TWIN CITIZEN: A MEMOIR

By

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Abstract

*Twin Citizen: A Memoir* is a book-length work recounting the writer’s life in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area from 2004 to 2012. The primary plot motivator is the writer’s inability to obtain and maintain stable housing; the work is divided chronologically into eight sections, one for each address he lived at, to reinforce the plot. Two secondary plots further guide the writing. First is a disability narrative depicting the writer’s struggle for the accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment of multiple psychological disorders, originating from an abusive childhood and the conflict between his evangelical Christian faith and gay sexual orientation. The second plot line involves the writer’s job in customer service at a museum and the interrelationship between how his disabilities interfere with his job performance and how the high-stress work further exacerbates his symptoms.

The memoir tackles the subject of intersectionality by illustrating how the writer both enjoys privilege as a white male American citizen and suffers lack of privilege as a gay lower-class disabled individual. This paradox serves as the basis for the work’s fundamental themes of duality, deception, and misrepresentation. Furthermore, these themes help to challenge the cultural norms of Minnesota that allow for a liberal and progressive environment but hold at arm’s length the marginalized communities that most benefit from progressive policies.

Stylistically, the prose relies on fragmentation and experimentation, making much use of stream-of-consciousness and adopting poetic devices such as caesura and concrete poetry. This approach attempts to simulate for the reader the psychological state of the narrator.
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DISCLAIMER

Some names, details, and events have been altered for the sake of narrative and to preserve anonymity.
Chapter 1

You don’t want to show up in a new town risking arrest for indecent exposure. But that’s how I stood in the middle of the Minneapolis Greyhound station on the morning of June 5, 2004, a tear down my jeans from crotch to midcalf. I could, of course, have just gone to the bathroom, pulled a fresh pair from my luggage, and changed. But many things don’t occur to you when you’ve been awake for thirty-six hours, and at any rate, it didn’t occur to the bus-station employee, either, who told me that, though he empathized with my plight, I was nonetheless in a family-friendly environment with visible boxers. So I complied with his order to wait for my friend Tony outside. But in my sleep-deprived state, I feared spending a night in jail for showing too much underwear.

The tiny rip I heard when I leant in to hug my mom good-bye back in Bloomington, Indiana wouldn’t have been so bad had I not been straddling an overstuffed tote bag on the two buses up to the Twin Cities. I’d grossly underestimated the size of the overhead compartment, and by all rights, the driver could have denied me passage per company regulations, but I begged him, told him I was moving, told him this was virtually everything I owned, so he took pity on me.

Five hours to the Chicago station, my bag wedging me into my seat. In the station, packed with black families and college students and Amish farmers on their way to parts unknown, I walked with my thighs squeezed together to hide my embarrassment. I spotted a convenience store in the station, where I bought a small sewing kit. It contained five safety pins, which I used to repair my jeans in a manner akin to how my punk friends back in Indiana attached patches to their jackets. The pins proved no good, though; by the 4:00 a.m. McDonald’s stop in Tomah, Wisconsin, the rip ran down to my knee. By Minneapolis, the seam had nearly split in two.
Through the dense city traffic I spotted the car Tony had described to me over the phone. He pulled up, and upon noticing my sartorial catastrophe, offered to take me to his place first so I could pull a good pair of jeans out of my bag. From there, Tony treated me to lunch at Kramarczuk’s, a famed Ukrainian deli near downtown. As we filled up on pierogis and cheesecake, I related why I’d been up so long. I’d grossly underestimated how long it would take me to clean my apartment and get rid of unnecessary items and pack—a pattern of gross underestimation now established—so I worked right up to the last minute, and even then, I hadn’t got absolutely everything taken care of, such that my mom had offered to take care of the rest. It had been so long since I’d moved, I’d forgot what all was involved.

After our meal, Tony drove us through North Minneapolis to the Folwell neighborhood and dropped me off at the home of his coworker Reggie, which was now my home. I rang the bell, Reggie and his partner Stefan offered a quick tour that I was too tired to remember, and I collapsed on the air mattress the couple was lending me.

I slept dreamlessly, for my dreams had been fulfilled.

I awoke and stumbled into the kitchen, the walls of which I now noticed were hung with pornographic paintings and posters, to find Reggie and Stefan dressed for work and munching a quick breakfast. Reggie: black, chunky, bespectacled. Stefan: a Nordic version of Reggie, minus glasses, and sporting a near-albino pompadour.

Bears. I had only recently learned the word’s application to thicker-built gay men who preferred each other’s company. I was for all intents a bear, though I lacked the body hair often associated with this genre of gay, and besides, it felt fatuous to wrap one’s identity in appearance, especially the appearance of a potential partner. And in any case, I longed to return
to the svelte self of my adolescence, to go back to a time before the medications piled on the pounds. Or just back before medications, full stop.

Reggie reiterated the previous night’s tour: the kitchen utensils I could borrow till I could afford my own, the computer running Windows 95 that I could use “as long as you don’t open two windows at the same time because that puts viruses on it, and sometimes the internet goes out when it gets hot”), the beagle in the cage (“This is Snoopy; she’s fat and lazy.”).

I asked the couple how I could best acquaint myself with my new city.

“I think you’d really like Uptown,” said Stefan.

“Yeah, Uptown, that’s what Prince wrote the song about,” said Reggie. (As I had squandered my youth on contemporary Christian music, I didn’t know what song he was talking about.) “And Dinkytown. That’s out by the U. You’re from a college town, so you’ll love it out there.” He didn’t understand how desperate I was to get away from my college town. For me, it represented limited opportunity and limited future. Those who escaped, succeeded, and vice versa. I’d try Dinkytown another day, maybe, but for now, I wanted to get as far away from the familiar as possible.

“Just be careful on the #5 bus,” said Reggie. “It goes through some sketchy neighborhoods south of here.”

I set outside to catch the #5 that stopped across the street. A quick breakfast of chocolate milk and cherry pie from the convenience store, where I made acquaintance with the cheery young cashier, Imani. Hop on the bus, then explore my city.

Downtown was a gem in the gleaming summer sun, an ode to midcentury architecture, hints of future utopia made manifest in glass and steel. I let myself get lost in the lattice of tunnels and skywalks that rendered much of downtown a hermetically sealed community. As I
wandered, I discovered that one could in theory live entirely within the buildings, without ever
going outside. Apartments, groceries, clothing, restaurants, the justice building, even a church,
all within this labyrinthine marvel. Once outside and on the street, I found myself near Marquette
and 7th, standing before a glass entryway. My feet took me through, and I saw myself on another
planet, Captain Picard on a diplomatic mission to a peaceful interstellar society. A complex grid
of glass soared seven stories above me. A fountain in reverse rained down from the ceiling to the
floor. Mature deciduous trees sprouted from enormous planters. Above me, people buzzed about
along the second-story corridors and up and down the escalators, while all around me on the
ground floor, citizens flitted from restaurant to dry-cleaner to bank and back. I uttered a long and
loud "whoa," declaring myself a yokel to all.

This city looked like hope.

Next stop: Uptown, and Pandora’s Cup. The exterior: Two-story Victorian, painted in
pinks and purples. The front porch: Picnic tables filled with customers my age and younger,
dreadlocks and mohawks abounding.

Welcoming enough, as far as I was concerned, so I entered.

I walked in and worked my way through the charmingly mismatched furniture to the
counter. A quick perusal of the menu: an iced decaf mocha, today, as a treat, but I’d cut back to
sodas until I get a job. Pinball, featuring *The Simpsons*; perfect. Spend a dollar on the pinball just
for today. As I headed upstairs, I choked on a waft of smoke—why wasn’t there a smoking-
section sign? What should I do next? Look around, no empty tables; should I start a conversation
with someone? That’s the purpose of coffeehouses, right? But everyone looks absorbed in books
or their companions. Step out onto the balcony. A lovely day, sunny, about 70, almost too warm.
So many trees in this city. Take a seat in the fresh, smoke-free air. Look down upon the hubbub
of Hennepin, the buzzing traffic, the hodgepodge of urbane young denizens strolling down the sidewalk.

Sit back. Sip my mocha. Relish my new life in the Big City.
Chapter 2

Three-and-a-half weeks prior to my inauspicious arrival in Minneapolis, the good state of Indiana had seen fit to slash my Vocational Rehabilitation funding to the point that the fifteen credits remaining in my philosophy degree at Indiana University would be dragged out over two or three years, and, if that weren’t enough, the state also took away the Medicaid I needed for medication I had to take every single day, all because my case manager had lied about providing a disability accommodation to help me make my annual appointment, an accommodation I needed, ironically, because a side effect of one medication was forgetfulness. That said, the withdrawal effects of my medications wouldn’t be pretty: tremors, loss of concentration, irritability, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, all lasting months on end. To be rendered incapable of taking care of basic needs like food and sleep was unacceptable, so it behooved me to leave Indiana post haste for ready access to my prescriptions, leaving behind my college career and my part-time job—the best job I’d ever had—working on the floor of WonderLab, a science museum geared for children.

I spent my remaining two weeks at the university hunched over a computer, googling any and all possibilities, talking to anyone I knew who might be able to help—mostly friends from a gay-Christian website I’d joined a year prior. Three suggestions rose to the top. Seattle was the dream of every ’90s kid, but I couldn’t afford a bus ticket that far. Toledo lay just a few hours away, and I had a good friend there, but the local economy foreboded neither ready access to medication nor solid employment prospects. Which left Tony’s recommendation, Minneapolis, and its many assets—a stable, broad-based job market; well-connected public transit; a large gay community; an artist’s mecca—everything I could hope for in a new home. What was more, Tony’s coworker Reggie had a room available for cheap. It was a foregone conclusion.
Here in the Twin Cities at last. All that remained was to get hold of my medications—two weeks max, as soon as my medical records arrived from Indiana—and land a job.

oh my gosh what’s going on we JUST crossed the Mississippi River and so we should be in downtown St. Paul now I mean they’re the Twin Cities so that means they’re conjoined twins, right? the two downtowns joined back to back but I haven’t heard the driver announce my intersection and he should have done so by now WHY must this bus be so full I can’t look out the window to see the street signs 7th and Cedar 7th and Cedar 7th and Cedar can’t forget my intersection all the museums are within a few blocks of there my GOSH I can barely move barely breathe in here so many people don’t go manic don’t go manic I just need to find my intersection and then I can get off the bus it’s been what maybe twenty minutes already and still the driver hasn’t called out 7th and Cedar what if I ask this passenger “Excuse me, how far until we get to 7th and Cedar?” “Ha, you’ve got a long way to go yet, maybe half an hour” oh no oh no oh NO I thought this would be an easy bus ride from home and getting to a job would be easy but no don’t go manic don’t go manic I’ve been so close lately but it’s so weird my mania isn’t like the normal mania but the doctors say my bipolar disorder is just really different from the most common forms my mind doesn’t bounce from one subject to the next and I don’t get illogical my thinking is focused and almost hyperlinear when I go manic which is why I keep thinking 7th and Cedar 7th and Cedar because that’s where most of the museums are and museums are my area of expertise my ONLY area of expertise thanks to my old job at WonderLab and I can parlay my experience there into a new job so that I can have my new life here my GOSH I think I’m almost there the crowd on the bus has finally thinned out OH there’s downtown St. Paul smaller than I expected and most of the buildings look older it’s like
Minneapolis is the princess and St. Paul is the grande dame. We’re on Cedar now. We’re close. I’ll just walk around to the museums and check them out really quick. FINALLY off the bus. Oh, that museum looks nice. Purple, green, and red branding looks cheerful. Looks friendly. It would be worth bussing an hour and a half each way. I’m going to apply there once I get my meds. I’ve got this.

In those first few weeks as a Minneapolitan, I tried my best to make myself at home. I picked up a sofa-bed for a song off Craigslist. I pulled out my acrylics and painted when I felt so inspired. I chipped away at City of God, a fruitcake-dense novel by E. L. Doctorow. I’d picked up used at Magers & Quinn, a bookstore in Uptown. But my bedroom door was to be kept closed because the air conditioner out front could only cool so much of the house, and we were facing near-record heat, so I was to swelter in my bedroom. I dared not venture from my bedroom or bathroom nude, as was my wont when I lived alone back in Indiana. And the odes to Tom of Finland gracing the walls left me wary of having company over, if I were to make new friends anytime soon. Tony would be cool with it, but he was busy with work and boyfriend.

One day I sat at Reggie and Stefan’s computer in the living room, talking to Tony via AOL Instant Messenger, a.k.a. AIM. He had an offer, passed on to me from another of his coworkers: a used computer for only $65. It would be cutting my current budget close, but I’d be working again soon anyway, and I couldn’t pass up the price.

A key clicked in the door, and Snoopy barked and bounded about in her cage. As Reggie entered, he yelled at the whimpering dog, “Hush up, we’ll take a walk when I’m ready.”

“Hey, Reggie, how was your day?”

“Good, I—” he broke off and glared at the computer screen “—what are you doing?”
“Instant messaging. Talking to a friend.”

“You’ve got two windows open. That’ll put viruses on the computer.”

“It’s instant messaging. I have to have my buddy list open in one window and talk to my friend in another. That’s how it works.”

“I said you could use the computer as long as you don’t put viruses on it. Having two windows open puts viruses on it.”

“I’m not sure that how it works, but okay, I won’t use instant messaging again,” I lied. I wasn’t going to argue. He didn’t know what he was talking about, and besides, he was the one running an operating system six years and at least two iterations out of date. And I saw zero evidence that he had ever run antivirus software. Anyway, soon enough, I’d have a computer of my very own, to do with what I wanted.

“And would you do your damn dishes?” called Reggie as he fumed off to his room.

A mess of French fries ground into the bus floor underneath the seat across from me. A bit of dirt on them. But tempting still. In my bag, all I could afford from the store: small jar of crunchy peanut butter, two cans of refried beans, bag of flour tortillas (the small kind for tacos because they were cheaper.) All I have to eat till who knows when. I’ll have a half, no, a third of a can of beans a day. One tortilla every other day. Two spoonfuls of peanut butter a day. One dollar saved back for when I absolutely need some flavor and I can buy a box of Grapeheads across the street for a quarter. Stomach gurgling. Loudly. A shame that those fries are going to waste. But people are watching. If I were riding alone, maybe. No. I have my groceries. I’ll eat them when I got home. A spoonful of peanut butter.

Snoopy whining in the cage. Poor thing. So sad, so depressed. Reggie doesn’t care. Key in the door. “Hush up, you’re gonna get your walk.” Fucker doesn’t know how to treat a dog.

Into my room. Avoid Reggie. Avoid Stefan. Avoid the dishes piling on my desk. Avoid the arguments about the dishes piling on my desk. Strip. Hundred fucking degrees outside. Don’t keep your door open for the A/C, they say. Fuckers.

Put my computer on. A connection straightaway, for once. Cycle through my sites: Hotmail, the blogging site Livejournal, the gay Christian website, then back through, over and over in case I miss an update. Not using AIM. Can’t talk to anyone. I’ll just upset them.

Reggie: “Get the damn dishes out of your room and wash them. We don’t have anything to eat off of.” Can’t take them out to wash them. Can’t face Reggie and Stefan, can’t deal with them. Can’t cross them or I’ll lose my home. So, avoid them. But then I avoid doing dishes. That crosses them. No-win. Fuck.

Stefan: “Hey, we’ve got something for you.” Eviction notice? Nah, no lease, they’d just tell me to leave.

Throw on my robe, head to the living room. In Reggie’s hand, a dirty, battered manila envelope. “Something from Indiana. I’d gone upstairs to try to collect the rent from those fucking deadbeats, and I saw this poking out from under a pile of junk mail, your name was on it, so…”

My damn medical records. Postmarked six weeks ago. The key to my sanity had been within shouting distance the entire time.
I’d called twenty-some facilities over a two-week span in search of anyone who could prescribe medication to a guy with no job, no insurance, and no money. Now, here I sat, shirtless, in the St. Paul clinic that had taken me two weeks to find, spilling off my diagnosis of bipolar disorder, my list of medications, and really anything and everything under the sun, to the two nurses who still looked perplexed as to why I was there. Upon giving them my birthdate, they wished me a happy birthday. The big 3-0. I then rattled off the tale of lost insurance and relocation; one nurse turned to the other and said, “I just don’t understand how this could have happened to a young white male.”

I reminded them I was still in the room and replied, “I’m from Indiana; this is just what the health-care system looks like there.”

The second nurse said to the first, “I don’t think we can help him,” and my heart leapt from my chest. I’d just run out of the leftover Seroquel Tony had given me, and my Depakote withdrawal worsened by the day. If I couldn’t get what I needed from this clinic today, I could well see myself locked away in an institution, or worse, homeless. All this effort for nothing.

“Let me think,” said the first. “There’s got to be something.” As the two brainstormed, my fears of homelessness rose once again to the surface.

“I’ve got it,” the first finally said. “La Clinica.”

“Of course, why didn’t I think of that.”

“What’s La Clinica?” I asked.

“They’ll take care of you, don’t worry.”
The first nurse wrote out the instructions to take the bus to downtown St. Paul, where I’d transfer to a bus that would take me across the river to La Clinica. I thanked them both profusely and headed out to the bus stop.

It took nearly an hour, between the wait times for the two buses and the travel itself, to reach my destination. The neighborhood, just south of downtown St. Paul, was delineated by signage written almost entirely in Spanish. Four semesters of Bible-college Spanish were finally coming in handy. I walked down Cesar Chavez Avenue to the big orange stucco building with the bright La Clinica sign over the entry.

I once again rattled off my whole story to the receptionist, going so far as showing her my records to prove that yes, I should actually get medication. She took down a bit of my info and asked me to sit in the waiting room. The half-full space was open and airy, not at all grey and institutional like I’d expected. I was the only non-Latino in the room.

After twenty minutes my name was called. First the nurse weighed me. I’d lost fifteen pounds in just two months, no longer under the pound-packing power of Depakote. Then she asked how I was sleeping, and I replied that I’d just run out of Seroquel, without indicating that it was Tony’s old prescription for fear of being perceived as a pill-chaser.

The nurse called in the doctor—the first white person I saw at La Clinica—and I handed him my medical records and reiterated my story.

“What insurance do you have?” he asked.

“None.”

“What’s your current income?”

“Zero.”
He pulled out his prescription pad. “Seroquel and Depakote, I see. Take this out to the front desk and they’ll take care of you.”

“But these are expensive.”

“Don’t worry.”

I followed his orders. Both prescriptions would cost me a total of four dollars. Ordinarily, they’d cost me four hundred dollars a month out of pocket. Though it would be two-and-a-half hours each way, plus time at the clinic itself, once a month to obtain my medication, I didn’t care; I’d just make a day of it when I needed refills.

Over two months of torture had finally come to an end. And I had a birthday to celebrate.

Tony had said he’d be busy, and I was in no place with Reggie and Stefan to ask them to join me in celebration. But I had my last five dollars in my pocket, and my copy of City of God, and that was enough for my birthday.

Downtown, I stopped by the Arby’s and got a five-dollar meal deal to go. I carried my dinner twenty minutes to the rose garden in Loring Park and ate my roast beef and curly fries and read my Doctorow as the sun tinged the western sky.

Happiness, manufactured from my own means and on my own terms.
Chapter 3

The technicolor megalith from my first trip into St. Paul loomed large in my imagination. I’d worked with children for several years: first during a Bible-college internship that took me to a tiny congregation near Liverpool, England; then a stint as a daycare teaching assistant (a job I stumbled into via the unemployment office); and most recently at WonderLab, a position I landed after having spent six months with a job coach I was connected to through an agency for people with disabilities. Because even with a job coach, it will take you six months to find a job in Bloomington, Indiana. I mean, there’s restaurant wait staff and factory work, both ill-suited to a klutzy bundle of nerves like myself. If you want anything else in Bloomington, you’d better have at least a master’s degree to compete with the overeducated labor pool. For eight bucks an hour.

Now, here I was with Stephanie, manager of the Customer Service department, breezing through the interview, thanks in part to the advice of my old job coach. Describe a time you delivered or witnessed exceptional customer service. Describe a time you handled conflict on the job. Softball. Then the questions got trickier. Why was there a three-year gap in my employment record? I explained the quirks of a college-town economy, and my work with the job coach (but not stating she had come via a disability-services agency.) How much would I expect to be paid? Commensurate to the position and my experience. And how much would that be? I highballed it at nine dollars an hour.

On to the second stage of the interview. Stephanie introduced me to Olivia, an older, willowy, wise-looking black woman who could have been an extra on Sesame Street.

Olivia and I entered one of the galleries, where a few families were at play. “For this part of the interview,” Olivia continued, “Stephanie has asked me to observe you playing with a child
here. Determine the parent or guardian first, ask them if you can play with their child as part of your interview. I’ll be sitting back and observing.”

I followed Olivia’s directions, and found myself sitting on the floor (I knew corduroys were the right move), chatting with a four-year-old girl, making vocal observations and asking the girl questions to stimulate her thinking as she pushed the buttons and pulled the levers. As I departed our playtime, Olivia said, “Looks like you know what you were doing.”

“I’ve been working with kids for years.”

“I have a suspicion you’re going to get this job,” said Olivia with a wink.

Olivia led me back to Stephanie; I shook her hand, and she told me she’d get back to me within a week. I walked out of the museum beaming, because I knew, after all my travails, that I’d landed the job.

Indeed, two days later, I was employed, up to twenty hours a week, nine dollars an hour. I had won the only job I applied to in the Twin Cities.

The training was the most rigorous I’d ever undergone. The first three days on the job were a whirlwind: meet my fellow trainees Kimmy (another part-timer) and Anjali (full-time, one level above me), read through the massive training manual, meet the department staffs from Education and Programming and Security, get told you’re lucky to be training in September when traffic is light, learn how to use the radio, learn how to mobilize the floor staff to look for a child separated from their family (note: NEVER use the word “lost”), wonder where Kimmy is on the second day, learn the educational and psychosocial principles behind each gallery, learn how to play with children (get down on your knees to their level, ask open-ended questions, let them take the lead), learn the recipe for bubble solution, learn the appropriate locations for the
props (do NOT call them “toys”), learn how to lead (relatively) more structured playtimes, learn the opening and closing procedures for each gallery, get put on your first rotations (a half-hour in each gallery), realize Kimmy quit after Day One, get told yet again how lucky you are to be training in September, learn evacuation procedures, receive the vest that indicates to visitors you are fully trained to meet their needs.

Over the next six weeks came more trainings: the craft room (nothing is structured; tell the kids to make whatever they want), the face-painting station (never paint their faces for them; doing it themselves boosts self-esteem and develops the eye-hand coordination necessary for learning to write), storytelling time (never read the book straight through; ask the kids questions about what they think will happen next). In the middle of it all, the museum had me spend a day renewing my CPR certification. And finally, in the sixth week, I knew the museum well enough that I could be trained for cash-register duties (cashiers were more helpful to visitors if they were intimately familiar with the workings of the museum.) It required two full days to learn the many membership types and discount programs, to understand how the register software worked, to manage crowds when we were busy and to keep busy when crowds were light, to get down how to count out my own drawer at the end of the day.

By the end, I knew so much, across so many disciplines, that it felt like I’d gone to school. And, unlike Kimmy and Anjali, I’d “graduated.”

Mid-October. Stephanie radioed me to come to her office in back. My stomach dropped as I headed down four flights of stairs. What had I done? Was I in trouble? Was I about to be fired? Every scenario had whirred through my head by the time I reached the security door to the
office wing and headed back. By the time I took a seat in Stephanie’s office, I did all I could not
to tremble with fear.

“So,” she said, “Since Anjali has left, her position is open. I’ve been impressed by your
work so far, so would you like to take the job? You’d be full-time, with benefits. Do you want
it?”

More than I could have ever dreamt for myself. I accepted on the spot.

That evening, the bus ride home zoomed by. I deserved to celebrate my promotion, so I
google for the nearest pizza place, and found a Domino’s only twelve blocks away.

But I wouldn’t get my pizza. The guy at Domino’s said they didn’t deliver to my
neighborhood. I replied that his Domino’s was only twelve blocks away, and he argued that the
distance didn’t matter, that they wouldn’t deliver to my address, that he doubted anyone would,
but that if I found anyone who would deliver, they wouldn’t do so after 4:00 p.m.

I didn’t get it. I was in a safe neighborhood. Tony said so. Reggie and Stefan said so. It wasn’t
sketchy until you got a few blocks south.

The weekday and Saturday commute to work: Wake at 6:45 a.m. Shower; dress; cross the
street, grab a snack, chat with Imani, note her swelling belly, ask how long till the baby comes.
Hop the #5, the driver and I the only two white people on the bus. Get off downtown at Eighth
and Nicollet, walk two blocks to Sixth, catch the #94 Express to downtown Minneapolis. Twenty
minutes later, arrive at work 8:20 a.m., wait for the 8:45 a.m meeting.

The Sunday commute to work: Wake at 6:00 a.m. Shower, dress, cross the street. No
snack, no Imani, because the convenience store isn’t open yet. Ride the #5 to downtown, walk
five blocks to Fifth Street to catch the #3, as the first #94 doesn’t start till after my shift starts.
Ride the #3 for 55 minutes, through the University of Minnesota campus, through St. Paul’s Como Park. Arrive at work at 7:55 a.m., take a nap in the break room until the 8:45 a.m. meeting.

Every workday: The morning department meeting always began at 8:45 a.m. sharp. A dozen of us crowded around the tables in the break room. Stephanie or Donna or one of the other managers would lead us through a corny teamwork-building exercise, pass on memos from other departments relevant to our work, and give us any special notes for the day, like a heads-up for a field-trip-heavy day, an alert that a piece of equipment was under repair and off limits to visitors, or a reminder of best practices in customer service.

Some days, the entire eight-hour day was dedicated to engaging with families and field trips as they roamed about and played. Every day was different, though; I might be called upon to lead a structured play time, or oversee the craft room, or manage the face-painting station, or my favorite, reading for story time. Other days were spent, entirely or in part, as a cashier.

If the museum was busy, I was busy: modeling developmentally appropriate adult-child interactions in the hope that parents would pick up on them, orienting field trips, telling parents the kids were to paint their own faces, telling parents the kids could create whatever craft they wanted, answering questions (“How far is McDonald’s?” “Where are the dinosaurs?” [we didn’t have dinosaurs]), tracking down lost—I mean, “separated”—children, training new floor staff. If visitor traffic was light, I was still busy, engaged in longer adult-child interactions, preparing craft supplies so we wouldn’t run out on busy days, cleaning the register keyboards. Never a still moment, and all to encouraging the next generation to be smart and kind.

The museum closed at 5:00, except on Fridays, when it closed at 8:00, though I rarely worked the late shift. At close, I would either tidy up if I was on the floor, or count out my
drawer if I was on register that day. In the former case, I would catch a 5:20 p.m. #94 Express; in the latter, counting out my drawer usually kept me until the next express, depending on how busy we’d been and how good my math was.

Once in downtown Minneapolis, I would once again transfer to the #5 northbound, though I usually had a little wait. I would arrive home at 6:30 or 7:00 p.m., depending on when I got out of work. I’d head to the kitchen, take my medication, put together a quick dinner, and take it to my bedroom. As I ate, I would run through my usual websites and talk with someone from my growing list of friends on AIM. Sometimes I’d put on some porn and jack off; the voices of the past that told me what I was doing was evil I pushed back into a nice safe corner of my head. I figured masturbation would help me sleep even though I was already exhausted.

At 10:00 p.m. I would collapse on the sofa-bed, springs poking my back. I’d toss and turn an hour, two hours. I blamed the sofa-bed.

Next morning, 6:45 a.m., or 6:00 a.m. on Sundays.

Six days on, one day off, four days on, three days off, cycling every two weeks, save for holiday disruptions (blackout dates meant I couldn’t take time off to see my family back in Indiana.)

On my Sundays off I attended Bethany Lutheran Church. Six months prior to moving to Minneapolis, I had joined the Lutherans in search of a church that would accept me as a gay man; my pastor back in Indiana had recommended Bethany to me. They were a small urban congregation with a gay pastor, Pastor Jay. I enjoyed the ritual of the Lutheran tradition, a far cry from my background in evangelicalism, but a downside was that they did little beyond Sunday morning, as faith was to be lived out in the world, not sunk into the church. As an evangelical, I was used to church three times a week. But I was required to work every other Sunday.
For eight months, this was my life, the inconveniences unimportant because I had the best job in the world.

The agreement all along had been that I’d live with Reggie and Stefan for a year, until I could save up first and last month’s rent on a new place. Drawing my purse strings tight—iced mochas at Pandora’s my one indulgence—I kept myself on pace to save $1400 in a year’s time. And now the time to move on drew nigh. Over the year, I had pieced together why the couple had taken me on as a tenant/roommate in the first place. The upstairs neighbors were also their tenants. They hadn’t paid rent in well over a year, long before I arrived, but Reggie and Stefan didn’t have enough money themselves to file to evict them or sue for back rent. (As to the spotty internet and cable, it had nothing to do with summer heat, and everything to do with the fact that the upstairs neighbors had spliced into our line to get free cable.) I was there to help make up for the loss in rent from the folks upstairs. So it turned out my residence had been mutually beneficial, but we were moving past that point. I wanted more independence, and I knew that I was getting on their nerves, my weird habits of isolating in my room and hoarding dishes. They were a happily married couple who deserved their own space.

I thought about remaining in the Folwell neighborhood. I liked the area mostly because it was peaceful and quiet, even if it took me two hours to get groceries, even if it got sketchy a few blocks south, even if I couldn’t order pizza delivery because Domino’s mistook my address for the sketchy part a few blocks south. But Folwell left me spending fifteen hours a week—fully ten percent of my life—either on a bus to work or waiting for a bus to work. As I’ve always been prone to motion sickness, I couldn’t read on the bus; I spent the hours staring straight ahead hoping not to throw up. Fifteen out of 168 hours each week. Nearly ten percent of my life. And
aside from the convenience store across the street, from which Imani had quit to have her baby and which was terribly overpriced except for Grapeheads, the closest supermarkets added an hour round-trip to my bus time each week. I had to live somewhere more convenient to work and food.

    After careful consideration of the bus routes, I decided to live in Minneapolis along Lake Street near Uptown. Not the heart of Uptown because I couldn’t afford the rents there, but a few blocks east, where I could catch a quick ride to St. Paul via the #53 Limited Stop. Some of my coworkers couldn’t understand why I didn’t move to St. Paul so I could be closer to the museum. I argued that St. Paul was more sprawled out, the neighborhoods less walkable. There was no nightlife, and little to do after work. It was just like the joke I’d heard a couple times by now: The Twin Cities make up a mullet—St. Paul is the business in the front; Minneapolis is the party in the back. My life to this point had resembled that of many in the Twin Cities metro, working in St. Paul but living elsewhere, and I could see no compelling reason for that to change. I wanted to live closer to the party.

    Suzette (everyone called her Suze) was a retired schoolteacher who used to work the position I began with, but when she wanted to cut back her hours, the museum created a job just for her in which she oriented and managed field trips exclusively. We got along marvelously, and were it not for the watchful eye of the managers, we would have spent all our time chatting. In our rare idle moments, we slipped in what conversation we could. I related to her my impending move, and she offered to help me find a place.

    A month before the move-out date Reggie, Stefan, and I had agreed upon, Suze treated me to brunch at French Meadow, a popular organic café in Uptown. The May sun shone through
the large windows, brightening up the lemon-yellow walls, and over French toast Suze and I discussed our plan for the day. She proposed we drive around in the immediate area, looking for any advertised vacancies, and, if there were any phone number posted, calling them on her cell phone. We’d develop a list as we progressed east down Lake Street, away from Uptown.

We only got as far as Grand Avenue, three blocks away. I called the number, and the management company said they could send someone out to show me an apartment in fifteen minutes. She arrived in ten minutes, let Suze and me into the building, and took us up to a one-bedroom on the third floor. It had everything I was looking for. Just the right size. A long entry hallway where I could hang my paintings. Windows facing east and south, ensuring I always had sunlight to help wake me up. A nice bathtub in which I could luxuriate on my days off. The building would put me within walking distance of clothing boutiques, thrift shops, movie and stage theatres, and most importantly, a supermarket. I could ride the #53 to work in about 40 minutes.

If I wasn’t sold already, Suze’s constant “this is perfect!” did the selling for me. I asked the management representative if I could look at a lease, and she told us to meet her at their office on Nicollet Avenue, a five-minute drive away.

We headed into the large second-story offices, and were shown the gym, for which I would have twenty-four-hour access. Perfect, I thought, an excuse to exercise. Then Suze and I were seated at a desk and shown a lease. I had to provide proof that the rent would make up no more than fifty percent of my income, which was a huge relief, as I knew most places required that the maximum be thirty-three percent, a figure I absolutely could not afford.

The management representative stepped away, and all the time she was gone, I repeated to Suze, “There’s going to be some catch; this is going too smoothly.”
“Nonsense,” she replied, “you’re going to get this apartment. You deserve it.”

The representative returned, and in short order, I wrote out a check for the deposit and first month’s rent, and signed my lease. Good-bye to Reggie and Stefan, good-bye to Snoopy, good-bye to buying Grapeheads from Imani, good-bye to the house that Domino’s said was in a sketchy neighborhood though everyone knew it wasn’t sketch until you got a few blocks south. Before we left the office, Suze nicknamed me “Uptown Boy.” I liked the ring of that.
Lyndale Neighborhood
Lyn-Lake Commercial District
Uptown Minneapolis
Chapter 4

I didn’t get the apartment. Or, more precisely, I didn’t get the apartment that was shown to Suze and me. On my move-in day, the agent directed me, not to the southeast corner of the top floor, with the lovely southerly and easterly views that afforded sunlight, but rather on the opposite side of the building, with exposures north and west. Evening sun, not morning when I needed it. I asked the agent why I wasn’t getting the apartment I was shown, and she replied that this was the one I was to move into in the first place, but when Suze and I had first checked out the building, the apartment wasn’t ready. I smiled politely and thanked the agent for the explanation.

What the management did was illegal, showing me one apartment and giving me another, but I didn’t know it at the time. Yet, even though I had so hoped for the sunlight to help wake me up, I at last had my own home in a great neighborhood. It wasn’t like the apartment was different, aside from orientation. All that mattered was that it was 525 square feet of independence.

The evening after I moved in, as I was walking through the front door up to my apartment, I ran into a man about my age, trim, blond, fair. “Hey, man,” he said, “you just move in?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t believe you actually live here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m getting ready to move out, and all this time I’ve been living here, I’ve been the only white guy; seriously, you’re the only other one I’ve seen.”

The only response I could muster was, “Um, okay.”

“Anyway,” he said, “welcome to the neighborhood.”
Over the following week I decorated. I picked up a red striped chair at a deep discount from the nearby Urban Outfitters. A futon and Japanese-style screen from the furniture store across the street. (My plan was to live day-to-day out of the living room, and to use the bedroom as my art studio, so convertible furniture was key.) Orange and red throw pillows from Agan Traders, a South Asian import company located inside Calhoun Square, a shopping plaza a few blocks away at the heart of Uptown. I also picked up from Agan an embroidered orange hanging with tiny mirrors sewn in. The clerk told me that Indians traditionally hung it over an entryway as a sign of blessing to visitors, but I would nail it over my kitchen window. And from Target, a wicker-wrapped ottoman that doubled as a storage unit. I asked one of the few locals from the gay-Christian message board for a ride to IKEA to purchase a computer desk and chair for my studio.

After a couple of days, I discovered that the window-unit air conditioner leaked steadily and left a massive puddle onto my carpet that was quick to smell musty. I called the apartment manager; they said it was condensation and there was nothing they could do about it. On my next Monday off, I rode the bus all the way to the St. Paul suburb of Roseville—over an hour each way—to pick up supplies from Michaels Craft Store: A plastic planter, a bunch of artificial flowers in reds and oranges, and duct tape. I sealed up the drainage holes in the bottom of the planter with the tape, and then secured the flowers to the inside of the planter, so that I had a pan to catch the drip that doubled as a decorative cover to hide the A/C unit.

The apartment included a large entry hallway—no closet or anything, just dead space. Some would say it was an inefficient layout, but I saw it as a gallery for hanging my paintings. I hoped to impress my houseguests with my handiwork as soon as they entered. And every day, as
I left or returned home, I would come face-to-face with my art and find motivation to create and to make some inroads into the arts community of Minneapolis.

I would paint. I would exhibit. I would make a name for myself. Somehow, when I lived in north Minneapolis, I had forgot all this. But now, I doubled down on my commitment to the arts. I would not be forgotten.

Upon moving to Uptown, I assumed I would hang out at Pandora’s a lot. Except that Pandora’s was no more. The owners decided to take the business into a new direction, converting the bohemian coffeehouse into an upscale restaurant, named Duplex after the building’s architecture. There was a gay coffeehouse nearby, named Vera’s, and I’d been a few times, but I wasn’t as loud, as cocky, as sassy as the other guys there, and fading into the walls to observe other gay men kibitz with each other wasn’t my idea of fun.

So I developed a new ritual. Every other Friday, on payday, I wouldn’t get off the #53 near my home, but instead would continue eight more blocks to the terminal on Hennepin Avenue. From there, I would walk a block to Calhoun Square. At 6:00 p.m., the three-story edifice was already abuzz, the dinner crowds headed to Sushi Tango and Famous Dave’s BBQ and Chiang Mai Thai, shoppers checking out the wares at Agan Traders or Kitchen Window or the sundry booths where artists sold their paintings and sculptures. But my first stop was to see Maggie at her chair-massage booth. One dollar per minute. My bank account dictated what I got; if I could afford it, I’d get a fifteen-minute massage, but more often, it was five or ten. She also worked as a massage therapist for the Minnesota Timberwolves, and as she kneaded the knots out of my shoulders and back, I would ask about their swingman, Wally Szczerbiak, and never did I let on that he was one of my celebrity crushes.
With five or ten or fifteen minutes of the hours of stress worked out of my muscles, I strolled over to Caruso’s for a scoop of gelato. My favorites were blueberry, lemon, and lavender, sometimes in combination. As I would walk out of Calhoun Square, savoring my dish of gelato, couples and trios and larger ensembles thronged around me, I did not feel alone. Here, in this agora, I was part of something bigger than myself—a capitalist machine, yes, but also a community.

This is where I found community: The Potter’s Cup in Bloomington, Indiana.

This is when I found it: October 2002.

This is what love smelled like: Musty thrift-store furniture, burnt coffee, recycling-center latex house paint, day-old donated pastries, patchouli incense.

This is what love sounded like: The hiss of an espresso machine, the whirr of a blender, impassioned conversation about theology and the Bible and how the church had corrupted both, The Talking Heads asking from a CD player how we got here.

This is what love looked like: The second story of the Knights of Columbus Building, one block off the square in Bloomington, Indiana; wood-paneled and linoleumed, thrift-store sofas and dining tables, a kitchen and a stage, two art studios (one for the artist-in-residence, Max, and one for the general public).

This is how many links you get if you google “‘potter’s cup’ bloomington Indiana” today: 8.

This is what The Potter’s Cup was: a coffeehouse, art gallery, or concert venue (depending on the advertisement); a multimodal arts center (what Nate, the founder, told
visitors); a covert ministry to the lost and hard-hearted souls of Bloomington (what Nate told us volunteers in staff meetings); a homeless shelter (what a random bus passenger told my mom).

This is what drew me to The Potter’s Cup: Nate came to my church one evening and announced his plans to start a coffeehouse ministry, and all through Bible college I had dreamt of doing something similar but had no idea how to start.

This is who worked at The Potter’s Cup: Nate, his wife Tirzah, a half-dozen volunteers from various area churches, and artist-in-residence Max.

This is what Max taught me when he took me under his wing: Paint every day. Listen to your materials. Paint on wood; canvas has no soul.

This is where Max learned art: From a homeless man in San Diego.

This is what my artwork looked like: Wooden panels, six inches by nine inches, covered in splots and drops and Rothkoesque squares of recycling-center latex house paint, sometimes with acrylics swirled in.

This is what Nate called my art: Genius.

These were the hours of The Potter’s Cup: 7:00 p.m. to midnight, seven days a week.

These were the hours I was at The Potter’s Cup: 7:00 p.m. to midnight, seven days a week.

This is what kept me at The Potter’s Cup: Nate gave me, along with another volunteer named Miranda, the position of co-director of the art gallery.

This is why that was important: My church had said I couldn’t volunteer in any “visible” position until they were comfortably certain that I had become a heterosexual.

This is what Nate said to me: “You’re fine with me as long as you’re not in the lifestyle.”
This is why I thought we saw so few visitors at The Potter’s Cup: We were located in the second story of a building in a small town where the street traffic rarely ventured beyond street level. Our entrance was inconspicuous and we were limited as to what signage we were allowed. We needed a promoter who knew what they were doing.

This is why Nate thought we saw so few visitors: The people of Bloomington had hardened their hearts to God and handed themselves over to Satan.

This is where I went when I wasn’t at The Potter’s Cup: The computer labs at Indiana University, either at Lindley Hall or the library.

This is where I went on the computers in the labs: Gay.com, at first, or more precisely, their chatrooms, especially the Christian and the Intellectual rooms. The gay-Christian message board. Gay porn sites, on occasion, while looking over my shoulder so as not to get caught.

This is where my GPA went for a semester or two: Somewhere south of 3.0.

This is what Nate said when he found out I visited the gay-Christian website: They do not love you. They lie. They are from the devil. We here at The Potter’s Cup are the ones who love you.

This is what love looked like to Nate.

This is why I lost my title of art gallery co-manager.

This is when Nate graciously allowed me to put on a show of my art: December 2003.

This is when The Potter’s Cup closed: January 2004.

This is when Nate and Max last spoke to me.

This is why I was so devoted to the gay-Christian website.

This is why I painted.

This is why I would become an artist in Minneapolis.
This is what I think The Potter's Cup was: A cult.
Chapter 5

Soon came the chill of Minnesota autumn, arriving a full month earlier than in southern Indiana. Once I regretted the western and northern exposures not yielding enough sunlight to help me wake up in the morning; now, as we sped towards the winter solstice, the sun didn’t rise until after I was on the bus to work. The surrounding buildings channeled the wind, speeding it up and rattling the large panes that dominated my apartment. Home grew too cold, the central heating system woefully inefficient, so I picked up a small space heater. I tried, at first, simply to run the heater when I was at home, but even then, it took hours to warm up the place, even with the bathroom and studio doors closed. It never occurred to me to notify building management that the heat wasn’t working right. Where I grew up, management never did anything.

So I adapted. I ran the space heater 24/7, knowing it was a fire hazard, but there was no other way to keep my apartment from freezing. After I came home from work and watched TV and goofed off online—lacking the energy to paint or to read—I showered, dressed in my clothes for the next day, and went to bed. This kept me warm. This also kept me from missing the bus in the morning. Too often I was oversleeping just enough to miss my bus, whereas if I could just wake up and run straight out the door, I could catch my bus on time. Anything to make it to work on time.

It had been a perfectly average day at work: we hit around a thousand in attendance by day’s end, and there’d been no big emergencies, nobody called in sick so that we had to rearrange our staffing, nothing of note whatsoever. So I couldn’t figure out why Donna had called me to her office out of the blue.

“First things first,” she said, “I don’t think you did anything wrong.”

“Okay…”
“But a visitor had concerns about you, and I wanted to address them here and now, just so that nothing escalates.”

“Concerns? What could escalate? Nothing’s gone wrong today.”

“A field-trip chaperone said you’d taken toys away from some children, and she felt that what you did was racist.”

I recalled the incident in question and related it to Donna. One of the exhibits featured two board games; although the idea of “winners and losers” was antithetical to our educational philosophy, these games were part of a package deal in a rental from another organization, and the leadership decided to let their policy on games slide just this once. The pieces of one game regularly migrated to the other, which left several children standing around the empty board complaining that they had nothing to play with. So this one time I turned to the children at the other board and asked them if, after they were finished playing with the game, they’d be so kind as to bring a few of the pieces to the empty board, as we were just busy enough that there wouldn’t be a dead moment for me to equitably redistribute the pieces. All the children agreed this was a fair deal.

“This is ridiculous,” I said, “because I don’t even remember the races of anyone involved.” Though I couldn’t remember, there was only one situation that would have called for this action: I had asked non-white children to give their game pieces to white children. I continued, “We were busy; I was just trying to keep all the children happy the fairest way I knew how.”

“I get that,” said Donna. “And I don’t think you’re racist, and I don’t think what you did was racist. But I told the chaperone I would talk with you. It can be tricky out there. Just
remember that sometimes people will misinterpret what you do, and you need to be prepared to respond appropriately when situations like that arise.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best.”

I returned to work, eyes up, on guard.

strobes flash eardrum-busting buzz the clock says 3:00 a.m. only been asleep an hour not my alarm why the racket FIRE ALARM throw my blanket round my shoulders down on all fours below the smoke touch the doorknob test for heat it’s cool Knock on the neighbors’ doors ¡ENFUEGO ENFUEGO! no one wakes I hope they’re out put my head low below the smoke down two flights of stairs, shout ¡ENFUEGO ENFUEGO! the whole way down out the front door, my neighbors whom I’ve never met never spoken to gathered round I ask ¿Qué pasó? What happened? they say No sé I don’t know Damn I was the last out of the building Even a fire alarm couldn’t wake me Whirr of siren I plug my ears too loud too loud firefighters enter my neighbors and I wait wrapped in robes and blankets so cold my bare feet ice cubes twenty minutes then all clear back 1 go back to bed so tired so so tired

I awoke at 10:00 a.m. Damn. I was already over an hour late to work, and it would take almost an hour to get to work. I threw on my clothes, put on a hat to disguise my lack of shower, and ran to the bus.

When I reached the museum, Stephanie happened to be standing near the entry. “Where have you been?” she asked.

“There was a fire in my building. Everything’s okay, fortunately. But I hardly got any sleep thanks to the evacuation; I got here as soon as I could.”
“You have to be here by the start of your shift,” was all she said as she disappeared into the office wing.

I was putting costume pieces in their appropriate locations within a gallery for the twentieth time that day when I spotted Donna leading an interviewee into the space. He was trim, fresh-faced, broad smile. And he wore a suit and tie, which made no sense for a job in our department. We got on our hands and knees. We got dirty.

Donna called me over. “This is Hayden. He’s interviewing for the full-time position Caitlin just left.” Ah, Caitlin. She quit just two weeks in; a mother bawled out poor Caitlin after the woman’s two-year-old accidentally got pushed by a little girl from an incoming field trip.

I shook his hand. “Pleasure to meet you, Hayden. This is a great place to be. You get to influence the future, and there’s nothing better than that. Good luck.”

“Thanks, I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

With that, interviewer and interviewee drifted off to other parts of the museum. I tried not to burst out laughing. There was no way this guy would get a job in our department. He wasn’t dressed for it.

Hayden got the job.
Chapter 6

In May 2006 I faced a tough choice. I could either renew my lease for another year, or sign a six-month lease at a higher rent. In other words, I could survive with things as-is, or possibly thrive in a better situation in the future, albeit with a short-term loss. The toughest part of my present living situation was the silence. Perhaps it’s because I grew up with three younger siblings that I can’t stand a still room. Perhaps the quiet reminded me too well of how utterly alone I was. But it was certainly not wise to leave me alone with my thoughts. Always, the first thing I did when I came home was turn on the radio or the TV. Though I was for the first time as an adult living in a neighborhood where neighbors got to know each other, my paltry knowledge of Spanish hindered any chance of securing a place in the community. Things just weren’t working as I’d hoped.

The solution was simple. I needed a roommate. And since no one was going to share a one-bedroom with me, I would need to find a new place. I signed the six-month lease, even though I would have to pinch my pennies till they screamed, between the raised rent and a new housing deposit. But I would simply give up what had become a twice-monthly ritual of visiting Calhoun Square for a chair massage and gelato. I would share a new place with roommates—ones with whom I would get along far better than I had with Reggie and Stefan—and come home each day to a space that had some sense of life in it, with something more than my computer and paintings to keep me company.

One of my first steps out of the closet, in the months before moving to Minneapolis, had been to join the dating website OkCupid. The site asked members, upon joining, to respond to a list of questions; the answers would be used to determine your compatibility with other members. Later, the more questions you answered, the higher the probability of a match. Back in
Indiana, the site generated one match of 65%, so I assumed he was a high match, even though we didn’t share many interests or attitudes. The truth was that we were the only gay men in Bloomington with accounts. Granted, OkCupid was only a couple of years old at the time, but when I moved to Minneapolis, suddenly, hundreds of potential matches were a mere bus ride away.

Or so it seemed. For, though I had many high matches, hardly anyone responded to my hellos. Of those that did respond, hardly any agreed to see me, and of those, virtually none spoke to me after the first date. It didn’t make sense. I thought my dates went well. The guys were polite and friendly, so I figured, if they didn’t want to date again, we at least had enough in common to remain friends. There must have been something wrong with me that had turned them off.

I persisted by branching out online. There were other options, I see now that, owing to an inconsistent work schedule that left me keeping my evenings open in case the museum was rented out and I was called in, I was hindered in joining any sort of weekly meetings, and at the gay bars, where I’d assumed gay men made friends, the guys clustered into cliques who already knew each other from who-knows-where. But a gay-friendship website just wasn’t a thing. There was only one place to go.

The aim of the gay hookup site Manhunt was explicit in its name, but, surely, not all gay men were just after sex. That was the stereotype I’d learned in church. In my coming out, I’d vowed to refrain from sex until marriage. I was not going to be one of the ‘bad gays” decried by so many on the gay-Christian website’s message board. Surely there were some on Manhunt who were looking for a boyfriend, or just wanted to make friends.
Good Times was playing on the television, in the living room of this chunky redhead whose name is now long forgotten. It was the episode where James, the father, goes off to Mississippi for a promising job but dies in an accident while he’s away, and his wife Florida is left to pick up the pieces. At the end, Florida tires of managing her family’s nonsense, cries out, “Damn, damn, damn!” and falls apart in tears. I cuddled naked with the chunky redhead on his sofa, gently weeping at the scene that gave actor John Amos an exit from the role he’d tired of performing. The chunky redhead put his arm round me and I nestled in deeper.

A half hour earlier, we were in his bedroom, having sex, or at least trying. His idea of sex mostly involved me lying on my back motionless while he sat on my penis, bobbing up and down occasionally. His heft pinned me to the bed, the angle of entry painful, but I kept silent for fear of rejection.

Two hours earlier, I had connected with the chunky redhead on Manhunt. I was averaging three hours every night on the site and one hookup about every six weeks. But it was worth the $19.99-per-month subscription fee if it offered me the chance to make a friend, a point I made clear on my profile—I didn’t mind sex but was hoping for friendship, hoping that perhaps sex was a means to make friends. Most of the men I chatted with wouldn’t come to my neighborhood because it was “too dangerous,” and didn’t want to wait for me to catch a bus to their place because they wanted sex right now, which limited me to the few members within walking distance. And those whom I did meet never spoke to me again after we did the deed, which made no sense to me; most of them expressed satisfaction with my performance, so I figured they would want a repeat show.

But things would be different with the chunky redhead. He was nice to talk with, and he didn’t kick me out of the house immediately after climax. As the Good Times credits rolled, I
dressed and thanked him for a great evening and told him I looked forward to seeing him again, and he said he hoped likewise.

The next day, he didn’t return my instant message on Manhunt. Or the day after that. Or the day after that.

Damn, damn, damn.

If OkCupid wasn’t shooting any arrows at my heart, the site was at least sending new friends my way. Darren was brilliant, charming, gorgeous, bisexual, polyamorous, and completely out of my league, but we hit it off as friends, so he invited me to a fundraising party he and his wife were hosting.

I was a ball of nerves as I stood on Darren’s front porch and knocked. What if this didn’t work? What if I didn’t make any connections at the party? What if Darren didn’t like me once we met face-to-face? What if I was still stuck alone after this party? What if people thought I was a loser because I had to leave early so I could work a Saturday? What if what if what if what if...

Darren welcomed me in with a huge hug. The living room was already half-crowded, and as I sat in the corner sipping my Sprite, it filled up even more. It wasn’t that I was shy; few have ever considered me such. It was more that I was intimidated. This crowd was smart and beautiful and confident, and I was, at best, one of the three.

At last I screwed up the courage to speak to someone other than Darren. I walked across the room and interjected myself into a conversation about science-fiction novels I knew nothing about. Marnie was a computer programmer with long raven hair and compelling green eyes. Marnie’s husband Jack was a sound engineer for a classic-rock station. Marnie’s boyfriend Pete was an administrative assistant for public transit. Her friend Llewellyn, a wiry, goateed
leprechaun of a man, was a social worker. And I worked an entry-level customer-service position that paled in comparison. Over the course of the conversation, I learned that all four belonged to LiveJournal, so we exchanged usernames and promised to read each other’s blogs. Soon a few others overheard our discussion and joined in, lauding the blogging site for its community-building features. This had not been my experience to date, but I exchanged a few more usernames before the clock hit 11:00 p.m. and I would have to head home. Before I went to sleep, I would add everyone to my LiveJournal friends list.

Over the coming weeks, I got to know Darren and Marnie and Llewellyn and the rest of their circle through LiveJournal. On the surface, I didn’t have much common with them. Some, like Marnie and Pete and Jack, were polyamorous; many were bisexual; most were in tech careers; nearly all were atheists. But we shared identities, as smartest-kid-in-the-room, as geek, as misfit, and for me, that was enough. Through LiveJournal, we shared our successes and commiserations, sought advice, and most importantly, created community—truly the first I’d found since my exit from evangelicalism.
Chapter 7

Simon, a member of the Programming Department’s staff at work, had trained me in storytelling, and from there we had developed an amicable relationship, though not the sort where we hung out; he was a little older, a family man. Simon asked me if I would mind housesitting for a week as he and his family went to Arizona for vacation. They also had a shy little black cat named Kuro I’d need to keep watered and fed. Before Simon could even tell me how much he’d pay, I agreed to the arrangement.

For one week, life was bliss. Simon and his family lived a few blocks from the staid environs of Macalester College, near the center of St. Paul. My bus commute was a mere twenty minutes, so I awoke with plenty of time to put together a proper breakfast without feeling rushed, and arrived early enough in the evening to cook up a nice dinner for myself. Taking care of houseplants for a just a week, before my black thumb could do them in, gave me great joy. The house was just as maddeningly quiet as my apartment, and I still ran the radio or TV all the time, but the neighborhood was so much quieter, more peaceful, that I didn’t mind the stillness as much. Kuro was a perfect companion, cozying up to me on the red-and-orange-cushioned sofa as I watched PBS. Simon only had dial-up, so there was little I could do online, but for once I didn’t care; the simple pleasures of housework and pet care were enough for me.

I just lied. It wasn’t entirely bliss. For I found myself, day by day, more and more tired, and I had no idea why. I was sleeping on a proper bed, for once, and sleeping well. I was taking my medications as prescribed. I was even drinking less caffeine than usual so I could sleep right. Yet nothing mitigated this bone-deep exhaustion. I called in sick to work twice. Simon’s payment for housesitting wouldn’t cover the loss of income from work.

*This isn’t anything,* I told myself. *It’s probably just the change of seasons or something. If it keeps up, I’ll go to the doctor, but I doubt it’ll come to that.*
In high-school French, I learned two words for “exhausted.” The first, *fatigué*, is where the English word “fatigue” comes from, and derives from the Latin *fatigare*, “to wear out.” I’m less prone to using this word when I speak French, in part, I suppose, because it sounds like “fatty gay,” which is a bit too on the nose for me, but more importantly, because it doesn’t describe my experience of exhaustion. The other French word, *épuisé*, is more emphatic in connotation, more exhausted. Etymologically, it means, roughly, “to have something taken from you.”

I had my security taken from me every time I called in sick to work, the fear of losing my job a guillotine over my head.

I had my income taken from me once I maxed out my Paid Time Off and still I was calling in ill, trapped in my bed.

I had my dignity taken from me as I sold my paintings to friends from the gay-Christian website so I’d have enough to eat.

I had my pride taken away when I got to talking with Jack about how bad things were, and he ended up coming over to help me clean house, except it wasn’t so much helping me as actually doing it, as I couldn’t get out of bed.

I had my faith taken from me as I prayed to God every day to give me enough strength to get out of bed, to stay awake, to get through work, and every day God denied me.

I had my clarity taken away from me with every doctor visit, every test, every negative result, until finally my doctor said, “You’re exhausted because you’re depressed,” and I replied, “But I’m not depressed,” and he countered, “You’re depressed without knowing you’re depressed.”
I wasn’t entirely sure I was depressed. But I was most certainly épuisé.

My doctor recommended counseling. With my ever-changing work schedule, I wasn’t sure how I’d fit it in. I didn’t think my insurance would cover it. And I didn’t trust counselors.

I’m sitting stiffly in a stiff chair. The room’s a touch too cool, so I put my jacket back on. The walls are lined with tomes of theology, Bible concordances, psychology books from evangelical publishers, Bible-study guides, New Testaments in the original Koinē Greek, and Bibles in various translations. Behind me, Jesus stares, framed in brass-finish aluminum.

In he walks, clad in sweater and khakis. He takes a seat across from me and pulls his notes from his briefcase. “So,” he asks, “how was this past week?”

“Not so good,” I reply. “I masturbated twice.”

“I see. Remember, it’s not so much the act itself, but what you were thinking about, the fantasy, the lust. What were you thinking about?”

“Um...my friend.”

“And what triggered this?”

“I saw him this past weekend. He was wearing a tank top.”

“So, you found yourself in a tempting situation. What did you do about it?”

“Well, nothing. My friend doesn’t know about me, and I didn’t want to draw attention to myself.”

“But there were a number of things you could have done. You could have put on your jacket, which could have signaled to your friend to do the same. You could have asked your friend to pray with you—you wouldn’t need to tell him why, because God would know why.
You could have excused yourself and asked your friend to meet another time. You *should* have been praying the entire time to ward off the temptation.”

He leans back, drawing his hands to his mouth, a prayer-like gesture, index fingers aimed heavenward. “How has your Bible study been going?”

I flush. “I’ve missed some. I think maybe I only read twice this past week.”

His brow furrows. “How do you expect to improve without taking the Word of God into your heart? Joshua chapter one verse eight clearly tells us what we need to do: ‘Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.’”

“I know, but—”

“What’s with these buts all the time? The kingdom of heaven is not founded on excuses.”

So goes the conversation for the remainder of the hour, no real progress, but an ever-deepening awareness of just how far I miss the mark, just how screwed up I am, just how much the sin of attraction to the wrong form, somehow tattooed on my face, led others astray, away from God and towards the eternal flames of hell.

The minute hand reaches its apex, just as I hit my nadir. We bow our heads and pray that I will be strong this week, guarding my heart against the Enemy through the Word of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

As I leave the office, I can’t help but notice the portrait of Jesus, his eyes boring into my soul.

That’s what my life looked like for the better part of ten years.

“It’s weird,” I told Pastor Jay as I sat in his office. “In some ways it feels like a million years ago, but in others, it’s still all too real.”
I’d been making biweekly visits to Jay at Bethany Lutheran. The museum required that I work alternate Sundays. I’d asked if I could start work at 1 p.m., but they said no, I knew I had to work those Sundays when I’d been hired. But I’d never heard of a job that didn’t let you attend church. Being off alternate Sundays was the allowance to go to church, they argued. What about Donna? She’s off every Sunday. Well, she got grandfathered in under an old policy, they said. What about Rosetta? She’s off every Tuesday because she’s Buddhist. She’s part-time, and Tuesday isn’t on the weekend anyway.

“I’m so deeply sorry,” Jay replied after I finished my explanation of my decade in ex-gay therapy. “That should have never happened to you. And it angers me that you were ever put in a position to go through that kind of abuse.”

“But what was I supposed to do? It was the only way I was allowed to stay in Bible college. And then, when I couldn’t afford to go anymore and moved back to Indiana, well, I was an evangelical; that’s just what you did.”

“None of that excuses it, though. You were being treated like a criminal when you weren’t guilty of anything.”

“What could I do though, really? I mean, I don’t think you quite understand.”

“No, I understand. Remember, I was raised Catholic in a small town in Minnesota. As a gay kid. I know what it’s like to live in a homophobic environment. So, yeah, I get it.”

Jay and I wrapped up our talk and I headed out to catch my bus. The portrait of Jesus on his office wall didn’t glower down at me, but rather smiled.

The room I designated as studio never became quite what I wanted. Boxes sat in stacks half-unpacked, over a year after moving in, partly from exhaustion, partly from the knowledge
that I would move on to a better place. I painted some but not nearly enough to improve. My copy of *City of God*, one-third read and collecting dust, sat atop a stack of books I’d collected from Magers & Quinn. The studio was mostly a space for me to sit at the computer, where I blogged and chatted with friends and jerked off to porn. I remained optimistic about OkCupid despite my track record. And, against all odds, I’d made a friend through Manhunt, though we hadn’t met face to face.

Frank was fifty-five, old enough that my fellow thirtysomethings on the site wouldn’t talk to him. He wasn’t looking for sex, I had given up on looking for it, and together we enjoyed thoughtful, intelligent online conversation. When Frank asked how I was doing, it wasn’t a mere custom; he genuinely cared, and wanted the full, no-bullshit answer.

As November 2006 ground towards my move-out date without a residence forthcoming, My current home in Lyndale allowed me to earn only double the rent; most places required you earn at least three times the rent, and none of those places were cheap enough for me to rent. I tried Craigslist, looking for a roommate to look for an apartment together, but Craigslist wasn’t well set up for that. I asked my friends on LiveJournal, but they knew of nothing. I so feared not landing a place anywhere, of ending up homeless.

But Frank laid my fears to rest. His friend Roger had an opening, a room in a three-bedroom apartment within a triplex on Garfield Avenue, just a few blocks away. Frank had already told Roger I was a stand-up guy and would be a good tenant. He gave me Roger’s contact info, and soon enough, I would be set, with a new home and new roommates. Strike that: new friends.
Garfield Avenue
Whittier Neighborhood
Uptown Minneapolis
Chapter 8

Only in retrospect am I able to recognize all the clichés involved in my move to the new apartment on Garfield Avenue. It was a dark and stormy night (yes, really). I’d enlisted the help of friends (Jack and Marnie). I promised to pay them in pizza. When they arrived at 6:00 p.m., I wasn’t even halfway done packing. (Had I been able to ask off work for the move, this might not have been the case, but missing any work at all was no longer an option, at least not until I started earning back Paid Time Off.) Jack and Marnie were stuck not only helping me pack, but helping me clean, as well. It was 10:00 p.m. when we got pizza, and midnight before we finished getting my stuff into the new apartment.

Here the stereotypes end, because I wasn’t allowed to move into the new apartment until December 1, though my landlords at the Lyn-Lake apartment said I had to be out November 28. I told them they were violating my lease by not allowing me there the full six months, but they retorted that they needed two days to paint the apartment for the new tenant. Roger, my new landlord, made a compromise move: I could move everything in the 28th, but couldn’t stay there till the 1st. So for the last two nights of November, I stayed with Pete, Marnie’s other partner, at his apartment in the Midway area of St. Paul.

On the afternoon of the 1st, for the first time, I left work for the new apartment on Garfield Avenue. Roger met me there with the lease. As I signed, he said, “Remember, the building is up for sale, but I haven’t had any takers.”

“Doesn’t matter to me,” I replied. “I’m sure if I end up with a new landlord, it’ll all work out.”

Then I more properly introduced myself to my new roommates. Charlotte was a tall, slim redhead who worked as a server at a downtown restaurant. She seemed genial enough. Dean was near-skeletal, grey at the temples; he was a computer programmer, and, suiting the stereotype,
was quieter than Charlotte. I wouldn’t have said we were the Three Musketeers, but I figured we’d get on well enough.

Shortly after I started working at the museum, Olivia, who had led me on my walkthrough, nicknamed me Smiley. And even though she quit about a year after I started, I still lived up to her name for me. Every day I’d hop a shuttle to the University of Minnesota campus and transfer to a bus that dropped me off right in front of the museum. (A different, longer route on weekends as neither of those buses ran then.) I’d usually fall asleep on the second bus. The half-hour nap served me well, as once I got to the museum, there’d be no rest. In fact, once I got off the bus, I usually stopped at the convenience store for a Dr. Pepper and an egg sandwich so that I’d have energy to get through the day. But once I entered the museum, I put on my smile because I was on stage. That theatre terminology, “on stage” and “off stage,” was right there in the training manual. Certain behaviors and subjects of conversation were inappropriate to working on stage. But our times off stage—in the offices or on lunch break—were few and far between. Some employees didn’t care, chit-chatting about their plans to get drunk or smoke pot when they didn’t think anyone was listening, only to be chastised and disciplined later. And we were all disciplined, in that when such incidents occurred, we were each spoken to one-on-one with a reminder of on-stage and off-stage behavior.

An example: One time, my coworker Theo, a retiree who wanted to fill his idle time with a fun part-time job, was corralling a rowdy crew on a field trip. In one of the galleries, the children had stumbled across a bilingual sign, Spanish and English. On the Spanish side was the word “diaria”, which means “everyday”. And oh, how these little white kids howled: “Haha, this says ‘diarrhea’!” And Theo explained, no, the word is Spanish, it means “everyday”. Some days
later, shortly after the start of my shift, my manager Donna pulled me aside. I was told that a customer had submitted to the comment box a complaint against Theo, saying they “overheard an old man telling the kids about his diarrhea,” which was entirely inappropriate. Donna reminded me that whenever we were on stage, we had to consider our words and all the ways they might be misinterpreted before speaking, so as to avoid misunderstandings like Theo’s.

I (and Theo and most everyone else) took our training seriously. Get down on your knees to play with toddlers and preschoolers. Children four to six years old enjoy “magical” language à la Dr. Seuss (for example, my go-to, “fantabulous”). If a child asks you what you think of their drawing, turn the question back to them to help them understand that their opinion matters. If a child shows you a drawing and you can’t tell what it is, don’t ask, “What is it?” but instead comment on the shapes and the colors, as the former question is not only irrelevant but can hurt the child’s self-esteem. Do not use negative words like “do not” because the brain processes positively phrased commands more easily. But to the parents and teachers who came to the museum that the colorful workers who roamed the halls were versed in the latest findings in the field of education, we were shlubs, slacking lackeys, fast-food employees without the fast food.

None of that mattered. For I touched children’s lives, and children held the future. They were everything.

It was less than two months into my stay on Garfield Avenue. I had just got home from work and was making a veggie burger for dinner. Charlotte came from her bedroom to the kitchen and greeted me. I didn’t see her often, for her work schedule often kept her out till midnight, and she was still asleep when I left for work in the morning. “I got some terrible news,” she said.
“Oh? What?”

“I just got laid off today.” She was near tears.

“Wow, I’m sorry.”

“We didn’t get any warning. Just an announcement today that we hadn’t been doing enough business and they were going to have to cut back staff.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I can’t afford to stay here. I’ve already talked with my boyfriend; I’m going to be moving in with him.”

We would be minus a musketeer, at least for a while.
Chapter 9

Maybe you noticed that I have yet to refer to myself by name. I wished to avoid any confusion until absolutely necessary, because, to this point, my name was not Whittier Strong. In fact, my birth name is Clint Jackson Baker, Jr., which, for the most part, I never liked. I had a certain fondness for my middle name, and even tried unsuccessfully to go by it at one point (people you grew up with will generally mock you if you try to change your name). But overall, I never thought it suited me. It was a cowboy name, and I was an artist, not a cowboy. More importantly, it was my father’s name, and I was not my father. He handled my five-year-old brother interrupting his phone call by smacking him against the mouth with the receiver, blackening a baby tooth. He responded to my other brother, who at age two accidentally broke an egg, by beating him across the back until he was momentarily unconscious. He plotted my mother’s murder; it’s in the medical and court documents.

I was not my father.

And that was a big reason why I wanted to be a father, to do better than he had. But the chance to do so seemed to be ebbing away. The modest annual raises at work (which barely kept up with the cost of living and which I received despite my absenteeism because of how hard I worked and about which I wasn’t supposed to divulge to my coworkers thanks to a nondisclosure clause) would never get me to where I could afford to raise a child on my own. And with my laughable lack of success at dating, I would be solo for the foreseeable future. Besides, nearly all the men I had met actively hated children, which I simply could not wrap my brain around.

Still, I fantasized about fatherhood. Ever since the age of seven, I’d made lists of what I would name my children. And now I found myself with the perfect name for a son: the name of my new neighborhood, Whittier. The founders of the city of Minneapolis had sought to mark their frontier outpost as a home to sophisticates by taking its place names from literature –
Emerson, Longfellow, Hiawatha, Minnehaha. The namesake for my environs was John Greenleaf Whittier, the Quaker abolitionist poet. If I could have a son, I would name him Whittier, but that looked like it wasn’t meant to be—I was too poor to raise a child and too unlucky in love to find a partner who’d raise one with me. I didn’t want the name to go to waste, though, so I assigned it to myself.

For two weeks solid, I came home straight from work and sat at my computer, hashing out a middle and last name for myself; a partial split from my father’s name would not do. I kept my activity a secret because I didn’t want anyone dissuading me from my course of action. And in the end, I chose Nathan for my middle name because it was Hebrew—a biblical language—for “gift,” and I aimed to be a gift to the world. Strong would be my surname because I was Strong. Or at least, I hoped I was. Or at least, I wanted to be.

Supersessionism is the doctrine that, when the Christian church came into being after Jesus’s resurrection, it supplanted the people of Israel as God’s chosen people on earth. In other words, Christianity superseded Judaism, hence the name. This doctrine has served as the catalyst for the growth of the Church (and the Inquisition and the pogroms and the Holocaust and and and...) It’s something many Christians don’t think much about, such an intrinsic thread in Christian thought that it’s taken for granted.

Yet as I sat through Pastor Jay’s sermon every other Sunday, in the back of my mind grew the conclusion that there was something very wrong with the argument of Christianity. If supersessionism wasn’t the case, then the Hebrew nation was sufficient to carry out God’s mission on earth, and there was no need to send the Son of God to earth at all, let alone have him endure an excruciating death for our salvation. But if supersessionism was the case, then God
had spent millennia lying to the people he called his own; he was the ultimate prankster: “Hey, Jewish people, you know how I said a few thousand years back that if you followed this stack of my rules, you were my people? Well, I was just kidding! In fact, I buried within those rules a totally different plan that you were too stupid to figure out, and the Christians are the good guys now.” It troubled me that God was almost unavoidably a liar, and troubled me more so that Christianity seemed inherently dismissive of Judaism, if not downright anti-Semitic. It’s not like I thought Bethany Lutheran or Pastor Jay were of this specific disposition; for that matter, many parishioners didn’t even believe in Hell. But this was much bigger than one congregation or one pastor; it lay at the very core of all I had held true since my baptism at age twelve.

I could come to no ready conclusion; I was faced with a paradox, and as a Christian, I had been taught from the beginning to embrace paradoxes such as the Trinity. But this, I could not so easily wave away as the mathematical paradox of 1 + 1 + 1 = 1. This problem was less abstract, more grounded; it affected how God related to people and, perhaps more importantly, how people related to each other. And I would not rest until I found a solution.

Enter the Quakers. A small worship group rented a classroom within Bethany Lutheran Church on Sunday afternoons. I figured that, as I wrestled with a doctrinal issue troublesome enough that it might well lead to my exit from Christianity, I might as well partake of a religious group that sidestepped some of the messier Christian doctrines. I had read online that the Quakers didn’t believe in the Trinity; they believed in Jesus as example rather than savior; their beliefs were adaptable, as there were Buddhist Quakers and Jewish Quakers and atheist Quakers. I didn’t know what I was. But I could be a me-Quaker.

So my Sundays off from the museum took on a new rhythm. I made up a breakfast of Weetabix cereal with milk and banana, all from the Wedge Co-op around the corner. Then I
showered, threw on jeans and a sweater, and ran up to Franklin Avenue to catch the #2. Eastward through an Ojibwe neighborhood, until the numbered streets got into the twenties and I got off the bus at Bethany.

Morning service with the Lutherans: Enter the sanctuary, eighty-and-growing gather, Bach on the organ, *Peace be with you and also with you*, sit in the pews, East African and Latin American hymns with English translation and more organ, prayers, passing the peace (hugs and clasping of hands and *Peace*), more Bach, homily from Pastor Jay *Be kind, do good, love others*, more Bach, Pastor Jay *Go in peace*, kindly conversation with old folks and young families and students from Augsburg College.

Down the street to the Seward neighborhood branch of local chain Pizza Lucé, where I order a meatball parmigiana hoagie with an old-fashioned cherry Coke. (Once I would have prayed over the meal but I no longer do.) Dally over lunch, read the alt-weekly *CityPages* cover to cover awaiting the 3:00 p.m. start for Quaker worship, shift my mind and heart and soul from the teachings of Martin Luther to those of George Fox.

Afternoon meeting with the Quakers: Enter the classroom, fifteen-and-holding gather, circle the folding chairs, sit, silence, dismiss the children for Godly Play class, sit, place my hands in my lap palms up begging to God, silence silence silence silence
Marybeth speaks *Call us to justice* silence silence silence Sophie sings *Thank you thank you for filling us with joy* silence silence silence silence I think *God, are you there and why don’t you answer my prayers?*

Silence
Chapter 10

Approach the brick façade that’s mostly huge windows full of gargantuan houseplants. Outside, seated at parasoled tables, musicians smoke, art students sketch, hipster glitterati pose for the world. Through the door, out of the sun, and it’s still stiflingly hot, thanks to the huge windows, thanks to the lack of central air because this is Minnesota.

Ahead and to your left hang old prints of ships and clowns and twee little girls but mostly ships, salon-style, from the counter holding silverware and a water cooler clear up to the ceiling painted like a Renaissance sky. To the right, the counter; seated on stools, a dreadlocked young man who looks like he’d teach African American Studies at the University of Minnesota and a grey, aging hipster, body wasted from a hard life, engage in quiet, friendly, intense debate (the question at hand: whether to push the Democratic Party further to the left or leave the party outright.) Above the counter hang two caricatures, each of the same two young ladies, one portrait airbrushed and the other penned, each from a different hand but both strikingly similar. “Hi! May I help you?” lilts the young lady at the register who is also clearly one of the two young ladies in the caricatures.

Order a Fitz’s grape soda, surprised to find the St. Louis product in Minnesota, sitting in the cooler next to North Carolina’s Cheerwine and Wisconsin’s Sprecher Root Beer and Kentucky’s Ale-8-1. It’s too hot for coffee, even iced. The cashier, beaming like the cherry-red Cheerwine, rings you up and, intuiting you’re new, directs you to the dining room directly behind you.

The booths are full, each occupied by a singleton tapping away at a laptop. Grab a copy each of The Onion and CityPages to while away the afternoon and take a seat at a small table in the middle, decoupage in yellowed comics, National Geographic photos, and witty bits from ancient issues of The Onion dating back to 1999. From the speakers waltzes the quirky
electronica of Austrian musician B. Fleischmann, the 3/4 meter making peace with a 4/4 cross-rhythm.

And in the stuffy, suffocating heat, over the speakers B. Fleischmann squeezing warmth from a cold instrument, the debate at the counter reaching tepid resolution, the grape soda cooling you but not enough, the humor articles and music reviews taking your mind off the heat but not enough, the tap-tap of computer keys serving as the crickets to the forests growing in the windows, you know, in the deepest recesses of your mind, a space sheltered from the swelter, that there is nowhere on earth like this.

This is Caffetto. This is home.

I looked around the hair salon where I had never been because, despite its location just around the corner from home, I couldn’t even fathom affording their prices. On the walls hung surrealism and calligraphy and pastiches of the two. An exhibit opening, on an evening when I had enough energy to venture out. I could have posted an invitation to my local friends on my Livejournal blog, but they tended to be more into board games and sci-fi conventions.

And so, alone, I munched on cubed Swiss cheese and summer sausage while sussing out who was clustering around whom, who the artist might be so I could compliment them on their impressive work. In short order, I spotted him: white, skinny, wool cap, glasses, layered sweaters, jeans.

I introduced myself as Whittier for the first time of my life, no baggage attached to the name Clint. The artist was named Nicolas; he and I kibitzed about his artistic technique, our respective home states (he was from Connecticut), and his education (he was a current student at
the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD, pronounced em-cad) just down the street, and as my dropout status would fail to impress, skipped over to my work at the museum.

Our conversation closed with the entry of two of his closest friends, so Nicolas and I exchanged e-mail addresses on the off chance we wished to continue our conversation, and I headed home. Perhaps I had made a new friend. But, for certain, I felt more at home in the neighborhood.

I was still dissatisfied with my fatigue and oversleeping, so once again I scheduled a doctor’s visit. I had tried to put together an enjoyable life of shopping at the Wedge and ogling the cute stock clerks and cashiers there, of daily porn and the occasional party, it wasn’t nearly enough to buoy my spirits. I was tired and unhappy, and tired of being unhappy, and unhappy with being tired.

My doctor referred me to a psychiatrist, who prescribed Wellbutrin, an antidepressant. Every other day I was to check my blood pressure, as Wellbutrin sometimes causes elevated heart rates. I was also ordered to take a week off work to monitor my progress, the last thing my bank account needed.

So every other day for a week, I walked to Burch Pharmacy, four blocks from home, at the corner of Hennepin and Franklin. The pharmacy was as if someone had captured the world of my childhood, Midwestern America circa 1978, and preserved it for all eternity in this awkwardly angled brick edifice. The walls were paneled in faux oak finish. The space was divided in three. In the front room were candy and groceries and the checkout. The middle room held glass shelving that was probably older than I was, displaying a vast array of cosmetics. In the back were the pharmacy and cards and gifts and toys and a tiny post office. One of the
cashiers ticked my gaydar, but he was what I imagined would be a well-respected but closeted gay man in a small Midwestern town in 1978, which struck me odd since the gay community in Minneapolis was so large and open. I could have got my prescriptions at Target at a sixth of the price, but I wanted to support a small, local business, and I finally had enough income to do so.

Every time, the monitor read 180 over 110. I was normally at 120 over 80. My pulse was 150; ordinarily it was 85 or 90. And every night, I went to bed at 10:00 p.m. and wrestled my pillow until 4:30 a.m. and threw myself out of bed at 7:20 a.m. and pray to God I’d catch my 7:30 bus.

The psychiatrist would have to take me off Wellbutrin. My brain and body were betraying me, and there didn’t seem to be a goddamn thing I could do about it.
Chapter 11

When Charlotte lived with me, she was away a lot, at work or with her boyfriend, but I still felt at ease around her. She was warm and friendly. Dean was... nice.

Nice is polite. Nice is considerate. Nice is soft-spoken, peaceful, gentle. But nice didn’t feel like enough, even though a nice roommate was all I’d hoped for, after the loneliness of Lyn-Lake. It was still just Dean and me in the apartment, Charlotte’s old room echoing with her absence.

Dean and I received an e-mail from our landlord Roger: “Please assist me in finding a tenant for the third bedroom.” But I didn’t know anyone who needed to move, and Dean the introvert was unlikely to, either. How it was our responsibility and not Roger’s, I had no idea, but surely he needed the rent money. I’d do my best.

ugh what time is it oh 6:45 need to get up damn morning erection can’t get up gotta let it die down gotta time? 7:05 still hard gotta wake up gotta wake holy shit 7:20 gonna be late CAN’T MISS THAT BUS goddammit still hard but I’ve gotta piss run to the bathroom dammit hate it when dried cum makes me spray gotta run NO TIME no breakfast this morning no shower no brushing my teeth gotta throw on my clothes anything clean? dammit no throw something on dirty hope I get away with it throw on a ballcap instant shower we called it in Bible college HOLY SHIT I’ve got one minute to catch the bus run run run run wheeze whip out bus pass wheeze collapse in my seat fall asleep sleep sleep so weird how I always wake up right at the museum throw myself off the bus damn do I need coffee but no time gotta make it to morning meeting how many field trips this morning? groans and sighs I’VE gotta be the energy be the charisma I’VE gotta buoy the troops channel my muses muses museum hm Big Bird Cat in the Hat SpongeBob Tigger be the energy be the charisma go out on stage prop up
The sky couldn’t make up its mind. At points, it looked as if our picnic would be washed out; at others I feared a hard sunburn. But we were the LiveJournalers of the Twin Cities, this was our new (hopefully) annual barbeque, and we would celebrate undaunted.

It was Jack’s idea, to gather area bloggers so that we could meet face-to-face. That was the theory, anyway. But as I mingled and munched on Jack’s fresh-grilled bratwursts, I discovered that most of the attendees already knew each other offline, mostly thanks to Convergence, the annual sci-fi-and-fantasy convention held over the Fourth of July weekend in nearby Bloomington. This event had always intrigued me, but it seemed always to fall on a weekend I worked, and I wasn’t about to take off work for something that frivolous. Paid Time Off was a precious commodity, thanks to my precarious health, and I simply could not afford to waste it.

It looked like everyone knew everyone else from non-LiveJournal contexts, whereas I
only Jack and Marnie and Pete and maybe three others from Jack and Marnie’s parties. But through Darren’s and Jack’s and Marnie’s and Pete’s respective blogs, I had expanded my LiveJournal circle to about thirty of their friends, and most of them were at the picnic. It was satisfying to see the faces behind the blogs (and the pictures of cats and video-game characters that served as their userpics). What had been mere pixels in Times New Roman now possessed flesh and blood, voices and mannerisms, as if a chatroom had been rendered in 3-D.

Just like at Darren’s party a year earlier, nearly everyone worked as engineers and computer programmers and graphic designers; only Pete and I worked in the service industry. (Did I work in the service industry? I was in customer service, but it was in an educational facility.) I did make a new friend whose interests were akin to my artistic bent: Rachel, an actor originally from Chicago, with a bright smile and a biting wit. Three hours in, and the rain never fell. Jack and Marnie broke down the barbeque. I exchanged Livejournal usernames with my new friends, said my good-byes, and caught the bus back to Uptown.

To this point, Minneapolis often felt like an experience, a collection of buildings, an endless string of bus trips. This city was an abstraction, its people a series of transactions. For the first time in three years, I felt rooted, connected, loved. Though I had Bethany Lutheran and the Quaker worship group, shopping trips to the Wedge Co-op and leisurely coffees at Caffetto, these pieces of my life were a skeleton with missing ligaments. At the picnic, I found my desperately needed connective tissue. I was whole.

One day I asked Dean why he kept stacks and stacks of boxes in our never-used living room. He replied that there was no point in unpacking them if he was just going to end up moving someday.
It didn’t make any sense to me that my building was painted black. Or was it black? Sometimes it looked midnight blue, at other times deepest chocolate. I asked Dean about it one day, and he said that our landlord Roger had told him that when he went about painting the house, he didn’t have enough of any one color, so he mixed together everything he had. So that was it; the chameleon color of the house came from different pigments picking up different angles of light.

The dark, inscrutable color stuck out on the pastel block, making it easy to identify my home when someone was picking me up or dropping me off. But, now, it was summer, and blazing hot. The building was over a century old and central air had never been installed, typical for Minneapolis, and in the summer, the black paint absorbed all the heat. After work I would lie naked and roasting in my room, a fan oscillating on high across my pale, freckled skin. And all I could think in the daze of overheating was, “Why on earth would anyone in the Midwest paint a house black? Why would anyone do that to their tenants?”

The e-mail was to the point: In fifty-five days, all tenants would need to clear out, per orders of the new owners of the building. Why would they kick us out? We were all good tenants. And didn’t Minnesota state law stipulate a minimum of sixty days’ notice to vacate?

I went for a drink of water to settle my nerves and ran into Dean in the kitchen. “Did you get the e-mail?”

“Yes.”

“Well, how are we going to fight this?”

“Fight what? I don’t want to live here. This just gets me out of here that much faster.”
The same conversation replayed several times that week, each time I ran into an upstairs neighbor while taking out the recycling or on my way to the bus. I was baffled. This ambiguously colored triplex wasn’t perfect, but it was doable. Wasn’t that enough for my neighbors, for Dean?

Or was I the one too ready to settle?
Chapter 12

When I called the number that was pinned to the corkboard at Caffetto, the last person I expected to hear was Nicolas. I certainly didn’t know he had a room for rent, as we’d only met up once for coffee since his opening. (Though I’d hoped for more, he was busy with school.) We scheduled a visit two days later. What luck; not only had I found a roommate, but he was already a friend.

The three-story house, in 1970s-hospital-green, overlooked I-35, only three blocks from MCAD. Nicolas had me take off my shoes as I entered. He showed me my room, about twice as big as what I had on Garfield. His three other roommates, who were all out that day, were vegan; I replied I was vegetarian (a six-month experiment I’d soon give up.) He showed me the recycling bins and the living room and the laundry room; we spent the most time talking about the recycling bins. He asked how tidy I was, and I stretched the truth a bit because I figured I would be neater in a happier environment. He’d have to talk to his roommates and he’d get back to me.

The call came three days later. The foursome had decided to bring into the household one of their classmates instead. What the hell. Was that the plan all along? Had Nicolas just tossed me a sop? Why wasn’t I good enough for them?

The Craigslist apartment was just five blocks southwest of me. As I walked to meet who I was sure would be my new roommate on this bright, cool September afternoon, all I could think of was how nice it would be to live near the #53 once again, closer to Lake Street and the heart of Uptown. Unfortunately, I couldn’t resume my Friday ritual at Calhoun Square; the chair-masseuse Maggie had closed up shop, as had Caruso’s Gelato, and Agan Traders had relocated.
to a suburban mall. The center had reconfigured itself so that an LA Fitness dominated the second floor, while smaller business like those of my ritual fled the three-story edifice.

I approached a long, squat two-story apartment building, climbed the outside stairs to #27, and knocked on the door. I introduced myself to a short, stocky Latino man with a New Jersey accent. “Okay, come in, man.”

The apartment was smaller than I’d expected, for all intents a large studio with two tiny bedrooms that looked like they’d been built in after the fact. “This here would be your room.” It was about two-thirds the size of the room on Garfield. “And you gotta keep all your shit in here. I mean, you can keep your cooking stuff in the kitchen, but the rest of the apartment is mine, understand?”

“Sure, no problem.” I hadn’t the foggiest notion how I’d cram everything into that room; it didn’t even have a closet.”

We sat in the living room to talk some more. “Okay, so, whaddya think?”

“I can make it work.”

“All right, then. So, one thing you gotta understand, I’ve got a four-year-old girl, she means everything to me, and she stays with me every weekend.”

“That’s fine. I mean, I work with kids, and I have for years. I get along with them fine.”

“Okay. Because I would never want anything to happen to my little girl.”

“Understood. So, I haven’t really had the chance to tell you much about myself. Like I said, I work at a museum in St. Paul, I grew up in Indiana, I’m gay, I’m pretty quiet, um…”

“You’re gay? Uh… I guess that’s okay, but you gotta understand, I will protect my little girl with my life, I don’t want nothing happening to her, I would kill for my little girl. When she’s around, you gotta keep that gay shit to yourself, and remember I will kill for her.”
“Um, okay. I said I’ve worked with children for the better part of seven years, you can trust me completely, and I’m sure I’m going to get along with her fine.”

“You just keep that gay shit to yourself, and we’ll be good.”

“Okay.”

On the walk back home, the situation I had deemed okay seemed much less so. On one hand, I was running out of time and needed to move somewhere. On the other hand, would I be okay living with a man who expressed a veiled hostility towards me? Halfway home, I called him up and laid out my conundrum. He assured me that I had nothing to worry about, that he wasn’t a homophobe, that he simply had a daughter he needed to look out for, which I understood completely.

The next day, I called him up to sort out the moving arrangements. And again he reminded me that I needed to keep my gay shit to myself. And finally I realized there was no way we could live under the same roof, regardless of whether he believed himself a homophobe.

Aside from Nicolas, the only bite I’d got was from a quartet of mid-twenties hipsters who rejected me because I didn’t do drugs. I’d tried Suze’s tactic of roaming my neighborhood—on foot—and calling numbers, but all the landlords performed a credit check I was sure I wouldn’t pass. Running around with Suze was no longer an option, as she’d just quit her job so as to enjoy a proper retirement and I didn’t have her contact info. I could have called Jack or Marnie, Darren or Llewellyn, but I didn’t want to impose. Same for Marybeth, the closest friend I’d made in the Quaker group. Frank and I weren’t friends anymore since I couldn’t afford to keep my Manhunt account going, so he couldn’t help.

Every night I checked Craigslist for an apartment. Too expensive. Too far from work.
Too expensive. No bus line. Too expensive. A week of this, after the homophobe affair. And then came The Ad: a room in a five-bedroom house just a few blocks away, only $425 a month, and most important of all, no deposit.

An answer to the prayers I seldom prayed.
Pillsbury Avenue
Whittier Neighborhood

(not quite) Uptown Minneapolis
Chapter 13

A century ago, a stretch of Pillsbury Avenue (from Franklin Avenue at the north end to Lake Street at the south) served as home to the Minneapolis elite. Brick mansions three stories high, complete with sculleries and servants’ quarters, graced the avenue, an era in which ladies of high society would dress in their finery to partake of an afternoon’s entertainment listening to an esteemed traveling lecturer at the Woman’s Club of Minneapolis, while the menfolk plotted the fate of the burgeoning city over cigars and a new-fangled drink called an old-fashioned. Then came the streetcars and the automobiles, then came the interstate that cut through the hearts of the black communities of Rondo, just east of the state capital, and Camden, on the north side of Minneapolis, the latter my first Minnesota home. Then disappeared the need for the powerful to live near the heart of power downtown, then grew the suburbs, St. Louis Park and Minnetonka to the west, Bloomington and Edina to the south, Woodbury and Stillwater west, Shoreview and Brooklyn Park north, then emptied the mansions, then filled once more, came the Chinese, came the Vietnamese, came the Mexicans and Ecuadorians, then came the whites priced out of the rest of the city.

Then came I, in Marybeth’s filled-to-the-gills hatchback.

Over the next two days, I tried to sort out who my housemates were. It wasn’t easy, as it seemed people ran in and out all day. I knew that my landlord Seth was the sole resident of the third floor. There was a drawn quality to him, to his face, posture, personality. He was gay, had just broken up his boyfriend. I didn’t know what his day job was.

Reece lived in one of the three bedrooms on the second floor. He was a 24-year-old Korean adoptee, a sharp dresser, and I could tell already, sarcastic as hell, a trait I’ve never particularly admired. Reece worked full-time as a supermarket cashier, and was bi.
Bill was 55, significantly older than everyone else. Short and scrappy, he clearly worked out a lot. He was also gay, and was unemployed but looking. He seemed amicable if overtalkative.

Cameron was a young’un, just 20, with boyish Celtic good looks. His wit outstripped his education, and though almost as sarcastic as Reece, I intuited a touch of kindness in him. He was bi, and I was unsure of whether he was Bill’s boyfriend, unsure of which room was his, unsure of his employment status.

There was at least one other roommate, a phantom I hadn’t met yet. I thought someone told me his name was Jeremy but I wasn’t sure.

Other people filtered in and out at all hours of the day and night. I don’t know who the hell they were.

OkCupid.com told us we were a 99% match. I hadn’t even known a 99% match was possible. Joshua lived in a studio apartment in Uptown, just a few blocks away. Raised in Alabama, the son of a professor, though he hadn’t a trace of a Southern accent. He worked in IT for a charity, and could have easily made much more doing the same work elsewhere, but he wanted to give back to society. When at last we met, I found he was tall and had nice hair and nice ears, and that’s all there is to say about his looks because it was enough for me.

We saw each other twice a week, taking things slowly as he’d requested, wandering Minneapolis, discovering cute little cafés and hip art galleries, or staying in and watching TV at my place. Sometimes, when they didn’t know I was within earshot, my roommates made fun of Joshua because being tall and having nice hair and nice ears wasn’t enough for them. But he was my boyfriend, not theirs, and I’d never met anyone so good and noble and pure.
Ten days after the move, returning home from work, I caught Seth in the kitchen to help me sort out something very important: “So, I’m trying to figure out exactly who lives here. I mean, I know you do—”

Seth replied, “I don’t live here.”

“Hold on, I thought you lived on the third floor.”

“I’ve got some of my stuff up there, like my fish tank, so I go up there to feed the fish. But I moved out of here with my boyfriend last month, but we just broke up, but I’m gonna still keep the place we were sharing.”

“Oh, so you don’t live here.”

“Right.”

“So that makes it me, of course, and Reece, and Bill, and... who’s that guy who’s, like, never around?”

“Jeremiah.”

“Ah, that’s his name. I haven’t even met him yet.”

“Except he’s not here anymore.”

“I’m confused.”

“I just kicked him out.”

“Um, okay. So, it’s me, Reece, Bill, and Cameron.”

“Cameron doesn’t live here.”

“You might want to tell him that, because he told me he definitely lives here. And his name is on the mailbox out front.”
“Really? I always come through the side door so I don’t know what’s going on with the mailbox.”

“You’re the landlord. You’ve got to know things like this.”

“I’m sorry. Things are just a mess right now. I mean, I moved out, and then I broke up with my boyfriend, and—”

“I just want the assurance that you know what’s going on in a place that you own and manage.”

“You’ve got my word. And I’ll talk with Cameron.”

“Thanks.”

Llewellyn threw a huge Halloween party every year. He asked us to come as someone or something dead. I knew instantly what I would wear. I would be coming straight from work and would need to find some way to dress on the bus. Black T-shirt and tan corduroys to work, then, on the bus, draw black X’s over my eyes and attach the Duracell logo to my shirt. Dead battery. Joshua struggled to come up with a costume; we tossed ideas back and forth until I suggested he tape play money to himself. Dead presidents. I had to explain the expression to him.

My bus arrived at Llewellyn’s just as Joshua was pulling in. The crowd grew quickly. Darren arrived as Mikhail Gorbachev. “But he’s not dead,” I said. “Ah, but I’m the young Gorbachev, and he’s dead. No more Soviet ideals! So sad!” he laughed. The best couple costume of the night was Friedrich Nietzsche and God. Everyone thought our dead battery and dead presidents were clever.

I got Joshua and me some punch and led him around the party, introducing him to my friends and making new ones. It was clear who was the extrovert and who was the introvert, and
so far, the dynamic was working. By night’s end, Joshua and I were holding hands. Joshua drove me back home. I suggested the night at his place instead.

He agreed.
Chapter 14

At the morning department meeting, Stephanie announced that Hayden had been promoted to an assistant manager position, the same rank as Donna. Leapfrogged over me. Why? Always I was told how hard I worked, how dedicated I was to the visitors, how endlessly enthusiastic and positive I was. How was it that I’d been here twice as long as Hayden, but hadn’t even the whiff of a promotion?

Ah, but Hayden had a Bachelor’s degree, came to the museum from Macalester College freshly minted. My Associate of General Studies from Indiana University—the means by which I was allowed to transfer, owing to my low grades in Bible college—was insufficient for the world of work. But my chance at a Bachelor’s had been stripped from me by a cold and calculating state government. So I was stuck.

No matter. If I were offered a management position, I’d spend less time on the museum floor, I’d spend less time with the kids, I’d have less opportunity to mold their minds and shape the future. I’d have less reason to work what was, for all its faults, one of the best jobs I’d ever had.

face-painting station duty damn I HATE the face-painting station “No, ma’am, I don’t paint the faces, your child gets to paint their face however they want” Can’t tell them that the child painting their own face is supposed to help their sense of self-image Can’t tell them that drawing on your face while looking in a mirror improves eye-hand coordination which helps them learn to write No no no the grown-ups are never in on why we do what we do “Here, sweetie, let me draw a heart on your face” Parents never listen oh GREAT a field-trip group just arrived twenty kids and six stations to paint at “Please don’t push the little kids out of your way” but they don’t listen it’s too loud and they’re seven so what do you expect “PLEASE don’t push” and the
teachers are off to the side yakking away “Hello there” to a little blond boy “Hi! I’m gonna be an Indian!” First red stripes across his cheeks “I think you mean ‘Native American’” “WOOWOOWOO!” yellow stripes beneath “Do you know any Native Americans?” of course he doesn’t he’s a white kid from the suburbs he’s never met a Native American in his life but who the HELL taught him this was okay it’s not like he’s watching Fifties westerns all the time and now his cheeks full of stripes “WOOWOOWOO!” “Do you have any Native American friends? I do” and I can’t I CAN’T say anymore can’t show my disapproval my anger my RAGE can’t make a scene We have to take into consideration ALL of the guests Have to make sure everyone has a pleasant time at the museum that’s the number-one rule and now the little Scandihovian is off “WOOWOOWOO!” goddamn it the Native American magnet school field trip is scheduled to arrive any minute and we’ve got this brat running around

Where did this impulse to save the world come from? Perhaps it started when I chose to study philosophy, enamored of the impact of Sartre and Camus, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. Or when I fell into, and continued in, the world of early childhood education and associated fields. Whoever changes a child changes the world, so they say. Or even before that, when I studied music in Bible college. My classmates begged me to change my major to preaching, maybe a little bit because I was a good preacher, but mostly because, in our denomination, no one began work in the field as a music minister, rather starting out as a youth minister or preacher and later segueing to direct music in a large church that didn’t bother hiring fresh Bible college graduates. I couldn’t grasp that, in that world I’ve long since left, musical skill, musicianship, these really don’t matter at all except as conduits for preaching; a concert wasn’t about the songs, but the sermons preached in between. But, for whatever reason, perhaps because
my classmates so intimidated me, I refused to tell them I held so fast to my music major because I reasoned musicians gathered the biggest audiences and thus could win the most souls to Christ, and that was the most important thing of all.

But the savior impulse came well before I enrolled in Bible college. I, pipsqueak that I was, would try to break up fistfights, without success. I was the intermediary when my friends squabbled. I was the logician, the voice of reason.

But no, even before my adolescence. Back to my childhood, to an era of *The Care Bears* and *Strawberry Shortcake* (the first-edition, original runs of the franchises), of clear-cut good guys and bad guys. To the time before my parents’ divorce, before my mother escaped my father’s clutches and his transparent plot to murder her on their tenth anniversary. To when the courts asked us who my siblings and I would rather live with and why, and we said our mother loved us and our father bought us things (never mind that he only bought them rarely, for he knew how to do just barely enough for it to stick in a child’s mind.)

To a time when I was eight years old and my mother was scrubbing the interminable pile of dishes at the sink, standing next to a dishwasher that was broken the day we moved in but which my father refused to repair so that my mother would work harder and not bond so much with us children, standing next to her as she washed those dishes and I uttered the question so obvious to me, thanks to all the kids at school from broken homes, but which had not yet entered my mother’s mind, a question from the mouth of an eight-year-old babe: “Why don’t you get a divorce?” To a time of good guys and bad guys, Strawberry Shortcake and Purple Pieman, to a mother and father as opposite each other as possible, such that to love both at once proved impossible, to a mother shrunk to under a hundred pounds because her husband shouted every mealtime, “You haven’t done anything, you don’t deserve to eat,” to a mother cut off from every
protection, and who needed someone to love her, someone to save her, with six simple words:

“Why don’t you get a divorce?”

And, unlike my mother, why didn’t I leave what hurt me?
Chapter 15

I hadn’t been to Caffetto in a while; it was now a few too many blocks out of my way to be practicable. But Pete, Marnie’s boyfriend, wanted to meet up for coffee, and this made for a good excuse to escape to my favorite haunt.

Pete ordered green tea, I had my usual decaf iced mocha, and we took a seat in one of the recently installed booths that had replaced some of the tables and chairs. “So,” I asked, “how have you been doing?”

“Pretty good, pretty good. Life is good. Didn’t know if you knew, but I’m moving. Sharing a duplex with Jack and Marnie; they’ll be downstairs, I’ll be upstairs.”

“That’s fantastic, congratulations!”

“Thanks. And how have you been?”

“I don’t know. Things at home, they’re nuts. Partying all the time. Not what I was expecting, and not how my mom raised me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Have you talked with the landlord?”

“Yes, and I swear, he’s one of the mousiest people I’ve ever met. Like, I tell him what’s going on, he says he’ll look into it, he talks with my roommates and they promise him some bullshit and he tells me everything’s fine.”

“That’s really unfortunate. Maybe you could move?”

“Not sure where I’m going to find rent this cheap, though I do have the advantage of a month-to-month lease.” I took a draft of mocha, the chill calming me. “I mean, I don’t know if everyone gets it. Like, look at you, your life is stable, you have someone you love. I envy you, honestly.”

“My life isn’t perfect,” replied Pete as he finished his tea, “but I follow the teachings of Buddha, ever since I was a teenager. I know that whatever ill happens is transitory. That’s true
for any good, too, you know. But I know I’m fortunate. I have stability, a good partner, a good job, a good union.”

“That’s right, you guys are unionized.”

From there, Pete regaled me with the benefits structure of his job, the rights the union had fought for and won, the regulated pay raises. Within five minutes, he’d convinced me to apply for a customer-service position with Metro Transit.

There were others around my age in the student gallery at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, but they were all attached to eager seventeen-year-olds—their children. Had I made a mistake? No, I needed some way out of the museum if was living mere blocks from one of the top art schools in the country, I should take my chance. Go big or go home.

Three university officials took turns lauding the school’s many assets, its world-class facilities, its networking opportunities, its track record of students finding gainful employment. They opened the floor for questions. I asked what supports they provided for nontraditional students. They replied that all students were welcome, but there were no supports specifically for nontrads. Then we partook of a quick continental breakfast before splitting into three groups to tour the campus.

Studio space for each student, larger and nicer with each year of advancement, the seniors with studios to themselves. Looms for the weavers, kilns for the potters, pulpers for the papermakers. A state-of-the-art production studio for the graphic designers and filmmakers. An in-house art-supply store with paints and canvas and other materials for cheap. And everywhere hung student work, technicolor-swirled, nano-level-etched, charcoal-fantasied, graphite-
grounded, acrylic-photorealistic. Everything top-of-the-line, cutting-edge, everything an
impossible hyphenated dream for this humble little abstract painter from Indiana.

I knew what I had to do. As the event closed, I signed up for a portfolio review, the first
step in applying to attend the internationally renowned MCAD.

As I walked home, I nearly passed out at the intersection of 25th and Nicollet, dizzy with
joy.

Jack sat on the floor, next to the mattress he and Marnie had given me when I moved in,
my old futon too far gone, breaking my back every night. “Let’s see what we’ve got going here,”
he said as he popped open the cover of my computer tower.

I’d related on LiveJournal that something wasn’t right with my computer; it was running
slower and slower, and programs I used to run with no problem—Flash games, AOL Instant
Messenger—wouldn’t even start up now. “Well, here’s your first problem. You’ve got like no
RAM. I can fix that, upgrade you with old parts. Would you go ahead and start it up?”

I hit the power button on the tower. “What the hell, man,” said Jack, “You’re running
Windows ME?”

“Well, yeah, that’s what the computer came with. I got it used.”

“That’s bullshit. Windows ME was the Jar-Jar Binks of operating systems.”

“Wow, surprised you didn’t go for The Star Wars Christmas Special.”

“I refuse to believe that such a thing exists. I can get you a copy of Windows 7, get you
all up-to-date here.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Get what?”
“Why you’re so kind and generous to me. I mean, you helped clean my place when I was sick, back in Lyn-Lake, and this, and so many other things. Kind words, kind thoughts. always helpful. I just don’t get why anyone would do all that for me.”

“C’mon, dude, you’re a good guy.”

“But—”

“The only but I’ll let you have is your boyfriend’s butt.” I laughed. “Is it a cute one? A tight one?”

“I’ll just say we’re not sexually compatible and leave it at that.”

“Dude, that’s a shame. I don’t know if I could handle that in a relationship.”

“Sex isn’t the most important thing in the world.”

“Fair enough. Anyway, give me a week, and I’ll get you all the spare parts you need to get this computer running like greased lightning.”

“Thanks. I’m so glad we’re friends.”

“Me too, dude.”

I showed Jack out, and then lay down in my room. Everything felt a little swimmy. Maybe I was crushing on Jack. But I didn’t think that would affect my field of vision.

The MCAD portfolio review required that I bring eight works of art, as well as four graphite drawings: a self-portrait, a still-life, an interior, and a landscape. For the works of art, I’d submit the mixed-media series I’d created during my time on Garfield Avenue, a mix of acrylic and wire and beads and drawings, all glued and stapled together. My aim was to depict my wrestling with the Third Meditation of Descartes—“I think; therefore, I am”—during my time as an undergraduate at Indiana University. But when I once showed the work to a friend, the
splatterings of teal and cobalt and yellow, the scrunched wires I could never quite straighten, the repeated pencil drawings of Descartes collaged to canvas, he asked if I expected the viewer to get my intent from the work. “Hell no,” I replied, “but they’ll at least get the feelings I went through as I was thinking through all this.”

Then, the drawings. The instructions for the self-portrait required that I include a background. But the only good mirror in the house was in the first-floor bathroom, and there was nothing on the wall in there. No matter, I’d make up for it with my drawing skill. I took advantage of one of the many nights my housemates kept me up, frown lines deep, dark circles under my eyes. If I couldn’t draw a background, I could at least draw raw emotion.

For the still-life, I made a special trip to the Wedge Co-op for bananas and pomegranates, the former for height and complexity of composition, the latter because I hadn’t ever remembered seeing pomegranates in a still-life before. (Bonus: It gave me two of my favorite fruits to eat afterwards.) I arranged the fruit in a glass bowl that gave me good reflections to draw, and set it on the checkered plastic tablecloth in the dining room so that I’d have nice perspective lines to draw. Cameron came in and looked over my shoulder. “Awesome job,” he said, and roamed off.

I decided my interior would be the Crystal Court in the IDS Building, the glass cathedral to capitalism I’d wandered into so many years ago and fell in love with Minneapolis. The staggered walls on the second floor lent a fantastic perspective, the store fronts receding to the back wall. I happened in on a busy Friday afternoon, thousands swarming the space. Was I supposed to draw them? How would I do that? So I hashed out my lines quickly whenever the crowds thinned out a bit, leaving this busy space barren, desolate.
My landscape drawing took me to the eastern shore of Lake of the Isles, just northwest of Uptown. One of Bethany’s sister churches, Lake of the Isles Lutheran, perched on the opposite shore, would be my subject. It was small, quaint, vaguely European, nestled in this neighborhood of modern-day mansions that looked like it had popped from a Jehovah’s Witnesses pamphlet, the promise of glorious homes in heaven for the elect. Point of the pencil to cross-hatch the masonry. Side of the pencil for the swoop of the barren tree on the left. Curly, doodly lines for the balls of leaves still clinging to the deciduous trees to the right.

The day of my appointment, I stuffed the eight-work series in a portfolio, tucked my sketch book under my arm, and walked the five blocks to MCAD, the November sky bright and clear, a brisk breeze catching my portfolio and bouncing it around in my grasp. Once on campus, I was ambivalent, nervous about what this meeting could mean yet confident in my work. I awaited my name to be called, and I was led into an office.

“Hello, my name is Lindsay Jepsen. I teach ceramics here at MCAD, and also serve as one of the admissions officers. So, let me see your drawings first.”

Her appraisals of my sketches: the self-portrait earned a bit of ire for violating the background, even as I explained my situation at home; the still-life got a smirk and a snide, “Hm, a bowl of fruit,” though she thought I managed the perspective and reflections well; the interior showed an exceptional grasp on perspective; the landscape demonstrated innovative linework.

As to my eight-work series, Ms. Jepsen most admired the fragility of my work, to which I replied, “But I don’t want my work to be fragile. I want my work to outlive me.” She asked me what I hoped to do with art, and I told her I was most interested in public art, thanks to the fountains and murals that graced the city of Minneapolis. I was interested in posterity.
I asked her my chances of getting in. MCAD had a 75% acceptance rate. *Wow,* I thought, *that’s really competitive. Bible college had a 99% acceptance. So there’s a one-in-four chance I won’t get in.*

And yet, as I shook Ms. Jepsen’s hand and headed home, my mind swam with the possibilities. Maybe it wasn’t wrong to hope after all.
Chapter 16

One of my few joys in life was the extra-large milk chocolate chips from the bulk foods section of the Wedge Co-Op. They lacked the wax so prevalent in American chocolate, melting at my merest touch as I popped each morsel into my mouth. In fact, they were so prone to melting that, as they sat in the drawer (because the refrigerator was overfull), they deformed and warped.

One morning, I grabbed a handful of chips to toss into my oatmeal. The clear plastic bag was shredded. I figured I'd somehow damaged it in transit from the co-op and I hadn't noticed till now.

That evening, after work, I wanted a quick snack and went for some more chocolate. And that's when I saw, sitting in the drawer, the bag shredder: a mouse. Now I knew why the chips were so misshapen: mouse nibbles.

By 9:15 a.m., there was already a line out the door of the museum, thanks to a visiting exhibit that featured a popular PBS character. Cartoon characters were always a big draw; it seemed to me the educational benefit of an exhibit was inversely proportionate to an exhibit’s popularity. Our two least popular had focused on African American and Mexican American history. But PBS cartoons generated the revenue that allowed us to put on the more educational exhibits.

By 9:30 a.m., we figured out that our latest register trainee was a no-call no-show. By 9:45 a.m., I radioed the management for register assistance, and Donna and Hayden each took a register, and one of the floor staff was called to take a register, as well. As each hour wore on, the families that passed through my register grew more and more anonymous, less human,
simply units I was processing, transactions I was completing. Everyone was testy, but always I
smiled, for I was on stage, I was an actor, my role all important, my humanity meaningless.

Stephanie spelled Donna at the register so she could take lunch. Lunch. I’d already been
told mine would be pushed back to 2:00 p.m. And you would have thought that the crowds
snaking along the sidewalk would have dropped off during lunchtime, everyone crowding the
McDonald’s, but no. Still they came.

A woman came in with her three daughters. “Here’s my admission,” she said as she
handed me a five and three ones, “and, you know, my kids are so proud,” she said, “they’ve been
saving up all their money just to come today.” The girls pulled out some bags and poured a pile
of nickels and dimes onto the counter. Bitch. Why didn’t she take her precious daughters to the
bank first and cash this mess in for bills first? “You don’t have to count it out; the girls made
sure it added up just right before they came here.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I have to count it out.” So I began piling up the coins until they added
up to $23.85. The families behind the woman and her three daughters started yelling at me,
started looking for other lines. I got to around $15 when I lost count. I apologized to the woman
profusely, but she insisted, “You really don’t have to count it out,” and I replied, “I’m sorry, but
it’s policy.”

Round two, and I doubled my concentration, separating each group of dollars until I had
twenty-three perfect little piles in front of me. This time I only made it to $12 before I lost count
again. I stared down the endless lines, the whining kids, the angry parents, and called Stephanie
over. “Look at all these coins. Do I really have to count every single one out with it this crowded
today? Can I get some help counting? I keep losing count.”
“They’re your customer, so you’re responsible for them,” was all she said before returning to her register.

Yet again I returned to the coins, this time calling each one out loud, my voice muffled by the din up in the galleries, keeping the little dollar piles further apart, all the while the woman and her three daughters stood beaming, blissfully unaware of how they were inconveniencing everyone. On the third try, I finally got the $23.85 counted out. If I had just taken their money, my drawer would have been $3.25 over at the end of the day, a minor mark on my record.

It had taken me twenty minutes to ring in four people. The woman and her three daughters skipped off as if nothing had happened.

And so I ground through the afternoon, my anger for the woman and her three daughters trapped behind the pearly whites I put on for every single customer. Ring them in, hand them their admission bracelets, ring them in, bracelet them, ring, bracelet, wipe nose and then—red. A nosebleed.

I should have peeled myself away from the register, run some tissues in cold water, pinched my nose. But the crowds kept pouring in, Stephanie would never let me leave my register to go to the bathroom with this big of a line, so as the blood tried to pour out of my nose, I just sniffed, sniffed, sniffed it up, back up into my nose, back into my sinuses, as the crowds poured in, backed up to the street. And as I rung them in and bracelet them and sent them on their way, all I could do was think of lunch.

2:00 p.m. Sinuses full of blood. A sinus infection forthcoming. A day or two missed of work, for sure, the pain so great I’d be flat on my back. Out of Paid Time Off, so yet another ding to my bank account. I wondered if I’d actually lost blood at the register, because I felt rather
light-headed. I lay down on the sofa in the break room until I returned to the register at 3:00 p.m. to do it all again.

I awoke for work having got only three hours of sleep. My roommates partied till 4:00 a.m., drinking, shouting, arguing, a fistfight maybe, screaming definitely, bass-thumping, laughing, crying. I stayed in my room, huddled in my bed, half-terrified of how far they might take things. Bangs against the wall, into doors: echoes of age seven, when my siblings and I were in bed asleep and my father broke into the house rather than use his keys.

I threw a towel around my waist and headed to the bathroom. As the only one who lived on the first floor, I for all intents had a bathroom to myself. But not today. A young woman, hunched over the vomit-filled toilet, a man rubbing her back and asking her if she’s okay. The upstairs bathroom, then. One guy, barely out of his teens, passed out on the dining room table, another slumped in the sofa of the front sitting room. Upstairs, knock on the bathroom door, “I’ll be just a couple of minutes,” says an unfamiliar elderly male voice.

At last, I showered, dressed, and ran for my bus, but not before seeing Cameron sprawled out naked on the sofa. I had to admit, he looked good. I had encountered five people in my home that morning, only of whom I knew, none of whom were supposed to be living in my home.

When I returned home, I headed straight to my room and switched on my computer. Conversations with friends, or a blog post to help me process what had happened that morning, anything to help me settle. After the previous night, I no longer felt safe in my own home.

Just then, a knock at my bedroom door. Bill. Staggering towards me, he said, “Now, I think you’re a good guy,” closer, a dark look across his face, “but you gotta know you’d never fuck with me, got it?” and poked me in the chest.
My own housemate was threatening me. Unacceptable. I closed the door on the drunken lout and phoned up Seth straightaway. “Do you know what all is going on in this house of yours?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the drunken party last night; I’m surprised the cops weren’t called. And then just now Bill threatened me.”

“Are you serious? Bill’s a good guy.”

“He said I’d better never fuck with him and he got up in my face like he was going to beat me up. I’m paying good money to live here, and I expect that I’m not going to be threatened in my own home by one of your tenants. You’re the landlord; you have some responsibility in all this.”

“I’ll talk to Bill and get things sorted out. I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“Well, I appreciate the apology, but I do expect to see some changes around here.”

“You got it.”

I hung up, and realized Seth hadn’t said a word about the wild party the night before.

godfuckit you mean I’ve gotta wade through crowds to get in and we’re not even open for twenty minutes This is fucking absurd what is wrong with you people Donna and Hayden tell us to prepare for the worst but of course they don’t put it that way we’re having an exciting and an energetic day and we need to put our best foot forward And I’ve got it in me I’ve ALWAYS got it in me you’d better believe it but look at poor Danielle over there Just her third day and she doesn’t even have her vest yet Hayden tells us she’s going to get her vest early oh my GOD that’s going to work just great everyone asking her questions she hasn’t been trained to answer
yet Head to the floor grab my radio Radio check! Copy! pep-talk the staff headed to my floor
We’ve got this! I believe in you! Here comes the crush all headed to the PBS exhibit fuck
Danielle’s on my floor stuck on what’s going to be the busiest floor to start off with
FANTASTIC yes sir I’ll call Housekeeping and have them clean it right up No ma’am we don’t
have dinosaurs Yes ma’am I’ll get a bandage from the first-aid kit Damn it I’m gonna have to
file an injury report and I don’t have any fucking time WOW it’s like the floor is to trying to fly
away from my feet just lean against the wall if you have to lean against the exhibit pieces if you
have to JUST KEEP GOING Danielle I’m sorry there’s a line for the restroom no you can’t wait
in line no you can’t head to the bathroom downstairs because then the floor will be short-staffed
and Stephanie will chew us both out I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m so sorry Little boy you can’t use the
wheels of your Heelies in the museum Okay I won’t use them (and off he goes on foot) “WHAT
DID YOU TELL MY SON?” No Heelies in the museum “THAT IS MESSED UP” There are
large crowds and long stairs so Heelies are a safety hazard “FUCKING RIDICULOUS! THIS
PLACE IS FOR CHILDREN” Yes ma’am I’ll have them clean it right up No sir we don’t have
dinosaurs here Yes ma’am Yes sir Yes sir Yes ma’am Yes Stephanie I’ll take a split lunch
LUNCH TIME godDAMN why is everything spinning so Grab tight to the handrail make my
way down step by step slowly slowly the crowds up and down the stairs up down everything is
turning upside down down four flights finally downstairs fling myself against the wall swipe my
badge back to the break room Sorry Hayden didn’t mean to run into you Eat but only half for
now finish the rest on the second half of my break FUCK gotta head back out already Hey
Danielle you’re doing GREAT just hang in there it’s not always like this Back out we go once
more unto the breach Was that Tennyson or Shakespeare? Hold on to the rail one step at a time
do not faint DO NOT FAINT do not puke DO NOT PUKE you’ve got this SMILE No ma’am no
dinosaurs Yes sir a bandage *Housekeeping*, we have *vomit* to *clean up* on the second floor.
godDAMN that makes me want to puke lean against the wall push yourself towards the exhibit pieces YOU’VE GOT THIS We’re out of crayons out of paper out of chalk check the supplies we’re OUT *Sorry folks!* God Danielle is going to quit after today I’ve seen it too many times No drive no stick-to-itiveness they can’t see that we’re SHAPING THE FUTURE god gotta stand straight gotta walk straight SORRY MA’ AM didn’t mean to run into you Sorry little girl I can’t play with you right now No sir we don’t paint the kids’ faces LEAN against the face-painting station the ceiling is spinning in circles OH MY GOD what’s happening to me Just gotta make it thirty more minutes just gotta hang on hold on to every rail anything bolted to the floor you’ve got this you’ve got this *You’ve got this, Danielle, great job!* why is everything spinning where the FUCK did this vertigo come from I CAN’T get sick I don’t have enough Paid Time Off the museum can’t afford to lose me now especially since I KNOW Danielle is gonna quit I’ve seen it way too many times
I'm so sorry Hayden I'm going to the ER and I don't know how long I'm going to be gone I wish I knew I'll know more tomorrow I'll call the museum as soon as I know what's going on

What's wrong? Are you okay? I'm sorry Hayden I'm so sorry Hayden I think I'm going to have to go to the hospital

it wasn't supposed to happen like this I was going to dedicate my life to the museum to teach the kids to be good and loving and kind so many who have left before Kimmy Anjali Olivia Theo Suze so many men and women all gone and I've stuck it out why didn't they stick it out I don't understand I'm so sorry Hayden I'm going to the ER and I don't know how long I'm going to be gone I wish I knew I'll know more tomorrow I'll call the museum as soon as I know what's going on

I don't understand what's going on why is everything spinning Doctor please help me please help me help
Chapter 17

The nurses of Sinai ER woke me at 7:00 a.m. A quick breakfast, and then the neurologist met with me. “I need you to walk towards me,” she said. And I tried to keep my balance, but with each step, the room swayed more and more, and I had to lean on the wall for support. “I can tell you right now, this isn’t neurological; it’s psychological. That’s doesn’t mean nothing’s going on. You clearly need some therapy to work out whatever’s causing your brain to do this. We’ll get you signed up for the Partial Program.”

“What’s that?”

“Day treatment. It’s a two-week program.”

“What about work?”

“You are in no shape to work. The program begins each Monday, so you’ll have to wait till next week to start, but we can start the paperwork now.”

“So I can work till Monday, got it.”

“No. You can’t work, period. Stay home and rest up till Monday.”

So I was sent home with a walker—I paid a hundred bucks out of pocket since my insurance wouldn’t cover it—all so I could get around without falling, but even that wasn’t guaranteed. Unsure I could make it to the bus stop safely, I called Marybeth to pick me up from the hospital. Then I had to change up my sleeping arrangements, as I could no longer get up from my mattress on the floor without assistance, not even with the walker, so I relocated myself to an overstuffed chair with matching ottoman in front of the television in the living room. When I had to get up, I mostly crawled, my world spinning too fast for me to see straight.

The next day, I called Marybeth, as she’d requested. She asked if I needed anything. Trips to the kitchen, let alone the supermarket, were difficult if not impossible for the foreseeable future, so I asked her to pick up various items that I could eat from the comfort and safety of the
chair, foods that needed neither preparation nor refrigeration. The partial shopping list: blueberry
Pop-Tarts, grape Gatorade, raisins, and as a special treat, Gansitos, my addiction of the moment, a
Twinkie-like confection covered in chocolate icing and filled with cream and strawberry jam, readily available in my heavily Latino neighborhood.

And so I was set.

After a week in front of the television, mostly America’s Next Top Model marathons, either by myself or with Reece when he wasn’t working, I was ready to begin the Partial Program. Marybeth would take me to and from the hospital each day. I would go through a carefully sequenced series of group-therapy sessions to help me reorient psychologically. I would get back on my feet, both figuratively and literally. I would. I had to.

Monday morning, Marybeth picked me up to take me to Sinai Hospital for the Partial Program. She would be my ride for the next two weeks, Monday through Friday. When Marybeth rang the doorbell, I eased myself out of my chair, leaning on the arm for support as I pulled myself into my walker, fighting the urge to lurch forward and fall on my face, then slowly, baby step by baby step, out of the living room, down the hall, through the sitting room, to the door. This took me five minutes. It took me another five to get into Marybeth’s car and for her to put my walker in the trunk.

We talked during the ten-minute drive. “I’ve never understood,” I said, “how you’re able to do so much. Your volunteering, the protests you go to, heck, even your helping me out. I guess I never asked what you did for a living.”

“It’s something I don’t necessarily like to talk about,” said Marybeth. “I received a sizable inheritance, and it was well invested.”
“I see.”

“I did work, for a while, as a Spanish interpreter. And that’s what led me to where I am now. A lot of my work was through the courts, and it opened my eyes to how much injustice there is for minorities. It made me aware of my own privilege as white and upper-class.”

“That’s pretty astounding.”

“I don’t know about ‘astounding.’ I just try to follow when God makes way.” Marybeth never said “makes a way”; the drop of the article was a Quaker usage I couldn’t wrap my mind around.

“Well, maybe I understand now why you’re helping me. It’s just what you do.”

“No, Whittier. I’m doing it because I care.”

“I mean, I haven’t known you long enough for you to care that way.”

“I think that’s the depression talking.”

Marybeth pulled up to the entrance to the psychiatric unit of Sinai Hospital, and got out to get my walker and help me to the door. In I went, in search of health and hope.

split in two groups Go down the hall to the conference room circle up introduce again “Hello, my name is Whittier” familiar territory How many hospitalizations now one in St. Louis two in Indiana but in Indiana they kept saying I wasn’t quite depressed enough gotta get you out as fast as possible because we don’t have enough beds but they said that to EVERYBODY are they gonna cover any new territory today? are they just going to get me barely functional like the hospital back in Bloomington and send me on my way? “Tell us why you’re here” I already told you and ISN’T IT OBVIOUS I’m suffering vertigo it’s a struggle even to sit up straight at the
This is all going to be so easy I know the routine Check in and say how you’re doing Make one goal for the day in and out like it always was at Bloomington Hospital and

Wait a minute. This routine is different. The therapists, both of them, are asking me about my relationship with Joshua, and I’m opening up, telling them it’s okay but I wish it were deeper. They’re getting into exactly when my dizziness began, months ago, so easy to dismiss as joy or exhaustion or whatever, and wanting to learn more about my job. And they talk awhile with another patient, Loretta, describes how she’s leaving her boyfriend, how he calls her names, how he beats her, and there’s something in the way she tells her story, the timbre of her voice, that echoes deep, recall my mother, recalls my life at age eight. And then they draw this parallel between Loretta’s relationship with her boyfriend and my relationship with my job, and dance around the word “codependent,” and theorize that I’m dizzy because my brain is preventing my body from going to its source of stress.

Whoa.


I’d been placed as an inpatient after I’d called my best friend Shane to take me to the ER. I’d called Shane from a payphone because I was about five minutes from plunging to my death from the Washington/Elizabeth overpass, my misery given sweet release across I-270. And I wanted to kill myself because I was a paradox, gay and Christian, and, so I reasoned, nature abhors a paradox. I’d been out of a job six months, fired because I was too depressed to come into work, and seven months out of Bible college, without a degree, because of my abominable grades, also brought about in part by depression, had led me to lose my Pell grant. So I had six
months to with little to do but think. And those thoughts led me to believing I was a paradox that nature abhorred.

The new medications the hospital started me on have made much of those ten days a blur. I remember a deaf patient who had little access to an interpreter, and the fact that I knew twenty-some signs and could finger-spell gave her the only joy I saw out of her the whole time I was there. I remember a man deep in the throes of mania who was asking all the female patients for a date once they got out. I remember sitting with a doctor evaluating me, and him asking me about my sexual orientation, and me telling him I was in therapy to become heterosexual, and him warning me that there was nothing that could change me, that the founder of the largest organization for change, Exodus International, ended up marrying his boyfriend, that I was utterly wasting my time, and me telling him that I had faith in God and that, if I persisted with the right therapist, I would change.

I've found myself, over the years, flubbing this story, making the hospital out to be the place where I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. It's just simpler to pin the diagnosis at that point, but the story is in fact more complicated. Two years earlier, I began as a patient at a Christian counseling center in suburban St. Louis, seeing a therapist (paid for by my Bible-college dean) to cure me of homosexuality, who advised me also to see a psychologist with the counseling center (also paid for by my dean), who declared that I had bipolar disorder and started giving me free samples of Zyprexa.

The pills came in little purple packets; the logo on the packet was a human figure, on their left side standing and on their right in a running position. Two figures in one, standing still and running at the same time. And I was left all alone with my thoughts those six months before Shane took me to the ER, the logo on the box mocking me without saying anything or doing
anything: Look at me, trying to be two things at once; it’s impossible; I shouldn’t exist; you shouldn’t exist; you are a paradox.

A bit of sunshine arrived in the mail one afternoon. I had been accepted to MCAD. In other words, I had a ticket out of the museum. All I had to do was pay for it, which I had decided I wasn’t going to concern myself with until I had to.

So I looked at the price tag: $25,000. Per year. Could it happen? Certainly not out of pocket. But I wouldn’t know for sure until I looked into financial aid. So I checked out the federal guidelines online—the last time I’d had to do something like this, it involved paper forms and brochures—and discovered that if I maxed out my federal funding, I couldn’t even touch the bill. But no matter—I wasn’t even eligible to apply for funding. The spectre of the student loans I had taken out to attend a questionably-credentialed Bible college, a place that had broken me, had come back to place in my path the sign, “Abandon hope all ye who enter here.” The payments had been out of my grasp for so long that I was in default. I couldn’t return to school. So I’d begin repayment post haste, regardless of whether I could afford to, whether I had to choose between loans and food. But none of that mattered in the short term. I would remain at the museum, for better or worse—and, I had to admit, there were moments when it was better. I should be grateful for those moments.

Saturday. I’d made it through the first week of the Partial Program. It had been eye-opening, to say the least. In group therapy, we explored more deeply why my job was getting to me so, the expectations I’d placed on myself and my workplace, and my frustration with lack of fulfillment. We talked at length about my troublesome childhood, my father’s abuses, my
mother’s escape from his figurative, and sometimes literal, stranglehold, the effect it had had on me and how my trauma had been ignored for so many decades. The therapists theorized that I sought ways to punish myself because I was reenacting how my father treated me, his demand that children be seen and not heard, his only acknowledgement of my existence in my academic achievements. We even explored some of the sore points in my relationship with Joshua and how I might talk with him about how we could better support each other. And they gave me a goal: Not to use the walker anymore by the end of the therapy.

It had been a good week. But I hadn’t had a shower since the Sunday I’d been placed in the ER. Two weeks of oil and grime and stink. I tried once to crawl into the bathroom and sponge-bathe myself, but it taxed me physically, and I wasn’t too successful.

Cameron came into the living room to watch some television. In the middle of an episode of Project Runway, I spoke up. “I really hate to ask, but I really can’t bathe myself, and I really need to wash up. If you, um, wouldn’t mind, um, could you—”

“Do you need help with a bath?” Cameron asked.

“If you could, I’d appreciate it.”

“Sure, no problem.”

He took my arm up over his shoulders to support my weight, and walked me slowly to the bathroom, ready to catch me if I swayed one way or the other. Open the door, close the door, then he sat me down on the toilet to help me remove my clothes. Shirt, sweat pants, underwear. Then he helped me into the tub, ran the water, helped me shampoo, helped me soap up and rinse.

Nothing was the least bit sexual about it, as if Cameron had been born to be a nurse. To be honest, a tiny part of my brain wished there had been something sexual. A couple of days after I’d found him sprawled naked in the sitting room, I offered to “show him mine” after I’d
seen his, so I unzipped, he was duly impressed, and I zipped back up again. It was a secret I kept from Joshua.

And only now do I wonder why I hadn’t called Joshua to help bathe me, except that I thought it inappropriate to impose on my boyfriend.

Towel off, slip into fresh clothes, back to the chair in the living room. I thanked Cameron for all he’d done, and he said to think nothing of it. I thought, *Cameron is a great roommate.*

*He’d be even better if he signed a lease and paid rent.*

The second Monday of Partial. Today I would do it. It wouldn’t be easy, but I’d try my best. If anything, Cameron, in his gentle treatment of me, had boosted my self-esteem. I folded up my walker and set it aside. Slowly. One foot, then the other. Take a break if need be. Focus. If you get dizzy, it’s okay. Pay attention to what you’re seeing, rather than what you think you’re seeing. The world isn’t going to turn upside down.

Marybeth was shocked to see me at the door sans walker. “How wonderful! You’re making progress.”

“That was the aim, I suppose.”

“Hopefully this week, way will be made for new insights.” Again with the Quakerspeak. I was uncertain it would ever sound right to my ear.

On the way over to Sinai, Marybeth handed me a wad of cash and checks totaling nearly five hundred dollars. “We took up a collection when you weren’t at meeting last week,” she said. “This should at least help with rent and groceries while you’re out of work.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Just pay it forward someday.”
There wasn’t much new, only probing deeper from the week before. It was five days of diving into my relationship with my father, my struggle to find my way out of the closet, my enmeshment in a job that was making me sick. The therapists praised my improvement, my ditching the walker, the new smile on my face, my elevated posture.

If there was any revelation in my two weeks at Sinai, it was in the naming of abusers I hadn’t considered to be such before. My father, I always knew. But my Bible college, it was so easy to excuse their treatment as a matter of ignorance. And my employer, that was a new one. This had been the best job I’d ever had, the one with the most meaning and the best pay.

I had just got home from my last day at Sinai when I received the call. “This is Marquita from Human Resources at Metro Transit. Is this Clint Baker?” I still couldn’t use my chosen name in most circumstances as it wasn’t yet legal and official.

“Um, yes.”

“Well, Mr. Baker, I’m calling to tell you that your application has come up the queue and we would like to hire you for a full-time entry-level customer service position.”

I’d almost forgot that I’d applied. In fact, I’d jumped through a number of hoops—first the application, and then, for those whose applications past the first screening, an on-site examination for which I begged Hayden to let me go from work early though I hadn’t told him why I had to leave. Passing scores would be put in a queue, highest scores first; as openings came up, and as people quit, the queue would move up. And now I was number-one.

“I have to say, this is a pleasant surprise. Can you give me a day to think about it?”

“Of course, Mr. Baker. Just give me a call and, if you’d like to join us, I can tell you your next steps.
“This is great news, thank you so much.”

“And thank you, Mr. Baker. You have a good day.”

I’d be starting at five dollars an hour more than I was earning at the museum. That, plus the security of a strong union, was a huge incentive. But what if I still somehow found a way to go to MCAD? Then I’d only be working for Metro Transit for seven months. That just seemed a cruel thing to do, to get trained only to turn around and leave a few months later. Never mind that I’d seen it many, many times at the museum. It just wasn’t loyal. It wasn’t right.

And if I didn’t go to MCAD, it would be a dirty thing to do to the museum, to take this job. I held seniority at my position, and on my better days, I figured that was why I hadn’t been promoted, so that I could maintain stability in the department. As hard as the work was, as much as it drove me nuts, as much as it wore me out and hurt me, they needed me there. I couldn’t just leave them in the lurch.

I didn’t call Marquita back.

When I returned to work, I found a handmade “Welcome Back” card in my mailbox, signed by everyone in the department. It was such a thoughtful gesture. I put the card back in my box and leapt into my old work routine. My job wasn’t perfect—what job was? Besides, I had neither the time nor the energy to invest in a new job search right then. My exit would come at the right time, once the turnover rate dropped, once the department stabilized. For now, do my best; be patient.

Sinai had arranged for me to meet with a disability-services worker in my home once a week to aid my recuperation. I agreed to meet my aide, Tiffany, on Monday afternoons. Her first visit, we found ourselves alone in the house, which I used to my advantage. I had her sit in the
living room with me, and told her to keep her voice down in case the other roommates came in.

“At least one of them will threaten me or beat me up if he finds out I’m talking about him behind his back.”

“Is it that bad here?”

“It is not safe. Everyone’s drunk all hours of the day and night. There are strangers in and out of here strung out on drugs.”

“Have you talked with the landlord?”

“Over and over and over. He’s a pushover who won’t stand up for himself and lets the other guys here bully him. I’m trying to get healthy and I just can’t do it here.”

“Let me see what I can do.”
Chapter 18

I don’t want to write this. I don’t want to come off like I’m slamming Joshua. And I don’t want to get into the particulars of why our relationship didn’t survive its first argument. I respect him too much, even now. But suffice it to say that 99% compatibility can still be incompatible.

Tiffany and I met at the Wendy’s down on Lake Street so that we could more properly address my housing woes without the risk of Bill overhearing. Over sodas we discussed my options.

“We’ve got a couple of possibilities,” Tiffany said. “The first is a long shot. Shared rooms, with a kitchen on each floor. Only $150 a month. But they’re intended for homeless people. I’m not sure there’s a way to get in when you already have housing.”

“But my housing isn’t livable! I shouldn’t have to live where there’s a tangible threat to my well-being.”

“I get that’s where you’re coming from. But, look at where they’re coming from. The program was established for people who haven’t had any housing.”

“Okay, I get it. Long shot, but we can try. What’s the other option?”

“It’s housing for disabled people. A hundred a month. But you wouldn’t have as much independence. You’d have communal meals, you’d have a set time to go to bed.”

“Ugh.”

“I know.”

“It’s like I’m caught in this middle ground. Things are too bad for me to function normally, but not bad enough to get the services I need.”

Tiffany finished off her Diet Coke and let out a long sigh. “I know it’s hard. The system isn’t perfect, and people fall into these cracks. But we have to be realistic with what we’re
working with, while still investigating all your options. In the meantime, hang in there the best you can. We’ll figure it out eventually.”

“All right. I guess I’ll just do the best I can right now.”

Seth called Bill, Reece, and me to the kitchen. (Cameron, finally, was booted out.)

“Guys, I have to tell you something. I just got word today that I’m being foreclosed on. I’m losing the house in three weeks.”

And that’s when I finally figured out the math. This house needed five residents paying the rent for Seth to cover his mortgage. The whole six months I’d lived there, Reece and I were the only ones who’d worked. The long-gone Jeremiah, I’d learned, didn’t have a job, and Bill preferred to spend his time getting wasted at the gay bars than to look for work. I had paid my rent on time and in full every month, and hadn’t done anything wrong, yet I was being evicted.

Reece was the first to move out. Three friends—friends I’d never seen, friends who’d had the sense to steer clear of this madhouse—showed up to load up his boxes. I tried to wish him good-bye, but he wouldn’t even look me in the eye. At the time, I wondered whether he faulted me for never having baked the cookies I once pledged to him, as I’d accidentally spoilt for him the conclusion of his favorite show, though, given the condition in which I had found my chocolate chips, he was likely glad I had never followed through. Now I realize that he merely associated me with the madness we’d lived in, and now I remember that he was conspicuously absent from the wild parties.

Bill apologized multiple times for how he had treated me, but as I had observed no change in his overall behavior, I couldn’t take his mea culpas seriously.
At work, I let everyone know I’d be moving yet again. Hayden said, “Wow, I’ve never met anyone who liked moving so much!” “No,” I replied, “I hate moving. But I don’t have a choice. I haven’t had a choice about where to live in quite a while.”

Once again I was scouring the internet for a home. Nothing in my price range at all, nothing looking at all reasonable, the housing market looking worse and worse with every move. I posted every day to LiveJournal about my latest crisis. With two weeks left to relocate, Rachel, my actor friend from the LiveJournal picnic, suggested I get in touch with her friend Eduardo, a theatre buff. He had a room available in St. Louis Park, a large suburb to the immediate west of Minneapolis, a little past Uptown, for just $440 a month, utilities included. She gave me his e-mail address, and in short order, we exchanged some communiqués, made amicable acquaintance, and put out word that I needed help to move. At my next Quaker worship meeting, Marybeth volunteered.

Tiffany was right. I did figure something out; just not at all how I’d expected to.
Cedar Hills Condominiums
St. Louis Park
Chapter 19

To live here in St. Louis Park, I had to break a vow that hearkened back to Bible college. My school was nestled on a dead-end street in a second-ring suburb of St. Louis. But to my classmates—mostly corn-fed farm kids from southern Illinois—it was the Big City. My world: campus, plus the shopping center a fifteen-minute walk away. The next-nearest businesses were twice as far. Anywhere else, I had to snag a ride from a friend, or take an infrequent bus, which I didn’t dare do my first two years for fear of getting lost. One of my professors, too radical to last long at the school, decried suburban life, claiming it was inherently racist; the only Godly thing to do was to intentionally build multiracial neighborhoods in the “inner city.” So I pledged a tacit oath to my professor and God that I would never, ever move to the suburbs. And now I had betrayed it.

So once again Marybeth and I fit my ever-shrinking belongings into her hatchback, and headed west to the condo complex near the tricorner of Minneapolis and the suburbs of St. Louis Park and Golden Valley.

Eduardo, wearing a knee-length Indian-patterned caftan led me into my new home. The living room: light-oak laminate, a sofa and chair that were pretty to look at but didn’t seem to comfortable, the décor spartan—souvenirs he’d picked up in his global jaunts. It looked like an art museum, sparse and sterile, with items you Do Not Touch. The bathroom: lush, tiled, everything in chocolates and creams. My room: twin bed, desk, chest-of-drawers, and another damn west-facing window.

Marybeth, Eduardo, and I schlepped my possessions into the room. Marybeth parted; Eduardo offered me a bite to eat; I declined and collapsed on my bed, not bothering to unpack a thing.
Up at 6:30 a.m. Wait for erection to die down. Shower, hair, now shoulder-length, resisting shampoo. Slap soap on. Check clock. 6:55 a.m. Throw clothes on. Morning meds. Breakfast? No time. Run until the wheezing sets in. Hop on the #643. Notice the cute guy: short, trim, redheaded, reeking of cigarettes, Russian accent. Fall asleep, jerk awake, only a fifteen-minute ride to downtown Minneapolis. Wait for the #94. Hop on. Fall asleep, jerk awake, only a twenty-minute ride to downtown St. Paul, depending on traffic.


#94. Sleep. Sleep. Downtown Minneapolis. Wait for the #9; the last #643 left an hour ago. Snake through west Minneapolis. No cute Slavic guy. Slouch off the bus. Walk a half-mile. Unlock door. 7:30 p.m. Take evening meds. Collapse in bed, clothed. 7:35 p.m.

The third day, Eduardo sorts some of my things, unpacks me a bit. Thanks. No way I could. No w—

Sleep.

Every day, I face at least a half-dozen skunkhaired women, their hair dyed black with bleached streaks, each towing two or three children behind her. The first skunkhair controls her children’s every move, telling them what gallery to go to next, what to play with next, what to think next. The next plays side by side with her child, just as the folks in the back offices want the families to do, but the skunkhair waxes poetic about how her child was her best friend. Pity for the skunkhair’s friendship-starved suburban existence? Or disgust for her lack of boundaries with her child? No matter, this skunkhair came to the museum in high heels and is yakking on her cellphone. Either her children are running rampant, or they’re receiving motherly nurture from the nanny who came with the family. Over the phone, she rants to her best friend about this
black family, and how the little black boy wouldn’t give her son the toy he wanted, and would you believe how awful that woman’s weave was, straight down past her butt, these ghetto types, I swear, she says. Down at the register, a skunkhair is bawling out Donna, demanding that her aunt and uncle be allowed in on her inter-museum pass for free, Donna patiently explaining the structure of the membership and the inter-museum benefits, the skunkhair insisting that every museum she has ever gone to with the inter-museum pass has allowed her aunt and uncle in, Donna apologizing and saying that if the other museums were doing that, they were violating the policy of the inter-museum pass, the skunkhair shrieking at Donna for her supervisor, Donna radioing Stephanie, everyone staring at the skunkhair, Stephanie defusing the situation with stalwart calm, offering the skunkhair’s aunt and uncle free admission, ostensibly as an apology for the misunderstanding but in truth as a means of defusing the situation and returning the museum to a peaceful place for children to play.

The skunkhairs are perfectly coifed, because they stink.

The rare times Eduardo and I lounged about the living room, we shared more of lives. He and his family moved from Guatemala to Minneapolis when he was ten, yet his gentle, lilting accent had never faded. Between his skin and his tongue, he felt himself ever an outsider in Minnesota, never mind that he’d spent most of his life here. It was this, he believed, that drove him to his Indian jaunts, where he had picked up his caftan. In India, he was a foreigner, but he was brown, so no one questioned him or singled him out.

I replied that I felt more the outsider, at least in St. Louis Park, for I didn’t have a car, so I couldn’t connect to anyone or anything in the city that was now my official home. Besides, I went on, Minnesotans picked on me for my dialect; I said “diagonally” instead of “kitty-corner,”
“casserole” instead of “hotdish,” “parking garage” for “ramp.” “We’re both outsiders, I guess. Both the same.”

“We’re not at all the same,” said Eduardo. “That’s not how it works.”
Chapter 20

The Sundays when I didn’t work were bad. I had to catch a #9 bus at 9:00 a.m. to make it to Bethany Lutheran in time for the 10:30 a.m. service. I didn’t spend the entire hour and a half in transit, of course; I got to Bethany much too early, and I dawdled as much as I could before entering the church building, but I’ve never been a successful dawdler. I’d sit in the service, surrounded by the parishioners I’d known for nearly four years yet didn’t know at all. We’d sing our hymns, and though the melodies pitched well, the lyrics grew discordant. And Pastor Jay would ascend the pulpit in white cassock and scarved in whatever color was appropriate to the liturgical calendar. And he would preach Peace be with you and also with you Be kind, do good, love others Go in peace. And if I could excise the Bible verses, his sermons were perfect. And if I could just sit and listen to him, it would be perfect. And if I could just have him follow me around to encourage me and bring me peace, he would be perfect. Pastor Jay administered holy communion to me The body and blood of Christ given for you. The bread turned to ashes in my mouth, the wine into water. Then to Pizza Lucé, where the once-luscious meatball parmigiana tasted of cardboard, the old-fashioned cherry Coke gone flat despite the fizz. To the Quakers, where I sat in silent meditation, silent save my snore. My friends, my Friends (as Quakers are so fashioned): their hugs felt cold, their words like the scrape of the barren branches against the winter wind outside. The whole world flattening, losing flavor and texture and color and scent. All that remained was the monochrome of slushy snow and skies in death pallor, the grey grass and the black of the barren branches withholding their green.

The Sundays when I worked were worse. Were I to take the bus into work from St. Louis Park, I would have left my place at 5:45 a.m. to catch a 5:55 bus. Then I would sit and wait in the downtown Minneapolis terminal for nearly an hour before transferring a bus that put me at work.
at 7:55 a.m. for my 8:45 start time. Looking back, I realize it wasn’t so different from my commute from North Minneapolis when I first moved here, but at the time, I’d learned not to trust myself to wake so early.

So I asked Joshua if I could spend the night at his place every other Saturday night, as doing so would put me on a smart, quick bus route. And he agreed. Thus, for two Saturdays in April 2008, I stayed in the home of my ex, where once we enjoyed lovely dinners and sought an awkward fit for our poorly juxtaposed sexual proclivities. The whole evening he was friendly, cordial, his character unchanged. He slept in his bed and I slept on the sofa. I awoke before him, showered quickly, put on fresh clothes, slipped the dirties in my bag, headed to the bus. I’d hoped not to wake him but to no avail. He wished me good-bye. Once he would have said, “I love you,” and now my heart rung hollow with those three omitted words.

My Sunday off fell on Pastor Jay’s last Sunday at the church. He’d taken a new call in Philadelphia, and I would get to hear him preach one last time before he left Bethany for good.

And he poured out his heart from the pulpit. And oh the tears of the congregation he had tenderly built. And the deep, sinking realization that this would be the last time I would ever attend Bethany Lutheran, for by now the only reason I kept coming alternate Sundays was Pastor Jay’s sermons, and now my reason was flying to Philadelphia.
Chapter 21

May Day. Still the weather persisted in the low 30s, snow falling in thick, slushy clumps, the air damp, the ground waterlogged. Maybe that was why I snapped, the season stuck between winter and spring and deciding to be neither. Maybe it was that there was nowhere to walk from my home, and I was restless without a destination. Maybe it was that I spent so much time on the bus that grocery trips were random trips to Target and convenience stores squeezed into my life, and I wasn’t eating right. Maybe it was that I was torturing myself, stealing glimpses of the cute redhead on the morning bus, hoping never to speak to him, never to make eye contact with him, because I had to assume he was straight, just by the numbers, and I sat in terror every morning for fear he’d deduce I found him handsome.

Maybe it was all the above, but for whatever reason, I snapped. That May First I awoke with Mothra in my stomach, muscles rigid from a fright I could not name. When finally I worked up the nerve to leave my bed, it was 8:40 a.m., just before the morning meeting, and I called in to work. I lay possessed of a quickened rigor mortis, musculature locked in unplaceable dread, brain whirring in search of the source, body ridden with energy but without a usable direction. It was noon by the time I shook it off and began my day.

Not bothering with shower or clean clothes, I headed out and made a beeline east. One place signified normality and safety: Caffetto. I’d get a soda—cheaper than a mocha—and regain my day somehow. The sun was breaking, the air warming dramatically. Once I reached Cedar Lake, I shed my hoodie. Which way around the lake? I tried to remember the city map I’d checked online before I left. Counterclockwise would be faster, then south towards Lake Calhoun, so I headed south. But the lake was much larger than I’d reckoned, and I marched on, on, on to Calhoun. Upon reaching the north shore of the more southerly lake, I turned east towards Hennepin Avenue, which put me about eight blocks from Caffetto. I checked the time
on my phone. The lakes that had stood in my way stretched my journey to over two hours one-way. I wasn’t at all close to my home-away-from-home. I sat sipping my cherry Italian soda, plotting the buses that would lead me back to the condo in St. Louis Park. By the time I was ready to go home, I boarded the #17 to downtown, and then got on the very #9 that would have taken me home from work. Once home, I took my meds and fell asleep in my clothes at 7:00 p.m.

The next day, I left my bed only to phone in to work, and to take my medication and drink water. I didn’t eat, and didn’t need to go to the bathroom. I simply slept dreamlessly.

For five more days, a week solid, I vacillated from one pole to the other, terror to exhaustion and back, but with no clear or predictable pattern. And with each call to work, I could feel my bank account evaporating, Paid Time Off a mere fantasy, always burnt off faster than I could replenish it.

A week after the spell began, it subsided enough for me to come in to work. Before my lunch break, Donna sat me down. Disciplinary measures for excessive absence. I was placed at Second Warning. It would take a year to work my way down from Second Warning. If I reached Third, I would be fired.

My life: No money. No appetite. All bus. All work. No time for anything else. Not enough energy for even that.

In the middle of that dreadful week, I caught Eduardo in the living room on his way out. “I need to ask you about a possible arrangement.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”
I cleared my throat, choking on what I was about to say. I didn’t want to screw over Eduardo. But I didn’t see how I had a choice. “I don’t have enough to cover both my rent and my groceries this month, and this commute really isn’t working for me”—one of my greatest understatements ever—“so I was wondering if I could move out on the 15th and pay you half. I mean, I don’t know where I’d move to, but maybe I could crash with a friend until I found something.”

“No, you can’t, and frankly, I’m astonished you’d ask me.”

“But—”

“No, you have to see, I have a mortgage payment to make on the condo. If you don’t pay your rent, I don’t have enough for the mortgage. So no, you can’t pay half a month’s rent because that’s not the agreement we made when you moved in.”

“But—”

“No buts. You can’t cut out on me halfway through the month. That’s not how it works.”

If I wasn’t working, I was most likely asleep. Thus, I was rarely online.

I’d never been to a food bank. When I was growing up, after my father left, my mom couldn’t afford the gas to drive to the bank. (Hell, we couldn’t afford bus fare to the food bank.) We simply went without, like most everyone else in the neighborhood, our food stamps collectively running out with three days left each month. As an adult, I occasionally got food from my church—the last evangelical church I belonged to—but their application process for a food basket was probing, embarrassing, wound up in promises I would volunteer with the church to pay it back. As soon as I had enough income again, I spent some food stamps each month on
contributions to the church’s cupboard, mostly on principle but partly because I knew the parishioners were watching me.

Had Tiffany not suggested we visit, it wouldn’t have occurred to me there would even be a food bank in prosperous St. Louis Park. She drove me over, as it was nowhere near a bus line, and together we filled out the minimal paperwork. Then we were escorted into the donation center. Its neat, filled shelves impressed me; the people of St. Louis Park were generous. In one corner stood several shelves of kosher food. I was reminded of the families who came to the museum, immigrants from Russia dressed all in black, boys with sidelocks bouncing as they ran about, girls clinging to mothers and grandmothers who encouraged them to play (or so it seemed since I didn’t speak a word of Russian). Most of the time, these families were museum members through the low-income scholarship program.

I couldn’t draw from my own experience, or my own story, to envision their immigrant experience. The last “immigrant” in my family arrived in 1730; I was in truth the scion of colonists—and slaves. I’d envied Jack, all eight great-grandparents through Ellis Island, a notion of “old country” still within his family narrative, Lebanese cuisine passed through the generations down to him. Even my experiences in immigrant neighborhoods—the one-bedroom in Lyn-Lake, the mansion-shack on Pillsbury—had yet to dispel the romance and whimsy I wrapped round the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

But here, staring at a Hebrew-lettered food-bank shelf, and at work (and even in my previous homes though I let my willful naïveté get in the way), the story I’d been taught my whole life—at school, at church, in that damn Billy Joel song where everybody’s “coming to America”—lost its romance, shed its whimsy. All who came here were promised only a hard
slog along a path that led to this food bank, these poor Jewish families (which America had taught me didn’t exist) having only each other.

At Indiana University, I had taken two courses in consecutive semesters in Jewish history. Both were to fulfill distribution requirements, though I took the first because every good evangelical is fascinated with Judaism, and the second because it was taught by the same professor as the first, and he was not only a great professor but oh so beautiful (so would say my female classmates, within his earshot, yet I dared not utter a word.) He taught us, early on in that second semester, the concept of kehillah that sustained the Jews of Europe through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and beyond. Kehillah is Hebrew for “congregation,” but our oh so beautiful professor taught us that, for the Jews of that time, the word carried the connotation of “community without which one cannot exist,” since the laws of the lands the Jews inhabited (and were ejected from to inhabit another land only to be ejected from it again, a chain reaction across a continent and across centuries) prohibited any Jew from surviving or thriving on their own. A solo Jew was a dead Jew.

Stranded in St. Louis Park, nearly four years in Minnesota, and still I sought kehillah, in LiveJournal, in the Quaker group, at work, and still I struggled to find it. The LiveJournal folks didn’t really like me. The Quaker group was too good for me. I was sure of it. I was utterly alone in the world.
Chapter 22


See the doctor. Prescription: generic Metamucil I can barely afford.


Pray. Nothing.

Age: 12. Seventh grade. Mom took me to the doctor. I hadn’t been to school in a week. I hadn’t defecated in two weeks. The doctor told me I was malingering, that I just didn’t want to go to school, that I was wasting his time and I’d better shape up and go back to school.

I went back to school. Pushed down the stairs every day. Schoolbooks knocked out of my hands every day. Called “queerbait” and “faggot” every day. Every day I went to the cafeteria, every day I ate on the floor because no one would let me sit with them, until a teacher would yell at me for not sitting at a table and I’d explain what happened and she’d make someone let me sit with them and they made sure I knew I wasn’t welcome. Once, twice a week, in the counselor’s office, in the principal’s office, because someone had ridiculed me until I had shut down, the time some boys poured a soda can down my backpack and all I would think was that my mom couldn’t afford to pay for the damage to my textbooks and I shut down until I told someone what happened, the time some boys ambushed me in the locker room and stripped me of my towel and made fun of my small dick and lack of pubes and I shut down and couldn’t tell anyone what happened.

Then came the psychological evaluations, the IQ test, the interviews. Then the results came in the mail and I read them because my mom couldn’t afford books and couldn’t afford gas in the tank to drive me to the library and I was desperate to read whatever I could lay my hands
on. The results came in the mail, that I suffered major depression. That my constipation was a symptom of depression. That the bullies were the reason for my malingering. The results that they considered me a moderate risk for suicide.

And so I prayed and prayed and prayed, for years, for decades.

A new home was not forthcoming. Craigslist could yield nothing suitable on such short notice, and by now I had learned to read the warning signs in the ads, the druggies and the homophobes. So I threw out a desperate plea once again on Livejournal, and once again, a Livejourner came to the rescue. This time, it was Llewellyn, short a tenant for one of his bedrooms. At least I knew him. At least we got along. At least he was safe and sane. At least he was much closer to work.

At least it was something.

I lived in St. Louis Park two months. I lived in St. Louis Park an eternity.
Southeast Como Neighborhood
Southeast Minneapolis
Chapter 23

After the grimness of living with Dean, the chaos of Cameron and company, and the suburban sterility of Eduardo’s place, I was grateful to finally be moving in with a friend, a known quantity. Llewellyn and I hadn’t spent lots of time together, but we got along. Once again, Marybeth saved the day in helping me move; as soon as we pulled up to the house, there was Llewellyn, as well as my two other housemates: Cassie (a graduate student in clinical counseling) and Toby (an undergrad in theatre). As to these two new faces, time would tell, but, with Llewellyn as the homeowner, he had the final say as to who lived in the house, and I trusted his judgment.

My bags and boxes spirited upstairs to my room, thanks to five sets of hands, and Marybeth gave me a big hug and headed off. The newly formed quartet of housemates settled down at the dining room table to lemonade and enjoyed a long, breezy chat. Cassie and I made fast friends; it turned out she had done her undergraduate work at Indiana University, and we overlapped a year as students there. Toby had a sheepdog personality, fun and energetic, like me when I was his age. Before I started the ex-gay therapy.

A week after my arrival at Llewellyn’s, Tiffany came over for her regularly scheduled appointment. She took a seat on the sofa, I in the armchair—both pieces of furniture hopelessly mismatched. “How are things going?” she asked.

“Great. I’m getting along with my housemates. and this commute, I tell ya, life is so much better when I’m not spending all my time on a bus.”

“That’s great to hear. How’s your financial situation?”

“Slowly repairing itself. I’m not having any trouble making it in to work, so that makes a big difference.”
“Wonderful! So, how can we best spend our time today?”

I didn’t say anything for a while, sinking deep in thought. Why had Tiffany come into my life to begin with? Because I’d suffered depression that resulted in debilitating vertigo. The latter was long gone; the former was quickly sorting itself in my new living environment. How had she helped me? We strategized around a chaotic housing situation with suspect roommates that was already a fast-fading memory. She helped me remember appointments and sort out paperwork, but I’d started figuring all that out on my own, putting schedule reminders on my cell phone, keeping papers in an accessible stack on my desk. And she provided me sane company, but now I had Llewellyn and Cassie and Toby.

“I’m not really sure,” I told Tiffany. “I’m not even sure we need to keep meeting anymore.”

“Are you sure? It’s been less than three months since you were in the hospital.”

“I mean, I’m sitting here trying to think of what else you can do for me, and I can’t think of a single thing. My life isn’t perfect at the moment, but it’s improving rapidly.”

“Okay. So, how should we proceed from here?”

“You know, I think I’m going to be okay. I don’t know that we need to meet anymore.”

“Now, are you positive? I can go ahead and file the paperwork to terminate, but I just want to be sure you don’t need my services anymore.”

“I’m positive. Let’s go ahead and file the paperwork.”

My new neighborhood put me a mere half-hour bus ride to work that left at 8:10 a.m. and got me home by 6:00 p.m. It was also compact, walkable, homey. Around the corner was Bobby’s, a dingy and frightfully overpriced convenience store that hired underclassmen from the
University of Minnesota. A couple storefronts down was Crescent Moon Pizza, an offshoot of a popular northeast Minneapolis Afghan bakery, serving what they called “football pizza,” an oval naan covered in sauce, cheese, and halal meats. Across the street from Crescent Moon was a coffeehouse called Muddsuckers, cozy in part because it was cramped into a narrow 90-degree arc that paralleled the curve of the sidewalk outside. Inside they served up mochas and fruit smoothies and what they proclaimed to be the best waffles in town; the place was full of vintage furniture and bookcases and spider plants. Next door was a Japanese restaurant, Obento-Ya, which was too rich for my blood. A couple of blocks down was Joe’s Market, about twice the size of Bobby’s but still small and only a little cheaper than Bobby’s.

A few blocks south lay the East Bank campus of the University of Minnesota. When I took the bus to downtown Minneapolis to buy groceries at Target (I still couldn’t avoid that out-of-the-way errand if I wanted to avoid the prices at Joe’s), I passed straight through the heart of campus. I inevitably made comparisons to Indiana University, considered one of the most beautiful universities in America, its century-old Italian Gothic Revival buildings in local limestone, exquisitely engraved and topped with gargoyles, winding brick walkways networking the campus, ivy over every surface.

Indiana University consumed my upbringing. As a child, I saw it as this mysterious quarter of town that my father forbade us to visit, as he only allowed my mother two thoroughfares, one to the grocery store and one to the mall. Even so, my school would take us on field trips to the School of Music to learn about ballet and orchestras. As a teenager, it was the place that employed the rich kids’ parents—when you live in public housing, professors are rich. It was always out of reach, an institution for the fabulously wealthy, whereas, if I attended a Bible college within my denomination, my congregation would pay one-quarter of my tuition.
My mom asked me, “Why don’t you attend Indiana?” and I told her, “You just want don’t want me to grow up! You want to keep me stuck here like a little kid!” My high-school counselor asked me, “Why don’t you attend Indiana?” and I told her, “Because it’s too expensive.” I didn’t tell her, “Because if I go to a Christian institution, people will see my good example and be less likely to go to hell.”

And so I made the momentous decision to move to suburban St. Louis and attend Bible college, where I double-majored in closeted homosexuality and depression, and minored in failing grades. A decision that left me with massive debt despite the church scholarship, a decision that pushed me into a discredited therapy that broke my psyche, that pushed me out of school and five minutes away to leaping from the Washington/Elizabeth overpass.

I eventually made it to Indiana University, but only because my diagnosis of bipolar disorder allowed for Vocational Rehabilitation funding. And I lost that before I could graduate. I’d lost every opportunity I’d ever had to complete a Bachelor’s degree.

But it was all okay. People from my background don’t go to college. I’d already exceeded expectations. I had my job at the museum, and it wasn’t perfect, but it was okay. And I had a great new neighborhood with great new roommates, which made up for the okayness of everything else.

Okay was okay enough.

Every Saturday, Llewellyn had about a half-dozen friends over to play Dungeons and Dragons. They had met like this every Saturday since college, something like thirteen years solid before I moved in. And some of these friends had gone to high school with Llewellyn. They’d gather around the dining-room table, set their Doritos and Cokes and beers in the middle of the
table, Llewellyn enthroned at one end as Dungeon Master, the next chapter of their decade-long story unfolding.

Once they asked me if I’d like to join them, and I declined, citing my having to work every other Saturday, thus I wouldn’t be able to play my character regularly. The truth was that I couldn’t imagine intruding on their camaraderie. I envied them, yet when they invited me in, I figured they couldn’t be sincere. Besides, I’d never approach the history, the level of intimacy they shared with each other. So I headed upstairs to my computer, my digital security blanket.

I’m sitting in the computer lab in the basement of Lindley Hall at Indiana University. I got out of my epistemology class hours ago, but I’m sucked into playing Word Racer, a Boggle clone on Yahoo. I play a couple dozen games, until some better players log in and I find myself on a ten-game losing streak. It will be 35 minutes until the next bus home arrives. Time to kill.

I take up my new idle hobby: adding .com to random words in this new search engine called Google. Indigo.com sends me to a manufacturer of beakers and test tubes. Bored.com gives me a huge, cluttered page of links to games and funny stories. And what if I type—no. I can’t. As much as I want to, I can’t. All I can think is, It’s wrong. I shouldn’t put that word on the computer. I should put it as far from my mind as possible.

But the temptation persists. There is no one in the lab, no one I could cause to stumble, no one I could send to hell. Except myself. But I’m going to hell anyway, aren’t I? I remind myself that, after seven years in reparative therapy, my sexual orientation hasn’t budged at all. At least I haven’t had sex, I tell myself. But that doesn’t matter. I think about sex, and Jesus said that thoughts and actions are the same thing. I am to “take every thought captive” and submit it to God.
I press the G key. I’ll pay for this. I have no idea what I’m going to see there, though.

Something bad. Porn, probably.

A. I’m going to get in so much trouble. This is so wrong. But I’m a sinner, I’m going to hell no matter what, so why don’t I just go to the site anyway.

Y. There’s no point. I may as well just quit church.

Fly through the rest of the keys. Period. C. O. M. Enter.

And... it isn’t quite what I think. Some articles. Some advertisements. And a whole slew of chatrooms. For cybersex, I figure. As I can’t jerk off in the middle of a university computer lab, that isn’t going to do me much good. So I poke around the list of chatrooms. Bears. I’m not sure what they mean by that. BDSM. Bicurious. I scroll down. Chasers. Femmes. Twinks. Watersports. I’m looking for a link to a glossary.

I scroll back through. Christian. How is that even possible? There are 14 people in the chatroom. I enter.

And the conversation didn’t go too badly. I introduced myself, explained where I was coming from, that I’d been going through ex-gay therapy but it didn’t seem to be working out. A couple of guys scoffed at the idea, but most understood where I was coming from. I had to run for my bus, but I said I’d be online tomorrow.

And so I was, the next day and the next day and the next. There were a dozen or so regulars with whom I made fast friends. Occasionally I’d venture into other Gay.com chatrooms; most (but not all) were far too sexual in nature for this half-closeted virgin. But the Christian-room guys were an amicable lot who empathized with my plight yet encouraged me to rethink my theology and consider sticking a couple of toes outside the closet door. One of the chatters
even suggested to me a gay-Christian website, complete with a message board and articles on a pro-gay understanding of the Bible, to help me on my way.

And that is how I saw my exit from my volunteer position at the Potter’s Cup, the coffeehouse/art gallery/ministry/whatever and the community I’d developed there. That is how my pastor/counselor told me that to utter the words, “Ex-gay therapy doesn’t work,” even while dedicating oneself to celibacy, meant going from second-class status in the church down to fifth, the lowest of sinners, irredeemable.

The pursuit of truth had, throughout my life, led to the loss of *kehilla*. 

The kitchen fast became the hangout in my new home. Not only did the four of us prepare our meals there, but it also offered easy access to the three bedrooms and bathroom upstairs, the laundry room, and Llewellyn’s apartment in the basement. We’d talk about our days—Llewellyn and me about work, Cassie and Toby about school—but seldom settled for small talk, plunging headlong into politics, sociology, philosophy, arts, such a refreshing change after the catastrophe of Pillsbury Avenue.

One evening, the four of us put together our respective dinners: Llewellyn a turkey wrap, Cassie a spinach salad, Toby a pizza, and me a strawberry smoothie (one of my rare phases of attempting a healthy diet). Our conversation suddenly detoured into the subject of abortion access. It was something we all agreed on—what an odd journey that I, the former teenage pro-life protestor, had taken—yet the talk kicked my inner philosopher into high gear, for each of us was offering up the ethical underpinnings as to why we believed what we believed.

And here was the fascinating thing: I was the only theist in the room. Always I’d been taught in evangelicalism that the atheist—or, in the preferred parlance of the time, the “secular
humanist”—had no basis for morality without God and was thus immoral. Yet as my three friends laid out the reasons why they believed what they believed, this assertion proved groundless.

It was a bolt through the brain, like Meno’s slave boy who suddenly understood geometry once Socrates explained it to him. My three friends had built their view on the world based on what is. People will have extramarital sex, so how does one build a workable society around that fact, in terms of abortion access, sex education, public policy? A far cry from what the church had taught me, that people should abstain from extramarital sex, and thus education, policy, and so on are to be built around the world as it should be; those who suffer the consequences of not abiding by the “should” do so justly.

In my first philosophy class at Indiana University, Introduction to Ethics, we learned that the first rule for ethicists is that a just ethical system must be livable. “To be a just person, one must turn into a giraffe” is not a part of a just ethical system. The evangelical church, in its aim to turn me into a heterosexual—or a giraffe, which would have been just as likely—had handed me an inherently unjust worldview. As it had for so many—pregnant teens and addicts, divorcés and rape victims, and so, so many more.

That moment in the kitchen was like St. Paul’s conversion in reverse; the scales fell from my eyes, and I saw the smoke and mirrors, the myths and legends, that constituted the faith I’d held since early adolescence. Not only that, but I discovered new common ground with my housemates.

A new kehillah.
It was 2008, the Year of Hope. The charismatic junior senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, was running for president in a campaign the likes of which had never been seen. He was biracial, the son of an immigrant, savvy to the new technologies of Facebook and Twitter (neither of which I used, the former because it was not yet available to non-students, the latter because it appeared to be the domain of celebrities). After eight years of political division, brought on by a controversial presidential election won by a vote of 5 to 4, and two seemingly endless and needless wars, Senator Obama presented a message that somehow sounded both progressive and centrist, a man the people could find common ground with, a man the press deemed the average Joe would want to have a beer with (as if the average Joe would get to have a beer with the president).

And yet, for some reason, I found hope hard to muster, even with the short commute, even with the happy little jaunts to Bobby’s Market and Muddsuckers, even with three fantastic housemates. Even though I finally slept in front of an east-facing window, I remained drained, struggling to make it to work on time, still some days not having enough energy to come in at all. I’d thought the move from the drear and desolation of St. Louis Park would fix all this.

Donna confronted me about it after returning from a sick day. “I understand that you get sick. What I don’t understand is why you don’t call in before the start of your shift.”

“How can I call you in my sleep? I’m telling you, these days, I just have no idea when I’m going to wake up.”

“If you anticipate you’re going to have a problem the next morning, you can call in the evening before, no problem.”

“But I can’t anticipate that. I just wish I could tell you exactly what’s going on.”
“But you know you’re not allowed to tell staff here about any medical diagnoses, only the accommodations you need.”

At the museum, the D-word, “depression,” was as much of a swear word as “damn.” Or “fuck.” And I was fucking.

I made do the best I could on these unintentional days off. I’d head to Muddsuckers and order an iced mocha or a strawberry smoothie, and settle in with the copy of City of God that I had finally resumed reading. It had been years since I’d touched the book, and yet I remembered exactly where I’d left off, halfway through. I worked my way through Doctorow’s jumps in genre and his thirty-five narrators, luxuriating in the shape and color and texture of each sentence.

After an hour or so, I’d cross the street to Bobby’s Market for some candy. Many days, Hunter was working there. Oh, Hunter. He was 20, a biology major, and very straight. He was tall and slim, with luxurious curls, remarkably like an older version of Tadzio from the film adaptation of Death in Venice. Much too on the nose for me; Hunter was indeed much too young for me and completely unattainable. I’d chat him up as I’d select my candy, trying to learn what I could about him, learning what was acceptable for a customer to know, but learning a good deal more than I’d ever tried to learn about Imani when I had lived in North Minneapolis years ago, stealing as many glances as I could at his turquoise eyes and skinny build without being caught. I’d found my replacement for the red-headed Russian from St. Louis Park.

Then I’d head home and put on some porn on the computer so I could have someone else to think about other than Hunter or the nameless Russian redhead as I jerked off. I was still wary of connecting fantasy and masturbation, wary of lusting, of objectifying a flesh-and-blood
person. Viewing the object of desire in two dimensions provided just enough distance to justify my physical indulgence.

Though I had some moral qualms about how to masturbate, the act itself was more enjoyable than ever. Which is one reason of many reasons I’d begun distancing myself from the gay-Christian website. As the digital community grew, we saw wave after wave of closeted and semi-closeted gay Christians who fretted to no end about whether God was okay with self-pleasuring. It involved lust. It was done outside of marriage. Their preacher said not to. On one hand, I could sympathize because I’d been there, but on the other, I pitied them for believing that the God of a universe several billion light-years across with a bajillion star systems would get so overwrought about one human being discovering the joy that same God had built into their body—and that same joy he’d built into innumerable non-human creatures’ bodies—that his ire would send this one poor soul to eternal torment. My God had more important things to contend with.

But the final straw came when a member postulated whether it would be okay for a Christian to attend a Unitarian-Universalist church. This much I knew: Unitarian congregation vary greatly in practice. In my hometown of Bloomington, Indiana, the congregation veered towards the European earth religions, and hosted a witches’ coven. Across town, near the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the congregation was adamantly atheist. And in St. Paul, the Unitarian congregation in which my housemate Cassie had grown up was centered in the Christian traditions from which Unitarian Universalism had originally sprung. So I argued that, if a Unitarian congregation was the only gay-friendly option available to a gay Christian, then it
was fine for them to attend. I was eviscerated for advocating a religion that did not believe in
hell, or the Bible as the sole authority for life, or Jesus as the only Lord and Savior.

I wanted to delete my account, but the site didn’t allow for it, since, they claimed, people
always left when they got upset and came back later. So I simply left and didn’t come back.

So I was stuck. Stuck with these days off, days of oversleeping, of not knowing the night
before that I’d oversleep as Donna had wanted. Days of mochas and Doctorow, of lusting after
Hunter or at least trying not to, of masturbation and idle instant-message chatter.

And then there were the days, not of oversleeping, but of awaking to unnameable dread,
twice as bad as any I’d experienced in St. Louis Park. To be terrified of nothing amplified the
terror all the more.

And I couldn’t call in sick on account of terror. I could only seek accommodations. And
there was no way to create an accommodation that let me not be at work. And there was no way
to tell the museum why I couldn’t be there because it was against the rules to disclose the exact
nature of disability.

And so I was stuck.

Business at the museum had dropped off a bit, and no one could quite account for why.
We had an exhibit featuring a popular cartoon character, as we tried to do every spring, when the
field trips were at their peak. But the area school systems had seen budget cuts in the past year,
so there weren’t quite as many trips. And our weekends, for whatever reason, didn’t see quite as
much traffic as usual. No worries; the Financial Department had shown us rosy projections for
attendance over the next three years. We’d make up for the lull in the coming months.
One exception to the trend: Free Sunday. For one day each month, the museum packed out, thanks to the generous contributions of a local corporation. My coworkers dreaded Free Sunday because we could barely keep up with stocking the art supplies and sorting the props and responding to the many customer needs. I counteracted the negativity by referring to the visitors as VIPs—people so special they came to the museum only once a month. I was not about to let sour spirits spoil the day for the poorest of our visitors.

We had one simple, commonsense rule: We asked that everyone wear shoes in the museum. The problem was that, for some odd reason, visitors felt compelled to take their shoes off at the entry of every gallery, and when there are fifty or a hundred people in a gallery all piling their shoes in the doorway, it creates a safety hazard. So the Customer Service staff invested much of our time asking people to put on their shoes. Some complied without complaint; others explained that their precious little tyke simply refused to wear shoes.

But there was this one family who came every single Free Sunday. We called them “the German family” because of the parents’ accent. And whenever they were around, we were on alert. Their two girls, who looked to be aged around six and eight, refused to wear their shoes anywhere in the museum. And if you asked their girls to put on their shoes, both parents came at you at once. Mother played the good cop, lilting on about how their girls’ not wearing shoes really wasn’t that big a deal, and they were only going to be at the museum five or ten more minutes, and why don’t you just give them a break this once? At exactly the same time, speaking in the same cadence and volume as Mother but in much different tone, Bad Cop Father berated you for holding to such a preposterous rule, that children should be allowed to do whatever they want in a space built for children, for God’s sake, and that if you don’t let his little girls run around in their sock feet he’s going to report you to your manager immediately. And if you said
the rule came from management, Mother and Father would redouble their complementary
diatribes. If, at last, you said that the rule was in place for good reason and needed to be applied
to everybody, Mother would clam up and Father, taking on the aura of a fiery preacher, would
declare that he was raising his children to be independent thinkers and to ignore any rule they
deemed unnecessary or inappropriate. And with that, the family would storm off, both girls still
shoeless.

Those poor girls, I thought. Those monsters are raising them to be selfish and
thoughtless, to give no consideration to the communities in which they live, to only think of
themselves and ignore their contribution to the society. And there’s not a fucking thing I can do
about it. Because I’m just a schlub hired to pick up toys.
Chapter 25

My first real job was cleaning the bathrooms of my own dormitory as a Bible-college freshman for the minimum wage of $4.25 an hour. Never mind how filthy eighteen-year-old boys can be; a couple of them had taken to defecating in the communal showers as a protest of what they saw as unfair treatment (weekly dorm-room inspections, required chapel attendance four days a week, no tobacco or alcohol, on and on.) By the end of the school year, my boss had put me on a sort-of probation whereby I would only work special events on campus. I had given her a note saying that I was worried I was going to drink the cleaning supplies. I of course didn’t say that my suicidal ideation was rooted in being attracted to men.

The next fall, I took a job at Mrs. O’s Café and Pie Pantry, a cafeteria-style restaurant in a shopping center that made up the only businesses within a twenty-minute walk from campus, thanks to suburban sprawl. For nearly two years straight I scrubbed pots and bussed tables. I again earned minimum wage, because my boss didn’t take a tip credit, because nobody tips in a cafeteria-style restaurant. Every six months, I asked my boss for a raise, because he was always saying I was one of the hardest workers there, and he always said, “We’ll see.” I never saw a raise. I eventually decided that, when I returned from my internship in England, I would not take back my restaurant job but would rather set my sights on the supermarket across the plaza. My boss received three weeks’ notice rather than two because I wanted to be respectful. Two weeks before I left the job, my coworkers and I were talking over our dinner before the start of our shift. “I think I should see about getting another raise,” said the pretty blonde eighteen-year-old who had worked at the restaurant half as long and half as hard but who had the advantage of being a pretty blonde eighteen-year-old and our boss wanting to see a lot of pretty blonde eighteen-year-olds out on the floor.
Upon my return to the States, I applied to work at Schnucks Supermarket and landed a job straightaway as a stock clerk. A wage of $5.60 an hour, with time-and-a-half for overnight shifts. For my first weekly schedule, my employer had me working afternoons during the school week and overnights over the weekends. I protested, saying there was no way I could shift my body from day to night to day so quickly, so from then on, during the school year, I only worked afternoons and early evenings, though this meant a reduction in hours. After my first school year at Schnucks, the union secured for us a 40-cent raise. For two summers, I worked three overnights a week; thanks to time-and-a-half, I now earned $9.00 an hour. Into my second year—back to day shifts and reduced hours—I looked across the shopping center to what had been a JCPenney, vowing to seek employment at whatever business moved in.

That turned out to be an OfficeMax. The new job was well-timed. I had lost my Pell Grants to Bible college because my cumulative GPA was too low; after five years of going to school full-time, I was only barely a junior, thanks in part to the fact that all students were automatic double-majors, in Bible and something else, meaning we had to earn 150 credit hours to graduate. I could never lift my grades knowing that the wrong look at the wrong guy at the wrong time meant expulsion. So now I was no longer a student, but rather an OfficeMax Grand Opening employee; no longer a dormitory resident, I now lived in an apartment halfway between campus and the shopping center because that was the only available housing I could find on foot, a car ever out of reach financially. I was hired for a full-time position, only to be told that OfficeMax considered full-time to be 32 hours a week. I earned $7.25 an hour.

And then my father died. The last time I had seen him was on campus my first month of school, a hundred-dollar bill in his hand and a promise of a hundred dollars a month until I graduated. And he made sure that the college officials knew he was providing for me. I never
saw the money. But now I was off to his funeral, doped up double-strength on free samples from the Christian counseling clinic. Each of his children received an inheritance of three thousand dollars; my mom explained to us that this was his way of making sure everyone knew he had left us something, conscientious of appearances to the very end.

I returned to St. Louis and I was, understandably, depressed. Curled up in my apartment, tempted to suck my thumb, terrified of the telephone, for two days I lay frozen. On the third day I returned to work at OfficeMax. My boss said, “What are you doing here?” and I said, “I’m here to work,” and he said, “Two no-call no-shows; you don’t have a job anymore,” and I said, “But I have bipolar disorder,” and he said, “You should have said something before now.”

And so I lay in my apartment for days, weeks on end. One of my former Bible-college professors helped me sign up for welfare, $150 a month. My rent was $350. I took in a roommate, a former classmate who believed that the breakup of the Soviet Union was in fact a lie perpetuated by the liberal media in cahoots with the Soviets. It was a bad time for me to push the bounds of fashion, experimenting with nail polish, my roommate telling me I’d better knock off that crap before someone thinks I’m gay. And so I wandered off to the Washington/Elizabeth overpass but not without first calling my best friend Shane to drive me to the ER.

My inheritance had run out. I would not be able to cover my rent for May 1998. So I was sent back to Indiana. In the haze of new medications, I thought I was just back for a visit. To return permanently proved to the world I was a failure. And I was, indeed, a failure, in every sense of the word. A failed student, a failed heterosexual, a failed human.

But once I acclimated to the truth that I was once again a Hoosier, I sought to improve my life. I got a job as an office temp (that is, until the first fiscal quarter hit and there were suddenly no more positions). I signed up for Vocational Rehabilitation, which got me started
back to school at Indiana University. I started meeting with a therapist whose entire practice was
dedicated to converting people to heterosexuality.

And then to the unemployment office, which led to a position at the most prestigious
daycare in town. The position required two years of college and paid $5.65 an hour. So as to
make sure I didn’t run into the same problem as I’d had at OfficeMax, the first thing I told my
new employer was that I had bipolar disorder. While attending Indiana University part-time, I
worked at the daycare for thirty hours a week: ten hours a day, three days a week. The truth is
that I could have worked for as little or as much as I wanted. I received Medicaid so that I could
treat my bipolar disorder, and the only way the state of Indiana would allow me Medicaid was if
I also received welfare. Any money I earned would be deducted from my welfare, such that my
income was exactly the same whether I worked three hours a week or thirty. But I wanted to
work as much as possible to prove my loyalty to my employer and to show the world I wasn’t
some lazy welfare cheat.

Then the dread hit. I’d lie in bed with a gnawing in my stomach, my heart pounding out
of my chest, my mind stuck in a feedback loop. I once called in at 3:00 p.m. for a shift that had
started at 8:00 a.m. because it had taken seven hours for the fear to lower to the point that I could
get out of bed and make a phone call. Soon my boss dropped my schedule from thirty hours a
week to eighteen. And still I would wake consumed by some nameless phobia of everything. So
then my boss put me on an on-call arrangement, except that they wouldn’t call me; I was to call
them each day to see if they would want me. I didn’t have a phone at the time because I couldn’t
afford one. My mom told me she couldn’t understand why they hadn’t just fired me so that I
would at least be eligible for unemployment. In the end, none of it mattered; I ran into an old
coworker and learned that state regulations for daycares had changed such that my job title no
longer existed and everyone at my level had been let go. The new standard was that all employees needed at least thirty credit-hours of college coursework in early-childhood education. The pay for such a position at my daycare would still be $5.65 an hour.

And so I tried for three years to get a job in Bloomington, Indiana, and in the end landed my job at WonderLab only through the guidance of my job coach at the disability services center. I worked on the floor of the newly-opened science museum for children, helping visitors to grasp the scientific concepts behind the exhibits, aiding volunteer floor staff, and responding to any and every need. I adored my employers and they me. On rare occasion, I’d be asked to cover a full day’s shift; my bosses told me I was the only one they thought could maintain energy and a positive attitude for eight hours straight.

And then the good state of Indiana stole it all from me. And now I was a shlub picking up toys.
Chapter 26

Each May, the museum hired extra staff for the summer, because we were open seven
days a week instead of six. Typically, these new hires were local college students meeting
summertime expenses. I oriented three of them to their new job. They asked me where all the
visitors were. I told them that we’d expect a little lull right after school let out, but that over the
summer we would see some business, especially when it was rainy and the children couldn’t play
outside, that we always had a bump of visitors from Winnipeg and Thunder Bay around Canada
Day.

Summer 2008 proved to be dry and mild. When the seasonal staff complained that there
wasn’t enough to do, I sent them off to prepare craft supplies for when traffic picked up, and
reminded them to keep cheery for the handful of families who were there. Donna and Hayden
began sending staff home regularly and we’d run a skeleton crew for half the day. On Canada
Day, we saw a total of fifty visitors, and indeed, they’d mostly driven down from Winnipeg and
Thunder Bay. Fifty visitors came out to about six visitors an hour. In one of the largest museums
in the country.

Donna told us we must always look busy, regardless of how few visitors we had. If the
back-office folks ventured to the floor and found us unproductive, they might decide the
Customer Service department was too big, and then, come Free Sundays, we would be
understaffed.

The storage areas where we kept our craft supplies overflowed. Every smudge was wiped
clean, every dust bunny exterminated. I personally had cleaned the register keyboards until they
shone.

We weren’t busy. We looked busy.
Every June, Donna conferred with each Customer Service employee as to our merit-based annual raises. Each year, I was offered a raise of roughly three percent, with the encouragement that I was receiving one of the highest raises in the department, and the warning that I was not to divulge my earnings to my coworkers.

But in June 2008, Donna broke the news to each of us that all raises across all departments were frozen indefinitely. No matter. I still earned enough to cover rent and treat myself to coffee. It could be so much worse. I could be the guy in the three-piece suit.

I was standing at attention behind my freshly polished register. It was noon and I had checked in a hundred guests—about ten families an hour, never a queue. Above me, five stories of deadening silence. In walked a white man in a three-piece suit, a touch of grey at the temples. I assumed he was lost and looking for directions.

"Hello, sir," he started, "I submitted my application here a week ago and was wondering about its progress."

"If we’re interested in you, we will contact you within a week of receiving your application." This was our standard line; the explanation to those of us on the front lines had been that we received so many job applications that, were we to respond to all applicants personally, we would have to hire a full-time staff member to handle the volume.

"I don’t understand; it’s standard to follow up after you apply."

"Like I said, if we’re interested, we’ll contact you."

The man tugged the hem of his jacket. "Why are you being so difficult?"

I leant in so that, if Hayden or Donna or Stephanie happened by, they wouldn’t hear me. "Trust me on this. When people come in and follow up, we take it as a sign you can’t follow directions. So you have to believe me, if we’re interested, we’ll contact you."
The man’s shoulders slumped. “I was director of service center operations for Travelers Insurance, but they laid me off, and I haven’t worked in six months. They’re sacking people right and left. I’ve applied all over town. Listen, I’ll do anything. Security guard, custodial, you name it.”

My sinuses filled with the urge to cry. But all I could say was, “I’m sorry, sir. If we’re interested, we’ll let you know.”

my GOD how dead can it be here I’ve been in this gallery for 25 minutes and I haven’t seen a single goddamn person here Maybe just as well because GODDAMN we get some assholes in here Not the kids never the kids it’s always the parents and teachers and nannies and grandparents we’re stuck with and GODDAMN I have to keep smiling for the guests who aren’t here for the staff on the floor because it’s up to ME to keep morale up and for the fuckers down in the office wing if they bother to come up here because we have to look busy look busy look BUSY as if we were too dumb to know what that meant But you know what I can keep busier than anyone here because I’m on stage and by GOD I know how to act But what the hell is this performance I play day after day after day I can just stand here and do nothing paralyzed in this gallery and it won’t mean a goddamn thing It’s like I might as well not be here

Summer faded into fall. No matter what I did—timing my medications to the minute, abstaining from caffeine, putting myself to bed earlier and earlier—I never could break this unpredictable cycle of terror and dread, of either oversleeping to absurd hours or lying in bed awake yet panic-stricken, unable to phone in to work. Once again Donna placed me on Second
Warning status, and I had only just worked myself back down to First Warning. I told her I was doing my best. I didn’t tell her why my best wasn’t good enough. I was not allowed to disclose.

Why hadn’t moving fixed this? The sane roommates, the east-facing windows? Why was I such a failure at the simplest thing in the world: waking up? Why couldn’t my doctor fix me? Why couldn’t I fix myself?

On November 4, 2008, I arrived to work on time, and, as my mom called it when I was a kid, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. We held our daily staff meeting, promptly at 8:45 a.m. as always, but on my way out, Stephanie pulled me aside and asked to meet with me, to be joined by the vice-president who oversaw my department and the human-resources administrator.

The four of us entered a small conference room buried deep in the office wing. As they sat me down, a cannonball sunk in my stomach. With each passing second grew my certainty of what they would say.

“As you are aware,” opened the vice-president, “we’ve come on hard times. Attendance has dropped, and we’ve been forced to make the tough decision to lay off one person from each department. And—” his voice broke “—we’ve decided that you will be the person from your department. I am so sorry. We appreciate so much what you’ve done for us these past four years.”

The human-resources administrator spoke up. “You’ll receive one week’s severance pay for each year you’ve worked for us. And if there’s anything I can do to help with filing for unemployment, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Then Stephanie: “You’ll have two more weeks with us. We’re giving you the day off with pay. I know this is hard news, and you need some time and space to process all this.”
All I could say was “thank you.” No one ever said it, but we all knew why I was the one chosen. An employer can only make reasonable disability accommodations. My not showing up for my shifts was unreasonable.

So I hopped the bus home from St. Paul to Minneapolis. Once there, I headed up the stairs to my room, grabbed my nearly finished City of God and walked down to Muddsuckers for an iced mocha. There was no rush, no anger, nothing in my demeanor at all. Everything was foregone conclusion, almost fated, and it was foolish to challenge fate.

But today was a day of Hope, for, irony of ironies, I was laid off on Election Day. After I’d finished the day’s reading of Doctorow—only five chapters left!—I headed across the street to Van Cleve Park so I could place my vote for Barack Obama. The line into the rec center stretched to the end of the block; it took me a half-hour to finally make my way in. We were students and retirees, fifth-generation Scandinavian Americans and first-generation Somali Americans, and as we stood beneath the stately maples, waiting to carry out our civic duty and vote for the Democratic candidate in one of the most heavily Democratic districts in the country, we chatted with the citizen-strangers surrounding us, hopeful, free. My certainty of recent months that John McCain would win the presidency was completely forgotten. At last I filled in my ovals and walked back home, the air electric as I wove back through the crowd still waiting to elect the next president of the United States of America.

Once home, I turned on my computer to follow the results. And they were convincing. Barack Obama would be our next president.

Yet I couldn’t help but think that somewhere out there, the masses were murmuring, “Okay, you got your black president, now you can quit whining.”
I returned to work the next day, on time, as if nothing happened, walking through my duties with a big smile plastered on my face as always. My coworkers marveled that I could maintain an upbeat attitude, but I didn’t understand why anything should change. We still had visitors, however few, and they still needed my services. More than one coworker was pissed off at the museum for letting me go. They saw me as one of the top people there. During these final two weeks, no one, at any level, ever mentioned my attendance woes even though they were so painfully obvious.

My last day came and went. I cleared out my mailbox and hung up my vest one last time. From there, I walked down the block to join Hayden and a handful of others—but not Donna or Stephanie because of the anti-fraternization policy. My now-former colleagues toasted my accomplishments and regretted my departure. “And now what?” they asked.

Now what indeed.
Chapter 27

For the first couple of weeks, I settled into my new life. On occasion I’d venture across town to Caffetto, just for some sense of grounding, of continuity. I let everyone know at the Quaker worship group what was going on, and they offered their help, though I was reticent to accept. I’d already taken enough of their time and money, and I didn’t want to burden them anymore. And, of course, my housemates had to know. Toby was optimistic, as usual, that I’d find a new job soon. Cassie offered her condolences and promised to let me know if she stumbled across anything, though I held out little hope, as she was a graduate student, and about all I was qualified for was entry-level customer service, so I didn’t know how she’d hear about anything I could do. Nonetheless, I thanked her. As to Llewellyn, his first concern was my emotional well-being; I told him I was managing well given the circumstances. Regarding rent, I reassured him that my unemployment checks would come soon enough, and though things would be tight, they’d be doable.

So I maintained good spirits, my four weeks’ severance period serving as a mini-vacation, having so rarely taken a vacation while at the museum because I was always losing my Paid Time Off to illness. I resumed painting, and, by month’s end, finally finished City of God. I also set about a task I hadn’t felt comfortable with while I was working: joining Facebook.

I had been eligible to create a profile on the social site for two years, ever since Mark Zuckerberg and company had allowed non-students into the hip, Harvard-born online hub. But Facebook seemed redundant; I already used LiveJournal and MySpace and Yahoo. And I found security in maintaining a high wall around my online presence, keeping a safe distance from the former Bible-college classmates and the evangelical-church friends who wouldn’t be able to deal
with me as an out gay man, from the coworkers who expected me to be squeaky-clean, to always project a positive image of the museum, to not disclose disability status.

But there were advantages to having multiple channels of communication to people. If I wanted to hang out with Jack or Marnie or Pete or Darren, I could reach out via LiveJournal, but they didn’t necessarily check their blogs every day. And household management—who was going to be gone a couple days, who was hosting a party—would be easier to handle if I had an extra way to reach Llewellyn, Cassie, and Toby. Besides, it looked like everyone was joining, so it wouldn’t hurt to jump on the bandwagon.

Yet most important of all was the longing to recover some sense of personal history. My relocation from St. Louis to Indiana had cut me off from nearly all my Bible-college friends, save my suicide-rescuer Shane and a couple of others I e-mailed on occasion. Regardless of the official policies of my former school, my inner circle considered me a friend despite my sexuality. And my ejection from evangelicalism had lost me dozens and dozens of friends from my old church; perhaps there was some way to restore some of my relationships. It was as if my moving to Minneapolis had been a reincarnation, all personal history to that point erased, I a newborn navigating this city. As my current friends held fast to their roots, still hung out with the folks they grew up with, I could only mourn what I had lost. Facebook offered me the chance to end my grief.

So I created an account, with personal stipulations. First and foremost, I would go by my chosen name, Whittier Strong, rather than Clint Baker as my former friends knew me. This way, I controlled my connections; anyone from my past from whom I would expect homophobic rants would never know to look for me under my chosen name. And for those I sought out, I could attach a message to my invitation explaining who I was. No current coworkers (once I had a job),
and no prior superiors. I was an adult, and off the clock, I was permitted an adult life of which my place of employment ought to have no knowledge. No more 24-hour smiles, no more worrying about whether every random stranger on the sidewalk would avoid my workplace because I was some sexual reprobate.

Thus I gradually extended my digital reach, reestablishing my past existence, assuring the world I in fact had thirty-four years of history rather than four. My Bible-college classmates—a circle I carefully curated—embraced me, especially Shane, with whom I now enjoyed the occasional long chat when he wasn’t busy with his rapidly growing family. My former fellow parishioners, not so much; of all those I connected to, only two offered anything more than a confused reaction as to why I, having fallen off the heterosexual wagon, would want to be friends with them. No matter, I told myself. Their loss.

One more site added to my cycle. Though, over time, I found myself spending more and more time on Facebook. While I posted about my day, and read my friends’ amusing anecdotes about their pets and children and meals, I could also chat via instant-messaging right on the site, I could play Scrabble, I could read the news. My friends, bit by bit, shifted their attention away from MySpace (the layout is too chaotic, everyone claimed) and LiveJournal (they just got bought out by the Russians, read a banner announcement on the site). Part of me couldn’t understand the appeal. Yahoo had games and instant-messaging and a news feed; nothing about Facebook felt fresh. Yet Yahoo had never generated the social cachet that drove account growth into millions upon millions.

So I settled into life on Facebook. I chatted with friends, across the country and across the world, thanks to the relationships I’d still maintained from the gay-Christian website and had carried over to other social media. I played Scrabble with random strangers. I asked the locals
what all the Twin Citizens were up to that night, and then someone would correct me and tell me
the proper term was “Twin Citian.” And when I wasn’t poking around there, I was looking for
work.

The hoops to jump through so I could receive unemployment-insurance payments: First,
a two-week course at the Workforce Development Center. Then, every Monday, filling out an
online government form to confirm my continued efforts in finding work. I would receive $660
per month, a little less than half my pay at the museum, and leaving me less than $200 per month
after rent. It would be tight but not impossible, and it was only temporary.

I showed up at Workforce Development, an hour’s bus ride away, on the first Monday
morning of December, chill and grey. I’d put on a lavender polo and khakis, business casual, to
make my best first impression, but as I filed into the meeting room, I saw the other unemployed
hopefuls had worn hoodies and work boots, kitty T-shirts and torn jeans. A dozen of us
altogether, we chatted amicably as we waited for the day to begin; the scuttlebutt was that the
program would even pay for you to go to school. I was by far the youngest in the room, and the
only white male.

We took our seats, and the session leader introduced herself. They asked us to go around
the room and tell everyone what our dream job was. From the back, a black man in his fifties
said, in a booming baritone, that he’d just like to get back to working in masonry. A white
woman in a pink hoodie, late forties but felt older, made plain that, though she wasn’t quite sure
what she wanted to do, she wasn’t going to mess with any computers because she simply would
not do computers, wouldn’t touch them, wouldn’t have anything to do with them. When came
my turn, I put it simply: I enjoyed working with children, and perhaps if I could go back to
school to earn my early-childhood education credits, perhaps I could be a daycare teacher.

At the mention of going back to school, a clamor rose from the crowd: “I heard y’all will
pay for us to go to school,” “Could you possibly pay for my tuition? I’ve been thinking about
taking a class,” and so on.

The session leader replied, “We do not pay for college education. Now, we do have a
program available, three weeks long. It offers a certification in building trades, and we can pay
tuition for that.”

Complaints and grumbles all around, except for the older black man, who said, “You
know, I think I might try that out.”

The rest of our two-and-a-half our session was invested in learning how to network
through friends and professionals to seek work in our chosen fields. “As long as I ain’t using a
computer to do it,” said the woman in the pink hoodie.

Over the rest of the first week, we learned such interviewing tips as smiling and making
eye contact and wearing deodorant. The leader informed us that our shoes must always look
good, because security guards have said they spot potential suspects by the quality of their shoes.
Mine were falling apart, but that very night, I polished them anyway. She said studies showed
that men who wore beards weren’t trusted, and though this statement felt racist against Sikh men,
I shaved off my thick facial hair, and the next day, the leader noted my newly groomed face.

The second week was dedicated to résumés: what to put in it, how to phrase it, how to
tweak the formatting so that it was exactly one page or exactly two pages. Every day, my
colleagues asked when we were going to learn about cover letters, and every day the leader
replied that we weren’t going to learn cover letters because the only thing they did was prove to
the employer you had good writing skills. How my colleagues maintained this daily amnesia, I had no idea. Our leader said that we needed to be sure to have an e-mail address because that was how employers contacted applicants nowadays, and the woman in the pink hoodie went apoplectic and threatened to drop out of the program altogether, but then reasoned she had to stick with it so she could get her unemployment check.

The last two days were spent in a computer lab, putting our résumés together. The leader expected us to write the résumé for our dream job, and I kept stating that I didn’t have the thirty credit-hours of early-childhood ed for my dream job, and she told me that I must aim high if I hoped to hit anything.

And so I finished the two weeks with a shaven face and polished-but-raggedy shoes and a résumé prepared for a job for which I was unqualified. Thus Workforce Development released me into the wide world.

I was ready to work.

Every Monday morning I turned on my computer to report that I was looking for a job. And I would spend the week looking for jobs on Craigslist and Monster.com. My friends on Facebook and LiveJournal told me I had a great background for daycare; between my résumé and my charming personality, an employer would gladly overlook my lack of credentials. I argued that any daycare worth its salt would not violate the law just so they could hire me. There were unaccredited daycares, but knowing what I knew of the industry, I shuddered to think what such an environment, sans regulation, might entail. I thought about administrative work, as well, because of my time back in Indiana as a Kelly Services office temp. But all the positions I looked at asked for multiple years of experience and software expertise beyond my ability. And
then there were the scams, door-to-door sales disguised as “warehouse distribution,” payment for
filling out online surveys.

Week after week, month after month, more of the same. My student loans went back in
default because my unemployment checks couldn’t cover rent, food, and repayment. Regardless
of what I did or didn’t do, what I tried or didn’t try, nothing mattered. I didn’t matter. There was
no place in America for someone like me, someone with inadequate experience and insufficient
education, someone who didn’t luck into the genetic lottery that might have given me a better
shot at a Bachelor’s degree. There was no job for me.

And then, the third week of August, without warning or explanation, there was no
unemployment check for me.

Llewellyn and I acted fast. He couldn’t afford to let my room go idle, unpaid for, but he
didn’t want to put me straight out on the street. So, a compromise: a new housemate would take
my place upstairs, while I would reside for one month, rent-free, in the utility room adjacent to
Llewellyn’s room in the basement while I sought something more permanent.

So I shifted my possessions down two floors as new guy Rick joined Cassie and Toby
upstairs. It was as you’d expect a utility room to be: dark, dusty, windowless. And I had to work
around Llewellyn, cutting through his room to get upstairs. Whenever I passed him, there was an
ache, a sympathy, a hopelessness, all worn on his face at once.

I no longer had an unemployment check. No more need to file reports of my job search.
No more need to search for a job. Because I was utterly unwanted.
look at me pathetic a useless lump no good to anyone uneducated ignorant hick can’t do anything can’t do a fucking thing nothing to offer the world nothing to give I am nothing no one wants me Tony doesn’t talk to me anymore understandable he has a boyfriend and I have no one no one no one no one look at Marnie she has two men Jack and Pete and I have nobody nobody nobody nobody cares and why should they I have nothing to offer a man no money no looks nothing nothing and what’s the point there is no point no point to try to find a job anymore no point to tell my friends no point no point no point to keep on liv— NO NO NO must go to the hospital must call someone Marybeth please help please please please help
Undisclosed Location

Minneapolis
Chapter 28

For two weeks, I was an inpatient at City General Hospital. From past stays in Missouri and Indiana, I knew the game. Get out of bed, shower, and dress every morning. Eat meals when served. Take your medications. Attend group sessions. Speak in group sessions. Chat on neutral subjects with patients and staff. Spend your down time out of your bed and out of your room, watching TV or reading, playing board games or putting together jigsaws, doing crosswords or using the exercise equipment, anything other than lying in bed doing nothing. At City General, they even incentivized these positive behaviors, with passes for group visits to the rec room or the solarium, four-hour passes so you could relax or run errands outside the hospital, even passes for field trips to the movies or the zoo. The aim, of course, was to work one’s way up to release from inpatient.

But it seemed to me that not all the patients had figured out the rules to the game. I asked a nurse why, and she replied, “Remember that some people here are sicker than others, so it takes them longer to recover. If you’re well enough to realize what you need to do to get out, and to actually do what it takes, that’s a privilege. Not everyone here has that privilege right now.”

On the third day of my stay, I was administered the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, a standard test to determine diagnosis. I hadn’t taken the test since I’d enrolled in Vocational Rehabilitation back in Indiana, and didn’t understand why I needed to take it, as I’d given the staff my diagnosis of bipolar disorder when I checked myself in.

City General’s psych unit offered me a space to rest and heal, to establish a routine, to rediscover some version of myself other than the one that wished my entire being into nonexistence. And, unlike in Missouri or Indiana, they offered me options for after-care. They lined me up with a disability-services worker for the long term, a short, handsome, fiftyish Jewish guy named Noah, filling in the gap I’d made in my life by dropping Tiffany, a move
perhaps I never should have made to begin with. Noah met me in the hospital, helping me to set
the wheels in motion so that I could secure housing. For the short term, he’d get me signed up to
enter a group home. I protested, “That’s for people much worse off than myself,” and he replied,
“It’s that or a homeless shelter, and of the two, in my opinion, the group home is a far better
option.” But it wouldn’t be forever, as he’d help me sign up for the public-housing waiting list.
And I could extend my recovery by shifting from inpatient to the Partial Program, if I so chose.

Before Marybeth had picked me up to go to the ER, I posted to my friends on
LiveJournal about my situation and told them I’d appreciate a visit. So one afternoon, Llewellyn,
Marybeth, Jack, and Marnie all came over together. We sat at a table, the afternoon talk shows
droning on the TV behind us. It was simple pleasantries, how was I doing, what did I like here.
“I’m grateful for visitors,” I said, “there are folks who don’t get any at all, but it’s still all a little
embarrassing.”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” said Marnie. “We’re just glad you’re getting the help
you need.”

“Yeah, man,” said Jack. “We want you to stick around a good long time.”

Marybeth cleared her throat. “I had a friend do something like what you were thinking
about doing.” Clever; she was coding her language so as not to upset the other possibly-suicidal
patients nearby. “I vowed I would do anything in my power to keep that happening from another
friend.”

“It’s just, I’m a wreck. I know I make life hard on all of you, especially you, Llewellyn,
because you were stuck having to living with me. I’m just so hard to put up with.”
“Dude,” said Llewellyn. He never used the word “dude” unless he was dead serious. “I don’t think of you as some random tenant off the street. You’re my friend. And I want to see you taking good care of yourself.”

Visiting hours ended, and the four parted. I was loved. Couldn’t understand why, but I was.

Finally, on the first of October, I was released to the Partial Program; unlike Sinai’s, this was a three-week program that could begin on any day of the week, so I began straightaway. And I was set to move into my new home.

Like they kept saying in group therapy, one step at a time.

I stood on the stoop of a nondescript three-story brick building and buzzed the intercom. A shaky, elderly woman replied she’d have to find the manager to take care of my paperwork. I waited with Marybeth for the door to open. “Come downstairs,” came a younger female voice.

I dragged my bags down to a small office. “Hi, I’m Whitney,” replied a young woman, clothes, hair, and nails all on point, “and I’m the manager here. This is Tessa,” a frumpy older woman, heavyset and white-headed, nodded, “and she does a little bit of everything around here. Welcome.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Um, before we sign the paperwork and all, can my friend and I take my stuff up to my room?”

“I’m afraid guests are not permitted anywhere but the dining room,” replied Whitney.

“But I’ve got a lot of stuff; Marybeth and I will just be up and down if it’s two of us carrying the load.”
“We have to protect the privacy of the residents here. Tessa can help you with your bags once we’re done up here.”

Marybeth and I exchanged knowing looks. This was my new reality.

Whitney led me through a stack of forms. One paper signed me up for my new income allotment, $101 a month, provided by the city of Minneapolis but funded by the state. Another transferred all my prescriptions to a service that delivered to the house. I would have no access to my own medication; they would all be administered by licensed staff. Yet another document had me promise that I would never reveal the identities of anyone living in the facility; if I ran into another resident in public, we could not acknowledge how we knew each other. “And remember, if you have any questions about anything, just ask,” said Whitney.

“I do have one question: How do I access your wifi?”

Whitney huffed. “We do not have wifi here. I don’t even have a computer in the office, as you can see. I have to do everything in pen and ink.”

I gave Marybeth a hug good-bye and scooped up some of my possessions and headed upstairs, Tessa following silently behind with the rest. I didn’t have everything with me, as there simply wouldn’t have been room; Marybeth had agreed to store the rest of my worldly goods until I moved into public housing from here.

Here. It was just “here” to me, not home. I wondered if I’d ever know what home meant. But I was here. And as far as anyone I knew was concerned, “here” was a boarding house. Because I was too ashamed to tell anyone I was living in a group home.
The nurse comes on Thursdays from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. Her main purpose is to perform blood-sugar checks for diabetic residents, but you can ask her medical questions if you want.

The kitchen is unable to make any accommodations for special diets.

Breakfast is served from 8:00 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. Lunch is served from 11:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Dinner is served from 6:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. All meals are first-come first-served; if the kitchen runs out of food, there will be nothing available until the next meal.

You are not allowed to keep food in your room.

There is no longer a barber service.

You will be assigned the day on which your laundry will be washed. You must bring your laundry to the laundry room by 2:00 p.m. on your assigned day. It will be finished by 8:00 p.m. You must pick up your laundry the evening it is finished. You may not do your own laundry. Handwashing your laundry in your bathroom is not allowed.

Quiet hours are from 10:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.

There are two TV rooms, one smoking and one non-smoking.

Residents may not smoke in their rooms.

Sexual activity is not permitted on the premises.

Drugs and alcohol are not permitted on the premises.

I enjoyed a rare privilege: a room of my own. Nearly everyone in the group home shared a bedroom, but my space was divided up as a two-bedroom suite with a shared bathroom. The building had once been an apartment building, but back in the early 1970s, when the group home had been founded to house returning disabled Vietnam vets, the apartments had been diced up
willy-nilly to hold more residents. My bedroom had once been a kitchen, complete with cabinetry and a nonfunctioning sink. My suitemate’s room was twice the size of mine, as it had once been a living room. It struck me: with my own room, I was one of few in the building who had the privacy to jerk off.

My suitemate was named Rick; he was the only resident in the building anywhere my age. When first we met, he seemed likable enough, a talkative, sheepdog personality. “Yeah, this is a great place, man. I’m so happy to be here. This place is really turning my life around. I needed to get off the streets. It’s just the best thing in the world. I’m so glad I’m living in sober housing now.”

I wondered if he knew what “sober housing” meant. Though alcohol was forbidden on site, we could still drink elsewhere, and the group home offered no addiction-support services whatsoever. But I held my tongue, as I had just met the guy.

“I don’t know,” I replied to Rick. “I’m not trying to settle in too much. I’ve signed up for public housing, and if I’m lucky, I’ll get out soon.”

“Well, this place is just awesome, man. I hope you get to stick around a real long time.”
Chapter 29

Every weekday for three weeks, I followed a strict schedule. After breakfast, I walked from the group home to City General. I spent five-and-a-half hours there, including a lunch break. The sessions varied—Group Therapy, Life Skills, Symptom Management, Crafts, and so on—nearly everything we needed, and almost nothing I’d had at the hospitals in Missouri or Indiana.

My one point of frustration was that, when I told the therapists and group members the story of my life, I didn’t cry, the only patient not to do so. And I couldn’t get why this disturbed them so. I’d told my story many times, and cried my tears long ago.

I’m sitting at the kitchen table, drawing a picture of my invisible friends Doug and Sally. They are fun to play with, and they help me. Dad is sitting at the end of the table. Mom is washing dishes. She is always washing dishes. We have a dishwasher but Dad won’t fix it. He always says Mom doesn’t deserve a dishwasher, and that she’s his dishwasher.

Dad hasn’t said anything all day. This isn’t good.

Mom washes the dishes, and she doesn’t say a word. Dad always says she doesn’t deserve to talk. He says she doesn’t deserve to eat because she never does anything to earn the right to eat. Dad is fat. Mom is skinny.

Dad pounds the table, hard. He shakes my crayon. Mom turns around. Dad takes his pointer finger and draws a line along his throat. Then he points at Mom. He draws a line on his throat again and points at himself.

I run out the back door even though it’s cold out and I don’t have a coat. I scream and scream because I don’t know what else to do because I’m going to be an orphan tonight,
Of all the group-home staff, I’d taken a liking to Tessa the most. A bit more verbose, a bit more intelligent, really the only one I could have a decent conversation with in the whole building. So many of the residents were sunk so deep in their varying disabilities, in a perpetual state of animosity or stupor or anxiety. Chats with Tessa were a refuge within my refuge from homelessness.

One day, I showed her a bit of handiwork from my craft time at the hospital. “Gracious,” she said, “I don’t know if you know, but I design jewelry. I’ve been doing it for decades. And you show some real talent. I have a whole bunch of beads and wire and I’d love it if I could give some to you so you can develop as a jewelry designer.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“Just, we have to keep it between us. It’s against the rules for staff to give gifts to residents.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t.”

“Let me tell you, I’ve been working here a long time. Some of these rules are godawful. They don’t do a thing to help the residents, and they sure don’t give anyone a chance to make something of themselves here, or, heaven forbid, find a way out of here.”

“What if you get in trouble?”

“Then that’s on me, not you. Just keep it between us is all I ask.”

When I reached the end of Partial, the doctors offered me further treatment, a program called Forward. It ran for two months, meeting twice a week. Not everyone went on to this program, but they had determined I was a good candidate. Meetings were held at City General
three hours a day, twice a week, for eight weeks. I accepted their offer. At this point, I was willing to do anything to be fixed for good.

On Day One, I entered a meeting room familiar from my stay in Partial. More patients trickled in, six altogether, and then two therapists, who introduced themselves to the group. I knew Jamie from Partial, as he’d led most of our small-group therapy. The other, Tierney, was new to me; she seemed upbeat and vocal, a foil to Jamie’s laid-back attitude.

“Welcome to Forward,” said Tierney. “You are here as a select group of patients who have been identified as having what we call Emotional Intensity Disorder.” This was the first I’d heard of such a diagnosis. “Over the next eight weeks, our program, the second of its kind in the country, will make use of the practices of Dialectic Behavioral Therapy to teach you how to manage your symptoms. Our focus is twofold. We will look at how to process and analyze poor thinking processes so that you can short-circuit the trains of thought that cause problems down the road. That’s my job. Jamie here”—he nodded—“will teach us the practice of mindfulness. Put the two together, and you’re on your way to a happy and healthy future. Now, if each of you will introduce yourselves and what you hope to get out of the program, we can get started.”

The other five patients hemmed and hawed, so I spoke first. “I’m here, I guess, because I want to get my life together and overcome the abuse from my past. I got laid off from a job that didn’t treat me very well. My dad, he was abusive. And at one point I was in a cult that was run out of a coffeehouse. And I spent ten years in this fake therapy trying to turn straight—”

Tierney interrupted, “That can’t be. There’s no such thing anymore. Everyone who licenses therapists came out against this decades ago.”

“But these were unlicensed therapists,” I replied.

Jamie turned to Tierney. “Yeah, it’s a thing. Whittier talked about it some in Partial.”
“Anyway, I just want to live healthier, so here I am.”

The other patients took their turn, or tried to. They were all so quiet yet so intense. I wasn’t sure how I, who loved to talk, was going to fit in with them.

The mornings would be split in two, with Tierney educating us about our illness and teaching us coping mechanisms, while during the remaining ninety minutes, Jamie would lead us through meditation, crafts, and other exercises. “Why is crafts part of the Forward Program?” I asked.

“Crafts can help in a number of ways,” Jamie replied. “They involve planning and goal-setting. They can help you let go of perfectionism, and boost your self-esteem.”

“Hm, that’s new to me,” I said. Every hospital I’ve ever been to before, they said the craft time was either to help you regain your fine motor skills after starting a new med, or just to pass the time.”

“We’re a thorough and state-of-the-art program,” said Tierney.

After the first day, I headed to the library so I could read up more on Emotional Intensity Disorder. Google wasn’t very friendly to my search. It turned out that the phrase was used only by one medical school in the country, and City General had just happened to have established a working relationship with that school. Emotional Intensity Disorder was known to the rest of the world as Borderline Personality Disorder. The signs and symptoms: Extreme emotional reactions, impulsive behaviors, unstable relationships. I thought of how that diagnosis might fit me. The first, maybe. The second, I wasn’t too impulsive. The third, I didn’t get much chance to build relationships for them to turn unstable. I wondered if the other patients would bother googling their diagnosis, if they would tell their regular doctors what their diagnosis was, if their
doctors would laugh them out of the office for claiming an affliction that sounded totally made up.

As the weeks unfolded, certain patterns emerged in the Forward program. The other patients much preferred Jamie to Tierney; they found her bossy and unpleasant. Craft time frequently turned into a debate between Jamie and me: “I want to make jewelry today,” I’d say. “I’d like you to branch out into something you haven’t done before,” said Jamie. “But I’m trying to practice jewelry design; it’s not useful if I do something else.” “Why does it have to be useful? Why can’t it just be for your own enjoyment?” And every day, one of the patients, a young Hmong immigrant man named Tou, didn’t say a word, no matter how much Jamie and Tierney prodded him to speak.

On the last day of the eight weeks, after Tierney’s half of the meeting, I asked to speak with her privately. The other patients left on break. “Tou really upsets me,” I said. “He doesn’t do anything. He hasn’t engaged in treatment at all.”

Tierney turned a hardened gaze up to me. “Maybe you should recognize that Tou comes from a different culture, and that the way he’s been engaging in treatment is culturally appropriate. And maybe you should be less focused on him, and more focused on these issues with your father, because if you don’t, I’m afraid this anger and hatred you have towards him may well destroy you.”

As Jamie and the patients returned for meditation time, I sat, dumbfounded. I thought I’d forgiven my father long ago. I’d been a Christian, and Christians just forgave people without thinking about it. I wasn’t a Christian anymore, but it felt like a waste of time just to stew about the past. Except maybe I was still stewing. Not at him, but at myself.
Jamie pressed play on the CD player, New Age chimes streaming out. And as Jamie instructed us to breathe in and breathe out, to focus only on our breathing, to let our attention return to our breathing if we caught it wandering, I could only think of how I’d internalized everything my father had ever called me. *Stupid. Mental-retarded. Useless.* I had integrated my father’s abuse into the core of my being, and, in a twisted way, I refused to forgive him by not forgiving myself.

Tierney was right. If I didn’t change that inner monologue, I would destroy myself.

Rachel had given me a complimentary ticket to a play she was performing in at the Woman’s Club Minneapolis, a rare opportunity for a proper evening out. I dressed up, caught a quick bus to the club, walked in, and stood in awe. Statues and paintings and fresh-cut flowers and the finest furniture. Only one place I’d ever been was fancier, and that was an actual castle during my summer in England.

After she and her cast members took their bows, I met Rachel in front of the stage. “It’s so lovely out,” she said, “perhaps we could take a long walk back to your place.”

“That would be a very long walk.”

“But I haven’t seen you in so long, and I could really stand to just hang out with someone and decompress. It’s been a tough performance week.”

“Okay.”

Outside, it was unusually warm, up in the fifties, a good evening for a walk. And as we strolled, we chatted about many things: the meaning of being an artist, the difficulties of a challenging family background, and the awkwardness of finding one’s fit in Minnesota when one isn’t born there. But mostly the last one.
When we reached my building, Rachel asked if she could come in. “Not allowed,” I replied. “Well, technically we can meet in the dining room, but it’s not really a place for private conversation.”

“Oh, okay. How about we just hang out on the stoop here?”

We took a seat on the front step, scooting over to make sure any residents could pass through. “So, like, who lives here?” Rachel asked.

“There’s forty-five of us. Mostly Vietnam vets. All but three are women.”

Rachel got a sly look in her eye. “Ooh, that’s some ratio. I bet they really get up to stuff here, if you know what I mean.”

“No, no. Sexual activity is forbidden here.”

“Oh, c’mon, I gotta imagine there’s something going on.”

“I don’t think you understand. Most of the folks here are so far gone that they don’t even know where they are most of the time.”

“Wow. I didn’t know it was like that.” A long pause. “Are you sure you’re okay here?”

“It’s not like I have a choice.”

The two of us wrapped up our conversation and gave each other a quick hug as Rachel ran off to catch her bus.

Once inside, I found a note posted to my bedroom door. The building was to be treated for bedbugs.
Chapter 30

Tessa was a reader, which gave us another subject to talk about when I hung out at the office desk. So I thought I’d lend her my copy of City of God. “Who wrote it?” she asked.

“E. L. Doctorow.”

“Oh. He’s a man. I don’t like to read men.”

“Okay…”

“I don’t read men at all. I’m a feminist, and the writing of men just turns me off.”

“All I can tell you is that this book is incredible. I’ve never read anything like it.”

“Oh, okay, I’ll read it, but no guarantees I’ll like it.”

Two weeks later, I brought down from my room a necklace to show Tessa. It lacked symmetry, and the clasp was on cockeyed, but I was proud of it.

“Wow, that is just gorgeous,” she said. “You really have a knack for jewelry, I’m telling you. Oh, by the way, here’s your book back.”

“What did you think?”

“Honestly, I tried to get into it, but I simply couldn’t get past the fact that it was written by a man. I don’t really like anything created by a man.”

I’d been watching the news for months. Tim Pawlenty, Minnesota’s Republican governor, had targeted funding for the poor in his budget proposal, and I imagined it was only a matter of time before the group home would be hit. Who knew what could happen; maybe they’d shut the group home down altogether. Fine by me, I figured, as I could imagine a hundred scenarios better than living here, but it would be a death knell to the men who wandered the facility in a constant daze, to leave the only home they’d known since returning from the Vietnam War forty years before.
Then the official budget was passed. Amongst other cuts, the stipends to group-home residents was to be cut, from $101 a month to $89 a month. At dinner that day, I let some of my neighbors know, or at least those who had their wits about them. “Doesn’t affect me, I get veteran’s benefits, fifteen hundred a month.” “Yup, same here.” “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re just always full of hot air. Shut up and get out of here.”

The evangelical echo in my brain told me to be grateful. I had a roof over my head. I got three meals a day, usually, when they didn’t run out of food by the time I got there; who cared that the meals were sodium-filled and unbalanced and the diabetics couldn’t eat them at all? And I got my medicine, which is more than I could say about Indiana.

I had no idea how to make $89 a month work. I still tried to hang out with friends, when I could, and that cost money, a cup of coffee, at least. Sometimes I took myself out to eat so that I could escape the madhouse that was now my home; sometimes I had to eat out because I was at the end of the line at mealtime and they had run out of food. When I moved in, I bought a prepaid phone since I could no longer afford Verizon, and that cost $10 a month.

But I’d make it all work somehow. I always did. Besides, I had no choice.

January 19, 2010, 9:00 a.m. I met Marybeth and Jack in the lobby of the Hennepin County Justice Center. They would serve as the witnesses to vouch for my identity. I was officially changing my name, finally. I’d found out that, in the State of Minnesota, if you could prove you had a low enough income, they would waive civil-court fees, and it doesn’t get much lower than $89 a month.

We took the elevator to the 27th floor and awaited our turn with Judge Regina Chu. Another man went before me. He was a Somali immigrant who wanted to change his name to a
word that meant “riches,” because he believed in America and loved the country he had made his home and become a citizen of, and now he wanted a name that reflected his hope for the future. Then it was our turn. I handed the bailiff my paperwork. Jack swore he’d known me at least a year, and Marybeth affirmed so, because Quakers don’t swear oaths. Judge Chu asked me why I wanted to change my name. I replied, “I have many reasons, and I imagine you don’t want all of them, but a big one is that I’m named after my father, and I’m not my father, I’m my own man.”

And, just like that, I was, officially and forever, Whittier Nathan Strong. I felt, for the first time in a long time, that I had some control over my life.

I was the second to arrive in the basement meeting room of the Men’s Center. The first was Dominic, the leader of the discussion group for gay and bi men. As he set out day-old doughnuts and decaf coffee for us to munch on, I explained to him how I’d come to find his group, that I was following through on a promise I’d made to my therapists at the hospital to make more connections to gay men. “This will be great for that,” he said. I asked Dominic if there was anything I could to help, and he pointed out a stack of folding chairs and asked me to set up about twenty in a circle.

As 7:30 p.m. drew near, the men filtered in, about a dozen altogether, and we took our seats, some chatting with those they already knew, others snacking on doughnuts. At the appointed time, Dominic rang a bell and welcomed us. He passed around laminated sheets that listed the rules—we would go around the circle, introduce ourselves, and mention if there was anything we wanted to discuss with the group; we wouldn’t talk over each other; we wouldn’t let anything discussed out of the room.
The guy next to me was named Ken. “I feel fortunate. I have a great boyfriend. But my depression gets in the way sometimes, and that hinders my relationship with him. So I’d like to talk about how to help your partner when you’re depressed.”

*Must be nice,* I thought, *to actually be able to have a relationship. But it looks like it is possible to have a relationship and depression at the same time.*

I looked around the room and took my turn. “My name’s Whittier, and, I don’t know. I’m just getting out of the hospital, and I need some kind of community. I’m the only gay man in my circle. I used to belong to a gay social group, but I just couldn’t afford to go anymore, and I never really clicked with the guys there—”

“Yeah, good luck connecting with the men in this town,” came a voice from across the circle.

“Remember, no interrupting,” said Dominic.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I mean, I’m kind of screwed up. I was in ex-gay therapy a long time, and that really messed with my brain. The folks at the hospital just figured I need some kind of social support with other gay men. I’m not even exactly sure what I want to talk about tonight, but I just figured I’d introduce myself.”

The discussion ran for an hour, mostly centered on depression, relationships, and community. Dominic was an expert group leader, coaxing the quiet ones to say something, reining in the ones who tried to dominate the conversation. This group might not be the sort of thing I would want for the rest of my life, but for now, it was just what I needed.

After we closed out for the evening, a few of us milled around to chat; I needed to wait for my bus home, anyway. I fell into conversation with Dominic and Ken. “Great meeting,” I said to Dominic. “How long have you been running it?”
“About three years now,” Dominic replied. “I saw a need in our community, and figured I could help to fill it. I have a background in organizational psychology, so I’m always thinking in terms of how to create community.”

“Yeah, what is the deal here in the Twin Cities?” I asked. “What makes it so hard?”

“It’s a lot of factors. But for gay men, in particular, the world is changing. We used to build our community around the bars, and now everything’s being taken over by technology. We have the Grindr app now, so guys aren’t getting out and meeting each other in natural social settings.” I didn’t have the Grindr app. I couldn’t imagine affording a smartphone, and besides, guys didn’t want me.

“That,” said Ken, “and some of the guys in this town are just pricks.”

Dominic laughed. “There’s that, too. But that’s true everywhere.”

Ken turned to me. “You mentioned something I hadn’t heard of, ‘ex-gay therapy.’ What’s that?”

“It’s this pseudo-therapy that’s supposed to turn you straight,” I said. “Dangerous stuff.”

“How is that even a thing?” Ken asked.

“You’d be surprised what’s out there,” said Dominic.

“Hey,” I said, “my bus is about to get here, but I was wondering, would you guys mind if I added you on Facebook?”

They both agreed. My first meeting, and already I was making friends.

Rick and I discovered a note taped to our door: The next day, our floor was to receive a heat treatment for bedbugs. I didn’t even know our place needed the treatment, as I’d seen no evidence of any such critters; regardless, we had to vacate for the day, and remove anything and
everything that might melt or explode, as the suite would be heated to 140°F. I’d spend the day sitting in the public-library computer lab, a bag of aerosols and candles at my side.

I returned from the library in time for dinner, and after eating, headed up to the suite. I opened the front door, the heat blasting me. Then down the hall, into my room, and shock. My room had been destroyed. My books had been thrown all over. Every single bag of beads had been dumped all over the floor, thousands of them, everywhere. It would take hours to sort and rebag them. They had no respect for me and my belongings.

I opened a window to help cool the room. And as I began the arduous task of putting my possessions back in order, I noticed one item missing: a sex toy I’d used on occasion for years. Why the hell would they steal something like that?

And then I remembered: No sexual activity is permitted in the facility. Not even masturbation in a single room.

I came down from my room to take my Friday night medications. It was 8:00 p.m.; ideally, I should have taken them about an hour earlier, but owing to the group-home staffing, we were all given our medications at the same time for the sake of efficiency. I’d protested when I first moved in, telling them it would be harder to wake up in a timely manner if I took them later, but Whitney said that was just the way it was and it was up to me to adjust.

So I waited in line, and when I got up to the desk, I noticed that my Seroquel was missing. “Tessa, did something happen to my Seroquel?”

“These are the medicines I have for you.”

“Did they screw up my prescription or something? Did you accidentally hand my Seroquel to someone else?”
“I handed out the medication exactly as they were laid out on the tray. It looks like whoever was responsible just forgot to give you your medicine.”

“Can’t you just get the Seroquel for me?”

“I’m not licensed to dose medicine, only to pass it out. You’re going to have to wait until Monday.”

“But that’s unacceptable. I’m not going to get any sleep this weekend because I don’t have any bloody Seroquel, because someone else screwed up. I know how to freaking administer my own medication, I don’t need any help, and I sure as hell wouldn’t have screwed up like that.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s just how it is. You want to change the rules, you write the Board of Health.”

As if I’d have the concentration to write a letter with zero sleep.

I strategized my weekend the best I could. After dinner I went up to my room and played Minesweeper on my computer, rendered mostly useless without internet access, until I started getting tired around 2:00 a.m., around which time my roommate Rick stumbled down the hall of our suite and into his room. Drunk again, from the sound of it. I lay down, my whirring brain fighting sleep another hour till finally I shut down. I awoke at 8:25 and ran down to the dining room. “Sorry, we’re out,” the cook said.

“But it’s not 8:30 yet.”

“I can’t help that.”

I left for the library, where I planned to stay until 5:30 p.m., then walk back home in time for dinner. The public library was my sanctuary, their computer lab my one window beyond my
ever-shrinking life in the group home, the books my sole intellectual engagement, as I’d given up on Tessa after her ham-fisted rebuttal of Doctorow.

As soon as the library opened, I headed up to the computer lab and set a two-hour reservation. My computing habits were a little different now. I opened two browsers, one where I cycled through e-mail and LiveJournal and whatever else had struck my fancy, the other opened to Facebook and its endless stream of news from friends. (I’d long since abandoned MySpace.) LiveJournal had sent me an alert; user VeronikaS wanted to add me as a friend. I didn’t know her, though apparently we had a couple of friends in common. I looked through her blog. Half the entries were in Russian. My brain told me this was an automated account, thanks to the new Russian owners of LiveJournal, but my heart told me VeronikaS was an actual, authentic person. I went with my heart.

When my two hours were up, the lab was not yet fully occupied, allowing me to add fifteen minutes to my reservation until there was a waiting list for a computer. It was warm and sunny out, the snow of winter almost completely melted away, and if there was one thing I knew from my days as a museum worker, it was the people avoid the indoors when it’s nice out. So I launched into a diatribe, both on LiveJournal and Facebook, about what had happened to my medication. Friends commiserated. They told me to report the group home, to sue, but I passed on to them what Tessa had once told me: “Sure, you can report the place, and then the state will come in and shut it down and everyone will be homeless. It sucks, but there’s not really anything that can be done to make this place better.” One friend asked, “But I thought where you lived, it was mostly veterans, so wouldn’t they be treated better?” I replied, “This is how we treat our veterans.” Another said that the place I described didn’t sound much like a boarding house. I skirted the subject.
I skipped lunch because I couldn’t afford it and didn’t want to go home and, besides, Seroquel withdrawal kills the appetite. So I cycled through the afternoon, re-reserving every fifteen minutes, aiming only to occupy my time until I had to leave for dinner. Finally, the intercom announced that the library would be closing in half an hour, and I headed home.

At dinnertime, I could only manage to eat half of what was offered. My suitemate Rick glared at me the whole time. I had no idea why.

Back upstairs, I sat back down at my computer and ran through a few dozen games of Minesweeper. At 8:00 p.m. I went down for an insufficient dosage of medicine. More Minesweeper, and then I collapsed in bed at 10:00 p.m. And then ugh huh? what’s that noise what time is it 3:00 a.m. why am i waking WHAT is going on outside my door it’s Rick La-di-da look at me, I’m Whittier! Fucking faggot oh no he’s drunk again but he’s never gone on like this I’m the fucking faggot Whittier, look at all the pretty faggy jewelry I make no no no I must stay perfectly quiet he can’t know I’m here he could bust right in and beat me up don’t make a sound don’t make a sound Fucking faggot, why am I stuck living with this fucking faggot, he’s always saying he wants to get out of here, well, I can think of a couple of ways to get him out of here ohmygod he’s going to kill me don’t make a sound don’t make a sound wait wait wait for him to fall asleep oh my GOD I’m not safe here not safe at all I’ve GOT to find my way out of here what am I going to do what will I do is he asleep yet? not making any noise he’s shut up in bed I think I hear a snore oh my GOD what am I going to do

I slid out of bed as quietly as I could, threw some clothes on, grabbed my phone, and flew out the suite door so as not to wake Rick. I had to talk to someone, but who, at this late hour? Not Marybeth, I imposed on her too much. Jack? No, same problem. Marnie? Okay, Marnie,
even though calling her might well wake Jack. Oh, well, what else could I do? I reiterated to
Marnie everything that had happened, and asked if I could meet her at least so I could settle my
nerves, and she agreed to rendezvous at a 24-hour diner nearby. All along the walk to the diner, I
kept one eye over my shoulder in case Rick had tried to follow me, reminding myself I wasn’t
paranoid, just afraid, as Rick had given me just cause to be afraid.

I took a seat in the diner, and Marnie texted that she was almost there. The waitress asked
what I wanted, and I said a glass of ice water for now; in truth, I had no money for anything else.
Then Marnie showed up. “Can I get you anything?” she asked me.

“No, I’m fine.” I wasn’t, of course.

“So, what do you think is going to happen?”

“I think my roommate is going to kill me.”

“I think the odds of that are unlikely.”

“But you should have heard him tonight. There was this menace in his voice like I’ve
never heard before.”

“Still, just mathematically, the odds are in your favor. It’s not like murder is common.
And you said he’s drunk, and he’s never acted like that before. He probably just needs the night
to sober up, and then he’ll be fine in the morning.”

“But in the end, I don’t deserve to be threatened in my own home.” I thought of the house
on Pillsbury Avenue, and how Bill had threatened me, and how my landlord Seth had done
nothing about it.”

“True. But what can you do about it right now?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

“Can you do anything about it later on?”
“I suppose I can talk to the manager Whitney on Monday.”

“Good. That sounds sensible.”

“I guess it does. Thanks for helping me figure this out.”

“Anytime. Now, how about I drive you back home and you can try to get a good night’s rest?”

We did just that, and I fell fast asleep.

The next morning, I slept through breakfast again. I thought about going to the Quaker meeting. I hadn’t been in a little while. I always felt like I was imposing on everyone there, and I didn’t feel like I had much in common with anyone. Maybe I’d skip again.

I planned another day at the library, more of the same. Cycling through the same sites, Facebook on one side of the screen reporting everyone’s dinners and funny cat videos. The library closed early, so I just walked all over town until I had to be back at the home at 8:00 p.m. for my still-insufficient medication. Then I sat in the non-smoking TV room until it shut down at 10:00 p.m., and from there, I got to chatting with Tessa. I didn’t tell her what had happened with Rick since she couldn’t do anything about it. In the morning, I would report to Whitney.

Monday, 10:00 a.m. As Whitney walked into her office, I for all intents ambushed her and asked if I could speak with her privately. “I can’t close the door for security reasons,” she said.

“Well, I’m going to drop my voice as low as possible, because I can’t have certain people overhearing me.”

“Fair enough.”

I sought a voice just above a whisper. “First off, I need to report that I didn’t receive adequate medication for the weekend.”
“What do you mean?”

“I mean, whoever was responsible for dispensing medication skipped my Seroquel entirely, for the whole weekend, meaning I’ve been undermedicated the whole weekend. I can’t get sufficient sleep without Seroquel.”

“Well, there’s no one available on the weekends who’s licensed to dispense.”

“I know that. Tessa told me.”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“I expect you to speak with your staff and let them know the dangers of not properly dispensing medication. I mean, I lost sleep, but there are guys around here who would suffer a lot worse if they missed their meds.”

“I assume the staff are doing their best. And you know we can’t afford to hire fully trained staff for the weekends, so that’s just how it is. But I will speak with everyone anyway.”

My shoulders dropped, more in resignation than in satisfaction. “There’s one more issue I need to address. My suitemate Rick threatened me over the weekend. He used homophobic slurs and said there were ways to get rid of me. He was drunk as a skunk, by the way.”

“Did he specifically use words like ‘murder’ or ‘kill’?”

“No.”

“Then he didn’t officially threaten you, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Do you honestly not get it? He has made me unsafe in my own home.”

“Maybe you can talk with him about it.”

“Are you kidding me? He’s made it abundantly clear he’s a homophobe. I’m best off to have nothing to do with him. At minimum, I’d like to see about moving to another room, to keep as far away from him as possible.”
“You know there’s nothing available.”

“Then I expect you to do something to ensure my safety here.”

“There’s nothing I can do. So, if you’re done, I’ve got business to take care of.”

I stood in line for daily mail call, Whitney passing out the mail for each client. I rarely got anything—this was the era of e-mail, after all—but I had never let go of the hope that I would hear from public housing and get out of this hellhole.

Whitney handed me a single envelope, mailing address from public housing. I ripped it open right in front of her and read. Six months and three weeks after I’d moved into the group home, I had been approved for public housing. But I had only one week to accept the offer on an apartment downtown; otherwise, I was to wait until the next opening came up, which would put me back down at the bottom of the list and might take another few months, or years. The latter was not an option.

“Whitney, oh my gosh, I can’t believe it, I’ve been approved for public housing!”

“Congratulations!”

“I have a week to move out.”

“Um, no, you can’t do that. You have to give me a month’s notice before leaving. That’s what you agreed to when you moved in here.”

“But public housing doesn’t give you a month. I get one week. I don’t get to choose how that works.”

“You can’t leave here without giving me one month’s notice. It takes me that long to file the paperwork and look for a new resident.”
“Listen, the longer I stay here, the worse my life gets. I’m not staying here a single day longer than I have to.”

“You’re not leaving with insufficient notice.”

“Watch me.”
North Loop Neighborhood
Downtown Minneapolis
Chapter 31

On Friday, May 28, 2010, at approximately 1:00 p.m., I moved into an apartment on the sixteenth floor of a public-housing high-rise in downtown Minneapolis.

On Friday, May 28, 2010, at approximately 1:05 p.m., I began formulating my plan for how I would move out of my apartment on the sixteenth floor of a public-housing high-rise in downtown Minneapolis.

The view through my windows (which take up the entire northwest wall of my apartment): Rolling maples and cottonwood and ginkgos—verdant in summer, ablaze in autumn, laden with snow in winter, crisp and green in spring. Towering buildings punctuate the ephemeral colors. To the right lies the rise of the St. Anthony neighborhood, the anchor of Northeast Minneapolis (or “Nordeast” in the local dialect), its tony condominiums and posh boutiques poking through the trees. West of St. Anthony is the Mississippi River, hidden from view by the aforementioned trees and buildings. In the middle of the river is Nicollet Island; from my apartment, I can see the north end of the island and the tip-tops of its stately Queen Annes, relics from when Nicollet Island was home to the upper crust of Minneapolis. Moving west into my own neighborhood, I look down upon condominiums and office buildings, restaurants and nightclubs. These stretch to the horizon.

The southwest portion of the view is cut off by the adjacent tower in my complex; thus, perpendicular to my windows are the windows of a public hallway. Anyone standing in this hallway has a full, clear view of the interior of my apartment if I open my blinds.

I keep my blinds closed most of the time.
The signs I encountered in my building, going from my apartment to the front door:

**ATTENTION!!!**
STEALING CLOTHES FROM THE LAUNDRY MACHINES IS A **FELONY BY THEFT!!!**
ANYONE CAUGHT DOING SO WILL BE ARRESTED AND PROSECUTED!!!

This Washing Machine Is Out Of Order

This sucks! We got 350 people living here and we only got 9 washers and 9 dryers and we always got at least 2 machines broken!!!

PLEASE FIX THIS!

Elevator is OUT OF ORDER. Please use other elevator. Thank you for your patience.

**NOTICE:** This bulletin board is only for messages from Minneapolis Public Housing. Residents who wish to post a public message must do so in the TV lounge on the 1st floor.

**REMINDER:**
The Food Bank comes on the 1st and 3rd Thursdays of each month at 3:30 p.m. Please provide your own bags. Please arrive early to get your food lottery ticket. Please remain in line to hear the lottery ticket numbers. If you are gone when your number is called, we’ll move on to the next number.

We’re Having A Party!
You are invited to a SPRING PARTY on Friday, April 23 at 6:00 p.m. in the Community Room.
We will be serving: Fried Chicken, Mash Potatoes, Green Beans, Corn Bread, & Ice Cream

NOTE: Outside guests are NOT ALLOWED
It is AGAINST THE LAW to spend Minneapolis Public Housing funds on Non-Residents.

Building Management Office Hours:
Mon.: 10 am – noon
Wed.: 1 pm – 3 pm
Thur.: 10 am – noon
Fri.: 1 pm – 3 pm
For months, everyone had told me about Bridging, a charity that provided furniture to destitute people. It was a great deal; you could get a whole household of furniture; no other charity came close. So, while I was still at the group home, I filed all the necessary paperwork, and just after I moved into my new apartment, arranged to visit their facility in Bloomington, not far from the Mall of America, to select my furnishings. (Marybeth would return the possessions I’d stored at her place, but I no longer owned any furniture.)

I picked my way through their warehouse, rejecting the stained and faded Eighties upholsteries that dominated the space. Eventually, I matched up a sofa in a print of orange cabbage roses, a burgundy leatherette recliner, and a brown tweed love seat; a chair and desk for my computer. I chose a nice, large bookcase, and a solid chest-of-drawers, and a full-sized bed. The box springs were dirtyish, with grey specks, but for charity furniture, it looked to be in good shape. A handful of botanical prints rounded out my ensemble. My new home would look a bit like an English hunting lodge. I couldn’t imagine anything cozier.

To let someone into the building from my apartment, my guest would dial a number from the entry way, a landline (that I had picked up just for this purpose) would ring in my apartment, I would pick up the phone, dial a code, and this would buzz the door open for them. Except it
wasn’t working; Noah had shown up for our weekly meeting, and he was calling me, but as soon as I picked up the phone, it disconnected. So I called him from my cellphone and told him I’d be right down. Down sixteen flights on the elevator and to the door to let him in. Except, he couldn’t just walk into the building. First, Noah had to stop by the security desk, show the guard his driver’s license who then copied down the information, tell the guard the number of the spot he’d parked in, his license-plate number, and the number of the apartment he was going to. I mentioned to the guard that my phone line seemed not to be working, and he just shrugged and replied, “Yeah, about half of them in the building are broken.”

Noah and I exchanged pleasantries as we rode up sixteen stories, and then I showed him into my apartment, proud to show off my good taste in décor, especially under the circumstances. He took a seat on the sofa, I in the loveseat.

“So, it looks like you’re settling in okay,” said Noah.

“So far, so good,” I replied. “I tell ya, it’ll be nice to have some more income. My check from the county goes up to $203 a month now, and my rent is set at $50.”

“I’ve had a few clients do the same thing, go from a group home to public housing, and it’s usually a big improvement for them.”

“It’s just... I dunno. I’m not sure I like that phrase ‘settling in.’”

“Oh, and why’s that?”

“Because I don’t want to get too settled here. I mean, practically everyone here is like seventy and eighty. This isn’t any place to build a future. And, like, if I wanted a guy here, can you imagine him wanting to go through the third degree at the security desk just to see me?”

“Maybe he’d think you’d be worth the effort.”

“Anh, I suppose you’re right. It’s just not what I want for myself for the long term.”
“Understandable. But you can think of this as a kind of staging area for your life right now. You’re in a safe and stable place, you’re not going to get the boot. You can take the time you need here to take your life to the next stage.”

“I get all that. But I still don’t want to get too comfortable. I might get stuck here.”

I had just turned thirteen when my mom moved my three siblings and me into Henderson Court Apartments. We’d been on the waitlist for four years, ever since the divorce, but the apartment-complex manager, who had been a volunteer at the battered-women’s shelter when we’d lived there, held up our application because she feared if we moved in, my father would try to come around and cause trouble. The five of us crammed into three bedrooms, the largest apartment style available in public housing.

In this neighborhood, if you went outside, you got in fistfights, guaranteed, so my siblings and I soon learned it was smarter to stay inside and focus on our schoolwork. This inspired the ire of the whole neighborhood; one time, the complex manager said to my mom, “You know, you’re raising your kids to think they’re better than everyone else,” to which my mom replied, “Anyone is better than this place.” We couldn’t flush toilet paper without an overflow, and when my mom reported this to maintenance, they said that’s just how it was, so we had to keep baskets of shitty paper in the bathrooms. Almost all the kids in my neighborhood ended up dropping out of high school. No one in my neighborhood ate the last three days of the month because that’s when the food stamps ran out.

A couple of years after I moved to St. Louis, my mom called to tell me they were moving out of Henderson Court. My brother had been secretly saving up money from his after-school job at Burger King, enough to pay first and last month’s rent on an apartment. My mom had been
clueless; my brother simply walked up to her one day, handed her a wad of cash, and said, “We’re getting out of here.” This was seven years after my family had moved in.

After I’d moved back and resumed my studies at Indiana University, I had a couple of opportunities to visit an acquaintance who had moved into Henderson Court. And there were families there, who’d lived there when we did, on their third generation in the same run-down complex, no jobs, no hope. It seemed no one had ever told them they were too good for that place.

And yet, goddammit, here I was, back in public housing. A different city, but still.

The corkboard next to the first-floor elevators was home to resident obituaries. Typically I saw one or none posted, but one day, there were four. I read through them. Three were what you would expect in a building where most were well past retirement age: Died at 82, gone to be with the Lord and her husband, devoted mother of so many children and grandmother of so many more children, had a beautiful smile. But one obituary stood out, in part because I knew who he was, at least by face, and because I had heard the awful details of how he’d died.

He lived on the fifteenth floor, and now some residents questioned the wisdom of placing someone suffering from chronic depression up so high. Not that any of us had any say as to which apartment was ours; we had to take what was available. It was the eternal contradiction of my building—so many vacancies owing to death, yet such a long waiting list. And now there was a vacancy because, in his darkest moment, this man had found his fifteenth-floor window too tempting.

His obituary said he had “wrestled with his demons” for a long time. He enjoyed volunteering at his synagogue. He was single and an only child.
He was 41.

I was 38.

I had to go where I could build a future before it was too late.
Chapter 32

I wasn’t much of a reader growing up. Not that I didn’t want to read; in fact, I was reading by the time I was two. It’s just that my mom couldn’t afford gas in the car to take me to the public library. I could have gone to my school library after classes, I suppose, but my schedule was so swamped with the orchestra rehearsals and theatre rehearsals and academic-team practices I was convinced I needed to get into the Bible college that ended up having a 99% acceptance rate that I had no time in the day for the school library. So I read everything that came into my home, mostly shampoo bottles. Not my mom’s fault, or anyone’s fault. For some reason, I lucked out on not getting the dyslexia gene. There was, of course, schoolwork to read. And I tried. I learned to get up before my siblings could interrupt my studies, because, somehow, I could half-regulate my sleep as a teenager. Yet I wasn’t a fantastic student. So often, when I should have been studying, I was sunk deep into myself, nursing a wound I couldn’t then name. I didn’t know that was what I was doing at the time; I just figured I was lazy, like everyone at church told me I was.

Then I got to Bible college. Again, I was a subpar student, but not because the work was difficult. Indeed, most of my coursework was easier than what I’d had in high school. That was part of the problem; the work was so easy I had insufficient motivation to complete it. But the bigger problem was that I invested so much energy into trying to turn straight, and trying to convince everyone I was straight, that I had nothing left over to do anything.

And yet it was at Bible college that the door to literature was unlocked to me. Not by my professors; one of them famously said, “The only book you need in this class is the Bible.” Rather, it was one of my dormmates, looking to unload part of his library one weekend. He handed me a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I was supposed to have read it my freshman year of high school but got only nine chapters in before the voice in the back of my head spoke once
again, reminding me of the deep dark secret that was going to send me to hell, so that I had to
tend to the voice, numbing myself with endless hours of television. But now I came to the book
reading it because I wanted to and not because I had to. And maybe, just maybe, reading could
be my new way to shut up the inner demons. I devoured the book in twenty-four hours straight,
reading it as I ate, as I walked around campus, reading it when I should have slept.

I needed more to read. I went to the school library, where normally I would have been
pouring over research for papers on early church history or the gospels. Tucked away in a corner
I found a fluorescent-bound book titled *Generation X*, by Douglas Coupland. The subject of
*Generation X* had come up a lot on campus lately, as the youth-ministry majors pondered how to
reach America’s youth for Christ, so I imagined this book might help me consider similar issues.
Was I wrong. Another novel devoured in twenty-four hours, but this one of a racier and more
prurient nature. Characters had extramarital sex. Some toyed with notions of something other
than heterosexuality. And there was no clear-cut moral to the reader, a cardinal sin in the realm
of Christian literature. I figured the librarian had bought the book just because the buzzword in
the title showed up in the titles of ministry-oriented books.

I had to read more of Coupland, and this was the only book of his in the library, so I
discovered the joys of the interlibrary loan and requested everything he’d written. If the librarian
had known I was reading an openly gay writer, I might well have been kicked out of school, and
if I had known I was reading an openly gay writer, I might have had a nervous breakdown on the
spot, rather than the long, drawn-out nervous breakdown that led me towards the
Washington/Elizabeth overpass.

Flash-forward; I now lived across the street from the central branch of Hennepin County
Library, home to one of the largest public collections in the country. Not long before, I visited
mostly to use the internet and escape the perils of the group home. Now, I found myself checking out everything I could get my hands on. And I still used the internet.

And there were still perils in my home.

itch itch can’t sleep why they hell can’t I sleep what is this itching OUCH what was that a bug bite? what’s going on here try to fall asleep try to OW! what the hell was that thing? something on my foot Another another another! scratch scratch what the hell go to the bathroom turn on a light damn there’s a streak of BLOOD on my foot try to go to sleep try itch itch itch itch what the fuck what is this

For a week I slept like that, thinking nothing of it, thinking the creepy-crawly feeling of my skin was just my imagination, the blood from scratching my foot too hard. Then, as I headed through my building’s atrium on my way to the library, I overheard a conversation between two little old ladies:

“Did you hear about Miss Judy? I heard she got the bedbugs.”

“Oh, no, that’s no good at all. Good thing I’ve never got them.”

“Well, now, you be careful and you won’t get them. Make sure your wash your clothes with hot water and dry them on high. And whatever you do, don’t have Miss Judy in your house.”

“I know, I know. Well, just in case I do get them, I can always schedule with the manager to get one of them heaters in my place.”

“I'm just hoping you don’t have to”

Once in the computer lab, I decided to research the nasty little creatures. I hadn’t when I lived in the group home, but then again, they hadn’t bitten my feet until they bled. My Google search gave me great insights. First of all, the group home should have been treating the entire building at once, not just one floor at a time, regardless of Whitney’s insistence that treatment was already too expensive. Second, there were telltale signs of their presence. Like stained furniture. Like little grey specks, which were the bedbugs’ droppings.

Damn. My case of bedbugs had come in on the mattress I’d got from Bridging. Though it sounded like I would have contracted them regardless.

Noah came up to my apartment for our weekly appointment. Once again I’d had to let him in up front because my intercom was still broken, despite promises from maintenance to repair it. “Here,” I said to Noah, “I have a metal folding share for you.”

“And why’s that?”

“Bedbugs.”

“I see.”

“I figured they wouldn’t get you if you sat on metal. They prefer fabric.”

Noah sat down. I imagined many healthcare workers would have insisted we meet elsewhere, or given me up as a client altogether.

“I have something I want to show you,” I said to Noah. I pulled out my latest design, a necklace in light blue beads. Most of the materials had come from what Tessa had donated to me, but I had bought some crystals and a heart-shaped clasp out of my $203 a month ($153 after rent, and not counting $200 a month in food stamps.)

“That’s really something. It looks like something my wife would buy.”
“I know I can’t sell it to you, client rules and all, but do you really think my stuff is that good?”

“I’m no expert, but it’s pretty good.”

“It’s great having this hobby. It gives me something to look forward to, helps me to concentrate and set a goal of finishing a piece.”

“Goalsetting is important. And that brings to mind another question: What kind of long-term goals do you have for yourself?”

I sat on that question a while. It wasn’t something I gave much thought to. “Well, I’d like to get out of here someday. I don’t know how, though. I mean, the rules for how much you’re allowed to earn and put in the bank and all are so restrictive, I don’t know I’d ever come up with first and last month’s rent for another place.”

“Moving out is a good goal. But you kind of need some other goals in order put some wheels on that one.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, you could go back to work. Or even go back to college. You’re a smart guy, and, if I might be so bold, it’s a waste of potential for you to just sit here and make jewelry. You could do some big things.”

“Yeah, I believed that. Once. Then I got laid off.”

“You could do better than entry-level work in a museum. Like I said, you could get a degree.”

“But there’s the whole loan situation. I don’t know how I’d ever afford the payments.”

“Assume there’s some way around that. Then what?”
“But I don’t think I’d do well in school. I crashed and burned on the job, I’d probably do the same in school.”

“It’s always a case of the buts with you. What I’m trying to do is encourage you to think past those buts. Start thinking in hows.”

“But—”

“No more buts. For today, anyway. Here.” Noah handed me a pad and pen. “Write down some things you dream of doing.”

So I listed:

Work somewhere part-time
Find a boyfriend
Go back to school (maybe)
Quit being depressed
Move out of my building

I handed the list back to Noah. “Well, I can’t help you find a boyfriend, but this other stuff, it’s doable. Let’s start thinking about what you can do to accomplish these goals.”

Noah wrapped up his visit. I put back his folding chair. And I started dreaming.

After I’d finished the Forward program, Noah had helped me find a psychiatrist, both for medication and for therapy. “I can only do so much,” Noah said, “and for the rest, I can connect you to resources.”

Dr. Navarrini was an older man, pushing seventy. Three decades earlier, he assisted in hospice care for AIDS patients, when most people wouldn’t touch them, and from there, he established a reputation for providing psychiatric services for gay patients.
We met every two weeks for therapy. It would have been helpful to see him more often, he’d said so himself, but state Medicaid wouldn’t cover it.

A few months into his care, he started our appointment as usual and sat me down in the leather armchair in his office. “I really don’t understand it,” he said.

“I understand what?” I asked. It was an odd way to start a session.

“Before every appointment, I look over my notes from your past visits. And there’s this disturbing trend. No matter how things are going in your life, no matter what successes you have, you’re just plagued by this self-loathing, and I can’t for the life of me figure out why. You’re a smart guy. You’re good-looking—”

“No, I’m not.”

“Oh, give it a rest. You are. You’re friendly and likable, and yet you can’t see it in yourself at all. You can’t see what I see, what your friends see, and I’m absolutely stumped as to why you can’t see it too.”

“Hm.”

“I can’t make you like yourself. That’s up to you. But, I’m telling you, if you don’t find some way to overcome this awful, destructive self-perception, it’s going to do you in, and I’m not going to have that happen on my watch.”

I left Dr. Navarrini’s office, feeling I’d failed him. Failed Noah, and the therapists at City General and Sinai failed everyone all I do is fail I suck I’m this awful person I’m a failu—

NO. I wasn’t having it. Dr. Navarrini was right. One way or another, I had to learn to short-circuit the self-hatred. And I would. I could. I knew it.
I sat naked in my living room, on my computer, playing Civilization III, a gift I’d gotten for myself at the Target down the street. I probably would have been naked regardless, but it was a necessity in this heat. I was on the top floor of a sixteen-story apartment, and from what I’d once seen of an aerial shot of my building, the roof was black. It was easily a hundred degrees in my apartment. And Seroquel put me at a heightened risk for heat stroke.

My country was the Iroquois Confederacy, and I was in the middle of a war with the Americans, led by Abraham Lincoln. I’d cornered the enemy on the coast of the randomly-generated continent, and was on the verge of taking the city of Philadelphia, when the screen went black. I pushed the power button of my computer, but it did nothing. My computer was dead and I didn’t know why. So I called up Jack, my personal electronics wizard.

The next day, he came over, and went through the usual rigmarole of security. “God,” he said, when we got on the elevator, “what the hell was that all about.”

“Standard procedure here.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I’d heard it had something to do with the War on Drugs or something. It’s supposed to keep drug dealers out of the building.”

“Guilty till proven innocent. Guilt by associating with the poor. Got it.”

“What can we do about it, though?”

“Fight it.”

“Most folks here don’t have enough fight in them to take it on. They’re old, disabled.”

“And that’s how they’re able to take advantage of you guys.”

We reached the sixteenth floor, and I let Jack into my apartment. “Damn, it’s hotter than a witch’s tit in hell in here.”
“What do you expect, it’s summer.”

“I thought you guys had a/c here. It looks like it from the outside.”

“No, we just have boxes to put air conditioners in.”

“But you guys are, like, poor. How are you supposed to afford your own a/c?”

“Public housing. You get what you pay for.”

Jack crouched down and popped open the cover of my computer tower. He poked around at the innards, and diagnosed my problem in thirty seconds. “Your computer’s overheated.”

“Damn.”

“Well, what do you expect? Computers heat up, that’s how they work, and it’s gotta be hundred degrees up here. You’re lucky you got it to work this long.”

“Can you fix it up with spare parts like last time?”

“I don’t have any now. But I have an idea. Give me a week.”

And so I waited a week, a week of spending as much time in the air-conditioned library as I could, a week of taking a novel to the air-conditioned train to ride to the Mall of America so I could sit and read in the food court—without ordering anything because I couldn’t afford anything—until they closed at 9:00 p.m., a week of sleeping in the leatherette recliner because the bedbugs had run me out of my bed, except now they had begun invading the recliner as well and I considered a move to the cabbage-rose sofa except they’d follow me there as well.

Jack and Marnie arrived together. “We’ve got 2 loads,” Jack texted me. “Okay, but you’ll need to go through security twice,” I texted back. “Fuck” was his reply.

The first gift was obvious: a used laptop that Marnie was carrying. “My gosh, guys, you didn’t have to do this.”

“It’s not like it’s state-of-the-art.” said Jack. “If you didn’t get it, my mother would.”
“We’re just happy to help,” said Marnie.

We dropped off the laptop in my apartment and headed down to their car for the second gift. I was still clueless as to what it was.

We got to their car, Marnie popped open the hood, and there was a brand-new air conditioner, still in the box. “You’ve got to be kidding me, guys. you didn’t have to do this. This must have cost you a fortune.”

“Forget about the cost,” said Marnie. “We didn’t want to see you living in intolerable circumstances.”

“Yeah, man,” said Jack, “if you can make a shithole less of a shithole, you do it.”

It took all three of us to heft the box up to my apartment. In no time, I had air conditioning, though I figured the only way to make sure it worked was to keep the door closed between the living room and bedroom.

The bedroom was utterly useless, anyway.

The first week after I realized I had bedbugs, I went down to the manager’s office. His name was Scott, white guy, about my age, charismatic. I told him about the situation. He said that the heaters used to kill the bedbugs only came to the building once a month, because they were rotated around all the public-housing buildings, so they could only heat two apartments a month in each high-rise. Fair enough, I said, put me on the list. Okay, and in the meantime, I’ll send someone up to spray your apartment.

A couple of months passed. A maintenance man had sprayed pesticide in my apartment, but the bugs were biting me twice as much. So I went down and told Scott. He said I wasn’t on
the list for a heater. I told him he’d put me on it once already. He said he’d add me. No apology
for the screw-up from before.

And it went on like this, for months and months on end. The third visit, I had Noah come
with me to meet Scott, in my mind so I’d have a witness to Scott’s shenanigans, in Noah’s mind
so I’d keep my cool. And it all played out the same, the promise to sign me to a list I never saw,
the arrival of a maintenance man with a spray that might as well have been water. I was living a
Kafka story.

A full year like this. At the final meeting, I rolled up my sleeves and showed Scott my
arms, riddled with little red bites. He told me all I had to do with the bedbugs was squash them.

A week later, a notice was posted on the corkboard outside the first-floor elevator, next to
the latest obituary. Scott had quit without warning. Because of budget cuts, our building would
have no manager for the foreseeable future; the public-housing authority would send a different
staff member each day for an hour or two to cover some, but not all, duties.

I was squashed.
Chapter 33

My sense of community was shifting. I’d given up on the Quaker meeting. Since the age of twelve, I’d been engaged in some form of worship every week, save the brief period between my ejection from evangelicalism and my finding my way into the Lutheran church. But now, there were days I believed there was no one to worship, so there seemed little point in attending a worship service. I would engage in a little experiment: Could I thrive without religion? Noah had his reservations about dropping something that had been so much a part of my life for so long; besides, there were faiths like Unitarian Universalism where I could plug in regardless of my beliefs. But I had to try. And I was discovering that freeing up my Sundays somehow freed up my mind, as well.

I was attending fewer parties. Jack and Marnie didn’t host anything anymore, and Llewellyn’s only party was at Halloween. It seemed the others of our shared circle who had taken over hosting duties had quit. At first, I just figured folks were too busy for parties, but then I started paying closer attention to Facebook. It wasn’t that people had quit throwing parties; I just wasn’t invited anymore. So I instant-messaged Marnie to see what was going on.

“It’s a mix of things,” Marnie said. “Some people find you too depressing. And they think you don’t act right at parties. You’re too forward. You have to remember that Minnesotans are reserved.”

“This is bullshit,” I replied. “I’ve given years of my life to building relationships with these guys on LiveJournal, going to their parties. I just want to give them whatever I can.”

“But they don’t need anything,” said Marnie.

It’s telling that aside from Jack and Marnie and Pete, Llewellyn and Darren and Rachel and a couple of others, I have either forgotten their names or chosen to forget.
But I still had my gay men’s discussion group, which I attended off and on. And I talked with Ken on Facebook from time to time.

“Hey,” I messaged him one day, “what’s up?”

“Not much,” he replied. “Things still aren’t perfect with the boyfriend, but we’re making it work somehow.”

“Gotcha. A boyfriend still seems out of reach for me. I mean, I have no job, no money, what do I have to offer a guy?”

“You’ve got a lot, man. You’re smart and funny, for starters.”

“But it’s not enough. Dating is expensive. I can’t afford that.”

“What if you just get a job?”

“Lots of obstacles. Health problems. Things like that. Anyway, I can’t get a real job without a Bachelor’s degree, and that will never happen.”

“Why not?”

“Student loans. I went into default after I got laid off and couldn’t pay.”

“Dude, you don’t know about the new plan under Obama?”

“What do you mean?”

“They changed the law to make student loans easier.”

“You’re kidding me. I didn’t know.”

“Seriously, go to a TRiO office. It’s this government program”

“But even if I get that worked out, a school is still going to be expensive.”

“You mean you don’t know about Metropolitan State?”

“I’ve come across a couple of people who went there. Sounds like some kind of shady for-profit place.”
“Nope. Metro State is a state school. Cheapest in Minnesota. Check them out, seriously.”

“Okay, I will. Thanks.”

Jack and I had been instant-messaging on Facebook for an hour, talking about anything and everything. He wasn’t really the type to engage in long online conversations; LiveJournal was still his digital medium of choice, as it allowed writers and readers to slow down and think in a way that Facebook didn’t.

“I think we should go out on a date,” said Jack.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Why would I kid about something as serious as a date?”

“What about Marnie?”

“What about her? You do know how polyamory works, right?”

“Right. I’m just not used to getting asked out.”

“Well, let’s change that. This Friday. I can be at your place at 5:30 p.m.”

For the remainder of the week, I fretted. What would I wear? What would we do? What if he didn’t like me “in that way”? What if he did? How would I make it all work? No, I was getting ahead of my step. One step at a time. Just like they had taught me at City General.

Friday afternoon, I took my second shower of the day, shaved, and dressed in a long-sleeved button-down and nice jeans. A good first-date ensemble. At 5:30 p.m. I received a text: “I’m outside. I’m not messing with your lame-ass security.”

When I reached him five minutes later—a broken elevator doubling travel time yet again—I found him dressed in a grey hoodie and shorts. I should have figured. This was Jack,
and I knew Jack. “Where do you want to eat?” he asked.

“I dunno. Somewhere cheap. Things are a little tight this week.”

“Nonsense. I’m treating. I’m the one who asked you on a date, remember?” Except for a couple of times with my ex Joshua, my dates had always gone Dutch.

“Well, how about the Wilde Roast? It has a nice view of the Mississippi, and it’s gay-owned.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

It was a short across the river. The river reflected the setting sun, the trees stood sentinel in russet, the perfect autumn evening. We parked, entered, and took our seats. A waiter arrived in short order.

“So, what do you want?” Jack asked as we looked at our menus.

“I dunno, the grilled cheese sounds nice.”

“No way am I taking you out for the cheapest item on the menu. Live a little.”

“Okay, then. The French dip sandwich, and a Sprite”

“Better. I’ll have the bacon Swiss burger with a Summit Pale Ale.”

The waiter left with a twinkle in his eye that said, “Cute couple.”

Our conversation was quotidian but comfortable. Gone were the usual nerves of a first date, the fear of rejection, the unknown factors tied up in meeting a stranger. Jack and I had been friends for five years now. The worst that could happen was that we’d still be friends.

After Jack had paid for our meal, we decided to forego dessert. “Let’s take a walk,” said Jack. “It’s nice out.”
The two of us headed towards a bridge to Nicollet Island. Jack slipped his arm in mine. We passed several romantic pairings, all heterosexually matched. By the time we reached the park at the south end of the island, it was dark. “Let’s take a seat,” said Jack.

And so we sat next to each other. I leant against him. He stole a kiss. We sat some more, and I stole a kiss. Silently, I pondered my future. There was no telling if this date would lead to anything. It didn’t matter. As I’d learned in the hospital, it was important to be present to the moment. And the moment was beautiful.

I sat in the waiting room of an old sandstone building adjacent to the Metro State campus, doubting everything Ken had told me. There was no way I’d return to school. It was impossible.

“Okay, Mr. Strong, you can come in now,” came a Russian-accented woman’s voice from the office next door.

I entered and shook the young woman’s hand. “My name is Veronika—oh, hey! I know you!”

“You do?”

“On LiveJournal.”

“Oh, VeronikaS?”

“Yes.” She was a real person and not a robot, after all.

Veronika asked me some basic questions so she could look up my financial history with the Department of Education, and handed me a form to fill out. With each line I inked in, I internalized my mantra, *This isn’t going to happen, this is impossible.*

“So,” said Veronika, “this looks like a clear-cut case. You’ll just need to fill out this online application, and one more paper form, and you should be set.”
My jaw dropped. “No, something’s wrong. My loans are in default. I have practically no income right now to pay them back.

“No, everything checks out. It’s all a part of the student-loan reforms.”

“So, wait, you’re telling me I can go back to school?”

“Next semester, if you want.”

I collapsed in gratitude in my chair. “You have no idea what this means to me.”

“It’s one of the reasons I enjoy my job,” said Veronika. “I get to help people’s dreams come true.”

Noah and I stood in ambush outside the door of Lowry Avenue Public Housing Apartments. We’d got word that the new manager coming into my building was in her last four weeks at Lowry. I couldn’t wait four more weeks. The bedbugs were eating me alive. The whole ride up to Lowry, I repeated to Noah, “Should we be doing this? We’re breaking into their building. We’re breaking the rules,” and he only replied, “Sometimes justice calls for us to break the rules.”

A resident came up the sidewalk, punched in a code, and walked in. We followed her. Much different system; no security desk. Noah looked down the hall and spotted the management office. He strode casually to the door, and I followed as casually as I was able.

The office was divided in two, reception in front, management in back. Noah spoke to the receptionist. “Hello there, my name is Noah Greenbaum. I’m a disability-services worker, here on behalf of my client here, Mr. Whittier Strong, and we were hoping to speak with your manager.”
I blurted out, “I’m sorry that we don’t have an appointment or anything,” and Noah touched my arm to help settle me down.

“We had some questions regarding the building that your manager is relocating to.”

“Let me see if she’s available.” The receptionist dialed the intercom and said, “Tasha, I have a couple of gentleman here to speak with you about the North Loop building.”

“I have fifteen minutes free,” Tasha replied. “Send them in.”

I followed Noah through the inner door, and we each took a seat in front of Tasha’s desk.

“How might I help you?” she asked.

Noah replied, “So I understand you’re moving out of here soon, on to North Loop, do I have that right?

“Yes, next month,” said Tasha.

“You’ve got to help me,” I said.

Noah nudged me. “Don’t worry; we’ve got this.” He turned back to Tasha. “My client, Mr. Strong, has had a long-standing issue at the North Loop building that he’s hoping you can resolve.”

“It’s bedbugs,” I said. “They’ve been eating me alive for a year and a half and the manager Scott wouldn’t do anything about it and then he left and now we don’t have any manager and I’m just so tired and I can’t take it anymore.”

“Oh, yes, North Loop,” said Tasha. “That building has a certain reputation. The last guy they brought in as manager wasn’t all he was cracked up to be.”

“I’ve been begging and pleading for over a year to get a heater in my apartment so they can kill the bugs but they never put me on the list and I see them come to treat other people’s apartments and I just don’t understand why they don’t put me on the list and I’m so desperate
and I talked with Public Housing Authority and they just told me to speak to my building manager even though we don’t have one and I don’t know what to do so Noah and I figured we’d have to break in here just to speak to anyone who can help and—”

Tasha cut me off. “Hold on, you’ve been trying to get one of the bedbug heaters in your apartment for a year?”

“Closer to two,” I said.

“And they’ve done nothing,” said Tasha.

Noah replied, “The former manager was difficult to work with, as I’m sure you know. But Mr. Strong has been waiting so patiently for a proper extermination in his apartment, and, as you can understand, our patience now is wearing thin.”

“There’s a reason they’re bringing me into North Loop,” Tasha said. “That building’s been going downhill for years, so Public Housing Authority has brought me in to clean house, in a manner of speaking. I’ll make sure your apartment gets a heating treatment with the week, Mr. Strong.”

I let out a huge sigh. “Do you mean it?”

“Absolutely. It’s inexcusable you’ve had to put up with this for this long.”

“Thank you so much,” said Noah. “We’re glad you’re taking these matters into your own hands.”

“I joined Public Housing Authority ten years ago so I could improve people’s lives,” said Tasha. “It’s people like that old manager Scott who stand for everything I’m against. Don’t you worry, Mr. Strong. Things are going to get better at North Loop.”

“Thank you. I look forward to you coming to my building.”

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“And I look forward to having you as a tenant.” Tasha smiled, shook my hand and
Noah’s, and walked the two of us out of the office.

Back in his car, Noah said, “See? That wasn’t so hard.”

“It would have never occurred to me to take on the problem in such a hands-on way.”

“It’s a depression thing,” said Noah. “It can limit your vision and keep you from creative
problem solving.”

“I know. You’re right. I just wish my brain wasn’t like this. I wish it wasn’t so broken.”

“It’s not broken,” said Noah. “Just different.”

I found myself in Uptown, perusing the $1 shelf at Magers & Quinn. I’d been devouring
books as of late, classics from this bookstore and newer selections from the public library across
the street from my home. Now, as I grabbed up my selections—*The Old Man and the Sea, Pride
and Prejudice, The Awakening, The Chosen*—I thought about the surrounding neighborhood that
had been my home so long ago. Across the street, Calhoun Square had undergone several
metamorphoses. Back in 2008, after Agan Traders and Maggie’s Chair Massage and Caruso’s
Gelato had all cleared out, someone had got the bright idea to convert half the shopping center
into high-priced condominiums. And then the housing bubble burst, and Calhoun Square stood
halfway finished, between identities, for a couple of years. But gradually, it found its way, as
offices opened up where stores once stood, a few stalwart restaurants the only remnants from
when I made my Friday runs six years before. Down Lake Street, Vera’s Coffeehouse, once an
anchor of the gay community, had closed around the same time the condos moved tried to move
into Calhoun Square. It didn’t matter now; everyone used Grindr, except me, because I still
didn’t have a smartphone, and I saw no point in chasing rejection anyway, especially when guys
as wonderful as Jack were chasing me. Up Hennepin, Pandora’s-turned-Duplex was long gone, an upscale Tibetan restaurant having settled well in its place. About the only thing that hadn’t changed in Uptown was my beloved Caffetto, where I remained a regular customer.

I caught the bus downtown, reflecting on the notion of change, and all the changes that were coming in my life. I’d been accepted at Metro State; now I had to select a major. The most logical transition from my last degree program would have been philosophy, but the program was meager at my new school. Metro State had been founded for underrepresented student populations—people of color, immigrants, working women, first-generation students like myself—and philosophy was a bit too impractical for the goals of the student body. I looked into their art program, since only three years before I’d aimed to attend art school, but Metro State only offered an art minor. I’d add that to my degree, not out of some drive to create the finest art ever, but for my own enjoyment and edification.

I fiddled with the bag of books next to me. Jack had told me I should just do what I loved. Always before, in Bible college, at Indiana University, I chose my major based on what I thought the world wanted, what someone else wanted. But I was no longer beholden to that mindset. And what did I love? The answer was in the bag: Hemingway and Austen, Chopin and Potok. I thought about City of God, the way Doctorow had pushed and broken the limits of everything I’d known about literature to that point, the jumps in point-of-view and voice, the unconventional structure, the seemingly random adding and dropping of characters, the unresolved ending. I wished I could write like that.

And maybe I could aim for a higher purpose in writing, as well. I’d only found frustration in the visual arts; I remembered, back in 2003, during my exhibit at the Potter’s Cup before it closed down, someone looking at my giant painting of a galaxy, entitled Genesis, and more than
one patron noting, “Oh, an octopus!” I had no tolerance for being misinterpreted. In writing, I might not be able to communicate perfectly, but I could do so more clearly. And if I could pass on the tiny bit of wisdom I’d learned in this world, the wisdom I would be unable to pass on to children of my own, then I would have fulfilled my purpose in life.

As my bus reached my building, I was settled. Creative writing major, art minor.

I nearly bounced out of my seat in Dr. Navarrini’s office. “I have great news for you,” I said at the start of our session. “I’ve decide on a major: Creative writing.”

“That sounds just perfect for you,” he replied.

“It’s just, I’m so nervous about going back to school. I’ve failed twice already.”

“I hadn’t thought you failed out of Indiana University.”

“Okay. Well, it feels like I’ve failed. I just don’t know how to balance it with my diagnoses of bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder.”

“Pardon me?”

“I said, I don’t see how school will fit with bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder.”

“Who told you those were your diagnoses?”

“Well, I’ve had the bipolar disorder forever, like, going back to 1995. And City General told me I had borderline.”

“I have seen no evidence of either of these diagnoses the entire time I’ve worked with you.”

“What?”
“Let me show you something from my notes.” Dr. Navarrini turned to his computer and pulled up a document from my file. “You can see right here. ‘Depression Not Otherwise Specified. Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Possible Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.’”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Not at all. I’m only wondering how these other doctors came up with these diagnoses, especially after observing you so briefly. I’ve seen no mania. And you’re an emotional and passionate guy, but to diagnose passion as borderline is absurd. It honestly mystifies me.”

On the bus ride home, I reframed my entire life story. All the times that my brain spun out of control, it wasn’t mania but anxiety. My abandoned goal of leaping off the Washington/Elizabeth overpass wasn’t driven by mania, as the hospital in St. Louis had supposed, but rather the extreme pressure of living in a world of Bible college and church and homophobic roommate all telling me I shouldn’t exist. My intermittent fatigue could be explained by the combination of depression and anxiety; my attempts to fit my physical and mental symptoms into the rubric of bipolar disorder vanished completely.

It was as if I’d been lied to my entire life, regardless of whether anyone had intended to. Now that I knew the truth, I could move forward on the right path.

Now that I had selected a major, I had to share the good news with my friends online. First, a blog post on LiveJournal; the next day came the comments. Jack, Marnie, Pete, Darren, Llewellyn: all ecstatic for me. Rachel, speaking from experience, expressed reservations about the long-term financial feasibility of obtaining a degree in the arts. And everyone else, the Greek chorus, those who no longer invited me to parties, were furious. I was wasting my money going for a writing degree; I should go into the sciences or engineering so I could get a good job, just
like them. As far as I was concerned, they had forfeited their right to giving me an opinion on the matter, for I had to assume they expressed their views, not out of concern for me, but out of a desire to see me conform.

I had given up on conforming. I would never be a true Minnesotan, so there was no point in trying.

Noah took a seat on my cabbage-rose sofa, now officially bedbug-free. He pulled out his laptop. “Well, it’s that time again,” he said.

“The annual review?”

“Precisely.” He opened a document. “So, as you may remember, it’s pretty straightforward. Mostly I just ask you a few questions and I write down the responses.”

“All right,” I said, “let’s go for it.”

“What have you accomplished over the past year?”

I reflected for a minute solid. “I guess the big thing was that we got the bedbugs taken care of.”

“Well,” Noah said, “that is a big accomplishment. Not sure if that’s the biggest, though.”

“Okay, so I’ve been accepted to go back to school.”

“That is huge. You do get that, I hope?”

“I suppose you’re right. Let’s see, what else… I’m just… feeling better. More at myself. Less stuck in my head, and connecting more with the outside world. Managing my symptoms better. I’m better at advocating for myself. I guess the school thing has had a lot to do with all that. I have goals now. That’s about it.”

“Okay, moving on. How would you describe your life at present?”
“It’s okay. It’s not perfect, but it’s okay.”

“And okay is okay,” said Noah.

“Right. I don’t want to live in public housing the rest of my life, but it works for now. And I’ve kind of figured out who my friends are, and they’re the ones I want to invest my time and energy in. I have no idea if I’m ever going to find a boyfriend, but it doesn’t seem impossible now. And I’m just optimistic about school. It’ll be hard, but it’ll be worth it.”

“Speaking of which, let’s move on to the last question. What are your goals for the next twelve months?”

“Go back to school, of course. Work hard on my schoolwork. I can keep making jewelry, and maybe even think about selling it somewhere. I want to spend more time with my friends, and maybe find somewhere to volunteer. I can start thinking about getting a job and eventually moving out of here, start planning for all that.”

“Sounds good.” I caught Noah just before he closed out of the document.

“Oh, one more thing I want to put on my twelve-month goals,” I said. “I want to write a lot.”
Chapter 34

I had to finish up some paperwork at Metro State, which meant a bus transfer right near the museum. Maybe I could go in and just say hello. Not that there would be many people left who would remember me. I’d been gone four years. But entering those doors would exorcise some last demon lurking in my psyche.

It was a weekday, mid-afternoon, no line. I approached the register and spoke to a young man—a kid, it seemed. He was wearing a polo; at some point, the museum must have shifted from vests to polos. I told him who I was, and asked if perhaps I could say hello to Donna or Hayden, if they were still around. He radioed Donna, and soon enough, there she was in front of me.

We caught up as best we could. Donna told me that Hayden was still a manager but was off that day. Stephanie had been promoted to vice-president. Suze, she who had launched me on my housing sojourn seven years before, was still in contact with Donna, who would be sure to say hi to Suze for me.

“And what are you up to these days?” asked Donna.

“I’m going back to school, over at Metro State,” I said. “On my way there right now, actually.”

“That’s wonderful,” Donna replied. “I’m really glad to hear that. What will you be studying?”

“Creative writing.”

“That sounds like it would suit you really well. You always were good at telling a story.”