1-1-2006

Philly Forgets Spring

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Available at: https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/calliope/vol36/iss1/4

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March 17th Saint Patrick’s Day
I could use a drink. No, fuck that, I’m quitting. Casey and Irene are ignoring me so often now that I feel like a fucking insect to their mighty hipster Charley Nobody status! Some roommates—they don’t even say hello to me! Tonight I called Mom to tell her that I think I made a mistake and I want to come home to California. She tells me, using her Masters Degree in Psychology, to “toughen up” and that she is not going to “mother me” and that because my brother is in Iraq and my uncle Chris has just been diagnosed with schizophrenia, I should just basically stop being so damn worried about my own problems. Oh yeah I slept with a mouse last night—apparently we have what is known as a “rodent infestation” in this ex-crack house. God, what is happening to me?

Sunny memories of my little brother Eric climbing trees in our backyard randomly float into my mind. I miss him. He is now in Iraq where so many are dying. Maybe the Air Force is the right answer for me. No that’s crazy. Fuck it. I’m getting drunk tonight.

March 22, 2004 Monday Night
I have been trying to quit drinking and now I’m having withdrawal pains and nightmares where I wake up in cold sweats thinking that my brother is dead.

A few days ago, Jason Davis or “Gay Jason” as he is known, moved into our house on 22nd street. Gay Jason is a drunken, 20 year old wannabe fashion designer who sleeps with his lover in our living room and doesn’t pay rent. I think Irene, who worked with Gay Jason at Starbucks, let him move into our house not simply because he got kicked out of his old place but mainly because Casey and Irene needed a drunk to look down upon and laugh at. Looking at Gay Jason slam drink after drink and make an ass of himself each night makes my old category become clear to me. This is who I was. I have been replaced.

April 20th 2004 Tuesday Night
I stay out late each night riding my bike past the empty, darkened windows of closed office buildings. The homeless and poor are
everywhere. Their lost eyes connect with mine like they know me. The last snowflakes fell a couple weeks ago and I rode the bus home from work at 1:00 AM with a coughing dishwasher who wanted to “party” with me and sell me cocaine. A week ago, I saw a blind lady slapping a tambourine while sitting on a corner near the downtown Barnes and Noble who had blank white eyes and teeth that looked like fangs. Today I met a panhandling black woman on 10th street who told me that she caught her husband in bed with a man. “My husband’s a faggot, and he left me for a man,” she said. I talk to them. I give them change, food, and cigarettes whenever I can. That’s all I can do.

Once at Dunkin’ Donuts, and once at Starbucks, I had to turn down some strangers who offered to buy me some food. I don’t blame them for what they were thinking. When they saw me, I was pale, skinny, hadn’t shaved and I had only a handful of nickels and dimes to spend because of my limited budget.

They are giving me less hours of work at Trader Joe’s because I keep spacing out. But how can I help it? The number 26 keeps appearing everywhere. The product prices, the customers’ totals, and the change, they all keep magically popping up as the number 26. I am worried about my sanity. I better call my mom.

**April 21, 2004 Wednesday Night**

An Excerpt from an e-mail to me from my step dad Mike:

“I am sick of your whining and complaining to your mother. We are not going to let you move back here and support you, so forget it. Why don’t you stop being such a baby and realize that it is NOT the people that you live with and it is NOT ME that are your problems, but YOU, you are the problem and you have always been the problem. Why don’t you try doing something about THAT?”

**April 22, 2004 Thursday Night**

After banging the back of my head on a wall of the Free Library while I stared at the distance between California and Philly on a map of America, I rode my bike all night. I rode across rain-slicked,
glass-littered sidewalks, passing red and yellow flashing porno lights, sewer steam, winos, rotten smells and the echoes of screams from barrooms until I ended up at a random dive diner and I parked my bike outside and walked in. The place smelled like old grease, cigarettes and cheap rose perfume. It was completely deserted except for two smoking vampires sitting in the far back end of the diner and the three pink-uniformed wrinkly waitresses who were chatting in a booth by the front door. I sat down in a red leather booth and ordered an egg salad sandwich, the vegetarian equivalent to a blood-rare steak, and I listened to the conversation behind me. A scratchy voiced waitress said that she spent her whole day off yesterday watching TV shows and she loved it. Is this all there is to life?

On the way home, I deliberately ran a red light on my bicycle and I almost got hit by a car. Some local thug standing on the corner mockingly laughed at me and then shouted, “You shoulda been hit!” Maybe he’s right.

**May 3rd 2004 Monday Night**
The fuckers stole my bike. Today I locked my bike outside the train station and went inside and waited for a few hours on a wooden bench near a urine-stinking, homeless man. I don’t know what I was waiting for. I guess I was waiting and hoping that somehow I could leave Philly. Hours later when I finally walked back outside to retrieve my bike, I found that the lock was cut and that my bike was stolen. I couldn’t stop laughing.

**May 5th 2004 Wednesday Night**
It is so hot and humid that my brain is melting. Because I fear I might be losing my marbles, I have finally quit both drinking and smoking. The withdrawal pains are so bad that I wake up sweating and shaking every night. My roommates certainly haven’t helped me to soothe the pain. Gay Jason keeps walking around with his naked, fat, tattooed stomach hanging out of his wife-beater while he drinks tequila straight from the bottle and it seems like everyone else’s cigarette smoke keeps creeping into my bedroom from
outside my window just to torture me. I can’t breathe. I’m trapped in this cramped little room. I can’t escape except on foot. My head is throbbing and I can’t hear because tonight, the members of the Baptist church on the corner are insanely screaming, playing electric guitars, and banging on drums. The lunatic singer is shouting:

“IIIIIIIIII ANSWER TO JEE-ZUSSS!
I WANTCHA TA PA-RAAYZ-A! PRAZE THE-LORD!”

May 9th 2004 Sunday Night Mothers Day
To escape the sound of helicopters and police sirens, I went downstairs to the basement tonight and called my mom for Mother’s day. Recently, Mom told me that my schizophrenic uncle Chris also once worked at a Trader Joe’s. The following is the phone call that I made to her:

“I am turning into Chris!” I said. “To fight my inherited schizophrenia, I can join the military and fight along side my brother in FUCKIN’ VIETNAM!”

“You mean Iraq?” Mom asked.

“Whichever. I think I can fool them into accepting me into the service. The recruiting idiots won’t realize that I have three personalities.”

“Oh,” Then I heard mom’s psychoanalytical voice turn on.

“Can you name them for me?”

“Ok” I replied. “Well, personality number one is Dumb Baby. Dumb Baby gets scared and turns into number two, Mr. Dark, who tastes like stale cigarettes and battery acid. And then number three is Jack, the laughing sociopath with the empty, dead eyes. You wanna hear about my job?”

“Yes I do. Tell me about your job.”

“Today, I saw Little John vomiting in the break room. I never see the poor guy eat anything—I don’t now how he could vomit. Oh, I looked at a cardboard cartoon of a toucan resting at the top of a popcorn display that said, ‘Looking for great deals on Popcorn? Toucan play at that game!’ and I violently laughed at it. This job is so fucking fake happy! I feel like asking my bosses: ’Do you think this is fucking Disneyland? Do you want my face to be sewn
into a smile? *Come on!* You want me to have fun, **TJ**’s? **Ok! HA-HA-HA! Zippedy-Fucken doo-da!** _Fuck it!_ …Oh _god_ … I must be losing my mind. …I know you’ve heard this a million times, mom but …I think I should come home. I love you Mom but there is something seriously wrong with me…”

“I love you too, honey and it certainly seems that there is something wrong. Did you try and get some counseling?”

“…No. I don’t have any money for that. All my money goes to rent and food.”

“Ok, well, we don’t have much money but I will talk to Mike and I’ll see how I can help you. Let’s talk more about this tomorrow.”

“Sure Mom. Happy Mothers’ Day.” Then I said goodbye without any inclination of calling her tomorrow. I won’t get any help from Mike.

I’m sure she’s worried about all the crazy things I said. But I didn’t tell her that I saw the number 26 in red letters on the marquee of the tall building outside my work. I didn’t tell her that I plan to take its elevator to the roof tomorrow and find my own way down. It’ll be my quiet revenge against all the people who once claimed to care about me. They won’t be able to go on thinking that they are so great with me dead. My life is dry and plain anyway. I have no identity. My life is as plain as the paper I’m writing on. My life is as plain as a white piece of paper.

**May 10th, 2004 Monday Night**

*When I woke up this morning for work, I felt like I was falling through my bed. I jumped up and looked at my alarm: 1:48pm. I was late. As I put on my uniform and backpack, I had a strange feeling like everything was dark. This dark feeling persisted as I walked into the bathroom and heard the sirens again. Ambulance sirens. They always seem to be ringing. I thought about the tall building outside of my work and then I ran downstairs, out the front door and into the intense heat. I hurried down the deteriorated sidewalks of 22nd Street stumbling over piles of trash and bottles as I passed pockets of black families sitting on the outside*
steps of their dilapidated homes.

After about ten minutes, I got to Trader Joe’s and I stared over at the tall building and waited for an answer. The red numbers scrolled: 2:06pm. It was clear to me what I had to do. I started briskly walking toward the tall building. I felt the heavy thud of my heart beating in my chest. I felt the sun beating down on my neck and my feet slapping on the sidewalk as my squinted eyes locked on the looming, dark tower. Then suddenly, I heard the sirens cut in. But this time they were close. Really close. I stopped and turned around to see an ambulance pull into Trader Joe’s. I paused for a moment. “Strange.” I thought as two paramedics wheeled a stretcher into the store. That is when inescapable curiosity overcame me and I had to find out what was going on. So I quickly walked back towards my work to find out. As I stepped through the sliding doors and breathed in the soapy cereal smell of Trader Joe’s, something was different. It was too quiet. I still heard the 50’s Doo-Wop music playing but all the employees were silently standing around in a large circle near the registers.

I walked a little closer and I saw frightened employee faces, women with hands over their mouths and tears in their eyes, and I saw my buddy Straight Edge Josh looking very scared. Then I looked down and I saw Cynical Henry. Fat and pale Cynical Henry was lying with his back on the Trader Joe’s linoleum floor. His Hawaiian uniform shirt was off, and the paramedics were squeezing the clear resuscitation bag which was over his mouth. He didn’t move. Then the paramedics gave up on using the bag and just pumped Cynical Henry’s chest with their hands. He was dead. I was staring at a dead man. This is what my death could be. My lips began to silently mouth the words “wake up” as I wished for Cynical Henry to come back. It was quiet for a long time. Nat King Cole echoed on the speakers: “And he’ll kiss your lips. And caress your waiting finger-tips.” I noticed some apathetic customers putting packages of meat into their shopping carts. I hate them. More than anything, I hate apathy. I heard a thump. Cynical Henry’s arm flapped behind his head. He was alive! The paramedics quickly picked him up and laid him out on the stretcher. As he lie still on the stretcher, Cynical
Henry’s head flopped over to the side and his scrunched up little black eyes stared directly at me from across the room. As the paramedics rolled him out of the store, Cynical Henry followed me with his eyes, then he opened his mouth, exposing his sharp yellow teeth, and he let out a single slobbering gargle. I heard the sirens again and then it was quiet.

After a short, quiet day at work, I ran home, threw my backpack on the living room floor, picked up the phone, and called my mom.

“How are you?” Mom asked.

“Not good. My brain is fried and I’m really tired. I’m sorry, mom. I’m sorry that I couldn’t become the man that you and Mike wanted me to be, but soon I won’t even be your son anymore—I’ll be a fucking discarded newspaper lying on the sidewalk next to some cigarette butts and a beer bottle. I’ll throw myself away.”

May 22nd 2004 Saturday Night

The airport lobby is crowded. As I sit in one of a thousand plastic chairs, I watch the blue dot of Casey’s jacket as it disappears among the crowds down at the end of a long white hallway. I worked my last day today but I am still wearing my trashy, wine-stained Trader Joe’s Hawaiian shirt. It’s my only souvenir. I’m leaving this place even though I know that the darkness will follow me wherever I live. But who lives?