

FIRM GRIP
or
First Night Party

a Daniel Hardiner story

16 August 2007

I KNOW TOMORROW
IS A BIG
DAY AND EVERYTHING
BUT

it makes you better

Dan said

—He's right don't try it.

KING you said POE and LOVECRAFT

NAMES I KNOW

"SORRY QUOTATIONS CLASS CLASS"

RITCHIE I say HARDINER and DANIELS

my horror notables

the field the tree the sky

better at what

what can we learn

RITCHIE Smiles like he has abs, think he's in
business, never met his family

HARDINER Brown shirt coral tie, bay rum and coffee,
there's something in this pocket

DANIELS Whiny little bitch, always good for cloves,
better not be getting this

let's take a test match the following

RITCHIE and HARDINER and DANIELS

A

B

C

D all of the above

tricky there

get ahold of yourself get a firm grip

look up

Okay. So first of all, there were the three of us: Daniel, me, and Mitch, the three of us. Dan wanted the Daniels together he said. He talks to us like he's visiting from Nashville. Getting us together, chill out by the river he said. Mitch and his head out of his door listening. Leaning against the doorframe. Eyes on mine. I nod. We'll chillax.

—Chillax?

He holds onto things. He brought his camera. Little boy holding a grenade.

Dan turns a bicycle wheel like he knows what makes it round. Ahead of us then back with us. At one point Casey Jones came by, already ready.

—Do you have them?

Looking back at us like a vinegar volcano across the carpet. A concert, he told us, talking about tickets, like those handles in his room are for a friend. Who's he know opening a bar.

—Look at us all together.

The door to D closed, the gap beneath it dark. Nodding all around.

Mitch says The Lion's Den is letting loose. General laughter. Some lacunae. Mitch snaps a picture of me and shows. There are these things up on the bathroom wall.

Little marks.

Scorched—

How's your evening Daniel? Excellent, thank you. It made me better.

THIS IS FUN

Get your fingers in it, tighten up, hold strong. Do good work.
Daniel on the bike before us, Dan now, rebranding
I've got something for that
redanding?

no shit

TIGHTEN UP

Dan my friend Dan Ritchie, Most Likely To Succeed, he shipped ahead,
and Mitch and I, walking, catching up, sharing details from the
ancestral homeland, and he nodded, and understood, more than most,
I'll give him that, and swooped his hair, and caught a few shots of Dan
up ahead, his back bikehunched and moving forward, and some of me
looking over my shoulder back to the room, hands on my bag, and my
good khakis on. My fingers point to my work. Dan said —Bring that if
it'll make you come.

He said

—We need to party. The three of us together.

Mitch hugged him and said

—Kick off the year right! The Lion's Den is letting loose.

Ha-ha. Got ready all together, doors open, music running, Casey Jones
comes and goes, took a shot of Dan's good whiskey.

Left it in the sock drawer. Shit. Next time. He'll get it back next time.

Mitch has tequila in his flask. In the old days I'd have gotten it for him
while he made Dan look like art against the bright flash of the full

leaves. He scooped it up fine and took a deep pull. Shot me looking like I
got waitlisted.

Did I tell him to rub my nose?

That feels better. How does he know?

Does he know about

what can we learn

tighten

What did he say exactly

—9 o'clock. Be here. Be ready.

By then we left, him biking, Mitch snapping, me toting the bag.

We heard it around the block.

The dark sidewalk, sky cracked grey, trees brustling and sweeping in a
breeze we couldn't feel. Bass told my feet to lose the tie. I put it in the
bag. Buried deep beneath my book. Mitch pulled from his flask, swung
his camera up as we rounded the corner.

Low lights.

Hum hum hum

ONE

My feet told my legs

—RUN

I unbutton my top two buttons. Dan swings back around and messes up
my hair. Mitch snaps. I don't remember smiling. He untucks my shirt. I
snap.

Dan takes us by the hands and tells us,

—We should always enjoy our time together.

He kisses Mitch's palm.

He kisses my wrist. I unclench my hand. He kisses my fingertips.

—You two are special to me.

Hum hum hum

At the corner, the streetlight snaps off. Swung off the seat. He draws us close.

—We share a lot.

He pulls Mitch's camera off his shoulders and puts it in my bag and swings both across him.

—Hold each other and remember what you have.

We hugged Mitch and me. His ribs shuddered and he angled away. I clutched him closer. Summer at camp.

The lamp above us humming amber.

—You stole a pair of shoes for me.

I kicked him in his stolen shoes. He pushed his cheek on mine. I swallowed, hadn't shaved. You did that thing at the beach.

He dropped his arms.

Whoops.

And I forgave him and everything.

He just looks at me.

I'm all what? What? And he just goes

—I don't know what you mean.

The lamp snaps back to blue.

I took his flask and pulled deep. He rebuttoned me once and pinched my chest.

I'm all what?

And he's all

—Dan left us behind.

We saw after down Kent Road. Soft little houses, old and sound, lawns with old fruit and fresh annuals. Stone walks and walls. Dark brittle windows. Red and green and blue and yellow glowed against panes and curtains behind them. Place near the other end of the block. Dan's bike locked out front already. Mitch walks off down towards there.

I'm all I might need to head back.

I'm all tomorrow is a big day and everything.

He says

—If you go back I'll tell Dan it's because the whiny bitch, like he'd ever believe but Mitch took my hand. I pulled it back. He took it again.

—I'll be there with you.

I frown. He frowns.

—That used to mean something.

It still does.

He laced his fingers and walked and pulled.

TIGHTEN UP

Hum hum hum HUM HUM HUM

treble treble treble

snaresnaresnaresnaresnaresnaresnaresnare

at the gates

eye to eye without a lens

he unlaces

finger frames me

snap

I don't remember smiling

crayon green everything, red patches and orange but stepped through the gate deep violent purple from every fixture over the stone lintel and royal violet a growl against the eyes a warning TWO

—RUN

music cut like it got caught weakness in my shoulder take the strap in your hand get a firm grip where did it TIGHTEN UP run into it dozens outside the smoke like a soft mist through the privacy hedges and up in the hackberries above faces I know faces I've seen in class and at home, from Englishes and Geology and the dorms and that summer at the poor school and the grocery store, and fresh eyes, hard strange stubbled mouths wrung around anything handrolled anything clove anything European anything new and authentic, someone with short hair in the darkest back corner going down on a guy with a big chest and a white hat, a girl named Ilse who dated my brother last summer doing coke off her girlfriend's collarbone, bump into me once that's fine motherfucker it's crowded but twice

—You back off, bitch.

Sirens break open his eyes burning burning burning burning

—My name is Philip—Stokes—

bam bam shit sharp finger tapping at my nipple

—and I will end you if you cross me.

top notes come in like a ceiling fan takatatakataka synth horns and a grungy bass and he takes his ringpop and his yoohoo with the sillystraw and oozes through the thick to the front door.

—You want me to fuck him up?

Dan back, shouting over all, giving candy to Mitch. Why didn't I get one?

—Because you hate weed.

Mitch smiles and sucks.

—Brought you this though.

A drink. How thoughtful.

—Try it.

Damn. Goddamn.

—Right?

Never look at an icee the same way again, but the heat from the people and the burning and the sun trapped in the trees and in the hard red clay under us, we better move inside, I tell them, where it's cooler, and less smoke but I didn't say that, didn't bring anything making me TIGHTEN UP push through the crowd onto the cut up patches of oriental rug near the porch heptagons gnomons with whorling and imperfect patterns triangle with tassels and scorch marks from cigarette butts butts butts butts what can we standing there scoping you guys go ahead moving for an open pack and hey you got one of those to share he's all

—Sure. You friends with him?

Back at my roomies laughing on the porch, Dan bagshouldered and Mitch choking on his ringpop and I'm all sure and reaching and he nods and goes

—Rob.

Gives me a card says —GAZETTE INTERN; I'm all okay, give me the cigarette, putting the card in my pocket fingers brushing rough LOOK UP he's holding out two cigs. Says,

—This one's for you.

Some eagle on the paper.

—Tell your friend I think he dropped this.

Black filter, white paper with black lines, networks connecting at nodes,

a web, and I'm all like, appreciate it, and bail back out him standing there smoking behind me staring with his cigarettes still out in his other hand and the crowd washed back over him closed him out making it, stuffing the eagle in my mouth and the web behind my ear and both hands straight out cowcatchered to the stone steps and bronze bannisters, to the porch, the vestibule and veranda, losing sight of them now the welling squeeze of the gallery, actual rocking chairs being rocked peasouped with weed and rich dirty vanilla tobacco sweeping palmfuls of it away from my face and bum a light from the kids running the Information Desk at the Student Center who're all like

—When work on the Beasley Auditorium ended in 1943, the President of the University himself directed the inaugural work shown in the space: *Macbeth*.

—The German professor who played the Thane wore a Hitler moustache and shot himself in 1945. May, I believe.

—Definitely April.

I go probably late April;
and I'm all I've gotta
and they're all

—go look for your friends.

She puts fingers around my wrist

—Keep writing.

him holding my shoulder

—Our condolences.

her face near my cheek

—You'll never have a day of peace.

and she kissed me there by the jawbone and they parted and walked off a ways to finish an argument about the number of Asian exchange students at State.

—Are you counting the Turks?

—Of course I am, and the Russians too.

—Which Russians?

Lawn masked in smoke, sound even muffled, just

BUMBRRUMBUMBRRUMBUM

housebeams beating, porchfloor humming

which Russians

what can we

where is

Finding him finally fuck flip him around you ASSHOLE

and he SOCKS ME IN THE FUCKING FACE

FUCKING DAN I shout

and some kid there laughs a little and goes

—Hey Grey, he knows your brother!

And I dropped my icee on the ground motherfucker

—My bad bro

he goes pulling me up.

—You called me an asshole.

He really does look like Dan.

—He never told you I go here?

Turns out he kept a lot from me.

—What's he up to these days? Why is he here?

Why do you ask. Never met the guy but heard the stories.

—Looking out. I'm gonna make an announcement soon.

—The! motherfucking announcement! yeyeee!

—Shut up RayJ.
 and he takes a black filter cigarette with a web paper from a silver case
 and says,
 —For your troubles.
 softly softly RayJ mumbles
 —It'll make you better.
 Trust them on this one.
 Tuck it behind its hobbled brother.
 Turn the corner to a girl with blond hair and a familiar angry eye going
 —I saw what he did to you.
 I go it's nothing, we're cool.
 She goes
 —I'm going to give him a piece of my mind.
 Her looking but they're gone, the both of them, into the smoke and the
 faces. She peels off going
 —I've got your back.
 What a murray sweetheart looking for a Lucy.
 Sound flooding my eyes all
 gaRANGAgaRANGAgaFWEEFWEEumbumbumRARR a light need a
 light those assholes go on without me and I'm all I'll get some cigarettes
 those things will KILL you RRRRyatenyatenyatenyatoRRRRRR
 pulling the first web with the filter broken off out and to my lips and
 —DANIEL!
 It's for you.
 Mitch and Dan, waving from back on the ground, and me so close to the
 door, would have been wandering the house for an hour, pissy and sober
 and with a hurt face and elbow from where I fell down and they're here
 instead and I found them.
 I put the cigarette back behind my other ear.
 Hey, I say, and meet the girls.
 —Daniel, this is Robby and Patty. Their Daddy invented Burstcloth.
 I say I don't know and Mitch goes
 —The Chinese ambassador whose suit blew up.
 Oh, I say, that.
 —Daddy hates that, says one of the girls, the freshman. He says Fu
 Shenghua makes him want to retire and fight crime.
 —All he needs is a mask and a cape.
 —And a cane!
 The girls had to support each other, crying out their laughter.
 —Can you imagine!
 —The Masked Tailor—
 —And his faithful mutt, Henry!
 Dan's grin wearing thin already on another set back on the porch I
 follow his eyes and one of them is blond with angry eyes and I know her
 and headed towards us down the steps and the other is a strange face of
 broken and beautiful lines, dark and pale and angled and smooth,
 complexly complected, who gave me the finger and walked inside. Her
 blond friend came in right when Robby and Patty were saying
 —God, what would Mom do?
 —Are you kidding me? She'd make his costume and get out there with
 him!
 —You're a fucking two-shirt asshat.
 Dan smiles and goes
 —That's too much clothes to be for me.

It was his brother, I tell her.

—Oh, she goes.

—My brother's here?

—You guys look just like each other.

—What's he wearing?

Robby and Patty pawing Mitch's ear off, wrong tree, but a good listener with a cute smile, all

—Daddy meant for burstcloth to be used in construction, but the military-industrial complex pays slightly better.

Angry girl ducking her eyes, scanning the crowd, saying something like

—Pale pink polo.

and checking out his ass

—And the same worn out jeans.

—Mom got them for us.

Mitch going

—Uh-huh? Uh-huh.

—Daddy says that fire out in the woods before school? Someone wrapped the trees in burstcloth.

—Says it's the only way the flames could get so hot.

—And the gold—

—The gold flakes in the ash.

—The what?

—The way your eyes think is so—

Blond interloper restating but Dan's tuned back in.

—No:

—The fire in the woods out by the highway. There was a lot of gold deposited in the ash, which Daddy says is created in tiny amounts in a burstcloth reaction, so—

—Oh, Dan says. No, it wasn't anything like that.

—What, then? the little one asks, red-faced for Daddy.

Dan looks me straight in the eye.

—How should I know?

He looks at my hands.

—Where's your drink?

So we pull Mitch back to the porch and pass through the open doors into the house.

Kitchen kitchen kitchen kitchen a kitchen is a man's keep, a hold, more than any mancave or bedroom, a larder is the gutbrain of a home. Remember that, I told Dan, for your future days of siege warfare. Dan opens the third drawer down beside the sink and takes out a ziploc, then a london broil from the fridge, and gave them to me for my eye, and then he made me "juice", which went through a wonderful appliance which I want very badly, and which had about six different kinds of fruits and six veggies and six herbs I'd never heard of and of course he made a show of it for the Cool People in the kitchen with their vests and printed blouses, hats and thick glasses, an acupressurist from Atlanta, the lead guitarist of a band in town, the head chef of a date restaurant and his hot boyfriend who has a photo blog and makes jewelry which he sells in a few local stores but who Mitch says has a tiny dick. Ilse made her way inside with girlfriend skankwhore Glenda Dzurgul or however the fuck you spell her last name and asked Dan what he called it and Dan put in tequila, lime, honey, and a few sprigs of something curly. Dan smiled and gave it to me and said it was a Pulses and Water.

—Nice name, said a guy scruffy, well-preserved but greying, cut under his tailored leather jacket and smiling like Dan, who eyed him back like he knew him.

—Daniel, he said by way of an introduction, this is Dean Pelham. The guy shook my hand and bared his teeth.

—Another nice name.

I wondered aloud whether I were pressing his steak to my face.

—My children live here, he told me. Tonight, I'm just here to chillax.

Chillax

—And speak with Dan here.

Dan nodded and pressed rhubarb into the juicer.

—Independent study.

I asked what subject, and Dean Pelham stopped smiling. He took aim at me from behind an imaginary rifle and mimed cocking it.

—Military history.

Dan turned cutting something spiny from the counter pots.

The dean reached into his pocket and handed me something.

—This will do you one better than my sons' meat.

Small black pill with a white cobweb on it.

—Hide it quick. He pulled me in and patted my back and whispered, It will make you better.

The dean cupped my chin with his hand and looked deep into my eyes.

—Trust me; I'm an educator.

Ruffled my hair and laughed me back.

Dan handed him the rhubarb and aloe and vodka.

—The Slippery Dash, he said. Talk later?

—You all have fun, said the dean as he went. Mitch eyeing him, coming back from the bathrooms.

—Not worth it, piss outside. Where's Duncan Sheik going?

Pill in my pocket and little to lose. Fingers brush burlap. Why don't you follow him, and Dan punches me in the elbow where I fell from earlier and I yell and Dan goes,

—Let's find a room.

In the library with the woodpaneling Dan slid the doors shut fast turned and held one finger to his lips to still us. A look to shelves.

—A starfish has a gutbrain. Welcome to contingency.

He turned around again. Back bikehunched and bearing off against the oak.

—It's hard for me, he said, to say how I might feel.

One of his greatest strengths.

He tapped his fingers on the inlay.

—But it's getting easier every day for me to show it.

In the center of the room is a sixsided table, small and black, which we moved around and put our palms against the grain.

—I brought you here, to help. His face and voice lowered. I let you in.

—Thank you, Mitch says.

I ask him who died.

Mitch laughs. I ask again who died.

—You're creepy, buddy, Dan said, and wiped his eyes.

Mitch asks for his camera.

Dan unhooks my bag and gives it back. I hand Mitch his camera carefully. We put our things on the table. We put our palms against the grain.

—This has been a hard month, Dan says, eyes to me, eyes to Mitch. I've felt a little lost.

A low moan escapes before I know it's coming up. Mitch starts to sniff.

—And I'd hoped the two of you coming back this year, us, all living together, he looks at the ceiling. Would remind me.

Don't, Dan, I say.

—But you've changed too, both of you. I don't know what happened. I don't want to know what happened. Some thing changed you.

It wasn't his fault, I say.

—You asshole! Mitch hisses.

—**Be still.**

The music outside even dropped. Then the bass came in like a roaring tide.

—Daniel, how's your drink?

I sip my Pulses and Water. Thank you, I say. It's making me better.

He nods. Then he stops nodding. Then he stares.

What?

I say, What?

—What do you have behind your ear?

I take one out, the one from Grey not the broken one from earlier that's hidden in my curls.

Cigarette, I say.

—Who had these?

—Dan? Mitch sounding panga and thrillshot. What?

—WHO?

I sat hard on the couch. His face was in a fist.

Some rando, I go. And your brother.

And all the blood ran out of him.

—Grey? Grey gave you this?

I tell him about the hit and how he said it makes you better.

—He's right, Dan goes.

He shreds the cig on the black wood and wipes his hands on his pants legs, panting.

—Don't try it.

Mitch goes, —What is it?

—Something new. Dan says again, Don't try it.

Mitch goes, —Why not?

I look at Dan in the eye. I take out the broken one and put it in my mouth. Dan's forehead throbs and then he looks weak.

—Do you need a light? he asks.

His fist out holding his special zippo.

—Be careful, he says. It burns fast.

Zippo shenks open and chuts to life. The flame stands close in waiting for a lean.

I take the cig out of my mouth and hold it with a light grip, away from my face, and touch it to the flame.

It flies down the paper, stopping only briefly to hurdle over the black lines of webbing on the white paper meant to slow the burn. Four seconds of violet ember and all that's left is ash. Golden smoke stood in the room, tobacco on frankincense and myrrh, until Dan waved his broad hand and dispersed it.

My god, I go, that would have killed me.

—Maybe, Dan said. You'd be the first. He starts sweeping the ash from the armrest into his palm. Probably.

My god, I go.

—Dan? Mitch watching him, index finger pushing against the ash and rubbing and touching again.

—In ethanol solution, a few drops can crack a safe. He smiles at me.

My god, I go.

—What? Mitch goes.

Dan looks at me like he's asking, "Now?"

I nod and go, Now.

—I'm moving out tomorrow.

Mitch doesn't say anything, just watches for a while as Dan shovels ash around his palm and rubs it gently down. Mitch wipes away a few tears and takes his camera up and snaps us individually. Very bad lighting. Mitch used it to his advantage; brooding angles. After a few of these I get up and hug Dan and whisper in his ear, Where have you brought us, Danny. He just squeezes me. Behind my back, his finger in his palm. Mitch frowns at this.

—What are you doing?

I pull back from Dan and push his finger to his palm harder. Up come tiny blackened chunks studded to the pad. I tell Mitch, "He's panning for gold."

Pill in my pocket and little to lose. Dan brushes his hands against his pants, touches my face.

"I know tomorrow is a big day and everything," he told me, "so if you need to go home now, I understand." I declined. Mitch took a picture. "Good," Dan said, and the clock started to strike, "because I need new eyes on this thing."

The doors to the library slid open and Ilse found her way in, had ditched her Dzurgul and now trailed a foreign girl with a flower in her hair who spotted me and smiled when my eyes went wide. A beauty mark on her right temple, in the shadow of the dahlia. "Are you finding me attractive?" Mitch to the rescue, taking me by the elbow, all inner joints and heavy breathing, who pulled at me like he was asking me to turn over and went, "Come on, bubba, you've got to show me that juicer; I want to see if it's better than ours." Foreign girl's eyes go big, then narrow, knowing and feeling no pangs of pride. Wink at her as you get rolled by.

Out in the hall, Dan's gone already, past them before us, ahead, then back, his head around a corner. Mitch pulls and I follow down the hardwood, around the whitewall corners, and at the end of a blind hall, a blue door ajar. We disentangle. I whispered to the inside of your ear,

RUN

Three.

Mitch opens the door to a greentile staircase which winds around itself and a white wall with strange patterns of terra cotta

there are these marks

my knees tell my gut

VOICES voices from the Downthere from the Other Level

all

and my creepy buddy great Daniel fresh eyes they're all strong sight
no Daniel

do you want me to call you

The bell in the grandfather clock stops.

What can we learn?

Morgan Hardiner with his gun waiting on the dark porch alone
saying

Nothing good happens after midnight.

What can we

The clock decided to strike one more time.

Mitch started down the stairs and looked back at me. Coming?

I came.

Down the stairs around the white wall these marks these curl
around and down onto the burl the wide empty basement floor lit with
colored lights and the closet. Dan hurried past back behind us, closed
and locked the blue door, walked down again and held us by the
shoulders.

"We have a quorum."

Okay, so first of all, let me say it was the ten of us: Mitch and me,
and the girl with the broken face and Philip Stokes who will end you
who was back by a boy with a book in a beanbag chair in the corner,
then Casey Jones (eyes strange and hard as stones) touching a blond
guy with a deck of cards between the eyes, another blond guy who was
almost certainly the card guy's brother, and my man Dan heading to
stand with a blonde girl who had to be their sister—it was the ten of us.

Probably.

"Let's take a seat," said Casey Jones. "Okay," said the boy with the
book in the beanbag chair. He put a long silver leaf in his place and
closed it. I recognize the name. "I'm getting nervous," said the guy with
the cards.

"This isn't an audition," said Casey Jones.

"This is just another opportunity to do what you love best."

Shuffle. Over. Under. Flexed cards. Furred edges.

Philip Stokes made a face and sat by me. I made one back. He
smiled. "Why are we here, do you know?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Just turned to the cards. I sipped my
Pulses and Water. About a third of the slush left. Philip Stokes had
ditched the yoohoo and was currently finishing something that
resembled a melted popsicle out of a plastic tube. The girl with the
broken face finished watching me and decided, "You look like a Jerry."

I move my head in a mysterious way. "You look like a Billie."

The blonde girl with Dan smiled at all of us and said, "I've been
thinking of changing my name. Something like 'Sarah' or 'Jolene' that
sounds natural enough at the start, until you dissect it." I asked her how
'Sarah' could become unnatural in dissection. "Clearly," she told me,
"you've never taken apart a name before." I told her there wasn't nearly
enough hell in her to make a Helena and she just looked at Dan like he
was supposed to have told her something. Dan smiled which made her
mad and sat down saying, "That's my creepy buddy Daniel."

He called me his buddy.

Do you want me to

call you my

big

day and everything but

in the circle turning everything our orbits we twist against each
other we twine

Card guy finishes and puts his cards down on the floor. We're all in
a circle now watching. Casey Jones beside him saying, "Are you ready?"

With a nod, he takes the pill that Casey gives him (I'm not supposed to see it, I'm not supposed to, Dan clears his throat and Casey does some sleight of hand but the pill is black with white webbing printed on it black and it dissolves immediately against the card guy's tongue with a bright purple plume) and his eyes close. He sags forward and hiccups against his knees. He laughs. He rises. "I thought I was raidy!" he told us, took up the cards, and shuffled some more. "Buffalo!" he cried and put out some cards in a strange and mysterious pattern that seemed random to me. "Eggs, eggs," he muttered. "Eat statues." And he flipped one card over at random. It was the Devil.

Or rather it was meant to be, because the English writing on it suggested so. Most of the card was meaningless characters in different colors. Card guy laughed again. "Is this your card, sir?" he gave it to Dan who politely declined. "Chains are often regarded as signs of great rank in refined societies." Which societies these were, he could not be bothered to say. Casey Jones tapped a few other cards and the card guy flipped them too. One said Magician, and others said Lovers, Hierophant, Moon, Tower. All were covered with glyphs and whorls of many colors. Card guy pulled up Magician and pointed to some. "You see?" he pointed. "He is an apprentice yet, but his powers of discernment are only just budding out. He will seek and roam like the sunlight past the horizon." How can he know, Casey Jones asked. "Because," card guy shrugged, "this symbol is red, and this one is gold."

"They were that way yesterday," said the other blond boy, looking scared and angry.

"Yes," said card guy, equally mad but trying to be patient, "but today it means something."

The card guy talked for what felt like forever but was probably ten minutes, according to the timestamps on Mitch's photos. I tuned him out after a while, because for one thing he was saying only the patently obvious and maliciously obscure, like any fortune teller, and for another, watching the other faces in the circle became far more fascinating in practice than any attempt to decipher Tim Leary's prophecies.

Mitch of course took as many pictures as he could, mostly of the cards and hands against knees, of the ceilings and the exposed backs of necks, cropping out and zooming in, framing shadows of actions in the corners of carpets, but he avoided the main features, the things the eyes were drawn towards first, and kept to the margins and the cast gloom thrown by the sad colored floor lamps.

Billie found herself falling very nearly into contact with the arm of Philip Stokes, and, recognizing the dangers from the furrows of her craggy eyes, decided the risk was well worth the implied benefits of some nebulous success. Mr Stokes, for his part, was entranced by the cards, and, hearing of Lovers and Hanged Men, wrote across his brow that he understood each word the card guy threw at the cards on the carpet and found a secret oasis of meaning expressed solely for his own weary benefit. Every card, in fact, seemed to confirm to the dear Mr Stokes that his own longheld opinions of some great ill were being momentarily confirmed in the negative, and that no great actions on his own part could ever deter a peck of the evil which swarmed against him. His friend from the beanbag chair, for his part, rather wanted to return to his book—behind the lenses of his eyes could be seen the last words he'd read, and the ghosts of the words he'd meant to read if allowed,

even for one moment longer, to have continued. He was, in short, the only person at the party more dedicated to getting his work done than me, and, in shorter, was probably running from a great deal more terror than I've ever known on a subject I would never presume to penetrate.

Casey Jones seemed very old, as though his bones and chromosomes were depleted and dropping minerals and telomeres like flour out of a roughwove bag. Whether this age was material or not was of little consequence to the condition it wrought upon his mind and spirit, or whatever that glittering little piece of personality behind the eyes is called. He seemed sad for the first time since we met, but also, in a way that was uncomfortable to watch like a man with his fingers bent back too far, a great deal happier than I had ever seen. The lines around his eyes screamed for joy at every upturned card. There is grey in his temples. He rubs his thumb against his palm. Panning for gold.

While the card guy is talking all the while about strands of silk and great ringings of bells and a great pervading Presence that will come upon the fields of the earth and he flipped cards and flipped cards and they all said things like the Star and the Emperor and the card guy is talking through them like Chet Baker through a trumpet and his fingers are cut in some places from the newer edges of some cards and his brows are jumping with his lips as though pulled by the same strings and eventually the words he said stopped being English and he'd only murmur slurs of vowels interspersed with great thickets of consonants like "uuiooeuuKTKTaNGFTHFTHauaueeee" or so it seemed to me because while he spoke in this manner the other blond guy would nod and once in a while laugh or look concerned and rub his brother's back and say, "There, there, Casey, ride through it. It's just another trip." To which Casey II replied, "iiiiFFFFFFfaaaaKKBoouu" and his brother looked over at me and went, "Don't worry. I won't let him hurt you," and Casey II seemed quite calmed by the promise. For me, I found the matter to be quite perplexing and better left unexamined until I held another drink, for my Pulses and Water was running quite low and the emergency of the matter had not occurred to nearly anybody else in the basement.

In fact, the blond sister was ignoring her brothers entirely and had applied all of her attentions to Dan, an issue which might have alarmed or bedeviled me had Dan not seemed singularly disinterested with anything but the conjurations of card guy Cay-2. Dan after a great deal of plying on her part took her gently by the wrist and guided her to her own patch of ground. I cleared my throat largely and looked wistfully at my diminished drink, but Dan I'm afraid could not hear over the exhortations now flowing out of the card reader in a most animated fashion.

Finally the steam must have run out of him because he sagged again at the waist and fell over onto the cards he laid out. Casey, my Casey Jones, my bro, my homes, looked over at Dan and goes, "Convinced?" Dan just makes a face I decide not to read and Casey Jones snorts and goes, "Besides, he's already named Casey." Dan looks at all of us for a moment and I look at him, then blush and look away at the stairs while I tap with my tongue at one corner of my drink. Dan blinks and says, "Daniel." I look at him again and go what. Dan sighs. He looks back at the cards. He sighs again. "You're running low." He offered to make me something else and would I please join him in the kitchen in a half-hour's time for it. He begged my pardon for not being

able to make something sooner and suggested a tall glass of water might well do for the time being. Mitch poured it out of a tap I hadn't noticed in the walls. I asked where Dan was headed.

"He has to talk to Daddy," the blonde girl said, and pulled Dan up and out. The brother patted card guy on the back and rose too. "Yeah," he said, and frowned. "It's time for the Baron to make a change. Help me with him, will you?" Casey Jones walked near me and touched my pocket. "I don't believe in goodbyes." And he helped card guy up with his brother and the three followed up the stairs and out.

For a long time after, the five of us stood there staring at one another, until the boy with the book went back to his beanbag and resumed his reading as though nothing had happened. The girl with the broken face whose name was not Billie stared up the stairs for a while but returned to where I sat sipping water. "What did he take?" she asked me. "Did you see?"

I made a mysterious gesture with my hand. She slapped the back of it.

Ow.

"Bhujarti," says a voice. It's from the corner and the book. It's also what's on the book cover.

"What's that?" Billie asks.

"It makes you better," Philip Stokes told her.

"They call it other things," said the voice behind the book. "It's too new for one name."

"What's Bhujarti mean?" Billie asks the book cover.

"It's from a play," said the boy.

By who? I go. "It's by," the boy starts, but Mitch goes, "He's messing with you."

Billie goes, "What do you mean it makes you better?"

Philip Stokes said to her, "I haven't tried it."

Mitch thanked god and snapped his reaction.

"Who would?" asked the guy behind the book. "With what it's named after."

Philip Stokes goes, "If I'd known they just wanted a bunch of babysitters I'd have asked for a joint."

Billie goes, "What do you mean it makes you better?"

I took the pill from my pocket to my open palm. Fingers brush burlap. Mitch puts his camera down.

"Jesus," he said.

Want to find out?

Billie frowns. "I don't take anything that wasn't made by God," she told me.

Philip Stokes frowns too and pulls up the boy in the beanbag chair, who groans and slides his silver leaf into *Bhujarti* to finish it another time up the stairs.

Mitch who bore me a flute of sweetswallow water by not-Billie who brought me curiosity sharp as a spade.

Okay so first of all it was the three of us.

Want to find

what can we

kentrokentrokentrokentro

so I took it

Frankly, it was the first time I felt any sort of clarity all evening. All the wisps of past that people gathered around them like writhing tails were suddenly straightened against a featureless plane and for the first time it was obvious how past wonderings and moments lived conspired to bend these gentle arcs across event space, and more obvious how those curves followed off into the hospitable darkness across the horizon. It was wrong to blame Mitch for any wrongdoing he had yet to learn of—but Billie, whose urge to follow was nearly as great as my own to what Daniel to what, she had done great wrong in her old name, caused pain and destitute through her acquaintances with her merest touch, and the influence she exerted would only continue to grow with her belief in her own rectitude. Before she left the basement I told her that Philip Stokes would kill her on Election Day. It felt like the right thing to do.

Mitch would later tell me I sat down writing almost immediately, pulling my book from my bag and heading off my journal entry for class. Whether he rubbed my nose because I asked him or because he sensed ancestral aching from the bone beneath is a matter of some question, but I will never get the chance to ask. I could follow the arc—but the darkness in that direction is **THERE ARE THESE MARKS** not total darkness, and the pattern or arrangement of this not-light makes me think of **HUNTERS IN THEIR BLINDS** fireflies in distant trees and I would rather take this chance to follow paths other than one whose curve I'll learn another time.

I proposed to follow one on the nature of the atom and arrived at long last upon a crystalline account of the war between language and understanding. The disinformation supplied by each position was so apparent as to be nearly infantile and insulting, so I passed on along the line of mathematics, whereby I chanced upon the potent original forces of this awful artform and very nearly descended into the temptation to wreak the laws of probability against the world I so desperately cleave to, until I stood back and discovered the Great Line, against which no parabola may bend nor no angle mar, which I followed away from the grey empty fireflies into the dark, spiteful mouth of Fate, where, despite my careful ministrations against such knowledge, I would learn of my winnings and losings, debts, nightmares, and regrets, until the roiling grey wall of death maws up like a thousand rounded beaks all speaking to smash my mind to dust: then knowing as the dust!

The dust of a life may speak any of the million idioms understood by cesium, or a quartz crystal. But when applied to the mind of the living, its geometrical tongue encounters biological paisleys unmappable to the dead. The dead may speak to limestone, and the stone reply *stalactite*. The dead may say *who am I* and the leaves slip on red sleeves to breathe back *bee-dream*. Poetry has never known the imagery of the dust past the wall. And, rather, the oriental whorls of brain chemistry are not meant to hold these clouds of icons, the mists of past knowledge, and on the whole, every dead impulse is interpreted as flashing images, nonsensical phonemes or ululating tones, or the slightest nudge of physical force out of some alien waveform—enough to cause slight stroke or psychosis in healthy individuals. Still, though, on the whole I was grateful not to have headed back the other direction towards the blind lights of entropy and free will.

I will write this way in the basement for very nearly half an hour, much longer than Casey Pelham read his cards, long enough to make Mitch wonder whether he should go find Dan. He will read over my shoulder that Dan told me to meet him in one half-hour in the kitchen for a new drink, and, as I fully intended to receive that drink, it was an appointment I would not miss. He will be mollified by this, slightly, and attempt some conversation as though I were still a part of his world and not hurtling back down to it from a distant plane set at right angles to perception. Eventually he will leave me to ride it out and flump down over my book like I was Gilligan hit by a coconut. I'll come to thirsty, put my book up, and have no knowledge or remembrance of what I wrote, but it will be days before I can look at people and not see some shadowy map of their lives, told through their expressions and reactions in the present. It will strike me as some form of intuition, even after rereading this entry, that ebbs and flows in great El Niño cycles for those who pay close attention.

I will meet Dan in the kitchen and ask for something that will fix a broken eye, which I think both of us will take to mean the punch his brother landed earlier. He will make me something he calls a Bloody Chalice, filled with antioxidants and omega 369s, and I will thank him, and he will look at me funny and ask what I thought of the new Casey Jones. I'll tell him I think his last name is Pelham and he should have his own TV show. Dan will smile at this and take it as some confirmation. This might be the last time I will see Dan smile. This won't be the last time you see Dan smile, buddy.

Mitch and I will head back. Dan will say he'll be back for his things soon but he has decided to spend the night at a friend's. His night with this girl will set off a chain of events that will culminate in the Spring with the election of a new president. Faces I know faces I've seen will bend along the arc he'll start. I will wish him well and see only the faintest shades of bruising on windpipes and a ghost of the crossed Philip Stokes. Mitch will walk me home and tuck me in the bed, take my good khakis off and take what I gave him from the pocket, where I'll explain carefully exactly what he'll do to me at the beach, and at first he won't believe me, he'll even think I'm being cruel, but in the next few months he'll piece together what he's learned with what I say and everything will fall into place for him. He'll do that thing at the beach after all, because he'll miss me. I miss him too, already. You'll miss him less soon. You gave him fine gifts.

In the halo of near-sleep tonight, after Mitch has gone, after a golden sun has started to peek above the roofs of the Student Center, the evening will unspool from around my hand and rise high into the ceiling like a kite string suffering a stiff wind. Its coils will unkink, and the nice neat knots bent and bighted along it will straighten and whine under tension. Pulled by a firm grip to expose the grit between the fibers and the growl of its torsion over a broad, featureless sounding plane. I will pluck it and watch. New crests laid over old troughs, amplification, interference, and half-note modulation: Dan ducking out of the basement before the cards, Mitch staying home to take headshots for the guy down the hall, me in Bookbright with no one to talk to but a shattered pastor and a man in a grey suit. Alternate weaves. Knit basement burl. A fan of possibilities, arrays of rays, vectors out of nodes,

statues, icons, interaction and exchange. I will see how the night should have ended, had I taken any of my cues. I will see how happy Dan could be, and the way that Mitch and I could make it work. I will see thin wisps, split ends of the past, falling from my wrists and fingertips. I will slowly lose this knowing, how music fades in a room after hearing, but in the nights and weekends to come I will remember its notes and rhythms, cup my hands and strike keys, listen, listen for a fading verse beyond the flickering streetlamp beneath my window. And I will, slowly, slowly learn to gather up the proteinated clots of world glued to me and spin them out straight into fine silk, straight webs to bear up against the brutal mass of moments lived. In the meantime, I will frustrate the hell out of strunkwhite Maxence Lawrence, and, until this life makes sense around me, that will suffice.

So thirsty. Poor buddy. It's time for a drink.

