advancements certainly appeared beneficial to Americans seeking fortune in the West. However, Steinbeck and Norris demonstrate how monolithic economic entities adopted these new technologies as an instrument in their annihilation of the American dream.

Magnus Derrick, Annixter, and the other farmers of the San Joaquin, have no recourse in their positions as wheat farmers, but to submit to the fluctuating grain rates which are applied at whim by the P. & S. W. Railroad Company. The railroad’s monopolistic hold on the shipment of crops is a major component to the success of Norris’ “monster” in *The Octopus*. By causing the farmers to rely absolutely on their transportation services, S. Behrman and the railroad assume total control over each farmer’s ability to achieve the American dream. In this way the P. & S. W. Leviathan weaponizes technology in its monopolistic schemes.

The scope and cost of the railway’s construction is often cited by the company’s representatives as a reason for the egregious shipping rates which they impose. In a trip to the railroad station to see about their newly arrived plows, the Derricks are greeted by the novel’s

antagonist, S. Behrman—who Annixter and others repeatedly refer to as a personification of the railroad itself. Harran and his father Magnus complain to Behrman about the newly adjusted and unfavorable grain rates. In defense of the railroad Behrman refutes Harran’s criticism and argues that, “By applying your schedule of rates [the railroad] would not earn a cent; we would be bankrupt” (Norris 36). Feeling the monster’s tentacles tighten once more, Harran becomes irate and retorts Behrman’s insulting excuse. He points to the company’s suspicious discretion regarding the original cost of the railroad,

“Do you mean to say that twenty million dollars is seven percent of the original cost of the road?’ S. Behrman spread out his hands smiling. ‘That was the gross, not the net figure—and how can you tell what was the original cost of the road?’ ‘Ah that’s just it,’ shouted Harran [...] ‘we know this: that the road COULD have been built for fifty-four thousand dollars per mile and that you SAY it cost you eighty-seven thousand.’” (Norris 37)

It becomes impossible for Derrick and his fellow ranchers to operate their businesses at a profitable level because of the railroad’s monopoly on the transportation of crops. By deflecting blame on the supposed extreme cost of the railroad’s construction, magnates like Shelgrim and S. Behrman are able to set the grain rate at whatever they please. This transfer of accountability onto the road’s steep original cost, contributes to the monolithic image of the railroad. Shelgrim and S. Behrman act as if they have no control of the entity that they work for. Unlike Steinbeck’s servants of the “monster” from *The Grapes of Wrath*, in *The Octopus* the railroad company representatives do not make any attempt to feign pity on the people whose lives they liquidate. S. Behrman and Shelgrim are fully aware they are exploiting the ranchers for their own financial

gain. When Behrman smiles back at Harran, this act is a subtle admission of his own greed—he spits in the face of the helpless, and then he empties their pockets.

The late nineteenth century was a period of largely unregulated trusts. Large corporations were able to corner a market, and bleed their competitors and clients dry without repercussions. James Dorson suggests “Such preferential rate schemes shaped the market landscape, promoting national and global markets over regional ones, and strengthened the market power of large businesses over small ones. Rate disputes garnered so much public interest because they were at the center of the ‘trust problem’” (Dorson 51). Norris paints the railroad as a "monster" in accordance with the rampant antitrust sentiment of his time. *The Octopus* demonstrates the damage caused when monopolies are left unregulated. Norris clearly believes in the overwhelming power of greed. If powerful corporate entities are allowed to lie and fix the market to their advantage without consequence, they will do so without shame or remorse.

Like the bank “monster” from *The Grapes of Wrath*, the colossal octopus of the P. & S. W. Railroad Company also “must have profits all the time. It can’t wait. It’ll die [...] When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can’t stay one size” (Steinbeck 32). For this reason the “monster” is not only involved in the fixing of grain rates. The P. & S. W. is also responsible for assigning value to the odd numbered plots of farmland beside the railroad. This additional source of revenue truly shows the extent to which this monolithic entity has coiled itself around powerful forces inside the United States government. According to the novel’s narrator, none of the ranchers truly,

“owned all the ranches which they worked. As yet, the vast majority of these wheat lands were the property of the P. & S. W. The explanation of this condition of affairs went back to the early history of the Pacific and Southwestern, when, as a bonus for the construction

of the road, the national government had granted to the company the odd numbered sections on either side of the proposed line of route for a distance of twenty miles”

(Norris 50).

It is clear that the government is in cahoots with the P. & S. W. and the cards are stacked against the ranchers of the San Joaquin. Their ambitions are dashed at every turn by their inability to circumvent the railroad’s grasp. The rancher’s government representatives are in the pockets of the P. & S. W. and do not have the interest of their constituents in mind. This coalition between government and monopoly embodies the death of the American dream in *The Octopus*. Derrick, Annixter, Osterman, and the other ranchers are opportunistic self made men. By improving their land and buying it back from the Pacific and Southwestern at the pre-agreed price of two dollars and fifty cents per acre, these men hope to achieve good fortune. During and after the United States’ undertaking of manifest destiny, the West was viewed as a place where such aspirations could become a reality. But in Norris’ naturalistic vision of the West, the bank, the government, and the rich, always triumph over those who dream of a better future. It is not surprising then that Osterman’s “scheme of electing a board of railroad commissioners who should regulate wheat rates so as to favour the ranchers of the San Joaquin” is a failure, and that the rancher’s struggle “to resist the attempted grabbing of their lands by the railroad” ends in bloodshed (Norris 153).

Heated debates over railroad-controlled freight rates and property values were commonplace in terms of *The Octopus*’ historical setting. The 1880 Mussel Slough Tragedy (the event which the novel is loosely based on) occurred when California settlers—as Annixter would have phrased it—“buck[ed] against the railroad.” This violent railroad dispute in which seven men were killed over property values and freight rates, brought the excessive power of

monopolies to the forefront of economic discussion in the United States. Jennifer L. Bertolet's "Mussel Slough Incident" describes the origin of the dispute:

"Southern Pacific stunned settlers by announcing that it would charge market value, \$20 to \$35 an acre, for homestead lands within the district. The prices were well above those stated in the pamphlets and above what the company charged in other areas. Hundreds of families who had already improved the land were told they could either pay the established prices or vacate" (Bertolet 504).

The events which lead to the incident at Mussel Slough are nearly identical to those which unfold in *The Octopus*. Annixter, Broderson, Osterman, Harran Derrick, and Hooven are all killed for standing their ground against the monster. The Mussel Slough Tragedy is an obvious influence on Frank Norris' epic California novel. The book's gruesome ending parallels the deadly incident. The outbreak of gunfire and violence is a manifestation of the rancher's anger at an unjust system. On a physical level, the railroad is merely a machine—an unstoppable locomotive. But, the expansive economic ramifications of its existence are far more obstinate. Norris' "monster" serves as a money-making machine for members of the railroad trust, however the leviathan's true objective is to snuff out the dream of prosperity imagined by less powerful Americans. The railroad devours people's lives and excretes massive profits as a result. Presley summarizes this concept quite succinctly towards the end of the novel,

"in this valley of the West, far from the great centers, isolated, remote, lost, the great iron hand crushes life from us, crushes liberty and the pursuit of happiness from us, and our little struggles, our moments convulsion of death agony causes not one jar in the vast clashing machinery of the nation's life; a fleck of grit in the wheels [...] and the tiny impediment of a second, scarce noticed, is forgotten" (Norris 284).

Presley's conception of the "monster" as a massive steamrolling object, is reminiscent of the imagery used to describe the bank in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The bank's predatory lending techniques in an ecologically unstable environment, would lead to the displacement of thousands during the Dust Bowl crisis.

Before the 1870s when ranchers began to arrive in the Midwest, the region was mostly grassland. Rather than plant crops in a region notorious for its unpredictable weather, farmers instead elected to raise cattle. However within about "two decades of the ranchers' arrival, overgrazing had taken its toll, and a series of dry summers, severe winters, and poor markets forced drastic retrenchment" (Sherwood). Planting wheat, cotton, and corn soon became a far more profitable alternative for farmers in this region. This was encouraged by a steep rise in the price of wheat at the outbreak of the First World War. The agricultural implications of the war would lay the groundwork for the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl, and the financial crisis experienced by the inhabitants of the region. Sara Gregg explains the extent to which World War I shaped the economic and ecological environment of the Great Plains in the twentieth-century:

"The larger geopolitical context of the Great War in Europe precipitated fundamental changes in the economic and agro-environmental practices of American farmers. These new practices brought increased efficiency and the maximization of resources, and most Americans embraced them as the benefits of a modernizing age, not anticipating the unintended economic and ecological consequences of these policies" (Gregg 130).

For these historical reasons, technology in *The Grapes of Wrath* is portrayed as an amalgamation of good and evil. Renata Lucena Dalmaso believes "the allegory of the monster tractor criticizes the machine only if it is used as a tool for profit by banks, corporations, and big owners" (Dalmaso 36). Tractors and automobiles were all necessary and positive tools for farmers who

hoped to make a living before the Dust Bowl hit. These machines would help cultivate the earth, and quicken the traversing of great distances.

Without an automobile, Tom Joad and his penniless people would never have reached California. Without their jalopy's promise of escape, the Joads would have fallen victim to the "monster" in some manner—shot by police for trespassing, or starving and choking from dust inhalation. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, technology is either a boon or a curse. Only when machinery is adopted as a tool by the monster, can it assume evil qualities. Steinbeck shows how machines like tractors and cars become another moving part of the growing monster, when they are used in malice against the Joad family and other unfortunates. In this classic of American literature, the rich are not alone in their harmful deployment of technology against the "Okies". They are not only ones whose hands are laden with the blood of the poor and homeless. Members of the middle class act as foot soldiers in the monster's war against the "Okies". They too exploit modern man's necessity for technology. Car salesmen, gas pumpers, roadside waitresses, and agricultural inspection workers, oppress the herds of disheveled Dust Bowl survivors who flood over their borders. Infuriated by the sight of these lame wanderers in their heaving beastly vehicles, these selfish members of the middle class become indoctrinated by the monster's dogma of exploitation. Steinbeck explores this idea in chapter seven, where he writes from the perspective of a rabid car dealer whose immense greed allows no compassion for the forlorn. This unnamed opportunist purchases jalopies for nothing "more'n twenty-five, thirty bucks" and "[sells] em for fifty, seventy five. That's a good profit" (Steinbeck 62). The dealer adjusts his business to meet the demand of the "Okies" who now must purchase a vehicle to make their flight westward. The dealer profits from the desperation of his clientele. He rakes them over the coals, overcharging them for lemons that barely function. This predatory business is so profitable

that the dealer exclaims, “[C]hrist, what cut do you make on a new car? Get jalopies. I can sell ‘em fast as I get ‘em [...] God, if I could only get a hundred jalopies. I don’t care if they run or not” (Steinbeck 62-62). Even though the automobile is the Joad family’s deliverance from the Dust Bowl, they must shake hands with the "monster" in order to purchase one.

The banks and the rich—the brains of the monster—use tractors to demolish the homes of already broken families. The banks are able to complete this undertaking in a terrifying fashion by employing familiar faces as tractor operators. Dalmaso refers to Sigmund Freud’s interpretation of the word “uncanny” in order to better understand the use of tractors as an extension of the “monster” in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

“Freud defines the uncanny as ‘that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’ (620, emphasis added). Here the tractor transforms something familiar [...] such as the human being sitting at the control of a machine, into a frightening sight. The old acquaintance driving the tractor, then, becomes frightfully non-human and unfamiliar. The uncanny refers, then, to the traumatic possibility that a human being might not be human at all. The frightful feeling associated with the tractor is made even stronger by the use of the word “monster” to describe this machine.”

(Dalmaso 28)

According to Freud, what makes the uncanny a source of horror is its tendency to lead back to familiar associations. The initial dread expressed by the tenants is directed towards a nameless entity who is leveling their homes with tractors. They notice how “The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man [...] he was a part of the monster; a robot in the seat” (Steinbeck 35). The victims of the Dust Bowl witness the "monster" grow in size with each day while it consumes the people around them. As the "monster" assumes a familiar face, it becomes more

threatening and more powerful. The farmer's bleak situation is made worse when they notice the driver churning their lives beneath the soil is in fact “Joe Davis’ boy” (Steinbeck 36). Starving sharecroppers were given no choice but to bend their knees before the bank. Evicted from their life-long homesteads, destitute families would have to begin their lives once again—this time under the most perilous of circumstances.

Many farmers during the height of the Dust Bowl were forced to make the difficult yet necessary decision to forsake their own neighbors. The measly wages offered by the bank were the difference between life and death for people and their families. One tractor operator explains to an angry tenant that he gets paid “Three dollars a day. [he] got damn sick of creeping for [his] dinner—and not getting it. [He] got a wife and kids. [They] got to eat. Three dollars a day, and it comes every day” (Steinbeck 37). The figure of three dollars per day is shockingly low even when equated to twenty-first century standards. Three dollars from 1939 is equivalent to about sixty US dollars in 2022. If we assume that the man on the tractor worked the conventional eight hour work day, his wage would be seven dollars and fifty cents per hour in 2022. Such a low wage almost suggests a sadistic sense of humor being exhibited by the banks. To be paid so little to physically destroy the lives of your friends, is the ultimate humiliation. And yet, it would seem those who joined the “monster” on its path to economic supremacy, got off easy. By this time the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl had reached a fever pitch, there were well over “a hundred people on the road for [the tractor man’s] three dollars. And where [would they] go?” (Steinbeck 37). In the case of Tom Joad, his family, and the thousands of newly evicted “Okies” the answer to that question was California. Although the Joads believed they were leaving the “monster” in Oklahoma to feast on the dusty remains of their beloved homesteads, they soon learn the

“monster” is not so easy to escape. In her discussion of the trajectory of the Joad family’s flight Jessica B. Teisch asserts that, “*The Grapes of Wrath* relates the Joad’s migratory struggle from a depleted land to an artificially constructed fertile one” (Teisch 154). It is in this artificially fertile land, where the Joads are confronted by the “monster” once again.

Along the harrowing journey across Route 66, The Joads rest their jalopy in the lot of a dilapidated roadside gas station. The irritable owner of the station gives the penniless family “a goin’-over” before lamenting repeatedly, “I don’t know what this country’s comin’ to” (Steinbeck 126). Tom illustrates the direness of the United States’ economic situation to the man, warning, “Pretty soon you’ll be on the road yourse’f. And it ain’t tractors’ll put you there. It’s them pretty yella stations in town.” After this reality adjustment, the man admits he and his family “was already talkin’ about packin’ up an’ movin’ west” (Steinbeck 128). At this stage in the novel, Steinbeck expands upon his previous idea of what the “monster” in *The Grapes of Wrath* truly is. According to Jim Casy in this scene, the “monster” is a plague on the American people—far more intrusive than just the nation’s corrupt system of banks. Casy used to believe, “the devil was the enemy. But they’s somepin worse’n the devil got hold a the country, an’ it ain’t gonna let go til it’s chopped loose. Ever see one a them Gila monsters take hold, mister? Grabs hold an’ you chop him in two an’ his head hangs on. Chop him at the neck an’ his head hangs on. Got to take a screw-driver an’ pry his head apart to git him loose. An’ while he’s layin’ there, poison is drippin’ an’ drippin’ into the hole he’s made with his teeth” (Steinbeck 129).

In *The Octopus*, the image of the “monster” directly correlates to the P. & S. W. Railroad Company and remains consistent throughout the novel. However in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the “monster” adapts and takes different forms. In Oklahoma at the novel’s beginning, the bank is

the parasitic evil which feeds off the land and removes people from their homes. But as the Joad caravan moves westward, they continue to see signs of the "monster" they believed they had escaped. As Casy is trying to relay to this stubborn gas station owner, the "monster" is not easily killed. The "monster's" teeth deliver a slow death—its venom lingers beneath the skin long after the beast's maw has been pried off. At the heart of the "monster" in both novels is greed. S. Behrman and Shelgrim are consumed by greed, along with the banks who evict the Oklahomans. But as *The Grapes of Wrath* progresses and the Joad's situation becomes more dire, Steinbeck shifts his commentary on American greed towards the wealthy fruit plantation owners in California.

Towards the end of the novel when the Joad family has reached their wits' end and the brink of starvation, they find work picking peaches at a plantation called the Hooper ranch. The family is tipped off about this opening of work by a "brown-faced man dressed in a light gray business suit [... wearing] a massive gold wedding ring on the third finger of his left hand [and a] little gold football hung on a slender chain across his vest" (Steinbeck 364). This man who is a clear representation of capitalist materialism and excess, is another instrument of the "monster" growing in California. Greedy plantation owners like this man, use desperate workers like the Joad family to pick their crops—paying them extremely low wages. By recruiting the Joads to work on the plantation, this man traps the family into an even more unjust system of labor than the sharecropping business they had been a part of in Oklahoma. The managers of these large plantations are aware of how desperate "Okies" are for any form of money. These refugees are so desperate for work that the plantations turn a blind eye to child labor, reassuring their abused workers that there "ain't no reason why the little fellas can't help" (Steinbeck 370). The more people the fruit companies are able to hire, the less money they spend on wages. With the

knowledge that most “Okies” are “tryin’ to get work— not for money, not for wages [...] jus’ for a cup a flour an’ a spoon a lard,” plantation owners can continue to lower their wages. Even by paying such insufficient wages, these plantation owners still attract enough workers to pick their fields. Thus the “monster” continues to reap a tremendous profit—perhaps even larger than before now that their labor expenses have been dramatically reduced. The lack of morality exhibited by both the bank and the California fruit farms, is a result of their greed. The potential for higher profit, even if it is at the expense of their fellow man, proves irresistible for these Depression-era farming magnates. Steinbeck exposes his readers to the realities of the United States in the 1930s: a nation where in an instant the working class can be turned from poor, to destitute, to finally emaciated and dying.

At no point in the novel is the Joad family able to escape the clutches of poverty. At every turn their hopes are dashed—replaced by dread, isolation, and hopelessness. Just like the ranchers of the San Joaquin who eventually buckled under the influence of P. & S. W. Railroad Company, the Joad family is similarly obliterated by the leviathan’s wrath. The characters in these novels are socially immobile and powerless to enact change. Their violent frustration and fruitless efforts to improve their station, help reveal the American dream in the West for the lie that it is.

Ultimately it is greed that becomes the essence of both Steinbeck’s “monster” in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Norris’ leviathan in *The Octopus*. Greed redefines the meaning of the American dream in these books. It would seem that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness do not come without extreme cost— and even then these luxuries are reserved only for an elite few. Those who participate in the “monster’s” rampage can revel in the joy of prosperity, because for

them the dream is real. As for the monster's victims, there is no American dream—for them there exists only an eternal nightmare of social stagnation, poverty, and death.

The leviathan's henchman would have the reader believe they are but innocent participants in an unfortunate but necessary system of exploitation. The landowners and bankers from *The Grapes of Wrath* “would take no responsibility for the banks or the companies because they were men and slaves, while the banks were machines and masters all at the same time” (Steinbeck 32). Shelgrim expresses identical sentiment in *The Octopus* exclaiming to Presley, “THAT RAILROADS BUILD THEMSELVES. Where there is a demand sooner or later there will be a supply [...] Wheat is one force, the Railroad another [...] Men have only little to do in the whole business” (Norris 305). These remarks are of course utterly false. Men have *everything* to do with the “monster”—men *are* the “monster”, and their greed perpetuates its existence. The powerful figures in these novels deflect their wicked actions onto this nonexistent monolith whom they themselves have erected, in order to escape the consequences of their immorality. The railroad, the bank, and the plantation owners are driven by greed but refuse to admit to their misdeeds, for they are afraid to admit the truth—that they are the “monster,” and the blood of the American dream is on their hands. These accomplices of America's elite must cleanse themselves of this crime by doing what they do best—lying. Steinbeck and Norris conjure the image of a monolithic, inhuman entity to reflect how out of control the wealthy have become in the United States. When left unchecked these powerful forces coalesce into an unstoppable, gluttonous beast whose methods of economic domination seem almost monstrous.

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*Tomorrow Never Knows*

‘See when I was a kid, there was this house on the corner. Not on my street, the one three streets behind us, closer to the woods. It was on a street called Dogwood or Birch or I don't know some kind of tree, and it was painted this shade of blue no one could agree on. I liked to tell people the color was like some weird amalgamation of cobalt, sea green, and grey. But John Dwier, who was a year older than me and my friends, went around saying it was just grey. But what the fuck did he know? He was one of those dirt-bag-older-kid-types who thought he was cool because he chugged cans of Red Bull and liked to bunny-hop curbs around the neighborhood on his tiny atomic-green BMX bike. One summer though, he took a header off that clown-bike and cracked his skull. He didn't die though or anything like a lot of kids probably secretly hoped. Yeah, that day some wayward street acorn ejected him off the thing head-first into Mrs. Hadley's rock garden. That stunt costed him about twelve staples to the rear cranium, a few nights in the ER at St. Barnabas, and probably the lion's share of whatever lonesome braincells he'd still had knocking about the vast emptiness of his sub-70-I.Q. mind. Even after that though, he'd still call you gay if he caught you wearing a helmet. John was that type of kid, you know? He reeked of bullshit and maybe even chickenshit too. Overall, I'd consider him someone who, if you had to describe their physical appearance to a police sketch artist, you'd use repeatedly only the word, “*shitty*,” and based off of that single word, the artist would be able to produce an identical portrait of John down to every last black-head and boil. That's really who he was. Just *shitty*—like a person who's a real piece of whore's-shit. Now, let me make it clear I did not say *horseshit*. I said *whore's...shit*. Like try and imagine some bipedal yeast-refinery of a working woman squatting beneath a freeway overpass in downtown Patterson, who, instead of taking the Cosby kids to the town pool, opted to blend those fuckers into an aqueous black-tar-heroin infused mixture and blast them point-blank from her syphilitic sphincter into, I don't know, like, a discarded easy bake oven box—and then if you try and picture what kind of fucked up fecal version of a Pollack masterpiece she might have splattered against the soggy cardboard of that box's interior—only then might you begin to approximate a visual representation of the moral fiber and character of the late John Dwier. And despite this overwhelming stench of *bullshit* that just sort of wafted all around this kid, for whatever reason people always broke out their proverbial clothespins in his presence. They'd clip them squeezing-ly over their nasal passages in some perverse admission of unadulterated fear. A kind of dread twinged painfully within people at the thought of giving John any sort of hint, like, ‘hey would you please for the love of christ fuck off and never come back, because no one anywhere can stand the sight or thought of you.’ So, my theory's John Dwier always got along thinking was *the man* for just this reason. He was that type of kid, you know? He was that shit-head kid in every town who assumes the unspoken amateur civic duty of spewing all the little known (and usually made up) facts about, you know, the color thong all the slutty high school chicks liked to wear (which according to him was always light green); or the secret Grand Theft Auto cheat code that let you turn your car into a flying armored hotdog truck; or the sloppy mind-altering blowjobs fat black chicks in “the hood” dished out to their men by furiously pumping a hollowed out grapefruit up and down the shaft mid-fellatio; or Hitler's shameful historically redacted case of monorchidism; or whatever godforsaken topic he'd decided to fixate on that day, he'd just dump it all right into the mailable minds of Roslyn Township's most inspired youth. One morning though, I remember John Dwier sat next to me on the school bus. He looked me in the eyes and told me he knew what pee tasted like. He did not elaborate. But I'm sort of thankful he decided to leave it at that.

‘Yeah, and John’s mom was this real walrus of a woman who chain smoked Marbie reds and thought she was able to successfully conceal from parents and kids alike the fact that she pretty much non-stop guzzled sangria the whole day every day. She’d be at the bus stop leaning against the Ryerson’s green-wire fence at 7:02 in the AM holding a reused Big Gulp in her left hand, sucking that shit through an orange twisty-straw—all inconspicuous-like. This lady also had what could only be described as a spiritual connection with those rat-meat sliders from White Castle—ate ‘em by the crave-case like a fuckin’ woodchipper, man. This was a true New Jersey woman. One summer at a backyard 4<sup>th</sup> of July shindig, I heard my father call John’s mother a “garbage pelican” in a conversation he was having with my friend Ricky’s dad. Granted my dad had had a few that evening—but I guess he put it like that because of the flapping, fleshy gullet thing John’s mom sort of had hanging from under her chin. She wasn’t so bad though, and I guess to an extent I felt bad for their whole family.

‘She drove us to the movies a couple times, I remember, but she would only let us go see the R rated ones. According to her, stuff like Batman and Star Wars were “for faggots.” Now that I think back on it, she must have been fucked in the head or something. I mean, this bitch took us to a screening of *Eyes Wide Shut* when we were still in fifth grade. Nicole Kidman’s little mosquito-bite titties were the first ones I ever saw... But I guess I must’ve stopped hanging out with John maybe a year later because around then his mom caught a nasty deewie—got her license revoked and I think maybe did a not-so-quick stint in the can—and so she couldn’t take us to see the good movies anymore. Word on the street was she fell asleep behind the wheel of her ‘02 Honda Odyssey and smashed through the front of the 7-Eleven on Bloomfield Ave. Supposedly she fell out the driver side door, glass shards in her eyes, fire and security alarms wailing, unwitting customers screaming for their lives, and just wandered over to the junk food isle muttering something under her breath to herself about Tasty Cakes in a voice like someone who’d seen action on Omaha Beach. But that’s beside the point.

‘Maybe I’m colorblind, but I’m telling you this house was a green-blue-grey. It was on a corner right where two streets ended and met at the same place—I don’t know, maybe there’s an actual term for that sort of suburban street-formation. The house was two levels, with a bay window. It overlooked this little creek that ran between the edge of the front yard and the street. From there, especially after a solid rain, the water would slither on away from the street behind this grove of pine trees that towered over the back of the house. The stream had to have been redirected to flow into the Passaic River sometime in the early ‘50s. You could tell because of the way it was dug into the street with those concrete slabs buttressing it at the sides. Or at least that’s what John Dwier told me when I was a kid—but what the fuck did he ever know?

‘Anyway, after school at the end of the year in May or June when the weather would get real warm, me and my buddies would all like *dwel*l by that pinegrove by the creek. Finding your way back there through all the wild barberry and ivy—real thick foliage whose branches come whipping back at your corneas after the person in front of you passes—it was like pushing past those last few heavy mink coats in the back of the wardrobe before you came crashing into Narnia. And none of our parents were around to tell us what to do back there. I mean we’d smack each other with sticks, throw rocks at squirrels, build rock dams, pack lips of Kodiak and barf our intestines out into the brook with it babbling away all serene over soapstone and dead trees—or do whatever it was we used to do back there. One day back in the creek this kid Billy lit a tampon on fire he’d found in a dumpster. He put the douche, and thank christ the thing hadn’t been used, on a stone in the middle of the stream and lit it up with a book of matches I’d traded him earlier that day for a pack of Big-Red gum. Life’s weird sometimes, though. That

day, the tampon had been fresh out of the wrapper, no blood whatsoever. Still though, for some reason I think Billy died of AIDS like twelve years later. It was either AIDS or like some fiery mid-air collision over Bermuda. I forget.

‘But back when we were kids though, the creek was our sanctuary. Except to get to it, you had to trespass across the green-blue-grey house’s front lawn for a few yards, duck under a low window on the side of the house where the TV was always blaring for some reason, and then slide through a bunch of rocks and twigs down this muddy little ravine into the creek before anyone saw you. But before you did any of that though, you had to Army-Ranger-style clear the wire fence guarding the entrance to the backyard.

‘Scaling a wire fence was by no means an easy feat for me back then, but it had to be done if I was gonna maintain my reputation as a neighborhood cool kid—which by the way, I believe is a totally different thing from being a school cool kid. I think as kids get a little older, they start to decide for some reason that socialization in school and then around the neighborhood, transpire within totally unrelated parallel dimensions. Maybe it’s because you don’t have a car yet, so you’re sort of stuck in this suburban maze with whoever lives closest to you to hang out with. But I dreaded hopping that thing every time, especially because (A) back then I used to be a chubby little fucker and (B) because between you and me I may or may not have an irrational fear of climbing fences—metal wire ones in particular. I’m just horrified by the thought of accidentally getting my balls snagged on one of those sharp edges that sometimes poke up from the top of fences like that. I mean this is a recurring nightmare of mine—which is why if there’s ever a day where I think I might have to scale a wire fence, I try and wear jeans. I’m not kidding you, sometimes I have this dream where I’m running from some mouth-foaming junkyard rottweiler, or like a naked-zombie version of Hillary Clinton, and I’m about to vault over the top of a fence at the end of an alley to get away — but I’m wearing basketball shorts—and I just snag the fuck out of my sack on the fence. Then the dream shifts from you know, the pure horror of being eaten alive by a rabid former secretary of state, to one of those dreams where you think you’re just gonna die from embarrassment. Usually, the fire department somehow gets called to help with the whole un-puncturing of my sack from the fence— kinda like how they get called when people get their tongues stuck to flag-poles in the winter. Pretty soon, a crowd of onlookers forms below me. But when the firefighters get to the scene, they determine that my balls are beyond saving. Usually one of them tells me, ‘I’m sorry son but we have to break out the bolt-cutters,’ at which point I wake up screaming ‘GET AWAY FROM MY SCROTOM!’... Hang on what were we talking about?’

Lewis Clark ended his rant and looked up from the paper diner place mat he’d been doodling on. Even after having so far endured twenty-five years of life, no, Lewis *did not* think it was weird his first order of business after being seated at this roadside grease-trough, was to ask the waitress for, ‘*a couple crayons, and preferably at least one green one if you have it*’. Beneath the table, Lewis took the single red crayon that the waitress had granted him and snapped it to pieces in his left hand. As he crumbled a chunk between his thumb and forefinger, some of its red wax collected beneath his nails. For the past ten minutes, Lewis had been using the crayon to draw Civil War-era sideburns and ‘staches on the faces of the various divorce attorneys, plumbers, and shit-hawking real estate agents who crowded The Parkway Diner’s placemat advertisements. It was fun until he decided he was bored, so he crushed the crayon.

A beautiful disaster sat worried and cross-legged across the table from him. She was a curly flaming-haired introvert swimming in an oversized grey hoodie. As far as Lewis could tell, her downcast brown eyes and habitual sub-table cuticle picking suited the classic tells of an

individual perplexed by a perpetual inability to escape existential crisis in all its forms. She was also probably the only member of the opposite sex to have been seen publicly with Lewis for now approaching about a year and a quarter. She had just bitten into her cheeseburger. While she chewed and came up with an answer to his question, Lewis waited impatiently. He shook his leg to the brink of table-vibration. April chewed, swallowed, took a sip of her strawberry milkshake. She wiped her mouth with a napkin and tossed it aside in a crumpled ball.

‘First off—’

‘Hang on is this on the record?’

∞ ∞ ∞ ∞ ∞ ∞

‘Just tell me about the house, Lewis.’

Lewis bit a chunk out of his grilled cheese and spoke while he chewed.

‘Well, I guess it’s not so much the house that I wanted to tell you about, although I always had a weird feeling about the place. You know, all those times I ran across that house’s side yard, I never once saw who lived there. I never even saw a car in the driveway. The house seemed deserted most of the time, the way I remember it. But still, there had to be someone in there. There was that TV that was always on, for one, and sometimes kids would say they heard weird sounds and smells coming from inside. Man, but I hadn’t thought about that place for years until I saw it again recently.’

‘What’d you see when you—?’

‘Well, you know me, I’m a pizza man—not literally, like I’m not made of pizza—I deliver it to lazy slob who tip like shit. One time a couple nights back we got a delivery for three pies to an address I’ve never seen before on the other side of town. It was in that neighborhood that’s right after the gas station just over the bridge—’

‘Yeah, I know the area.’

‘Well, it was about 9:30 when I pulled into the neighborhood, so it’s dark as hell and can’t find the numbers on these motherfucker’s houses. So, I’m searching for this house I’m supposed to deliver to and I pull up to a corner where these two streets meet. And there it was. That green-blue-fuckin-grey house, man. The place is worn to shit now though. Grass and moss growing everywhere, broken windows, chipped paint. The place’s driveway’s all crumbling into the creek.

‘The house always looked totally vacant and decaying even when I was a kid. But I couldn’t help think when I saw it, that somehow it had managed to retain the same level of decaying-vacantness it had when me and my buddies used to hop its black wire fence in the early 2000s. I just sat there looking at it for a minute, parked in my car. That night I think the stars were out and I could see Mars shining down through the glass of my sunroof—that orange hue The Red Planet projects through the blackness of space if you look close enough for it. But then a light flicked on in the upstairs room—orange too and dancing like candlelight. Someone must’ve been watching me from up there. I said *fuck that*; popped the clutch and took off looking for the address I was supposed to go to.’

‘So, what, it’s a haunted house or something? What’s this have to do with my sister or that kid Dwier you were talking about?’

‘When we were kids, I told you we used to go back in the creek behind that house right?’

‘Yes, Lewis you’ve been abundantly clear on that.’

‘Okay, well back in the day all the neighborhood kids knew that if you followed the water all the way back, way back in the woods, you’d eventually come to the Hobo Hole.’

‘The Hobo Hole?’

‘Yeah, the Hobo Hole. It’s this huge fucking concrete drainage pipe at the end of the stream. It’s so damn big, the thing looks like a cave especially the way it’s built right into the side of this overgrown hill. We used to dare each other to go in there when we were kids. It gets pitch black if you walk in deep enough. Graffiti on the walls and shit—real creepy. Kids used to say there was some lost tribe of cannibalistic homeless dudes who like “dwelled” in there. Anyway, I was down for the count on this one day in the middle of the summer—got my tonsils removed and was bedridden watching Steve Irwin reruns all day on Animal Planet—but the story goes that John Dwier got dared to go in there. Self-proclaimed bad ass that he was, he said he’d go further than anyone had before. Next time someone saw him, he was floating face down in the river, bones smashed to bits.’

Across the diner, a server dropped a tray of waffles and coffee all over the floor.

‘Where’d you say this house was again?’ April pretended to ask, as she stole one of Lewis’ fries.

‘Across the bridge and make a right after the Shell. Make a left down Monroe and its somewhere back there.’

April looked out the window. The sun was lowering itself in the sky, turning the clouds apricot and gold. She looked back at Lewis. A smirk crept from the left side of his face.

‘Hey, I wore my jeans today...you wanna take a ride over there?’ he asked.

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The sky was crimson now and the sun’s final gasps of bright orange extinguished themselves—dying against the black horizon like embers consumed by an infinite pool of ink. April watched trees, houses, busses, and cars, fly by outside the passenger window of Lewis’ black ’89 Grand Marquis. Its interior was surprisingly immaculate. April noted the car’s merlot-colored leather seats and faint tangerine aroma. The pair drove in silence for several minutes. Lewis signaled right and turned the Marquis down a long one-lane road beset on either side by tall plumes of wild fountain grass. Lewis cruised at about 40mph, but to April the car crept down the road at the pace of a lame ox. A bridge appeared at the end of the road. She could make out a gas station on the other side—it’s Shell logo glinting in the day’s final rays. A faulty neon bulb in the logo’s serpentine first initial flickered in the half-light. April squinted her eyes. Lewis coughed and turned on the radio, searching through static to find a station. The car crossed over the bridge.

‘This is by Sadie’s place...where I was supposed to...where Kate was that night...’

A song came roaring out of the static—chaotic and swirling.

*‘Turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream... It is not dying...It is not dying...’*

The Marquis made a turn into a quiet neighborhood of cookie cutter homes. Eggshell, cream, beige. These were their only colors. Lewis switched the Marquis’ headlights on, cutting beams of white through a curtain of fog that had descended upon the car. Ahead of them, the road ended, and another began. The radio kept screaming.

*'Lay down all thoughts, surrender to the void...It is shining...It is shining'*

Lewis down shifted and eased the car to a halt beneath the gnarled branches of a withered oak tree.

'We're here...' he said in a soft tone.

April peered out her window. The house was exactly as Lewis had described—set back against the woods, its bay window looking down on the stream at the edge of its front yard. Riddled with patches of moss and mold, the whole structure seemed to slump forward towards the street from the hill it had perched itself on. In the twilight April noticed its color.

'Green-blue-grey.'

Lewis opened his door, setting off the car's interior light.

'You sure about this?' he asked.

'No, but we're here aren't we?'

They got out of the Marquis and walked towards the house's fence. April put her fingers through the links of cold metal wire, listening to creek babble. Daylight had vanished. Lewis turned to her. His expression seemed to ask, *Ready?* April looked up at the house. A single light danced in its upstairs window.

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The drainage pipe was a concrete leviathan, yawning from beneath the side of a wooded bluff. The creek flowed through the void of its maw. Lewis splashed through the water and stood before its entrance.

'Hobo Hole.'

Its mouth was large enough to fit him inside standing straight up. He chuckled, then shouted into the throat of the beast.

'PENIS, Penis, penis, penis, penis...'

April was frozen behind him, the creek's icy water seeping through the sole of her sneakers. She was trying to find her breath.

'You coming?' Lewis smiled and vanished into the black.

'Yes.'

April clenched her fists and followed.

The tunnel reeked of rotting leaves and sewage. April could hear only the rushing of water reverberating against the concrete. Far ahead of her, Lewis flicked on his lighter. The flame's glow illuminated the corridor, revealing disturbing graffiti on the walls. Skulls, demonic faces, and slurs were sprayed everywhere in every color. Further down the pipe, the images on the walls morphed into a kaleidoscope of burning, bleeding eyes. They watched April as she approached Lewis. A gust came from deep, fluttering the light and tugging at their clothes.

'Maybe we should turn around—'

Lewis stopped and turned to the blackness before them.

'HELLO? Hello? Hello? Hello?...'

A voice from the emptiness whispered back and blew out the light.

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Your whale of a mother is passed out again. Her mouth's gaping ceilingward, tilted back and yawning in the sort of position that's just begging for someone to maybe dump a shot of Frank's Red Hot into, or for like a spider to crawl inside of and spin its web across the belching chasm between incisor and yawning esophageal void. This woman, your mother, has been snoring through the early hours of this cooler-than-normal July Sunday morning like a biomechanical hyena in need of an oil change and definitely a new muffler. For since who knows how long she's also left the sink running in the kitchen—the static rush of which your ears keep fixating on even from where you're standing way down in the still dark of the living room, bathed in the blue moth-flame afterglow of an early-morning Maury Povich rerun, the TV cranked at about a 79/100 and the remote visibly submerged in a melted tub of Cherry Garcia. You've found her like this or worse for at least the past 182 Sunday mornings. Your eyes are stapled to the screen, transfixed by the elative shriekings and spastic convulsions erupting from a Maury guest resemblant of the late Biggie Smalls who's just found out he is, in fact, 'not the father.' On about 179 of such occasions, however, your mother's globular form maintained its inertia on the recliner, wheezing, snorting, rising, and contracting late into the evening with the throaty rhythm of an asthmatic pachyderm deep in hibernation. You are blinded by the man's windmilling arms as he completes, you count them, seven scream-crying victory laps weaving through the cheering aisles of the studio's live audience, dishing out radius shattering high-fives all around. You rub the sleep from your right eye and flick a crystalized yellow crumb of smegma into the darkening pink shag beneath your feet. Yours was one of those families who wore their shoes in the house. You watch the lumbering guest violently shake an audience member—an elderly woman, wheelchair-ridden—by her shoulders with tears gushing from his eyes and pelting down at her cheeks and you remember seeing him lift her by the midsection and heave her clear through the thin sheet rock of the set's prop wall to stage left. It becomes clear then, in your estimation—at least you've decided, considering the meticulousness of your data collection on maternal hangover recovery (MHR)—that your mother won't be rising from her couch-denting-Snuggie-encased-cookie-crumbs-infested sarcophagus until at least 9:00 PM EST. You stand in the living room for a minute. You watch cumuli of invisible dust whir in oscillating waves through the few daggers of orange daylight that've stolen through the cracks in the room's blackout curtains (which've remained drawn since last afternoon). You made a point of noting the early hour when about ninety-eight seconds ago when you threw off your Chewbacca sheets, rolled off your bottom bunk, wandered past the crooked portraits fading in suburban window-light down the hall, and into the kitchen where you read the time digitized in weak blue neon across the microwave's mini-display— 7:14 in the AM. You think to yourself for a bit regarding this beastly immobile maternal figure of yours who's heaving down here in the dark with you. It smells. Provolone and piss. You try and remind yourself that at least it isn't Tommy P. who's stuck around to see to your half-assed provision of a childhood. Your mother'd always claimed he was your old man, your Pops—T. P., the junk-head. You never really knew who or what your Pops was though, never really got to. *The junk-head*. But the sow, your mother, had told you he choked on his own vomit in a Denny's bathroom, totally cheesed out on a demonic fusion of heroin and paint-thinner somewhere in the ballpark of the week or weeks surrounding your 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday. And your mother's been main-lining your tiny hippocampus with the story of your father's handicapped stall death-cheesing like it is, detail for psyche-searing detail, since you were just about old enough to have developed a rudimentary grasp on verbal communication. So, in a sort of numb way, you've always figured her story to be the truth on how your Pops must've bit the bullet. You remind yourself that at least your mother's still breathing. Wheezing more like. And at least

she sort of stayed and raised you sort of. And now that you're sort of raised and now that every year sort of passes by a little quicker than the last, you've noticed you're noticing more shit. You've come to realize it's the little things your mother's done that've counted most: like falling into cardiac arrest on the squalid linoleum of an East Orange Walmart at 1:19AM amidst a Black Friday rampage, slashing her way through hordes of shoppers with a blood-spattered Nintendo Wii box; like making your bed and doing your laundry without so much as an utterance vis-à-vis the peculiar white crustiness of your bed spread and dirty socks. Sure, once in a while your mother'll spit low pH vitriol in the face of an unfortunate cashier or drive-thru attendant who's feeling daring enough to precede her gluttonous order with something innocuous like: 'I'm so sorry ma'am, but we're all out of honey mustard today.' Surely however, at least some of these shortfalls can be written off considering the atomic-green BMX she hid behind the tree for you last Christmas all just for being her 'little big handsome man.' Watching droop that faggot fifth-grade kid Lewis Clark's pretty-mug the day that pube-smear first caught a glimpse of you on your new atomic-beemie hitting a super sweet curb jump was reason enough to keep loving your fat mother for at least the foreseeable future. Sometimes though, the Balrog's fiery awakening, the White Whale's furious spout, the untethered acrimony of the rat-slider empress, would send you reeling from existence, triggered by some bizarre urge within you to recede utterly from all memory near the back of some dark cave at the edge of the world. The short of it was that mommy had a temper. And a pretty bad one. E.g., that time last fall during a vital school-parent 1-on-1 when she spilled\* the bloody contents of a reused 7-Eleven Big-Gulp brimming with sangria in a heinous deluge across your vice principal's desk. You recall the whole situation developing into what some would later refer to as 'a catastrophic fiasco.' The primary directive of the meeting had been to address your 'grossly insubordinate' behavior the previous Wednesday, 10/23/07, during a recess debacle which'd involved 9 classmates, the monkey-bars, a tube of Vagisil, and a steaming handful of canine fecal-matter—an event which indirectly somehow also resulted in the Bic-lighter immolation and eerily Mayan ritualistic sacrifice of Mrs. McEntire's class pet, William the gerbille. Your mother had of course pleaded your innocence in this case, fervently denying with red-spittled lips each accusation levied by the VP. However, the extent of her pleading that afternoon reached such a blood-vessel-popping fever pitch of hollering that the vice principal and her staff had no recourse but to ring Johnny Law downtown to help forcibly remove your mother from the premises. You remember weeks later watching the CCTV footage from Mrs. Carnival's office of that day's events: your sailor-mouthed mother in a sangria-stained torrent whirling about a carefully *feng shui'ed* administrative workspace like a drugged, caged, and severely fucking rabid honey badger, and you watching it all through the crackling technicolor of a portable TV a sad balding and almost certainly divorced bailiff had wheeled in during the State's presentation of evidence, and whose fuzzy screen you'd squinted at from the back row of the courtroom while the edge of an un-cushioned solid oak bench dug dull pain into the freckled white flesh of your right ass-cheek between the hummingbird shakes of your nervous right leg.

9:00PM EST is still around 13.5 hours away, allowing plenty of time for you to figure out something to get up to. You'll need to clean up the living room before you leave, though. But not super well or anything. It's not like she ever notices. Your cleaning of things that is. But you'll

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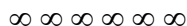
\*Although multiple eye-witnesses and formal reports from both Curtis E. LeMay Elementary's Board of Education and the Roslyn Twp. P.D. used the words 'angrily dumped' in reference to your mother's manner of receptacle displacement.

for instance de-submerge the TV remote from its tomb of curdled dairy, Clorox off the sludge and toss the batteries in the tangle of weeds shooting up behind the shed out back so she'll think it's your fault the thing won't flip between channels anymore. You won't touch the pulverized sleeve of E.L.-Fudges overturned in the sweat between her huge saggers, but you'll make damn sure to toss the near-empty 1L of Tito's she usually leaves behind the VCR. You'll steal it away in the recycling and remember to, of course, make sure and root through to the sweet fermentation at the can's bottom past heaps of aluminum empties to hide it there. And if like today, there's a few fingers left in the fiery backwash of the 1L, you'll recall a mantra you think you'd dreamt you'd heard from Ol' T.P. say once from behind the wheel of a '94 Sentra as he slugged from a leather flask on the way to drop you off for pre-school: '*over the lips 'n past the gums...*' It'll burn your throat at first. Your first breath, its air on your tongue, will feel highly flammable and somehow totally devoid of oxygen, so that really this initial instinctual inhalation is only a half-breath taken in through tear-squinted eyes.

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'The only other thing I know about Tommy Provaglio goes something like, in the dark interim near the end there, he started to develop a real insatiable need to whack off in the shit-sprayed johns of roadside fast-food chains. There was maybe something about it for him. I sorta think this habit exposed the insectile brain this dude must've possessed, you know? The guy was a gnat, a fucking mosquito. It was like he saw the bright neon coursing through those golden arches on the far side of the median and the lights convinced him he just absolutely *had* to glaze *that* particular establishment's weak-breathed hand-dryer with a few've his creamy swimmers. Never pausing, never ruminating on the potential legal consequences or blows to personal morale involved with someone walking in mid-crank, this was a man who desperately sought ejaculation and afterwards maybe a McDouble and a large fountain. But anyway, that's how I've always marked Tommy P. down in my mental rolodex—like he's some gnat on a summer night who's got absolutely no control, no choice, and *must* kamikaze directly into the white heat of the blue zapper swaying in the August breeze above the citronella pots on Mrs. Hadley's front porch—even if all it's about for the little guy is just that he'll finally get to feel what it's like to be wholly incinerated in one second. Ole T.P., a junkie to the marrow in his shivering bones. Oxies and a few PBR slammers. A couple percadoodle-dooos with that 16 oz. double-latte on the way to work in the A.M. never hurt nobody, except maybe your own nostrils or the life expectancy of the bathroom's subsequent occupants after that imminent half-hour-long 10:30 handicapped stall blowout. And you could be sure T.'d tie the day off after his shift and cook up a few massive hits before slipping from consciousness on a sweat-stained mattress watching Tucker Carlson's lips smack together through the chipped screen of a fuzzy 13" Mitsubishi perched atop a milk crate at the edge of his bed that went black and white when outbound planes from Newark Airport passed overhead. Tommy told me, or maybe I heard somehow, that his gig was operating a forklift at a medical supply warehouse down in Belmar stacking thousands of pallets of pregnancy tests and latex gloves up to the tin roof of a building in some crabgrass-riddled industrial park three and half a miles inland from the beach—a job I've since realized he must've been doing with his eyelids eclipsing his vision at around 98% and pool of saliva puddling around the gas pedal. And if you might think being an all-day-everyday-all-the-fuckin'-time speed-baller would have delivered more than enough thrill for your average "Tommy Provolone" working-man-type, then think again. The usage of hard drugs became for Tom like a maze he'd

intentionally built up and gotten lost inside of all for the purpose of momentarily removing himself from the world closing in around his mind. He shot up and drooled on the reg just to stave off the ennui and despair leaking steady from the rusty pipes groaning in the warped ceiling browning from a textured white above his frameless twin mattress in the AC-less broom closet he'd sublet from a Filipino dude named Chino who used to sell him brown stringy gasoline-flavored weed on the cheap that looked literally like a cat had coughed it up out of its own ass and who had also up and fled the nation for Brazil last August to pursue his dream career: guiding the psychedelic voyages of white tourists tripping on ayahuasca in the Amazon rainforest—and but so the permanent vacation of this shamanic-dirtbag Chino left his buddy, a certain forklift certified recidivist, with the keys to his closet on the tenth floor of one of those parkway-front brick tenant houses that rise into the grey morning above the crater pocked cement boulevards and gutter-ways of southern-North Jersey, the same deadscape of rain slick streets where Tommy P. found out the hard way that with the right chemicals, every day could be rainbow-sunshine-fairycorn-land. Apartment rises. West Side. Ellis Avenue. 13<sup>th</sup> Street. Brick corroding under ceaseless sheets of black rain. Looming blocks of stone cut from the ashen skyline of Pyongyang and pasted beside a roaring four-lane highway in Jersey. Windows choaked with plywood and mounted air-conditioners. Mausoleums for the modern villein towering above absolutely nothing. As you speed down the parkway especially when the cold wet of mid-March takes hold, these types of buildings'll just start materializing out of the greyness in your north and southbound peripheries, appearing out of the mist like massive neolithic structures, omens from a civilization that's long been left for the birds.'



The summer before State P.D. fished her sister's soggy remnants out from the spiney branches of a conifer half-drowned in the Passaic, April had interned briefly as a paralegal for a local real estate attorney whose offices were perched directly above a Monster Mini-Golf on the second floor of a loaf-shaped commercial building situated at a hair-pin turn off route-46 amidst the cracking asphalt of a lot that held about 300 parking spaces more than it could ever hope to fill. A 12ft inflatable Frankenstein had obscured the building's front entrance\* for the duration of April's legal tenure that summer, twisting in the wake of the autos whipping down 46. The polyvinyl monstrosity held an arrow-headed sign reading "*OH WHAT TERRIBLE FUN!*" as it whipped and keeled beside the road blocking from view to any passing motorist the 948-address sign pasted in bold white above the building's sun-faded wooden outdoor directory board which listed the legal offices of Fitz Mankiewicz Esq. in suite 201. Fitz Mankiewicz Attorney at Law, a squat pallid man with little to no hair and wealth of custom pinstriped suits, as April would later parse through an accumulation of in-office eavesdroppings, was actually an Irish diabetic named

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\*An access point so abrupt and easily overshot that over the years it's gained notoriety among the firm's more senior paralegals for thwarting many a new hire's attempt to gain favor by showing up early on their first day, but who instead find themselves screaming 'fuck' and pounding the wheel of their Prius once they've whizzed past the entrance despite slowing down carefully beforehand in the right lane and keeping their corneas extra peeled for an address by the number 948 lettered on one of the hundred decrepit corporate structures flying through the glare in their passenger window until there it is maybe, a 948 behind the 12ft Frankenstein, and 'fuck' now the entrance is in the rearview and the new hire must in moment of utter horror, like the countless unfortunates who've preceded them at the same underpaid position, discover the absence of a U-Turn down route-46 for at least another 3 miles.

Ryan Fitzgerald who maintained the illusion of Jewish ancestry for the personal comfort of his clients.