

BRADFORD TICE

How to Become an American Boy

GOAL ONE: Realize a sense of fraternity.

The psychiatrist will not talk to you during sessions. Questions only, and then you speak. Those are the rules. She will sit, back straight, in a green leather chair—the gold studs along the arms and sides winking as you drone on. Recline in a posture of defeat in a similar chair across from her. Feel somewhat disappointed that the chair is not a couch. The psychiatrist will remind you of Mary Poppins after a particularly trying night of umbrella transportation. A certain wind-blown style will take up her hair, a smudge of mascara will accentuate the crow's feet around her eyes. She will ask you to begin, as usual, and the whole of your life will move in to drown you. During these episodes, without knowing why, you will be very conscious of your genitals.

You have just graduated from high school. Your mother thinks that therapy will give you a sense of your place in the world, and will encourage you to hold nothing back. The psychiatrist will suggest, think of yourself as an open book. You will not be able to picture this without seeing the *Hustler* magazines your father keeps under the sink in the bathroom. Attempt to think of something else. The hothouse orchids your mother is fond of buying at the local supermarket, for instance. Find yourself still vaguely discomfited.

Tell your psychiatrist you are a homosexual, a fag, queer, puffer, ass pirate, and that it was definitely your mother's fault. She will raise a smoke-thin eyebrow and ask you why this is. Act confused and say there must have been something in the water. Be extremely impressed by your wit and charm, and pretend not to notice the slight tightening of your psychiatrist's face.

Smile. Try to change the subject. Focus your attention on the comfortable line of degrees on the wall, or the spider fern hanging like a nightmare in the window.

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Struggle to think of anything besides genitals. You will find this difficult. Like not thinking of pink elephants.

On the desk will be a series of photographs of children, propped up with velvet and cardboard. Ask her about her kids while trying not to think of her genitals. Recall a caesarean birth you witnessed on the surgery channel late one night. Picture melons splitting open, pink elephants giving birth.

Ignoring the query concerning her kids, she will say, You seem agitated. Does this subject bother you?

Tell her you love kids. Always have.

Harbor many resentments, like the fact that when you tell her about your life, and it feels like your insides are being squeezed through your mother's spaghetti strainer, she will show no emotion. No concern. She will be professional. She will not interrupt you. Tell yourself, she is incapable of understanding your complexity. However, you will continue because your parents are taking out a second mortgage on their house to pay for these sessions—and because it's Sunday, and if you weren't here you'd be in church or at your Aunt Noreen's place babysitting her kids because she's laid up in bed after faking a fall in the local mart. For a nest egg, she says. There isn't much to do in a small town, so all things considered, you're better off where you are.

The therapist will pull down on the tight, salmon-tinted front of her suit jacket, which isn't her color and makes her look bloodless and poached. She will ask, When did you first know you were attracted to men? Pause and gape at the ceiling, pretending to be deep in consideration, despite the fact you've known the answer to this question since you were eight years old. Tell her, you blame your friend Mark's older brother, who wore a pink shirt, on purpose. She will say, You seem to blame a lot of people for your sexuality. Could it be that it's no one's fault? Look flustered, and then nod sagely. Say, That's definitely a possibility.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE ONE:

Out behind the tool shed—where your best friend Mark's father maintains a

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safe haven of metal drill bits, sawdust, and dirty magazines—you're being held hostage. Mark's older brother has you held to his chest, a hand over your mouth. You will be able to smell the residue of soap on his thick fingers. His knees to both sides of you will assert a slight pressure to your body. He will whisper softly into your ear, No biting, or I'll snap your neck.

You are eight years old. In front of the shed and to the right will stretch the snipped lawn of Mark's backyard. There will be a fort set up in the mimosa tree at the property line, before the cornfields that roll out to a small airport where single-engine crop-dusters lift into the air above the crops. The fort will consist of a platform of boards about three paces across with a rope tied to an adjoining branch. It is a broken arm waiting to happen.

On any other day, the lawn would be adrift with gung ho, young male aggression, and dandelion seeds. The three of you—Mark, your brother Shawn, and yourself—would play war with plastic guns and unripe persimmons as grenades. One man holds the fort while the others try to take it by siege. You'd feel like you'd earned your scars, which amount to a skinned knee and a yellowing bruise on your neck caused by a particularly nasty grenade.

Today is different though. Mark's older brother, who is just a year from graduating high school, will decide to enlist. Think of him as a Navy S.E.A.L., who, unbeknownst to your compatriots, will grab you as you head for the line of persimmon trees to reload on ammunition. You will struggle fruitlessly against his arms, and for reasons nameless, you will be very aware of his touch on your skin. Feel something like a charge run up your back.

The others will not yet have noticed that you're missing, but you know it is simply a matter of time. You can hear their shouts above the hum and rattle of the air conditioning unit in back of the house. Try to gain a tactical advantage. Think about what you know of the enemy. Fact one, the enemy is prone to wearing pink Hawaiian shirts. You mentioned it just last week to Mark as you watched his brother climb into the family Plymouth. Here's how the conversation went.

Your brother's wearing pink, Mark, you taunted.

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He responded with, Yeah, but my mother says it's okay for a guy to wear pink if it's a Hawaiian shirt. That's the only time. Otherwise, you're fag.

You didn't ask what fag was.

You don't know what a fag is, do you?

Your brother, as usual, saved you. It's when a guy stops liking girls and starts liking guys. And then if he doesn't get himself straightened out in time, his dick shrivels up and falls off. Then he becomes a girl.

For a week now, you'd spent a good deal of time looking at men's crotches. Monitoring their convexity versus concavity. Several people have mentioned it, and your father has begun to look at you funny over the morning paper. The results of your study are inconclusive.

Try not to think of your failures. Concentrate on the problem at hand—namely, the hand over your mouth. Fact two, Mark's brother is really strong. You come against this every time you struggle to escape, his body like a steel trap. Fact three, he sleeps with a knife under his pillow. You remember Mark telling you this, the very idea engendering a feeling of admiration in both of you. Why? you asked.

Just in case someone breaks in while we're sleeping, Mark said. My brother's a bad ass.

Fact four, you're fairly confident that Mark's brother has genitals.

Weigh the information that you have—pink, peccs, knife, penis. It's not a lot by way of escape plans. Suddenly, the yard will go quiet and in the hush you will hear the organic swell of your captor's lungs behind you. Mark and Shawn will have sensed that something is amiss, like sailors sensing a drop in the barometric pressure. Shawn will wonder aloud where you've gotten off to. It's only a matter of time before you are rescued.

Come suddenly to the realization you don't want to be liberated. Your mind will grow frantic and irrational. You will begin to cook up wild schemes in which you switch sides, turncoat. Imagine you and Mark's brother sitting beside a campfire in the jungles, laughing at each others' farts. You and Mark's brother hard-pressed against each other in a bunker, enemy fire raining down around you. Think of

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holding his knife for him. Think of his scent lodged in your throat like a stubborn pill. Brand yourself forever a traitor.

Mark and Shawn will have fanned out in a search party. You will be able to hear them getting closer. Mark's brother will rise and squat on his haunches, ready to run. He has you in his arms and he's not letting go.

Later, when this is all over, ask your mother to buy you a pink shirt. Then when her back is turned, steal a steak knife from the drawer in the kitchen. Sleep with it under your pillow.

GOAL TWO: Get a girlfriend...or two.

Your psychiatrist chews on a clear pen, rotating it between her teeth as she listens. The pearly enamel flirts with you while you talk. In your seat, grow quiet and fidget. Begin to notice how the skin of your thighs sweats and sticks to the green leather. Think of jungles in Cambodia.

What did you think about what Mark said... about fags? On the last word, she will hook the fingers of her hands into politically sanctioned quotes.

I thought he was full of shit. Be proud of the way your vocabulary has expanded.

She will say something like, How did this make you feel? or Have you ever been called a fag?

Nod your head and keep your face open-ended. Say, It's nothing new, in a seasoned manner. Then try and divert attention away from yourself. Say, you think it always bothered your brother more than you. That you were called a fag in school, that is.

Why do you think that is?

Think about this question for a second. Come up with an answer. I guess he resented the fact that his brother was a pussy. Hook your fingers around the last word. He always said I needed a girlfriend.

She will repeat the question from above. Shrug your shoulders and look put upon. Say, It definitely confounds the enemy, don't you think?



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SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE TWO:

Fast forward eight years. The war is over, and what has grown in its place is a cold arms race. You are sixteen years old. You have a bedroom in the basement of your parents' house that smells musty when it rains. You have a stereo, a collection of wildflowers pressed under sheets of plastic in a photo album, and a bed with silk sheets that you took from the closet upstairs, which were never used after your parents married. You are aware of certain ironies.

In high school, choose your clique carefully. Weigh all options. Consider how you feel about sports cups, horticulture, bodily mutilation. Opt for the edgier circle of friends. The ones who smoke weed in bathrooms, who look like a fan club for Satan and apathy, who consider bisexuality a viable option for girls. Make friends with two females named Columbia and Magenta, who will have sacrificed their Christian names for the sake of image, taking on the personas of characters from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Columbia will be a born-again pagan, with a diamond chip through her nose and blue-purple black hair. Magenta will possess an air of mystery, her hair lightning frizzled, raven black, her nose hooked like a dangerous femme fatale. On weekends, you will gather in the dens of their homes to plan school massacres and to bitch about your other classmates who just don't get you. Columbia and Magenta's parents, ex-bikers and hippies, will make you cookies and disappear respectfully when the girls decide to roll a joint, drop some acid, dye their hair.

If you don't count what you do to yourself, you're still a virgin. At night when you lie awake, it will be next to impossible to think of anything besides genitals, or to keep from touching your own. Try to have sex dreams involving your two girlfriends. Fail miserably. Magenta will be replaced by her leather-clad, Hell's Angels father whose right forearm will bear a sine-curve muscle and a tattoo of a devil giving the finger. Find this mildly disconcerting. Random images of chrome and grease will float through your mind.

This will be an awkward time in your life. Your various body parts will often be swollen, a stainless steel spike driven through an eyebrow, an ear lobe, a nipple. During geometry class, while classmates are proving theorems on the perfect

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conical shape of your teacher's breasts, feel the blood throb around these punctures. Think this is the pain you must endure to be "dope." This is what your girlfriend, Columbia, will have said before impaling your ear with a safety pin, two cubes of ice for anesthesia. Your other girlfriend, Magenta, will say you look like Billy Corgan, which is also "dope."

Give yourself over to these girls. Allow yourself to be reinvented. Tell them, you are their clay and must be molded. A life-size Ken doll in the middle of a life crisis. Columbia will dress you in corduroy pants that are too big and in flannel shirts that grow heavy when it rains. Magenta will dye your hair Smurf blue, star silver, magenta. They will compare you to pictures in music magazines, and nod their heads in approval.

Your mother will begin giving you worried looks, pinch her lips together, and try to be supportive. She will give you condoms, and say things like, For god's sake, you don't want to get trapped in this nowhere town. She will try to reach you. You will have quiet, tension-soaked talks about the hazards of drug use in the car on the way to your grandparents. You will see a thin glaze of fear develop over your mother's eyes, and this will terrify, confuse, and sadden you. Make you feel like you are four again, hiding in her shirt tails from Uncle Robert, who plans on grabbing you and rubbing his stubble against your face. Out the windows, will be rolling hills cast in late afternoon light, pastures of puddles, women bending over in gardens to pluck weeds from the dirt. It will all make you feel like a square peg nailed through an ear lobe. Your mother will say something like, I just want to know who my son is or Please, don't shut me out.

This is the most important part. You must push her away. The car will smell of sunlight and a coconut air freshener. Don't let this make you nostalgic, taking you back to family vacations to Florida or to fishing trips in July. Steel yourself. Give her the cold shoulder, the evil eye, the You can't understand me that easily face. Make her feel like a round hole in a square peg. This is for her own good. Consider how many ways you will hurt her in this life. This will be a mere paper cut, a slight sting in comparison.



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GOAL THREE: Find a male role model.

The sessions will sometimes frustrate you. Your psychiatrist will chalk up everything—your over-treated hair, your clothes, your acerbic glower—to cries for attention and emotional displacement. She will say things like, As long as people are outraged by your looks, they will overlook your sexuality. Begin to think she is a quack, a nut job, a bitch. Stare at her degrees on the wall and wonder if they are forged. Point to the pictures of her kids and say, That one, with the blond hair and the Snoopy shirt. He's going to turn out to be a homo. Make yourself sound like an expert on the subject.

She will laugh in that way that makes you feel like wax paper. Her eyes will sparkle for a moment, and she will bring her hand to her mouth and regard you over her fingers. Then she will say, You're a piece of work. Definitely one of my more entertaining patients. Love her for this.

Then, with a smile still hovering at the corners of her lips, she will ask if you have ever had a sexual encounter with another man. She knows how much she is charging, and will not mince words. Envision space aliens that vaguely resemble genitals before answering. Then say, Maybe once.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE THREE:

Over an extended conversation at the local pizza restaurant, using pizza toppings as metaphors, tell your friends Columbia and Magenta that you are gay. The associations may go something like this—sardines = vaginas, sausages = penises, the bottle of crushed pepper = spiciness of a sexual rather than gastronomic nature. Explain to the girls which toppings interest you. Tell them you've never really cared for sardines, but sausage has been a personal favorite since you were a little boy. Columbia will be arrested mid-bite with a slice of pizza, mushrooms and fish corpses dangling by threads of mozzarella. Magenta will raise an eyebrow, but then continue eating, apparently unfazed. Ask them if they are surprised. Magenta will say something like We kinda knew. We were just waiting for you to tell us. Columbia will nod agreement and huff around a mouthful of cheese and greasy

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dough. It's pretty obvious, dude. For Christ sake, you're wearing fish-nets.

Take a moment to look down at yourself. You're wearing a leather jacket, a black corset with garters, netted hoses, and five inch high heels you spent the better part of the afternoon learning how to walk in. In the distorted reflection from the napkin holder, you see a face you hardly recognize. Above each eye will be a palette of eyeliner and shadow, your mouth a crushed rose, wilted. Wonder why you're always the last to know things. Columbia and Magenta will be in full costume. The former will be in a top hat and vested suit smothered in gold sequins. The latter will be in a French maid's uniform with her hair primped and teased like male pheasant feathers. Begin to notice the attention you are getting from the other customers. They will cut eyes at you and giggle, shaking their heads into the buffet bar. Become self-conscious and brazen in equal proportions.

As the three of you get up to pay your tab, leave a tip for the waiter and blow kisses to the crowd. They will pretend not to notice. Outside, you will all climb into Columbia's station wagon, borrowed from her mother, and drive the forty miles to the neighboring town, where every Saturday at midnight there is a live showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. In a backpack, Magenta will have packed a couple of decks of playing cards, water pistols, Scott toilet paper, several boxes of Minute Rice, and an assortment of other odd items. These are the things you will need to fit into the crowd.

At the theater, you will feel as if you have entered another world. The movie will play on a forty-foot wide screen, while below it, on a stage beleaguered with red velvet and confetti, a group of actors will act out the events taking place on screen. At particular points in the movie, there will be tasks for the audience to perform. It is vital that you not miss a cue, for the uninitiated are often singled out, a needle of spotlight pinning you to your seat like a butterfly to the board. Be ready. Don't miss your moment.

When the crowd uses squirt guns to simulate rain, think of it as a baptism. The throwing of the rice will be the closest you will ever come to a wedding of your own. You will get a paper cut from an ill-thrown queen of hearts during the "I'm

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Coming Home” number, but it will hardly matter. You will feel as if you have been reborn into a kingdom of sexual autonomy and decadence. You will flounder in a sea of rhinestones, face paint, feather boas, and silk lingerie. The woman standing next to you in the aisle will grab you and kiss you hard during the orgy scene in the pool, and it will be like permission. Everyone in the theater will be celebrating their genitals. Feel redeemed, feel naughty, feel saved.

During the show, fall in love with the actor pantomiming Frank-n-Furter. Watch as he struts the length of the stage, lip syncing Tim Curry’s lyrics, his thighs in fish nets will be like sculpted Greek torsos. A noticeable bulge will be bobbing in the silk pouch of his panties. He will mouth the words of every song for you. His eyes will be like dark lodestones. Feel your bones splinter into iron filaments. Be conventional and go weak at the knees.

After, when the credits have rolled and the light from the projector has ceased its magic, follow Columbia and Magenta onto the stage where the cast will hold an after hours party. There will be champagne in plastic glasses, the smell of clove cigarettes and make-up, and a strong heat rising from the floor lights. Drink several glasses of the champagne and stumble in your heels. You will find the guy who played Frank-n-Furter standing beside the bowl of bean dip in back of the stage. You will just be drunk enough to start up a conversation. Tell him something inappropriate and vaguely humiliating, such as You were like an angel up there or You were so sexy, I could hardly stand it. He will smile, somewhat drunk himself. He will lean into your ear, placing a hand lightly on your chest, and say something appropriate like Thank you or You’re very cute when you’re fawning. Blush like a little girl as his hand slithers down your side.

He will offer to take you backstage behind the velvet. Say yes, but grow nervous, as if there were a pinball machine being played in your stomach. Behind the curtains, comment on something idiotic. A wind machine or a stuffed owl. Frank, without responding, will place both his hands on your hips and draw you close to his chest. Be prepared—the black lace will be scratchy. As he begins to kiss you, notice the sweat on his lips, letting the sounds of exchange and laughter from

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behind the curtain fade into the background—just like in the movies when eyes meet and a love song comes on. Worry briefly if you're doing everything correctly. Wonder when you're supposed to breathe.

Hours later, Columbia will drop you off at your parents' house. Everyone will be asleep. You will stand on the porch and watch as the headlights of the car disappear into the night. Inhale deeply so that you may catch the ghost of Frank's scent on your lips. In the distance, there will be heat lightning and the rumble of something building. Feel electric. Feel reckless and driven, the blood vessels under your skin like whips, the hair on your head standing on end.

GOAL FOUR: Be stoic in the face of disaster.

Your therapist will ask you to talk about your family. Try to divert her. Tell her your grandmother was distant and an unapologetic racist. Tell her you find horses to be mildly erotic animals. See if she bites.

She will say, I want to talk about your family now. Tell me about the day you told your mother you were gay.

Your heart will sound like an accordion being played badly at a funeral. Throw up a wall, an ocean, an abyss around you. Nail shut what doors you can. Ask her why she feels this is important.

She will respond with, To be frank, I'm beginning to wonder what the need is for your being here. You seem like a healthy teenage boy.

Say, Looks can be deceiving. Tell her you're a mess, a wreck, a debunked product. Tell her you think constantly of genitals. Want more than anything for her to think that you are special.

She will give you a level look. Her skin will not twitch an inch. That's why I want to talk about your family. There's obviously not a problem with your extracurricular activities. But I need to know how your family relationships fit into you.

Wonder at this turn of phrase.



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SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE FOUR:

The night of the live show, you will lie in bed after arriving home wide awake until morning. Perhaps you masturbate to the memory of Frank's presence leaned up against you. In the early hours of morning, a late spring storm will pass above the house. The wind will be deep and guttural around the eaves, the house groaning under the weight of clouds. This will be like an epiphany. The earth shook. The sky was rent. You will decide it is time to tell your mother everything, with obvious omissions.

You will already be tired of the constant self-awareness. The fear that at any moment some Freudian slip might expose you. That you'll be seated at the kitchen table, parents and sibling surrounding you, and ask your mother to please pass you the butter and a queer of corn. Remind yourself of how conscious you have become of how to hold your hands, your posture. You are always mindful of the rules. Earring in the left ear. Don't lisp. Don't order virgin drinks with umbrellas in mixed company. Pink is not an acceptable hair color for men. You will feel constantly exhausted and aroused, and you will somehow know that only one of these feelings is customary.

The next morning, you will head upstairs with purpose. You will find your mother sitting on a stool at the bar in the kitchen. She will be eating a grapefruit with a baby spoon. Go to the window of the front door and look outside. The world will be rain-washed, dew-spackled. In the yard, your father and brother will be passing a football back and forth over the still-wet grass. Your cocker spaniel, Beau, will run circles around your brother, caught up in the excitement. Find yourself thinking of Norman Rockwell paintings. Thanksgivings where your Uncle Robert hurls blobs of cranberry sauce at the striped referees on tv.

Your mother will comment on how late you got home. She will look at you as if suspecting something but will not voice her suspicions. You will expect everything unsaid between the two of you to roll like a scud of clouds over the oceans of her eyes. This is simply melodramatic drivel, and will not occur.

Tell her you have something important to say. Something that's difficult to articulate. She will immediately get wind of what's happening. She will calmly set

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down her spoon and give you her attention. Expect this. She's a mother. She's been through this drill before.

You might find yourself picturing a picturesque vision of Americana—middle-class life, a solid marriage, two sons, a dog, blender in the kitchen, an expanse of backyard. Ask yourself, what the hell are you doing? Imagine you can already see the disappointment welling within her face. The grief of losing grandchildren before they've even been born. There will be a stillness in the air, like the quiet that gathers in summer evenings. Never a good sign. Open your mouth to speak, to form words, and feel them shrivel into dried husks and slither back down your esophagus.

Your mother will look at you in your speechless state and say, That bad, huh?

She will begin to make guesses. She will ask, are you on drugs?

Is Columbia pregnant?

Have you pierced something unmentionable?

Say no. Then she will look at you calm as cabbage, and ask if you're gay, and like that, a snap of fingers, a bolt from the blue, it will be over.

GOAL FIVE: Risk everything.

She will ask, So what has your life been like since you came out?

Tell her what she wants to hear, but what is only partially true. Something vague like, Peaches and cream. A sundae with a cherry on top. Cloud nine.

Actually, it's been a seven and a half as far as clouds go, but one can't expect miracles. She will smile, and talk about the progress you've made. She will even venture to admit that her role in these proceedings has been minimal, and that she doesn't see as how further therapy is needed. While you're doing this, your psychiatrist will smile at you, her eyes glistening in their beds of coal-black mascara. The spider fern will turn in the breeze from the air conditioner, and the dust in the light from the window will settle on the varnished desk. She will respond with, You're ready to grab the world by the balls, no pun intended, or I'm afraid you're perfectly unconventionally normal.

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Be prepared. At this moment, you may feel a loss so great it will half-life your heart. Think about how many skins you have shed in this room. So many, in fact, you may expect to look into the corners and see the shadows of them watching you.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION SCENE FIVE

After the news is delivered, after you've "come out," your mother will nod as if she expected as much. She will open her mouth to speak, and suddenly you will begin praying for a diversion. Anything to stop the questions that are coming. Hope for a satellite to dislodge from orbit and come crashing into your living room, or for a rift in space-time to open in the microwave. Instead, what you will get is your father bursting in at that moment, saying "You'll never believe what I heard from Cupcake next door. He will tell the family about an F5 tornado that touched down in the neighboring county the night before. He will herd up the family, drive you like cattle into the Blazer, and steer toward the scene of catastrophe. This will be nothing out of the ordinary. Say your father has a strange fascination for tornadoes. Say he watches Discovery and the Weather Channel avidly for any kind of special on "nature's fury." Convince yourself this is not a leap. Not a *deus ex machina*.

Your town is full of his type. Most of them stumbling day to day, working dead-end, factory jobs, trying to make ends meet. All of them in their off time developing strange hobbies and obsessions to make themselves feel interesting and worthy of note. Think of your cousin with his exotic, five thousand dollar saltwater aquarium. Or the eccentric on the other side of town you read about in the newspaper, who rigged together a transistor radio and an eight-track player in order to communicate with the home-world, somewhere in the vicinity of Orion's belt buckle. For your father, it's the chaos of weather that turns his crank. This will be old-hat in your neck of the woods. Tell yourself, these people are not crazy, they're just bored. They want to believe they are special. Don't find the heart to blame them.

Your mother will sit in the front seat with your father, silent as you have never seen her, answering questions put to her in monosyllables. Your father and brother will begin to joke, talking about the hazards of life in mobile homes. How

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tornadoes are God's sly, yet firm way of saying, Get that shit off my planet. Try to ignore them. Concentrate on your mother. Briefly, wonder what she is thinking, then turn your attention to the windows and the passing landscape—the weeds on the roadside, the alternating fields of corn and cows, the birds perched upon power lines.

You will arrive at the site of devastation in the haze of late morning. The change will be obvious and profound. Your father will whistle softly under his breath as you drive by ruined houses turned on their sides or scattered like food wrappers on the sides of the interstate. Cars will be stacked in pillars, the tatters of clothes fluttering in the trees like the skins of their former inhabitants. Thin sticks of people will wander through the wreckage, turning over plaster and splintered wood, looking for anything recognizable. A soap dish, a spatula, anything. The silence of the car will be palpable, everyone caught up in the awe wind sometimes makes.

Look at your mother's face reflected in the passenger mirror as she stares out the window. Her expression will be unreadable, and you will not be able to help yourself wondering if she can relate to these people who have seen their homes picked up, rearranged, and handed back to them like a broken puzzle. Find yourself thinking of her as slightly petty.

As you drive away from the footpaths of gods, the previous humor will return to your father and brother, a buffer to the storm. They will start swapping jokes again, as you withdraw into a corner of the car with your own thoughts gathered about you. Begin to think of when you will see Frank again, and when would be an appropriate time to tell him that you love him.

Then, your brother Shawn will crack a joke and the word "faggot" will drop like furniture from the sky. Your father will laugh. Your mother will stiffen.

She will turn and say, Shawn, I don't want to hear you using such language in this family ever again. Do you understand? Something to that effect.

Your mother's nostrils will flare, like the last sight a matador ever sees. Your father will giggle, smelling thunder, and respond with He's just joking. Jesus!

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What will result will be a quiet kind of truce wherein no one will say anything. Turn your attention to something else. Something important which you've neglected, the future. Think of the plans you've outlined with Columbia and Magenta, an escape route out of town on the day of graduation. Picture yourself driving on the only highway, toward a horizon that runs ahead of you forever. Columbia will have only one request, the only one she has ever had. She will want to drive to New Mexico and tool down Highway 666, smoke a joint, and let the past roll like road kill under the tires. Out the window will fly a feather boa, red feathers lined with silver, like a flag driven into the landscape of some alien world.

As a peace offering, your father will drive you all to an overlook where a cliff will drop away into several green rolling valleys with frame houses built in lines. Your family will line up at the side of the road, leaning on the metal barrier, and watch the world unfold below. Your mother will take your hand and squeeze it within hers. There will be wind in the tops of sycamores, swallows slicing the sky, swooping in close and then veering off. In no particular order, you will think of genitals, tornadoes, and the previous day. Maybe your mother will lean in and tell you this is where your father and she shared their first kiss. Maybe you will tell her of yours.

What will overtake you at this moment will be a realization that there isn't very much separating you from the people in those white, geometric houses. The zombies slouching their way through the next blue-light special, thinking if they only had a brain. You will look down and see yourself standing on a knife blade, balanced between your hopes for freedom and a whimpering need of warmth. Feel as American as apple pie, Graceland, channel six, loud color—and know someday you will unpack an attic full of junk and kitschy cast-offs onto your front lawn for a rummage sale. Strangers will wander through the maze of your life casually, as if they knew you. Spread out, it will all look like a map you remember from grade school—divided into territories, states, cities, homes—a whole teeming nation of desires.