

Part One: Old Media

**The Privately-Funded Life of American Psychology
[1990's]**

This wasn't the same air of our ancestors. The denizens of past societies passing down centuries-old ruminations on invisible forces at work: the priest, the rabbi, the prophet, the soothsayer, the clairvoyant, our spiritual guides appealing to the intentions of gods and ghosts, the cosmic hierarchy. Stories tweedy critics study in cultural speculation, that scientists claim evolved from the social psyche — minds desperate for purpose. They pulled these messages from thin air, reveries propounding a channel, a communication with the divine.

As it stood by the late-twentieth century, the air – a known mixture of nitrogen, oxygen, argon, and carbon dioxide – was filled with unseen undulations communicating consequence across spacetime. No longer waiting for a revelation, a pinging of the soul from a long-awaited caller, we broadcasted them freely. At any moment a conversation, a personal crisis, a boss's voice, zipping by your head in a digital wave. Our bodies permeated by sin and cos functions. A constant influx of information coded and decoded, invisible yet real.

1996

Lampposts marked the pavement with overlapping circles of copper light. The overcast sky, faintly glowing with the final minutes of sunlight, appeared bleak above the sprawling indoor plaza. In front of the Macy's entrance, a plump security guard held open the door for a tiny, stiff-haired woman in a red skirt suit. A propagating wave at the **right** frequency struck the antenna of his walkie-talkie. Guard needed at Spencer's Gift – attempted theft. He swung through the door, leaving his job to the single, black-and-white security camera recording itself onto a VHS in an enclosed room under the food court.

Elaine Shaw drove slowly through the grid of white lines and tall light posts. The mall was unexpectedly crowded and the day's frustration turned her search for a decent parking spot into a series of abrupt start-and-stops that jarred her son and his friend in the backseat. This morning she signed off on a loan – \$10,000 – to help her become certified as a neonatal nurse practitioner. Two years into a separation and it was evident that her house and kids were not made with the notion of a tight budget in mind. Rolling past a clean, uniformly khaki-garbed family stepping out of their BMW, her stomach melted. It's the day *after* Valentine's Day, how did everyone have the money to go shopping, again?

Century III Mall, tactfully built at the fringes of four neighboring Pittsburgh suburbs, was one continuous, beige exterior encircled by a few acres of parking lot. The entrances had names: JC Penney, Macy's, Sears. Arriving at the mall engendered a sense of change and possibility: bored, teenage boys hoping to locate some curious

girls; housewives desperate for the outfit that would reinstate their youthfulness; men browsing through gadgets that promise to satiate their short-term desire to play with something. This was all the result, the payoff, of a middle-class career. Thirty-year mortgages, 401(k), \$65-100,000 annually, and three, maybe four weeks of vacation – the ennui had to be justified and consumption provided justification.

Elaine scanned the lot, caught in a repetitive time lapse of Camry, Malibu, Alero, Denali. She traced U's over the asphalt, row-by-row searching for a spot. Her gaze intent, her perception filtering out irrelevant information, she restricted the visual modality to finding a gap amongst the lines of vehicles.

"Just park Mom, there are tons spots in the back," Fred was getting impatient in the seat behind her.

"I don't like parking far from the doors. A woman was on the news just the other day, beaten up and mugged walking to her car."

Finally, Elaine spotted a woman packing up her trunk; second spot in from the JC Penney entrance. Perfect. She tightly turned her steel blue soccer-mom van through an intersection, cutting off a car heading the same direction. Now that her eyes were on the spot, it was rightfully hers, vindicating any maneuvers needed to properly proceed to the prize.

She put the car in park and listened to the boys in back. Fred and their neighbor Randal were giggling about something. An angled glance into the rear view mirror availed the two boys tossing a basketball into the air trying to head-butt it at the same time.

"Hey, cut it out, you kids'll hurt yourselves."

Fred quickly grabbed the ball and pretended as if he had been sitting quietly all along. The boys sat, smirking, wearing baggy sweatpants and green basketball jerseys. They were in a constant state of play. Unable to sit still - bouncing, flailing their limbs, wrestling to get out of the car first. An inexhaustible desire to be entertained, the mall was a mecca. Toys, junk food, arcade games. Their brains craved sensation; taught by television sets, after school and sports practice they sought the almighty screen.

Elaine brought the boys on a detour after basketball practice so she could purchase a jacket. Something leather perhaps, or maybe fake fur. Her puffy green winter coat with the ripped pocket was not meant for 'going out' – something she desperately needed to do. Fashion dictated something sleeker, shinier, something so that her exterior didn't shout *I'm a lonely mom*. She was hyper-aware that her arrival to most places was alone or with a herd of children. The marriage certificate was on its way to being voided, nullifying a future she planned ages ago. Coupled to another for life. A shared laugh when the kids make a joke they don't understand. She told herself it was important to hold onto the laughing, even if no one else joined.

The tile floors of the mall reflected the wiggling neon shine of the arcade's sign. Inside a middle-aged woman with sandy hair was propping herself up on a glass display of prizes, reading a Tom Clancy novel. Conveniently for Elaine, the arcade was directly across from the entrance to JC Penney.

"I'll be right here looking at the coats. Go ahead over and pick a game to play." She handed Fred two dollars.

“We won’t even come close to beating a game with this.”

“That should give you eight plays, that’s plenty.”

“Four plays. We both want to play.”

Randal’s round face looked at her, expecting. Mrs. Shaw had always included him in whatever she did for Fred. Feigning assurance, she handed Randal two bills as well. She watched as the two sprinted into the arcade, running into one another, making a calamity as they ventured. Once she had an eye on where they ended up, she turned to the racks of clothing.

“Wake up, wake up, the revolution has begun, generation X is in effect,” Steven Tyler’s voice screeched as the boys grabbed onto two mounted light-guns. *Revolution X*, a rail shooter that takes players on a predetermined path to save Aerosmith from the NON – New Order Nation: a dystopian union of corrupt government and corporate militia that has taken over the world in 1996. Soldiers in yellow and black suits bearing the NON insignia fell onscreen from helicopters. Running to their calibrated positions in accordance with the noticeably slow refresh rate of the screen, firing in inaccurate machine gun bursts, the men awaited their quick, inevitable deaths at the hands of the boys. Blood squirting in exaggerated clumps, sounding deep, robotic moans as their images are picked up by photodiodes in the plastic machine guns facing the screen.

Careful no one was watching, Elaine slid on a faux leather bomber jacket with thinly cut lapels. It reminded her of Bonnie Tyler’s leathered-out getup of the 80s. She sucked in her stomach and pulled the jacket together allowing the curve of her bosom to show. A few yards behind her, at the perfume counter, three young

women smelled each other's wrists. One buxom with brown-hair and high-hipped jeans wore a similar jacket. Remembering the kids, she craned her neck, peering out over clusters of clothing, toward the arcade. Fiddling with the tag at her wrist, she checked: \$84.99.

"Oh yeah," Randal chuckled as the game's path brought them to a club where blonde, pixelated girls wearing pink bras and G-strings danced in cages. They shot at the girls' asses between hoards of NON soldiers. When decked-out soldiers with iron shields and riot gear appeared onscreen the boys were forced to unload explosive Aerosmith CDs. The ultimate weapon: music. The song "Eat the Rich" shredded in the background as flying discs were hurled between giant lava lamps and flying-v guitars. Packed to the brim with conspiracy, radical suggestion, sexual themes, and mediocre alt-rock, the boys' took away nothing but adrenaline. Fred's tongue stuck out between his teeth as he tore through every living thing in sight. The sole strategy was aim-and-fire. All other movements were fixed into a magnetic transcription, a minute improvement from Nintendo's Duck Hunt – a game the boys mastered before handwriting. Their brains learned to ignore the path – there was no possibility of straying – the targeting was all that mattered.

Standing at a mirror, she imagined a man, a divorcee, or a widower, approaching her to dance. The nightclub would be dim, but at the bar her jacket would make clear that she would dance, might even take risks. Where would it go from there? She'd have to come home eventually; could she bring someone? What would Fred say, or her daughter Haley whose sensitivity was a constant source of worry? It didn't matter, she promised herself she would never repeat last night –

alone on valentine's day, pathetically crying in her room, too embarrassed to let her kids know the truth. Through the door she told them she was ill, didn't want them to catch what she had. The jacket was a must, she had to put her happiness in the equation and this was step one toward her triumph over loneliness. Unable to afford it on her current budget, she charged it to her JC Penney credit card. This is why we have credit, right? At any given moment, we're worth more than summation of what we have earned, the banks help us to see that.

Randal stood, fists clenched, watching Fred try to take down an NON chopper with a mixture of bullets and compact discs. At the low end of his health and out of quarters, this was the breaking point.

"Keep throwing CD's at the rocket launcher," Randal tried to guide Fred to victory over the insidious new order.

"Awwww, I wanted to get to the jungle part," Fred bemoaned the final strike to his health, signaling defeat by the program. The music faded, the speakers no longer gurgling the sound of machine guns. Still riding waves of violent energy, Fred and Randal stood there as the screen flickered to an image of the FBI seal: a shield impressed with an image of Lady Justice's scale and a flowing banner with the words, 'Fidelity,' 'Bravery,' 'Integrity.' Below, the message written into the program of every 90's arcade game:

"Winners Don't Use Drugs"

William S. Session, Director of the FBI

1990

An eight-minute trek from the surface of the sun to the earth, photons rained down on the beach, heating every inch of white sand. An electromagnetic frenzy blurred the air near the ground. Imperceptible amplitudes excited each granular speck's fundamental components.

Along the Gulf of Mexico, tawny retirees and soon-to-be retirees, milled along the waterline in Nautica swimtrunks and wispy cover-ups, searching for seashells and late-life solace. Marco Island, Florida was made up of mostly northeastern businessmen and their wives who took part in the migratory practice of upper-middle-class Americans. Make your way in life and move south. Owning a condominium near the beach and a handful of golf courses meant you made it – this was one form of the realized American Dream.

Lines of lounge chairs paralleled the Royal Palms that stretched the coast. Condos overlooking the ocean, one after the next, setback from the beach, each with a private poolside cove to ensure the comfort of its residents. Dozens of miniature boardwalks spanned the gap of shrubby seagrapes and catclaws that separated shore and domicile. Metal gates stood at the midpoints, a security measure toward any wandering beach patrons or drunken visitors stumbling into the wrong community. Once you were through the gates - part of the condo-dwellers - there was a further, tripartite separation: those with strictly ocean-view balconies, half ocean-view and half inland-facing balconies, and the solely inland. The difference

between the first and last: a half-million to a million dollars, pending the community of course.

Retiring real-estate entrepreneur, Harvey Billings, made it into the middle category. Six floors up on the all-white, austere Chalet San Marco, he read *The Wall Street Journal* while sipping a screwdriver. Inside the sliding-glass door, his wife, Carmen, put on a pair of large sunglasses and draped a cover-up over her black one-piece swimsuit.

“I’ll be down at the pool. Cheryl and Linda want to do lunch. There’s roast beef and potato salad in the fridge if you get hungry,” Carmen peeked her head onto the balcony.

“Could you put tomato and mayonnaise on it?”

“I might as well make it while I’m here,” she said and turned toward the kitchen. A loose flap of skin oscillated on her arm as she moved. Harvey and Carmen held to the traditional roles of marriage. Carmen was a resilient mother and wife, open to challenging her husband’s decisions, but it never crossed her mind to rethink her place in the day-to-day. She was a church-goer—a former choir director—who could cook a mean pot roast and kept a tidy house. By no means average, Carmen brightened a room, lightened the mood, with her pleasantries and witticisms. Taking a note from Lucille Ball, she knew the terrain of simple sarcasm and heartwarming humor.

A digital signal came speeding in from a junction box on the outside telephone pole. The phone rang.

“Bill! How wonderful to hear from you. I’m loving it, Harvey’s loving it. I’m surprised you even have the time, my god. How is it in Washington? Oh my, I only touch temperatures like that when I open the freezer.”

She tapped the glass, getting Harvey’s attention. Still treading through small talk, she shuffled onto the balcony with the cordless phone and leaned over Harvey who was supine with the paper open across his chest.

“Well, here he is, be sure to tell Alice I said hello,” she covered the mouthpiece, whispering to Harvey, “It’s Bill Sessions, he’s calling from Washington.”

On Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington DC, William Sessions sat upright in a black leather chair staring over a mahogany desk into the monitor of his IBM Model 50 PS/2. The cubic screen rested atop a thin rectangular computing unit showing nothing but a power button and a floppy disk drive. Just over two years into his position as FBI Director, Sessions had a directive to incorporate new science and technology into the bureau’s processes. His current task: finding someone with the right qualifications to start up a DNA database.

The two men were friends since becoming Eagle Scouts together in high school back in Kansas City, Missouri. They both graduated from Baylor University in the 1950’s and relied on the other’s support and advice ever since. This time, however, it wasn’t Harvey’s support, but his son’s Bill was after. President Bush wanted to see big improvements to centralized intelligence during his term. He was committed to seeing an integration of medical, criminal, and surveillance records into a single, searchable form. Under some scruple by the administration for having wide support from the Democrats in Congress, Bill Sessions had impressed his new

boss by coming up with the idea to make DNA the new, infallible identification system of the FBI: “The system would be incorrigible Mister President. A simple prick to the skin and we’d have the most profound piece of evidence known to man. We could exonerate those wrongfully on death row.” The final thought was the one driving Sessions’ judicial heart, but President Bush had been swept away, relishing over the first line.

Now Sessions needed a vanguard, someone ready to bring the FBI into the all-knowing age of perfected tracking.

“I’m glad to hear the new place is treating you well Harv, but I’m calling about Howard. I’m putting him on the shortlist for an important position in the bureau’s new program.”

“Well, fantastic, what’s the position?”

“This isn’t the sort of thing we’re going to be able to talk about in detail, what I need to know, before I dig up his records, is does Howard have any blemishes in his past? You know, hiccups?”

“Besides being a Democrat, he’s about as clean as they come to my knowledge. The boy’s got a heart of gold though Bill. I’m unsure he’s going to walk away from his residency to do some clandestine operation.”

“No, no, it’s not like the Hoover days. The FBI is changing. He’d be part of a real improvement on this nation’s security. We’d be freeing the wrongfully accused, washing away the old, sloppy spy-work of the Cold War.”

“Well, he just finished up his medical license up at Georgetown, he’s workin at some hospital out near you now. Sounds like something he shouldn’t pass on. Let me go get his number.”

“I have his number Harv, I’m hoping you’d be willing to give him a call and encourage him to take seriously what I’m going to offer him.”

Harvey was no hack, he knew the FBI had a broad net of knowledge about Americans, but it shook him slightly to hear Bill so confident in having his son’s information.

“What do you think Harvey? Can you call him up? I know he’s always been so eager to make you proud.”

“Sure Bill, I’ll have a conversation with him tonight. But, can I ask, why Howard?”

“Computers. Computers and medicine. Your son fits a very select profile.”

After hanging up the phone, ending the handset’s wireless sync with the receiver inside, Harvey stood up to lean on the railing where the sun was shining. Letting himself bake a moment, he realized he knew nothing about what his son studied at Yale. Computer science? What the hell did it even mean? At the time, he thought it meant making games and spreadsheets. He thought of the computer in his office, his TV, his home phone; how did any of it work? Some people say TV’s can watch you back, but that had to be impossible. He had gone to see *Hunt for Red October* not five days ago with Carmen. Sonar, radar, submarines, all of it a mystery, while the mission was as clear as day – stop the soviets.

He stared out into the infinite blue lengths where the ocean met the sky. Seagulls were filling the air with their high-pitched shrieks - a whistle that complimented the sloshing tide. Aware of small swimming creatures no human eye could see, they swooped into the water, in constant communication with their squeaking calls. The sounds drew him away from his mind, drifting his attention toward the densely humid air. The Florida sun had a beautiful way of clearing your head, the sheer heat drowning out everything else.

It was time for his sandwich.

1991

“Is the red light blinking?”

“No, it’s not even on. Hurry up and get the tape going, they’re going to come on.”

“I can’t see anything through the eye hole.”

“For Christ’s sake, I know you’ll die if you miss a moment. Here, give it to me.”

Regis leaned in, wrapped his hands around the camcorder, and removed it from his wife’s shoulder. Biting his tongue, he examined the device - a boxy, grey RCA hi-fi camcorder with a stubby microphone jutting out above the lens. Elaine, palming her hair to keep it from catching on the camera, made a snapping noise with her tongue. Eyes narrowed on Regis, she feathered her bangs.

The room sounded hollow – stray coughs and whispers created lasting vibrations in the air. Saint Sebastian’s Middle School auditorium was the site of Bonnie’s Dance Studio’s autumn recital: a nine-part performance of three to ten year-olds clad in tights and puffy dresses. A procession of stumbling girls in yellow leotards with pink frilly skirts at their hips finished their rendition of Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini moments ago. The crowd was charmed by the youngest performers basic whirls and waves. Parents paid for this moment: seeing their babies on stage, each one the star of the show. A dozen camera angles secured that these minutes would never be lost.

“Rege, I don’t like it when you do that.”

“Do what? I’m trying to get this friggin’ tape rolling before Haley comes on.”

“Well, this is one of those moments for me,” Elaine inflected her voice, accidentally arousing the attention of a few audience members.

“What does that mean?”

“Like we talked about in our last session with Dr. Cheshire.”

The two had been doing couples’ therapy – not ‘marriage counseling;’ they decided counseling was for ‘the troubled,’ they were merely in ‘a rocky patch’ – and their current goal was to “take a moment and point out to each other when you’re feeling hurt.” Dr. Cheshire told them they were both too subjective in their understanding of the relationship, that neither realized how their behaviors were being taken. He challenged them to speak up when they felt offended or misunderstood. Elaine, noting her husband’s lack of faith in her competence with the camcorder, felt this was an archetype of his snappiness, his impatience with her.

Haley practiced a three-step move in the hallway. Lined up along lockers with the six other girls in her ensemble, each wore shiny, skin-tight purple pants with silver v-cut tops dangling glittery streams at the stomach that fluttered when they spun. She whispered to herself, “*Oh, Oh, Oh,*” stomping her feet in rhythm.

“You know why you’re in the middle, right?” A stick-thin girl, blonde curls in a bun, stepped out of line to make a point to Haley. Even at nine, popularity, image, and power relations were part of female life. An unspoken rule: no one can be cool if no one is lame. Determinations had to be made based on comparative judgments. Pop-stars and TV celebrities held a divine position for these girls and their aesthetic

was unquestionable. Haley's pink, semi-transparent plastic glasses made her eyes look small. Static-charged strands of hair floated around her crimp. She had an inclination about what was coming.

"Because I've got Paula's moves?" A cautious smile took shape on her mouth.

"No, it's cause you're the biggest," flippantly honest, the skinny diva sparked a chuckle from a few girls in line. Immediately, Haley's face heated up. The rush of blood made her vision blurry. She sucked in her lips a few times, licking them nervously. Not even two hours ago she told her mom the outfit was too tight. Elaine reassured her that she was beautiful, said she was a healthy-sized girl, that the girls on TV were making themselves sick. Haley didn't fully understand what this had to do with her tight pants, but it was becoming clear now.

When the girls made it on stage, bright lights gleaming, Haley's brow was speckled with sweat and her face was running with tears. She didn't know what curse she was born with, but she was positive she wasn't pretty. True confidence came with a tiny stomach and thin limbs, everything else was acting. As Paula Abdul's *Straight Up* started playing and the girls began bobbing their behinds to the synth, Haley noticed her bulging hips in a new light. Her body was jiggling when the other girls' weren't. Without thinking she began restricting her dance moves to short, exact gestures.

"*Do you really want to love me forever, oh, oh, oh.*" Keeping her body movement to a minimum, she tapped out the beats lightly, hoping the song would end early.

“What’s wrong with Haley? Is she crying?” Standing in the aisle, Elaine began to panic.

“Calm down, I’m sure she’s just nervous.” Regis, whose already-ruddy cheeks warmed into a deep burgundy upon any rise of emotional tension, felt sympathetic for his daughter.

“No, something isn’t right. She loves this dance and she’s barely moving.”

“You want me to stop recording?”

“I don’t mean to make demands,” Paula continued singing her love **policies**.

“Don’t play stupid, this is serious.”

“But the word and the deed go hand in hand.”

“I’m not being stupid. I understand Haley too sometimes,” Regis relayed his ‘moment.’ The song finished with the girls encircling Haley, their backs facing her, flexing their eyebrows at the crowd like scorned lovers.

After the performance, family members hurried into the school hallways to find their little ones. Moms crouched down for hugs, dads lifted their daughters into flight. Self-esteem was soaring for most of the girls, and the parents were sharing in the feeling. Regis and Elaine were waiting with flowers when Haley finally moped out from backstage.

“Sweetie, what’s a’matter?” Elaine lifted her daughter’s chin, meeting her glassy eyes.

“I don’t want to dance anymore,” Haley buried her face into her mom’s shoulder. Regis, a few feet back from the women in his life, noticed the other

families looking at theirs. Unsure how to act he nodded and waved at them as if saying hello. Pretending to fix his suit jacket, he remembered his father's stolid representation and some advice: in public, it's always business.

1991

Regal and stout, Howard Billings rode the elevator to the eighth floor of his apartment building. Two open buttons on his white-collar shirt revealed a few curly chest hairs. Sleeves rolled and grey pants cuffed at the crease, his prowess was reflected in his neat dress. Waiting, he flipped through *The Epistemology of Disease: Diagnostic Triumphs and Breakdowns*, a specialized text written by a former professor.

The processing power of his brain was magnificent. Latin etymologies, medical etiologies, psychopathology, the blueprints of electrical and neural wiring, Howard's education enveloped the two peaks of man's known mechanical networks: the body and the circuit board. He engaged with the world like a puzzle. Each moment a novel deconstruction of components at work, his perception bewitched with scientific process. He observed as causal orders controlled us, quantities of dopamine and serotonin. Knowing this was a marvel, sharing in a milestone of man. While the culture battled over souls and neurons, embryos and life vessels, Howard felt lucky to be introduced early to the side of science. Akin to a religious experience, he reveled in reading the codification of the world. For computers it was lines of syntax replete with logical loops, instantiations, and declarations – a wondrous flow of stark inference: machine read, man wrote. In humans, genetics bonded us to the vast spirit of life: chains of nucleotides transcoding the destiny of the body, our code merely one iteration in the multitudes of living organisms. It brought a tear to his eye on several occasions, a radiant effect of his mind wrapping

around all our shared histories. Who needed mythology when you had the complex of nature?

Currently, Howard was aroused by the lecture he attended on nosology and improvements in clinical coding. William Sessions' assistant, Terry, had tipped him off that afternoon, calling him at the hospital: "...the lecturer was a former member of the intelligence community. It may be worth listening in and introducing yourself afterwards." Preparing to begin his job with the FBI, he was modifying his brain's personal database. Rewiring the connections, developing new frameworks, fitting crime and medicine together into a causal nexus. He fetishized the perfection of our pattern, our double helix: a twisted ladder, two chains linking all the information of our physical history, an inescapable shape we cannot but help leave in our trail. As any archaeologist or forensic scientist will tell you - our evidence lives beyond our lives.

A quick *ding* brought Howard's attention away from the book and to the thought of greeting his wife, Ava, in their apartment.

Striding in jubilantly, his smile was met with pursed lips and unwelcoming eyes. Legs crossed on their leather horseshoe couch, Ava bounced her foot to an inaudible beat and stroked the stem of a wine glass. The TV was muted with CNN rolling in front of her. A dark-skinned beauty with a Harvard degree and cunning tongue, seeing her caused many men to second-guess the innocence of Howard's sheepish smile and blush cheeks that seemed permanently on his face.

Their story proved that even the finest minds run on impulse. The two were married only six months after meeting at a public health conference in Philadelphia. She was inspired by a talk he gave on the future of electronic medical records – proof that he was going places. Chatting him up at the reception she found him to be articulate and calm, congenial with enough insecurity to make him cute. Five drinks into the evening and they absconded to a hotel room to have the tenth-best sex she had up to that point.

Young and charmed by his subservience and glee in filling her whimsical desires, she decided to marry him as a move of personal security. However, unable to be candid about what he did, in fact, lack in the bedroom – mostly the fault of inexperience – she began cheating on him only months later.

This afternoon, in a fit of guilt brought on by some jarring news, she cancelled a lunch-hour rendezvous with a well-endowed journalist at the Washington Post. Rushing home to prepare a romantic dinner with Howard who left at sunrise that morning, blowing a kiss from the doorway saying, “I can’t imagine I’ll be any later than seven.” She was now miffed and tipsy upon his three-hour-late arrival.

“Decided to break into the Bordeaux without me?”

“There’s a glass left,” she picked the bottle up off the coffee table, “I got a tad impatient and decided to wash it away.” Howard shrugged, kicking off his shoes. He noticed one served dinner plate was sitting in the dark at the dining room table a

few yards behind her. This was a surprise, a fast-paced policy analyst at Brookings, Ava rarely took on domesticated work.

“Well look at that, someone did some cooking today. I must be forgetting an occasion,” he squinted through his wire-rim glasses.

“No, well, yes, I was hoping to do something for you. You’ve been so busy since the new job offer. I didn’t expect you so late though,” she kept her eyes on the wine glass, “something come up?” secretly hoping to have caught him in his own lapse of scandal, maybe some reverent nurse at the hospital.

As the final ‘p’ popped off her lips, the speed of sound was the only delay in Howard’s impulsive burst of excitement. Working a circle around the room, putting down his briefcase, picking up a wine glass off the serving table in the dining room, getting his plate, and looping around her to the far side of the couch, he finally plopped down connecting a straight line between them and the bottle of wine. All the while unloading details of the lecture he attended. He told her how the ICD and DSM would soon be able to improve the synchronicity of their codes using new information networks. How using shared databases the NIH will be able to unify reported symptoms falling under particular diagnoses in a way never done before. Pathogenesis between mental disorders and other physical ailments could be inspected under a new light. His delineation reached a crescendo recalling a memory of the speaker effervescently saying, “access to researchers will commence our saying goodbye to idiopathic diseases.” At his climax, Howard suddenly felt stymied. How awful, those poor people stuck with no knowledge of whatever virus, bacterium, or malfunction haunted their bodily systems.

“What’s idiopathic?” Ava asked, having followed Howard’s jargon-filled rant up to this point.

“Oh, that’s how we talk about diseases with no known cause, ones that come up spontaneously, out of thin air. The word is synonymous with nightmare. Such a sad situation, no real hope, no real *knowledge*, for crying out loud.”

“Any illness causes a degree of desperation. Sometimes the less you know, the better. Maybe it allows for a more peaceful way to go, you know? Instead of treatment after treatment, each moment praying for that magical cure to kick in, you accept what nature has in store.”

“Try telling that to a patient, or even more so, their family. Reasons guide the distressed into understanding, a place of reconciliation. Even more importantly when dealing with mental disorder. You can’t just tell some horrified mother that her son is *troubled* when he just bludgeoned some kid at school half to death for spitting gum at him.”

“I don’t see the problem with some people merely being troubled,” she slowed her voice signaling her mind was at work wrapping words around some intuition she was following, “some kids feel traumatized, angry, even violent,” she sped back up, “without needing to be told they have a mental illness as much as an alcoholic for a father or an over-demanding mother.”

“Conceptually, I agree with you, but psychiatrists need more to rely on than family history. I’m not saying everything is a disorder, but the cognitive turn, the advent of psychiatry, Freud and all those guys, if they taught us anything, it’s that our brains are fraught with maladies. We’re totally messed up.”

“Conceptually you agree with me?”

“I mean, I followed your thought.”

“So what about you and your daddy complex, is that a disorder?” Even a woman who can drink her husband under the table will let her tongue slip after most of a bottle of wine drunk over thirty minutes. This is a thought she skirted and avoided on most occasions when talking mental health with Howard, a much more frequent topic here than the Average American Household.

“Daddy complex? Do you really think that? I have nothing to be concerned about with my dad, he’s enthusiastic about the new job, said he couldn’t imagine me doing something better. Wouldn’t you say that’s a pretty firm ground to be standing on in a father-son relationship?”

*“Howard, listen to your tone, listen to what you just said. Your first thought was to prove to me that your dad was pleased with you. You have always been insecure you’re not impressive enough, not successful enough to earn the respect of your father. You cared so much about what he thought of the job, but what about what *I* thought of the job,”* she quivered on the subjective, in fear of what was inevitably coming.

“What are you saying, do you have a problem with me taking the FBI position? Do you realize the people I’ll meet? This is huge for us.”

“Look, I know, but,” she was spacing out her words, hoping the right ones would fill themselves in, *“you’re not going to have any time for us. In fact, you’re not even going to be able to tell me about your job. Don’t you see this as a sign things are changing? You’re moving up the ladder Howard. What am I supposed to do,*

wait for you late every night? Become some kind of run-of-the-mill house-mom, pitifully normal?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Where's this coming from? You have the job at Brookings, I thought we said a family was still a few years away. I'm not planning on making a life in the FBI, it's a career move – work on the cutting edge of technology, make a network."

Ava covered her face from Howard. Up to this point, she kept her emotions internal, but now, hearing her husband project their future, she broke her cool.

"I'm pregnant Howard," she said it smoothly, with a long breath of relief at the truth finally working its way out. Despite doing the right thing, she felt her existence hovering over her - endlessly alone, forever responsible.

"Something's wrong, why are you telling me this way?"

"Because I'm not sure whose child it is," she flashed a scared glance at Howard under her hand that was rubbing her forehead, but his sanguine face couldn't bear her sight. The two sat there, palms sweating onto the leather, and much like other members of the human race, neither had the courage or power to look disappointment right in the eye.

1999

Well into the summer lull, Fred reclined in languor on a seafoam green chair in the family room. Next to him the sliding glass doors were open, letting a breeze fill the room. His sister, Haley, squat on a roller-chair in the corner, was plugging up the phone line using dial-up Internet to connect to her vampire-fantasy IRC channel. Minutes earlier, as he walked downstairs he had heard the high-pitched tones and hollow static of their PC, requesting an access point, an entrance into the growing abyss of information. This registered as one thing: he couldn't call his friends and they couldn't call him.

Elaine clacked down the hallway to the kitchen in a hurry, late for her date. Pearl earrings matched the flowing silk blouse she wore that ruffled at her chest. In the kitchen, dark brown cabinets with yellow stained glass followed a wrap-around counter. Entering, she noticed a clutter on the countertop. A response pattern emerged: she began clearing off and organizing the mess, standing at the partition of the eating and cooking areas. Milk residue in a dry cereal bowl, two Kit-Kat wrappers, a half-dozen plastic cups, a sauce-stained rehearsal schedule for her daughter's play – the kids were still getting used to having their mother in school.

"You kids need to clean up this kitchen," Elaine yelled around the countertop. Her voice disturbing the stagnant state of the family room.

"None of it is mine," Fred claimed, his voice resonating through the rooms. He rubbed his palm on his temples and ran his fingers through his bowl cut. Video games had grown dull for the day; sabotaging terrorist plots and winning

superbowls lacked its lure without someone to share in the triumph of victory. Hunched in torpor over his bent arm, the cartoon he was watching was repetitive - an episode of *Rocko's Modern Life* he'd seen ten or twelve times. Bored with the EM-beams of the big-screen across the room, he resorted to the timeless entertainment of the setting sun, nature's coda to the day's vicissitudes. Staring out, the screen door to their deck overlaid a grid on the bruised sky. He gazed listlessly, extending his thoughts into the clash of reds and purples at the intersection of cloud, sun, and sky. He longed for the feeling of reciprocity: a collective moment interconnected with his friends. The common desire for some temporary security of one's popularity and purpose. His mind went through scenes of preteen romance: everyone excited to be your friend, like at your birthday party when the kids gather around you for the unwrapping of gifts, hoping to share in feeling special.

Twelve years of age, already nostalgic for past evenings. This one was perfect for capture-the-flag or release, maybe a walk to the baseball field to light off some forbidden firecrackers. The sky bled out over the horizon, yellow beams casting angelic attention on the dancing maples in the distance. Dreamy, he followed the power lines over the hillside with his eyes, imagining an adventurous day where him, Randal, and James, his neighborhood posse, would traverse the row of towers on foot.

"You be nice to your sister tonight. And don't make me worry about you out runnin' around the block late at night," Elaine was behind the recliner, checking her purse for money and a palm mirror. A petite blonde with a prominent bust, her face was beginning to lose elasticity, the hollow sockets of her eyes more pronounced.

With the aid of some skin cream, lip-gloss and mascara, she reframed her maternal façade. In her mind, she conjured her self-image, borrowing a scene from a past screen where strobes and music set the energy.

“Tell Haley to get off the computer. It’s not fair. I can’t call my friends,” he felt isolated without the dial tone, the comforting whine of the outside world. Now if he picked up the phone it would be the screech. The creepy voice of the network.

“Why don’t you go over and see if Randal wants to play?” Elaine scratched the back of her son’s head.

“He’s sleeping over James and Brad’s house,” a slight annoyance in his tone.

“Sounds like there will be something fun going on then.”

“Josh Waller is sleeping over too,” he looked up at his mom. He knew that she knew what this meant. Josh was somewhat of a bully and delinquent. A trailer park boy, rough and experienced for his age. Fred going out to play meant risking being made fun of or taking part in cruel behaviors that queased his stomach.

“You have plenty of stuff here at the house. If you’re good, I’m sure your sister can take a short break from her thing,” she passed a glance toward Haley who was slumped over the keyboard.

“Don’t get used to this, it’ll be gone as quickly as it came. At school they are already talking about how Y2K is going to reset everything – our computer, my chatroom, everything. Who knows when or *if* this will be running again come January,” Haley didn’t pause from typing, yet still managed to inject an air of drama to the scene. It was hard to tell when she actually believed what she was saying.

The motif of a failed artist had befallen her. Despondent and withdrawn, over the past year she chose to play the role of a wry realist.

“The two of you behave, I love you both very much,” Elaine shook her head and kissed Fred on his cowlick.

Darkness introduced a new ethos, a freshness in the summer evening, cooling the pavement, freeing the cul-de-sac from the infernal solar blaze. Internal timers clicked on the buzzing streetlamps, parents poured liquor into highball glasses, television sets filled living rooms with blue and white hues, and Fred played Pokémon in his bedroom while listening to an insect orgy pulse outside. Species of katydids, cicadas, moths, and crickets wolf-whistled to their mates, bowing their legs, tymbals clicking in unison. The pitch black of the hills played an orchestra of life, reminding the residents of the hidden masses beneath their feet and in their trees and houses. Billions of buggy, robotic lifeforms, hatched with a plan of action. Inscribed with a definitive purpose – eat, fuck, and prolong the species. Eastern Hemlocks and Box Elders, resting from the surge of light they fed on all day, acted as nightclubs and brothels. The forest and neighborhood - hook up central for arthropods.

Meanwhile Elaine was practicing a human mating ritual: consuming wine and dancing in the crevices of crowded spaces. Her date—an Italian-born restaurant owner—wore all black and gestured when he spoke. She was introduced through a friend, a fellow nursing student, who knew just what she needed: lots of good wine and a man who could salsa. Alcoholic juices flowing, a Latin fusion band marched

the outing forward one song at a time. Sweaty bodies warmed the room. Moisture growing in the air gave dancers a sense of moving through fluid. An electric bar, emanating an icy glow from its surface, provided a catalyst for the escalating evening. Hesitant to step on the dance floor two hours ago, Elaine found herself stretching and compressing to the syncopated timpani without thought.

“Ahh yes, there you go,” the man leading her was becoming more pleased with what he was seeing. An inside turn brought her to his chest. Tasting the salt he kissed her smiling mouth. Elaine dizzied, losing her internal timing. This was her first non-plutonic kiss in five years. Oxytocin released, giving her a lustful tingle that trembled out through her limbs.

“Do you have a curfew?”

“It’s flexible,” her blue eyes stinging when she blinked. Inhibitions momentarily muted, she chose to follow out the needs she was designed to have.

Working toward catching a snoozing Snorlax, Fred’s concentration broke when he heard voices speaking English amongst the sexual creaks of the bugs. Lifting a single panel on his blinds, he could see figures in shorts and tennis shoes walking toward the storage shed in the backyard. Eager to take part in a late-night exploration of the neighborhood, he ran downstairs causing a muffled vibration on the banister.

“Frederick!” Haley yelled, still in front of the computer’s monitor, hearing the open-and-shut of the front door.

Outside he tiptoed past the garage surveying the backyard to ensure it was familiar faces he was following. Hearing Randal's characteristic mock-lisp he affected for laughs, Fred treaded onward toward the shed. A waft of cigarette smoke laced itself into the scent of the pines and grass. Noticing this slowed Fred's approach, turning his enthusiastic trot into a cautious sliding.

"The fuck you doing Shaw?" A hoarse voice inquired from the darkness.

"Randal? James? You guys down there?" Fred checked one more time, intimidated by the initial greeting.

"Yeah, come on, you're giving up our spot," Randal answered.

In the shadow of a tall sycamore, Randal and Josh had snuck away from the sleepover to share cigarettes and pilfered vodka. Fred expected this from Josh, but was surprised to see Randal casually dragging a Marlboro Light. Above, a half-moon beamed brightly, tracing crisp shadows of the branches and palmated leaves.

"Why aren't you guys at the sleepover?"

"Why aren't you?" Josh asked in return, the moonlight creating a white slash across his nose. He was wearing a baggy pair of JNCO jean-shorts and a plain black t-shirt.

"I don't know, no one invited me," Fred stepped back and pulled some leaves off a hanging branch.

"Brad's being a little girl," Randal explained, "He's mad because you were acting all cool in front of your other friends the other day playing basketball. You called him pudge. He told their mom so James couldn't invite you."

"We were playing sports. Everyone messes with each other."

“It’s lame over there anyways. They’re playing Magic,” Josh added, attempting to ease Fred’s concern, “you’re better off with us.” He held out the pack of cigarettes. Fred took one and examined it.

“Fire?” a white lighter sparked in the darkness. Bouncing shadows stretched out on the inner-canopy of the tree. Fred’s body felt twitchy, subconsciously wary of the eyes of his mother and sister. Premonitions of the other, a watcher, the voyeur to one’s sins, stunted his behavior.

“I don’t think I can,” he finally spoke, handing back the cylinder.

“Pussy. Told you Randy. He’ll probably go tell on us.”

“I didn’t know you smoked,” Fred turned to Randal, tuning out the insult.

“It’s fun, I don’t know. It’s not like real smoking, like our dads or whatever,” Randal rubbed his arm with his wrist, eyes on the ground when he spoke.

“Why don’t you go home to your mom before you get us caught?” Josh directed his head at the opening between tree branches Fred had entered through.

“She’s not even home,” Fred hesitated, “I should go anyway.” He left the two wondering to himself what Randal’s parents would do if they found out. What would Randal do if Fred told them? Maybe he should, if this continued. At least he wouldn’t smell like smoke when his mom got home soon. This fact comforted him.

From her date’s cellphone, Elaine tried to call the house to say she’d be late. Busy signal. Binary packets were scurrying through the line, instantaneously unpacked on the screen in front of Haley. Sending and receiving online requests, the phone’s attention was blocked, diverted to the task of socializing.

In bed Fred waited to hear the garage door go up. He thought he'd tell his mom about Randal. Ask her if he should do anything about it. By the time he fell asleep he was fixated on whether or not his mom was okay. His brain's pathways would be exciting different patterns in the morning.

1998

Two black birds, Cormorants, were honking at each other, pissy because one stole the other's fish. Martin Trexel caught a glimpse of his watch – 9:36 – reaching to dab sweat off his head with the cuff of his shirt. A picture perfect day at 70 degrees, but his black Mazda did a good job of forcing him to perspire on the ride over. Early for his interview with Yahoo, he stumbled through various possible worlds in his head: Maybe the receptionist will be cute. Maybe the CEO will do part of the interview.

He was prepared, confident even. A careful choice of outfit - black collared shirt, royal blue tie, and charcoal grey pants. Black is thinning and sleek, helps create a sense of power and solemnity. The royal blue tie secured people noticing his eyes – an oceanic blue – keeping attention on his face. He had learned that this was a very important part of successful first meetings. Offsetting the ensemble with charcoal grey was the speck of genius he celebrated in this outfit. It softened the domineering darkness of his shirt and created a subtle shift at the belt that made his walking-by more noticeable with the added bonus of increasing the probability of someone checking out his crotch. People do it subconsciously when they have it presented – crotches, asses, tits; he exploited the science behind revealing these parts casually, and even slight arousal of an interviewer will play to his advantage.

Not wanting to show up too early - seem eager - he waited by the man-made pond that reflected the clean, glassy architecture behind him. He felt comfortable here – the drive in from SFO along the bay, bikers and runners, clean, modern

architecture. A new sleekness in aesthetics on the rise, he noticed. Everything looks cooler when it's cleaner. People want to feel efficient; there's power and satisfaction in it. Trendy members of the corporate class were already paying hundreds for RIM wireless handhelds and they looked like shit, but they felt like the future. He considered ways to incorporate these thoughts in his interview.

The two birds in front of him continued to wrestle, bashing their orange beaks, splashing, back peddling to pull away the fish. He wondered if that fish had been transplanted from somewhere far away. Forced here to enliven the scenery, give employees something to look at on their lunch break. Finally one of the birds flapped away with the fish twitching in its mouth. Astonishing how the larger of the two birds was dominated, quitting abruptly as if it knew it had encountered a fiercer version of itself. Martin smirked as the defeated Coromant rustled its wings, letting out an agitated groan. He couldn't help but recall the imagery of a human carping indignantly after being outdone by some competitor or outwitted in a debate.

"Can I help you with something?" the front-desk receptionist inquired Martin. He was paused looking at a mosaic of an exploding head. Not a blood-and-guts explosion, but a bonkers one with shiny streamers and spirals. The entrance to the office building was palatial: two rounded staircases meeting on an upper walkway, everything a combination of shimmering metallic and glass. He could see two men in suits in a conference room upstairs. On the ground floor, three hallways stretched out from where he stood, one between the staircases, the others at right angles. The corridors were filled with an eclectic mix of deco shapes – a large shiny

sphere, a collection of cubes of various sizes – and nature scenes done up in reflective materials.

“Are you here for an interview?” she tried again in a raised pitch that squeaked at the end. A cloying tone that irked Martin. Why do people affect saccharine voices to sound polite? The question was clear and friendly, the added octave at the end just sounded dumb.

“I am actually, but I’m a little early,” he responded in a matching tone of sugary glee. He did a momentary examination. She had silky blonde hair with a white smile; he was guessing mid-forties. A wire showed through her teal blouse. The stiff curve gave some shape to her otherwise flat torso. A golden pendant was hidden in the space between her chest plate and a taut v-neck.

“Oh that’s no problem, what’s your name?” she leaned forward, putting her hand to her chest, rolling her necklace between her thumb and index fingers.

“Martin Trexel. I was told to be here at ten o’clock,” walking over, he leaned his elbow on the counter peering into her workspace while she looked through a few papers. He noticed a picture of two kids playing dress up, or maybe a Halloween photo, but no husband and no ring. She was fit for having birthed two infants.

“Here we are,” she found the sheet with his interview schedule, “our HR rep will be picking you up here in a few minutes. Don’t hesitate to explore in the meantime, the office is a free space. Touch what you’d like, or sit in some of the comfy seats around, these spaces were created to promote relaxation. The

philosophy here is that if you're happy at work, you'll do better work. Relax and work. Breathe and work."

"Sound like mottos I can live with," he smiled and held eye contact, "but tell me, whose little ones are in that photo? They are too cute." He pointed to the plastic frame where a boy and a girl, neither older than ten, made goofy faces. The boy's tongue was out, standing in attack position with a plastic ninja star in his hand and his sister, dressed like a 1920's damsel, dangled a feathery red scarf like a seductress.

"Those are my kids, Hope and Ezra. You'd think they were hopped up on something they have so much energy, but raising them has been a blessing," she smiled and picked up the picture for both of them to inspect.

"Good looking kids. Must have a good looking father as well," he glanced up from the picture to check her response: flattened lips, nodding slowly.

"He was a hunk, to be honest. Passed away when the oldest was just five."

"Oh my, I can't even imagine how one goes on from that."

"You don't, really. I still feel his presence, and see him everyday in our kids." Martin wondered what she was feeling in those moments, what it meant for him to be present.

Silence ensued, both meandering their minds for a way to transition the conversation. Finally a woman in grey suit-pants and an aqua blouse approached. The first thing Martin noticed were her blue eyes.

“Martin Trexel?” she cocked her head in his direction. Martin turned to face her. She stuck out her hand, “Hi, Shelby Harman-Sanders. We met on the phone a few weeks ago.”

“Nice to put a face to a voice,” he smiled and shook her hand with a soft grip.

The two walked down a hallway of offices where she pointed out some of the art she liked. They entered a staircase and went up two floors emerging into a brightly lit lounge with some couches and coffee tables, a few real plants, and a view onto the pond. It was less industrial up here; it felt homier. Her office was the first after the lounge.

“Have you had a chance to look over the schedule for today?”

“I don’t think I got a schedule,” a quiver ran across his face.

“Heather didn’t give you a paper with your times?”

“If that’s the receptionist, then no, I didn’t get anything,” he was relieved he wasn’t to blame.

“Friendliest woman I know, but can be in a bit of a float sometimes. Well here’s some information you’ll need for today that includes a copy.” She handed over a white, glossy folder, thick with pamphlets and packets.

“So you’re with me for the first twenty minutes talking more broadly about your goals and interest in the company. You’ll meet with Sam, the product design team leader next. When he’s finished, he’ll take you to a testing room for a forty-five minute behavioral assessment, after which you’ll do lunch with Mindy from sales. The second half of the day will consist of two quantitative exams and a meeting with our head of marketing. Does that all sound okay to you?”

“Sure, but what is the behavioral test? Is it a paper test?”

“It’s written and verbal, and I honestly have no clue what questions will be asked, but I can tell you it’s mostly situational. Testing ethics, personal management tactics, and communication skills.”

“I think I can handle all those,” he gave her a joking smile.

“Well great. Now let me start by asking you how long you see yourself working for us? Is this a short term opportunity, or are you hoping to start a career?”

“I’m definitely seeing this as a career starter, but I don’t know if I could say with certainty how long I plan to be here without knowing the job and the people a little better. Right now I’m excited by where the online world’s headed, the possibilities seem endless, but it appears to be changing too rapidly to make long-term predictions about the industry and my place in it. AskJeeves, MSN, eBay, there are so many alternatives being presented to our old patterns of life. Who knows what will catch on?”

“Well, I’m sure you’re aware that we’re one of the highest trafficked sites on the Internet so I think you’ll find this to be a great place to learn the current atmosphere of the tech world. And it’s your background in psychology and philosophy that makes us believe you’ll be an asset in figuring out *what’s catching on.*”

There was a cute attitude injected into how she reused his phrase. This hinted to him that a humored, encroaching on flirty, tone would carry him through this part of the interview. He spent the next fifteen minutes performing quick eye

rolls, chuckles, and, sarcastic quips; all the while maintaining an air of confidence and reassurance – nodding his head to implicate mutual understanding when speaking, peppering his descriptions with terminology like ‘ease-of-use,’ ‘network dynamics,’ and ‘smart design.’ He acted impressed at her Alma Mater – UCLA – and complimented her outfit between answers. Each of these things was strategic, a meticulous building up to avoid being seen as fake or sucking up, the art of conversational risk aversion: never say what you mean; figure out the other’s expectations and play to them. Shelby’s were somewhere between ‘flatter me’ and ‘impress me.’

The product design team leader was an easy win – a nerdy guy who needed the slightest prod into feeling accepted to be happy. A winding conversation starting at color schemes, passing through what search trends signify to product need, and ending with sci-fi. Throughout Martin gave off the impression of camaraderie, treating him like the new friend to the group who was getting approval. Sam’s farewell closed on Martin’s hope to generate a friendship vibe, “We’ll have to set up some Starcraft once you’re moved in out here.” Martin had been truthful to Sam, he loved Starcraft, but this was only to be revealed to a select audience. The real business players saw games like this a distraction and he was seeking a role as a moneymaker not a creative child.

Sam left him seated in the first room he’d been in without some piece of glass. He read the instructions on a test packet: twenty minutes to write out answers to as many questions as he could before someone would be by to collect the booklet and start the oral examination. Each question was designed to get a feel for

your social hermeneutics – what to assume about doctors in sweaters versus doctors in suits, a woman who makes firm eye contact and one who hides her glances – softballs mostly. Only one threw him off guard:

15) Respond to the following scenario.

You're meeting with a firm that builds wireless networks. They ask you to sit down with a hardware developer to discuss selling to IT firms that buy third-party equipment, but request no installation. In the meeting, he uses specialized vocabulary that you're unfamiliar with and asks a question outside of your knowledge base.

How do you respond to his question?

Martin hadn't considered he meeting someone that he couldn't keep up with in conversation, but was guessing that the answer they were looking for availed one's ability to admit his or her limitations; though, it also could be that they know everyone will lie and fake humility so, actually, it's admitting your bullshitting methodology. Catching his thoughts from spiraling into circle of reverse psychology, he laughed at himself. They probably don't even read half of these fucking things.

A man who didn't introduce himself came into the room and asked Martin to sign and date the back of his booklet. He pulled a small black leather-bound notebook out of the breast pocket of his navy blue sport jacket. His tie was immaculately knotted and colored blood red with checkered white lines. "Let's say you walk by an attractive young female," he began abruptly, "and say the breeze happens to blow enough that her skirt lifts, revealing some sexy stockings and lace panties. She quickly pushes her dress down. Did you venture a peek?"

"What are my intentions? Am I in a club, at work, on the street?"

“Street. It’s the daughter of your boss and you want her to respect you,” he said, jotting something in his notebook.

“What kind of top is she wearing?”

“A v-neck,” the man looked up from writing, the slightest lift in his left eyebrow.

“I’m going to play it safe and assume you meant twenty-something when you said young. She’s the boss’s daughter so I would have already been looking to her face to try and catch her eye. When her dress blows, I smile and look at her sympathetically so she catches me with a smirk that says, ‘we can laugh at this,’ then when she looks away out of shyness, I check out her chest.”

“She’s not shy, she’s closer to thirty and already high up daddy’s business ladder.”

“I still check out her chest because a woman like that isn’t wearing a v-neck if she doesn’t expect people to take notice.”

“Alright.”

He nodded and made another note. This didn’t seem like a planned procedure. Martin got the feeling this was someone more important; not your routine interviewer.

“You’d be surprised how many people lie and say they’d look away.”

“How do you know they’re lying?”

“Well, all men meet Shelby, and since we don’t assume who is gay or straight being this close to Frisco, she acts as a litmus test, passing on her impressions.”

“You do this for all your interviewees?”

“I don’t personally, but someone does, yes. Especially when we get a cover letter that claims,” he turned back a page and squinted into his notebook, “you can read the psychology behind the nuanced choices of consumer life,” he looked back up, “as if it’s a book open in front of you. Normally we’d see this as too audacious, but seeing that you’ve interned with Apple and did research on the relationship of advertising and insecurity, we wanted to see what you had to say for yourself. Before we continue, may I ask, why didn’t go back to Apple? Or are you planning to go back and this is a back up?”

“No, didn’t even apply. The colored computers and gimmicky looking designs. It’s all for kids and teachers. I’m more interested in college students and young to mid-career professionals. People in their twenties to forties. These are our big adopters in the coming years.”

“Don’t be mistaken, education’s no small market share and gimmick sells.”

“I’m not mistaken, but everyone chooses their own targets,” Martin heard himself becoming arrogant and decided to cool it off, “and Apple’s market researchers know theirs’, just not my cup of tea.”

“Fair enough. How about this, you meet a guy in a bar, thirty-something, dressed dapper, clearly has money and is good looking, but he’s alone. He talks to the bartender like they’re chums. You overhear him say he’s in finance. He makes some comments about being bored all day staring at the damn ticker. What do we have to offer him?”

“What was he looking at when he entered the bar? What kind of shoes is he wearing? Are they polished? And, is there a pool table or some other kind of game in the bar?”

It went on like this for the next twenty minutes. A person. A setting. A potential consumer. How do we uncover the potential? Then a laundry list of outside-of-the-box questions leading to something hidden, revealed beneath the veneer of the casual. It was hard to tell if he was being tested on his knowledge of people, or whether or not he was part of the herd. But who the fuck was this interviewer? The question of this man’s importance still irked him.

At lunch he ate the fixed course. Each day a new set of options, and if you didn’t like it there was always the salad bar or fried food. Today it was salmon over rice side of asparagus. He picked apart his food listening to Mindy prattle on about living in the Bay Area and how she knows people who used this job as leverage into Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard. He really didn’t care, but she had a good body so he gave her positive feedback, body and facial expressions mostly, few words. Her pinched together tits, glistening smile, and glib demeanor made it obvious she was in sales.

“Do you do internal or external sales?” he interrupted her in the middle of a story about being out in The Castro.

“Oh, uh, external. I’m at conferences a lot of the time,” she took pause at Martin trying to keep rice and salmon on his fork at the same time.

“Mostly men coming around the tables?”

“What are you trying to say?” she gave him a penetrating look – winced eyes, nostrils opening. She was playing roles, too, and knew it. Again his boldness interfered with his careful maneuvers. He was risking a bad review with her so he tried something even bolder to recover.

“I’m going to be honest here. You’re a good-looking woman, you obviously know how to entertain a guest, and I’m certain men flock to you, please don’t deny that. I was being playful. Your stories about going out, the nightlife of San Francisco, the way you present yourself. I started getting an inkling that you had impressive sales stats. Look, I’m not trying to demean, I just wanted to know if you were using what I’m pretty sure you know you have,” he looked her in the eyes and smiled. She was looking down, doing something in her mouth, cleaning her teeth with her tongue maybe.

“Well I’m glad you had the balls to fess up what was under your comments,” she looked him back in the eyes and smiled. A desperate, but successful attempt to cover his misstep.

“I’ll push the ante and tell you that I’m looking for something to do with my one night in town and it sounds like you know the good spots. Any chance you’re free?”

The quantitative exams were loaded with farcical estimates about how many blades of grass fit someplace with the occasional trick question that had answers like, ‘ten cents and a dollar.’ You know, the-horse’s-name-was-Friday kind of shit that tricky uncles pull out on their smarty-pants nephews. These were fun, tickling

Martin's penchant to turn everything into a little game. But by the end of the tests he was starting to get anxious, remembering he really hadn't found the opportunity to delineate his theory of marketing to anyone. The real reason he was the strongest candidate: his personal heuristic to the consumer problem.

During the final interview with the head of marketing he had to hold back from outlining his thesis immediately. He made sure to look dazzled as his interviewer read off numbers and laid out one team's current market research. It took a long fifteen minutes of nodding to reach a point where he was asked to respond in more than a few words.

"Excite.com, America Online, AT&T, they all have search engines. I'm certain you know this, the harder question is, how are they different? You might say presentation, where their major ad-revenue comes from, or some other obvious shit. In my eyes, there is one thing that will highlight the difference, and that's whose going to be left when the dot-com bubble bursts. All the energy, all the money going into the online world, but we also know preferences are developing and many of these guys are going to be losing clicks soon. Let me take this as an opportunity to hear your thoughts. How does Yahoo stay above water when the flood hits?" The head of marketing – Mr. Irving – turned his wrist, gently opening his palm toward Martin.

"I think it's going to come down to what we're funding," Martin let the sentence linger in the air. Ambiguous and obvious, he wanted to gauge any initial reaction. He sought out the opportunity to derail a train of thought, redirect a track only visible by suggestion.

“It should come as no surprise when I say that this is all market research is, the whole purpose, figuring out what to fund. We’re quite aware that this will be the deciding factor.”

“When I say funding, I’m not talking about a product, per se. What I mean is the private funding of American Psychology. All sustainable businesses fund a share,” Martin nodded his reassurance, but Mr. Irving rubbed his neck and looked down at the papers on his desk.

“You can talk about it in terms of product design, sure, or investment in a certain share of the market, but what are we really talking about? Consumer demand. How do you secure consumer demand? You entangle your product in their fundamental thought process. Let’s take medicines for example. They point out to you – look, look at this problem that is out of your control. If, indeed, you have that problem then they have to reassure you they can hand control back over to you. It’s a matter of handing you a pill. The whole marketing side of the pharmaceutical industry funds this – our insecurity that we suffer real problems that need handled, that make us abnormal, and when, inevitably, the thousands who believe they suffer some ailment have had enough, the question comes down to who dug in the deepest,” Martin opened his palms up and lifted his shoulders in a “c’mon-you-know” gesture. Mr. Irving leaned back, more interested to see where this was going.

“To make a lasting mark on American Psychology, you figure out what part of the brain is being purchased by your industry, and how can you secure your fraction of it.”

“Tell that to an oil company,” Mr. Irving smirked.

“Right, this is more so the case in new industries and ones with high competition. Oil companies don’t have to play this game. everything is secure for them. They focus on policy and land. The only time this line of thinking appears is when they’re saving face after some oil spill. You know this, I’m sure. Yahoo is just another website in an endless sea of choices that bump around when someone hovers over the URL bar. It’s like walking through the cereal aisle – how do we get them to grab us every time? For fashion products it’s all about picking your body insecurity. You convince women that men are looking at some part of the body you want to cater to then you show them how to make it look good. The important thing for those marketers is keeping in mind how our consciousness came to be – someone else’s gaze, their recognition. In America you can’t get recognition without judgment so we have to teach people how to identify that judgment and feel triumphant over it. This is fashion 101.” A nasally laugh gusted from Mr. Irving.

“For our industry it’s that only brainy nerds understand it, it’s that it’s slower than you’d like – these are the insecurities. On the other end it’s the limitless nature of it all. Match these thoughts with the catch phrases out there, “The easiest just got easier,” “My connection to the world,” “Where do you want to go today?” We need to stray away from this stampede of next-generation ease of life and endless possibility selling points, and start targeting people’s secret hobbies and fetishes. Of course we want to maintain class or we’ll lose the casual consumer. However, we need to let people know you can find what you’re *really* looking for here. Porn and scandal, fantasy football, time-wasting games, stamp collections, fish

bait, whatever your thing is that you don't need to or shouldn't be looking at when you're at work or at home and go online, but that you will definitely type in at some point. AOL is not for this, it's too family-oriented. Microsoft is too busy explaining to small and large businesses that adopting them will change their world. No one's scratching our tantalizing little itches. Not in public. We all carry these desires – The Seven Deadly Sins or whatever – but who is going to be the first online company to invest in them? Let's fund these desires and make sure to plant that seed that they can find any and all random hankerings here.”

“You're spot on about the Internet being a place to explore secrets. Hell, I've already caught my son on porn sites, and he's eleven. I'll never support a campaign that classifies us as the garbage dump of web portals, but I'm open to the idea that a platter of vices is precisely what we need to convince people they'll find. This is unofficial of course, but, given what some of the others have said about you, I'd like you to start thinking about how we can advertise this covertly. How to say, 'we have your oddball shit.' You know we may be in need of a gimmick?”

“I know.”

After the interview Martin sat in his hotel, pants unbuttoned, fly down, hand down his pants, watching a re-run of Full House. It was the one where Danny wins 'Bachelor of the Month.' Interested in how the show tackled Danny's sex life without straying from the motif of upholding family values, he sat up, paying close attention. As unappealing as he found the show, he was able to learn something from the tactic of making Danny's sex life seem immoral when he was ignoring Michelle, his

daughter, but then moral again by appealing to the fact that he's a lonely, widowed father. We all know what he needs and we all know that these ladies with huge early-nineties hair are giving it to him. This episode could easily have been set up as a porno – Bob Saget, one by one, fucking each roller-blading, art-gallery-crawling, pastry-making chick under the guise of The Sweetest Dad You Know. With raunchy thoughts on his mind, he remembered that he got a phone number at lunch.

The two decided to meet at a sushi spot downtown. They ate Rainbow Rolls and drank Saki, doing the whole, “Saki, Saki, Saki, bomb!” thing with chopsticks and shot glasses. Mindy wore a skirt with a collage of French advertisements on it that went past her knees and a loose-fit black shirt that tied around her neck leaving her shoulder blades exposed and her chest covered. She talked with deeper pitch than she had at lunch and made jokes about yuppies. They made fun of The Oscars and celebrity worship. They barhopped and laughed at guys with too much muscle – “These fucking guys act like they slaughter buffalo or some shit, what the hell do you need to lift 300 pounds for, it's 1998. We have machines!” She giggled at this, but mostly at how drunken Martin was getting. With his inhibitions down he became less analytic and more comedic.

After a one-AM-beer at a gothic bar, Mindy decided it was her turn to be candid, “How about you stop drinking,” she put her arm around his shoulders and looked at him patronizingly. He was lighting up a cigarette, squinting at something down the street.

“Well shit, sorry I get a little belligerent when I have a good time. Thought you were enjoying yourself.”

“I am, I just want you to be able to fuck me when we’re done here.”

Martin took a hard drag of his cigarette, giving her a squinted glare, testing to see if she was messing with him.

“You sure as hell say a lot, so why don’t you show me what you can do in the bedroom?” she added.

They went back to his hotel room where she quickly lifted her skirt and pulled him over to the bed. She put his hand on her panties, right over the lips of her vagina.

“Rub my clit,” sitting at the edge of the bed, she fell backwards and untied her top. Martin tried going under her panties to slide a finger inside.

“Not yet,” she grabbed his wrist, “tie me up.”

Martin started kissing her, biting her bottom-lip harder and harder each time. He ran his hand up and down her thigh, which was smooth, freshly shaven. He gently ran his fingers along her skin giving some pressure at the little indents created by the tendons between her thigh and her Mons Pubis when her legs spread open. With his other hand he began fondling her breasts. She had small nipples, and he bent down to bite one.

“What are you waiting for? Tie me up.”

“With what?”

“Fucking bed sheets, I don’t know, you’re supposed to be the smart one.”

“Like, all your limbs,” he stopped kissing her and looked up at her, cow-eyed.

“You’re telling me you haven’t done this before?”

“I’ve done *this*, but maybe not what you’re asking.”

She laughed to herself, tilting her head back to look at the window across the room. Martin pulled away from her warm crotch, feeling embarrassed. She got up on her elbows, her breasts dangling over her top.

“Let’s not leave it here, don’t worry, just fuck me.”

After some more foreplay and him taking his pants off, Martin fucked her doggy-style with his hand dug under her belly, playing with her clit. As far as he could tell, she got off when he did. Afterwards, she went to the bathroom and came out completely dressed.

“This was fun, but if you get the job, which you probably will, we can’t do this anymore.”

“Why not? Cause I didn’t tie you up? I’m willing to get into that kind of stuff.”

“Kind of yes, but also, I don’t fuck guys I work with.”

Martin put his pants back on and watched Mindy as she started putting her shoes on. She was hot, and much more intelligent than he first judged. He was already starting to replay how good her body looked when they fucked and how funny she was at the bar. This was the kind of girl he had hoped to meet.

“Take care Martin,” she opened and shut the door without even offering a kiss.

Martin got the call two days later – he got the job. Strategy Coordinator – Marketing Department, 50k plus benefits.