Snow

Brett Bender*
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Here it is man. I know you're going to love it! Take as much as you want, but don't get too crazy, it is your first time you know. Don't share it with anyone, either. Ha-ha, just kidding, I know you want to try it on your own, but be careful. Give me a call if anything happens. I'll be at work, but if you need anything or take too much or something. I'll return your call as soon as I can. Be safe, man. Have fun!

Your Roommate,

Joe

The razorblade slides through the delicate mound dividing two, three, four rows; all of them half the length of the tinted glass coffee table; a five-inch rush waiting for inhalation. The razorblade is set next to a three-inch straw; desk lamp hunches over the coffee table, heating the glass like a restaurant glow ray. All the other lights in the house are off. “Requiem for a Dream” buzzes its acid-house music through the living room. He turns it up, and the windowpanes begin to vibrate. His hazel eyes fixate on the cocaine. He paces across the living room, eyes staying connected to the lines. Another world of sedation awaits, beckons, calls him back. He cranks the volume knob another quarter of a turn and kneels next to the table. Pulses of blood thump through his body causing his eyes and limbs to shudder. The solitary glow of the lamp amidst the dark room shuts off the world around him; the music supplements, and eases the thunder of blood in his ears. The straw is not for drawing breath. A child should be sucking Dr. Pepper through it while playing with the racecar from his happy meal, but it has been mutilated and deformed to suit this purpose. Higher grandeur and meaning. He inserts the straw into his left nostril continuously adjusting until it stops tickling the sensitive inner wall, provoking him to sneeze. The yellow line on the straw lines up with the beginning of the powder. He stops breathing and pushes the right nostril closed with his right index finger. He sniffs a powerful vacuum of air through his left nostril while moving the straw up the line. Immediately the nostril floods with powder, caked along the inner wall. The tickle comes back, only now it burns. Sneezing is not an
option halfway through the line.
His head loses all its weight. The disorientation makes him tilt as he attempts to finish the line. The powder disappears and so has the feeling of his left nostril. He disconnects his nose from the straw. Sniff. The numb inner wall travels down the throat and into his mouth. Sniff. The drip reverses, now sliding down his throat, single file - drip, drip, drip. Sniff. Every drop floods his throat with an aching burn.
A rush of adrenaline overwhelms his veins, down the arms gaining momentum into the hands and spreading to each fingertip slamming against his nails. Sniff. It continues down the thighs, shins, ankles, feet, and pounds into the toes - repeating over and over again. Sniff.
His teeth become tools. The molars begin a soothing monotony of friction. Sniff. One dose, the world is right. Everything is at his mercy. Sniff.
He paces and needs to break out of this dark prison, feel the outside air, but the artificial light calls him back to his home, his sanctuary. Again, he kneels next to the table like a priest at an altar. He takes the second line up the left nostril. Sniff. The powder paralyzes his mouth and nostril like Novocain. His head floats like a balloon held to earth with a string; the drip down his throat continues. All thoughts are good thoughts. All movements are pleasurable. Sniff. A smile is plastered onto his face, and only goes away when he bows down to pray again. The last two lines are taken one after another. Sniff. Sniff.
The music floods through his veins, urging the adrenaline to burst out the top of his head. His brain starts to spin, rattling back and forth with every beat. He scrambles to turn it off, jumping and stumbling over every fiber in the carpet. After the music is off he regains orientation of the living room, and turns around. He surveys the room through his new eyes. It is silent except for the resonating grind inside his mouth and mind.

The sun crawls over the eastern sky atop the downtown high-rises. The first bell of the year chimes, echoing off the three-story school building.
"You'll be fine, Brett," says his mom from the passenger seat of the brown minivan.
"I don't want to go. No one's going to know me here. I want to go back to my old school," says Brett with his arms
crossed, blue Jansport cradled between his knees.

“I know, sweetie, but this is sixth grade. Highland Park only goes up to fifth.”

“Well, why couldn’t I have gone to public school like everyone else,” he asks while staring out the window at all the kids filing into the front entrance.

“Because your dad and I decided private school would be better for you. Besides, you’re going to get to know people, and eventually make some new friends,” she says; hands still at the ten and two position, “Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

Brett continues to stare out the window, the playground is empty aside from two basketballs nestled against the chain-link fence. He replies, “But Mom!”

“Better get going. You don’t want to be late for your first class.”

He steps down from the passenger seat and looks up into his mom’s green eyes. She smiles.

“You’ll be back at three o’clock to pick me up, right?”

“I’ll be here, don’t you worry.”

“Alright, here goes.” He shuts the door and heads towards the entrance. With both hands squeezing the squishy straps on his shoulders, he walks down the main hall examining the white tile walls. High pitched chatter echoes through the hall piercing his eardrums, and settling in his stomach in the form of butterflies. Flutter. Flutter. Flutter.

The entrance door swings open letting in a gust of cold air down the hallway; it brushes against the hairs on Brett’s forearm.

“Hey. Hey, you,” says Joe as he jogs up to Brett; the echo of his clumping shoes amplified down the hall, “Have classes started yet?”

“No,” says Brett, “Uh, I don’t think so anyways.”

Joe attempts to establish his breath and say, “What’s...your...name?”

“I’m Brett. What’s yours?”

“Joe. Nice to meet you. Hey do you know where you’re going?”

“Not the slightest.”

“Good, I’m glad I’m not the only one.”

“You wanna attempt to find the office?”

The flutter in Brett’s stomach disappears, “Yeah, that sounds great.”
They continue down the hall, the scent of freshly sharpened pencils and Windex fill the air.

“What grade are you in?” asks Joe while looking down at his bright white Air Jordan's.

“I'm in sixth grade,” says Brett, “what grade are you?”

“Same,” says Joe.

They make it to the end of the hall, and enter a large, square room. The hall continues to the other side, but there are also doors scattered around the walls of the square. Their heads turns from side to side, examining all the possible rooms.

“What are you boys late?” says a voice from behind them.

They both look at each other with eyes wide and mouths gaping, like they just got caught for shoplifting candy from the gas station.

“Uhmm,” says Joe with a gulp, “Yeah, we don't know where to go. Can you help us?”

She has the boys follow her into an office. The oversized woman flattens the back of her flannel dress, and sits at the front desk. Her fingers start punching a keyboard while she stares at the screen, head tilted down, eyes peering over the rims of her glasses.

“And your names?” She asks with a delayed head turn.

“My name is Brett Bender, and this is Joe. Joe, uhhh.”

“Salyer.”

She looks at them both, back and forth and says, “Bender and Salyer. Okay, let's see here. It looks like you're both in Mrs. Gerrafa's class.”

She hoists herself up out of the chair with her overworked arms and walks past them both, and into the hall. Her arm waves back at them as she continues to walk. Brett and Joe look at each other and chuckle.

“I thought her arms were going to snap.” Says Joe with his hand cupped over his mouth, the opening pointed towards Brett's ear.

“They were like toothpicks holding up an elephant,” says Brett.

They both start cackling and hollering with laughter. The sound bellows down the halls causing the flannel elephant to turn around.

She points the tip of her index finger underneath her nose, and over her mouth, and says, “SHHHHHH!! There's class going
on right now! And we don't need anymore trouble makers around here, so be quiet."

The moment she turns around and continues down the hall, Brett and Joe let out low chuckles under their breath; hands clenched against their mouths. The flannel dress stops at the third door on the right. She knocks and opens the door; left hand on the knob, right hand waving them in like a guider for an airplane.

The lady whispers into Mrs. Gerrafa's ear while she stares at Brett and Joe, and nodding every few seconds. The elephant clunks out the door once she's done talking, and doesn't look at either of the boys.

"Class," says Mrs. Gerrafa, "it looks like we have a couple more joining us; they will also be a part of our homeroom."

They both wave at the class while examining the room for possible seats.

"Brett Bender and Joe Salyer, we welcome you. Why don't you both sit in those two seats in the far right."

She points to back at two vacant desks, right next to one another. Brett and Joe find their way to the back and whisper the rest for the class period.

At recess Brett and Joe find their way outside; the same door that they burst into at the beginning of the day. Joe grabs a basketball from along the fence and starts dribbling it; Brett stands under the hoop.

"You like basketball?" asks Brett, watching the orange ball go up, down, and around Joe's legs.

"I love basketball, it's my favorite sport." He shoots from the top of the key. The black lines of the ball fade into a spinning blur of orange. It smacks the back of the rim, pops into the air and down into Brett's hands.

"You like basketball?" asks Joe.

Brett dribbles the ball, keeping his eyes on the motion. He looks up at Joe and carries the ball to the top of the key and says, "Yeah, it's alright. I'm definitely going to play this year."

Brett shoots the ball from the top of the key. The rotating sphere arcs up and over the backboard hitting the fence. He puts his head down.

Joe jogs after the ball and returns by strumming the ball back and forth through his legs. He heads to the top of the key and says, "Hey, you wanna come over after school? I can help you with your shot, if you'd like. You've got great form. All it needs is a lit-
tle tweaking."
Joe shoots the ball and watches as it sails through the net -
swoosh.
"That would be great," says Brett, "I need to get ready for basket-
ball this year, and who better to do that with than an awesome
basketball player."
"Thanks," says Joe with a smile.
"Thank you."
"For what?"
"For not laughing at my air ball - I'm a little rusty. And wanting to
help me out."
"No problem, Brett. What are friends for?"

"I got it," yells Brett from the upstairs hallway. He picks up
the cordless Bell and pushes "Talk."
"Hello," he says.
"What's up, man?" says Joe.
"Hey, Joe. How's it going?"
"Going better now that it's Friday. I'm ready for some
major chillin' out tonight. How about you?"
"Oh, definitely. I was actually thinking that we could all go
to City Brew, or something. We could call up Ember and Becka to
come join us," says Brett.

There is a pause. Then Joe says, "Hmmm. Yeah, that's an
idea."
"What were you thinking?"
"Well I talked to Baker, and he said he knows where we can
get some beer. And I really want to try it. I want to see if it's as
good as everyone claims. I know you're not a big fan of disobedi-
ence, but do you think you might be up for a little hell-raising? I
mean, we are freshmen, we gotta have a little fun too - it's not all
for the upper classmen."
"I don't know, Joe. We're sixteen years-old, if we get bust-
ed we're all screwed."
"I'm way ahead of you, man. There's this perfect spot up on
the rims; no one will know we're there, and we can hang out as
long as we'd like."
"Who else is going to be there? If it's a lot of people than I
don't think it'll be too subtle of a get together."
"I understand. Umm, let's see, Baker, you, me, Brian, Eric,
Josh, Ember, and Becka."
“Becka and Ember are going to be there?” says Brett. He presses the phone as close to his ear as possible.

“I knew you’d be happy about that. So you’ll come then? Come on, it’ll be fun. Can you think of any better group of people to try your first beer with besides the crew?”

“No. You’re right, we’ll be in good company. And you invited some nice lady-friends that I thank you for.”

Joe laughs, “What are friends for?”

“Well, dude, what time is it?”

“Ummm, it’s about a quarter to seven. What do you say we meet at City Brew in a half an hour, and we can take one car from there.”

“Sounds good, Joe. We’ll see you in a bit.”

Brett pushes the “Talk” button again, and hops down the stairs into the living room. The TV in the kitchen echoes into the living room; Alex Trabeck regurgitates another question from his stack of blue cards. Brett walks into the kitchen and sees his mom mixing and mashing ingredients into a silver bowl. The sweet aroma of baking dough, sugar, and chocolate floods the air.

“Hi sweetie, who was that on the phone?” asks his mom.

Brett sits at the barstool and puts his hands on the counter, “Joe. We’re going to get together shortly.”

“Oh yeah,” she says while hovering over a Better Crocker cookbook, “what are you guys up to this evening? Going out for coffee?”

“I think we’re going to chill, and we’re meeting at City Brew, so I’m not too sure.”

“Well, I’m sure glad you have such a nice friend like Joe. You have both known each other for quite awhile. How long has it been?”

“Hmm, I guess it’s going on four years,” says Brett, taking in the wafts of candied air, “We met on that first day you dropped me off for school in sixth grade.”

“Oh that’s right. It’s nice to have a friend like that; someone you can count on.”

“Yeah, things would be a lot different if he weren’t in my life.”

“Well I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Brett gets up from the stool and gets ready for the evening: shower, gel in the hair, J.Crew collared shirt, Lucky pants (he
hopes). He walks back into the kitchen and gives his mom a kiss on the cheek.

“Well, I'm heading out. We're supposed to meet in a few minutes, so I'll see you later.”

“Ok, sweetie, tell Joe hello, and tell him that he needs to come by more often. We barely get to see him.

“I'll do that.”

“Be safe.”

“Yes, mom.”

Brett and Joe pull up to the curb in Joe's red Subaru Impreza, next to a blue Honda Accord. The night air serenades the clouds covering the sky, causing the white puffs to move in a continuous momentum.

“Guess who's here already,” says Joe with a dimple-creasing smile.

“I know. I'm a little nervous,” says Brett. He stares out the window and looks up at the sifting clouds.

“Don't worry, the beer will help take the edge off. At least that's what Baker told me.”

“No, it's not seeing Ember that's making me nervous, it's the alcohol thing. I just feel like we're doing the wrong thing here.”

“That's natural, man, but don't worry you're in good company. Keep in mind this is my first time too.”

“I know, but I almost lied to my mom tonight about that. She asked me what we were doing tonight, and I had to be vague.”

Joe looks up at the sky, and looks back down at Brett,

“Dude, you worry too much. Look, the weather is perfect, Ember's already here. It will all be alright.”

“Yeah you're probably right.”

“You ready then?”

“Yeah, let's go. Fuck it.”

Brett waits in line at the employee side of the cafeteria. The St. John's residents have all gotten their meals, and now it's his turn. He orders and takes his food down the long hallway to the east exit door. The youthful air blows in his face as he opens it. He sets his plate of spaghetti on the wooden bench and clamors through his pockets looking for the Turkish Golds. Once found he sits down and scans the traffic going up and down Shilo, looking for a red car. One pulls into the parking lot.
“There you are, and right on time,” says Brett. Joe gets out of his car and yells, “My brotha.” The ends of Brett’s mouth stretch upward as he moves the spaghetti around, steam rising with every turn. “Hey, Joe,” says Brett before taking a heaving bite. “What’s up? How’s work going?” asks Joe while sitting down in the wooden bench next to Brett’s. Brett takes a gulp of noodles and says, “Alright I guess. I’m glad it’s break time.” “Residents getting rowdy again?” “Yeah, there are a lot of call-lights going off. I’ve been busy helping the residents with everything you can think of.” “Like wiping butts,” says Joe with a chuckle. “Everything except that.” “Sure, Brett, whatever you say.” Brett takes heaps of spaghetti, finishing it all in four fork-fulls. “Damn dude, slow down or you’re going to choke,” says Joe. Brett chews consistently, the response lingers. He finally says, “I don’t have much time, and I haven’t had a smoke since before work. If I finish quickly I can get a couple in. And after a night like this one I’m going to need a couple.” “Hmm. That’s interesting. What do you mean by needing one. I guess I’ve always heard smokers say that, but I never understood how you could need a smoke. What’s it like?” asks Joe, raising his eyebrows. Brett sets his empty plate on the bench, lights a cigarette and says, “Well it’s like a craving, you know?” “No, I don’t. What do you mean?” “It’s like when you crave a pizza, or something like that. It’s the same feeling except it doesn’t go away, and it’s a cigarette and not pizza.” “Wow, that’s weird. Is it nice though?” “Hell yeah,” says Brett, taking a drag. “It’s so relaxing once you actually get to have one. That first puff is the best. You get a little buzz, especially if you haven’t had one for awhile, or if you’ve never had one.” “So I would get a pretty huge buzz then?” “Yeah. Why? Do you want to try one,” asks Brett, putting the butt end of the cigarette in his mouth and grabbing for the pack in his pocket.
“No, dude, I'd better not,” Joe says and shakes his head. “C'mon, I've got some right here. Just one, you can try it out and see how it is. If you don't like it you don't have to finish it.”

Joe puts his hand out, and Brett hands him the pack. Joe examines the box and opens it up, smelling the odor of premature raisins.

“They smell pretty good,” says Joe. “They are good,” says Brett, putting out his smoke. “C'mon, I'm going to have one more. You can have one with me.”

“I don't know,” says Joe as he hands the pack back. Brett flips the top open and pulls out two cigarettes, puts one in his mouth and holds the other one out.

“Just try it,” says Brett. “Can I see your lighter?” asks Joe. Brett smiles and hands him the bic.

Brett and Joe walk outside, their eyes immediately flood with light and close. Brett locates his pack of cigarettes without looking, but slowly pries his eyes open once he has one pressed between his lips. The cigarette moves up and down synchronized with the grinding of enamel. Joe lights his and hands Brett a blue bic. He doesn't take his eyes off of Brett's sedated squint.

“I take it you found the gram I left you?” says Joe, immediately followed by a drag. Brett forces his eyes open and cringes with the pain of too much sunlight. “Hell yeah.” his head flashes back and forth investigating the world like a cat hunting down a mouse.

“Did you save any?”

“Nuhuh.”

“You took it all?” asks Joe choking on his last drag. “But this is your first time.” Brett begins pacing and flicking his cigarette in unison. It becomes an extension of his grinding teeth. It's a formed habit that doesn't require thinking, like breathing. He needs these newly formed movements to stay in synchronization with the spinning world that belongs to him - the god of 32nd street; at least for another ten minutes.

Thoughts do laps around his skull drowning out Joe's voice. Joe's voice finally seeps back into Brett's coherent state, “...and Cydney called, but I didn't pick up the phone. I checked my voice
mail, and she said she wanted to go out to dinner.”
“You wanna go for a drive?” Brett asks.
It was Joe’s turn to squint his eyes, but with a smirk, “Uh, ok.”
Brett gets into his black Civic and explores the interior. The steer­
ing wheel sends surges of anticipation through his body. His foot
wants to push on the gas, and his right hand wants to shift. Joe
finally catches up and crawls into the passenger seat while Brett
starts the car. His index finger goes directly to the stereo navigat­
ing through the CD.

“Hey, Brett,” says Joe while pushing buttons on his cell phone.
Brett continues to rummage through CDs in a Case Logic
holder attached to the visor. After examining each one for a few
seconds they get thrown in the back seat.
Joe stares at him waiting for a response, “Hello?”
Brett stops right before tossing another CD into the back,
“Yeah?”
“Can we stop by Heather’s? I want to pick up an eight-ball.”
“Sure I guess, but I don’t need anymore.”
“Just wait, you’ll want more. So what do you think? Do
you like it?”
“I am invincible!”
The car jumps out into the street as Brett continues to sift
through CDs keeping his eyes off the road. Red Hot Chili Peppers
begins to scream from the speakers as the Civic carelessly speeds
down King Avenue.

Joe turns down the stereo and holds the phone up to his
ear. Brett grinds his teeth even more profusely. After a few sec­
onds Joe detaches the phone from his ear and flips it shut, “Damn.
No answer. Let’s go over there anyway, I’m sure she’s home. She
never answers when I call, but she always answers the door.”
“That’s cool. How do you get there?”
Once directions are given the music returns to the level
where thoughts can’t even be heard. A level beyond the capacity
of a human eardrum; ripping and tearing the inside leaving it ring­
ing and numb. On specific turns Joe points instead of turning
down the music.
The black car hums and coasts to a stop in the Highland
Apartment parking lot. Joe gets out and begins walking towards
the three-story brown building. After ten steps he stops and turns
around waving his hand for Brett to follow. Brett doesn’t move.
His teeth throb and he stops grinding. Joe calls for him again.
Brett gets out of the car and into the bright glare of the sun. It's a spotlight and he's on the stage.

"Are you coming man?" asks Joe in an overly loud tone; it echoes off the apartment walls.

Joe hikes up the stairs taking two at a time. Brett straggles behind with a cigarette clenched in his teeth. There's a knock on apartment 321 as Joe searches for breath. The shade welcomes Brett, and helps loosen the muscles in his back. He catches up to Joe just as the door opens a few inches, enough to peek out of. The gold chain blocks it from going any farther.

"Yeah," says a crackled voice from behind the white door.
"Hey Heather, it's Joe. Can we come in?"
"Who's we?"

Brett peers around the corner getting his first glimpse of the pale Heather.

"Me and my friend Brett. Don't worry, he's cool."

The door closes, the chain rattles and the door opens again, except this time all the way. Joe steps in, and Brett follows. Clothes cover the floor except for a small spotted path leading to a blue couch. Heather sits cross-legged on one end while Joe and Brett sit on the other, elbows on their knees.

There's a glass coffee table in front of the couch. On the glistening surface are a pile of small plastic bags, rubber bands, a scale, a bulging bank envelope, and a mountain of cocaine about ten times the size of the one Brett ingested through his nose. "A Requiem for a Dream" plays on the 52-inch Toshiba nestled on the opposite wall of the couch. Jared Letto just injected himself with a large dose of heroin.

Heather stares at the TV with her head propped up by her right hand, "So how much do you need?"

"How much does an eight-ball cost?" asks Joe.
"Two fifty." She still doesn't look over.

Joe digs in his pocket and pulls out a money clip. A hundred dollar bill is on top. He unclips it and sifts through the others; the rest are tens, fives, and ones. Heather hears the rustle of money and turns her head revealing the shade of black under her eyes.

"Two thirty-five, two forty, two forty-five, two fifty, Mumbles Joe pealing away the majority of bills from his wad.

He hands over the money, which she swipes in one quick motion. She counts it in half the time, and then stuffs Joe's life savings into the bank envelope. After sifting through the pile of
plastic bags filled with powder she finds one marked with blue ink. She tosses it over to Joe and says, “Nice doing business with you. Enjoy.” Her eyes reattach to the TV and don’t move.

“Thanks,” says Joe.

Brett is the first to get up, and heads for the front door. As he steps outside his eyes don’t squint. He begins pacing while he waits for Joe. Joe comes outside with a smile on his face so big that it shows both upper and lower sets of teeth.

Brett is leaning over the balcony, doesn’t look back at Joe and says, “Ready?”

“Yeah, let’s get high.”

“I don’t know dude I’m not feelin’ like doing much right now.”

“You’re just coming down, it’s no big deal. Dude, we’ve got plenty more to bring you back up. If you thought what you had earlier was a lot, wait until we bust into this.”

The Chili Peppers greet them as they get into the car. Brett turns off the stereo and takes the drive home in silence, in darkness. Joe examines the bag, smelling it, tasting it, and feeling it.

They get back, and as soon as the car stops at the curb Joe is off, sprinting towards the house. Brett drags his feet along the curb, head down and hands in his pockets. When he enters the house it is completely black except for the lingering glow from the living room. Joe yells, “Hurry up Brett, I’ve got a couple of lines with your name on them.”

He slowly closes the door making sure every creak has moaned and bellowed from the hinges. The living room is lit with the hollow glow of light against the tinted glass.

“Come on dude - you ready?”

“Uh, I don’t know man. I feel like shit.”

“C’mon this’ll make you feel a lot better, I promise.”

“Yeah, but for how long?”

“Dude, we have plenty. Don’t worry.”

Brett looks down at Joe, his eyes glowing in the lampshade. The powder drops in small rocks onto the table, urging him back into the darkness.

“Alright, I guess so,” says Brett.

“That’s what I like to hear. Line for line?” asks Joe.

“Yeah, fuck it.”