

Sample Chapters

Euthanize My Love

Two Brothers Quest for the Perfect Girl,
Unending Happiness, and, Of Course, Celebrity

a novel
by
Luke Heyerman

Word Count: 88,000
Luke Heyerman
231 8th Ave.
San Francisco, CA 94118
415.407.9244
luke@lukeheyerman.com
coolhandme@hotmail.com

Chapter One:

A Part of This Nutritious Breakfast

This is my story. And it's my brother's story, too. But not our sisters', though they play a part. Nor mom's or dad's, despite that one afternoon at McDonald's.

#

When my brother was seven and I was fifteen, our mother told us she was taking her boys to lunch, special. Mike, Mom, and Ryland. Wherever Mike wanted us to go, more than anywhere.

Chocolate shake, small fries, a burger. And your father loves you.

Even a child knows that when someone tells you something obvious, you're about to get hit with the surprise. He's not going to be living at our house anymore.

Why?

In a big adult world full of big adult problems all children cling to Why. They string Why's together in an endless line—not out of curiosity, not as a game to annoy grown-ups—because the deep string of Why dives low to the roots of our world. Roots that hold earth in place. Roots that keep hills from sliding. At its very root, Why implies that a thing may be questioned. And a question has an answer. A solution. A solution means fixed. Means repaired. Means maintained. Means same. Means never change.

Why?

Because, Michael.

Why because?

Chapter Two:

Natalie, Destiny

Wednesday. After work and a quick stop for coffee, I drive to the theatre in Santa Monica, yes, to direct Natalie in the play, and no, I can't get out of it—I already spent the theater's money.

Thoughts & Theories:

In retrospect, I'm willing to admit that casting Natalie as the lead in a play...that I wrote...about her...wasn't exactly an air-tight substitute for couples counseling.

But I do have a plan. Of course, I have a plan. Now, I understand that some might say that talking Natalie back into love with me isn't the best way to recover and move on with my life. But I think it is.

And, if I may, the Natalie situation/misunderstanding/breakup is probably the one and only typo in the screenplay of my life, which I've tentatively titled: A Totally Unabridged Understanding of All Things, by Ryland Florida. Florida. If I believed in God, I know that he'd be a sitcom writer kind-of God. "Give us this day, our daily bread...and thank you for naming me after my least favorite state in the union." I mean, It dangles off the map like a limp phallus. It's muggy and so flat that any day now the most minimal of tides will swallow it forever (hopefully). A talent agent at William Morris once asked me how I would describe myself in five words or less? I answered, 'I – don't – know. – Not – Florida.'

Cutting through Brentwood, I drop into Santa Monica, pull into the theatre, and take a deep breath, here goes...

FLASHBACK: SATURDAY

I receive a text: Ryland. Forget Natalie. Come out. Drink till amnesia. Feel better.

It sounds like the cure.

SUNDAY

Through the pain of hangover, I reach for my phone...but yank my hand away just in time. I give it a fierce stare to show it who's boss and then carefully set it on the floor in the far corner of the room.

Sit. Stay.

The phone buzzes. I peek. It's my brother, Mike. He's emailed that it's time to end our recent bouts with depression and get back on track to take over the world. He's right. So I get out of my Hollywood apartment and hit Café 101.

The waitress asks, "What can I get for you?"

"Do you have anything for pain, misery, and rejection?"

"Yes."

"Bring it quickly."

My phone sits on the chair next to me, out in the open. I'm not going to use it. I just don't want it sneaking up on me. The danger that I might call Natalie wags its tongue. The phone almost barks, keys salivating. Anyway, Natalie won't answer—she'll be in bed with him. Which is why I won't call. Which is why I probably will.

The waitress drops a bloody mary before me. And toast. She smiles, but her kindness threatens to undermine my hard-earned self pity. "Anything else I can get for you?" It's her job to be nice to me, but I wonder if she'd have any interest in me under different circumstances, say like, we were at a bar or a club and I'd brushed my teeth or showered?

Thoughts & Theories:

Some people have the skill—I don't have it. I've never and will never meet a girl in a bar or a club. Bars are super crowded and clubs are super noisy. How do you communicate? How do you even signal the other person that you'd like to talk to them or make out with them or whatever?

Now, if I see a cute girl at a stoplight, I'm likely to jump out of my car, knock on her passenger-side window and ask her out on a coffee date—which I've done. I'm so old fashioned. Maybe if I had my brother's traffic-stopping good looks, I could meet a girls in the usual places. I mean, I'm not ugly, I've been told that I'm cute, though personally, I don't care where I fit on anyone's beauty scale. But why not handsome?

Definition:

Handsome: adj. 1) Great-looking. 2) A nice thing to say to an ugly guy who happened to dress well on that one occasion.

Okay, fine, I'll accept cute. But I was cute when I was eight, and even then I sensed the term implied not a viable sexual human being. I ask the waitress, "How would you describe yourself in five words or less?"

She cocks her head in thought, says, "Impossible. In. So. Few. Words." She beams proudly. "And you?"

My temples throb. "It's not nice to be smarter than your customers this early in the morning."

"It's noon."

"You're still doing it." I drain the bloody as my friend Devon from San Francisco calls. Dropping an appropriate amount of cash at the register, I head out and take the call on my way up the sidewalk.

Devon says, "You called her, didn't you?"

“No.”

“Bullshit.” In the background, I hear him saying goodbye to someone. I’m fairly certain I hear two girls’ voices.

I ask, “Did you bring two girls home last night?”

“No.”

“I just heard you talking to them.”

“Okay, yes. But I only brought one home. Then she called her friend.”

“Never mind, this isn’t what I need to hear.”

“Actually, you do. When the friend came over and we started messing around, the girl I brought home ended up getting jealous. There was crying. Crying. I had to make smoothies and sit up with them all night watching reality on MTV. Women are nuts. You’re better off now that you have one less of their kind in your life. See. I just healed you. You’re fixed. Done. Better.”

“Yep.”

“Why don’t you take work off and come up to San Francisco. We’ll head up to Tahoe.”

“Can’t. I have rehearsal this week.”

“Rehearsal!” He’s laughing. “You have rehearsal with Natalie, that’s what you’ve got.”

“So?”

“So don’t go to rehearsal, you dumb ass.”

“Getting drunk and watching you hook up with girls isn’t going to get me over it.”

Devon says, “I’m not trying to get you over anything, I’m keeping you away from Natalie.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“No. You’ll do something stupid.”

“I’m not going to do anything stupid.” Devon starts laughing, then tries to say something, but can’t because he starts laughing again. “Are you done?”

“Don’t call her.”

“I know.”

MOMENTS LATER

I call her.

Instead of me giving you all the details of the phone call, just imagine...a conductor at Carnegie hall directing a symphony. Sweet, melodic, seductive. Then, with a flinch, the horns startle you with echoes of a hunt or a battle. Next, the great conductor slumps...and the strings, ohhhhh the weeping strings. And the oboe...a single, quivering note of sadness, beauty. A sound so beautiful you regret even coming to the symphony to hear it, regret you ever heard of a symphony, regret you knew music existed at all, if only you could have been spared the knowledge of that glorious sound...that you’ll never hear again, but have only yourself to blame. And last, the conductor leads you on a deceptive build to the finish. Ascending to the climax, the conductor halts... denying you the harmony of closure...ending, instead, with a last off-key chord, a cruel pin prick.

I was that conductor. I take a bow. The applause. Victory feels so so good.

MONDAY

A middle school in The Valley needs a teacher for the day. I take the call. This particular middle school can be particularly dangerous. So when the noon bell rings, I sneak down the hall, taking a more secluded path to the lunch room.

But sure enough, a high thin voice freezes me in my tracks. “Mr. Florida?” Oh no.

The cry goes up. “Mr. Florida’s here!”

Hormones are horsepower, and preteen girls are drag-car fast. My fate flashes before my eyes like a scene out of Day of The Locusts. I run for it. Sprinting. Dodging. Using the picnic tables to my advantage. A sixth-grade boy becomes collateral damage, and I apologize as I knock him over. Still, they’re gaining on me.

At last, I see it. Sanctuary—the teachers’ lounge. I kick it into high gear and duck inside just as a hailstorm of eleven and twelve year-old girls thud against the door behind me. You think I’m exaggerating? No. Crumpled in a heap, just outside, is a throng of girls with freshly bruised elbows and extremely flushed complexions.

The door opens, and a wiry, balding gentleman steps carefully over the pile of bodies. “Your entourage?” asks sixth-grade math teacher Mr. Dirk. “It’s Mr. Dirk,” he says, reminding me. I nod. “You remember my class?” I nod. “Well, um, can you cover for me this week?” Dirk always leaves complicated lesson plans and his kids are unruly. I stall as though I’m trying to recall whether I have conflicting obligations. He tries to entice. “It shouldn’t be too much work for you. No extensive lesson plan.” I’m still pretending to think, hoping he’ll sweeten the deal. “Two periods are taking a test.” I nod pensively. “So I guess the others can just watch a movie.”

“I’d love to.”

Joining the cafeteria line, the knot that Natalie has tied in my stomach isn’t leaving much room for food, but maybe I can stomach a bowl of soup. The lady asks, “Small or large?” I go for small. I’m about to change my mind, when I see the cup she grabs is actually a pretty good size. Extra soup! Who could ask for more?

I pay. I sit. I take a cracker and...duped. The big cup is only filled part way.

Depression. As I contemplate the moral significance of the lesson and how it will figure into my philosophical welfare, I suddenly feel bad about that phone call to Natalie.

ONE HOUR AGO

I hit the Coffee Bean near Laurel Canyon for some caffeinated courage before my pending interaction with Natalie. “I’ll take a dark blend, no cream, no sugar, black—‘Like my men’.” Obviously the barista hasn’t seen Airplane for the thirty-seventh time. Or I’m hitting on him. This block of West Hollywood stays fairly straight, but a few streets toward the ocean and everything gets real neon.

The barista says, “Coffee, you got it.”

I say, “Wait, let’s change things, what’s different?”

Barista suggests, “Winter Dream Tea.”

“Is it good?”

“Uh...Yes.”

“I do not chai.”

“No chai in it.”

“Perfect. One of those.”

Barista says, handing it over, “Winter Dreamy...like your men?”

“I was joking. I’m not gay.”

“I am.”

“Oh?”

And so I quickly slip out onto the coffee shop veranda where pretty girls always linger. For what we endure living in L.A., we deserve the sunshine and fake-blond hair, the surgically-altered Pamela Anderson breasts and the super-slims with the skin-tight tops. I prefer this

second choice, not because I want children to grow up anorexic, but I think girls who go to the trouble to purchase huge boobs might be a little bit trappy while the tiny-breasteders invoke the hope of a lingering innocence.

I look for a seat among the crowd of well-clothed insecurities for the exact right girl to sit near while I further hone my plan for getting Natalie back. I appear in no hurry—just a nonchalant guy who doesn't care where he sits. I spot the one.

She's cute. No, sublime.

I choose a position—where I may casually look up and have it be an accident, look away easily, flash a smile, or engage in one of those mind-reading, love-at-first-sight kind of stares. With some girls you can just tell, you know. Sometimes she's just your type. It's chemical. Like this girl. Only, she never looks up.

BACK TO: NOW

I remind myself, be calm, stick to the plan. Exhaling a calming breath, I enter through the backstage door and... there she is.

Natalie.

Her hair is the kind of blond that gathers all the light from around the room and shines it right at you, stunning you. The statuesque angles of her face, are pure chiseled beauty. But don't let her delicate frame and pale skin mislead you—she's a bolt of energy, a coiled spring.

My plan begins with saying, "Hi." Her plan begins with slapping me really hard in the mouth. Fuck. I knew my plan was shit.

Natalie next holds out the copy of Tolkien's The Two Towers that I loaned her back when we were perfect together. Shaking with anger, she tries to tear the pages from its spine. Which is harder to do than you might think. She gives up and chucks it at my head. As the book

sails toward my face, my first thought is of the phone call that I've been feeling bad about.

FLASHBACK: THE PHONE CALL

I say, "Natalie, listen, I respect your needs. You've got your problems and I forgive you for being all screwed up."

She says, "I know I made bad choices. I wish things didn't happen the way they did."

Is it just me, I wonder, or is she accepting blame a little too readily? Maybe it's some kind of female trickery to keep me from resenting her. Or maybe she really is over me and is trying to be mature. Whatever. Then she says this thing. "If it's any consolation, I'm not in a relationship with him." Well, what does that mean?

So I ask, "But are you sleeping together?" Silence. (Never ask that question)

So it comes to the part I'm feel bad about. She suggests I go visit Devon in San Francisco. They got along that time we all went to Tahoe. "Devon would be good for you right now," she says. The opportunity is ripe.

I tell her that in Tahoe Devon lost all respect for her—that he felt she was coming on to him. I tell her, "Evan says you would have ____ him."

"What?! I wasn't coming on to him. I was talking to Devon about you, about what I was feeling about you!"

I tell her it's Devon's opinion, not mine, that I defended her, so don't be mad at me.

"That jerk! That ass—" Then her tone changes. "We're not alone anymore," she whispers, and I can hear him, the guy she cheated on me with, the guy she left me for, clomping across her wood floor. But she can't let go of it. "That really hurts my feelings," she says.

"Yeah," I say.

Still whispering, "But, I'm just...I'm so...whatever...just..."

End call.

Victory.

BACK TO: THE THEATRE AND THAT BOOK

Tolkien isn't exactly light on words. Those pages are dense. I turn to protect my face as the corner of the book's spine hits me dead center on the ear.

Reaching for the prop table, Natalie grabs a carton of orange juice—the brand reads Florida's Finest. The irony isn't lost on me.

FLASHBACK: NATLIE AND I IN BED

As we near the climactic throes of bed-wrestling, Natalie's favorite joke is to do that sexy bite of her lip and say, "You know what the best thing is to come out of Florida..." Or in the a.m.: "Wake up Florida, let's make some fresh squeezed..." (kind of gross, right?) Personally, as penis references go, I prefer the semi-flaccid Southeastern state over the image of a round peelable fruit.

BACK TO: THAT CARTON OF ORANGE JUICE

As the carton ricochets off my head, Natalie says, "I am not a dog whore!"

It's true. I may convince myself that I'm not screaming mad that Natalie went out and made orange juice with him behind my back. But I did, in an email, describe her as a prostitute for dogs. In my defense, I say, "I can't believe you tried to rip my book."

"I read your email."

Why does Natalie know my email password? I gave it to her as a gesture of good faith. Why did I forget to change my password? It's because I'm stupid.

Idea for a Drinking Game:

If you want, every time I do something stupid, take a drink. I'm positive you'll pass out in chapter five.

Natalie, "I didn't cheat on you."

"You did."

"Did not."

"You did."

"What makes you think I cheated on you?"

"You told me."

"I never said I cheated on you."

"We're all carved ponies on your little merry-go-round. You ride a new one up when the other's down." She slaps me in the mouth again. Real hard. After the sting starts to ebb, I turn to the horrified actors and stage manager. "And scene," I say, managing a half-smile. But they still look horrified. I look back to Natalie as the theatre door slams shut behind her. I say to everyone, "I guess we'll rehearse the scenes without Natalie, today."

The stage manager says, "There aren't any."

Michael

When I was nine and Michael was one, I wasn't sure how things would work out.

My sisters, like any sisters, wanted to ruin the boy—turn him into a dress-up doll or keep him leashed like a helpless puppy.

When Michael was three, he had fourteen-inch legs and had but one function—he loved to run. He'd run as fast as he could for about thirty feet and then fall onto his face. Eventually, he piled pillows approximately thirty-two feet from where he started.

Thoughts & Theories:

If you enjoyed flame but consistently burned your fingers lighting matches, would you invent thimbles...or would you stop playing with matches?

Chapter Three:

My Stupid Penis, My Brother's Clever Heart

Thoughts & Theories:

It's called a relation—SHIP because it's like a vessel, movement is implied. It sails into a breathtaking sunset. Or dashes on the rocky shore.

Sexually, Natalie drug me to new ground. Dirty stories, little outfits, the occasional appliance. But if you're going to have good sex with a girl, do everything possible, everything you ever dreamed of. Leave no undiscovered land for the next Magellan to come along and poke his flag into.

I begin compiling a list of our sexual adventures. If the list is complete and I can imagine nothing to add, I might be able to get back to three meals a day.

#

Natalie sends me a text: I'm sorry we hurt u

#

Brandishing a room key Natalie once stole from the Beverly Hills Hotel, I sneak into the restricted pool area, pretend to be a rich person, and soak up the Sun beside the glistening water in the company of the most sparkling people around.

Thoughts & Theories:

Five words or less. I – am – a – movie – star. But like, in a black and white film—one with Cary Grant and Grace Kelly, or Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal. I'm not gay, but I actually like Fred Astaire and even Audrey Hepburn, just not that god-awful movie, Breakfast at Tiffany's.

The shadow of a poolside waiter surprises me. He asks, "Would you like something?"

Sitting up probably a little too fast, “What? Room four sixty-five!”

“Okay, sir. But would you like a drink?”

“Uh, yes. But...not charged to my room.”

“Yes, sir.”

Thoughts & Theories:

Ordering drinks, I veer toward the western genre—Scotch rocks, bourbon up, anything to sound like I just crossed eighty miles of hard country and killed a man.

“Whiskey.”

“Yes sir.” But something in his tone suggests I’ve made the wrong choice.

“Gin?”

“In this heat, maybe you maybe like something cool?”

“Martini.”

He shudders.

“Do you always question drink choices?”

“I wasn’t questioning. How would you like your martini?”

“Like John Wayne.” Noting his expression, I clarify. “Straight and strong.”

“Have you ever had a mojito, sir?”

“Okay fine.” He nods in congratulations and heads to the bar. But a mojito just doesn’t feel right. “And two shots of Patron,” I call after him. “No chaser.”

Alright, it’s not solely the sex with Natalie that was good. There’s something else. Before Natalie...I struggled occasionally. You know. What I mean is, with girls before Natalie it was sometimes, for some reason, difficult to...perform. With consistency.

Yes, it bothered me. A lot. So I went down to that Boston place, what’s it called? Anyway. I went in there and I said, “So, something’s wrong with it.” Actually, it wasn’t that

easy. The clinic is on a busy street, so...I had to sneak in through a 99¢ store, get a donut at the bakery nearby, and then fake like I was getting a paper in order to duck into the building without anyone, you know, spotting me. Inside the lobby, there was a couple. A couple!

Thoughts & Theories:

Why on Earth! Why would you want your girlfriend or wife or whatever to come along with you? Leave the man some dignity, woman! No wonder the guy's impotent. (never say that word, even in your head)

Pulling my hood lower, I then stepped to the window and thank Christ they let me right in.

The doctor, I guess he's a doctor, said, "Well, let's take a look." Pause. A look?

"Can't you just," I started to say, but he put on a glove, ordered me to "drop em", and grabbed it. It was awkward.

All I could think was...Thank God I'm impotent.

After that exam, the next involved some kind of electrode test, and then he said, "Mr. Florida, there's absolutely not a thing wrong with you...or your thing. It's all in your head."

Great news, I thought. "Bad news. In your head is the worst thing you can have," he informed me. Two options: Viagra. Or a serum you inject (with a needle) into your flaccid penis (approximately right around the panhandle). I asked which was better. "Viagra is basically junk and doesn't work very well," he said. I took the Viagra.

I used it to kick start the sexual part of whatever relationship I was in, and it worked. With the next girl, they were out of Viagra, but I was really anxious about our first "encounter". So I took the needle thing. Half hour before sex, I drew the serum into the syringe—and then I had to inject. That's all I had to do, was inject. That's all it was. Easy. That's all I had to do. Just inject. It was the longest three minute conversation anyone in the world ever had with the bathroom mirror. Ever.

I know it's a funny story, but my point is...with Natalie, I didn't need it. In fact, I think

she cured me forever. Since the first time I pulled her hips near mine, my southern Keys stood like Maine pointing at Quebec. So what I'm saying is, there's that.

#

Thoughts & Theories:

Not only did my brother get movie-star looks, he has, I'm tempted to say, a smarter way with women.

When Mike—a soft-spoken punk rocker with a poetic disposition (self-described)—catches a girl's interest, his M.O. is to get drunk and stumble home with her on the icy Colorado sidewalks of UC Boulder. Invariably, he slips and tackles her to the ground where they huddle in bruised laughter and make out. He then applies various closing-the-deal tactics.

For example: Amanda—to impress her, Mike unveiled his bookshelf.

Book Shelf Contents (partial list)

(titles arranged to portray a boy light/shadowed, hopeful/grim, complex)

The Sun Also Rises—Men Without Women

Love Medicine—Heart Of Darkness

Bless Me Ultima—The Origin Of Satan

The Tao Of Pooh—The Grapes Of Wrath

Love Is A Special Way Of Feeling—Dee Snider's Teenage Survival Guide: How to Be A

Legend In Your Own Lunchtime (Dog eared at chapters: "What's Going On Down There?" and "Sex Is A Four Letter Word")

One Hundred Years of Solitude—We Rock, So You Don't Have To

Yes, Amanda was impressed, and yes, she also thought his vinyl collection and antique record player made him sophisticated, and, yes, she wouldn't mind sleeping with him. At which point, Mike began to undress his singles collection, one record at a time, flinging the disks to disrupt her approach. One record stuck in that crack between the ceiling and the wall. Another winged her in the shoulder. She laughed—perhaps the record game was how someone like Mike expressed emotion. It wasn't. It was an unconscious survival impulse. But Amanda fell in love

with him anyway, though this would be only the first of his many veiled rejections.

Also: Erica Baby Doll—Mike decided to be in love with her, but then came to realize that she was and that he couldn't stand to hear her speak. He tossed her aside. But then he forgot she was annoying and hurled himself upon the anvil of jealous longing. On campus, when he saw her, he went limp as a string-toy when its button has been depressed, then collapsed and lay there on the sidewalk as she continued past. Subtle, unforgettable, the kind of charm that would keep her coming back.

Finally: Valetta—of all the girls in Mike's life, Valetta is the most notable. I know because he confessed to me, "She has a quality." In other words, Mike fell in love. Which happens often. Shortly thereafter, he gave her a good reason to break up. To his surprise, she actually did. At a party, when he saw her kissing another boy, Mike expressed his emotions the way someone like Mike does. He got drunk, insulted people's hair, and got shoved down a flight of twenty stairs. Which also happens often.

Currently, Mike is in London for a semester. Sean, Valetta's new boyfriend, and the boy she was kissing at the previously mentioned party, is also in London. Quite coincidentally, Mike and Sean became roommates. And friends. Isn't fate funny? They decided not to tell Valetta.

Meanwhile, they've learned five things about living overseas:

1. Never pick a fight with a gang of cab drivers even if one of them does run over someone you know.
2. Never leave the country without refried beans.
3. If you drunkenly take home a girl, and she starts calling you five times a day, follows you around, and scares the living ____ out of you... encourage one of your drunken Australian flat-mates to take her to bed...so that she will start calling him five times a day...in which case, you're absolved.
4. There is no God.
5. Ice is a contemporary, capitalist invention.

The black eye Mike received from the cab drivers is almost healed when Valetta comes

to visit Sean. As the door to their flat opens, she finds Mike standing before her and convulses involuntarily, causing her oversized Gucci sunglasses to leap from her face to the floor.

Thoughts & Theories:

Sometimes the word, “Hunh”, is the only right response. As when you run out of fuel halfway across Nevada, at night. “Hunh.” As when you were thirteen and you thought the bathroom door was locked, but suddenly your mom walked in. “Hunh.” As when, at a party, you hurry that last shake, zip up, and suddenly realize there’s something left, and it’s quite significant.

“Hunh.” Valetta stares at the two of them together, Sean and Mike. “I must have been something terrible in my past life. Like nerve gas.” She regards her broken glasses with deep sorrow.

Mike says, “There’s no Sun in London anyway.”

#

On the floor of his London flat, Mike wakes to a hangover and a pain below his sternum. It’s Valetta’s fault.

“Val,” Mike sputters. But the revelers are still drunk and blind from whatever the hell they did last night. He calls out again, “Val, why did you kill me and pull my still beating heart from my chest?”

Australian flat-mate on far side of the room, “Shut the fuck up, it’s early.”

Mike says, “Sean, ask her why she did that.”

Sean says, “Valetta, tell Mike why you did that. And then tell him to shut up, it’s early.”

Mike shouts, “It’s eleven!”

Sean positions a pillow over his eyes. “Liar, how would you know eleven, you’ve never seen eleven.”

It's a valid point. "Verily so," Mike agrees. He shouts, "Val!"

Finally, Valetta responds, "Screw you, Mike. You were hanging out with two other girls while we were dating."

"So?" counters Mike.

"And one was my roommate. And you lied about it."

Mike hangs his head. "Verily so."

#

Thoughts & Theories:

Pool.

Sex with Natalie in a pool. Near a pool. In any body of water. The ocean. A hot tub. So simple...and yet pool is not on my list.

The bell rings, and I collect math tests for Mr. Dirk. Today, I'm going to skip the teacher's lunchroom. I don't feel social. Or hungry. This is all my fault. Why? Because I'm stupid. Back when Natalie's mortgage was getting to her and she considered letting him, an actor from her class and a friend of mine, rent her second room, I thought—Hey, he needs a place. Besides, he's harmless. That's why.

But why him? He's not better looking. I don't mean to be shallow or critical or cruel, and I know I said I don't care about the beauty thing, but my kryptonite-proof ego has become a light bulb with a rattley twang—that volume button on the universal remote, the Rubik's cube that you completed and set out on your dresser, but really you couldn't manage it, so you took off all the stickers and replaced them to make a finished cube just so people would think you were a genius. Maybe you didn't do that. Maybe you never had to circle your wagons in defense of the doubts that your mind planted out there in the darkness. Maybe you solved the damn

cube. I'm happy for you. But today, I care!

I tell Mr. Dirk's middle-schoolers, "OK, guys, make sure your names are on the test. Go to lunch. Get out." But a handful of girls linger behind. "Vamoose," I say.

They're not budging. "We're eating in here with you, Mr. Florida."

"Well, go get your food and bring it back, then."

"No way, Mr. Florida. You'll close the door and lock us out." Which is true. Sigh.

Because it won't do to sit in a room with preteen girls with the door closed, I prop the door wide and make them all sit at the very back. For several hundred or more girls, I am the guy, the one, forever tattooed on their sexual psyche. Diaries—Today Mr. Florida put a smiley face on my science quiz. Reunions—Remember Florida? Bored with their husband—"Did you just call me, Mr. Florida?" Dare I say, in the midst of that first sexual exploit when they're compelled to shut their eyes and cling to a familiar image—they will think of Florida. I don't have a problem with it. It's the closest I'll come to James Dean.

"Mr. Florida?"

"Yeah."

"How old are you?" They have no concept of age. I'm either their brother or their father.

"Old." A moment of quiet.

"Mr. Florida?"

"Mm hm?"

"Do you have a girlfriend—"

"Nope."

"Mr. Florida?" Oh. My. God.

"What is it?"

“Would you ever make out with an eighth grader?” I need a new job.

Not to mention that pretty-much broke is no way to meet my life’s perfect costar. Nor is it going to help me invent any kind of style. Fashion sense, hair style, a swagger in my walk, an expensive car (currently I drive a very nice hand-me-down from my mother), great sunglasses, the right shoes...none of these do I have.

I always fashioned myself as someone above style. The same reason I refuse to wear cologne. I am above cologne. I smell better than cologne. Well, yeah, that’s fine and all. A little hygiene and stay consistent with your deodorant—you can pass. But something happens to people when they start to get old.

More cells are expiring than are being generated. Even when you were a kid, parts of you were dying. But the ratio was in your favor. You had ten brand new genetic Lego’s for every chewed-up one. So you were always tight, clean, and fresh. When old hits, all those popping new skin cells and sparkling fresh sweat glands are replaced with a new pungency. Like layers of loam. Think of beautiful fall leaves after they’ve had time to compress and really take the weather. In under a year I’ll be thirty. So I’ve got, what, one year—two years tops, before I’m over the hill and I’m undesirable.

I’m holding out on the cologne, but my style problem is really starting to reek.

#

Mike meets an exotic girl with an English accent at a pub. Turns out she’s from Ethiopia.

Mike, “Really, are you hungry?”

CUT TO: PHONE CALL

Me, “Nice move.”

Mike, “Jesus, Ryland, did I actually say that to her?”

“How did she react?”

“She didn’t really hear, I don’t think.”

BACK TO: THE BAR

Ethiopian Girl, “Hungry? No, not really, my friends and I ate earlier.”

Mike, “Oh. Loud in here, huh?”

Ethiopian Girl, “Sure, I’ll get out of here. Where should we go?”

PHONE CALL

“Ryland. She’s so exotic. Oh my God. I’ve always wanted someone exotic.”

“Sure, of course. So...this Sean, your roommate, is dating Valetta, who’s visiting you in London?”

“Ethiopian’s have smooth skin.”

“Naturally. So, the Valetta you used to date? The Valetta you never got over?”

“I like her accent. She’s from Ethiopia, but she sounds like a Redcoat?”

“Yeah but...Is she real skinny or what?”

“Uh, yeah, but not like malnourished or anything.”

“Hunh.”

“Yeah, I was surprised, too.”

#

“Hi,” I say cautiously.

The rest of the theatre crew walks past, ignoring us, or at least pretending to ignore us.

Natalie responds, “Hi.”

Rehearsal lasts a few hours. At the end she walks over. Calmly, this time. Doesn’t grab

anything to throw at my head.

She says, “I’m sorry I read your email. Actually, I’ve been doing it all along. I read the things you were saying about me the whole time we were together.”

I say, “I’m sorry about some of the things you might have read. I was venting. Only, my brother was in Colorado and in London and Devon lives in San Francisco. I vent online.”

Natalie, “I know, but it hurt.”

I say, “I really don’t think you are awful or a dog whore.”

She nods, “I know you don’t.”

Definition:

White lie: n. a diplomatic truth

Michael

Determined to lure baby Michael away from our sisters' claw-like grip, I needed a strategy. But my sister Brie was ever vigilant, and her energy tireless. However, I was the more clever.

CUT TO: THE STRATEGY IN ACTION

Brie plays with Michael as Ryland drifts within eyesight of the toddler, near enough to make Brie's hair bristle—Quietly, Ryland sits and reads—Their mother coo coos from the kitchen—Other sister, Kirsten, joins in the play but is allowed only a subordinate role—Michael notices the one person in the room not paying attention to him—Curious, he crawls toward Ryland—Brie snarls, but Ryland feigns only a mild interest in the toddler—

(If Brie had sensed that I endeavored to take him from her, she would have used her influence to turn him against me. And she'd have won.)

The Mother, seeing her youngest take interest in his older brother, shouts encouragement, "Ryland, look at Michael."—So Ryland looks down at the drooling boy—Their eyes make contact, and the hook is set—But like a master fisherman, Ryland waits—

The Mother calls out, "That's your big brother, Michael. Your buddy. Can you say buddy?"—Brie ingests a scream like swallowing steak knives.—In a furry misdirected at the mother, Brie springs, "Mom, I was showing Michael something!"—Ryland maintains eye contact.—Brie snags Michael up and races away with him...like a fish running with a lure.

By the time Michael was four, he was mine.

Chapter Four:

E.T. and Vodka Tonic

There's this friend of Mike's named Alex. You don't need to know much about him, except that he believes his crowning achievement to be the patenting of a thing called "The Spit Move", wherein he spots a girl impossibly out of his league, sits beside her, gives her an earnest look, and then spits a large ball of saliva directly onto his own shoulder. It's an excellent icebreaker.

But Alex's true asset, is that he does not fear his own mortality—does not fathom an irreversible decision or a life unfulfilled. I had what he has. I was Superman. In Superman II, Clark Kent trades immortality for the love of a woman, and, in the very next scene, he sees his own blood and realizes, "Oh shit!" Well I'm not ready either. And I want my red cape back

#

Mike calls. He's silent.

I ask, "How was the date with the Ethiopian girl?"

"I can't believe it."

"That good?"

"I can't believe myself."

"What?"

Mike, "It's going real well. I wore my new punk-rock belt, everything. We see a movie, and afterwards I was getting the sense she was going to come home with me if I wanted."

"Yeah?"

"But then at the end of the date, she said I seemed a little distracted. She said she thought I had seemed bored all night. And then I said, 'Yeah, maybe so, I guess I kind of was at times.'"

He's quiet for several seconds. "Can you believe what an idiot? I was BORED. At times!! An exotic Ethiopian girl, Ryland! Why?! Tell me, why did I do that?"

"Because...she was boring?"

He's quiet for several seconds. "Oh."

Definition:

Crush: n. 1. Infatuation. 2. Destroy, deform. 3. Implies pain, hurt. Hence the word—crush.

#

My friend Martin and his wife, Jenny, have me over for dinner. They go all out.

Cabernet. Candles. While Jenny is in the kitchen putting on the final touches, Martin sits with me on the couch. "OK," he says, "I'm giving you seven minutes to whine and bitch and cry on my shoulder about Natalie, then you're done."

So I mutter, "Oh, I'm doing alright, keeping busy, just, you know, moving beyond it."

Martin, "How's the rest of life?"

Shit. Crap. "You know, putting it all together. Making changes."

Martin, "Oh, so you might be almost back to a normal person again."

On the verge of medication. "Yeah." Martin goes into the kitchen to help Jenny, and I'm left on the couch wondering how I can possibly express everything in under seven minutes.

At dinner, Martin and I do a good job of having a conversation about nothing at all. Then Jenny ruins it. "So what exactly happened with you and Natalie?" I bring her up to date.

Martin says, "Jesus, Ryland."

"Martin, be understanding," she jumps to my defense.

"Well, he's just close to sounding like a girl."

“Martin! He’s just more sensitive than you.”

FLASHBACK:

I’m eight again, at my uncle’s wedding, where I finally get up the courage to dance with the girl in the purple dress. Maybe it’s gonna happen—my first kiss. Romantic setting, I’m looking sharp. And that woman...leans over and says, ‘Ohhh, aren’t you little kids so cute?’ And I was ruined.

BACK TO: JENNY & MARTIN

“Jenny, if you plan on setting me up with anyone, I hope you will find other words. For a single, almost-thirty year-old, sensitive is death.”

“You’re already thirty, darling.”

“What?”

“Your birthday was last month.”

“Which one?”

“Your thirtieth.”

“Jesus.” I reach for the wine.

Jenny says, “Seriously, are you ready? Because I’ve got plenty of girls in mind. Give me your perfect match. Five words or less.” It’s a hard question—‘perfect’ is a relative term. Does she mean: quick to bed and no risk of emotional attachment, perfect? The semi-casual perfect rebound? Or, like, I’ll just go get a ring right now, perfect?

I ask, “Which kind of perfect?”

She says, “Like, not a stripper.”

I say, “Then I guess she’d be...Little Mermaid...meets Aeon Flux...at Harvard. Is that too many words?”

“I can’t help you.”

Definition:

Perfect Girl n. 1. A female in her late twenties. Young enough to tolerate a cute but struggling boy/man. Old enough to be beyond the, well, the early twenties.

The standard cut-off for a guy my age is twenty-six. A sweeping generalization, but there is real value in this rule. Twenty-five and under, you are an E.T. (not an Extra Terrestrial, though a case could be made).

Definition:

E.T. n. 1. A person in their early twenties. 2. Someone not eligible to meet parents or family members. 3. Bubble gum. Five-day rentals. Snow tires.

Our fascination with E.T.’s is not unlike our fascination with outer space. We see it. We know what it’s made of. What the heck, send out a probe, see if we stumble upon the meaning of our existence. But take these girls seriously at your own peril. They are guided by emotions, which are entirely fickle. Plus, as they are still under the impression they will live forever—which means their definition of commitment is a little flighty.

In two nights, I am going to go out with an E.T., a twenty-five year old I met in my favorite coffee shop last night. We’ll see what she thinks of my age cut-off theory. Worst case, she’ll want to prove me wrong. In bed, hopefully.

#

I hate mentioning that I spend so much time in coffee houses. I only recently became a regular, because I needed to get the ____ out of my room. I avoid cappuccino, abstain from Starbucks, and never wear black.

Thoughts & Theories:

There's a stigma about people in L.A. wearing black. However, I don't think it's necessarily in order to appear deep or brooding. For one, black does a decent job with ugly and fat and goes with everything. So it's economical. Also, if you take a moment, you might notice that a lot of people around here are actually in mourning. Of their dreams, their car, their apartment...my own situation not excluded.

I also try not to wear ties. Agents wear ties. Other than that, the specifics of my wardrobe is owed entirely to girlfriends. If I had my own style, I would attract girls that never want or need to change me. The only time I spend my own money on clothes is when I sense a girl is going to reject me. À la Cool Hand Luke, if the blow is coming, I want to look pretty and take a punch well.

#

About the E.T. I'm meeting up with from the coffee shop—some lunatic was talking her ear off, so I had the girl at the counter take her a note stating there was an extra spot on the couch by the fire. She came over, and we spoke for hours.

Then she suggested I take her number. She suggested we do something on Tuesday. Today is Tuesday. Today I called her. She hasn't called back. So I go straight back down to the coffee shop.

If E.T. is going to stand me up, then I'm going to ask out the really sexy barista who I've been staring at for weeks. "Is Tabitha working tonight?" I ask the guy behind the counter. In my mind, it was just a casual question. But by the look on the guy's face, I said it like a cop on a murder case who just flashed a warrant for her arrest.

Hippy Coffee Dude, "No, man, she's not working tonight."

I say, "Oh. That's cool."

He looks like he's worried about me. "Did you want a coffee or just Tabitha?"

I say, “Just a coffee.”

Given my current emotional state, I suppose it can’t be helped that I spot the one really pretty, really young girl, twenty years old at most, sitting near the fireplace. Only after I sit down next to her do I realize that she’s not alone, she’s with two girlfriends. Perhaps I act out of panic.

Here I am, faced with not one, but three, pretty and impossibly-young girls. What I need right now, in this awkward moment of quiet...is the ultimate icebreaker.

The spit move, when properly executed, recreates that mythical crossroads where extreme confidence meets self-deprecation in a head-on collision. Unfortunately, I’ve never been much of a spitter.

When the half-hocked loogie dribbles onto the sleeve of my sweater, it’s still connected to my lip via a stubborn saliva string. I try to shake it free.

“Oh my god,” one of the young trio whispers. Surprisingly, her expression is not horror. It’s pity.

I look for a napkin, and, only after I turn my head, do I realize my mistake. The string of saliva now sags in a glistening arc spanning from my right arm to my chin, and stretches ever further as I grope for anything that might be useful in wiping it off. The red-headed girl doesn’t actually say the word, “retarded,” but she mouths it, as her friend offers me her napkin. “It’s okay.” she says, dabbing the spittle from my arm.

I quickly ensure her that she doesn’t need to worry—I’m just a normal guy who attempted a complex and funny maneuver called the Spit Move. But with the spittle still hanging from my lip, it comes out, “I an hine juss tied this stit noove. Id’s actally kind ull slunny.”

“Oh my god, he is...(retarded)”

At this point, it's easier to just go ahead and let them think what they want, and head to the bathroom to clean up. I'm almost there when I hear a voice. "Ryland Florida." My friend, Ben Rodin, and a girl I've never seen before are standing behind me.

I'm overjoyed. After a quick wipe of my face, I say, "Wow, you came to see me?"

Ben Rodin says, "We came here for coffee."

I say, "That makes more sense."

He laughs, "I think you must come here a little too often."

I introduce myself to his girl. "I'm Ryland. I need a girlfriend. To keep me out of the coffee shops at night. It's so great to meet you."

She says. "Were you rendezvousing with someone here this evening?"

"Nope."

She asks, "You can join us, then."

"Yep."

Suddenly, I'm not longer the idiot who got stood up by someone far too young for him. Nor the guy failing to ask out a sexy barista. Nor a guy who can't manage a decent spit move. I'm with friends. Under no pressure. Nothing I can do or say wrong.

While I explain to them about my night, I can't help notice that they're deeply in love. Her affection pours, their eyes sparkle. We laugh and forget my bad luck. I give a comical dissertation on the E.T. rule. They kind of stare at me. "The under twenty-five rule. Instability," I explain. They stare. "The problems with dating a girl too young for you," I clarify. She shifts and looks at Rodin. He glares.

She says, "Last year, I was twenty-four."

I say, "Well, sure, but I was talking about age not maturity. Obviously, if one is

mature... as you so obviously are...then the rule doesn't apply. Actually, after meeting you, I don't even believe in the E.T. rule anymore. In any case, it's more a theory than a rule."

"Just shut up Ryland," Rodin says. "But seriously, listen, my birthday's next week, and we know the perfect girl for you."

She chimes in, "Oh my gosh, he's right we do—"

"Ryland, this girl is going to turn the page for you." He's so excited. "A whole new chapter in your life."

I halt them. "Don't tell her about me. I don't want it to be awkward."

Ben nods. "No, no, we'll let be natural. She's—"

"Don't even tell me her name."

"Okay, sure, leave some mystery. But seriously, she's the—"

I throw up my hand. "Or anything about her."

Ben rolls his eyes, "Okay, I won't. In fact, I don't give a shit anymore. But she'll be the tall, gorgeous brunette."

I sip my coffee. "Brunette. I do like brunette."

#

In London, on a night that happens to be Valetta's birthday, impulsively and without warning, she kisses Mike.

Mike, as we know, can barely hold himself up when drinking. Which is why they fall to the dirty pub floor together and make out. Mind you, Mike believes that Sean and Valetta make sense as a couple. Her family has a controlling interest in the state of New York—they're "The" Knickerbockers. And Sean's dad owns all of Arkansas. But Valetta wouldn't be the first

wealthy daughter who was attracted to Mike. The lovely Amanda is heir to a top-ten teen magazine, and the infamous Erica Baby Doll (raised on a yacht the size of Rhode Island) will one day inherit a third of Montana. In any case, Mike and Valetta continue to make out.

A pair of shoes approaches them.

A pair of knees bends toward them.

A finger taps Mike on the shoulder.

Mike looks up—at a waitress. She extends him a beer. Waitress, “The gentlemen seated over there sent this.” Mike looks where she points—Sean waves. Mike stands, and Valetta, too, rises from the floor.

Mike says, “I wanted a vodka tonic. With lime.”

Sean holds up a vodka tonic. “Trade you then. This...for my girlfriend back.”

“Done.” Mike hands Valetta the beer.

Valetta stares at him. “I think I thought you were Sean.”

Mike says, “No you didn’t.”

Valetta tries to compose herself. She says, “Maybe I forgot what year it was.”

“Anyway,” Sean points out, “Rolling together in grime is far better than the two of you starting a brawl, which wouldn’t be outside the realm.”

“Happy birthday,” Mike says in toast. Clink. Clink. Clink.

#

On a night that happens to be me alone by myself, impulsively and without warning, I grab my phone, pull up a text window, and choose recipient—Natalie.

I key in a message. Delete. Enter a new one. Backspace backspace backspace. Then I wake up, and it’s the next day. Thank God I didn’t send her anything.

However, I get a creeping suspicion. I check my phone. The little envelope on the screen says: To—Natalie. Sent—2:15 am. Message: **Have u done it w/him in a pool**