

Kill Our Demons

“Is something wrong?”

“What?”

“You seem withdrawn, you've been staring out the window for quite some time, is there something you see?”

“Nothing really, just people. I'm sorry I don't have an answer, I don't know why I'm here.”

“Well, what are you thinking about? Anything you want to talk about? Anything about the people you see?”

“No, not really, just wondering where they're going I guess, sorry I don't really have a lot to say.”

“We're going to be meeting throughout the entire academic year so know that it's okay to not want to talk during your first session David, most people aren't comfortable talking about themselves during their first session. My guess is that they think I'm intimidating.”

“I don't think you're intimidating; this is just kinda surreal ya know, never thought I'd be here.”

“I know, but I want you to know that I'm here for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm here to listen to you.”

“I know. I know you're going to listen to me, you're supposed to Doc. I sit here and talk, you sit there and listen, I get it, it's your job. I'm confused as to how you're actually here for me though, you don't know me.”

“Okay, well then tell me. I want to know. Why do you think you're here?”

“I don't know, I had a breakdown, not doing too great in school, what's the big deal? You're the doctor, don't you already have a file on me? What does that sheet of paper say? I'm sure you know why I'm here.”

“You're right. I do have a file on you. Your advisor and family didn't hold back telling me about you. But I still want to hear your perspective on things. If you don't mind, I'll just read a note I made summarizing everything they said, just to get things rolling here.”

“Go for it.”

“Well to me David, it seems like you internalize a lot of what you think and feel, and you're putting up a facade so that no one hears or sees you for what you are.”

“Really, *that's* what you've come up with, kinda vague isn't it?”

“Well yes, that's just my observation but still, from what's been described to me, and from what I've already gathered it sounds *and* seems like you're in pain and hiding it.”

“What? I've been here for like fifteen minutes; you can't say that after fifteen minutes. You're making me sound like I'm crazy”

“I never said that David, I said it seems like you're in pain. Many people show the same signs, but less actually do something about it. You're forgetting about the file David; I finally have a face behind the name. It's not an uncommon practice for people to bottle up their thoughts and emotions as a defense mechanism. In your case, I think you've been through a lot in your life, good or bad, I'm not sure yet, maybe a great deal of pain and trauma, or at the very least one major significant traumatic event. This potential event or events have subconsciously defined who you are and will define who you become, and without a better understanding of who you are, or what you've been through, you won't make any progress, and I don't want that. I know life isn't easy and seems unfair, I'm here to listen to you, so that you know you're understood,

and talk things out in hopes that you don't choose another, potentially harmful way to come to terms or reality with your pain. Your family, your advisor and I, all of us, we all care about you, we just don't want to see you have another breakdown."

"Okay. Look I'm sorry I don't mean to sound annoying I really don't. It just seems like this is going to be a lot. I'm the first person in my family to do something like this, it's weird."

"I know this is our first session, but I want you to do something for me that I think will really help you open up and understand what you're feeling."

"What is it?"

"Writing in a journal."

"Writing in a journal, are you serious?"

"Yes"

"Writing what?"

"Writing down your thoughts, feelings, what you like, what you don't like, people or experiences that shaped or changed you, made you the person sitting across from me, anything that comes to mind really. I want you to do this so that you always have a medium to express your thoughts with or without me."

"Seems like a cliché, but whatever you say Doc."

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Feelings? What I like? What I don't like? Experiences that shaped me? This is a lot harder than it sounds.

Background?

I'm from Brooklyn. Flatbush, to be more specific, not the gentrified part but it's getting there. I only bring it up because I don't spend as much time there as I should I guess and I wonder what life would be like if I did. It's funny, most people say I don't sound like I'm from there but whatever.

I guess I should talk about my family. My mother always does the best she can for my sisters and I, and that's all you can really ask for in a mother. I don't really see them that much, primarily during the summer because I've been away at school since the seventh grade. Not because we had the money to pay there was financial aid. Now I'm putting myself in debt for college.

I have a father, just wouldn't say he's my "dad", the older I get, the more I realize there's a difference. I don't know why; he's just never been that figure in my life. All he really does is watch TV and sleep, that was all he really did even before he stopped working. When I was younger, I almost converted to Islam to be more like him. I feel dumb looking back on all the times we went and prayed at the mosque together. Those few times together stopped after I questioned the practice of the religion. I didn't understand why men and women didn't pray together. It was a simple misunderstanding that confused me because I went to Christian churches with my mother and sisters and everyone there prayed and worshipped together. Men and women. So, one time on our way home after leaving the mosque I asked him about it, I just wanted an explanation that would fill my curiosity. His explanation was a real head scratcher. His answer to my question was, "Men are always the head and not the tail, men and women

shouldn't hang together when praying, there should be no distraction before Allah." But that confused me even more. How were my mom and sisters distractions?

In fact, it was my mother who made sure we had food to eat, and everything was paid. My oldest sister Thalia to me at least will always be a fucking genius. She aced all her classes and her teachers loved her. She was the first to strive for greatness, asking our mom if she could attend private school. Against my mother's doubts she did, and excelled. Her bravery always stood out to me; she was the first real role model I had. At a young age my second sister Natalia was a gifted artist, and I don't know if I'm in the position to say she was any good, but to me she had the ability to bring things to life from her mind, so she was gifted. One provided, one was smarter, and the last a creative, surely, they're already leaders in their own right. How were they distractions? It just didn't make sense. In my confusion I went to my mom and asked what makes Islam different from Christianity and using the different examples my father gave me and she wasn't impressed. They had words for each other, and it felt like my fault. I didn't mean to start anything. But I was already used to it, and so were my sisters. They fought a lot, religion just became one of those things we didn't really talk about. It was easier that way, I understand that but sometimes I think it affected my views on religion. I believe God is real, I know there's *something* but, just in my own way, I guess.

Anyway, we all live together but he never really did much, still doesn't. It took a while to get rid of the need or desire to connect after I stopped watching sports with the old man, mainly basketball, it was the easiest for me to follow. I remember thinking it would bring us closer together. Never full games, I don't remember, but it'd be just us, together. "Why don't you play basketball, man?" "That's a great way to make money here". The two of us went to the park to play basketball a few times. I was tall and somewhat athletic for my age, so he started filling my head with ambitions whenever we played. "If you're really good you can go to the NBA, make millions" I still think about the excitement on his face whenever he spoke words like those. That dream was quickly deferred after all the times I was criticized and mocked whenever he saw me play against the other boys in the park. After a couple of failed attempts to become a basketball prodigy, all of my other sports ventures were irrelevant. I especially remember being scoffed at when I said I wanted to play lacrosse. "If you play basketball, you can make millions. You won't go anywhere playing that white sport." There's more but I don't really want to write about this anymore. We aren't close, that's all there is to that. It's weird though, the older I get, the more I wonder...

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Feelings?

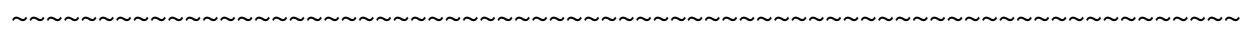
I don't know, I'm not sure what I want to do with my life. I've thought about it a lot and the more I think about it the more I don't know. It became harder after I came to the realization that there's a difference between what you do for a living and what you do with *your* life. I'm in college now, pursuing a communication major, with no real idea about what I want to do after school. I was never one of those kids who gave a straight answer when I was asked "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I never gave a real answer because I don't think I ever really had one. Not because I couldn't think of anything, I could think of a lot of random professions to

say. The problem was and remains that none of them seem to connect to what I really want. Happiness.

For as long as I could remember I just wanted to be happy. There's always a specific memory that comes to mind whenever I think about it. Sometime in the first grade. For a class homework assignment, we were told to write a few sentences about what we wanted to be and why. After a few minutes we were asked to share with the class and when it was my turn, I was nervous because to me it seemed like everyone didn't understand the assignment. Sometimes, it still feels that way. When my turn came, I stood, and the page shook in my hand. Planted feet to the ground, I mustered the strength to say, "I want to be happy". Over time, I've learned that's not the answer people want to hear, almost never. My teacher was nice about it but made sure I had a tangible idea when I got asked again. But something eluded my teacher's perspective that day in class. I can't blame her, there's no way she could've known, the night before that class assignment my thoughts were influenced by the yelling I heard. "It was never supposed to be like this Anthony, WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE HAPPY, If I'd known it'd be like this, I never would've said yes" I couldn't really comprehend my mother's words but understood that happiness is important as you get older. At least it should be. Right?

Anyway, since then I've said anything that seemed logical or doable. A veterinarian, a teacher, I even said I was going to be a fireman one day. I'd just pretend like it was true and maybe it would be, to a certain extent. But that's just it. If I knew I was lying I felt pity for those who believed me. It's the same as saying yes to plans with someone and then making up an excuse and cancelling the day of. I've been thinking a lot about that. Now, I pretty much say "I don't know" or "I'm thinking about it". What's weird and really messing with me is that now, they ask, "What's your major?" and "What are you going to do with that?" Even in the early stages of adult life people are relentless to use it as a crutch in conversation. It's all starting to feel trivial.

Sometimes it feels like it's *happening* too fast. I'm not mad about getting older, it's scary but that's not what has me fazed. We're all meant to die and that's okay, I wish someone, anyone instead of just asking what the fuck I wanted to do or be, just told me why it's important to know what you do or at least have a passion. Because it's scary. When you don't know what you want to do, without realizing it, you *waste* time, and that shit moves fast. Now I'm a junior in college on track to get a random degree in communications, no real work experience, and still no closer to knowing. Before I know it, I'll be bound, confined to a fluorescent prison, forced to hear "gonna need that report by the end of the day" or "gonna need you to work late today". Trying to climb a ladder for more, as my life just goes on. I'm not saying that I don't respect people who choose to live their lives that way, obviously you need to make money. I'm just afraid that I'll never find something to do that I like and can change my family's circumstances. I don't know how I'd ever do that. Probably won't at this rate... What does it even mean to be happy?



Experiences?

Throughout middle school, the second time and high school, I was an average student. I say second middle school because that's when I started going to private school. I repeated the

seventh grade. It was nice to see how excited my mother was for me after I got accepted into such a prestigious school. It meant a lot to her, but I didn't want to go. Looking back at it all, I think it was the best move for me. But I was still scared, and she knew it. Anyone could see that, but no one knew why. I was bullied and jumped pretty bad before I repeated the seventh grade. I had some friends at the time, but they never knew. No one did. I never said anything about it. My mother had no way of knowing but I was scared because I didn't want to be bullied away from home and have no way of escape.

"I know you're scared Davey, but this is a good thing. You're going to get a good education, and that's good."

"Why?"

"Because that means you'll be successful"

She's always believed in me; I don't think it's just because she's my mother. It's her nature, she's a believer. She tries to see the good in everything. After that moment I was ready. Before my mother left, she made sure to tell me some words that I've always tried to live by.

"Treat everyone you meet the same, no matter their background or what they come from, they don't have to know where you come from, just be nice to everyone you meet."

I watched my mother leave and waved her off. It was hard at first, meeting new people and living in a foreign place often, but I would hear those words in my head, and I survived wherever I went. I think that's when I learned how to conceal my thoughts and opinions effectively.

It was easy when there were all sorts of remarkable minds, and awesome degenerates around. Beautiful personalities I took for granted. For every third person that couldn't be replaced, there was always the spoiled spirit I hung around but tried not to emulate. I saw great examples and learned dark secrets. But I was always just there. I've always just been *there*, nothing more, nothing less. The only downside is that I began to see where I differed in comparison to everyone else. I'd like to think if others were in my shoes, they'd do the same. Sure, my skin made me a paradox in those environments, especially when people said I didn't really sound like I was from Flatbush, or when I tried out for the lacrosse teams. I learned another lesson in silence. Money and lack thereof. I realized that there were kids who grew up with multiple houses, while my mom struggled to scrape together the money to rent a car to pick me up from school. It was a hard realization to fathom and still is sometimes.

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"Why do you want me to write everything down? It seems pointless. I already know all this about myself. I don't mean to be annoying, but can you explain it to me?"

"I think you have a tendency to get lost in your thoughts, which is a normal thing to do, everyone has thoughts and has trouble deciding which ones to listen to. In *your* case, I believe if you write your thoughts down just a little bit more you won't be as withdrawn from everything. Maybe even find the reason for your breakdown"

"I guess that makes sense."

"I know this seems unproductive, but I want to help you and I want to put you in a position where you're helping yourself"

"Okay"

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Emotional Detachment, that's what the Doc told me I might have. Sounds weird, like some made-up thing. Doc, she believes this is gonna help, maybe I should do it. I'll give it a shot, it's still weird to me though. Just never really opened up before, I guess. I just don't want to have another breakdown.

Truth be told I've been through some shit, I know, but I'm fine. I'm not "depressed", I just don't care. Even after *that* day. So yeah, maybe I do internalize a lot of things. I like to think if other people were me, they'd do the same. I have demons but doesn't everyone have them too? When you're associated with certain things at a young age the way you view the world, people, and things around you changes. Some people cope in different ways, that's just common knowledge. That's why I don't like the idea of having to meet with a shrink every week. Maybe it's just me but I never thought I'd have to worry about this type of stuff. No one I know ever talks about it. How does anyone know when ever really okay, doesn't asking yourself the question mean you're already compromised...?

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"So, like what, am I some sort of fucking sociopath?"

"What makes you ask that question?"

"I don't know. Being here, all this, the things you tell me about myself. The notes you're making me write. It makes me sound cold and emotionless."

"I don't think you're a sociopath David."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's clear to me that you show signs of social anxiety, signs that could be linked to other disorders, but I don't want to make that connection just yet. From the sessions we've had and the person I've come to know, I think you have the potential to be rather genuine, but for some reason it seems that you've become emotionally detached."

"Genuine. What do you mean by that? Genuinely what?"

"No, genuine. Authentic, original, real. Down to Earth."

"What makes you say that?"

"When we first met you showed we talked and had a discussion about you and why you're here, Before you stared out the window and wondered where everyone else was going, you showed an interest in me and my life, you wanted to know who I was before, asking about my background and education before we got started, then you smiled when I showed my children and you told me they were beautiful, which isn't particularly rare but from what your mother and advisor told me, I gather that you're someone who's easy to talk to but prefers others talking about themselves."

"Even if all that's true, how does that not make me a sociopath or some crazy person? Maybe that was just my way of making sure that you didn't know what I was really like. Maybe I'm just that cunning and manipulative. Maybe at some point I just decided that it was better not to show emotion and just show people what they think they want to see."

"I don't think that's it David."

"Why's that?"

“In my dossier there’s a note from your mother sharing what she thinks about you, and why she believed you needed help. I have no reason to doubt her even if it’s biased because you’re still her son, and a mother like yours tends to know these things.”

“I know this all sounds surreal and feels weird for you David. But it’s okay, we’re going to work through this together. I like to believe that you’re a genuine person because it’s also my general belief that genuine people are sympathetic, understanding and putting people first, and it’s commonly believed they have the potential to be truly happy.”

“That’s bullshit isn’t it?”

“No, hear me out David, I’ve seen broken and damaged people, people that made me question if there was truly any way, I could help them. If you can truly understand your own emotional pain, who’s to say you can’t be the one to find and determine your own happiness?”

“Whatever you say Doc.” It was like she was talking nonsense, but I was still interested.

“Can I see some of the notes you have so far?”

“Sure.”

“This is good David. I like that you noted some of our conversations. It’s almost like you’re writing a story.”

“What? I’m just doing what you said”

“I like how it all flows together, keep it up. Write about yourself, the people you interact with, what you think but don’t say, anything you think is important or worth noting.”

“But I’m *not* a writer, I was just writing down what you told me to write. I don’t know how to write like that.”

“That’s okay David, by the end of our meetings together I want you to understand what brought you here to me. Maybe at some point in life you and through a series of choices you disassociated yourself from your true self and thoughts. It’s critical for you to find and understand that disconnection. The point I’m trying to make is, I want you to become the person you can say is the best version of yourself. The person that, if it were their choice, you wouldn’t even have to meet with me, and no one would even force you to be here if they spoke to you. That’s what I want to be the endgame of our sessions together. So please don’t hold back with your notes, I won’t read them, if you don’t want me to. It’s important for me to understand you and what makes you tick, but it’s necessary that you do too. This is *your* story.”

The dull conversation we had came to a slow halt. Doc spoke a little more, but her words lost their pull. The small arch-shaped windowpane on the far-right wall in her office had a covert and awkward view that overlooked the campus quad, and I couldn’t help but look at everyone walking to their different destinations. The semester wouldn’t start for another couple days. Who were these people? Where were they going?

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Syllabus week was always fun but the easiest way to lose your grip on your academics. Like some test to see who would remember why they attended the University. No matter how hard the professors tried they couldn’t make students attend the first week in early September. With the add or drop deadline in late September, it’s quite obvious why Syllabus week was a known and running joke among American college campuses. Upstate’s reputation for hedonism among its student population preceded itself and garnered the attention of applicants from around the world, then for just one week every year, for fall and the following spring, all hell broke loose.

But before I could think about partying, it was necessary for the financial aid program I was in to meet with my financial advisor. The campus was littered with welcome propaganda and signs. After your first year you almost get annoyed by it because it seems like the school is trying to outdo itself every year. But the scent of new beginnings, new destinies lingered around and retained tempo with my steps all the way to the advisor's office.

"Been a while, Amy" I always liked her. I didn't have the option to choose who my advisor would be and had no qualms with her being the woman for the job, in fact she deserved every award available for the position. You could tell that she loved it by the pictures of students who sat in the same seat I did layered the modern office walls. She had a funny way of making me feel special whenever we met, and I appreciated that.

"I know, how are you doing?"

"I'm alright, started meeting with the Doc a couple days ago, we've had a couple of sessions."

"Good, how are those going?"

"I don't know, we just sit and talk"

"Okay, let me know if there's anything you need."

"Okay" I wouldn't.

"Are you excited with the classes you're taking this semester?" She always spoke with a soothing rhythm.

"Alright I guess, it's still syllabus week so kinda just figuring it out" Something seemed off to her, she always kinda just knew. Maybe because I didn't make eye contact. My dreads usually hid the aversion of my eyes but couldn't hide my disinterest in the conversation.

"Are you going to them?"

"Not really." I could've lied but didn't want to.

"David, I know we're still in the beginning of the semester. But you need to work on your GPA and this program only provides aid to those with GPAs over 2.0, you're very close to losing your financial aid and your ability to stay in this program. I don't want to be the person to tell you this, but David, if you don't take your junior year seriously, especially this semester, you might not be able to graduate. You finished your freshman year with a 3.8, I know something happened last year but, please David. I want you to graduate. Please take this seriously and give it your best." She was strict and comforting with her tone.

"Okay" Curt wasn't my true intention, but it seemed there was no end to the annoyance. Was it that important, was anything? She was right, but I felt like she was nagging me. I knew what I had to do, and I would do it, or at least try.

My pocket buzzed; someone texted me.

"Sorry" I thought I put it on airplane mode. It was rare for me to look at an alert during our sessions. I never wanted to cut our conversations off ever since our first meeting freshman year. I knew she didn't care but I thought it would be rude to her.

"It's okay if you have to take that, we can go over this later" She was understanding but didn't have to be.

"Okay, yeah" She didn't know that I didn't want to talk anymore. I pretended it was serious, stood up with a passion, put my bag over my shoulder and left our meeting in a fake hurry. I said a quick goodbye and let the office door close before I looked down at my phone again.

It was a text from my roommate Michael asking me if I saw the group chat with brothers in the house. I turned off notifications from the fraternity, I never liked texting, especially in those group chats. I was too quick to say no, too quick to notice I stood outside the campus building open to the bright surroundings. The small building was forgettable in comparison to the more nuanced and time-tested buildings that littered the campus. The sun shone on them all, and I squinted scanning each one forcing the readjustment of my eyes to the sunlight. After I stood for a moment looking around, it seemed the only people on campus were the freshmen of all different backgrounds with great and proud smiles, and it made me jealous.

It was weird to think it would be my third year at Upstate University, especially because I lived in an off-campus apartment instead of a dorm. It was the first time I ever really had my own space before. After I went over my schedule and different syllabi for my fall course, I knew it was time to stop when my door opened. It opened to show an innocent face with pure and hopeful intentions covered in short red hair. Somehow Michael knew it was time too.

“What are you doing tonight?” Either way he knew what he was going to say.

“I don’t know” I didn’t care either way.

“Well, that’s a lie, we’re drinking and going to the house” Oddly enough I already knew what Michael was going to say. He loved everything about drinking and anyone who would drink with him. We met sophomore year and had no way of knowing he’d be such an interesting companion. It might not have matched his slightly awkward demeanor or his lanky body, but he could be quite a confident and prideful drinker. That skill and its inflicting humor made him quite popular among the brothers in our house.

“Yeah okay”

“Okay let’s head to the house, I’m pretty sure the party starts at nine, we can go drink and hang with everyone else at the house before it starts, I’m just going to change shirts.” As he with purpose and audacity, he forgot to close the door behind him.

Alone, I had to do something no one ever saw. I poured the water in my plastic bottle out my room window. After there was no drop of hydration, I filled it to the very top with vodka. It was stashed under my bed, a little overflowed and dripped over onto my hand. I might’ve poured a little too much, but it was more than enough for the night. A practice I perfected in the early beginning of my time in school. Drinking alone calmed me. It wasn’t anything serious, just something casual. It was warm and lacked any flavor, the syrupy bitterness made me wince, but I felt ready. I took two more full sips and left my room, stuffing the bottle in my back pants pocket.

“You ready?” Michael never knocked when he opened my door.

“Yeah”

“Okay, let’s go” For him, there was no time to waste.

Our house, the last house on frat row meant we would have to pass the other oddities of the night. Upstate University was widely recognized by the nation for the absurd and uproarious parties that infected the campus. The first night, the beginning syllabus week, didn’t disappoint. In all my three years, it *never* did.

Michael and I walked together. The act of walking those five blocks became mindless as Michael led us in conversation. Excited about the start of the semester, he wanted to share the excitement. I got away with yeahs and other signs of agreement until he asked to hear my thoughts about previous times we partied together. A weird silence grew between us as I struggled to find words. I didn’t want to upset him with signs of indifference for the conversation. What could I

say? What would he want to hear? The awkwardness faded with all the distractions of the night, but I was truly free of guilt when we reached the block our house was on. The vibrations of the different houses combined to create a rumble felt from the bottom of our feet. Michael became obviously more excited about the first sights of bedlam. It was here you saw kids without parental supervision revel in it all and become nonsensical. Legal and illegal groups of drunk youth meandered from house to house. The known truth that girls were invited to all the different fraternities, as boys were denied without guilt meant they outnumbered their desperate counterparts. Some lied in the street, others danced about, and more screamed greetings to people they hadn't seen in a while. We passed the lost on our way to our function.

“Yo what's up *****?” I knew the laugh before I gave it my attention. It was just a nickname and how'd I be known to my peers and brothers. People really liked how long my dreads were and compared me to a famous rapper. I liked the compliment but never understood how they missed the difference. My dreaded hair reached the back of my neck in a ponytail so maybe there was a comparison to be made, but it felt like the art of French braids was lost to many of the people I'd come to know. Michael and I walked up the steps of the house and greeted the brothers. Why would anyone stay outside? Their choice to remain outside would've kept me in the conversation but the alcohol began to take effect. My ears weren't sensitive, but the wood that laid on the porch of the house bounced while the three of us stood in place.

“Nothing much, just moved in, you?” Impatient, Michael walked ahead without me. The door closed slowly behind us but made it clear what was going on inside was supremely more interesting.

“Want a cig?” The brother reached down into his pocket and retrieved a pack of cigarettes. I rarely smoked cigarettes. Nothing against cigarettes, they weren't for me. I, like most of my peers, unintentionally gained an addiction to nicotine through electronic devices. They were much easier to inhale. I didn't mind the smoothness of American Spirits and I definitely didn't mind the complimenting palliative it was to alcohol.

“I don't smoke, Juul is all I need” I agreed with him but that was it. As an awkward silence grew between us, girls approached the porch. The three of us stopped talking and stared as they made their way up the steps. Out of the six girls only one met us with a greeting which we returned. The others either yelled or danced their way inside.

“Look at all these girls tonight,” The brother gawked and held his stare.

“You see Katie's here” The other brother patted him on the shoulder to make sure he was heard.

“Yeah, she's so bad, I would say something, but that was Mark's girl”

“What, they're not together anymore, who cares?” It was weird to me that she still held that title.

“Nah, I would but you just don't do that?”

“Why not?” I was confused as to why I was wrong.

“Man, you don't get with your brother's girl” Both brothers looked at me with condescension. It was an interesting stance to take because we all knew Mark's nature.

“But bro, I would if I had the chance” The brothers laughed, but I thought it was strange. Their conversation began to run in circles and bored me. After the cigarette gave me a new perspective of inebriation and opened the purple house door. Simply grabbing the handle sent fun and inviting chills throughout my body. I wasn't ready but immediately had to readjust my eyes to those first dark steps into the house. Maybe it was the growing buzz I stumbled into the strobing lights and deafening bass of the speakers. With solid footing, my eyes took in the bold and

daring view, and I smiled. After taking another sip from my stashed bottle, I smiled again and felt *something*.

The party scene continued well into the night, as the crowd grew louder and drunker. The same mentality repeated itself seven times and spilled over into the following week. I'd forgotten what Doc and I talked about on Monday, I only remembered drinking in the morning to fight away the headache. Soon, we all had our routines. Go to class, maybe two or three days in the week, Monday through Wednesday then forget everything at night. The night was how we truly found meaning. It was lewd and raunchy, but I must admit, I loved it.

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The brothers of Sigma Delta, all gathered to discuss the plan for the parties that would be hosted at our house that weekend.

"Bro, we need to do some crazy shit this weekend, I heard that Sigma Beta is doing this whole boats and hoes theme. We need to make sure girls come here-" The betas were always seen as our biggest rival for the best house on campus, and that never sat well with Mark, the house president.

"We could do something with the lights-" The interruption was common.

"Shut up with that weak shit" It wasn't a surprising interjection Mark made, but it was interesting that one of us tried to break his train of thought.

He sat in the middle of the main room and made it feel bloated. His frame couldn't be contained by the worn and dirtied leather armchair. It would be hard to find any chair that could, his own shirt stretched to fit his in and spoke to everyone in the main room briefly making eye contact with everyone including me. Large and in charge, the brothers of the house all hung on his every word. He liked it that way. Much like in other large groups of people, I never really talked much but, I was there. Briefly looking around at the diverse groups of boys, I saw the same characters. The same personalities in different forms. Some were short, some were tall, some were quiet, and others were loud.

They saw me but didn't know me. I liked it that way. That's how it's felt since the beginning, I only really joined the house to meet girls. At such a well-known party school, it was rare that undergraduates were unaware of the correlation between Greek Life and fun. Many of the people I associated with freshman year convinced me it was the best way to enjoy your college experience. So, there *I* was.

"We gotta show those betas why we're the best" The statement confused me, but I smiled to show I was in agreement with the hurrah of all the other brothers. Life as a brother in Delta Sigma was simple, always had been. Just smile and laugh whenever it was socially acceptable. Drink, laugh, party, and repeat.

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I thought about skipping out on my session as the new week approached, but something told me not to.

"What do you think about your classes?" Doc's intentions were innocent, but the question annoyed me.

"What do you mean, like do I like them or what?"

“Yes, I want to know what you think about your classes, what you’re learning?”

“Does it matter?”

“To me it does, and it should to you too”

“I don’t know, I don’t think they do Doc”

“Why’s that?”

“It just seems like a scam, doesn’t it? What, we take tests that don’t really mean anything and then we’re done with it, all just to say we did it.” There were two windows in her office, one behind her and the other an arm’s reach away in my right direction. Behind Doc and her sharp bifocal glasses rested a slight reflection of my face.

“I understand what you are saying, but you can never underestimate the doors a good education can open for you.”

The view was shaded and forgotten by the sun but left a transparent silhouette that reenacted my long and shaggy dreadlocks. It failed to add any interpretation for my dark skin, but I didn’t care. I became more concerned with what was happening outside the right window and turned my head to see just that. The leaves on the trees shifted and writhed in rebellion of the branches that held them captive. A mass of people walked about the pathways by the campus quad. I droned out the rest of the conversation and before I realized I was standing outside the Doc’s office. Out of the bag that hung over my shoulder I grabbed the plastic bottle and took a strong sip.

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It was my third class of the day, COM 220, and I only stared at my computer. I suppose it was normal because I wasn’t the only one. They were mostly large lectures filling the impersonal auditoriums scattered in the different buildings around campus. The scores of students who filled the seats weren’t paying attention, some were shopping, others were doing homework, and more were watching videos. There was no difference if I sat in the front or in the back. I wasn’t being taught, in the far back left audience, I was being talked at with PowerPoint slides.

On my screen an application to the Peace Corps held my attention. I always circled the idea of becoming a Peace Corps volunteer around in my head. That day I was leaning towards the former. The happy pictures enticed me, and the volunteers all over the world were smiling, almost right at me. Telling me it was something worth my while. I wanted their joy. I never told anyone about it, out of fear of being dejected and misunderstood, just kept the thought to myself. My own quiet dream. You have the potential to go anywhere in the world and spend two years with people who know nothing about you, you get to know them, then- you go your separate ways. It sounded so simple. Some even spend their lives giving back, and I liked that. Before I knew my class day was over and I listened to music on my phone making my way home peacefully.

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The crowded bar trapped everyone’s heat within its walls in a similar way the house did. But it was a nice change of pace from the overblown house gatherings, it became repetitive after three weeks. Even standing and drinking by the open entrance one could not capture a comfortable climate. No one was having fun, but I drank as I made my way around the scene. A girl started a conversation with me. I didn’t know what she was saying, but it was easy to just nod along.

Soon, she was pulled away by her friends, it was their time to leave. Her body fading out into the distant crowd brought me to a realization, I needed another drink. The bartenders were overworked and definitely understaffed. The thirsty mob surrounding them was almost impossible to penetrate but had a small opening at its far end. I made my way to the gap, but *something* stopped me. My arm was slightly tugged backwards forcing me to regain balance to save whatever remained in my cup. I figured it was a simple case of mistaken identity but when I turned to face confrontation, I laughed it all away. It was only Michael flashing a giddy and childish smile.

“Yo everyone’s going to a party down the block, let’s go” Michael pointed to the group of brothers talking at the exit.

“We need to leave now if you’re trying to go.”

“I’m good, I’m about to get another drink”

“What? WHY? There are gonna be more girls at the party, and it’s gonna be cooler than this shit” I didn’t look at him or care too much for his reasoning. Getting the bartender’s attention was my main focus.

“Nah, I’m good” I wasn’t ready to go outside.

After a few more tugging attempts, I shrugged him off with complete determination for my next drink. So, he left to catch up with the leaving group. Alone standing at the bar weighed by the dizzying heat, I was finally about to get another drink. Struggling in the crowd I stood and chugged the cold yellow drink. With all its sugar and tang, I was unable to forget the weirdness of my situation that night. Why was I alone suffering in the bar's sticky heat when I could get some fresh air outside? The moment I escaped, freeing myself of it all was followed with a sudden return of Michael’s voice in my ears. He was right there was another party to attend.

On the long sidewalk, the elusive crowd of brothers and girls ahead of me were lit by store signs and streetlamps. They weren’t too far gone from the bar’s entrance; I could follow and reach them. So, I did. Hustling with a drunken drive in every step I caught them and was met with loud greetings and continued conversations and laughter. I smiled and laughed along with the drunk ramblings walking a few steps behind everyone. Clueless to where the group was going, I almost asked.

“Where are we goi-”

“YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT I’M CAPABLE OF” The yell startled most of the group, but everyone decided to look around for its origin. It was hard to distinguish but became clear. The lone man on the other sidewalk was belligerent and unnerving to witness. Grabbing his skull, he pulled his mangy hair outward. His beard was shaggy and unkempt, and looked wet in the cover of darkness.

“I swear I’m gonna get YOOUUUU” The girls screamed, but it was clear he wasn’t talking to them. Some seconds after his declaration, the girls laughed loud and in unison. They hurried behind some of the brothers, and the contagion spread through the group. I didn’t follow, my steps slowed to an eventual and complete stop.

“Leave me ALOOONNNEEEEE” It was strange and surreal to listen as the stranger continued. He wasn’t in control. In the vacuum of his mind something had begun its reign and exercised its influence on his actions too.

“I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care” Rolling on the ground, he began to spit after every constant. After about ten seconds he shook and trembled as he sat up under a dim spotlight to cradle himself, only to shake his head and continue spitting after every constant.

In my time spent bearing witness, I fell paces behind the group. As I walked on they were within reach and I could hear them laugh. No one looked back. I continued but looked back in a concentrated motion as my dreads hung before my left eye, noting as he grew smaller in my peripheral vision. Focused on what was behind me I tripped on an uneven brick that pointed upwards in the block. After finding balance I made sure my next steps were firm as I walked on with slurred coordination. But thoughts of that strange man came with every step, I couldn't help it. Who was he? What happened? Why was he acting like that? Maybe he just needed-

Finally, one with the group, everyone still laughing at the man, walked into the modern apartment building as a collective, obnoxiously spilling into the well-lit lobby. I didn't know where we were going, all I knew - there was another party. Someone pushed the button and I stood quiet in thought. I even smiled when my eyes met another but didn't say anything. "That guy was crazy, some safe campus this is huh?" Michael spoke loudly and got what he wanted, more laughter. Pushing the elevator button, a dingy orange light let all know as the elevator was coming down, we were going up. "Yeah" My surroundings didn't matter, but what I saw did. I wondered if the man would be okay, but the lingering question left as the elevator door opened. There was another party to attend.