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The Opening Chapters of: *Only A Game*

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I am a Senior English and Linguistics major. I participated in the Gaines Fellowship and the Honors Program. I received The John Spalding Gatton Provost’s Scholarship in the Arts and Sciences and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. Next year I will teach English as a Second Language in a small town in Austria via the Fulbright Program.

I worked on these chapters under the mentorship of Jane Vance and Kim Edwards and I am eternally indebted to them for their wisdom, patience, and willingness to give feedback about crappy writing long enough for said writing to become slightly less crappy.

Faculty Mentor:
Professor Thomas Marksbury, Department of English

Some satisfactions are permanent. It’s been very gratifying to consult on a sustained piece of fiction with a young writer at once as open to criticism and as certain of his own emerging voice as Andrew Crown-Weber. He learned a lot from the leaps and snags and second starts of the process, but then again so did I. The proof is in the resolution, and “Only a Game” is an honest, penetrating, original novel in progress about the painful business of growing up in the twenty-first century. As this year’s model of the oldest of stories, it hearkens back to Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield even as it anticipates texts and techniques yet to come.

We make such contradictory demands of our platonic fiction students — who invariably turn out to be real people in search of consistent advice. Over the course of this academic year, I have watched “Only a Game” evolve from an admittedly clever, somewhat self-absorbed and would-be opus spun out from a brilliant central metaphor into a mature, absorbing and now fully self-contained coming of age tale which movingly explores the aftershocks and repercussions of that initial image. It’s one thing to whistle past the graveyard about such chestnuts as compression and point of view and consideration for the audience, and something else altogether to see Andrew put his old wine into such a useful new bottle.

The opening chapters of:
Only A Game

Abstract
These are what may turn out to be the first chapters of a novel tentatively called “Only A Game,” which could possibly be finished some time in the future, maybe. At present this book-to-be deals with the life of a young man who is addicted to one of the few new drugs to be discovered this century: massively multiplayer online role-playing games. If you are unfamiliar with this digital scourge, have some time on your hands, and haven’t eaten recently, I recommend Googling the term for an eye-opening experience. I won’t spoil all the many surprises and twists and intrigues that will appear later in the narrative (mostly because I don’t know myself at the moment), but I will say that these chapters represent this young man’s interpretation of how he arrived at such an addiction. And, because this young man is diligent enough to begin his account in utero, we must at least commend him for his thoroughness.

Let’s say it was April when Squire Kyle and I awaited our White Whale so our Quest could begin. Let’s say we were dressed to kill: I in shining plate mail with the mythical sword Gondolin slung behind me and Kyle holding his Wand of Healing, his squat body bearing chain mail covered by a purple cleric’s robe down at the Vine Street Bus Stop near the Post Office. Let’s say we were outfitted for one purpose: to trade one death for another. Or more if need be. And that need would probably be because Furor, our enemy, the newly-minted Emperor of all Erewhonia, the wielder of ‘Zentropia – Katana of the Void,’ the Brutus who betrayed and murdered the former emperor Aaron, my better half… let’s say that Furor would be our greatest foe yet faced, surrounded as he was by a horde of followers in his Summer Palace in Las Vegas where Kyle and I would mete out justice in one final showdown.

You could also say that I was a disturbed former-computer gamer whose character was killed and deleted in an online game called PenultiQuest and who had quit his job and burned his bridges in Lexington, Kentucky so that he could dress up in sheet-metal to journey across country to PQCon, the
yearly PenultiQuest Convention in Las Vegas, so that he could kill his in-game murderer in real-life.

Let’s just say I was in a strange place at the time.
“But don’t they say the best revenge is living well?”
This was Kyle, my would-be conscience slumped against the art-deco wall, a façade of smoky glass wafers welded together at the far eastern corner of the bus station. The station was simultaneously a glass cavern at the side of a sea teeming with schools of commuting carp-fish. Our whale-bus was due any moment, so for now I humored my rotund and pensive companion. Kyle is the only person I’ve met who could still seem vulnerable under forty pounds of chain mail. “You could start over. Something new. I’d help you.”

But I was beyond help at that point. I would not sit down – nor stand down, for that matter – for I’d learned to keep my guard up at all times, so I simply paced in front him in the limelight of his earnest, audience eyes.

“Dearest Kyle, I don’t doubt that you would give up your life for me if you thought it would help. I don’t doubt your intentions, which are as noble as ever. But I do doubt your perspective.”

My pacing paused with a clank of oven-pan armor as I removed my helm, a silver spray-painted bike helmet supplemented by scrap metal. My months as omnipotent Emperor of a relatively sizable universe had taught me to seize and heighten whatever dramatic opportunities came my way. Sword in one hand, the other holding helm to hip, I gazed grandly and wistfully toward the Lexington skyline. Padruptiter himself, Game Master of The Two Worlds, offered mood lighting of his own, sending two suns to stain the skyline red since Erewhonia had a pair.

“When you have been to the top of the mountain, when you have conquered and mastered everything worth conquering and mastering, only then would you see we have but one option. See you yonder 5/3rd bank building?” I said, gesturing majestically with sword as laser pointer toward the shiny blue headquarters. “That building, the spot where I first learned of my destiny and that destiny nearly came to an end, I have looked down upon this city from that height and it cannot compare to how I towered in PQ. Thousands quivered with every mouse click and trembled at my slightest keystroke. No, only when you have been so high could you understand our sacred mission of vengeance. When you are King of the Hill and lose your spot, you don’t go searching for new hills. You gather your strength and reclaim the throne. Or die trying. These are the Rules of the Game. We did not choose them, and yet we must obey if we are to win in the end.”

The final ‘win’ went echoing down the length of the cavern to where two elderly men sat on a bench by the ticket booth and craned their heads to look at us, at me, before turning back and returning to their mumbled conversation. It was alright if they looked on me with disdain. They didn’t understand. They could not. But apparently Kyle did not as well.

“But you can’t win anymore,” he cried, waving his wand in the air. “You’re banned for life. You don’t exist in PQ anymore and you can never be restored. The game exists online and you can never log back on. You can’t win at chess if all your pieces are off the board.”

“I thought that, too, my friend. I thought that all was lost until I realized I had to think outside the board, outside the computer screen. Moving chess pieces or characters, that’s just moving around symbols, but those symbols exist outside their realm. I’ve told you how I died, haven’t I?”

“You’ve told me a thousand times!”

“And I’ll probably tell you a thousand more. Rule of the Game #54: The noble man keeps his demise on his mind at all times. Since you know the exotic means of my undoing, then surely you can see the symbolism, the transcendent transformation this death worked upon the world? Aaron died so that the two worlds might be joined. The sacred could join with the profane. The world of energy mixed into the world of matter, the spiritual with the mundane, supernatural with natural!”

Aaron was the name of my most powerful character and, for a brief time, the most powerful character in the entire world. His full name was: Sir Aaron Spacemuseum.

Even then, I think I could smell the bullshit piling up, but I kept on going. Behind me the commuters in their cars were driving lazily down Vine, attending to whatever petty missions they were on in their own attempt to rise up the scoreboard.

“When the sun went down in my final sunset on Erewhonia, there was the darkness… the soul-crushing darkness. Though you know all about that…”

“Yes,” Kyle said, soberly. “I knew it long before you.”

“Well when I was in that darkness, when I was neither in pixelspace nor meatspace but in limbo — meatspace being derogatory game slang for what outsider’s called ‘real life’ — I too felt that utter doubt. That there was no game. That all was meaningless. The one world where things were hard and fast was gone and now all I had was this” — I gestured around me — “this slapdash unprogrammed mess people call the ‘real world.’ But then dawn broke and I saw all at once — it poured in like morning light. Aaron, Rythm, all my former selves had died so that I could live now in a fused world. They died to show me that the worlds had always been united, that they had only seemed apart because I had not learned to see clearly. The two worlds were like the red and the
blue sides of 3D glasses. That morning atop the 5/3rd building, all of Lexington and all of Kentucky stretched out before me like one intricate, amazing game board. I learned to combine the two sides and now I see more clearly, more beautifully, more richly. It’s all 3D, Kyle. This is the greatest graphics engine anyone could ever design. This is it. This is the big leagues. This is where the real game is. Look at the detail on this sidewalk. Look at the patterns in the clouds. Look at that court jester walking our way.”

From around the corner came a homeless guy in a dirty jogging suit whose neon colors were upstaged only by his gravity-defying shock of unkempt hair. As he gamboled toward us I realized it was Henry Earl aka Downtown James Brown, a bum become famous for never being sober and always being in jail for said lack of sobriety. His relatively straight gait testified that he was freshly released from the county jail. We made eye contact and I knew his game. You had to pity the guy: stuck in his own tiny little world, seeing people only as means of getting his precious booze. Truly pathetic. But, also, in a strange way it was pure and noble the way he single-mindedly pursued his obsession.

Now he stood before us. Or, more accurately, an entity stood before us. With meatspace eyes he was a homeless man dressed in a jump suit. With pixelspace eyes he was a court jester in full fool regalia. The jump suit was the meatspace version of the pixelspace motley garb and the motley garb was the pixelspace version of the meatspace jumpsuit. I combined the two like 3D glasses to form my hybrid hyperreal reality.

I was totally fucking nuts.

And the jester saw it.

“Halloween’s done been and gone, I believe. What you all dressed up for?”

I phrased my answer for both aspects of this entity. “We are on our way to Las Vegas for a video game convention. We are tracking down the killer of one of our friends and rescuing my Empress.”

“That so?” he said, his wide smile showing a ravaged gum line. There was a pause, as if he was searching for some way to segue from my stated mission to his own, but, finding nothing, he plunged right ahead. “Say, you wouldn’t have any change on you, would you, man? I could use to eat.” The gin breath suggested a liquid lunch.

“My dear man, I could give you some petty silver, but that would not last you very long. You know what they say about giving a man a fish, and all that? Well, today I’m feeling generous. While we’re waiting on the bus, I’ll teach you a few Rules of the Game so you can earn your own silver.”

He gave me a befuddled look, but, because I hadn’t said ‘no,’ wobbled where he was. Sheathing my sword, I reached behind my breastplate for my Bible. Now, it must be said, that this was my personal Bible, custom made over the years. It bore no resemblance to the Ju-deo-Christian tome, save that it too had two testaments which had been rudely crammed together. I’d made it by weaving together the spines of two books: the manual for PenultiQuest (My Old Testament) and the self-help guru Derik Powers’ break out best seller “Everyone’s A Winner: And So Can You!” (My New Testament).

Henry Earl would rather’ve had me pull out money instead of this shabby book. I flipped the book to the self-help section, since it was the more ‘good-newsy’ of the two.

“Oh, here’s a good one. Rule #28: “You have to see it, before you can be it.” Now, see, you’re a bum because you see yourself as a bum—”

“Who you callin’ a bum? You best watch that.”

“I mean no offense, dear sir. I too was once just like you. When I started out I was a mere Level 1 like everybody else: naked, alone, and armed with nothing but a rusty broadsword. But look at me now! It wasn’t easy. The only way I got to where I am now was by first seeing myself as a winner, as a secret king. That’s the only way to change for the better.”

“Man, I don’t want to change nothin’. I just want some change for food.”

“See, you’re still caught up in the ‘survival game.’ You need to ‘shift your paradigm’ toward playing a game more conducive to self-realization.”

“I got a game you could play. How bout trying to find a way so that I don’t have to dig through garbage to live? I’m tired of playing it.”

“Only you can change the game you’re playing! Of course, it helps to have a book like this to guide you,” I said, holding my Custom-Bible aloft.

“I got that covered already,” he said, pulling out a small tattered Bible from his jumpsuit’s pocket. It was a New Believer’s Children’s Illustrated Bible. “I can’t read a word of this here book, but I believe every word of it. When I’m wonderin’ bout how my day’s gonna go, I’ll open it and see what picture I get,” he said, leafing through it like a flipbook. I was instantly intrigued.

“Well for Padupiter’s sake, consult your tome! Prophecy upon how fortune regards our grand mission!”

“Say huh?”

“Tell me my fortune and I’ll give you some money.”

“Oh, hah.” He said, laughing. The poolball ends of his cap swayed as he shook his head back and forth. “Man, you a piece of work.”

A piece of work! Yes, what wisdom from a fool! I was a piece of work: it’d taken me four years of hard work to get to this level of strength and experience.
I made mental note of all he said now, knowing the pregnancy of his prattle.

“Here goes,” he said, looking up toward the night sky while his hands split the book open. His left hand darted upward and then down.

“No picture on this page, want me to go forward or backward?”

I wished like hell I could save my game here, in case I chose the wrong way.

“Forward!” I cried, since progress was all important.

He pawed a few pages forward. “Well I’ll be,” he said, opening the book wide toward me.

Beneath his cracked fingers was an angry sea holding an angry beast, a whale with snorting nostrils, which, thanks to an x-ray cut-away, you could see held a helpless Jonah in its gullet. In keeping with the style of the book, Jonah looked like a strange, anime child, though the beast was as fierce as ever.

And, miracle of miracles, when he lowered the book our own whale thrummed up to the cavern’s mouth and opened its mouth sideways for its exiting passengers.

“A prophetic book!” I was dumbfounded and made a sign of the cross with my sword in spontaneous reaction to the miracle.

“Well you got your fortune told, now where that money at?”

As I reached toward my gold purse, it struck me that this encounter was meant to happen, that it was a part of this quest, and that this homeless man, not only a wise fool and a prophet, was also a helper sent to bring me aid to reach my goal. And that aid was the magical artifact: The Illustrated Children’s Bible of Prophecy. I had to possess it. “Your gold is here, my good man, a few coins from this ample purse. But, say, this whole purse could be yours, enough to feed a man like a king, if you would part with that rotten old book of yours.”

He looked at me quizzically for a moment. “You wanna to buy my Bible? Ain’t for sale, jack. The devil himself could offer me a mansion and I wouldn’t trade him this. This here’s my soul. I’d die before I lost it.”

Rule #14: A strong enough desire destroys all obstacles in its way.

“I’ll give you all this gold plus these two books, my own Bible. They’re a lot newer and make more sense for this world we’re living in right now, anyway.”

“Whew, buddy. I don’t know what world you livin’ in, but why would I want two books I can’t read and I don’t believe in instead of this here book I do? Now where’s that money?”

I scowled and shoved the handful of silver into his mitt. I tried one last gambit.

“You know,” I said, making my voice low, quiet, and quivery. “I only want it because...because...I just feel this emptiness inside of me. Like there’s something missing. And I don’t know, just empty... but also open, you know? Like something could change inside me but I just need that spark to set it off. I’ve been a sinner, but, I just get this feeling, like the angel’s themselves are whispering to me, that this book could bring me over to the side of the lord and deliver me from the devil.” I looked up, to see if he’d bought it.

“Shoo. I knew you was crazy when I saw you rambling on in the corner, but now you done shown you crazy as a fox. You ain’t ready to get nothing in your heart, right now. You slippery as a snake. Don’t worry about finding Jesus, man. He’ll find you soon enough.” And with that he turned and wobbled away.

I cursed at the ground and stamped my mighty boots.

“R, come on,” cried Kyle, standing at the whale’s mouth, ready to board.

I flipped my cape angrily as I went toward the bus. Denied already at journey’s beginning. Fortune seemed to be turning against us. I boarded the leviathan, climbing its stairy tongue which lolled from the side of its mouth, panting like an idling engine. The conductor seated in the beast’s brain stared at me with a smirk of amusement

But then I received a message from Heaven, an epiphany of sorts that gave a certain knowledge of what to do and how to act. I received this power, coincidentally, shortly after my character was deleted. Now I knew the next part of my quest.

I turned to the Captain of the Whale and said: “My dear man, hold this beast here for me. I’ve something I must do.”

The Captain replied with a salty seaman’s gruffness: “Bus leaves in one minute. Don’t matter who’s on it.”

A glorious, metallic *PLING* tone shivered the air, which announced the undertaking of a MiniQuest. And in the right hand corner of my vision a timer appeared, counting down the 59 – 58 – 57 seconds remaining.

“Fortune favors the bold!” I cried and dismounted the humming brute.

My armor clinked and clanged as I rounded the corner and found him stumbling uphill toward High Street. The noise robbed me of my chance to rob him by surprise, for as I jangled toward him he spun around, his confusion shifting to groggy recognition to furious readiness. As I closed in he crouched into a tight fighting stance. At that moment he became an NPC, or non-player character, that is to say a monster to be vanquished. Keeping my momentum I tackled him straight on, butt ing my shoulder into his chest as we both slammed to the ground. I started to work my way up his thrashing body to pin his arms with my legs but found there was more feist than anticipated in the old bum who, when
I reached into his coat to grab the book, took hold of my arm and pulled his way up it’s length to bite at my exposed neck. He succeeded. I reared back and, he, fastened to me by both hand and mouth came with me. This backward shift of weight caused us to both tumble down the sloping sidewalk, at first end over end and then horizontally spinning, an like an elongated multi-sided human die which rolled and bounced in a j-shaped path until we crashed into the cement wall bounding the alleyway. As luck would have it the roll came out in my favor, with me on top, and seizing the advantage I unleashed a series of one-handed blunt attacks with my fists upon the exposed weak point of Henry’s face. I continued the pummeling until Henry’s hitpoints were exhausted, his arms no longer flared about trying to shield his face or strike at my own. His eyes closed and he passed out.

In the air appeared golden text:

“You have slain a_bum07! You have gained 500 experience points! You have become better at hand-to-hand fighting (8)!”

And then, even better, I heard that beautiful, golden chime. *DING!* which meant that I’d gained a level. I jumped up in celebration, and then, remembering my time limit, quickly knelt down to loot the body. As I did I got the message:

“You have obtained the Illustrated Children’s Bible of Prophecy!”

Being a fair-minded and noble guy, I opened my ration sack and left him a loaf of bread and said, before sprinting back to the bus: “Man does not live by Bibles alone.”

And I was back on the bus before the timer ran out and the whale closed its sideways grin and began its leviathan swim and the world gave a resplendent *PLONG*, the beautiful response to the *PLING*’s call that said “mission accomplished,” quest fulfilled. Though the passengers on the bus, the young woman and her small son, the elderly redneck couple, the punk goth girl, the Mexican guy, though on one level they all avoided eye contact with me after glancing at my get up, on another level they were avertting their eyes out of respect for a conquering hero, and thus the march to the back of thrumming bus was a triumphal procession, the black polyurethane floor was also a red carpet, and thus also the whale’s tongue. I sat down by my squire and raised the book aloft.

“Ask and ye shall receive,” I said.

Kyle looked me up and down. “Looks like you did more than ask.”

“Ok. How about “Take and ye shall get?”’

The whale veered starboard up the connector road toward High Street. The form of Downtown James Brown still lay on the ground, pinned by gravity to the sidewalk, until the Whale took another turn and it swam out of view.

I layed Gondolin down on the seat beside me, grateful I’d not needed to use it so early in the quest. While Gondolin was simply a children’s plastic sword, the two rows of razor blades welded onto an iron rod running the length of the plastic blade’s interior were real. Appearances can not only be deceiving. They can be deadly.

2

Now you may be wondering how I became a tin-can knight embarking on a cross-country quest of vengeance. I too wondered this after I suffered my most recent, and hopefully last, ego annihilation, which we will get to in our good time. Though I’ve never been a big fan of cause and effect, it goes a little something like this: I was in such a state because I became addicted to PenultiQuest. I became addicted to PenultiQuest because I started playing it. I started playing because, among other reasons, back in high school David Gash, a senior, hoisted me, a freshman, up against the Centerville High School Wall of Fame and... embarrassed me.

But for its terribleness it would have been a thing of beauty to have watched Gash’s hands fasten on the breast of my jacket, grip firmly, then heave my quivering body up into the cold air of the gym to smack against the Wall of Fame with all the choreography of a brutal ballet.

This was back when I was not insane and didn’t have double vision, so Gash did not appear as a vengeful and furious giant or demon. He appeared as he did in meatspace: a soccer team captain’s body much stronger than mine wearing trendy clothing much cooler than mine bearing a face much handsomer than mine that was twisted in grimace that would have made his red afro, if I’d been insane back then, look like a flame haloing his head.

There was simply staring in the brief moments before the end-of-school-day bell echoed through the empty gymnasium.

“Nobody talks to my sister like that. Especially not some piss-ant little freshman like you.” He emphasized each syllable with a fresh slam against the wall.

How does one answer such a statement? I did not have my lines and was forced to ad lib. I replied only with the increased trembling of my body and grotesque distortion of my face whose mouth sputtered and searched for words, finding none.

“You fucking embarrassed my little sister you little shit. You know what, though? You hurt her, I hurt you.” Another slam on the ‘you;’ this time my limp head flopped back and met the sharp edge
of a commemorative plaque — perhaps the Women’s Triple Jump record. The sharp pain at the back of my head traveled down past the twin pillars of his arms, cutting through the dull pain all over to reach down to my retreating genitals. In the midst of my tightening muscles, I felt an impending loosening, and clamped and squirmed to halt it.

This humiliation against the wall followed hot on the heels of another humiliation. Before I had fled my classroom, before Gash had found me breaking for the exit and cornered me in the gym, not two minutes previously all had been normal. I was in shop class, the final class of the day, wallowing in the normal. No! Not normal. I, my backpack, my aura: it all was aglow with glory from my first real party, a Lake House Party, the weekend before. As I remembered it I was the life of the party, and though I’d blacked out sometime during the party’s lifespan, I was certain my behavior in the unremembered time was simply an extension of joys remembered.

Kyle, my best friend, my companion forever, my soulmate in a non-gay way, was in that class as well. He had not been to the party, nor any other party, and I, like everyone else in the class, was trying to forget his presence. I was working my way up the cool ladder and fraternizing with Kyle, the pudgy nerdy weirdo dweeb, would ruin my promising future. After all, going to a lake house party as a freshman put me ahead to the game.

The end-of-the-day announcements brought me back to “GO.”

“Good afternoon Centerville High. How’s my favori-te school doing? Just a few quick announcements. As y’all know, we have an away football game this Friday and we really hope everybody will come out and support the team. If we don’t support ‘em, who will? Directions will be available in the lobby on Thursday. Also, I have a special announcement today. It’s a special message from R Fancy to Samantha Gash coming to you straight from last Friday.”

Static hissed from the intercom until a fuzzy recording clicked on: “…it’s like we were meant to be here, you know? I mean I have always like, I mean, like, loved, LOVED you, loved you so much ever since we were just kids before I even had pubic hair, but don’t worry I do now and I bet you do too well of course you do because girls become women before guys become men but Samantha SAMANTHA I want you to make me a man because, because you’re the reason people play the cool game and you only live once right? You’re the reason the sun”…

By then the vice principal had run into the room and stopped the pirate radio.

It is worth noting that, at that point in my personal development, I’d come to believe that high school was a game where the goal was to be popular or die trying. One accomplished said task by accumulating cool points, commodities bought and sold, earned and exchanged within the social marketplace of Centreville High. And in that moment I did die trying and lost all my cool points. I was socially bankrupt, socially dead.

The faces in the class, which had already pivoted to gawk at me, now burst into hoots and hollers and howls of laughter. I left my books where they lay and ran.

And I was out of the room, trying to outrun the laughter pealing from the classroom. I broke down the empty hallways toward the front entrance. If Mom’s car was parked outside to take me home, the plan would be to jump in and tell her to drive us home NOW. But that hypothetical, as hypotheticals are wont to do, remained so, for as I came into the lobby so too did David Gash emerge from the seniors’ hallway between Mom’s minivan and me, he a seething monstrosity and me skidding as I turned one-eighty degrees toward the back entrance. Then came the footage: a string of heavy slaps echoing from the lobby past the lunchroom up the handicap ramp and by the vending machines, until I, certain that he would gain on me, veered toward the gym to lose him by doubling back through the second pair of gym doors. I flung open one set of doors to go in and ran down and flung open another set to go out when he was still coming in, thus he changed course and now I was trapped in the empty gym. I broke for the girls’ bathroom, of all places, but Gash tackled me not far from the entrance, more or less right beneath the “Centreville Wall of Fame,” an intricate metal matrix of athletic superlatives, such as “Highest High Jump” and “Longest Long Jump” with slots beneath for the current champion’s name. I’d always wanted to be up on that board.

And now: here I was! Pinned up by the champion who would make the “Most Goals Scored” slot later that year.

“What do you have to say for yourself, you little shit?”

Having now received a direct question from my assailant, I felt it apropos to answer posthaste. The impulse was correct, though my response, judging by his response, was not.

“Go beat up the guy who played the tape! You think I wanted anyone to hear that?”

This must have struck him as not according enough respect to the person pinning me to the wall, for he slid me down across the name plates behind me and head-buttoed me in the stomach. I “ooofed” of course and felt a plume of pain, but even more worrisomely, I felt the tingle, the nearly irresistible urge to piss.

By now a few of the first kids heading to their cars had heard the commotion and become bystanders standing by the door. Sophomores or juniors, by the looks of it. None rising to my defense.

“This is between you and me kid. Now you’re going to stay up there until I think of some way you can make this up to her.” This beast did not seem to tire but now a change came over his face. His scowl blinked for a second into a smirk, a knowing, almost conspiratorial smirk, before changing back to an even harsher scowl.

Now I am aware that memory of the past often serves the present, and thus my remembrance may be colored by current circumstances, but I’m sure that right then that son of a bitch gave away his hand. This brother held me up not to uphold the honor of his sister, but to raise his own standing in school. And it was all within the rules of the game; you had to give him that. For better or worse, it was permissible to destroy the reputation of another to defend the reputation of your own. Gash, in seizing me, had seized the day. Carpe freshman! Especially when said carpe-ing magnifies your status as untouchable badass.

But to be a badass, you need to make someone your bitch. Guess which loser was the lucky winner of that honor?

“Do you think my sister is some kind of whore?”

“No!”

“Do you think she would ever sleep with you?”

“No!”

“Tell you what; I’ll let you down if you’ll yell this out: ‘My name is R Fancy and I have a small dick and... uh, and if I could ever find it, I wouldn’t know what to do with it.’ And you better fucking yell it!”

Though I’d gotten used to the painful punctuation, learning to brace myself at each period or exclamation point, his next head butt broke through the meager meat of my abs and crushed my vital organs. Most vital of all, for the moment, was my bladder which responded to the pressure with orders of evacuation and I sputtered to admit my eternal sexual, social, total impotence before the dam burst.

But I had not felt that way last Friday, the night that fateful tape was made. That night my ‘best friends,’ Tommy and Patrick, and I had pledged eternal friendship as we drank our first beers together to the thought of our first real party, a Lake House Party, and how, as freshman, we might enter the record books for becoming so cool so fast. We spoke all this into Tommy’s tape recorder, Tommy being my best best friend, since we wanted to save our collective triumph for posterity.

Earlier that night we’d convinced Patrick’s mom of our angelic naïveté by letting her wish us good night with us curled up virginally in our respective comic-book-themed sleeping bags. Inside, we were all convinced we’d get laid that night.

Minutes later we had lost our alcoholic virginity and known the lithe body of liquor in the carnal sense. Then we were out the back door to the street where a creeping S.U.V. opened by Gash, Green, and Rightmeier brought us abruptly into a senior party caravan, scrambling between lip-bound beer bottles and cigarettes held to the side to exhale fog machine fog that enveloped us in our three-deep bitch seat with the blasting Rage Against the Machine shuddering the wisps of fog in time to the bass and the staccato howls of “PAaaA-RRTTY” yelled out windows to the blue Kentucky tree-lined night roads.

I had finally been cast in the beer commercial of my dreams. I was finally amongst the cool.

And I worked like hell to play the part. How? Observing and aping the main actors: studying how beers caps were snapped, how cigarette packs were packed, how seven white heads bobbed to the rap of five black rappers to show appreciation: not too slow and certainly not too fast. Just right. Let the head sway the way the clutch of kegs in the back clinked and clanked.

I calculated spontaneity, faked naturalness, was earnestly nonchalant. I worked hard to take it easy.

At the lake house, Gash swung one keg above his head with a grunt and marched like a conquering Cro-Magnon hunter into the lake house, a small wood building whose few windows glowed like campfire coals in the indigo night. Appropriately, the beer in the keg was ‘Beast.’ We followed behind, the three freshman at the back. Before we stepped in, our shared glance communicated our unspoken communion of coolness. We were three musketeers: one for all and all for one.

“I’m going to give you to the count of three to say it or your chance is over, Fancy.”

I desperately juggled bodily activities: trying to open up the throat while clamping down at the earth chakra.

“Three...”

Fresh beer frothed forth from the keg cups. I was a red Dixie cup myself, was collecting the experience into myself, a vessel being filled with new knowledge. The foam on top was called ‘head’ and you didn’t want too much of it. You tilted the cup to keep the head down and could use face grease to melt the remaining head away. I gave myself 20 cool points for having a perfect cup of beer.

Alone with new people, I searched for Patrick and Tommy, wandering through a room full of girls dancing to gangster rap to the patio where people were playing cards and drinking. I found Patrick and Tommy crammed onto a ratty sofa in the corner. There was no room there. I considered crouching on the lip
of a potted plant but decided that was too desperate. I wandered around. The cool meter spiraled backwards. Look like you’re going somewhere. Talk to people. I went to refill my still half-full cup because I needed a premise, a mission, something with a clear goal.

“How many you had?” said one cool guy to another.

“Me and Nate killed a half-case before we came out, so this here’s number seven,” said another cool guy, lifting his cup.

“I think I’m on 10, but you lose track at double-digits,” laughed back the other.

I made note and drained my glass. It was cool to drink as much as possible.

From across the room came a burst of laughter. Gash had a laugh like an ambulance at night: You couldn’t help hearing it and you had to decide whether to look or to pretend you didn’t hear it. A crowd was circling a sofa upon which a chubby blonde guy was slumped.

“He’s in creature-mode already!”

“The creech is loose,” they cried.

The blonde paid no heed. He rambled to nobody in particular, eyes half-closed, his hands curled into tight, raptor-like claws. Each babbled nonsequitur brought out more laughter from the onlookers.

And then, like a becalmed hinde cow, the creature slumped across the couch’s arm.

“And he’s out!” they yelled and no sooner had he slumped then they pulled up his shirt and filled his belly button with maple syrup, tied his shoe laces together, and drew large permanent marker penises onto his cheek, each point with subtle squirt marks toward his mouth. A ritual shaming. Some must be sacrificed for the amusement of others, I thought.

I made another note: It wasn’t cool to drink too much. I shuddered imaging myself such a ridiculed spectacle.

“Two…” grunted Gash, his smiling face daring me to disobey while I struggled to keep my bladder obedient.

I plopped myself down beside Tommy and Patrick in the newly opened seat. Our group was alone again and we strained for something to talk about so we would be seen having a good time.

All around people were talking and laughing. Each shared stories, anecdotes of past parties. The more you talked and the more people listened, the cooler you were. The more stories you had the more you could talk and the more parties you were invited to. The more parties you were invited to, the more stories you had. The more stories you had the more you talked the cooler you were the more you were invited and so on. This was the cycle of coolness, as certain as the water cycle. I wanted to break into this cycle.

And in my own way, I did. Not as storyteller but story told.

Two pretty girls came up and stood in front of our couch. One wore a purple blouse and had faintly purple lipstick to match. The other had brown hair and bright large eyes.

“Well Ashley, don’t you think these are just the three cutest little boys you’ve ever seen in your life?” said the one with purple make-up, her pursed lips filling her twisty straw with a red mixed-drink.

“Yes I do Becky, and I do wish they would introduce themselves,” said big-eyed Ashley.

The three of us sat like statues and the girls giggled. Finally I stuck out my hand for a handshake and said, “Sorry. I’m R Fancy, nice to meet you. The beer has made us a bit lethargic.”

The girls giggled again.

“Le-what?” said Becky, laughing.

I returned my outstretched hand and deducted 30 cool points.

“Hey Sam,” yelled Ashley. “Hey, do you know these guys?”

From the far side of the room walked Samantha Gash. I hadn’t been within ten feet of her since middle school but seeing her come over made me understand why people played the cool game. It was for girls like her. Her tight, lithe body bouncing our way assigned a mission for me that night, which at the time I was drunk and naive enough to believe attainable: to possess her.

“Oh my God, yes I know these guys! I’ve gone to school with them since we were all in Montessori!”

She gave us all hugs in turn. I received the last hug and feeling the pressure of Samantha Gash’s tiny arms encircling me, for a moment was heavenly and I fought the unsought tremors of impending erection.

“One…” growled Gash, the grim tenor upholding his fierce reputation. His arms digging under my solar plexus were a hell I sought to end by confessing whichever sins he assigned me, though within I felt a bubbling, a carbonation of bad spirits fizzing and buzzing like being tickled by knives from the inside. I still couldn’t say anything and I fought the impending urination.

I couldn’t saying anything to Samantha as she sat, squeezed between Tommy and me on the couch. I wanted to be smooth so much that I became a ball of nerves. As she and Tommy talked I discovered that if you were drinking beer you had an excuse not to talk. I kept the cup at my face, draining it slowly and steadily. When the cup was empty I filled it again.
I had a great time filling the pump now. My arms and body were loose and wobbling now. Things were getting blurry. Now I no longer monitored my speech. Words came out and faces around me laughed. Every laugh was another 10 cool points, I thought, or maybe even muttered at that point.

It was now a card game and a table. You had cards in your hands and had to have people explain what to do with them. It was a game. A black card meant you drank as many drinks as the number and four in a row meant a waterfall everywhere everybody drank and you couldn’t stop until the person to your left stopped and the music was getting thicker and everything was funnier and you laughed when the beer dribbled down your chin and Tommy and Patrick were over with the senior guys having a big laugh waving at you and you wave back, eyes closed feeling how thick the music is and realizing you’re talking like some beast granted the gift of speech.

And to an outside observer you appear a complete fool. But within you feel suave. Your every utterance one more hilarious joke in one long impromptu routine. You feel like you’ve accumulated so many cool points that you could do anything, accomplish any wild goal. And so, when you see Samantha head off alone toward one of the side bedrooms, you follow. You decide it’s time for a private word or two to bring the matter to a head and a satisfactory conclusion.

It takes a rare ass to realize he’s making an ass out of himself. I could not.

I could not have known that following Samantha into that bedroom with the intention of procreation would be a death sentence for me, nor that Tommy’s tape recorder lay on the dresser greedily vacuuming up my monologue as I surrendered to the welling pressure and confessed to Samantha my eternal love in that now infamous drunken earnest outpour.

“Zero!” snarled Gash.

“My name is R Fancy and I have a small dick and” I began, yelling out, voice cracking and high pitched, when another high pitched voice added to the caterwaul.

“David! Stop! Put him down!” This was Samantha. In that moment her ample breasts concealed an ampler heart as she ran toward and through the crowd to my rescue. And yet, perhaps because my painful and awkward teenage longing for her love, vagina, and breasts—not necessarily in that order—was still strong, this final addition to the problem did not quiet but heighten the riot in my loins and, to mix too many metaphors to count, her rescue was the straw that burst the camel’s dam. My body, racked and afraid traitorously disobeyed the orders of my mind and released the pressure of my groin.

Warm and moist the urine dripped from my shrunken member and began to pool in my tighty whites, crossing that cotton membrane to stain across the face of my pants. One needed no instruction manual to read the message of my shorts: manliness, honor, and my entire social universe were on trial, and as one awaits the results of a home-pregnancy test, one could only read the moist blot bleeding across and down my shorts as an uncontestable negative, failure crudely scribbled in bodily fluid.

I’m told that some lizards use this trick to escape predators. I may be quite highly evolved.

The laughter did not start immediately. Within the hush that arrived as the pant stain appeared there were the acoustics of disgust as Gash gagged, the flutter of my shirt as he unlatched and I fell, and then, loudest and clearest of all the wet repercussion of collision as my limp body landed toes, knees, and finally hands onto my own thin puddle.

The laughing started just after that. Not only were they not laughing with me, they weren’t even laughing at me: their laughter went through me. Tore through me like piss through toilet paper. Slipping and sliding in the limelight I scrambled to my feet, taking one last masochist scan of my audience, a Pandora glance, before exiting the gym at a sprint. Then the school. Then the parking lot.

I traded piss stains for grass stains as I desperately humped the ground in a vain attempt to dry that cursed soak. I did not dare return to the school where Mom, presumably, now waited impatiently out front for a son who would not appear. Instead I walked the opposite direction across the overgrown field. I walked the three miles to home, avoiding all roads where I could, darting across them when need be until I escaped the thin band of urban and suburban and finally made it to the open, rolling grass hills where shy cattle grazed.

Out in the pasture at a small stream in the trough of the gently undulating hills, I could see no sign of town, no sign of humanity at all in every direction.

A wish welled up in me then that when I crossed the stream and peeked the hill in front of me, it would not be Centreville or Kentucky that surrounded me, but another time, another place.

But it was just more grass and trees and houses in the distance.

But I’d get my wish soon enough.