Explorations in moderation: A collection of essays

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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INTRODUCTION

Creative nonfiction is my passion—my pursuit. While other types of writing are interesting, I see them as foundation for the work I do in creative nonfiction. I enjoy reading memoirs and personal essays best. I’m entranced with the notion that authors can make a reader relive personal experiences, that they can transcend personal moments through vivid language and metaphor, that they are writing about life.

Every time I write nonfiction, I draw from the material of life. My goal is to always lift my lines off the page and connect with my reader. While the subject matter of my writing may not always be universal, my hope is that the experiences of my life can surpass boundaries and give readers a new perspective on their own situations—allow them to see life as I have. After all, what is good writing if it does not lend a hand to the reader in understanding life from a new perspective?

The one thing I have learned most about my writing during my graduate study is that my essays focus on people. Many of the professors under which I have studied here put a large emphasis on the importance of the land. But unlike most of the scholars at Iowa State, I cannot claim the Midwest as my place of origin. I am a product of the East coast landscape. The acres and acres of cornfields and separation of people in Iowa have replaced the miles and miles of roads and people living on top of one another that is so common in the East. In essence, the culture of people from the East has become the landscape on which I focus my writing.
A variety of people meet King Odysseus during his journey homeward in Homer’s epic poem, *The Odyssey*. Through these interactions, Odysseus learns the valuable lesson that moderation is key. Whether it is fighting in battle, controlling his hubris, or satisfying his hunger, Odysseus learns that taking the moderate route always results in the best outcome during any endeavor. Homer’s entire epic poem is about this affirmation of human life and values.

Like *The Odyssey* that embodies the notion of journeying, *Explorations in Moderation* shares experiences from the travels of my life dealing with extremities. It’s about being young and finding out where to fly, how I belong in a variety of situations, and how to rise above some of the mazes I find myself in throughout the years. Discovering who I am directly involves learning the value of moderation: Sometimes this moderation comes in taking the time to listen, as in “Cactus Pete,” while other times it just comes from understanding those who are different, as in “A Matter of Convenience.”

Many of the characters and situations that are found in this collection of essays are almost too uncanny to be believable. But often this is the case with nonfiction—it’s more bizarre than any fiction writer can imagine.

As mentioned above, the essays in the collection are about people—in physical, emotional, and mental realms. The underlying themes about these people focus on religion, family, and the law. Unfortunately (or in some cases, luckily), you can never live the exact same experiences as me. But I ask that you learn from my essays about understanding the middle road of life as I have by writing them.
I remember sitting with my eldest brother John in our living room on the most disgusting looking furniture I have ever seen in my entire life. The sofa and loveseat were dark brown, and the weave of the fabric reminded me of a burlap sack. But the worst part (and what made it so ugly) was the variegated threads of orange, lime green, and mustard yellow set against the dark brown. My parents bought this furniture when they first moved into our house in the early 70s, and I'm sure at the time, the look of the furniture was fashionable and trendy. Ten years later when I came around, I couldn't imagine how anyone ever thought this furniture was tasteful.

John didn't give me lessons about sex, teach me how to play football, or show me how to drive. He didn't really do any of the "normal" things that an older brother teaches a younger one. But he did teach me to read on the disgusting, yet comfortable, furniture.

I was 4 or 5 years old, and John was probably a junior in high school. At night after we had dinner and he did his homework, John would call me into the living room for our reading session. Sitting next to each other on the couch, he would read to me. We started out with simple books like Dr. Seuss' *The Cat in the Hat*. Gradually, we began shifting from pictures dominating the text to the text containing only a few pictures every couple of pages. We worked our way through many Seuss books, *Sounder*, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, much of *The Hardy Boys* series, and many more.
Each night John would read aloud a chapter or two of the story. At the time, I idolized him for being such a great reader. I guess it's rather obvious that a high school junior reading a book designed for 3rd or 4th graders would be a simple task. His reading was excellent. He developed voices for the characters. Each character's voice was always distinct although, from night to night or reading to reading, the voices sometimes altered. But that didn't matter because his reading transcended me to whatever place occurred in the books.

The book I requested him to read over and over was *Hildy and the Cuckoo Clock* by Ruth Christoffer Carlsen. I remember thinking how cool it was that the author's middle name sounded like mine, the only real variation being spelling. When you're little, you think your name means so much and is so important. If there was a Christoffer out there, even if that was someone's middle name, writing great stories like *Hildy*, then maybe someday I too could write.

*Hildy and the Cuckoo Clock* involves Hildy moving into a new school and learning to deal with her classmates. Together, Hildy and her new friend Rob Fortin, with the help of a magical cuckoo clock, get into some crazy adventures. My favorite one is when the washing machine spills over and fills the whole house with bubbles. Hildy and Rob float on them and ride the bubbles down the hill behind her house.

I identified with Hildy so much because we had a cuckoo clock in our living room. Every hour a little bird popped out of tiny red doors above the
clock-face and spoke its notorious "cuckoo." There were also two little men who operated a saw that would cut a log in between the cuckoos.

Every night when that clock struck nine, the same scene unfolded in my house:

"Christopher, time for bed," Mom called.

"Ok, I'm going. Just five more minutes," I said.

"Now!" said Dad.

I looked over at John, and even though he heard my parents, he kept reading. I continued listening intently to every word. Until around 9:30 pm or maybe sometimes even 10 pm, when my parents finally came into the living room and physically dragged me into my bedroom. There I was to kneel and say my nightly prayers, while my father hovered over me to make sure I actually said them.

Oftentimes I prayed to God to make our cuckoo clock magical. I longed for the day when the cuckoo clock would let me have some of the same adventures as Hildy. Unfortunately, that never happened.

But what did happen was that after having John read *Hildy* to me so many times in a row, I eventually learned the words and could read it back to him. All 200 pages! His encouragement and a little help with the three-syllable words got me reading. The process was slow at first, and like the two-man saw on our cuckoo clock, we would go back and forth. Sometimes he would read a paragraph and then I would read one, or sometimes a whole page at a time,
back and forth. There came a point when I started to dominate the reading. In the end, I was reading the books aloud to him.

Around this time, he had graduated from high school and moved away for college. He wrote a letter to me every few weeks and included some possible book titles that I should check out from the library.

He eventually graduated from college and moved to California. However, the letters and book suggestion list continued to be sent. And every other week I demanded that my mother take me to the library so I could check out his suggestions.

"I'm going to run to the store while you look for books," Mom said, while dropping me off at the library.

"Ok," I said.

"Be out by the curb when you're finished so I don't have to park the car and come in to get you."

"Sure," I said, as I watched her drive away.

Once in the library, there was a standard routine. First, check the card catalog to make sure they had the books. Second, head to the fiction section and find them. Third, check out.

I usually got two books at time. One day when I was about 12 years old, I collected Dean Koontz's Watchers and John Sandford's Rules of Prey from the shelves. I walked up to the check out counter and handed the librarian the books and my card.
“I’m sorry but you can’t check this book out,” she said, pointing to the Sandford book.


“Well, you have a young adult card, and we aren’t allowed to check this book out to you.”

“That’s dumb.”

“I’m sorry, but those are the rules. Do you have a parent here? Because if your Mom or Dad gives permission, we can check the book out for you.”

“Well, not right now. My mom ran to the store, but she’ll be back in a few minutes. Can you hold these books until she comes?”

“Yes, that is no problem.”

I walked outside of the library, sat on the corner of the curb, and waited. In a few minutes, I could see and hear my mother’s 1972 bright cornflower blue Volvo station wagon chugging down the street. (This vehicle is the only reason I know what a choke is!) As the car approached the corner where I was standing, she slowed down and the brakes screeeeched loudly. She rolled down her window.

“Where’s your books?”

“Well, there’s a problem. You need to come in and talk to the librarian lady.”

After a sigh, “Christopher, I told you I didn’t want to have to go in.”

The issue was not that she didn’t want to come in the library, but that she worried if she shut the car off, there was always the possibility it wouldn’t
start again. One time while at the library, she couldn't get it to start. We had
to walk home six miles that day. Since that time, I didn't think my mother had
stepped foot in the library. She must have thought there was a bad curse.

After she parked the car, she met me outside the doors of the library.

“So what's the problem? Were those last books overdue?”

“No. They said I can't check these books out because I have a youth
card. So I need your permission.”

We approached the counter and the librarian explained the problem to
my mother. Apparently, there was some sort of mature content in the books I
wanted.

My mom turned to me and said, “How about you pick out some different
books?”

“No, I need these. They're on the list from John. I'm sure they're okay.”

I showed her the list to back up my claim. I've found that using my older
brothers' experiences to manipulate my parents was a good thing. Always. For
instance, if I wanted to do something that I knew my brothers had done and my
parents said “no,” I pointed out that my brothers had done it. Or, if I wanted to
do something that I knew my brothers did but didn't work out and my parents
said “no” to me, I pointed out what went wrong for my brothers (showing their
faults) and then promised not to make the same mistakes (proving I'm smarter).

“Oh, if John suggested them, I'm sure they're okay.”

I nodded in agreement. I collected my now checked out books, exited the
library with my mom, and we made it home with no car trouble....that time.
I started reading Sandford's *Rules of Prey*. The story follows detective Davenport, who in his free time invents video games that he sells for cash. He is called by the Minneapolis police department to aid in a case that involves a psychopathic serial woman-slayer.

After about 10 pages, I realized why this book would be considered "mature" and why I needed more than a youth card to check it out. The word "fuck" was used too often to keep track. Up to that point in time, I didn’t think I’d ever seen "fuck" used as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb so many times.

And then there was the sex—graphic sex that leapt off the page. My unexposed, naïve mind thought I was reading a pornographic novel! As a 6th grader, I was still undergoing changes associated with puberty and trying to make sense of it all. This book thrust me to the forefront of understanding. I suppose one could argue that inductively my brother did give me some lessons about sex.

Also at that time, I was still struggling with my role as a Christian and trying to understand my father’s regime of what it meant to be a true Catholic. I knew that if I ever used the word "fuck" in front of him, I’d have a whole day kneeling session to repent for my wrongdoing. I also knew that God knows all my thoughts, and so I would be headed straight to Hell for even reading about sex.
The sex in the novel wasn’t marital sex. In fact, it wasn’t even pre-marital because the characters in the story had no plans of marriage—just one night stands! This book, and others John suggested, allowed me to question my worldview on Catholicism. I thought that only people who were married had sex. If you weren’t, sex was a mortal sin, and people would be damned to Hell for doing so. But suddenly this book suggested that my understanding of things might not be as concrete as I previously thought.

But just to be on the safe side, I never read the book when my parents were around. If they were, I felt dirty and a little ashamed. And my father would cast me out as nothing more than a sinner if he ever found out.

Growing up, I never saw my parents read, other than the newspaper that my father glances at each morning. I have never seen a book in his hand, with the exception of the hymnal at Sunday Mass. For a while, I used to question whether or not he and my mother could even read.

My brother stepped to the forefront and adopted the parental role of teaching his little brother the value of the written word. While I appreciate his taking the time and teaching me to read, I feel like his reading selections should have been different. I couldn’t fathom why my brother would want me to read books that housed vulgarities. We never discussed the books I read, other than if I liked them or not. There was no dialog between us of pre-marital sex or the use of vulgarities as everyday language. By reading these books, John never questioned his faith. In fact, he is as devout to the Catholic Church.
as my parents. So why would the books make me question things? Was I reading further into them than John was?

I want to think there is a deeper meaning for the selections he chose, like trying to lead me to a more examined life and that the world exists beyond my father's Catholicism. But I never seem to find that thread. In reality, I think it was just that John wanted to see me reading. The content took second place, as long as I was reading.

John continued to send me lists suggesting books to read over the next few years. I continued to read them. And the books continued to contain sex and an abundant use of "fuck." But I trusted his judgment on books for a long time; he was the one after all who picked out *Hildy and the Cuckoo Clock.*

I cannot remember when the book lists stopped exactly, but I guess it was around high school when I started taking literature classes. Suddenly, I was too busy or had too much of my own class reading to give attention to John's booklists. I also discovered that the books he suggested were not of the best quality. After I graduated from *Hildy,* I never connected with the characters in *any* the books John suggested. All of the books were driven by plot page turners, and the characters were flat.

The stories in my literature classes were completely opposite. They all focused on characters—understanding their motives and connections to human existence around them. No longer was I flipping pages to see if the serial killer would be caught by the end of the book, or if the unexplained mystery would really have a logical explanation (which were always the cases). Now I read to
understand why Reverend Dimmesdale remained silent about his fornication with Hester Prynne for so many years, or to verify how a life of decadence may be appealing on a physical realm but understanding the harsh realities of what happens to Dorian Gray’s soul, or to identify with Telemauchus and if he could ever live up to King Odysseus’ shadow, or to determine whether Hamlet’s master plan of feigning madness really reached the revenge for his father’s death that he so deeply sought. I cared about these characters because, to me, they were real. Just as I had to make conscious decisions to deal with everyday situations, so did these characters. I could learn from them because the authors wrote them as if they were three dimensional, as if they were sitting right next to me.

Eventually in our living room, my parents bought new furniture. The burlap weave was out and in came a much more suitable fabric. My father also decided to remove the cuckoo clock because it now longer fit in with the décor. He stored it in the back part of our basement; the two-man saw became caked with gunk and dust and was to never to move again.

When John stopped sending book lists because I wasn’t reading them anymore, he also stopped sending letters. In fact, I honestly don’t think I have received a letter from John in over ten years. It was as if somehow when the reading connection I had with John halted, so did our communication.
SACRAMENTS & SACRIFICE

My name is Christopher Toth. Christopher—Bearer of Christ. How can this be? Obviously whoever is in charge of naming must mean to call me Chester or Chase, or whatever names come before Christopher in the baby dictionary. I cannot be the one to carry the burden of Christ. But my parents apparently believe I am.

There is a picture of me just before I am to be dunked into the christening bath. Someone is holding me, probably my godmother or godfather, in the center of the picture with the holy water basin behind me. The priest's hands are in a corner of the prayer book and a bowl. If I knew the name. My arms are stretched straight up in the air, the only limbs poking out of my pure white christening outfit, as if I am calling to God to bring himself upon me. My face shows contentment. Perhaps it is not contentment at all, but fear of the approaching obligation. I cannot seem to angle or hold the picture in just the right way to tell what my true feelings were. A few minutes after the picture is taken, I'm sure shouts, cries, and tears of an unhappy baby rang through the hollow church as I am anointed into the Catholic faith, and my head is dunked into the basin.
I have another picture of my christening. I am being held by the priest, with mother and father standing near. I am sleeping, probably exhausted from the crying session I just endured. Dad isn’t looking at me, isn’t looking at the priest, isn’t looking at anything really, just staring blankly. Mom is looking, not at me, but at the priest. Examining the picture, I realize she is not even concentrating on him. She is staring at the priest’s white collar, which protrudes from his black shirt. I don’t know his name, and to be honest with you, I don’t care enough to research it. Maybe my mother is wondering why she has just forced her baby to adopt a religion that he may one day come to loathe. Or perhaps she is reflecting on her own life, trying to figure out if being christened was best for her.

Years later, it is Sunday morning around 10:15 am, just after the nine o’clock mass has ended at St. Peter’s Roman Catholic Church. I sit in the far back seat of my family’s minivan while Dad drives and Mom reads the church bulletin. Just as I am about to waft into a nap...

"Christopher!"

"Yeah, Dad?"
"You were rather quiet on the ‘Apostle’s Creed’ and I only saw your lips moving during the ‘Our Father.’ I don’t think any sound was coming out."

"Really?"

"Yes. You know, God is watching and listening to your words. You need to proclaim them loudly if you ever want to be saved. How about you say them out loud now a few times till we get home? That way God can hear you."

Now that sounds like tons of fun! Here is my chance for God to hear each of my words instead of them being muffled with hundreds of other voices.

"Sure Dad. We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God..."

I say the prayer. The words are merely something I have memorized; they mean nothing.

As Catholic as my family is, I don’t have to attend a religious school. For that I am rather thankful—not having to wear navy blue pants and a white button down shirt every day, not having to attend prayer sessions every morning, not
having to be immersed in God all day. I'm not really sure why I don't have to go, for my three brothers attend Catholic grade school. It probably is the extra money my parents will have to spend on me. Public school means free; Catholic school doesn't.

In order to make the sacraments I have to attend special classes at night called CCD. (I never really knew what that stood for.). I hate going to these classes, but there is no way to get out of them. If I don't attend, I'm headed straight for Hell.

I make my First Holy Communion while I am in third grade because I go to public school. Everyone else in my CCD class goes to Catholic school and is only in second grade. I guess God feels that Catholic school kids are ready to accept Him at an earlier age. To my classmates, I am the "dumb kid" because I am a year older learning the same material as them. But I'm not dumb. I know the stuff probably ten times better than any of them ever will. Dad makes sure of that.

"Teenage mutant ninja turtles, teenage mutant ninja turtles, teenage mutant ninja turtle...Turtles in a half shell...Turtle power!"

"Christopher!" Dad calls.
"What?"

"Sure hope you know your prayers as well as those dumb songs. You study your prayers today?"

"Yep."

Dad knows when I am lying; he always does.

"Let's go."
"No, I don’t really have time to..."

"Let’s Go! Kneel!"

I kneel for hours on our hardwood floor. Part of that time is to be spent meditating while I reflect on my “sins;” the rest is to learn prayers for the damn CCD class. When my knees are sore and fiery red, my time to rise comes. I stand and recite prayers to my father, while I await judgment.

“My God, I am sorry for all my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong, and failing to do good, I have sinned against you who I should love above all things...”

“Wrong! It’s against you whom,” he shouted in a tone that reverberates off the walls in our house.

No surprise really. Even though I know the rest of that twenty-some line prayer, it doesn’t matter. I’m going to Hell for confusing who with whom. What am I thinking? Whenever Dad quizzes me, though, I always mess something up. Perhaps it is the pressure of him staring at me, or just knowing that if I get it wrong, I will be back on the hardwood floor for a couple of more hours. Salty tears stream down my face for disappointing my father and because of the pain. But I discover a way to use the tears to my advantage. I wipe my knees on the drops that hit the floor. The cool moisture on my raw knees provides comfort.

Hours of doing nothing but kneeling wears me down. I’m so exhausted that I literally fall asleep kneeling. It becomes a game to see how long I can go before my father catches me snoozing and he yells the infamous “Christopher!”
in that militant voice, as if saying, if you do not do what I want, God's wrath will get you.

Jesus being my Shepherd and I a member of his flock is the overall theme for my first penance when I am in third grade. Sister Kathryn decides we will make lambs and situate them in front of the altar to let everyone know the Shepherd is welcoming back his lost lambs. I am lost all right. But I probably strayed too far to ever hear the Shepherd's call.

Sister Kathryn sees this lamb thing as a staging production of a Broadway show—the lambs under spotlights, while my class sings songs, recites prayers. Our lambs, she says, have to be perfect or else God will not fully accept us, and we will wind up in Hell. She gives everyone in the class an outline of the lamb's body, which we need to trace and cut from white poster board. The next step is gluing on cotton, followed by coloring the eyes and nose. Sister Kathryn holds a special session for parents to come and learn the exact way to assist their child in assembling the lamb.

The night my parents leave for the information session I take it upon myself to start creating my lamb. I finish all steps within a half hour—the shape is cut, the cotton balls are glued, the eyes colored black. I use my own artistic liberties to color the nose bright pink, thereby having my lamb stand out so God can pick me first.
When my folks get home, they express their displeasure. Well, not my mother so much, as she just agrees with and adds a word to whatever my father says.

“What are you doing?! You’re not supposed to be doing that by yourself. Sister Kathryn showed us how to do it right and asked if we’d watch you when you made yours. How could you be so dumb? That looks horrible and a two-year-old could do better. The cotton balls aren’t lined up and the nose is pink! What kind of lamb do you know that has a pink nose?” says Dad.

Apparently God doesn’t like non-conformists.

My punishment, of course, is a session of kneeling. I guess I need to pray to God to forgive my wrongdoing and ask him to be kind and not to let this stupid act of mine change his mind about giving me the gift of forgiveness, much less eternal life. Instead, I think about how much I don’t like God and how dumb the punishment and project are.

The next day, when my father gets home from work, we sit down together, and I start my lamb once more. Heaven forbid I approach God in an imperfect manner. Under my father’s supervisory eye, my lines are perfect, as is my technique of gluing the cotton balls. For the lamb’s eye, we go to a craft store and buy one of those google eyes. The nose is colored black, as every young boy knows that lambs’ noses are black, not pink.
Confirmation is a fiasco. Or at least the naming part is. In the Catholic faith during confirmation, you select a name, which becomes a middle name. For most people, they are given a middle name at birth and after confirmation have two middle names. I'm not sure what the whole middle name thing has to do with confirmation—the time when the Holy Spirit is sent down upon you. At baptism, godparents take your vows into the Catholic Church for you. In confirmation, it is time to take these vows for yourself.

The bishop of the dioceses in which your church is located comes to perform the sacrament. Your guardian (usually your godmother or godfather) stands behind you while you kneel before the bishop. He says something pertaining to religion and faith and the Holy Spirit. Then as he anoints your forehead with oil in the sign of the cross, he says, "I confirm you...(fill in name you have chosen)."

My confirmation is running smoothly. I kneel before the bishop and he goes into his religious babble. My guardian—godfather Bill—stands behind me with his hand on my shoulder. I have chosen his name William for my middle name. The bishop stretches out his hand and says, "I anoint you John."

John! John! The look on my face is one of total perplexity. I look around to see what happened, but I am ushered away before anything can be done. As I sit back in my pew, I contemplate what just occurred. My name is supposed to be Christopher William Toth. Now I am Christopher John! How can the bishop mess this up? I know I don't want that name. I wrote down
William myself on the paper that had to be handed in weeks before confirmation. I ask Joey, who was sitting next to me, whether they got his middle name right. He says they did and gives me a look, as if to say I am stupid.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, I rush back to my parents. I explain my dismay and how the bishop just confirmed me in the wrong name.

"John!" I say. "I don't know what happened!"

My mother glances at Dad and they smile.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, well, we decided that Christopher William doesn't sound good, so we called and told the priest to change the paper to John instead," Mom says.

They both chuckle to themselves; I walk away—furious.

John F. Toth Jr. is my father. Not to be confused, of course, with John F. Toth, my grandpa, or John F. Toth III, my oldest brother. If anyone asks what my middle name is, I say I don't have one. And I don't, except in the eyes of the Catholic Church. John! Birth certificate, driver's license, bank account, passport, official documents—they all only say Christopher Toth. I will not be part of the "John" tradition.

Growing up, the Bible rules in my house, and I have much resentment against it. The guidelines and stories it contains are the models of my upbringing. It's not just the book, but all of the Catholic faith, which I detest. Not going to church is in no way an option. I kick, scream, and stamp my foot in
opposition, but my efforts always fail. Sitting through the Mass is a waste of my time. Playing with the hymn books, crawling around on the kneelers, pester ing the people sitting in front of us—these are more important than the ceremony itself.

When my brother Stephen returns from college, it is a turning point for me in terms of religion. In the time away, he has already lost his faith in Catholicism. We have conversations about Jesus not really doing everything it says he did in the Bible. Together, we devise a plan to avert going to Mass. We tell my parents that we are going to the 10:30 Mass because they always go to the 7 or 9 am. We dress in our normal church clothes, but instead of actually going to church, we walk around the interior of the mall (since none of the stores are actually open that early in the morning). We do this for an entire summer until he moves away to Florida. Only once does our mom have a suspicion that we aren’t at Mass. But somehow, we manage to tell her a small lie that she believes and gets us off the hook.

For the past few years, I have separated myself from the Catholic Church. My parents always taunt my brothers and me that college kids think they know it all. I somewhat understand their feeling—resentment. We all went off to college and got the education they never had. There is no doubt in my mind that I am intellectually superior to them. How could I not be? I mean, I sit in classes and listen to professors give lectures on the Western World. Every word
they speak builds up one more idea for me to use against the faith, my parents, and the Catholic Church.

One story distinctly stands out from my Classical Mythology course. Ovid, the second most vital source of classical stories after Homer, writes a history of the world’s origins. Zeus sends down torrents of rain and tries to destroy the human race. His brother Poseidon adds watery waves. Water is everywhere; it ruins fields, trees, crops, cattle, human beings, houses, and sacred statues. But there is one man, Deucalion, and wife, Pyrrha, who survive on a little boat. Later, the myth tells how the two recreate life.

Isn’t this the same story about a man named Noah from the Bible who survives the great flood by building an ark? I am a college kid, and I know it all. And so every lesson unlocks a new notion and closes a former one behind me. For me, the Bible becomes a book of stories comprised from earlier myths; it no longer holds the power of being solely God’s word.

I sit during Mass and listen like all the other lost souls around me, but I guess I have arrogance about me. They believe; I don’t. I find the contradictions and “unexplainable truths” in the priests’ stories. I recognize that biblical stories have roots in ancient Greek mythology. I learn the horrible deeds the Catholic Church was part of during the Inquisition. I hear, “give money, give money, give money.” I’m not tricked by the show put on before my eyes. The others sitting around me are brainwashed. They all are.
Driving home to eastern Pennsylvania from my college in Ohio, I think of death. Not death in general, but my own death. I don't claim to know when I will go, but I know that I will die young. I think of my funeral. The faces I don't recognize because they are there merely to support my parents. Everybody’s wearing black: an idea from some 1950s flick. I want Pachelbel’s Canon in D—real horns, not some bad recording. The song is typically a celebration of life and new beginnings, not death. I need to make sure a close friend carries out my last wish for this song because my parents will never approve. But this funeral is about me, dammit, and I want happy music to remember my life.

My grandfather died three weeks ago. I couldn’t drive the six hours home from college to attend his funeral; I just didn’t have the time. I was too caught up in my own life to worry about the ending of another.

I pull into our driveway and notice the garage door is closed, the blinds and drapes drawn covering windows. I make my way to the front door, hands filled with my bags. The door is locked. I ring the doorbell, hoping that someone is inside so I won’t have to set all my stuff down and dig for my key.

No one answers the door.

After digging through my stuff, I finally find my house key.

“Oh...hey.” I say, as I enter the house.

“Hi,” Dad says. I stare at him sitting in the La-Z-Boy recliner in our living room, ten feet from the front door.
"How are you?"

"Fine."

"Didn't you hear the doorbell?" I ask.

No response.

"Where's mom?"

"Out."

Something is different. Although my father is rarely overwhelmed when I come home from college, this time it feels like he doesn't even notice I'm here. His face an ashen tint, overgrown with whiskers. He wears a haggard frown and a cloudy layer covers his blue eyes. Something is definitely wrong.

This look of disapproval is common from Dad. Like the time I told him I had changed my major from chemistry to English. According to him, I was making "the biggest mistake of my life." He still constantly badgers me about it: I will make no money, I will have no job, I will be homeless on the street. I try to explain that passion is a much better reason to pursue a career than money. But why talk to a man who never listens?

Today, Dad is resentful because I didn't come to support the family for the funeral of Grandpa Toth. I guess I can understand some of his angst, but I don't think he understands how impossible it would have been to get out of my final exams to come home.

The next morning I visit the one person I need to apologize to most: my grandfather. It's a May morning, and the sun's warmth alludes to the fact that
summer is near. Before today, I knew of only one person buried in St. Peter's Catholic Church Cemetery—Grandpa Covely, my mom's dad.

A service road divides the cemetery in two—not a road for thru traffic, but for funeral processions. Grandpa Covely's tombstone resides on the right side of the road, the first at the edge. I have peered to the other side, but have never crossed the service road from Grandpa Covely's grave. *Never.* Perhaps because I didn't know anyone buried over there or perhaps because I once heard that the plots both my parents and other grandparents purchased were there.

I remember the times my family went to put flowers by Grandpa Covely's grave. Mom always looked upset and, with Dad, would bow her head and say an "Our Father" or a "Hail Mary." I did too... kind of. I would bow my head, but it was rarely thoughts of prayer that occupied my mind. I would think about Marie, the name on the tombstone next to my grandfather's—the grandmother who died one month before I was born. I wondered who that woman was and if I resembled her. Would she have been as calm tempered as Grandpa Covely? Did she have the thick hair that plagued the rest of my family?

Today, after stopping by Grandpa Covely's grave, I cross the road. The journey is easier than I anticipated. Grandpa Toth's grave emanates from the rest. All the other graves are loaded with perfectly trimmed flowers; on Grandpa's there are none. It's the only one with a six-foot rectangle of dead grass.
The shape and brownish color of the plot remind me of the coffee table in my grandparents’ living room—the place where my brothers and I held World Wrestling Federation Championship Matches.

“You boys better behave,” Grandpa would shout from the kitchen. We all knew the tone and the consequence—his leather belt.

“Yes, Grandpa.” The reply came in a unified tone, restoring our angelic images. We returned to our “spots”—my three brothers on the couch and I on the love seat with the afghan that I could never get to stay in place. It wasn’t long before my brother Stephen provoked me into the championship wrestling again. I stood on the love seat and prepared to body slam my brother, who now lay on the floor. As I jumped, he rolled. The edge of my right eyebrow made a new friend: the corner of the coffee table. Tears and blood streamed down my cheek as Grandpa came running. When he saw me, he threw down his belt, which was already in hand, and tended the bleeding.

Standing in the afternoon sun looking at this lifeless plot, I feel dehydrated. I have an urge to recite a prayer, but I’m unsure as to whom exactly I should address it. I ask myself the old question, “What is death?” The absence of life. But I don’t believe in the afterlife...so what am I doing standing over the grave of a corpse? Searching? For what? Forgiveness? I notice drops falling onto the dead rectangle and realize they are from me. But I can’t tell whether the
salt I taste is from tears or sweat. I am too preoccupied with wanting to lie down on the ground.

The tombstone will only arrive once my grandmother has also passed away. Now a simple metallic oval marker juts up from the ground. Three things are engraved in red letters: John F. Toth, 1912-2001, Riechle. The third—Riechle—is the name of the funeral parlor our family uses, but it is also the name of a scholarship I was applying for at college when Grandpa died.

While I stand, feeling my legs straining to meet the ground, an elderly woman comes up to me. I acknowledge her with a nod and continue to stare down at the dead plot of land. After some silence, she speaks.

"Is that your mom or dad?"

"My grandfather."

"Who are you?"

"Christopher Toth."

"Oh, Toth. Then this is Charlie?"

"No, John Toth." I say it proud. This was my grandfather. Who the Hell was Charlie?

"Oh. Well, it’s a shame about the grass."

"Yeah."

"But whatta ya gonna do, we haven’t had any rain."

"True."

"Give it some time."

"Okay."
I am rude, but I just need my time here. She begins to walk away, but turns back. Her face contorts into a creepy grin. “We all must be there someday, Sonny.”

She calls me Sonny. Sonny? I know that lots of old people refer to younger men as “Sonny,” but that was the name my grandpa called my father.

After looking down at the grave again, I begin to speak to the woman, but she vanishes. My eyes trace the cemetery; I turn in a circle. I am alone. The woman is in her late 80s or early 90s and there is no way that she walks away in the time I look at the dead grass and then back up. Things are getting too weird for me, and before I actually decide to lie on the ground, I leave.

“Mom?” I shout as I enter our house. “Mom?”

“What?” she calls from the kitchen.

“Who’s Charlie?”

“Charlie?”

“Yeah, Charlie. Charlie Toth?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Well some lady at the cemetery thought that Grandpa’s grave was Charlie’s.”

“Oh, well you know how many Toth’s there are around here.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” And she was. The eastern part of Pennsylvania is loaded with Toth’s. I remember one time finding out that there is a Christopher Toth the exact same age as me living one town over. And to
make matters worse, his father's name was John! We always get tons of wrong
numbers.

I head downstairs to the computer to check my email. Dad is there.

"Where have you been?" Dad asks.

He looks better now, shaven and clean.

"At the cemetery."

"Oh." Pause. "How do things look?"

"Dead."

I am referring to the grass, but it comes out as a lame sarcastic joke. He
shrugs it off, just like most things I say. But I am somehow redeemed in my
father's eyes for paying tribute to his father. I remember the look—blue eyes
locked on me. I can hear a conversation—"You went to see my father?" "Yeah,
Dad. I told him you said 'hi'"—that was only in our minds. I remember Dad's
smile.

Later that day, Dad shows me three pictures that hung above the coffin during
my grandfather's viewing. He spent hours on this art project—getting the
creases, rips, and discoloring to disappear. Two of the original photos date to
the late 30s, but the final product looks almost new, except for the brown
edges.

"I kept the edges like that. I thought it would add some authenticity."

"Looks good," I say.
One of the photographs is a shot of the Toth garage. Stephen (blond, as is typical with all the Toth boys when we were young) looks intently at Grandpa tuning his banjo. They are both sitting on a picnic table bench. Stephen’s feet don’t even touch the ground. Grandpa looks so involved with tuning that I’m not sure he even sees Stephen sitting there.

“Grandpa played the banjo? Why didn’t I know this?”

“I don’t know. You never asked? I bet there is a lot you don’t know about him.”

“Oh,” I say not really knowing what else to say.

But he is right. I try to think of what Grandpa did for a living. Nothing. I try to think of a story he told me about his own parents. Nothing. I try to think of what his middle initial “F” stood for. Frank? or Francis? or is it Franklin? I try to figure out why I don’t know the answers to any of these questions. Suddenly I realize it is because my family doesn’t talk about anything from the past. Ever. It is if we can only concentrate on the future and forget all preceding occurrences.

“You probably don’t remember, but years ago when we had picnics in our garage, your grandpa entertained the whole family.”

I glance at another photo—one of my grandfather and grandmother. In the background there is a shed, but the landscape is unfamiliar to me. So are my grandparents. They both look to be around their late 20s or early 30s. If I just randomly found this picture somewhere, I’m not sure I could have identified the occupants by myself. I’ve only known my grandparents to be old:
they were 70 when I was born. Grandpa was always slightly hard of hearing, had little hair, and wrinkles covered his face. In the picture, my grandfather stands proud in a nice suit with my grandmother on his arm. I think this picture is the only time I've ever seen them poised like this. Even in later years, like for their 50th wedding anniversary when I was around, that look of pride in my grandfather’s body structure and face was never there in any picture.

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you mean I don’t remember the picnics of Grandpa playing the banjo, or I can’t remember? Stephen looks like he is about four years old in that picture, which makes me negative five. Dad, I can’t remember because I wasn’t there. I wasn’t born. And I think after I was born, Grandpa’s banjo days had come to an end."

"Oh," he says not really knowing what else to say.

Dad hands me another of the photographs.

"Well, you see, Grandpa used to be in this band."

The picture is a group shot and across the bottom is their name, “The Roving Cowboys.” Grandpa is on the far right in a cowboy uniform—hat, big belt buckle, two stars on his shirt pockets and two on his pants pockets—next to five other band members similarly dressed. All their instruments are sprawled out in front of them, the banjo in front of Grandpa.

"The banjo, huh?" I say.

"Yep."
Below the picture, the whole band signed their stage names. "Pee Wee, Poodles, Buck, Barney, Zeke," and Grandpa: "Cactus Pete." I chuckle at the name.

“What?” he says.

“Thanks.”

“For?”

“Everything.”
GOODBYE BAKED GOODS

I went to Grandma's house the day before I was moving halfway across the country from eastern Pennsylvania to Iowa. I wanted to sit with her in the kitchen on that hot August afternoon, tasting the samples of her freshly baked goods—poppy seed strudel, strawberry pie, lekvar kiffels.

But when I got there, Grandma confessed that the weather was too warm for her to bake anything that day.

"It would be over a hundred degrees in here if I started the oven today," she said. "She offered to thaw out some Christmas cookies she saved from last December . . . but I passed on the opportunity. Instead, we just sat across from one another while my eyes traced the gold lines embedded in the white of her kitchen table, observing how they just stopped and started. I glanced at grandma's blue eyes, and then noticed the line of moisture above them. I wiped my own forehead with the sleeve of my shirt and dried the wet beads. Grandma pulled out one of Grandpa's old hankies and did the same.

And so we sat there, looking at one another. I watched as she neatly folded up Grandpa's hankie. A few birds chirped outside, a lawnmower putted in the distance, the second hand on her clock tick tick ticked—we said nothing to one another.

We repeated our routine again. I looked at the gold lines of the table, glanced up at her, wiped my brow, she hers, and said nothing. Sitting before her without any idea when I would see her again, why did I have nothing to say?
“Sure is hot today,” I said.

“Yep.”

Gold, glance, wipe—repeated.

“Gonna be a lot hotter in Iowa.”

“I hope not.”

Lines, eyes, sweat.

I got up and walked across the room to the refrigerator. I took out a quart of Minute Maid fruit punch and poured myself a glass.

“Grandma, would you like some...” When I turned around to face her, she had stopped fiddling with Grandpa’s hankie. Instead, her own eyes were fixated with the broken lines on the table. She was staring at them, too.

“Grandma?”

“Yes?”

“Would you like some juice?”

“No, thanks.”

I sat back down at the table across from Grandma with my cup of juice. My parched mouth swallowed it down in one gulp. It wasn’t long before I was back filling my glass.

I returned to the table, but this time sipped my red juice instead of guzzling. The minutes of the afternoon ticked away and nothing was exchanged between Grandma and me. I peered out the kitchen screen door in hopes that a breeze would blow through. But the air was stagnant that day. Nothing moved.
“Christopher, did you send St. Peter's your graduation information?” she asked. “I didn’t see your name listed.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

Two months ago, the Catholic Church she and my parents attend had an advertisement in the weekly bulletin calling for all recent college graduates to send in their information. The Church would print an announcement in the next week’s bulletin to alert the Parish of the graduate’s accomplishments. Grandma, along with the urging of my father, clipped this ad and presented it to me in early summer to complete the necessary steps.

“Well, why not? You should still send it in.”

“I don’t really see the point.”

“Don’t see the point? You could get the family name printed in the bulletin.”

“So what?” It bothered me that this whole bulletin announcement really wasn’t about my accomplishment of graduating from college, but was just a chance for the Toth name to appear in print. So they could say to their friends, Look, the last Toth boy achieved something.

“I think it’s just best if my name doesn’t have any connection to the Catholic Church,” I blurted out before I could catch myself.

And with that comment, my grandma’s blue eyes—the same beady blue eyes as my father and three brothers—bulged. She removed her glasses and the rest of my visit was doomed.

“Why would you say something like that, Christopher?” she asked.
“Because I’m not really Catholic.”

“You were baptized Catholic and you will always be Catholic! Don’t talk so dumb!”

“Being Catholic is a way of life, and if I don’t believe in that system, I’m not really part of it.” I never wanted to have this conversation with her. I wanted to just let her keep thinking that when she went to Saturday night Mass, I was at the Sunday morning one. And when she went to the Sunday 9am Mass, I went to the 7am. I hadn’t gone to Mass in over three years. It kind of surprised me that my parents never let this fact escape. They just allowed her to think I was always at a different Mass.

“How can you say something like that?”

“I don’t go to Mass, Grandma. I haven’t been in years, except for Christmas. And the only reason I go then is for the theatrics of the whole event.”

“Those are the Devil’s words talking.”

“Who’s that?” Since I’m already being charged with the crime, why not play his advocate?

My Grandma never had a heart attack, but the way she gripped her chest and practically fell off her chair—I’m sure her reactions would be similar. I looked back at the gold lines on the table. Why can’t they be a continuous line? Why must they stop and start?

The familiar sounds of birds, lawnmower, clock resonated in my ears. And I looked at those lines as the heat radiated across the table from Grandma.
At that instant, we sat in silence not unlike that of the tea kettle that always had a place on top of the stove. Inside, she was building up pressure from my news, and it would only be a matter of time before she blew.

"Who is telling you these things?" she asked.

"What things?"

"Somebody is planting these horrible ideas in your head."

"I learned to think for myself is all."

"Uh-huh, Christopher. Someone from school is making you think like this. Who is it?"

I thought of my friends from college and their mixed religious beliefs—Catholic, Disciples of Christ, Baptist, Muslim, non-denominational, Jewish, Lutheran. My finger couldn't point to any of them for my changed philosophy on religion as my grandmother would like to do.

"I just don't agree with religion in general. I'm not particularly against Catholics, although I must admit that throughout time that religion probably has had some of the biggest blunders and problems."

She got up and started pacing the kitchen floor. "What does that mean?"

"Well, I guess most recently, I mean, have you read the papers lately?"

"What about?"

"The priests! All the cases of sexual molestation that are finally surfacing after years of being silenced—that's a big deal."

She stopped her pacing and stared down at me sitting at the table: "You were an alter boy for almost four years. Did anything ever happen to you?
“‘No.’

‘Right, you were fine. Our church is fine. Don’t be concerned about those other people bringing false cases to the papers.’

‘But it’s a big deal. And that’s not the only issue I have with the church.’

‘I don’t understand how you would allow someone to force you to think this way after you had such a good Catholic upbringing. You’re going to go to Hell!’

‘Nice try, but my current views don’t include the notion of Heaven or Hell.’

With this comment, she marched out of the kitchen into the living room. But before leaving, she scolded, ‘Your Dad should wash your mouth out with soap for saying such things.’

At the age of six, I had had my mouth washed with soap for saying shit. I thought it was one of those empty threats parents tell their children to keep them in line; no parent would actually ever do that to their child. But I was wrong. I was too young to even understand what the word meant; probably, I was provoked by one of my older brothers, or maybe it was a neighbor friend who lived down the street. But the who or why weren’t really of significance in relation to the consequence.

My mom was standing in the kitchen doing dishes or preparing dinner. I went right up to her and said it: ‘Shit.’
She looked down at me in disbelief. "What did you say?"

"Shit," I said it again, proud. It seemed like before I could even finish the one syllable word for the second time, she had grabbed me by the arm and marched me into the bathroom. I remembered thinking that the bar of white Dove soap was too large to even fit into my mouth, but Mom forced it in. I was crying and pleading for her to stop, but she was just yelling—"No son of mine is going to use that language"—in a tone so loud I don't think she could even hear me.

The unbearably bitter taste lined the insides of my mouth—sort of like milk that's been spoiled for weeks. Soap coats like milk too. And no matter how many times I rinsed after the incident, I could still taste soap. There were just some lessons in life that you learned the hard way. I don't think I ever said the word "shit" again until I was a sophomore away at college. Every now and then something will remind me of the soap residue, and my face will contort with the knowledge of just how bad that flavor can be.

I walked into the living room following my grandmother. She stared out the window, while sitting on the plush green flowered sofa that was always covered by her homemade afghan. I leaned against the archway separating the living room from the dining room and took a firm stance.

"Grandma, I respect your own beliefs of being Catholic, but I've made the decision that religion is not for me."

"I just don't understand. Who would make you think like that?"
"You’re not listening to me! I’ve come to my own conclusions. No one is forcing me to believe one thing or another."

"Are you hanging out with Jewish people?"

"Ugh!"

And now I left her and went back to the kitchen. I returned to the lines on the table. It looked as if someone had broken the white part, but filled the cracks in with gold. The cracks were just on the surface and that’s why they weren’t continuous lines—just little lines that stopped and started.

I began thinking about the walks my grandmother and I would take when I was much younger. I would get dropped off at my grandparent’s house a lot while my parents went off to do other things. Grandma and I would always go for walks. These walks meant everything to me; I looked forward to getting dropped off at Grandma’s house just so we could go on one. It was our time together for Grandma to tell me about her experiences in life.

Sometimes we walked around the old canal, or down to the park, but most times it was just around town. About a mile from her house, there was a city garbage dump. It wasn’t really regulated by the town, but was just a place where people came and dumped their garbage. The spot used to be a quarry years ago when the cement mill was still in operation. Now it just collected trash.

There was a ridge around three quarters of the top on which Grandma and I would stroll. Every time we got to that spot, she would say the same thing:
“Look at this Christopher. I can’t believe people just throw their trash here.”

“Why do they do it, Grandma?”

“Because they’re lazy.”

People littered the hole with white, gray, black bags of garbage. There were cases of empty beer bottles, tons of soda cans, scattered amongst the odd discarded bed frame, desk, or dresser, useless parts of cars, old paint cans, empty bottles of laundry detergent, along with leaves and raked grass. Anything imaginable was thrown into that pit.

And the smell! It was horrific the way decomposing trash emits such a stench. I would often hold my nose as we walked by because it was so bad. Grandma would usually just comment on how bad it was, but it never seemed to bother her that much because she never showed physical reactions. Of course, her way of life was a lot more self-disciplined than mine ever will be.

Years later on our walks, the compost pile became a suburban neighborhood. The city decided to fill in the quarry with a few hundred tons of dirt and started building houses on top of it. As Grandma and I would pass these houses, I would always think how dumb these people were: If only they knew what Grandma and I did—what truly lay in the ground under their houses.
Grandma finally returned to the kitchen. I didn't look at her, but I could hear the sighs in her breathing. Outside, the birds had left and the lawnmower had long since finished.

"Well, I guess I should get going," I said.

"Christopher, I'm going to be dead." She stared directly into my eyes.

"What?"

"You don't know when you're coming back East, and I'm going to be dead one of these days here."

"Don't talk like that." I looked away. What game was she playing now?

"I mean it. And my funeral is going to be in the Catholic Church."

"Okay."

"Well, since you don't know what it means to be Catholic anymore, you're probably not going to come into the church for my service."

"I'm not opposed to entering a church. It's just the religion that I have some qualms with."

"You're going to miss my funeral just like you didn't come home for your Grandpop's."

I felt I had reached a level of understanding with my grandfather for missing his funeral. But apparently for my grandmother, I had never made amends, and she would continue to hold that over me. I knew my grandmother well enough to know that I couldn't do anything to make the situation better; she always holds a grudge. One time in a letter, my oldest brother told my
grandmother to stop being so nosey in my parents’ lives. She stopped talking to him and refused to show any sign of interest in his life. That was ten years ago—they’re still not talking.

I stood and walked out the door. “Goodbye,” I muttered without even looking at her. At the time, it seemed like the only appropriate farewell.
My cell phone rang displaying the message “Unknown Caller.” The caller I.D. never seems to work when anyone from back East calls me in Iowa. I was at a class function and contemplated whether or not to answer, but decided to anyway.

“You’re ruining everything,” the voice said.

No Hello, no Can I speak to Chris, nothing in the way of a formal greeting.

“Umm, ok,” I said.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this.”

“And what exactly am I ruining?”

“The surprise, of course.”

And then I recognized the voice—my oldest brother John.

He went to college for computer engineering in Milwaukee, Wisconsin seventeen hours away from our house in eastern Pennsylvania. A month after we dropped him off for the first time, he got homesick. He would call home almost every day to talk to Mom or Dad. John liked to talk. With six people in a house, there was always someone around for him to be yapping to; however, there was no guarantee that someone would always be listening. Somehow he must have lost that chance to talk to people at college. A break never went by when he wasn’t demanding to be flown home or picked up by car.

He made it through his four years in Wisconsin and immediately after graduation was back in Pennsylvania. He was working there for about six months before he landed a great job opportunity in California. He packed up
all his stuff and off he went. But he only made it through about one year before the overwhelming feeling of homesickness returned. During year two, he was already applying for jobs back East. It wasn’t until his third year in California that he received a job offer in Maryland.

I think that now he is rather content. He lives approximately 3 hours away from my folks’ place in Pennsylvania. And he tries to visit them every other weekend, if not every weekend.

But this past summer, he got busy with work and didn’t make it up to our house too often. Every time he did come up, I always missed his visits because of work or being out of town. So I hadn’t talked to him since May.

John does whatever it takes to gain my parents’ favor. For some reason, he thrives on it to the point that he can’t live without it. Somehow, it’s as if his whole world will be ruined if my parents don’t approve of every choice he makes in life. But no matter how hard I try, I never can understand his reasons for needing their approval.

“I can’t really talk right now. I’ll call you back later,” I said and hung up the phone. He didn’t see the need to say “Hello,” so I didn’t see the need to say “Goodbye.”

I must say though, he had piqued my interest. What could I possibly have done all the way in Iowa that would have ‘ruined everything’?

A few days later, I returned his call.

“So what exactly have I ruined?”

“The surprise,” he said.
"And that would be?"

"Well if I tell you that, then it wouldn't be a surprise now, would it?"

Oh right, because I forgot that we lost all maturity, and now we're acting like second graders.

"Well, can you at least tell me how I'm ruining everything?"

"I talked to Mom the other day, and she said you're not coming home for Christmas. Therefore, you're ruining everything."

Still having trouble following his logic, I figured it was just best to go along with him. "Okay then."

"Why aren't you coming home?"

"Because the law firm I work for asked if I wanted to work extra hours over the holidays. I need the money, so I agreed."

He continued with his little childish game of I've got a secret and you don't know it' for another fifteen minutes. I decided that I had better things to do with my time than have this stupid conversation. When I threatened to hang up, he caved and told me the 'surprise.'

"Well, I shouldn't be telling you this, but as part of Mom's Christmas present, I am going to fly Stephen home. That way we can all be together for the holidays. But now you're not going to even be there, so my efforts are pointless."

"Oh well." I don't understand fascination with seeing the whole family together. Was he part of the same family as me growing up? What does he
remember that I don’t to make this togetherness meaningful? Or he is trying to unite our family in a way that never really existed?

Stephen is our brother who lives in Florida. Years ago, Stephen and I used to share a bedroom and bunk beds in our house in Pennsylvania. At that point in time, we were what one might call “close.” But he went off to the University of Pittsburgh when I was only nine. When he left, I remember how great it was to finally have my own room—as I was convinced that nine was the age when everybody should get their own room.

I remember waiting for Stephen to finish college so he could return back to our room and things would be like they were—talking about baseball cards, watching a game, or playing SEGA. But that time never came. While away at school, Stephen changed. And unlike John, he wasn’t anxious to come home for college breaks, and when he did, he couldn’t wait to go back and hang out with his fraternity brothers. Somehow they had replaced his real brother.

After college, he was home for a few months. But things were definitely different between us. He’d go out to bars all the time, and for me, being only 13, well that just wasn’t an option. Stephen constantly complained about my mother’s nagging him to do this and my father’s ordering him to do that. The littlest things would set him off, like if my mother would tell him to pay his bills or complain he was watching too much TV. I knew it wouldn’t be long before he would be gone. And then my parents started charging him for my mother to do his laundry. That was the turning point. At the time, I thought he was overreacting a bit. But now having had the experience of not living with my
parents, I understand how difficult it is to return to living in a house with rules once you've had a taste of total freedom and independence.

Shortly after the whole laundry fiasco, two of Stephen's fraternity brothers from Pitt were moving down to Florida. He gave two weeks notice at his job working with juvenile delinquents and decided to go with them. I remember my parents badgering him with questions:

"Where are you going to live?" Mom asked.

"I dunno," Stephen replied.

"Where are you going to work?" Dad asked.

"I dunno."

Stephen didn't know. But at the time, he felt adamant that anything would be better than living with my parents. He landed a job working as some sort of assistant for an insurance agent. My parents were pissed. They forked up money for him to attend four years of college, and now he had a job that didn't have anything to do with his psychology major.

"The only thing that kid ever learned at school was drinking," my mom would say.

The distance between Stephen and me grew deeper. We didn't stay in contact.

He called me a few weeks before I was going to receive my bachelor's degree.

"So you're graduating?" Stephen asked.

"Yeah," I said
“That's cool.”
“Yep.”
Pause.
“How's life?” I asked.
“Fine, yours?”
“Good, thanks.”
“Well, I should get going.”
“Yeah, me too.”

Since he moved down to Florida, he only came home once—for our other brother Jeff’s wedding. The wedding was over four years ago. No one in my family had seen Stephen since.

While the chance to see Stephen this Christmas might have been nice, I didn’t care that much. After all, when you go four years without communicating with someone, it’s just easier to keep things the way they are.

I hung up the phone that day with John still pissed at me because I didn’t agree to come home. And of course, because I was ruining all of his plans. It was as if there was some mandatory requirement that since I’ve been home for all previous Christmases, I was expected to be there for this one.

After quitting my job at the law firm, and with much urging from my friends back East, I decided to come home for the holidays. When I exited the Philadelphia airport terminal, my friends were waiting to pick me up. They were holding big posters that read “Wilkomen Kristtoffer,” shouting and waving
at me in German and videotaping the whole spectacle. I felt the eyes of holiday
travelers staring at me. But what else could I do but laugh. It was really good
to see my friends.

Unfortunately, the same fun was not in store for me when I entered my
house. My mother sat at the kitchen table baking Christmas cookies.

“Oh, you’re here.”

“Hi.”

I waited around for a little while, but that was about it. Dad was already
in bed. So I unpacked my bags and did the same.

Two days before Christmas, the big day came when Stephen flew to Baltimore,
was picked up by John, and the two of them drove to our house in
Pennsylvania. It was really late by the time he got there. So late that night
when they arrived, my parents were excited for like five minutes—“Stephen!
Wow! It’s so great to see you! How was your flight? I can’t believe I didn’t
know you were coming! I can’t believe you’re here”—and then went to bed.

No one said anything about the change in Stephen’s physical
appearance. He had been diagnosed with severe diabetes since the last time we
all saw him. I don’t know if it is a change in diet, or the multiple shots of
insulin he gives himself everyday, but he had lost at least 90 pounds. And
when you take 90 pounds away from someone who was never fat to begin with,
you’re left with one thing: bone. Not one person in my family mentioned it. No
one even seemed to notice that his clothes didn’t fit, but rather just hung on
his body as if he were a drying rack. We just carried on with our lives like it was still 1985, and we were all living under the same roof. I wondered why he hadn’t bought new clothes since he lost so many pounds. But I didn’t ask. Perhaps he was thinking that if he kept the larger clothes, he’d put some weight back on.

The next day we ate our first family meal together in almost four years. Stephen got out his insulin shot and prepared his routine.

“What are you doing?” my mother asked.

“Giving myself my insulin shot,” he replied.

“Here? Now!?"

“Yes. Why not?”

First he poked his thumb and put a drop of blood on the tester that measured his glucose level. Next he took a syringe out of a little black case, filling it with clear serum. Finally, he injected it into the skin around his stomach.

This was the first time we had seen him complete his ritual since he was diagnosed three years ago. I don’t like needles, but was too entranced to look away. Everyone at the table stared in awe, except my mother. She made noises of “Oww, Ooo, Ohh, Uhh, Ouch,” while her face and body contorted in dramatic spasms. She then started taking deep breaths and gasping for air. It seemed as if the needle was being injected into her with the way she carried on. My brother didn’t flinch. I suppose after years of shoving in needles multiple times a day, he got used to the pain.
“Pain is just a state of mind,” a college friend always tells me, “It’s how you deal physically with it that makes it hurt.” As a child, I would play in the cornfield behind my house with friends. Farmer Young was a hardworking, rather secluded man who didn’t care if we ran through the field as long as we didn’t destroy his crops. We were careful playing for hours—corn hide-n-go-seek, corn row races, and corn field capture the flag. Or we at least tried to be.

Corn row races were fun, but they hurt. As the corn dried before the harvest and turned a goldenrod color, the sheaves became as sharp as the pages of the Bible I should have been reading. Unfortunately, no cut from paper ever stung or bled as much as the sheaves did. A little blood never stopped the fun, though. If you kept playing the games, no matter how severely you were injured, it didn’t hurt.

Farmer Young invited us to ride in the wagon that was attached to the machine that magically ripped the corn from the husks. It has a green square body near the ground connected to a large green neck with an open chute on top facing the wagon. I never did quite figure out the mechanics of the John Deere product, but I knew it was cool and painful at the same time. It fired the corn into the wagon as fast and as hard as one of those indoor batting cages at the fair. You never could ride in the cart and feel like you were safe from being shot. And it was just this feeling that made the ride so intense.

Perhaps my brother used my friend’s philosophy about pain when it came to his needles. Physically the prick probably stung like the dried corn
sheaves, but mentally, he doesn’t let it bother him. I wish I could say the same for the rest of my family.

For the rest of his stay, Stephen gave himself insulin shots in rooms where no one was present. I think the reaction he got from my mother the first time was a sign he shouldn’t be doing this around people. In a sense, my family ostracized him, as if he wasn’t good enough to be around the rest of us in his unperfected physical manner.

When he would go into other rooms to give himself shots, my mother would whisper to the rest of us that “he was doing it again,” implying he was doing something filthy, which could only be mentioned in a hushed voice. Perhaps she didn’t realize that it was her father who genetically passed this disease along, or perhaps she didn’t realize that Stephen needed to take the shots to continue living.

I wanted to ask Stephen about his disease. But to be honest, I was afraid. Years ago after my grandfather died from heart complications accelerated by his diabetes, I did a report on the disease. I learned that diabetes usually skips generations. I also found a report that said if your mom’s father had the disease, there was a two out of four chance that her offspring would. Both John and Jeff are older than Stephen and don’t have diabetes. Therefore, according to my scientific rationale, I am genetically predisposed to develop the disease.

Although impossible, I think I can already feel this disease living inside me. I consider some of the common symptom questions:
Do you excessively urinate?
No.

Have you had a significant amount of weight loss?
No.

Are you thirsty all day? Do you drink water or other fluids throughout the day?
Yes.

Do you sometimes have temporary blurred vision?
Yes.

Do you experience extreme hunger at times, even sometimes after you just have eaten?
Yes.

Are you often fatigued?
Yes.

Do you sometimes experience tingling or numbness in the feet or legs and sometimes the hands?
Yes. My limbs seem to fall asleep if I don’t constantly keep them moving. Lately, the frequency of them falling asleep has increased.

Although I seem to have a bunch of the symptoms, the two major ones have not been a problem—excessive urination and weight loss. So I’m fine; nothing to worry about. I’ll only go to the doctor to get checked out when something serious occurs.
But I do wonder, in the unlikely event that I am diagnosed at some point in my life with diabetes, will the relationship between Stephen and me change? Will I call on him as a guide who has traveled the road before me?

I still question whether Stephen would have been better off staying in Florida during the holiday break. On Christmas morning, he sat around while the rest of us opened presents. Since Stephen’s visit was a “surprise” to my mother, she had previously mailed all his presents to Florida so that they would arrive in time for Christmas. But he wasn’t missing that much. My mom has that tendency not to ask us what we want for Christmas. This year I ended up with clothes that didn’t fit, a frying pan, and broiling tray for my toaster oven. You know, the cooking essentials that every 23 year old needs.

Later that day after my third brother and his wife arrived, Quiet crept into our household. It was like sitting alone in a church when Mass is not in session—just you and flickering candle flames. My parents tediously worked on the feast in the kitchen. I set the table in the dining room. In the living room, John read a book, Jeff napped, and Stephen watched the television with the sound muted.

“What time did you tell everyone dinner would be served?” I asked, more than once. I wanted the other relatives there, just something to break the silence. Everyone was late. This was the first time in my life that a considerable amount of snow fell on Christmas: 8 inches. For some reason, the
snow wanted to keep us all together in our house. Our relatives were all waiting for the snow to be cleared before they chanced the drive.

Finally they began to arrive, and our house filled with noise. The first was my Aunt Dolores.

"Christopher, wow, I haven't seen you in a while," she said. "And look! Stephen! Oh my gosh."

"Yeah, I flew him home," John said.

"That was nice of you," Dolores said.

As each person entered, it was like watching the same 25 frames of a movie over and over and over. The relative walked through the door, said something like "Merry Christmas" to no one in particular but everyone implied, then said "Look, it's Christopher. I haven't seen you in a long time," then "Oh my God! It's Stephen." Then John piped in, "I brought him home," as if he wanted a gold star or was entering a competition for attention that the rest of us didn't know or care about. But suddenly, he won it. It was no longer about Stephen, the actual person being there; he was reduced to an object. Everyone started praising John. Everything now became about John—the wonderful John—bringing him home so we could all be together. Whoop-de-freakin-do.

I admit that Stephen must have had a boring time while at home. Every day after Christmas was virtually the same. Jeff was at his home or at work. I went out with my friends. My parents went visiting relatives, and John tagged along to appease them. Stephen sat home by himself and watched football.
Throughout Stephen’s stay, John asked him a few times to go see a movie, but Stephen always declined.

I thought about asking him to go out with my friends, but could never picture him standing next to my friends holding a large poster that said “Wilkommen.” So I didn’t ask. I would like to think that if Stephen stayed home in Florida he would have at least had the companionship of his Dalmatian and girlfriend. Instead, it was him, our empty house, and the TV.

At the end of the week, my family said our goodbyes. No hugs or handshakes. Because the Toths don’t do that. And I’ve gone so long without receiving hugs from my family that I think it would only be awkward if we started now.
A MATTER OF CONVENIENCE: ADDICTIONS

The mound of candy on the counter keeps growing. She already has two packs of Twizzlers, a pack of pecan twirls, three energy bars, one king size 3Musken, a Kit-Kat bar, and a box of mini donuts. She is probing the candy aisle deciding what else she needs.

Every night around 11:20 pm, this woman comes in the store and stocks up on sugar. I call her the Sugar Lady, simply because I don’t think she has anything else flowing through her system. She is extremely hyper, shakes a lot, and talks so fast that sometimes I don’t even know what she’s saying. She runs around the store—mainly the candy aisle which is the second from the store’s entrance and the bakery section which is a few aisles further back—and has all of these items on the counter within a few minutes. Tonight she also brings up an extra large slushy from the machine at the back of the store.

"Don’t-forget-to-add-on-the-extra-large-coffee," she says while running over to the coffee station.

“Yes, ma’am. Would you like some insulin with your order? I think we have some extra shots in the back," I say.

“Haha-That-is-funny-but-I-will-be-ok-with-my-candy.” She’s thin and has a bit of an overbite. She’s always smiling, of course, and her teeth have an ashen tint to them. I’m convinced her teeth are rotting from the inside out.

“Twelve dollars and sixty-five cents is your total. You know it would probably be much cheaper if you bought this stuff at the grocery store.”
“Yeah-I-know.-But-if-I-go-there-then-I-buy-even-more-sugar-I’m-trying-to-cut-back.”

Looking at her items, I say, “Yeah, I could tell.”

To pay me, she lifts up her shirt to the point that her sports bra is exposed. Strapped to her body is an odd purse contraption where she digs for her money. I want to ask her about it, but figure it is some sort of military thing. Last week she told me that she is part of the Army Reserves and every Saturday goes for training. I can’t picture the Sugar Lady standing at attention without shaking from all the sugar pumping through her bloodstream.

She starts gathering up her purchases.

“Would you like a bag?”

“No-I-can-manage,” she says while stacking the candy on top of the box of mini donuts.

“Okay then. Have a good one.”

I’m not really sure how she manages to get outside the store, but I hear the chime and know that somehow she hoards all of her items. Maybe when strung out on sugar you develop some sort of super powers.

The chime rings again, and I look to the door to see who’s entering.

“Shit!Shit!Shit!Shit!Shit!,” the Sugar Lady says as she races back into the store with coffee spilled down the front of her shirt.

“No problem?” I ask, pretending not to notice the coffee.

“Yeah-when-I-was-trying-to-open-the-car-door-the-coffee-dumped.”

“Maybe it’s a sign that you shouldn’t be drinking coffee.”
"Nah-I-would-get-all-hyper-if-I-don't-have-my-coffee."

I try not to laugh, but a chuckle escapes. She is busy filling another extra large cup.

"You can just have that one. Don't worry about paying."

"You-sure?"

"Yeah, it's cool. Drive safely."

During nights like these, I actually don't mind working 14 hours a day. I started working at TopStar Express Convenience Store as a summer gig and a second job simply because I need to pay off some debts. My other job is a standard nine to five. I figure I can work some nights at the convenience store, and it will be no big deal. After all, it is a convenience store. How much effort will I really need to put into the job? I assumed it would be one of those mechanical jobs where you merely move through the motions and get paid for it. It honestly never occurred to me when I applied for the clerk's position that I would be dealing with people. Just an oversight I guess.

During the day, I work at a non-profit organization that deals with people who are mentally handicapped or mentally retarded. I work in the administrative offices and usually have very little direct contact with the clients. Ironically though, I think I get my fair share of hands on experience at the convenience store.

Patty comes running, well more like hobbling, into the store. She immediately pulls the door closed behind her to stop the chimes and peers out the window.
"They’re coming! They’re going to get me!" she says in a frantic tone.

"Really? Imagine that," I say. Over the past few weeks I’ve determined that Patty is a pathological liar. She probably has some sort of psychological illness, maybe personality disorders, and for all I know escaped from the mental hospital that is a few blocks from my store. Last week she told me every one of her family members died of cancer within a month; the week before her daughter graduated from Harvard. I play along with her scenarios, more to amuse myself than her.

"I started it. Tell everyone you know that I began everything," she says.

"What did you start?"

"The war, of course."

"Oh, I see."

"Flashing lights, the cops. Up there, they’re following me too," she says while pointing to the sky. She is in a complete state of paranoia, crazily convinced that people are following her.

"Wow, look at them all. They’ve got you surrounded," I say. Of course, there are no cops or any helicopters in sight, but it’s best to just play along.

"It started with the explosion. There was that loud boom. And then I was running; they were chasing. I started it all. Make sure you tell everyone. I saw the star in the sign out there and knew this place had to be safe. Mary followed a star to have Jesus. It must be safe here."

"Is she alright?" asks a woman customer standing at the counter.
“No! She’s not all right! Does it look like she’s all right?” I say, slightly more dramatically than I had intended. “They’re after her. Wouldn’t you be scared too?”

“Oh, well, should you call somebody?”

“Nope, I have the entire situation under control. Have a nice day and enjoy your fruit punch.” The woman leaves the store trying to stay as far away as possible from Patty who is still guarding the door.

“Don’t tell them I’m in here!” Patty says to the woman and puts her forefinger up to her mouth, making the sign to be quiet.

As soon as the customer leaves the store, Patty snaps out of her ‘I’m being chased’ mode.

“Can I get some ice?”

“Sure,” I say. She always asks for ice. Probably because it’s free, and I’m sure she can’t afford anything else.

I watch her walk to the back of the store where the fountain drink machine is located. Patty is in her middle forties. She has strangely, greasy brown hair and always wears a nightgown when she comes into the store.

If she can find enough change laying on the street somewhere, she buys a snack size piece of candy for 15 cents when she comes in. The store is illegally selling these candies since it says right on each piece of candy, Not to be Sold Separately.

She comes back to the front counter with her cup of ice and selects a piece of candy from the baskets by the register. She lays down the change and
counts each penny with her grime-caked fingers. While waiting for me to ring up her sale, she lifts up her nightgown, not wearing any underwear of course, and scratches her ass cheek. The man standing behind her in a suit gives a look somewhere in the middle of disbelief and disgust.

I probably would give the same look if I hadn’t been working at this store for weeks now. But instead, I smile and tell Patty to have a nice day. She says thank you and exits, forgetting all about the authorities who were chasing her only a few moments ago.

“How can you let people like that in here?” The man asks me.

“Sir, please do not impose your opinions about my paying customers.”

Just then Patty runs back into the store.

“Can I have a pack of matches?” she asks.

“Sure,” and I hand her a pack, making sure my hand does not touch hers.

As she exits again, I think of all the reasons why someone like Patty should not be given a pack of matches. I smile.

It is interesting how we become accustomed to oddities, whether people or otherwise, that we don’t even notice anything as being absurd. For instance, when I first moved into my apartment that is by the railroad tracks, I would get annoyed at the trains’ whistles that seemed to blow every ten minutes. Now, after living there only a few months, it is usually only when other people come by that they point out the whistles to me. But every once in a while, there are
those whistles that are extra loud and just blare in your eardrums. You never
become accustomed to those and wish they would go away.

“I’m quitting,” says a blond woman in her middle thirties.

“No, you’re not,” I say.

“Really, I am. This will be my last pack.”

“But that’s what you told me last week, and the week before, and the
week before that.”

“It’s been a rough few weeks. My dad has been in and out of the hospital.

These help me get through,” she says to me as she unwraps her box of Virginia
Slims Extra Light Menthols.

“Listen, I don’t really care what reasons you have, and I don’t believe that
you’re going to quit.” She is really starting to get on my nerves. Not only is she
lying to me, she’s lying to herself. She’s not really going to quit. I see it over
and over again. People want a reason to stop smoking, but can never seem to
do it.

During the time I worked at the convenience store, the price per pack
took two major increases. In the end, it cost about $5.50 a pack with tax
included. Customers would tell me that once the price increase comes, they
are finished. But obviously this was never the case. When you’re addicted to
something, you can’t just quit because it costs extra to get your fix. You make
other sacrifices.
One man comes in with his little daughter and slaps down seven dollars on the counter.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"Yes, I need gas. How much gas can I get if I get a pack of Marlboros?"

"A little more than a gallon," I say.

"Great! That should be enough to get me home."

"You're joking right? You're not really going to buy cigarettes over gas?"

"Yeah. I've only got seven bucks on me, and I need a cigarette bad."

I want to punch this guy. I want to tell him go to Goodwill and buy his daughter a pair of shoes so she doesn't have to be walking around the convenience store with bare feet. I want to tell him we're out of cigarettes, although this could be difficult because I'm sure he sees the hundreds of cartons stacked behind me.

But instead, I just tell him to have a nice day and to not blow smoke in his daughter's face. He doesn't think I'm funny.

If I had my choice, I would stop selling cigarettes to customers. But I'm pretty sure that wouldn't help the store's intake, nor would it please the management.

The franchise that owns my convenience store has a catchy jingle on the radio that my friends often sing to me, "TopStar Express: Convenience Done Right." I would sing it back to them in jest with a twist, "TopStar Express: Convenience Done Wrong." The first time I had to open on a Saturday morning (three days after my initial hire date), I was to report for work at 4:45 am. I
didn’t have a store key yet, so my manager was going to meet me there to unlock the doors. At 6:00 am, after sitting outside on the curb for over an hour, after arguing with the paper delivery guys that it would be okay if they left the daily newspapers with me, after arguing with the customers that started showing up at 5:02 am (God knows why on Saturday morning!) that the store was not open yet and in disbelief having them try to open the front doors to a store that they could clearly see through the front wall of windows was all dark, my manager’s truck flew into the parking lot with a screeching halt. No words were exchanged between us, but as soon as we got into the store, I received a key for the door and the security code on a little piece of paper. At that point, I realized that this particular store (and probably all the others owned by the franchise) was in no way a representation of the cheery voices that sang TopStar Express knew how to do things correctly.

We can never fully understand place while immersed in it. Only after being away from the convenience store now for a while, do I begin to understand it. These customers defined my notion of place. I needed them to have my day make sense, as much as they needed to come into the store to get their daily fix. My day would somehow be incomplete if they missed their routine visits. Nights when they wouldn’t show up, often times would drag on and on and on. I recall catching myself wishing for these unique customers to come in and get that free cup of ice or pack of cigarettes.
But I don't know how it happened. I was only there do to a job and get paid. I wasn't supposed to let myself care about the place or the people. And suddenly I find myself not only longing for them, but defending them, no matter how they acted in the society of the convenience store.

A bright orange shirt and purple shorts, or a flowered fisherman's hat in bright yellow, a lime green shirt, powder blue socks, and Hawaiian shorts—these are his typical styles of dress. One of my convenience store co-workers tells me his name is Lenny. I'm not really sure if that is his name, but I like the simple fact I can attach a name to him. He reminds me of Dustin Hoffman's character from *Rain Man*, with the addition of a pair of thick aviator glasses. When he comes to the counter to pay for his items, he stares. And I have this urge inside me to stare back. I try to look away because I know it's impolite, but I can't. He has black disheveled hair, a perfect tan, beady blue eyes behind his aviator lenses, and foaming drool that runs out of the corners of his mouth.

He continues to stare and so do I. I don't look at the cash register because I know where the buttons are. I stare, and he stares. Everyday his purchases consist of one medium coffee and one Tastykake, totaling $1.94. And everyday he gives me two dollars, and I give him six cents change. I'm reminded of a song about a sideshow "come look at the freaks, only pennies for peeks," as I hand him his change. This man's staring, eyes so intent and focused, creates a fear inside of me.
One day my finger slips, and I ring in a large coffee and his total comes to $2.13. Lenny spasms at my mistake, just like Hoffman in *Rain Man* when he can’t get his boxers from K-Mart. But he doesn’t yell at me, just grunts. No words ever form, and it’s like talking to a four month old baby.


I don’t understand what he is trying to say, or even realize my mistake. The foam at the corners of his mouth runs down his chin and drips onto the counter. He starts jumping up and down while pointing to the total on the cash register. It hits me then. I fix the amount due, and this immediately calms him, like giving a baby a pacifier.

After his purchase, Lenny dances around the tables in the deli section to the music playing on the TopStar Express radio station. Often I think he’s really dancing to a beat in his own head because his movements never seem to coincide with the songs. He stops every once in a while to take a bite of his Tastykake and get a sip of coffee. He sings too. Well, it’s not really singing, more like grunts that start in the back of the throat but never form into words or a melody.

After he finishes his dance routine and snack, Lenny heads to the bathroom located on the east wall of the store. When his duty is complete, he leaves the store. Usually there are a few grunts on the way out. But once outside the store, he always stares back inside through the entire front store wall of glass windows—one last time. His last look always catches me off guard, reminding me with a jolt that *I*’m still staring at him!
"That guy is whacked," a customer says to me one time as we watch Lenny leave the store.

"Lenny? Nah, he's just unique," I say. I'm actually a little offended that this man is making fun of my Lenny. "He just has some mental illness, probably had a rough life. Give him a break."

"Yeah, he's messed up in the head all right," he says. "And really, it's his own fault."

"What do you mean?"

The customer takes his finger and pushes it against his left nostril. Then he starts sniffing. From the unofficial universal sign language, I interpret this to mean Lenny snorts cocaine. But I question, just to make sure.

"Coke?"

"Yeah, he wasted his life."

"Oh," I say, having a hard time imagining my $1.94 drooling staring Lenny as a drug user. How the hell would this customer even know this about Lenny?

"He's really a genius, has a really high IQ. Well, I guess you could say he used to be one. He got a lot of money for using his brain. And he got the money fast too. But then he got mixed up with some bad people and started using the white powder, other shit too, I think. He lost his fortune and his brain."
During my day job, I conducted lots of research on reasons for and symptoms of mental illnesses. During the evening, I had field experience. I'm not a psychologist, so I can't predict whether the people who came in the convenience store had schizophrenia, multi-personality disorders, dementia, autism, or other illnesses found in the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders IV*. But I can tell you that symptoms I researched, I often saw exhibited at night. And through both jobs, I developed an appreciation and understanding of those people who society easily casts out. But what society doesn't realize is that while we ourselves may not be a textbook exemplification of a mental illness, we all in a way exhibit some of the symptoms at one point or another. After all, what is normalcy? Isn't it just a social construct that is defined by conforming to a norm?

So maybe I am the one who is mentally ill because I'm positive that from time to time, I see facets of myself in the crazy customers that come into the convenience store. Occasionally, I'll act weird just to get a reaction out of someone.

I also take an interest in getting to know those who are not mainstream. For instance, this one man comes in the convenience store three or four nights a week. Both his arms are covered in tattoos that create an artificial skin. He buys the same items every visit—a medium coffee, a candy bar, a pack of Marlboro Red Box. We never really talk, but I always give my usual
pleasantries—“Hi, what’s up?” when he comes to the counter to pay, and “Have a good one!” when I give him his change.

I honestly couldn’t describe his face; I never looked. I can’t say whether he has brown hair or blond, brown eyes or blue. I am always too enthralled with the colorful stained glass mosaic that wraps around both his arms. There is no white space, just a mass of color and black lines—forming tigers jumping through hoops of snakes that are the limbs of trees, whose roots are buried in chests that are covered in tribal signs that form the tails of dragons, whose eyes.... The pattern is endless, so interconnected I don’t think there is one place to stop or start.

Many times I have contemplated asking this man questions about his arms. I am always too apprehensive, thinking that a clean-cut guy like me would somehow offend him. But one night as he approaches with his coffee, candy and cigs, I build up my courage and let my questions flow.

“How many hours does something like that take to finish?” I'm talking to him, but really my eyes are still directed at his arms. I don’t look at his face.

“Well, it’s not done. It’s like an ongoing project. I’ve been getting my arms tooed for the past two and a half years. I have a little bit more before it’s finished.”

“Where? There’s no room left.”

“Look,” he says, and points to a little patch of white skin the size of a half dollar on the outside of his right forearm. Why didn’t I notice this spot of flesh looking so bare in contrast to his second skin?
"I've been trying to figure out a design to fit the spot. This is what I came up with." He takes out a piece of paper from the back pocket of his jeans, unfolds it, and shows me the design, sketched with what I think is colored pencil.

Awestruck, I speak to the paper and ask what it is exactly.

"It's the Chinese symbol for warrior set inside a rising sun. I think it will fit nicely in this ring of swords," he says pointing to his arm.

A line of people forms behind the man, wanting to pay for their bags of sunflower seeds, Vanilla Cokes, deli sandwiches, gas, cigarettes. I don't really care though, as I listen intently to the artist explain his work.

"Did you design all the tattoos yourself?"

"Hell, yeah. They're my arms, aren't they?"

"Sorry," I say to him, more for myself than to actually apologize to him. A woman coughs, or kind of clears her throat, trying to get my attention. I keep examining his tattoos, but with a glance I make sure she knows that I know she wants to check out and leave. She can wait. Doesn't she realize I'm finally talking to the tattoo guy?

"It's sort of my personal masterpiece. It's trickier than it looks: to meld all the designs together to create an overall picture, especially when they aren't all done at the same time."

"Well, it's awesome."

"Thanks."
I have many more questions about the costs, the pain, the time. But I just fall into my normal routine, “Well, have a good day.”

Walking out the store, he yells to me:

“I go back once I stop remembering what the pain feels like.”
THE LIMITS OF SPEED

"Listen up everyone. I'm not associated with the law, so any complaints you have about the unfairness of cops or the laws will just be falling on deaf ears. I'm just a normal guy, and I work a normal 9-5 job surveying the land," Roy says as he sits behind a desk at the front of the room.

As I look around my Driver Improvement Class, I immediately know that I have one thing in common with my 35 fellow classmates: no one wants to be there. I can see it in the way everyone slumps in their chairs; the complete boredom etched on everyone's faces; the constant clock-checking to see if it is over. The class meets at a local community college. The walls of the room are the typical white, and there is the standard pink and gray carpet on the floor. Almost all of the desks are facing forward in neat rows, with the exception of one row which faces perpendicular in relation to the other desks. I sit in this row and observe the side of everyone else's head. I'm amazed by the age range of people sitting in the room, anywhere between 17-65 years old.

Our instructor Roy, a stocky looking fellow with a mixture of blond and gray hair, sits in the front of the room. "I'll need to finish up some housekeeping before we begin. I need to collect the fee from the people who haven't sent it in," Roy says.

The course costs an outrageous $55 for two four-hour sessions of driver improvement instruction. But perhaps it only seems outrageous because I, like everyone else in the room, don't want to be here.
Roy begins the introductions, “As I've mentioned before, I'm Roy. Again, keep in mind that I’m not associated with the law. I’m only here to help you learn the law. The only reason is because my wife works at the community college and tells me they needed extra instructors for this driver improvement class. I took a training course from the Iowa Department of Transportation and became certified. And here I am.” He insists that we follow his method of introduction.

As we work our way around the room, everyone tells their name and mentions what they do for a living.

The woman sitting behind me says to the class, “Well, I’m a stay at home mom. I have three kids that are five, seven, and eight. They’re just the greatest kids in the world! Oh, and my name is Sally.” Her attitude is just a little too perky given the circumstances. About a fourth of the people in the room fit into her category. They are middle-aged mothers who incurred traffic violations while somehow transporting their kids.

“The name’s Jim. I work in the garage at the Karl Chevy Dealer,” says a guy wearing a shirt with the name Jim scripted in an oval shape above a pocket on his left side. “And I don’t want to be here.” Everyone half claps for him with this added comment. Another fourth of the people in the room are guys who work in some sort of garage or mechanic positions.

“Hi. I’m Jesse: I’m in high school and don’t have a job. But I just want to say that cops are stupid and unfair,” says a girl with pink and blue hair.
“Listen Jesse,” chimes in Roy, “I’m sure most people would agree with you. But like I said before, I don’t work for a law enforcement agency so your comments are really falling on deaf ears. Take up your issues with your county representatives, congressmen, or even the governor. But for our purposes here tonight, those comments are not going to be helpful.”

Jesse just glares at Roy, but doesn’t say anything more. A fourth of the room is a similar mixture of men and women in their late teens, approximately 17-21 in age.

The final quarter of the class is comprised of a hodgepodge of people, including myself.

“Hello. I’m Glenn. If you haven’t figured it out by the way I’m dressed, I’m a pastor. I’m 65 years old, and I’ve been serving God since I was 28,” says Glenn. I think it odd that he is in the Driver Improvement Class. If I am an officer of the law, I will probably let any pastor off for speeding for fear that I will in some way condemn myself to Hell. But later in the parking lot after class, he nearly runs over half of the students with a huge van. Perhaps he is there for reasons other than speeding.

Throughout these introductions, I realize that I am the only one in the room pursuing a master’s degree and one of only two other people who hold a B.A. I wonder on average, do people with higher education degrees receive fewer speeding tickets than those who don’t?

The one recurring thought that keeps running through my mind is how the hell did I end up here?
“Christopher, could you please step out of your vehicle?”

“Yes, Officer.”

I exit my car into the crisp January night air. Immediately, I wish for my coat. A few minutes ago, I had watched the sun set behind the approaching Iowa horizon. When you’re driving and blinded by the last red-orange glow of sunlight, it’s weird how warm you think it must be outside. But only cold blackness surrounds me now.

I’m blinded by the flashing lights and bright spotlight the Illinois State Trooper aims at me. He motions for me to follow him back to the front of his car. I’m 32 miles from the Iowa state border, and all I want to do is get home.

I’ve been pulled over by the cops before, but never have I been asked to get out of my vehicle. Usually the cop just comes back with the ticket, asks me to sign, and I’m on my way.

I watch as cars pass by on the interstate, worried about what they think of me. How the drivers will make up stories to their passengers like, oh, he’s out of the car. He must have been doing something really bad. Maybe he even has a gun or something. When the driver is pulled out of the vehicle, the reason is never as simple as a speeding ticket. I’ve created these stories myself; so I have little doubt that other drivers aren’t doing it now.

The officer hands me a metal box on top of which my ticket is posted. When I first touch the metal, it’s so cold in the 20 degree air that it stings my
fingertips. I watch as the officer routinely points to the place where I need to sign my name.

"Christopher, by signing this citation, you are not admitting guilt. You are simply acknowledging that you have been notified of a potential violation of driving 88 in a 65-mile-per-hour zone and that you are entitled to a trial by jury on February 24, 2003, at 9 in the morning. If you choose to waive your jury right, please follow the directions on the back of this citation."

I sign and hand the metal box back to him. The officer attempts to rip the ticket and give me my copy. In the process, he tears the bottom corner of the citation. He doesn’t seem real concerned, and I’m not about to argue with Illinois State Trooper James B. Kessy standing on the side of Interstate-80 as hundreds of cars pass by.

I fold the 95 dollar ticket and put it in my pocket. Thinking we are finished, I turn and make my way toward my vehicle.

"Christopher."

I turn but cannot see him. The flashing red and blue and bright white headlights allow me to see only his silhouette. "Yes, Officer?"

"I want to get you on your way as soon as possible, but I have one more question for you."

"Okay." I walk back towards the blinding lights and stand next to him.

"Christopher, when you first opened your window, I got a whiff of something. I’m not accusing you of anything, but I am wondering if you or any of your friends who may have been in your vehicle use cannabis?"
I can feel my heart start pounding. It doesn’t feel as cold outside as it did a minute or two ago. I look forward, and my mind is racing. Cannabis? Cannabis? Shit...It sounds familiar. What the hell is cannabis? He’s going to think I’m a dumbass if I ask.

“What is that, Officer?”

“Cannabis? You don’t know what that is?”

“No.”

I can’t look at him. I know there will only be one expression on his face right now: moron. Shit.

“Cannabis? You know....marijuana.”

“Ohhhh. No, officer. I don’t use that and don’t associate with anyone who does.”

“Are you sure? I got a really strong whiff of something when you rolled down your window. Do you have any incense or cigarettes or anything like that in your vehicle?”

“Nope. I don’t smoke and would never allow my friends to do that in my car.”

“I see,” he says in a tone that says I don’t believe you because you’re a college kid on your way back to school and I’m stereotyping you and trying to take advantage of the system and pin you with more fines. “Christopher, would you mind if I had a look around the inside of your vehicle?”

“Sure, but what for?”
"Like I said, I'm not accusing you of anything. I just want to make sure everything is okay."

"All right."

He walks around the passenger side of my car. I follow closely behind. When he opens up the door and senses I'm right behind him, he turns.

"Would you mind standing over there off the side of the road?" he says, pointing to a spot in the field.

"Sure," I say. Again, my fears of what the passing drivers are thinking returns. Me standing on the side of the road while the officer goes through my car. I hear the conversations—there must be a gun in that car, Son. No doubt it's anything less. Don't get mixed up with the law. It never pays—that resemble those my parents have had with me when passing similar situations along the road.

I watch as Officer Kessy first searches my glove box. He has his flashlight out and digs though my car manuals and a small tool set in there. Finding nothing, of course. Next he looks in the center console. As I stand there, my anger starts to rise. What if he plants something in my car? Is this even legal? I think he needs a warrant to search my car, or at least probable cause. A simple "whiff" cannot be enough to go searching through my belongings. He closes the console, again finding nothing.

He holds up my water bottle and shines the light up to it. He turns the bottle and splashes the water around and looks at it as if he's never seen water before. What the hell is he looking for? After he's satisfied with the examination
of my front seat, he begins to exit through the passenger door. He shines his light into the back seat.

“What’s in those bags back there?”

“Dirty laundry,” I say. “Would you like to see? You’re really just wasting both of our time here. Like I said before, I don’t use marijuana or associate with people who do.” I’m fuming, and I can see the heat from my body condense as it hits the cold night air.

“Well...” he says and looks at me. “You’ve been compliant thus far and you don’t really seem nervous about getting caught with anything, so I guess you can be on your way.”

“It’s about time,” I say under my breath, heading for the driver’s side.

“Remember, Christopher, slow down.”

I climb back into the driver’s seat. Cannabis my ass, Asshole! I start my vehicle and merge back into traffic. I feel like a fugitive. I cannot drive more than 65, even though all the cars around me are doing at least 75. I want to drive faster, but no, I can’t. I’m trapped. I know that if I go 66 mph, Officer Cannabis is going to be behind me again pulling me over. And so I crawl along the road doing 62, the way my father drives: extra cautious.

“Every time you drive, you’re getting behind the wheel of a 2000-ton speeding bullet. Accidents are bound to happen if you’re not safe,” Roy says, which I soon learn is one of his favorite catch phrases. He passes out a Driver Improvement Workbook. While I really don’t want the booklet, I feel a little
better about the $55 entrance fee. At least I have something tangible to take away from the whole thing. One by one, Roy goes around the room and calls on us to read the introductory pages of this workbook. Perhaps ironically because I’m an English major, every time it is supposed to be my turn to read a paragraph, Roy absentmindedly skips over me. Apparently he likes calling on people that read with the speed of a snail and can’t pronounce words like “unauthorized,” “requirements,” and “habitual.”

According to the workbook, “the course is not designed to be a form of punishment or to make you feel guilty for breaking traffic laws.” I think how funny this is because punishment for my fast driving is the exact reason I’m here! It’s not like I can opt out of taking this class. The book also mentions that 90% of traffic accidents are a result of improper decisions, uncontrolled emotions, and the bad habits of drivers. That’s an interesting statistic, but I cannot put a lot of faith in it because there is no documentation as to who, where, or how the study is completed to come up with such a percentage. I also find it unlikely that any transportation department, state or federal, would have the capabilities to monitor accidents that occur because of “uncontrolled emotions.” How exactly could they measure those?

I love driving. It is one of my favorite things—to get behind that wheel and just drive. Fast, of course. Speed limits: those are for losers. Speed should be determined by the driver’s ability and feeling of safety. If the driver doesn’t feel comfortable at 95, the driver is obviously going too fast for his or her ability.
But when you're going straight on the interstate, speed limits should be the driver's option.

I love driving. Road trips are my thing. I've driven to or through 37 of the 48 continental United States and their major cities. Boston, New York, Orlando, Los Angeles, Chicago—I've driven to them all.

I love driving. Whenever I go out with my friends, I always volunteer to drive, no matter how far or close the destination.

I love driving. Being behind the wheel of my six-cylinder car loaded with safety features gives me a sense of control. There, I can accept that I am at least in charge of one part of my destiny.

I love driving. Until one day in early July when the State of Iowa sends me a letter that says I'm in danger of losing my license for too many speeding violations.

I am stunned. I open the letter up outside at my mailbox. As I stroll down the hallway to my apartment, I have to stop reading. I just keep thinking this can't be true. Once inside my apartment, I sit down on my couch and carefully read. The letter states:

To Iowa Driver:

You have been scheduled to attend Driver Improvement class because you have received three moving traffic convictions during a 12-month period. The Iowa Department of Transportation is authorized to suspend the driving privileges of anyone who is a habitual violator or commits a serious violation. If you do not successfully complete the Driver Improvement Program, a notice suspending your driving privileges will be sent to you.
After that paragraph, the letter lists the dates of the Driver Improvement Course and that it will cost $55 dollars. This is freaking ridiculous! I have to pay $55 dollars for an 8-hour driver improvement class that I don't even want! On top of all the money I already had to fork over for getting speeding tickets.

The letter lists a number to call and check on my driving record. Immediately, I reach for my phone and call. I only got one speeding ticket in Iowa, how could they know about the tickets from other states?


Busy.

Again.

Busy.

I need to get through and have to keep calling. I memorize the phone number from trying so many times. Instead of just hitting the redial button, I pound the numbers into my phone, positive that this will be the time I get through.

Again.

Busy.

Again.

Busy.

I enter an obsessive compulsive state. I just need to keep calling because at that instant, I have to talk to someone about my driving record. After 20 minutes of reaching a busy signal, I realize I'm not going to get through.
I take a deep breath. Then I fold the letter up, place it back in the envelope and smooth my hand across it. There is some kind of a mistake and that’s all there is to it. I place the envelope on the bottom of my mail pile and go on with the rest of my day as if I’ve never received this letter.

“Okay. Get into groups of five or six people,” Roy says after we finish reading about what this class means for our driving record and about all 44 Iowa moving violations.

People in the class are still reluctant to participate or even to be here. Everyone lets out a small groan when Roy tells us to do something. The getting-into-groups consists mainly of angling our desks slightly towards those sitting near us.

“I want full circles!” Roy shouts, until there are 7 circles of desks throughout the room. “We’re going to work on a few pages of the workbook that deal with values, attitudes, and behaviors.”

My group consists of Glenn, the 65-year old pastor; two “soccer” moms; a mechanic; one of the three people who holds a B.A.; and some girl from the teen group. While we are sitting in a group, we really work individually with our workbooks, determining where our values, attitude, and behaviors lie on a continuum. Then; and I guess this is where the actual group is necessary, Roy tells us to, “Discuss your findings with the rest of the group.”

We just sit there and look at each other. No one in our group really cares about sharing. Roy walks over to our group and stands above us, staring as no
one talks. He encourages everyone to start discussing. Glenn finally talks in hopes that Roy will stop hovering. And Glenn continues talking and talking and talking. Somehow he starts saying things about God and allowing Him to control our behaviors, and I have no choice but to tune him out. I look around the room and can see that the other groups are in similar situations. Unless Roy is lingering over the group, none are really discussing. But everyone constantly keeps glancing at the clock, including myself, just waiting for this all to be over.

Apparently the lesson we are all supposed to learn from the activity is that it’s easier to change our attitudes and behaviors than it is to change our value system. Well, duh!

Eventually, everyone starts sharing what they did to end up in the class.

“I got mine because on three separate occasions I went through a stoplight on yellow hurrying to get my kids to school,” says one of the “soccer” moms, who drives a minivan. After class, I realize she’s parked next to me in the parking lot. I see she has a soccer ball decal on her back window.

The teen girl offers that she is here because “I didn’t come to a complete stop at a stop sign twice and was caught for going 8 mph over the posted speed.”

The mechanic says, “I got them because I was running late for work and went a few miles over the posted speed to get there on time. But the cops didn’t really seem to care.”
Everyone else is basically there for the same reason. In my opinion, minor cases of doing a few miles over the posted speed or going through an intersection on yellow. None are really in a similar situation as me.

"I got my speeding tickets on the interstates. Because I don't think there needs to be speed limits there. Because I love the rush that speeding on the open road gives me," I say. Everyone looks at me with horror, except for the other person in my group who holds a B.A. He nods, as if he understands where I'm coming from.

Our discussion is cut off, and we are told to put aside the workbooks. Everyone receives a Color Matrixx Personality System Packet from Roy. The Greek philosopher Hippocrates apparently started the entire system when he suggested that all humans can be divided into four distinct personality types. In the early part of the 1900s, psychologists revisited these personality theories. Supposedly, by understanding human behaviors of others through their personalities, we are able to recognize, accept, and learn to value their differences.

The entire system is broken into four colors—gold, blue, green, and orange—one for each personality. Gold people comprise approximately nine percent of the total population. They are extremely organized and most people would term them "anal." Blue people make up 45 percent of the population and are most concerned with caring, family, and other people's feelings. Green people are the thinkers and the ones who analyze everything. They only consist of about six percent of the population. Finally, the last group, orange, houses
approximately 40 percent of the population. People in this group are competitive and usually take part in extreme sports.

Roy leads us through a series of steps which help us determine what color personality we are. I'm green. But I know this before taking the test when I simply read over the characteristics of a green person. A green person: seeks insight and knowledge, takes pride in competence, has an abstract perception, has ingenuity, and who's highest virtue is objectivity. Basically, green people think they are smarter than everyone else because, typically, they are. However, they also are most stressed by feelings of inadequacy.

On March 21st, 2003 after driving all day long, right after dusk, 30-some miles from the border of New Mexico, I notice the flashing lights of an Arizona State Trooper pursuing me in my rearview mirror.

I am too tired to deal with his crap. As the officer approaches my vehicle, I already have my license in hand. I won't deny that I am speeding.

"Good Evening," he says in a grouchy tone. It doesn't feel as if it's a greeting as much as a formality to begin the ticketing process. Do you know the posted speed limit on this interstate?"

"Yeah, It's 75, right?"

"Yes. Do you know how fast you were going?"

"A little faster than that." I really had no idea. At one point I was averaging about 105 mph, but I think I had slowed down some since nightfall crept up.
"A little? You were going 95!"

"Oh." I think about telling him I've been driving for almost 12 hours, how I am just trying to make up some time because Iowa is a long way away, how I just want to go to sleep, but I figure he isn't going to accept any excuses.

"I need to see your license and proof of insurance."

I give him the license already in my hand. I have to dig in the center console for the insurance card. I can sense the officer outside my widow put his hand on his gun when I start searching. I find a packet of stuff that contains insurance cards from a company I am no longer with, as well as insurance information from when I lived in Pennsylvania. I try shuffling through the material looking for the most up-to-date insurance proof.

"I'll take that," the officer says, reaching for the packet.

"No, I have to find the right one for you. Some of this is outdated."

"Is this your vehicle?"

And with that, he grabs my packet of information cards and storms back to his patrol car. I can only imagine what he is thinking as he fishes through the material. He is already suspicious that I'm not the owner of my car. Now, he probably suspects I have fraudulent insurance as well.

He returns moments later and hands me back my license and insurance information.

"Mr Toth, I need you to sign on this line. By signing here, you acknowledge that you have received this citation on this here said date. However, you are not admitting guilt to any charge and can opt to have a trial
by jury on April 8, 2003. If you wish to admit that you’re guilty, here is an envelope that lists the fines.”

Police officers always say that. But really, it’s a ticket, and I’m going to have to pay no matter what. Who in their right mind would appear in court and argue that their clocked speed was incorrect?

“Thanks, Officer,” I say.

“Slow it down!” he says in a joking tone. Police officers are always nice the second time they come to my car. I guess once they run my license through their machine, it makes them more relaxed to know that I’m not a serial killer on the loose or a convicted felon.

As I drive away, I’m struck with the deep sense that if I go just two miles above the posted limit, I will get pulled over again. I scan over my ticket and notice the name of the speed measurement device—Stalker Radar. It has such a negative connotation. As a motor vehicle driver, I have been reduced from a human to some sort of animal. Now that the officer has caught me, he can threateningly track some other unsuspecting prey.

Roy tells the class a story about a drunk driver. Apparently, the driver crashes into the front of Roy’s house, flies through the windshield, picks his bloody self up in the living room, and sits in Roy’s recliner. The cops are called; however, they can only charge the guy for reckless driving, even though he is completely drunk. Iowa law says that someone has to witness a drunk driver behind the
wheel to get a DUI. While it was obvious that the bloody man is drunk and was driving, no one sees him, and thus he can’t be faulted.

However, on the flip side of this, if ever you find yourself leaving a bar and realize that you’re too drunk to drive, DO NOT sit behind the wheel of your car, even if you have no other intentions but to sleep. Iowa law enforcement officers can charge you with a DUI, even if the car isn’t started! As long as you’re sitting behind the wheel, you’re guilty.

It’s kind of ironic that Roy brings this story up because that morning, I was selected to appear for jury duty. And of course, as it goes in these sorts of cases, a jury is needed, and I have the fortunate opportunity of being selected.

The case is a DUI. The attorneys keep asking whether anyone would have partial opinions about the case or has any involvement with the law that would obstruct them from being objective. I keep trying to say that I have personal feelings about the situation and most likely, they will interfere.

Back in mid-April, I have a run-in with the cops and get pulled over, first, for speeding, and then, for suspicion of DUI. It’s around 3:30 am, and I’m driving a friend that is visiting me for the weekend back to my apartment after we left Perkins. While I can’t deny that I was drinking that night, I only had about two drinks starting around 10 pm. It was now five hours later and after a few glasses of water at the bar before leaving and a full meal at Perkins, I am definitely not intoxicated by any legal standards.

“There’s a cop over there. Look out,” my friend says as she spots a patrol car on the other side of the deserted highway approximately a quarter mile
away. At that exact moment, I’m doing 60 mph in a 35 zone. I can’t deny that I am speeding, because I am. But as soon as my friend points out the cop, my speed decreases to 32ish.

The cop starts speeding up on the other side of the road. I watch through my rearview mirror as he makes an illegal U-turn at the approaching intersection to follow me. By this time, the speed limit changes to 30 mph and I’m doing 29. The cop follows me for about a half mile or more, and then turns on his lights. I pull over and the normal routine ensues.

The policeman strolls up to my car, and I roll down the window.

“Morning,” he says. “Where are you headed?”

“Home. Is there a problem?”

“Well, you were going pretty fast.”

“That’s funny because my speedometer was reading 30 mph. And if I’m correct, Officer, that is the posted speed limit through here.”

“Nah, you must have been going a lot faster than that. I had to go 90 mph in my patrol car just to catch up with you,” he says. I almost burst out laughing at him because he’s lying out his ass. The only reason he would have had to go slightly above the speed limit is that he was on the other side of a medium divided highway. But at no point in time could he ever have been doing more than about 40 mph while pursuing me.

He asks to see my license, and I hand it over. He shines his flashlight on it but doesn’t go run it through the machine in his patrol car.

“Mr. Toth, Were you drinking at all tonight?”
"I had two drinks earlier in the evening." I have nothing to hide, and I think being honest will be a good thing here.

"Oh, I see. Would you mind stepping out of the car while I administer some tests?"

I comply with his request. He still has not run my license through his computer and for all he knows, I'm an escaped convict. Instead, he tucks my license into his belt and motions for me to move to the side of the road. He gets on the little radio thing attached to his shirt and calls for backup.

We stand on the side of the road and wait until another patrol car pulls up before we do anything. It's 3:40 am on an April morning, and so I'm a little cold. I'm wearing only a thin button-down shirt and put my hands in my pockets.

"Could you please remove your hands from your pockets, Mr. Toth?"

Again, I comply. The second patrol car arrives. The cop in that car just waves at the officer standing in front of me. By this time, the cold has set in again, and without thinking, my hands go back into my pockets.

"Mr. Toth, I need you to keep your hands out of your pockets. I don't know if you have a grenade in there or not," he says to me. Right, because the average pedestrian really walks around with grenades!

"Okay, the first thing I want you to do is follow my finger."

The test seems to go on for an abnormally long time. My friend waiting in the car watches the clock and later informs me that the eye test lasts
approximately 5 minutes. Next, I am told to walk a straight line, heel to heel for ten steps, turn around on one leg, and then walk back.

"Where would you like me to do this?" I say, because there is no straight line in sight.

"Umm...well, let's see. How about if you just kind of follow where the grass meets the gravel here. That's kind of a straight line," he says.

I want to argue with him about the logistical issues that arise when not using a straight line to administer an intoxication test that is supposed to determine if a person can walk a straight line. But instead of arguing, it occurs to me what is going on. This cop is a rookie, and I'm his test subject. He needed to call for backup so one of his superiors could watch him perform the tests. My rookie theory also fits in with the fact that he obviously hasn't read his manual close enough to know the right procedures on administering the tests.

I complete the test to the best of my ability, but I'm sure I would have done a much better job had there actually been a straight line. Next, it is time for the one legged stand test.

"Pick a leg, whichever leg you feel more comfortable on, raise it, flex your toe inward, and count like this, one-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand, four-one thousand, five-one thousand," he says.

I lift my leg, flex my toe, count to five-one thousand and stop.

"What are you doing?" he yells.

"You said to raise my leg and count to five-one thousand. I did that."
“You need to keep going!”

I start the whole process again. However, it isn’t until I reach thirty-two one-thousand that Office Rookie decides to let me stop. Again, I think someone doesn’t know the correct procedures for administering the test, as I don’t think most people could stand on one leg while flexing their toe for that duration of time.

Finally, Officer Rookie decides he will give me a breathalyzer. I watch as he hooks a hard plastic tube to the machine. He instructs me on where I should blow and how I need to keep blowing until he tells me to stop.

I start blowing on this tube to the best of my ability. But I have a severe case of asthma, and I’m not blowing hard enough for the Rookie.

“Blow harder! Blow harder! You need to keep blowing harder!”

I try my best, and it gives him some sort of reading. But he never informs me of that reading. Instead, I watch as he flicks the plastic tube on the ground and litters. I want to call him on it, but again, now is probably not the best time to get into a fight with the law.

He says, “I’m seeing some inconsistencies with these tests here. I’m not going to charge you for a DUI, but I also don’t want you driving your vehicle home. I’m going to have Officer X over there drive your car into that parking lot, and you’ll have to walk home.”

At 4:10 am, I have to call a friend to come pick me and my friend up while we stand next to my car that I’m not allowed to drive according to Officer Rookie. It’s interesting that he never runs my license to check if I’m a criminal.
Also, after the initial talk, there is no mention of my supposed “90 mph speeding.” And I cannot believe that if my blood alcohol content was too high according to the breathalyzer that I would not have been charged with a DUI. And people wonder why I have so much angst against cops.

Months later when I appear for jury duty, I try to inform the lawyers and judge of my dislike and bias towards cops. But my protests go unheard, and I’m still selected for the jury. After the twelve jurors are officially picked, the judge asks if anyone has any commitment that will prohibit us from being in the courtroom past 5 pm, because he feels the case will run over a bit. Because of the driver improvement class, I have to stand in front of the entire court and pronounce:

“Your Honor, I have a Driver Improvement Class tonight that I cannot be late for and which I cannot speed to get there.” I immediately feel as if I’m the one on trial, as everyone watches me, and in their mind, judges me.

In ancient Greece, shame was the worst forms of punishment. It’s interesting that the Driver Improvement Workbook suggests that the class is not a form of punishment. Then, why am I so embarrassed admitting to everyone in the courtroom that I have to attend the class? So on account of me having to go to the class, the court case adjourns early for the day, and everyone is forced to miss a second day of work.

The trial is in some ways very useful for fueling my dislike of police officers. One of the defense’s witnesses is an Iowa State Trooper who trains officers on conducting field sobriety tests using the guidelines outlined in a
manual all officers receive. *None* of my tests that April morning were administered with accuracy, according to the Iowa State Trooper's sworn testimony about the correct procedures.

Ticket #3 is just uncalled for. I am picking up a friend who called me, frantically upset because a significant other is being stupid, as is usually the case. I'm speeding the entire way there on Interstate 80, because I need to get my friend out of the dangerous situation as soon as possible. Once I turn off the interstate and start driving through a residential neighborhood in some part of Iowa City where I've never been before, I slow down. I know how the cops patrol everywhere in IC. The posted speed I see is 35 mph. I make sure to maintain this speed. It's around 1:00 am after a rain storm has passed through, leaving a glistening shine as my headlights bounce off the street.

Parallel parked in a row of about six cars is a police vehicle. One word comes to my mind: entrapment. I drive by him at 35 mph. He pulls out, turns his lights on, and follows me one block until I pull over. I remember thinking that I have no idea what just happened. Maybe I had a tail light out or something, but I definitely wasn’t speeding.

The officer strolls up alongside my car as I roll down the window.

“What's going on, Officer?”

“Where are you headed?” he says. He is wearing what looks like a clear plastic bag over his hat and a rain slicker. Despite the weather, he's smiling happily, knowing he 'got another one'.
“To go pick up a friend, is there a problem?”

“Do you know the speed limit on this road?”

“Yeah, it’s 35. That’s what I was doing.”

“Wrong, it’s 25 mph! You were going 10 miles over the posted speed.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Officer. I have never been to this part of Iowa City, and I’m unfamiliar with the speed limit. I’m sure the last sign I saw was 35 mph.”

“My patrol car was parked two feet in front of the 25 mph sign.”

Oh, right, stupid me for not paying attention to the speed limit sign

because I was too concerned about the cop car that was inconspicuously parked in a line of cars!

“I need to see your license.”

Out of all the tickets I’ve received in my life, this is one that I should not have gotten. But I guess I just have bad karma—the fact that I was doing a good deed to help out a friend that night, the fact that for once I was really paying attention to my speed, the fact that I was the only car on the road in this residential neighborhood, and the fact that the cop car was clandestinely hiding among a row of parked cars: I didn’t deserve that ticket.

After working in our groups for an hour or so, Roy gives us break time. I go outside the building where the driver improvement class is being held and call a friend on my cell phone.

“Are you joking?” she asks.
“No, I’m serious. I have to take a Driver Improvement Class because I got too many speeding tickets.”

She just laughs.

“And it’s such a waste of my time and everyone else’s who is here too.” I continue complaining about the class, the other people in it, and the fact that most of these people are lame because their speeding tickets are for like seven over the posted speed, versus my tickets that average about 15-20 miles over. I continue complaining about everything I can think of.

I end the phone call and turn the corner to head back inside. One of my fellow classmates is sitting there, and I’m sure he heard me bitching about how lame everyone is. It is one of those awkward foot-in-my-mouth scenarios. I just said “hi” and pretend like I didn’t do anything wrong.

Back inside, Roy tells the class to break up into our color groups. There are only four other green people in the room, versus the blues and oranges which are so large they have to break into two groups. My fellow green group members and I agree our group is far superior over all the other groups (but I suppose this is typical of green people). Together, we mark on a large sheet of paper what our joys, values, stressors and frustrations are. Being with like minded people, it is rather easy for all the groups to come up with answers. The green group’s poster expresses how we really don’t like incompetent people.

I punch into the phone the last 3 digits of my driver’s license—666. I often wonder if those numbers in some way are a premonition of my driving habits.
How if I were a true Christian, I would follow the speed limit and not get tickets. But I’m marked with the number of the Beast.

Finally, after a week of fighting at different times throughout the day for my call to be selected from the thousands of other Iowans phoning to check on their records, my call is answered.

“Hello. What can I help you with today, sir?” The woman on the other end of the phone sounds pleasant, sincere, like my grandmother. And here I am calling her to discuss my bad driving.

“I’m calling about my driving record.”

“Okay, what is your question?” she asks.

“Well, what is on it?”

“Are you calling because you received a letter about the Driver Improvement Program?”

How can she know? I look around my apartment just to make sure no one is watching me hold the letter while talking on the phone. But I am alone.

“Yes, and I think there is some sort of mistake,” I say, defiantly.

“Well sir, we send those out to all Iowa drivers who have committed three moving violations.”

“Well, what are my violations?”

“Ok...let’s see. The first one was on January 20, 2003 for 88 in a 65 mph zone.”

“But that was in Illinois. How did you know about that?” This cannot be happening. I thought states don’t have that kind of reciprocity.
“Well sir, each state’s Department of Transportation periodically checks with other states and that information is pulled in electronically.”

“Oh, I see.” This isn’t looking good for me.

“The second one listed occurred on March 21, 2003 for 95 in a 75 mph zone. It says that one was in Arizona. And the third one we have listed is in Iowa City on May 24, 2003 for 35 in a 25 mph zone. Is there anything else I can help you with today, sir?”

“Umm...do you have any other tickets listed?”

“No, just those three. Why?”

“Well, here’s a hypothetical question. What would happen if I were to get another ticket? Would I automatically lose my license?”

“Well, no. The State of Iowa allows up to four tickets prior to the Driver Improvement Class. However, after you take that class, you cannot get another ticket for 12 months or else your license will be suspended.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Sir, did you get another ticket that is not showing on our records?”

“I believe so.” Telling her at this point in time doesn’t really seem like a big ordeal. What do I have to lose? I’m sure she’ll find out eventually.

“How fast were you going?”

“80 or so in a 65. It was in Ohio two days after that Iowa City ticket.”

“Well, then you’re fine. As long as it wasn’t above 25 mph over the posted speed limit you should be okay.” Pause. “You must travel a lot for work.”
"Yeah, something like that," I say. I can't really figure out a way to tell her that I just love to drive and see friends all over the country. Somehow, I don't really picture my grandmother, who doesn't even like the 10 minute drive to church, relating to my situation.

"But you do realize that you can't get any more tickets?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

"There is actually. You know this Driver Improvement Class? It's eight hours long! What are they going to do for eight hours? Telling me not to speed takes two seconds."

"Well sir, I don't really know. I mean, I've never had to take it."

"Oh." And I feel like I somehow completely offended my grandmother. I'm not accusing her. I just think maybe since she works for IDOT she may have some understanding of what happens during an 8-hour mandatory class assigned by her place of employment...but I guess that is asking for too much.

I plan to visit some friends in the Cleveland area. However, the third ticket that I received two days ago in Iowa City makes me consider not going. I mean, I know that I don't possess the ability to go on an interstate road trip without speeding.

The day I leave on the trip, still skeptical about going, I order take-out Chinese food. At the conclusion of my meal, the paper inside the cookie reads, "Traveling This Year Will Bring Your Life Into Greater Perspective." I can't think
of a more appropriate fortune to receive, and in an instant, I decide I will take the road trip after all. I have the good sign of a fortune cookie—nothing can go wrong.

I drive from Iowa to the Cleveland area in 10 hours, driving well above the posted speed limit the entire way. Everyone knows about the ‘unofficial’ rule to never drive the speed limit, except in construction zones and during bad weather conditions. The interstate should always be a ‘choose your own speed’ road.

The next day after arriving in Ohio, I head with some old college friends up to Cedar Point Amusement Park in Sandusky. I, of course, volunteer to drive.

Traveling on Highway 2, we make our way up to the Point. I drive around a bend and spot the flashing lights of a police car parked on the side of the road. I immediately slow down a little and get into the left lane to give clearance to the patrol car. As I get closer, my friend says,

“Why is that cop standing in the middle of the road?”

“He must have a radar gun; although that’s pretty stupid of him to stand in the middle of the road. He’s going to get run over,” I say.

“Chris, I think he’s waving to you,” she says.

“What?”

The Ohio State Trooper, standing in the middle of the road, waves me off to the side.

“I don’t even think I was speeding! Damnit!” I shout.
The officer approaches my car, and I put my window down.

“Howdy.”

“Hello. Where are you headed today?”

“Cedar Point.”

Then the cop starts chuckling, “Are you lost?”

“No. What do you mean?”

“Well you’re from Iowa, ain’t ya?”

“Umm, yeah?”

“Well you’re on the east side of Cedar Point, and last time I checked, Iowa was on the west of it,” he says, proud of his geography knowledge.

“Uh-huh.”

“So you must be lost?”

“No,” I say.

“Well, I don’t understand?”

“I’m on Highway 2. This road goes directly to Cedar Point. I don’t really see the problem.” What the hell is his problem? Does it really matter where I’m traveling or how I get there? Just tell me why I’m pulled over.

“So, you are lost then? Is this your car?”

No, my three friends and I just decided to steal this car and now we’re not going to Cedar Point on a road you think we should be taking and were dumb enough to get pulled over by you.

“Yes. I was picking up a friend in Cleveland. We’re going in the right direction. Trust me. It’s fine.”
“Can I see your license?” he asks.

“Sure. What seems to be the problem, Officer?”

“Well, our aircraft clocked you going 80 mph on this road with a posted 65 mph speed limit.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I’ll be right back,” he says as he walks away with my license.

“Is he joking? Aircraft?” my friend says. “Oh my God! That’s freakin’ hilarious!”

I just look at her.

“I mean, it’s not really funny because you’re going to get a ticket and all, but aircraft...you have to admit, that’s funny.”

I don’t laugh.

Red cars are said to have the highest insurance rates and also to be the cars that are most frequently pulled over. My car is maroon—part of the red family. Maybe that is why my luck is so bad with speeding and the law. The cops must have some internal sense that because my car is reddish, I must be speeding. I wonder how much stereotyping of this sort really happens on America’s roadways.

There are those signs on the side of the road sometimes that say, “Speed Monitored by Aircraft.” I’ve always thought how peculiar they are and how planes don’t actually monitor speeding motorists. The Transportation Department just hangs those signs as a scare tactic. Well, if you’re ever
traveling on Highway 2 over Memorial Day Weekend, please note, they enforce speed by aircraft.

"Every time you get behind the wheel, you're in control of a 2000 ton speeding bullet," Roy repeats once more before we continue with our color groups for some more workbook fun! The rest of the night we work with our groups through exercises in the workbook. Roy facilitates entire room discussions after we finish a section in order to understand other's personalities. The main idea of the entire class is that by understanding our own personality and other's, we will be able to modify our behavior when driving. Well, as good as the intentions are, the methodology of the workbook doesn't really help. If someone pulls out in front of me and cuts me off, I'm going to still get frustrated behind the wheel, regardless if I understand that some blue personality colored mother is hurrying to get her kids to school because she cares for them and doesn't want them to be late.

The final thing we talk about that night, before receiving our "Driving Improvement Class Diploma Certificates," is insurance. Roy gives some key tips on what to do if we happen to get another moving traffic violation before our year probation period is up. He also warns us that our insurance will most likely go up.

That is one of the biggest comments I always hear when I tell people that I've received four speeding tickets. "Wow, your insurance must have sky-rocketed!"
But in all reality, it hasn't. In fact, my insurance company urges me to send my certified Driver Improvement Diploma, and then gives a deduction. As an end result, my insurance goes up $40. That averages out to $10 per speeding ticket. I can live with that.

You cannot ask an alcoholic to one day just stop drinking. But the Iowa Department of Transportation demands that habitual speeders stop speeding. To me, recovering from speeding is a lot like a recovering alcoholic. Speeding in its own way is like a disease. Just like a 12-step program for alcoholism, learning how to re-drive has been a process for me. Every day I'm behind the wheel of my car, I face a new battle just like the alcoholic faces every time he or she walks by a bar.

I think the people who wrote the Driver Improvement manual are also aware of this similarity. The workbook suggests, "You hold the key to the success of this program. No one can force you to learn." It sounds rather similar to the Alcoholic Anonymous guidelines, "You are the key to the success of your problem. No one can force you to stop drinking."

Driving fast is just how I'm programmed. To reconfigure my network has taken time. At first, the most obvious answer for me to not get another speeding ticket was to stop driving. I no longer volunteer to drive all the time. I often hitch rides with other people or take the bus. I've even become a badgering backseat driver when I'm in the car with my friends. I constantly monitor their speed and give unwanted advice on their driving abilities.
When I do drive, I'm constantly monitoring my own speedometer. So much that sometimes I pay more attention to that than actually watching the road. I'm taking it one day at a time to re-learn how to drive. Over the five months in which I accumulate four speeding tickets, I put close to 15,000 miles on my car. In the seven months since the Driver Improvement Class, I've put on only about 4,000 miles. The one activity I love doing has turned into something which I no longer look forward to.

I have this overwhelming sense of fear instilled in me now when I drive. I guess it first started when I received the letter from I-DOT stating that if I had any more speeding violations in 12 months, I would lose my license. This terror was re-enforced in the Driver Improvement Class. I cannot afford to lose my license. In many ways, it is my sense of freedom. Without it, I'd be lost.

Every time I see a cop car, I'm convinced they're going to pull me over. I notice that I have to bad-mouth all law enforcement officers in a way that before these speeding tickets I never did.

By the end of the Driver Improvement Class and probationary ordeal, I end up driving like my father, who never has received a speeding ticket. I do a few miles below the posted speed limit and watch in my review mirror as eight, nine, or even ten cars pile up behind me—extremely annoyed, I'm sure.
FLYING FREE

OBSSESSION

No matter where I am—a mall, campus, or bar—I seek them out. I notice tattoos on that girl's shoulder blade, or the guy with the tattoo on his back, or the one on his upper arm, or the one on her ankle, or the small inking on his neck, or the tattoo band on his arm or leg, or the girl with tattoos on the underside of her biceps.

I have a really good friend who always checks to see if someone is wearing a wedding ring. For her, it's a perfected talent that is so nonchalant no one ever realizes she's doing it. And like her ability to pick out rings, I have the ability to spot tattoos. On whomever and wherever.

If someone tells me they have a tattoo, I always ask to see it; even if I just met the person. A few years ago, I worked in a store where one of my regular customers had a bunch of tattoos on his arms. The colorful stained glass mosaic wrapped up and down both his arms, creating an artificial skin. Because of the lack of visible white skin, his tattoos gave the appearance that he was naturally colored with swords, tigers, dragons, and other symbols. The tattoo man had almost everything imaginable inked onto his arms.

Every time he would come in, I would just stare in fascination while hundreds of questions floated through my mind about his tattoos. I wanted to know about the process of getting tattoos. I pondered how he decided upon each tattoo. I wondered if he had tattoos all over his body, not just on his arms. Yet for some reason, I always withheld my questions.
One night, the tattoo guy caught me staring at his arms.

"How many do you have?" he asked.

"Umm, oh, well...I don't have any yet." I said. "Someday."

"That's cool. Wait till you're ready and know what you want."

The entire exchange was odd. Even though I was talking to the tattoo guy about tattoos, I didn't look at him. I couldn't take my eyes off his arms.

"How many hours does something like that take to finish?" I asked.

"Well, it's not done. It's like an ongoing project. I've been getting my arms tooed for the past two and a half years. I have a little bit more before it's finished," he said in a deep crackly voice. He shows me a little patch of white skin on the outside of his right forearm, where he will get his next tattoo. "I'm going to get the Chinese symbol for warrior set inside a rising sun."

"Cool. Did you design all the tattoos yourself?" I asked.

"Hell, yeah. They're my arms, aren't they?"

"Sorry," I said.

"It's sort of my personal masterpiece. It's trickier than it looks: to meld all the designs together to create an overall picture, especially when they aren't all done at the same time," he says in a tone of a proud artist.

"Well, it's awesome."

I had so many more questions to ask the tattoo man about the costs, the pain, the time. But I didn't want to hold him up any longer. He gathered up his purchases and headed to the door.

Walking out the store, he yelled to me:
"I go back once I stop remembering what the pain feels like."

It was the last time I saw the tattoo guy; he never came into the store again. It was as if, by talking to him instead of silently praising his art, I somehow broke the magic.

**HISTORY**

Scientists identified that Otzi, the Iceman discovered in remote mountains on the border of Austria, had marking of lines and crosses that were tattoos. If the oldest preserved human iceman dating to 3300 BC had tattoos, it was definitely my turn to enter the long history and tradition.

The actual word *tattoo* comes from the Tahitian word *tattau*, which means, "to mark." Various cultures have different ways of classifying the purposes of tattoos. They range from decoration to identification to rites of passage to even souvenirs.

Thomas Edison invented an autographic printer that was later slightly modified by Samuel O'Reilly in 1891 to create the first tattoo machine. Today, this device has been relatively unchanged and is still used in tattoo parlors. The hand-held tool moves an attached needle up and down at a rate of several hundred vibrations per minute. It's similar to a dentist's drill and makes the same familiar buzzing sound.

The tattoo needle punches holes through the epidermis and deposits ink on the dermal level, about one-eighth inch deep. If the tattoo artists are good, they'll know how far down to go with the needle. If they don't go far enough,
the skin will have a scratchy, raised line after healing. If they go too deep, it will cause excessive pain and bleeding. The cells on the dermal (second) level of skin are stable and soak up the ink, which helps preserve the tattoo, making it an permanent fixture.

Unfortunately, tattoo parlors don’t offer nitrous oxide gas to inhale while they inflict the torture. And so, all I need to do is survive a half hour or so of someone poking me thousands of times with a needle—the instrument of my worst fears.

**BELONEPHOBIA**

It’s a fear of needles, for those who don’t know. While belonephobia is a condition that has received little formal study, it is an issue that affects more than 10% of the population. Also, the phobia is more common in men than in women. The good thing about this illness is that 10% of the population will never experiment with heroin.

The classic symptoms of belonephobia include a frightened reaction, which results in the plunging of blood pressure and sometimes, even loss of consciousness. I have experienced both of these. Needles are my Achilles heels.

Basically, when it comes to needles, I’m a big baby.

I have never donated blood. I just can’t. And I never will.

My family’s doctor’s office used to have this nurse who would trick me when I had to get routine shots. She would have me to look away and then tell
me step by step exactly what she was doing to my arm. She'd say that she was just prepping the area a few times in a row, but the last time, she always lied, and it was the actual shot. And I would scream out, "Oww!" and start crying.

When I get shots now, it usually requires about two or three nurses—one to actually perform the injection and the others to calm me down. One time when I had to have a small vial of blood drawn, a second nurse told me to squeeze her hand while another prepped my arm. She told me to squeeze her hand as hard as the pain and that I wouldn't hurt her. Well, I started squeezing her hand as soon as the first nurse began prepping. And I kept squeezing, harder and harder. By the time my blood was drawn, the second nurse was crumpled in half and screaming for me to let go of her hand.

Probably my worst and most recent experience with a needle was the time I had my wisdom teeth removed. All four of my teeth were impacted in my gums and growing in at horizontal angles. The procedure required that I be put to sleep.

I sat in a padded chair shivering with fear, covered in a cold sweat. The anesthesiologist stood to my left preparing his torture device. He reached for my arm, and I reluctantly turned it over for him.

"Your veins are hiding from me," he said.

"That's because they don't like you," I replied.

He laughed although I failed to see the humor. So he started slapping my arm.

"This will make them come out," he said, slapping my arm even harder.
He reached for his needle, and I started freaking out. I became someone I didn’t know, kind of like my Mr. Hyde. Defensively, I started screaming, jumped up, and punched the anesthesiologist in the gut. He dropped the needle and just stood there stunned.

But within seconds, he called in his aides (or cronies as I like to call them.) Two of the cronies grabbed me by the arms and pushed me back in the chair. Instantaneously, there were leather straps on my arms and ankles. A third crony put the Snoopy nose on me and turned the nitrous oxide gas on to calm me down.

They let me sit there strapped to the chair inhaling gas for about 15 minutes. Obviously, I became much more relaxed. He slipped the needle in without me even noticing because I was so high. But I do remember the icy cool feeling spreading through the veins in my arm from the injected anesthetic, and then I was out.

PERMANENCE

I read a study once that said 49% of all people who get tattoos later regret them. I think the permanence of tattoos is part of what has scared me for so long about getting one.

I’m constantly learning, growing, and changing. If I get something inked onto my skin, will I later regret my choice? Will I want a different design? Will I want a different location? I know right now that I’ve evolved so much from two years ago that I definitely would regret any choices I made then. Who’s to
say in two years from now that I won’t keep changing, that I’ll regret the choices I’ve made now?

A few months ago, I went along to witness two good friends get tattoos. I was on the verge of getting one too, but just couldn’t bring myself to do it.

I helped one friend pick out a dragon tattoo. Like the permanence of her tattoo, she’ll always remember me as being the one who picked it out for her.

After my friend finished getting the dragon tattooed on her upper arm, I asked her, “Do you think you’ll regret it?”

“No, why would I?” she asked.

“Well, because it’s permanent. You’re always going to have it now. For the rest of your life.”

“Right, but who knows how long my life will be?”

And she was right. I kept telling myself not to get a tattoo simply for the fact that it was permanent, that I would have it the rest of my life; that I might one day regret it. But I never considered the idea that tomorrow I may die. Life is so uncertain like that. I’ve always had this weird sort of premonition that I’m going to die before I’m 35.

The thought of actually dying and never getting a tattoo scared me too. It was one of many things on a list of life goals—get a PhD, become a published author, backpack across Europe, live in NYC for one year, live in Greece, get a tattoo—that I needed to accomplish before I die. It was also one of the more attainable goals. So there was no more point in waiting.
PAIN

Obviously since I have an obsession with tattoos, I've given a lot of thought to what I wanted to get inked onto my skin. Since this tattoo would be permanent, I wanted something meaningful. Simply picking something off the walls of the tattoo parlor wouldn't be sufficient.

I asked three different people to design a tattoo for me on three separate occasions. All of them seemed completely interested in doing so when I propositioned them. However, the progress of all three fizzled, and my tattoo design never came into fruition.

I took it as a sign that I needed to do my own work. It probably was good it worked out that way. The tattoo man designed all of his second skin. And, it is my body; shouldn't I design what gets permanently drawn on it?

After spending about 8 hours working—drawing, shifting, coloring, re-drawing, enlarging, reducing, re-drawing—I took my design of a sun and two falling wings to the tattoo parlor to get a price quote.

It was only a matter of seconds before the tattoo was appraised.

"80 bucks," the guy said. "Do you want to get that now?"

"Umm...no thanks. I'll be back tomorrow."

I went home that night and did what I thought every person should do before he or she gets a tattoo. I cut out the design, got some duct tape, and taped it to my chest. I stood in front of the bathroom mirror trying to imagine what the tattoo would look like without the white paper between the black lines.
I realized my tattoo was too small. I don't have a huge chest, but the design looked like it was drowning in a sea of skin. I enlarged the drawing and went through the entire cutting and taping process again. Still too small. I repeated the whole procedure two more times before I finally settled on a size. What scared me though was the larger my design, the more needle time I needed to endure.

Just days before my twenty-fourth birthday, I scheduled to get my first tattoo at 5pm. The entire day seemed to zip by without me noticing until 4:45pm when it was time to leave.

My friend, whose philosophy on the permanence of tattoos I now adopted, went along. I took a few deep breaths as we walked up the sidewalk. We passed a bar, and I thought to myself how having a few shots before the procedure would be a good idea. But then I recalled how drinking alcohol before getting a tattoo is a bad plan because it thins the blood, making excessive bleeding more of a possibility. Also, most parlors won't tattoo a person if they sense he or she is drunk.

Instead of drinking, I opened the parlor door and marched right up to the counter. I handed the clerk my design and explained how I enlarged it and needed a new price quote. The appraisal came as instantaneously as yesterday—100 dollars. I agreed to the fee and filled out the necessary paperwork. I thought that if everything moves this fast, the tattoo would be completed before I even knew what happened.
On the receipt for a tattoo, there was a place for a tip. I thought this to be odd, but then recalled my friend's advice:

"Remember to give a tip! If you don't give them a good tip, they'll do a crappy job or if you need touch-ups, they'll refuse to do them."

She was so adamant about it that I thought it best not to ignore her warning. Twenty dollars seemed like an adequate tip to ensure a good job. After I handed the clerk the signed receipt, he told me they would be right with me and headed to the back of the store—behind the closed swinging doors where I could hear nothing but laughter.

And then the waiting started. I stood and looked at all the flashes of possible tattoos on the walls. I glanced through all the books of tattoos laid out on the desk. And I continued waiting. I kept watching the time. The minutes were moving, but I wasn't getting closer to a completed tattoo. My anxiety started building even more. I had to keep breathing—telling myself in and out, in and out—till finally the clerk came out to get me.

I followed him to the back of the parlor. Here, three tattoo artists were sitting around watching "The Best of Saturday Night Live." All of them were laughing hysterically, pointing to the screen so the others "wouldn't miss this part."

I just stood there, not really sure what I should do. One of the artists with slicked-back brown hair finally motioned me over to his chair. I sat down, and immediately after he let out another laugh to the TV, he instructed me to stand and take my shirt off. I did as instructed. He started washing the area
of my chest down with some solution, an antiseptic I assumed. Both of his arms were filled with tattoos, but I was too nervous to really examine them.

He spread some jelly-like substance on the area and then handed me a mirror copy of my tattoo design. He told me to place it on my chest the way I intended. He pressed it down and waited a few seconds before removing the paper, which left a purplish outline of the design on my chest. Next, he put a pillow in between the crack of his now reclined tattoo chair and pointed that I should lie down.

As soon as I was in position and he let out a few more laughs at the TV, the sound of the drill...errrr needle...started. I wondered what happened to him telling me about the safety precautions. Every time artists create a tattoo, they're supposed to explain how the needle is sterilized and exactly what they're going to do.

But no words were exchanged between the tattoo artist and me. After lying down, I determined his name was "Mump", from a flag at his tattoo station. There was no, "Is this your first tattoo?" or "What I'm doing now is..." or even a "Hello."

"You're going to love this clip, it's fucking hilarious!" Mump yelled to the other guys in the room.

Immediately after he finished shouting, the needle was in my skin. It was kind of like my former nurses who pretended to be prepping when they were actually injecting the needle. I clenched my left fist and my entire left arm in the hope that I could alleviate some of the pain. But it didn't help. I
continued clenching though. I had to keep telling myself to breathe. Mump would stop every few seconds and wipe the area and that was my chance to take in some air.

The first question people always ask me when they find out I got a tattoo is, “Did it hurt?” YES! Of course it hurt! It hurt like fucking hell! But while it hurt more than any other pain I have ever experienced, it was like no other pain. And it didn’t feel at all like a needle. In fact, my fear of needles really didn’t play a part. It felt more like Mump took a pocketknife and was carving out chunks of my skin. I was positive that blood was squirting all over the place and that was why he had to keep stopping and wiping the area. Later, my friend who watched me getting the tattoo said there was actually no bleeding at all.

Because of the way I was lying and the location of my tattoo, I couldn’t really look down or actually see the needle piercing my skin. Instead, stared at the overhead fluorescent lights, and I noticed the drop tile ceiling with brownish water stains, probably from a leaky roof.

About halfway through, the guys watching SNL cleared out and a new guy entered the back room. Again, I’m assuming he was another tattoo artist, or this parlor lets a lot of random people roam around in the “private” area. He got into a deep discussion with Mump about the pixels of a digital camera.

“But really, for my use, I don’t even need a good one because if I post the pictures on the internet, it only allows 75,” Mump said.
“True, but if you ever want to print them out, it would be better to have
the higher quality,” the other guy said.

Their discussion continued while I lay in the most excruciating amount
of pain I have ever experienced. At that moment, I swore to myself I would
never get another tattoo in my life.

When he finished the black, Mump looked down at me and said, “You
probably don’t want to get the yellow around the sun because it won’t really
show up.”

“Oh...well, what about orange?”

“Same thing. Probably won’t show.”

“Oh.” Gee, thanks for telling me this now! Now after you have tattooed
my skin. Now you decide to tell me that my original design isn’t going to work!
Why not before, asshole?

“Red might be okay,” he said. He motioned for me to go look at his work
in the mirror. The black design looked good. The entire area of skin was fiery
red and puffy. But I felt like it needed some color. At the time, I convinced
myself that I already paid for the color, so I told him to do the outlining in red.

Once again, I subjected myself to the torture of his instrument. Once
again, I climbed back into the chair of pain, lying on top of the pillow that I had
sweat all over. Once again, the piercing sound of his drill started. And once
again, the discussion continued about the number of pixels really necessary.

Finally, he finished and told me to look at it again in the mirror.

“Sure.”

He folded a paper towel in half, got out some surgical tape, and taped the paper towel to my chest. This was to serve as my bandage. He handed me a paper as I fumbled to put my shirt back on.

“These are instructions for the care of the tattoo for the next few days. If any scabs form, don’t pick at them.”

“Ok,” I said, while glancing at the paper.

“Alright, you’re all set then.”

“Thanks.”

I was outside before I even realized how cheated I felt. I wanted this tattoo experience to be great. As I writer, I imagined myself interviewing this guy while he tattooed me. I needed to know how he got started, how long he’d been doing this, why he chose this profession, and so on. But there was none of that. I determined it was a combination of his poor interpersonal communication skills and the fact that I couldn’t really say anything because I was in so much pain. While waiting for the torture to take place took 40 minutes, the actual procedure of getting the tattoo took 20. Only 20 minutes to brand my chest forever and join the 5300 year old tradition of tattoos.

**DESIGN**

One of my deepest passions is Greek mythology. My tattoo consists of a tribal sun and falling wings as a representation of Icarus’ fall. The design is
somewhat simple looking, but at the same time complex because it embodies an entire Greek myth.

My favorite myth was the one about Icarus. Icarus’ father, Deađalus, was the chief inventor for King Minos on the island of Crete. One day, Deađalus decided he wanted to leave the island. But the King refused to let him leave because Deađalus performed so many useful services. The King ended up imprisoning Deađalus and his son Icarus in the labyrinth to punish them for attempting to leave. Ironically, the labyrinth was initially constructed by Deađalus to house the Minotaur. It was impossible for anyone to escape—even its inventor.

But Icarus demanded Deađalus find a way for them to escape. While imprisoned, Deađalus observed birds to understand why they could fly and man could not. Finally, he built two pairs of feathered wings held together by wax. These would allow Icarus and Deađalus to fly above the high walls of the labyrinth and escape Crete forever.

In the Metamorphosis, Ovid recounts the instructions Deađalus gave to his son: “Icarus, I advise you to take a middle course. If you fly too low, the sea will soak the wings; if you fly too high, the sun’s heat will burn them. Fly between the sea and sun! Take the course along which I shall lead you.” After attaching the wings to Icarus, Deađalus took off and showed his son the skills to fly.

But Icarus reached a point when he no longer wanted to follow the lead of his father. He wanted to create his own path in the heavens. But his
imagination had out-shown his capacities. In exploring the skies, he forgot his father’s warning and flew too close to the sun. The wax on his wings began to melt, and the wings fell apart. Icarus could no longer fly and descended into a watery grave—a place now called the Icarian Sea.

The first question people always ask me is “why would you want to get something tattooed that’s so sad and depressing?” Because I identify so much with Icarus. Many people interpret the meaning of Icarus’ myth as you should always heed your father’s warnings. Conversely, I see his tale as a transcendent message. Break from the lead of those before you. Don’t always follow what they say you should do. Be your own person. Icarus flew higher and saw the world from new heights, a perspective no one else ever had. Sure, sometimes taking the less trodden path will make you fall, as was the case with Icarus. But it can also lead to great possibilities—things you could only dream of.

If I were still following the life my father had set down for me, I would be working as a chemist in some laboratory for 12 hours a day. Instead, I escaped the mold he created, and I’m living my own life. Just like Icarus’ imagination, my curiosities of the world needed to be explored. And the best way I’ve found to do this is by reading and writing English: Those two acts can take me places I never dreamed of going.

The word Icarian means “of bold and vaunting imagination.” The experience of getting a tattoo is one of the boldest things I’ve done. I cannot
think of a more perfect symbol to be branded upon my chest than a representation of Icarus flying free.