

Sketches of the Inchoate



By Charles Davi

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The outlines of a day

It's Syttende Mai, we're in the living room of our apartment, there's a TV mounted on a white wall.

You take your earrings off, which are large, and silver, and quite reflective, your hair is blonde.

Our bedroom is sunny, as is the entire apartment.

I watch your fingers, as you take your earrings off -

Your ear is almost glowing a bit in the light, and so I can see the faint outlines of the blood vessels branching under your skin, causing your earlobes to look like small opaque gumdrops, in context.

It's all a bit disorienting, leaving me relieved, we're finally home -

You seem so comfortable, undressing, slowly and casually, with something in between indifference and affection, occasionally, making eye-contact, smiling.

Though I'm borderline offended by your pantyhose, which take me by surprise, given what you're wearing is, otherwise, tantamount to a costume:

The translucent, brown top is high-waisted, looks a bit cheap, like a beer bottle.

I can nonetheless see the outlines of your underwear in the bright light of the room, which compensates.

Our apartment is not that big, though certainly not small -

My snobbishness creeps into almost everything, including our home, though you are the rare exception, leaving even my exhausting pretensions exhausted, unable to find an unflattering aspect of your appearance, or behavior.

The bedroom has what look like floor to ceiling windows, and the room is filled with typical Scandinavian summer sunlight:

Ultra-bright and white.

Your knees are shaking, somewhat, planted into the bed, with your palms also flat on the bed, supporting you, with your back approximately upright -

Your hair is down, obscuring your face, which is looking into your lap, just a few inches away from mine.

...

I drank beer for most of the day, to avoid acting like a jerk, so I must really like you, and it seems as though we love each other, but I'm nonetheless concerned with your opinion of me, which is atypical -

It breaks my confidence, leaving me less free to enjoy my drunkenness, than I'm accustomed to, which I dismiss, as an unavoidable consequence of adulthood, and a mature relationship.

We're engaged, and I can feel pangs of financial anxiety at times when I see your ring, and my obnoxious car, and my obnoxious clothes, my obnoxious expenses generally, all tethered about some pretentious drivel, pushing papers about a desk, quantifying some nonsense risk, all of which leave me carrying the weight of a career that appeals in many ways to what is worst about me:

An aggressive jackass, eager to remind everyone they wouldn't fare terribly well, but for constraints of civility.

You elicit something else in me, I've grown addicted to, perhaps because I'm being paid to be my worst most days, providing me with an escape:

An exaggerated privacy -

We both enjoy the same pretentious bull shit, with a common set of signals we interpret in a private manner, regardless of who's around, which allows our space to live, wherever we are, together.

Nonetheless, we spend substantial time laughing at each other, suggesting that, despite our mutual admiration, there's a current running under keeping us from slipping too far into our own graces.

...

The sunlight cuts through a glass plant vase, through the soil, illuminating its roots, which distracts me from you -

It's on a table near the bed, to the righthand side from my perspective, just a few feet away from my eyes.

Your legs are shaking, seated near me in the center of the bed, as I'm still laying on my back, and you're crying.

You say, in a disappointed tone, with inappropriately long pauses,

"Charles, ... I want us, to have a kid."

You don't look at me, awkward overall in stating the idea.

I become uncomfortable, initially expecting something different, though I

noticed your mood change, so I expected something.

The birds are up, and chirping quite a bit, annoying me, subtracting significantly from the gravity of the moment.

Without any pause, I sit up, placing my left hand on your forearm, and say, “OK”, though still unsure of the merits of your idea, growing worried apprehension shows in delivery or expression.

You slip your arm out, and place your hand in mine, and so I squeeze it, with a firmness consciously adjusted to convey assurance.

...

I was drinking Carlsberg, or Tuborg -

I don’t remember which, but it was a green glass bottle, for sure.

...

The curtains are open, we’re on a somewhat high floor, and so no one can see in as a practical matter, and the Sun is so bright, it cuts through the fabric of the curtains -

We must look like lit up cutouts from a distance, haplessly entangled in each other, while our handler is off doing otherwise.

You have alarmingly beautiful eyes, with some freckles around them, and though I’m used to seeing you at this point, I’m always taken back by your appearance, especially now -

Outlines of your lips flash, mixed in with the sunlight through your hair, your skin brushes its way against mine, as you lean in to adjust your posture.

I see droplets in your eyelashes, which remind me of the light through the roots of the plant, minutes earlier, though I can’t make sense of why I’m making these associations.

“You think it’s, OK, that we have a child together?”

To an American, you have a sophisticated accent, suggesting plainly you grew up speaking British English, but you nonetheless have the charm of a Norwegian bumpkin, with a typical bounce to your articulation.

You start laughing, at yourself, and my thoughtless response, for a bit, for having been so dramatic, which suggests it’s out of character for you, which might be why, I’m actually worried what you think of me.

You wipe your eyes, and your nose, collecting yourself, and though an imposingly mature personality emerges, I can see that part of your persona has been shattered by your honesty, which brings me a bit of pride, and guilt, but mostly pride.

You slap my right shoulder, quite hard, laughing harder, and say,

“You’re such a prick! Charles ...”, sounding this time, entirely British, and I gather, that you measured, my placating had grown to something else entirely, leaving you confident in my love, and your expectations, though their realization may have been a bit off from what you had hoped.

...

You slip in the shower, afterward, and hit your head, which leaves me feeling hopeless -

The prospect of an impossible loss, becomes a possibility, and my arrogance shrinks to meekness.

I resent slipping so far into my affections for you, but my concern preoccupies my thoughts -

I see your wet hair stuck to the bones of your naked back, the top of your head, your hair split roughly down the middle, darkened from falling water, and I’m terrified I’m about to see blood color soap running down our drain.

I cautiously move your hair back from the left side of your head, as you’re still seated on the shower floor, not talking, or moving, simply staring forward.

Your skin has been scraped off a bit near your left eye, but I don’t see any serious injury, which I find relieving, though I did hear something crack, so I sit behind you and take your right hand, and lean in toward you, giving you a moment, to organize yourself and your thoughts.

You slip your fingers in between mine, and the water becomes a bit of a nuisance to us both. †

Just before she fell in the shower

She resents that her professional life has forced her into thinking like an adult, which is now creeping into her personal life -

The poisons of reason, observation, and strategy.

So she wishes you were different -

Realizing your petty criticisms are entertaining when it's at the expense of her outfit, or someone else's hairline, she imagines your cruelty directed at her child, that perhaps has some unchangeable aspect, disappointing you, and that no matter how well you mask your thoughts on the matter, a subtle glance or comment could reveal a stinging criticism, which is something she's felt, when your references overlap a bit too much with her life:

The loud joke about an ostensible stranger at a dinner, of course painted as some idiot, with ruthless disregard for anything other than clarity, leading to the quiet realization, that she has more than nothing in common with this person, making her feel as though you did it on purpose, though she knows this is certainly not the case.

She also realizes that you operate as a type of highly entertaining constraint on her self image, vacillating between the immediate, physical and emotional love for her that you make no secret of, the relentlessness of which leaves her numb, and a bit guilty, because no normal person has the energy to sustain something like this -

Constantly celebrating another person:

She can see that every new moment with her, if she just opens a door, sets off a carnival in your mind, an energy too big to be contained, that borders on embarrassing, even when no one else is around to see it.

But the horrendous things you say about other people, suggest at least the possibility, that somewhere in your mind lives a small box of devastating insults that you keep handy, in the off chance that she ever decides to leave -

So that if you can't have her, then she'll be ruined for everyone else.

That all of her happiness, and all of her memories with you, exist within a set of places, at particular times, when both of you behaved in a particular manner -

That you both voluntarily, but perhaps unconsciously, limited your options in life, simply because you are so happy.

It creates a window within which she's the happiest she's ever been, but

nonetheless a range of conduct, beyond which a terrible anxiety exists.

Making things worse, she realizes, you may echo our hostile environment -

An evolutionary bargain, that allows for otherwise impossible, unconditional love, which she never questions.

In her vulnerability, she can see at least the possibility that she probably wouldn't find you attractive, if you weren't so cruel -

That your love would appear otherwise foolish.

She imagines the possibility of getting sick, while pregnant, and being unable to feed herself, remembering how automatic your care is for her at moments like that, able to see how the rest of the world falls completely out of your focus, leaving not even yourself, and only her;

An aperture, that drops to a single fixed point, her;

An animal, that invests all of its well-being in a single, exogenous being, her.

She knows this makes her emotionally lazy, and that your predictability allows you to be manipulated, but she also knows, that you're plainly conscious of it all, and that you don't care -

And so she doesn't find it unattractive.

That on balance, compromise is inevitable, leaving her with a sense of being completely trapped.

The realization that morality necessarily implies that love operates as a trap, while at the same time, basic emotional needs suggest the alternative is less desirable.

Economics suggests the same conclusions, and though she feels guilty for thinking of money, she's afraid of you, because she concludes, you are a trap, otherwise you wouldn't make sense -

That she has to make a decision over a set of two drastically different outcomes, suggesting in that sense, that she has already been trapped.

These considerations lead her to the possibility that she's just as petty as you are. †

The day we found our apartment

The door to our apartment is matted black, with brushed chrome accents and components, an overall aesthetic similar to the interior of a high-end sports car.

The door and lock tumbler are both very high quality, as are the hinges upon which the door is mounted.

The key is however cut by the building, and is quite cheap to the touch, with an awful, hard plastic casing around the top, which annoys me.

There is no handle to the door, and you instead simply turn the key, and push the door in, which I quite like, in terms of simplicity of gesture, and the resulting overall finish of the door, and the hallway.

The apartment itself is immediately bright, and sun-filled, the moment you open the door, with high ceilings, painted white brick walls, grey concrete floors, and a large, flowering tree by the windows, housed in a large, green glass vase, filled with dark soil, and a mix of matted and partially reflective stones -

A significantly larger version of the same vase in our bedroom.

There are small glass accents, scattered about, that light up when there's sufficient incoming sunlight, which we both enjoy coming home to.

I sold nearly all of my belongings in New York before moving, other than my primary guitar, which is now stored in a closet, as instructed, producing an aesthetic that is certainly a compromise, skewed towards your preferences.

None of it is too effeminate, and is instead somewhere between the look of a Williamsburg condo, and a reasonably high-end apartment in Stockholm.

There are large, floor to ceiling windows, and it's a generous one-bedroom, with a very oversized bedroom, two bathrooms, including an equally oversized bathroom in the bedroom, that has dark, plank wood, heated floors, a large glass-doored shower with no tub, that also has plank wood floors.

The building itself is tall for the area, a bit dated, with an almost kitsch, Soviet brick exterior, but it's been completely renovated, so the apartment interiors are legitimately outstanding.

...

We had an argument the day we first saw the apartment, and were very late to the showing -

It's because I showed up preposterously late picking you up, ultimately due

to drinking with a friend, Ove, that you really do not like, because you know I use my time with him as an opportunity to discuss awful things, and that he is a terribly misogynistic man, that religiously complains about his wife's laziness, and is also an alcoholic. †

When I met Ove

I met Ove after a night out in Oslo, soon after first moving there, on line at a kebab stand, near Oslo Central Station.

I had been drinking in the center of town, and things did not go terribly well for me, having been repeatedly rejected on multiple, independent occasions, mostly because I was alone, making my many unsolicited social intrusions appear like the outset to sexual assault.

Ove took it upon himself to say hi to me, and given my circumstances, I was in no position to be picky about new friends, so I took up his conversation, which was surprisingly entertaining.

Ove's a bit older than me, sort of bald, about my height, and though he didn't seem to have the greatest fashion sense, he seemed relatively normal, in terms of his appearance.

His English was pretty good, and after a rather forward discussion about his wife's many inadequacies, and some stories about my life in New York, he reached into his pocket, unveiling a folded piece of paper -

He had the posturing of a man revealing something not quite secret, but nonetheless earned, during my brief tenure at the kebab stand, with a cautious pride, as he unfolded the page, making eye contact with me, just before it opened:

It turns out, it was a bit of dated, internet pornography, that had been printed on a very low-quality machine, producing a heavily pixelated representation of what appeared to be a seated nude woman in her 30's, with a background that seemed lifted from a high school yearbook.

It was a truly worthless bit of smut, not notable on any metric -

She was not particularly attractive, the subject matter was perfectly mundane, all conveying the sense that it had been engineered for mediocrity.

I was simply astonished by the display, deciding that Ove is someone I need to keep in touch with, and so any obstacles to two men making friends, publicly exchanging contact information this late in life, had been decidedly overcome.

There were a group of girls in their early 20's behind us that had witnessed our interactions, and burst into laughter upon seeing the pornography.

I gathered they couldn't quite make out the entire conversation, and because we exchanged numbers after jointly admiring pornography, they likely assumed we were perverts, perhaps unable, or perhaps too lazy, to find real women. †

When I finally show up

I finally show up, noticeably smelling of alcohol, despite driving a considerable distance from Ove's house, an hour late, blaming the traffic, which did play some non-trivial role, though this is disingenuous, at best -

We had been texting back and forth the entire time, and I more or less lie, about where I was, and what time I'd show up.

As I pull up, a screeching movement, from an otherwise beautiful piece, by César Franck,¹ that I am positively blasting inside the car, reaches its zenith, and I burst into singing along to the shrill violin, knowing full well that you cannot stand this piece.

An old lady exits a fish shop behind you, unsure of what she's experiencing, visibly astonished that you're about to get into my car.

You hate where I currently live, and this adds to your aggravation.

All of this reminds you of my self-entitled willingness to impose a total nightmare on other people, though to your credit, you understand that it is due to my inordinate enjoyment of life.

You open the car door yourself, before I can reach over, and before I can utter a single word, you say,

"At least chew some gum, because you look a bit shit at the moment, so try to not smell like shit as well."

Taken back by your rudeness, I look in the mirror to find that you are in fact correct, and that my hair has been blown upwards, causing me to look a bit like a cockatiel, and upon inspection, I find a dark, oily stain on the right leg of my jeans.

There is a candy bar wrapper to the right of the gas pedal, suggesting that I even stopped to get something to eat, which you notice.

You also saw me quickly, and clumsily eating it as I pulled up, which adds to your temporary revulsion towards me.

All of this breaks my confidence, as I clumsily fix my hair, realizing that I am in fact a bit drunk, which in turn sours the mood, as I begin to feel legitimately bad for upsetting you, though you know that I do these things, at least in part, as a form of performance art, to amuse you with my outrageous conduct.

You eventually laugh at how stupid I look, and fix my hair, as if I were some

¹The Violin Sonata in A-Major, Mov. 2.

kind of disabled child, that you have been tasked with caring for.

You know that this is simply how I am, and that for most of my life, I somehow simply get away with these things, perhaps because I look a bit stupid at times, but nonetheless, it annoys you, occasionally.

You're not bothered by my drinking, and you trust that I would never consciously put you in any danger, which is in this case the result of hubris, adopting the same at times careless attitude towards how I spend my free time.

Perhaps you trust my vanity more than anything else, which would never let me cross the line from the outrageous to the truly degenerate.

You want to participate in how I see the world -

To show up drunk, an hour late, with stained pants, and disheveled hair, and somehow get away, driving off with a beautiful woman.

Though you're the reason it's possible in this case, it is in part driven by your desire to understand the mechanics of the process.

You could have walked, as it's only a few blocks away, but you waited, perhaps because you want to be part of these moments, where you're legitimately disappointed in my petty, inconsiderate nonsense. †

Ove's house

I'm surprised, and a bit relieved, to learn that Ove lives in Bærum, which is one of the nicer suburbs of Oslo, making my trip to his home less uncomfortable for me.

My ex-girlfriend grew up in Bærum, and so I already have fond memories of the area.

I'm honestly astonished at how nice Ove's place is, and it turns out, that he's an electrical engineer, with his own company, and does commercial electrical wiring for large buildings around Oslo, and neighboring cities in Norway.

We have a common interest in engineering, and sports cars in particular, which really makes our initial conversations go remarkably well.

I looked around for a dot-matrix printer, as the presumed source of his carry-on pornography, but didn't see one, so I concluded that he had printed it at work, as an executive privilege of sorts.

However, Ove has a pet rat, which is immediately distinguishable from the cliché lab mouse, and is instead an actual rat, that is visibly unhealthy, with disgusting teeth, and matted hair, that he's simply left to coagulate.

He keeps it in a large, square, glass fish tank, that has a plastic, model race car in it, and a more traditional hamster wheel, neither of which appear to be getting much use by this visibly sickly creature.

The tank is large enough to fit a dog food bowl, and its internal condition is simply disgusting, though I can see that the outside of the tank is cleaned regularly.

On this day, the bowl contains a left over steak, that has clearly been chewed on extensively by, "Micky", which is apparently the rat's name, suggesting either a language gap, or perhaps an inability to distinguish between cartoon mice, and large, diseased rats. †

The story of Ove's pet rat

Ove was working on a construction site in East Oslo, and the ground under the site had been torn up to allow for construction, which had been otherwise left relatively undisturbed for centuries.

This released an enormous number of rats, which caused problems at the construction site, with workers frequently spotting rats attempting to steal their unattended lunches, and otherwise infesting the site, with many rats fighting each other, rather viciously, extending their presence to surrounding neighborhoods as well.

Occasionally, teams of rats would run after pedestrians, with local newspapers featuring zoomed-in, pixelated photographs of vicious-looking rats, with off-center, sensational headlines, alerting locals to avoid particular corners, reportedly due to trash cans that had been completely overwhelmed by rats.

Ove is convinced that he had befriended a particular rat, and took to feeding only this rat each day at work, insisting that the rat's matted hair, and personality, allowed him to discern between Micky, and his many friends, all of whom ultimately terrorized the neighborhood for months.

Their friendship had reportedly blossomed over a few days, and so he brought a trap to work one day, that he had fashioned himself at home, baiting Micky with what I'm told was his favorite cheese at the time, Jarlsberg, cleverly ensconcing him in the trap, and ultimately taking him home.

The race car was purchased during another work trip Ove had taken to Trondheim, feeling guilty for having to leave Micky at home alone for over a week, so he bought the race car just to cheer up Micky, which cost Ove \$150 USD.

I asked whether his wife had come with him to Trondheim, and after a brief bit of reflection, he simply said, "no". †

How we met

She had just joined the firm about a week ago, and I had been invited to her welcoming drinks, at a bar not far from the office, certainly within walking distance.

If it sucks, I go back to work, or home -

I have no idea who she is, but I can see on the invite that there's an internal client going, and I never miss an opportunity for face time.

I already checked to see if her photo was in the HR system, which I'm not supposed to do, but there was nothing there yet in any case.

It turns out that she is quite attractive, and seems to notice me, perhaps in part simply because I'm much louder than everyone else.

It's a professional event, so she has to at least talk to me, and so I take the opportunity to get to know her -

If she's interested, great;

If not, who cares.

I reach out to shake her hand, and she responds with a good grip, which I like.

I'm taken back enough to check out her hands, suspecting some monstrous, club-shaped sausages to explain the power of this grip, but I instead see what looks like a normal hand, with long, elegant fingers, a bit bony, veiny, perhaps from squeezing so hard.

She has an extremely youthful face, but I can see a bit of age in her hands, and her forearm muscles, which I find relieving, because I'm old enough now that younger women have gotten a bit old.

I'm already impressed, and she catches me looking at her hand, and can sense that I'm starting to like her -

We hold hands, for a bit too long, making eye contact, she smiles a bit, which is broken by food guy, with his tray of mediocre fried nonsense, and related mystery sauces.

I'm hungry, so I select the least repulsive looking item from his greige buffet, grab a napkin, and thank him for his service.

She passes, perhaps because she's new, and eating in front of people is always weird, especially so in a context like this, where you're in essence being

evaluated, subject to significant personal financial risk.

She tells me about her group, within private equity, and I'm familiar with a few of the people that she works with, saying the usual, polite things:

This one's bright, that one's a worker, blah blah blah . . .

She leaves at some professionally reasonable time during our conversation, leaving me extremely attracted to her -

And I realize that it's been years since I've felt something like this.

The professional risk is non-zero, but Europeans have a more open attitude towards office relationships, so I decide that I will pull the trigger, if she seems interested.

And it seems that she is, as she sticks around, as do I, noticing that she's looking at me periodically, fairly openly suggesting that she would like to continue talking after everyone else leaves.

This is precisely what happens -

We get into a fairly heavy conversation about our lives, at times making me a bit uncomfortable, because I try to keep my personal life and professional life walled off.

I need another drink, so I offer to get her one as well, and she says, "sure", asking for whatever white wine I think is best -

I like the fact that she already trusts my judgment, and I get the sense of an almost instant mutual familiarity.

The line for the bar is quite long, and the place is itself somewhere between a bar and a club, and of course, some guy steps in, about a minute or so after I leave, and I can see him chatting her up.

I already noticed this loser eyeing her up while I was talking to her, which annoyed me, because it subtracted from my enjoyment of her.

But, I'm an adult, and this is not the first time that something like this has happened, so in addition to our drinks, I buy a shot of this revolting Norwegian liquor that my ex-girlfriend pointed out one evening at a bar in the East Village.

I return, hand her the glass of wine, and introduce myself to, "Johann", handing him the shot that I had so generously purchased for him.

He says, "Takk, vad er det?"

I say, in English, “It’s a Norwegian Seamen’s shot”, which when said out loud, sounds about right.

She starts laughing, trying to contain herself.

I was hoping that this would send the message, but apparently not.

I had a look down at Johann’s shoes, as part of my primal exercise of sizing this idiot up, and spotted what are the most ridiculous looking loafers I have ever seen:

Dark suede, with some kind of family crest sewn into the top, as if Ralph Lauren’s family had an official shoe.

Johann doesn’t seem to get the message, and minutes pass with both of us trying our best to ignore him, with varying degrees of civility.

Then he suddenly leans in, and puts his hand on her naked shoulder, and I feel a rush of total hatred fill my blood, as his little fingers squeeze and compress the skin around her bones, I can feel the person that I thought I’d left behind me come alive again, and I imagine that it showed -

I push him off of her, put my left hand on his shoulder, squeezing hard enough to hurt him, and pour my beer all over his stupid shoes, staring into his eyes the whole time, looking down only to correct my aim, as he awkwardly dances backwards, while I shake what remains of my beer at whatever foot is closest to me.

She cannot believe that I’ve done this, and her attraction towards me drops to nothing, briefly even hating me for it, walking away, without saying goodbye.

She later remembers I was so angry, that I didn’t even notice that she walked away -

So consumed by petty hatred, directed at a shoe, I would abandon someone I was clearly interested in, taking non-trivial professional risk as well, though she realizes, it was triggered by a strange man touching her. †

Redux

We meet again, this time, accidentally, during lunch, outdoors, a few months later.

I had a shitty day at work, so I'm a bit out of it, and she can see that, so she's almost opportunistic about it -

Though I don't compete with her at work, she is occasionally on calls with me, and less frequently, in meetings, and at this point, she thinks that I'm brilliant, but she really dislikes me as a person.

I don't say much at lunch, just listening, and nodding, staring off into the sunlight, not even apologizing for what happened when we first met.

As she's getting up, I ask if she'd like to get dinner tonight, and she almost feels bad for me, and says, "yes" -

She walks away, realizing that my hostility might have an origin quite different from its expression, and so her mental portrait of me instantly becomes more complex, forced to concede that I'm actually quite weird, and not the meathead she anticipated -

Then the night at the bar replays in her head as she walks away, again realizing how strange it is that I poured beer on another man's shoes. †

What I do

I replace people that make a lot of money, with machines, and I enjoy it, because I'm a dick -

If they can't justify their jobs when compared to some trading platform, then it's my job to figure out how to seamlessly get rid of them, comprehensively, from blocking communications, to cleaning out the stupid nonsense they keep in and around their desks, without introducing risk to the firm.

This includes anticipating shitty behavior on the part of people that I'm trying to get rid of, which I also enjoy, because it requires me to out-think people, and not just consider how to replace them with technology, creating a job that is both psychologically, and intellectually challenging.

I interact with executives often, because I'm saving the entire firm money, so they know who I am, and though I'm far from that level in terms of my career path, it's obvious to everyone, even the current executives, that I'm a contender for a C-Suite position, eventually.

Other people my age simply don't have that kind of exposure at the firm, or pressure, and this creates a mix of admiration, and profound, professional jealousy.

Most people accept that they cannot do my job, which involves a preposterous mix of managing software development, trading operations, telecommunications, ID badges, and people crying.

My internal clients absolutely love me, whereas most people around me really dislike me, except my immediate colleagues, both out of pragmatism, but also because I stick up for them, aggressively, ultimately making sure that we all make money as a team.

People talk about what an asshole I am, and they're annoyed that nothing changes -

My manager is the CFO, who mentions these things in my reviews, because he has to, but everyone knows that it doesn't matter, because the bottom line is the bottom line itself, which I move, because I don't care.

The only metric that I'm ultimately concerned with is my compensation, which consistently moves in the correct direction, up -

Technology has fundamentally changed, and I see an opportunity to use it, and take money that the firm is spending on other people, and put it in my own pocket.

I am being rewarded on every metric, according to my preferences -

Cash, location, girlfriends -

For being what borders on a monster, but I justify it by knowing, that typically, these people are already rich, and because I grew up with nothing, I couldn't care less.

I know they have kids -

I don't care.

I know their lives get disrupted -

It's my job to fuck them, maximally, I don't care.

This one has a disease -

Whatever, don't care. †

What she does

She makes private equity investments in the energy sector, which she really enjoys -

She takes money, and puts it to work, creating something that didn't exist beforehand, creating jobs, ultimately improving people's lives.

She travels, to the project sites, which she also enjoys, as she feels a sense of real accomplishment seeing a plant, or a wind turbine, incrementally get built because of work she's contributed to.

It requires her to think about engineering and finance, and practical administrative matters as well.

She has the typical professional anxieties:

She's constantly managing her relationships with others, trying to compete, balancing competition with friendships.

The workload is occasionally unreasonable, and the travel too frequent, or too long, and this creates a type of psychological isolation that can exist even in the presence of others.

But she's actually quite happy with her work life, and it is instead her ambitions to raise a family that trouble her the most.

These thoughts come to her when she's feeling alone, imagining that her work would change in color if she were doing it for someone else, that required it to happen, so that she could provide for someone else -

In these moments, she can imagine what her home would look like, what it would sound like, and even feel and smell like to carry a small baby of her own:

The tiny outfits she'd have to buy, holding them close to her skin before purchase;

And how her weekends would have a longer view, slower moving parts, until some broken pencil brings her back to more temporary concerns.

But she still thinks like a college student in some respects, yet to connect the type of strategic thinking she applies at work to her personal life, mostly because she's afraid of what that will require of her -

She has a fun life, and it's full of good stories, pleasant experiences, over which she has a significant degree of control.

So while she deeply wants a family, in particular a child, which haunts her,

often, there's no trigger to break what is a generally pleasant cycle of interesting work, and fun weekends. †

Our first proper date

I book a table at a modern, almost corporate restaurant, near Tjuvholmen, and the atmosphere is very stiff -

She's familiar with the place, and judges it a wise choice, given the fact that we're colleagues, and she suspects that I sensed that she was almost doing me a favor, providing both of us with a professional gloss for the next day at work, when people ask where we ate.

Everyone at the office noticed that she stayed late at the bar to talk to me the night of the shoe incident, and so there is general awareness of the possibility of romance, but given the absence of any visible follow up, everyone assumed that whatever was there had quickly faded.

There were rumors about what had happened that night, with some colleagues aware of the correct facts of the shoe incident, since as it turns out, Johann (shoe guy) went to university with one of our colleagues, which facilitated an in for a roughly accurate recounting of the events, including Johann's devastation due to the seemingly impenetrable stains left on the surface of his suede loafers.

I explicitly tell her that I'm arranging a car for both of us, and that I'm going to pick her up, at her apartment, at exactly 20:30, to make sure that we're both on time, and don't risk losing our reservation -

Scandinavians take reservations rather seriously, and it is in fact impolite to show up more than just a minute or two late.

She thinks this is a bit much, and that I'm behaving like I'm her boss, which is not the case, though my delivery deliberately conveys this impression, but it's not an inconvenience for her, so she says, "alright", but she's still a little annoyed, and gets a bit nervous, recalling the shoe incident in the abstract, as a bad association.

When I call her on my mobile phone to tell her to come downstairs from her apartment, she can hear regularly spaced clobbering, clicking sounds, and for a brief moment, she's worried that I'm wearing heels, but dismisses it as background noise.

However, I show up on a horse, i.e., an actual horse, that I paid a ludicrous sum of money to borrow for the evening, and she is simply astonished, and starts laughing hysterically.

"My God, you are a total ass -

What is wrong with you?"

She refuses to get on the horse, so I walk it to the restaurant, beside me in the street, as she episodically looks beyond my shoulder, to see this monstrous, inelegant farm horse, clobbering about the streets of her home city, Oslo.

I insisted on the horse being cleaned, which cost me extra, because the farmer had to do it himself, and the results were acceptable for a date, so her refusal appears to be based upon principle, rather than hygiene.

I tie the horse to a bike stand outside the restaurant, with no regard for public safety, or the horse, prompting her to laugh at me, yet again.

“You’re such a child.”, she says.

There’s a huge pile of piss and shit under the horse after dinner, which I simply leave, taking off with her, this time on the horse.

Though it’s summer, it’s a bit cold, so I “buy” a blanket from the restaurant, i.e., I pay the Pakistani table busser 1000 NOK to steal one for me, and throw it on the horse, while I chat up the *maître d’*, disingenuously apologizing for the giant pile of horse shit outside.

I deliberately buy an extra bottle of wine from the restaurant for the trip back to return the horse, which I make her hide in her purse during dinner, to her partially feigned embarrassment.

I’ve already cleared spending some time at the farm to have drinks with her afterward, which is about an hour and a half by horse from the restaurant.

Though I don’t tell her, I’ve also already paid the farmer to let us sleep in one of his bedrooms.

On the ride to the farm, she realizes that I must have somehow planned all of this while at work.

Connecting this astonishing practical reality to how little I seem to care about most people, she feels a bit broken by it all -

She’s not sure anyone has ever done this much for her before, and I did all of this in one day, while at work, unsure if she would even like me.

The ridiculousness of the evening fades into a quiet warm, as she realizes that she must be important to me, already -

She leans in, the familiarity returning, resting her head on my back, wrapping her arms around my waist, as the wind picks up a bit across her skin, prompting her to take the stolen blanket from her lap, and wrap it around her back, trying her best to include me in its coverage.

Neither of us say much of anything, clobbering on, cars passing, as at this point, she realizes that I've likely already made convenient arrangements for us to stay together.

We both miss work the next day, and that's it. †

Good morning, Caligula

“Good morning, Caligula.”, she says, waking me with the statement, and I giggle a bit at the reference, once it settles in, which was quite good.

Her face is very close to mine, and I’m facing the righthand side of the room, notice a bit of drool on my lip, which I quickly wipe off, out of embarrassment.

“Ugh, fucking revolting.”, she says, smiling, but not quite laughing at me.

She looks really good:

I can see the blue of her eyes, and her gaze is constant, with remarkable confidence, as if she were waiting for me to wake up, so that she could make fun of me once I did.

I’m feeling quite awkward, and a bit nervous, as I was very drunk, and though I remember everything, I did rent a horse, and leave a large pile of horse feces in an urban center, riding off visibly drunk, having effectively stolen a blanket from the same restaurant that I desecrated with said feces.

Nonetheless, the results seem to have been a success, as she clearly had fun, and seems quietly happy at the moment.

I briefly turn my back to her, to see fog on the windows of this old farmhouse, in Holmlia, and these old, stiff, plaid colored curtains that don’t even completely cover the window, made out of a fabric more appropriate for a small flag that you attach to a car antenna.

The bed is simply ridiculous:

One of those military style, steel spring devices, with an ultra-firm mattress, about one inch thick, that smells a bit off, and episodically sponges in random locations, leaving you shaped like a broken paper clip in the morning.

I brought my own sheets, blanket, and pillows, which add a bit of normalcy and comfort for us both.

Despite all of this, we had a tremendous night, and she clearly finds all of these deficiencies charming, so even though I’m not quite ready for profound thoughts about our future, I note her attitude as a plus.

I turn around to look at her again, and it seems as though she hasn’t moved, and so she must have been staring at my back -

“Is that an extra blanket you’ve brought for me?”, she says, in reference to what is really not that much back hair, but I suppose it’s quite a bit for a Scandinavian.

“No, it’s a wash cloth, for your intimate bits.”, I reply.

She smacks me on the chest, which prompts me to grab her and shout, and she screams in response, quite loud.

“Are you trying to get the farmer involved? Isn’t it a bit soon for that?”, I say.

“You, prick!”, she replies, as she climbs on top of me, causing both of us to hesitate for a moment, as we realize that perhaps we’ve both become a bit too familiar -

The environment, and my absurd antics, perhaps designed to take her out of the familiar, creating a temporary space in which only the two of us exist, and some aspect must have crept in to spoil that for both of us, perhaps the hour itself, a time when we would ordinarily be getting ready for work, creating a scheduled anxiety.

Moments like these are branches in relationships -

Everyone assumes that you can correct for something that could have happened, by simply doing it later on, but that’s simply not the case, as sometimes things don’t work, including relationships, when things happen out of order -

Just imagine frying an egg before you break it.

The choice presented in this case is fairly obvious -

Both of us are aware of what is happening, and that it’s a bit soon, especially given that we work for the same firm, and so the decision to lean in and kiss someone that you’re already in bed with depends upon context, and in this case, it’s a signal, and possibly a path to something that neither of us can fully control.

To my astonishment, she leans in, completely unprovoked, grabbing the back of my head, pressing her entire body against mine, kissing me, and I put my finger tips on the right side of her face, pushing her hair behind her ear, ultimately holding the base of her head with my hand.

We pause often, and simply stare at each other, laughing a bit, not quite childishly, but aware of each other’s silliness, and at one point we pause, and she looks at me, and says with clarity and confidence,

“I love you, Charles.” †

Universo ao meu redor

We decide to take a trip to Italy together, which is a big deal, because it requires using vacation days, at the same time, and of course, people talk -

Everyone will understand, we've transitioned from office romance, into relationship.

This is not lost on us, but at this point, memories of the shoe incident resign:

A vestigial portrait of a curmudgeon freak, that can't stand the sight of another man touching his woman -

It just happened out of order, in this case.

She's gotten to know me well since then, and thinks that I'm a ridiculous person, as she's unable to reconcile the office robot, with the guerrilla artist, part-time scientist.

Moreover, neither of us are fond of our current apartments, and she absolutely despises mine, which is admittedly awful, littered with guitars, and paintings in trash bags, like Syd Barrett's asylum chamber, so we're both excited to spend some time together in a place that is legitimately beautiful.

We decide on Sardegna, as we've both been a few times, and really enjoyed it, and also because it gives us an opportunity to make a quick stop in Rome.

We've booked a hotel within Costa Smeralda, with its own, private, cashless section of the beach, though we're both a bit suspicious of being tethered to a hotel environment.

In terms of appearance, the hotel presents like a significantly smaller version of The Standard in the Meatpacking District:

The building is vertical, and flat, with significant glass coverage, a pale brick frame, though certainly not as tall or as wide, and the bricks are a bit yellowish in color.

Our room is simply ridiculous:

Massive, about 1,000 square feet, open floor plan, but for a moveable wooden partition, positioned between the bed and the windows, which have black iron frames, floor to ceiling, looking out onto the sea below.

There's a full kitchen on the left wall of the space, with cupboards stocked full of lovely plates, cups, and cutlery, a Viking range cut into a white marble counter top, and a large, pale grey sectional to the right of the space, just off from the wall, across from an over-sized, brown, heavily weathered, extremely

soft, leather love seat.

Otherwise, the room is mostly empty space, save for a few small tables and plants scattered about, with hardwood floors, and a giant Persian rug that covers the empty center of the room.

The bath is equally mental, with small, multicolored subway tiles along the actual shower wall, which is to the right when facing the windows, not sectioned off in any manner from the rest of the room, other than by the coloring of the tiles, which demarcates its area, together with the drain below the showerhead, with the rest of the tiles along the walls a faint grey.

The bathroom also has a wall of floor to ceiling windows, with an old-fashioned, iron, claw-foot tub, painted white, positioned along the right side of the room, parallel to the windows, with another wooden partition behind it, that also covers visibility into the shower.

The room number is 56, on the 17th floor, which is my birthday, in the European system, 5.6.17, which I make a point of, to which she responds,

“You’re a moron.”

To which I reply,

“Don’t be bitter that chance favors my boldness.”

“Your baldness?”

“If I ever go bald, you will refer to me, lovingly, as, ‘Your Baldness’.”

“If you ever go bald, I will refer to you only in the past tense.”

“So long as you use my title.”

I grab my phone, connect to the room’s Bluetooth, and begin a playlist commencing with, “Renaissance Affair”, by Hooverphonic, as we both get ready to head out for lunch.

...

We decide to risk it, and go for the hotel’s beachfront bar, which looks impressive online, though we agree in advance, that we’ll quickly grab two beers, and leave, if it’s filled with a bunch of hoi polloi whatnot tourists.

Walking from the hotel, we climb up a slight, sand hill, up to the bar, which is positioned on top of the hill, between the hotel and the sea, where a man politely asks us to remove our sandals before entering.

I entertain the notion, as I can already see the outlines of what looks like a beautiful chandelier hanging from the center of an extremely long, rectangular building at the top of the hill.

And so I take off my sandals, eyeing a row of shoes assembled by the other patrons.

Once we get close enough to see the interior, we are both taken back -

It's one of the most astonishing spaces I have ever seen:

A busy, intricately patterned, hardwood floor reveals itself as we approach, the length of two Manhattan blocks, but the width of one, with no side walls, and now I know why he asked us to remove our sandals -

It's because the flooring is of the order you'd find in a museum, with a wonderful grain, comprised of short, small planks, each about one foot long, and two inches wide, though arranged in a knotted pattern, preposterously detailed, totally incommensurate with what is appropriate for a dance floor, fit instead for an avant garde woodwork exhibition, mounted upon a wall.

We both smile at each other, implicitly agreeing to at least a few drinks, barring the truly extraordinarily awful.

We approach the bar, which is a long, rectangular slab of black marble, nearly the entire width of the space, and about two feet thick, with a large number of implausibly thin legs beneath, like a deconstructed spider, each made of dark wood, with some light colored accents in the grain, and bronze anchors.

We finally get up to the bar, and we can see the marble's surface, which contains thin white, light blue, yellow, and grey veins, clustering occasionally into what look like puddles, consisting of the same colors.

There are two bronze tubs cut deep into the surface of the bar:

One is filled with beer and soda bottles and cans, and ice and melted water, and the other is a functioning sink, filled with spent cocktail glasses, and small soiled plates and cutlery.

I look closely at the bar, and see black steel slats cut into the entire width, beginning at the opposite end, closest to the bartender, and extending toward me for about 10 inches, to facilitate drainage along the workstation.

This prompts me to look below to trace the path of the drainage, and I see the same blackened steel in the floor under the bar, this time, with a rough surface, presumably operating as a grip, to prevent the bartender from slipping.

The wall behind the bartender is a massive, white marble wall, about 20

feet high, with a proportionally massive baroque wooden frame, that contains a mirror, above which is a hanging potted vine, housed in a bronze trap, that matches the sinks, forming a metallic, horizontal accent across the entire white wall, that is littered with green bits, that drape over everything below.

We've been reading the menu while waiting, and have decided on two dishes:

A burrata plate, which comes with a handful of flatbreads, and a rosemary and sea salt focaccia, together with a prosciutto, fig jam, and mozzarella baguette.

I initially expected the hotel kitchen to provide the food, but was yet again astounded to find that there's both a refrigerator, and an oven, hidden in the wall behind the bartender, which is accessed by simply pressing a bit into it, causing a pressurized arm to release the applicable door.

When we get up to the bar, I can actually see the outlines of the two doors cut into the wall, and realize they're chest-level, relieving the bartender of having to constantly hunch over, which after hours of doing so, would presumably be exhausting -

Everything about this place seems to have been relentlessly obsessed over, producing a borderline divine environment, wildly out of proportion to the amount of thought and effort that goes into an even excellent hotel bar.

The bartender hands us the two Ichnusa beers we've ordered, and tells us to find a seat, as the food will apparently be a minute.

So we find a seat, a couch, a smaller version of the same couch in our room, with a small, round, black marble table that matches the bar, with the same dizzying array of tiny wooden legs beneath.

I look up to see the large, bronze chandelier, with a parabolic, bowl shaped base, long slats cut into the bottom, through which the light above is shining.

The light source is a metallic bush of bronze antennae, with iridescent glass bulbs literally melted onto the ends, only partially illuminated, presumably because it's still daylight.

The bronze column connecting the chandelier to the ceiling also has small antennae with bulbs on their ends, like the thorns on the stem of a rose.

Marisa Monte starts playing, "O Bonde Do Dom", and now I'm legitimately suspicious of what's going on around me, feeling as though, somehow, someone has stolen this entire scene from the innards of my mind -

That I stumbled upon a stolen dream, a group of bandits, meticulously

reconstructing my vision of the external world, presumably now worried that I somehow showed up, foiling their cosmic plot.

I look up at the ceiling, to find that things get only even weirder -

Mounted into the beautiful, bronze colored, tin ceiling, I can see updated, Yamaha NS-10 audio monitors:

The same speakers that I used as a young audio engineer.

“This place is wonderful.”, she says -

I’m too confused to agree, instead staring in disbelief, at a memory mounted into a ceiling. †

New York City

The Club

She's getting dressed at our hotel, whereas I've decided to visit my old social club, which has arranged all of my dry cleaning for me, and so I shower, shave, and get dressed there, before the concert.

I step out of the sauna, walking through the grey marble shower area, towards a white tiled room, filled with sinks.

There are aluminum racks mounted onto the walls, filled with fresh, white towels, of various sizes, and I grab a small wash cloth, that I plan to use while shaving.

My old routine comes back to me:

The sensations, and smells, of having spent about an hour in a sauna and steam room, working out, playing squash, my skin numb, prime for a shave, I grab a disposable plastic razor -

Using only unscented bar soap and water to moisten my skin, I trim the hairs that go beyond the intended perimeter of my beard:

The ones that grow too high along my cheekbone, or too low below my neck.

I use a pair of scissors, and a plastic comb, and get to work, trimming the beard itself, using the comb to first lift the hairs up, by brushing up against the grain, and then using the scissors to clip the beard to a roughly uniform length.

I also trim my hair itself, eyeing for anomalously long hairs that have grown out of sync with the rest.

This takes significant time, but I've set aside a few hours to enjoy myself at The Club, which I haven't been to in about a year.

The Club is a proper, New York social club, centuries old, with deep, long-standing ties to the U.S. Government, set in a repurposed mansion, complete with paintings of U.S. Presidents, generals, and an old wood bar, with a fireplace, a stated code of conduct, and art from the Revolutionary War, and Civil War, that hangs above.

All of this brings back memories of my elementary school:

The blue blazers, khaki pants, my school motto and crest, turtlenecks, and Nicole Miller ties:

The Upper East Side in the 80's -

I remember the sting of this joy being taken from me, after only a few years of childhood, leaving me totally crazed as a young adult, relentless in my ambition to return to the station at which I felt most at home, that I was completely convinced someone had stolen from me.

Later walking outside the Metropolitan Club as a broke teenager, seeing clouds painted into the colossal wooden ceilings, knowing now that I can walk in whenever I want, and order a drink, because I belong to a small circle of people allowed to walk into these types of buildings, all over the world.

The Club reminds me of who I am -

An American, that fell from grace, desperate to rebuild.

When I'm finished shaving, I enter the shower room, throw a fresh towel over the frosted glass door of one of the available stalls, turn the water on, spending a minute simply relaxing under the oversized showerhead, letting the water remove any soap, or hairs, that I may have missed during my shave.

I again use only the same unscented soap, not washing my hair, which I do at most once a week.

Once I feel ready, I turn off the water, grab the towel from above the glass door, and exit toward the lounge, where my dry cleaning and shoes are waiting for me, hanging in one of the dozen or so wooden changing areas that line the walls of the lounge.

A TV mounted on one of the walls is playing a hockey game, and there's an old man in a bathrobe, seated on the leather couch, opposite the TV, staring into it, with a plate of deviled eggs in front of him, and what appears to be a sizable glass of straight vodka, with some olives in it.

I reach in, tearing the plastic wrapping off of my dry cleaning, to see my dark blue, Hugo Boss suit, which looks crisp, my white cotton Valentino shirt behind it, stains gone, and the cuffs look excellent.

My tie was already in great condition, a light blue, sort of shiny, also Hugo Boss, and so that's rolled up in my gym bag, along with my belt, socks, and boxers.

I slip my boxers on first -

Ralph Lauren, cotton, spacious, with a comfortable waistband, solid blue denim in color, with a single tiny red horse on the bottom seam of the left leg.

Then I put my socks on, also Ralph Lauren, simple, black, no additional coloring, or unnecessary structure -

Just somewhat elastic, and tight, pulling them up, as high as they can go, up my calf muscle.

I pull my suit pants out the plastic, slip them on, and I can already feel they fit well, having been recently tailored to account for a slight dip in weight, I leave them open.

I then grab my shirt, slip my arms into the sleeves, begin tucking the shirt into the back of my pants, then pulling my pants up a bit, and button up my shirt.

Once complete, I close the clasps on my pants, zip them up, grab my belt, and loop it through, eventually running the right side of the belt through the gold buckle, and secure the leftover brown leather into the first loop to the left of the buckle.

My jacket still hanging, I reach into my gym bag, and pull out a pair of Paul Smith cuff links, gold, with the classic rainbow print that matches the trim on the interior of my wallet, and slip them both in, looking at them the way you would check the time on a watch, I can see the deep contrast between the white of my shirt, and the painted gold face of my cuff links.

I sit down on the bench inside the changing area, and examine my shoes, which look great, and I can smell that they've just been polished -

Sliding my right foot in, I get the sensation of the frictionless entry that occurs with a freshly polished pair of shoes.

I see the faded gold remnants of a Bruno Magli logo disappear as my left foot slides in, giving me a sense of completeness.

Carnegie Hall

We plan to meet outside the main entrance at 19:30, so I get there at 19:15, since it's a concert, and being late could leave you shut out.

At 19:25, I see Ida begin to exit a black car a few feet away from me, through the crowd outside the concert hall.

I walk over to her, rather quickly, partly to make sure that she that sees me, but also because I'm excited to see her.

Once she's exited, I lean in to thank the driver, close the door, taking her right hand with my left, and we head into the concert hall, together.

I've printed out our tickets, which are folded in the inner pocket of my suit jacket, which I present to the attendee at the base of the stairs, just beyond the main entrance.

The attendee tells us where to go, but I already know, as these are my favorite seats in Carnegie Hall:

Tier 1, Box 33.

We walk up the main stairs, and given that we have some time, we grab a drink.

The place is completely packed, the line for drinks unreasonable, as a result, but we have time, so we stand, and we wait.

She tells me about the last concert she saw, at Oslo's new concert hall, and I recount walking outside, with Norwegian friends of mine, a few years ago.

I tell her about my college professor, who would always talk about seeing Horowitz play at Carnegie, and her eyes light up, both of us mutually enchanted by these stories, and I feel a bit sad, realizing how rare it is for people our age to actually enjoy these things -

Most people wouldn't even understand what I'm talking about, let alone enjoy the conversation.

We get our drinks, and eat some snacks they've laid out, for free, given the scale of tonight's event.

The attendees show up, ringing chimes, a few minutes before we're supposed to head to our seats, and so we both finish our drinks, as we begin walking, tracing the hallway that surrounds the concert hall, following the numbers along the way, ultimately arriving at the door to our section, which I open, and step back, as she enters.

We're the first to arrive, and carefully make our way through the miniature maze of eight seats, on our way to the front row, having booked the center and righthand seat.

Just before she sits down, she removes her jacket, and I see that she's wearing a beaded, black dress, effectively opaque, with straps over her shoulders, and a low-cut back, displaying the breadth of her shoulders, as she turns away from me, revealing the muscles in her back, placing her jacket on the back of her seat.

She's not wearing a bra, since the dress seems to have internal support, causing it to be snug around her ribs, and under her breasts, lifting them.

This causes the weight of the dress to hang mostly from her ribs, rather than the shoulder straps, which appear decorative, not load-bearing.

The dress falls freely, not form-fitting, but slowly floating away from her body as you approach the bottom seam, though it's tight enough that you can nonetheless see the structure of her body as she moves.

The dress rises up under her breasts, and though it's nonetheless modest from the front, you can see the outlines of her cleavage, with additional, small grey and mother of pearl beading, woven into the dress, beginning near the upper portion of her ribs, increasing in density as you approach the bust of the dress, accentuating the lift of the dress under her breasts, and the seams around the front of her dress, near her skin.

The bottom of the dress has fluted pleats, and is asymmetrical, higher on the left leg than the right leg, ending roughly six inches above her right ankle, with the same beading around her breast, increasing in density as you approach the bottom seam from all sides of the dress.

She's wearing simple, black leather flats, with the leather a bit scrunched around the center of her feet, suggesting perhaps an elastic lining, creating tension, keeping them snug, as there are no laces.

Her purse is small, the size and shape of an envelope, completely covered in large, white sequins, that look like feathers, under which is a steel mesh that the sequins are sewn into, with the sequins and mesh almost totally obscuring a blue fabric under the steel that makes up the outer body of the purse itself.

The inside of the purse has a decorative silk lining, like a classic ascot, or tie, with an overall blueish hue -

I look in to see that she's brought only her phone, lip gloss, credit cards, and keys, as she quickly applies a bit of lip gloss just after sitting down.

She's wearing hardly any makeup, just mascara, and what is ultimately a

subtle, almost colorless lip gloss, with no earrings.

She smells like Heaven when finally settled into the seat next to mine.

Evgeny

Evgeny Kissin walks on to the stage, which is itself littered with seats, the piano surrounded, because the show is totally overbooked -

Everyone rises, the entire house bursts into an uproarious applause, with some even shouting in their excitement, as he approaches the piano.

He's wearing a simple, black tuxedo, white shirt, black shoes, his confidence remarkable, walking directly into a sea of people, celebrating him, desperate, for him to deliver them somewhere better.

Unfazed, this is exactly what he does:

He opens with, "Liebesträume", by Franz Liszt, which begins with a delicate opening line, modestly accompanied by arpeggios in the upper registers, that is of course later full of the dramatic, impossibly busy work that Liszt is known for, and that Kissin is famous for interpreting.

The acoustics are wonderful -

I can almost feel the low register of the left hand, the high register, clean, lucid, resonance sustaining, without a noise in the house.

Ida and I are transfixed, as Kissin begins to hammer the bass notes, as the piece modulates from E-Major, back to A-Flat-Major, eventually dissolving into the midpoint:

An initially busy, but ultimately sparse, chromatic line, that reintroduces the opening theme, this time in a higher register.

I point to the program, which lists the song title, taking a pen out of my suit jacket pocket, drawing a line below the title:

"Liebesträume, S. 541, No. 3."

I then write below the characters,

"541, No.",

The message,

"Eda, Norway.",

She looks at me, concerned, as if she's slipping into something, but she understands.

...

Kissin is notorious for extended encores, that would otherwise border on abusive, except no one wants him to stop, with people sometimes seated for an hour after scheduled closing -

Ida and I are more than happy to simply sit there, until he's said what he needs to, astonished, every moment passing, appreciative -

The tireless, relentless, human effort, and love, that go into reaching these levels of performance.

Both of us know how lucky we are to simply participate, however meagerly, alive, knowing there's a pile of bodies that blindly and relentlessly dedicated themselves to nothing other than what we are experiencing.

The unending nonsense of heartache and death, disease and pointless loss, misfortune and injustice -

Whatever, we will make art,

For we know this is not a world made for us, but we will make it ours, anyhow, take what we can get, while we can, most importantly, each other.

...

After about forty-five minutes of unscheduled performances, of Fauré, Chopin, Bach, Mozart, The Brahms Intermezzo Op. 118 No. 2, shocking me with, "Je te Veux", by Erik Satie, he finally closes with, "The Lark", by Mikhail Glinka:

The piece briefly modulates to C-Sharp-Major (using the mode on the five), but then, the opening theme is reintroduced, in the original A-Sharp-Minor, with the addition of an independent chromatic line, in the upper register, as if Liszt showed up, lending a hand, but she still sees only one man on stage, doing all of this work -

I hear Ida say, "My God", under her breath, almost in tears.

I look over at her again, during a lull, just before the closing phrase, now to find that she's actually crying, her bottom lip quivering, and I lose it -

I feel tears, well up in my eyes.

She sees, takes my right hand, and with a bit of desperation, places it below hers, on top of her left leg, and I can feel the beads of her dress press into the palm of my hand, under the weight of hers, the tip of my fingers briefly brushing against the red velvet of the seat below, feeling the warmth of her hand above mine and her leg below, as the closing phrase of the piece finally begins, echoing the opening, but with the introduction of a major third, still holding onto the minor sixth -

Bitterness, the simultaneously irreconcilable tones, when separated by time, making the joy of the major third, feel like relief, holding Ida's hand, after only a moment of separation.

Cafe Mogador

We're planning to have brunch at Cafe Mogador, which she's heard of, through friends, but never been to -

Mogador was a constant in my life in New York, with nearly every weekend involving at least one brunch there.

We take the green line, 6 train, from our hotel, in midtown, heading downtown, and get off at Astor Place.

It's a nice day in late September, about 70 degrees, I'm wearing shorts and a light knitted sweater, and she's wearing black jeans, and a simple white cotton t-shirt, both of us wearing sneakers.

We walk down St. Marks, entertained by the usuals -

Dive bars, head shops, tattoo parlors, karaoke bars, Yakitori spots, all creating an impression of the city I knew growing up, since bulldozed over by the real foreigners, looking only to park their cash, in some vacant condo -

I'm no communist, and I understand the value of development, but there's a balance, and we've reached point too far in favor of capital, forgetting the real point, which is to live your life.

We pass the old pommes frites spot, that I've been to once, and don't remember a thing about, that apparently exploded, continuing onward, past Second Avenue, now in the portion of the East Village that starts to feel domestic, with tall brownstones, tiny dogs, and small bars and restaurants, though this part of the city was never fully worked over, leaving it with a visibly rougher appearance.

We accidentally pass the restaurant, ending up not far from Charlie Parker's house, just outside Tompkins Square Park, on one of the most beautiful blocks in the neighborhood, on Avenue B, between 7th and 8th Streets -

I make a note of his house, telling Ida some stories about growing up with my unusual uncle, a Jazz guitarist, and his simply ridiculous friends, all of whom were also musicians, and artists:

She laughs at my absurd tales -

Driving on the actual sidewalks of Rome with my uncle's bassist, who's also a nudist, while drinking beers, in a tiny car, seated next to an upright bass, laying on its back;

My other uncle, a rock guitarist, passing out on the floor of his recording studio, in the early afternoon, holding a frozen margarita;

A pianist emerging from a bathroom, his face covered in paint, completely blasted, from huffing paint;

A drummer, who would compete with his bandmates, playing beats so pointlessly complex, that everyone would lose rhythm, deliberately ruining the performance, and later bragging he achieved exactly this result;

This same drummer, kicking a stranger on the streets of New York City, for simply touching his drum set, which was roped onto a cart, on the sidewalk.

“What is wrong with you people?” , she says, in response.

“Don’t include me in this.”, I reply.

“You were there.”, she says.

“Fair enough.”

Though I can’t say for sure that this actually happened, my uncle also told me that Charlie Parker showed up stoned to a set once, apparently playing not up to par, and the drummer stopped, took his cymbal off the stand, and threw it at Parker -

Music is not an object, it is instead an idea, that just happens to have physical substance when performed, totally loaded with far more volatile psychological substance, that could lead to assault by a crazed musician.

...

We finally get to Cafe Mogador, and there’s a huge line -

We wait outside.

Who cares?

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

We again take the green line, this time, uptown, getting off at 86th street.

We trace the path from Medieval Art, to The Annenberg Collection, obviously noticing the subject matter change, as we move through the galleries, echoing the transition from an economy dominated by The Church, to a free market.

We connect it to Kissin's music from last night, as you could clearly hear the freedom of the later artists, in Brahms and Fauré in particular, then taking it further, discussing Ravel's String Quartet in F-Major, and of course -

Franz Liszt.

His economic success, undoubtedly fueling what was a notorious personal life, with women positively obsessed with the man, reportedly picking up his spent cigarettes in the streets of Vienna, putting them in vials, and wearing them as necklaces -

He was the first proper rock star, post Fall of Rome.

Though a piece of music is ultimately an idea, unlike a painting, the artist is always real, and the notion of The Artist, independent of any institution, comes into fruition, with the rise of free markets -

The Artist becomes an economic entity.

We enter The American Wing, as the sunlight breaks through the glass ceiling, illuminating a wall containing floral topped columns, taken from Louis Comfort Tiffany's home, in Oyster Bay, Long Island, just to the right of my favorite statue in the whole world -

A bronze, a mother, holding her child, below a bunch of grapes, suspended, by Frederick William MacMonnies.

It reminds me of a day in Central Park, when I was in college -

I saw a truly tiny baby, just big enough to sit up on its own, wearing a little red jumper, and a matching, baby-sized, red hat, the net effect, a tomato growing from the grass beneath, from a distance.

The Vanguard

We take a nap after the museum, exhausted, ultimately sleeping in a bit late, deciding to have dinner in our hotel room, as we've made reservations at the Village Vanguard, to see a show at 21:00.

We take a car down to the West Village, along the Westside Highway, the bike lanes to the right, the street lights repeating as we pass, bars spilling out onto West Street, further onto the piers, under the night sky, bouncing off the Hudson River.

We head down until we hit Houston.

...

The Vanguard takes music very seriously, and the atmosphere is a bit tense as a consequence:

Talking is unacceptable, not paying attention is decidedly rude, and more importantly, a waste of your time.

The band is a quintet, and though I'm not familiar with them, I trust the venue:

"The Bellwether Quintet", consisting of tenor saxophone, trumpet, piano, bass, and drums.

They open with, "Blue Train", by John Coltrane, the subtle dissonance of the already iconic opening, in the dim lights, just past the stage, where we're seated, as the tenor joins, the piece opening to define an entire genre, as the upright bass picks up, with the tom drums signaling the beginning of a definition.

I don't have perfect pitch, but nearly perfect relative pitch, which allows me to think like a Jazz musician, even though I can't play like one.

As a result, I can at least follow along, and I'm familiar with a handful of standards, which makes it easier.

Despite portrayals suggesting Jazz is associated with beat poetry, and hippie nonsense, Jazz musicians are in reality, phenomenally competitive people.

Jazz is intellectual athleticism -

The spontaneous navigation of a quantized space, in all twelve tones, and the personalities reflect this.

Just imagine someone showing you a Picasso, and then asking you to reproduce it, but giving you a random palette of colors, right now.

This is exactly what a proper Jazz musician will do, which is to take a song they know, transpose into a random key, and improvise in a manner that is technically consistent with the original composition, right now.

Jazz is in that sense more abstract than classical music, because songs are typically presented as a sequence of chord changes, with only relative relationships, and moreover, you're free to improvise over the melody.

But, because of that, the actual performance is paramount, since you can't know it beforehand.

It's a spontaneous invention -

Idea, and immediate execution.

The next piece is, "Cherokee", by Ray Noble, though I associate it with Charlie Parker.

After that, "Polka Dots and Moonbeams", reminding me of the recordings by Chet Baker, and I immediately become sentimental -

This song, built to make you long for love that may have never even existed in the first instance, leaving you convinced that it did, though on this night, there's an actual hand in mine.

Next is, "So What", by Miles Davis, and though I'm reluctant to admit it, I don't know his music well.

For me, Miles and Coltrane were like Brahms and Schumann, and for me, it was Coltrane, not Miles, Brahms, not Schumann.

Nonetheless, it's an iconic piece, and immediately reminds me of the musical onomatopoeia of, "Salt Peanuts", with the opening line repeating a favorite phrase, and philosophy of mine -

"So What?"

They close with, "Essence of Sapphire", by Dorothy Jeanne Thompson, which I absolutely love, having discovered her work by chance, rather late in life, while in Stockholm.

The tenor and trumpet together, in unison, take the lead from her harp, the piano providing comp, underneath, thickening the sound, with some counterpoint to the melody as well, occasionally quoting the opening to Coltrane's arrangement of, "My Favorite Things", together with the bass, which is otherwise largely unchanged from the recordings I'm familiar with, though the brass completely changes the timbre of the song, from a delicate ballad, reminiscent of Ravel, to a charging work of bebop, perfect for the setting, with the drummer

wailing.

That's the end of the set list, but then the pianist looks at me, and nods his head, so I do the same, in reply.

Ida sees this, so she looks at me, thinking that perhaps I know him through my uncle, but I don't, and though the band is clearly about to step down, off set, the pianist starts playing Scriabin's Etude in C-Sharp-Minor, on his own, without the band, no improvisation -

I immediately recognize it, confused, because it's obviously directed at me, but I love the song -

He sticks to the score, a perfect performance, with a heavy hand in the middle register, float away melody during the climax.

Ida knows the piece as well, and she knows that it's one of my favorites -

Realizing that if I knew him well enough for him to know this about me, I would have said something, so she looks at me, again, with the same look from last night, concerned, understanding now that it's too late.

Thai food

“Do you mind if I invite my friend Aaron to brunch?”

“He’s coming to dinner tonight anyway, so, it’ll give you a chance to meet him beforehand.”

“No, of course not.”, she replies.

We’ve booked a table at 12:30, at Pastis, in meatpacking, which closed for a while, but has since reopened.

We take a car, again down the Westside Highway, pulling up through the busy streets of meatpacking, filled with overdressed pedestrians, everywhere, flooding the cobblestone streets, obstructing traffic, which annoys me.

I can already see Aaron waiting for us -

He’s usually on time, often disappointed by my total disregard for the timing of casual social engagements, so he seems pleased we’re on time.

We exit the car, I grab Aaron’s hand, and lean in for the one arm shoulder hug, then stepping back, I say,

“This is Ida.”, as Aaron reaches out, and she shakes his hand, the three of us now standing in front of the signage of the restaurant, the Sun partially obstructed by the clouds, on an otherwise really nice day.

“OK, why don’t we head in.”, I say, looking at both of them, and so I lead in, since I made the reservation -

I approach the hostess, and say,

“Hi, we had a reservation for 3, at 12:30.”

“What’s the name?”, she responds, to which I reply,

“Charles.”

“Got it, just follow me.”

I look back to get Ida and Aaron’s attention, standing about a meter behind, and they both nod, so I follow the hostess, giving Ida and Aaron a chance to perhaps kick off a conversation, which they do:

“So how did you meet Charles?”, she asks.

“We have some lawyer friends in common, and met at a party one night,

and kept in touch since then.”

“You guys work together, right?”, he asks, to which she replies,

“Yes, but not on the same team, so it’s perfectly manageable, and we barely interact -

We met at an event, not during proper work hours.”

“Got it, I see, so that makes sense then.”, he replies.

“Here you are, enjoy.”, the hostess says, as she places three menus, and a cocktail menu on top, down on our table, which is circular, attached to a booth, and so I volunteer to sit in the middle, though Aaron leaves a bit of extra space between the two of us.

“So where in New York do you live?”, Ida asks, to which Aaron replies,

“I live in Brooklyn, in Park Slope.”, to which she responds,

“Ah, that’s a lovely area, and you work in Manhattan?”

“Yea, but the commute’s not that bad, because my office is downtown, and I got the gym down there too.”

I’m reading the menu, happy some kind of normal conversation is taking place, remembering Aaron recounts all things with a reservation, keeping him from total satisfaction, given any set of facts.

“You do private equity, right?”, he asks, to which she replies,

“Yes, in the energy sector, though I also advise on secondary market work.”

“That’s interesting.”, as he picks up a menu, and starts to read, so she does the same.

I generally don’t drink at brunch, so I focus on food, deciding on gravlax benedict, and a cappuccino, looking up from the menu once I’ve decided.

The waiter shows up, and we order.

...

“So what’s with you and the Thai lady?”, I state, with a deliberately unsolicited delivery, in a somewhat louder than normal tone.

Ida looks at me, a bit puzzled, quickly expecting some kind of gossip, she looks back at Aaron, who’s now hiding a faint smile.

“It’s still on, but it’s still weird.”, he replies.

“How weird? Am I going to see some food related headline in The New York Post, about a murder?”

Ida’s legitimately intrigued, and knowing me, she’s now expecting high quality nonsense, smiling in advance, despite not knowing the facts, just yet.

“No, her husband’s not that bad -

He knows, it’s fine.”, he replies.

Ida interjects,

“Her husband?”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds -

They still work together, but they’re basically divorced.”

“What?”, she responds.

“How old is she?”, I throw in, already knowing the answer.

“Fifty-eight,” he responds, causing Ida to oscillate back and forth from a smile, to morbid curiosity, as she looks at me, and back at Aaron.

Our food shows up.

...

The conversation drifts from Aaron’s indiscretions, to some nonsense about health care spending in Scandinavia, so I again slam the wheel,

“Does her husband still give you free food?”

Ida pauses, with a french fry in her hand, which is now not making it in, as she tries to make sense of what I’ve said.

Aaron is visibly annoyed, but starts to laugh -

“Yea, whatever.”

Ida then eats her french fries, staring at him -

I can see a combination of scorn, and fascination, as she visibly ponders the role of food in this relationship, unable to help herself, she asks,

“Alright, so is this a relationship that involves all three of you?”

“What? No, of course not.”, to which Ida replies,

“I’m sorry, I just thought the food ... ”, as Aaron cuts her off,

“No, they own a restaurant together.”

There’s a brief pause.

“I see, so you go to the restaurant?”, to which he replies,

“Yea, it’s really good -

Thai food.”

She’s now chewing on some french fries, nodding, visibly placating, clearly astonished by this sordid set of facts accompanying her brunch.

The Standard Grill

I'm wearing a black cotton t-shirt, that's snug around the shoulders and the arms, with a knitted wool, light brown sweater, draped on my shoulders, faded, but not torn, Diesel jeans, baby blue, "recycled", Muji socks, soft brown leather drivers, with a matching, ultra thick, Cavalli, braided leather belt, with a large gold buckle, reading, "Just Cavali", embossed, on the bottom of the buckle -

This is New York, even billionaires wear t-shirts.

Ida ends up liking Aaron, despite his rather questionable personal life, and so the three of us order for the entire table, jointly alerting our waiter to the plan -

Sharing a large number of dishes.

We then discuss food allergies, bottled water, all standing near the long table for ten, set up just outside the main entrance.

Though not going quite as far as a set up, she nudges a friend of hers, and says,

"Why don't you sit next to Aaron, so we can all catch up."

She's a fairly petite, and very attractive Norwegian -

A friend of Ida's from university, I've met only a few times in Oslo, then realizing, how much of Ida's life is consumed by time with me, and that we all live in the same city, yet now catching up on things, on the other side of the planet, but this is again New York.

We start with a huge plate of oysters for the entire table, served on an oval shaped bed of finely chopped ice, and I get a Pimm's Cup, as Ida gets some kind of cucumber thing, with one of those giant, single ice cubes, cucumber slices so thin, they appear to have been prepared by a surgeon -

This is what happens when you pay people too much money.

Ida's friend, Mari, is a bit shy, so I ask,

"Is this your first time in New York?", knowing that she's almost certainly been here before, she responds,

"No, I've been to the U.S. a few times, and was a summer analyst here, so I know the city fairly well."

I can see that Aaron likes her, as she's bright, with an almost nerdy affect, and several decades younger than his chef.

“What do you do now?”, he asks.

“I work in credit, at a bank in Oslo.”, to which he immediately responds,

“Ah, I work in credit too, but I’m a lawyer.”

“I work with a lot of lawyers, but I’m not a lawyer.”, she replies, clarifying,

“I work in operations.”, to which he replies,

“Got it.”

I step in, “Mari lives reasonably close to us in Oslo, and went to university with Ida.”, though the conversation is quickly broken by a group of servers, this time carrying what appear to be nearly identical charcuterie platters, as I jealously eye the platter furthest from me, to ensure that it doesn’t contain anything not present in the most proximate.

I lean back a bit to let the server in, as he lays the display before us:

Salted meats, glistening, slightly reflective, rectangular and triangular wedges of various cheeses, cut thick, with a particular soft blue that I’m coveting, near a dollop of what appears to be peach jam, resolving to a generous pile of salted almonds, resting in a scalloped corner.

Aaron and I do not talk for several minutes, as we viciously consume essentially everything before us, pouring olive oil on small baguettes that we’ve torn open, later dipping them again into the spoils on our plates, having already salted the partially spent remnants beforehand -

I can see him sweating along his brow, with almost no capacity left for the beautiful, young, blond woman that actually seems interested in him, seated just a few inches away, quietly eating a modest portion of cheese, with a single almond, and a bit of jam, like a small bird perched near a rhino.

The Jane

We all pull up in black Chevy SUVs, outside the Jane, I'm sitting in front, as part of an effort to push Aaron and Mari into sitting next to each other, which worked, but has yet to yield anything.

I exit the front passenger seat, as Ida exits the rear left passenger seat, both of us ultimately walking side by side, she places her jacket on her shoulders, without putting her arms through the sleeves, like a shawl, as we approach the steps of The Jane Hotel:

It's a black, leather bomber jacket, with ribbed, leather shoulder pads.

Her hair is tightly, and neatly pulled back into a single, thick, braided ponytail, and she looks a bit mean -

What could you say?

I got to know the manager of the Jane, after a dispute of sorts, relating to a stolen jacket, which ended with him actually liking me, despite the hostile initial conditions, and as a result, I can show up whenever I want, and simply skip the line.

I take her hand, as we ignore the long line, both of us heading right up the stairs, towards the building.

At the top of the stairs, I shake hands with the security guard, using my right hand, as we nod at each other, briefly making eye contact, and so I give the signal, raising my left hand into the air, two fingers pointing up -

Aaron is already outside, and directs the crew, as a small army of Scandinavians, and one Jewish man, make their way out of their cars, and up the steps.

I spot the manager, as he's chatting up a group of people, so I wave, he acknowledges, and the guy who ultimately manages the door, who completely despises me, reluctantly waves us all in, as we approach the doors to the main hall.

We open the doors, and I see my usual bartender to the left, she smiles, as Aaron says,

"I'll get us a bunch of drinks."

We leave the bar area, under the assumption that it's going to be a minute before we get our drinks, and so we enter the main hall itself, to an immediately preposterous scene:

Britney Spears, “Till the World Ends” , blasting, the house lights episodically flashing, from total blackout, to spotlight, in sync with the music, and everyone that can be, is dancing on a table -

There’s one man, with no shirt on, who has apparently scaled the cathedral-sized walls of the establishment, now seated atop a dangerously high perch, shouting, waving his shirt as a flag of sorts, as the entire place lights up, celebrating his positively reckless display.

She looks at me, in love with everything.

Circa Tabac

Everyone's still gunning for more, and so we reassemble into SUVs, and make our way to an after-hours cigar bar in TriBeCa, that is usually manageable, in terms of getting a table.

Ida and I both get old fashioned, two punch cigars, feeling a bit like gangsters, with background smiles, that remain roughly fixed at nearly all moments, like a pair of benevolent devils, finally at peace.

She's seated across from me, and we both look over to Mari and Aaron kissing, and I give her the look of a mission accomplished.

I can feel her start to run her foot run up my inner thigh, under the table -

So I completely blow up her spot, tickling her foot, which causes her to yelp, and kick the table, glasses rattling, minor spillage, modest ashes landing on the table, embarrassed, she throws a napkin at me, staring at me, all of her friends having heard her kick the table, now laughing at us both, Coltrane plays, "My Favorite Things", Ida still staring, a bit red in the face, this time, simply happy, the dim lights, her goofy drunkenness, soften the impression of an otherwise intimidating woman.

She looks down, to put on her shoes, grabs her purse, and then climbs onto the long horizontal window ledge below, about six inches above the floor, just behind our table, and jumps out into the street, turning back, smiling -

"I'm out", throwing my left hand into the air, as I get up, and walk quickly toward the door, taking my phone out along the way, to order a car.

The Empire State

We're both in bed together, having just showered, since we wreaked of cigars, the both of us wearing plain cotton T's, and boxers.

While sitting on top of the freshly made bed, the comforter still laid atop the sheets, Ida says, visibly drunk,

"Dette er så koselig!", smiling at me.

I reach under the bed, and pull up a tan, thin, and nearly translucent, delicate folder, that I planted there earlier -

It's closed with a thin red thread, I've tied into a bow, through a brass ring, that's cut into the center right of the folder, at the opening.

She looks at it, with a goofy drunken smile, slurring very slightly, she says,

"Vat ar det?", to which I reply,

"Open it.", also smiling, quite drunk myself.

She unties the bow, to find a single, white piece of paper inside, with what appears to be a poem, handwritten, blue ink, with my signature on the bottom right, undated.

She sees the title, "Jane", and as she's beginning to read, I stop her, turning the page over, to show her sheet music I wrote on the back of the page -

She takes a moment to imagine the song in her mind, and really likes it, so she says,

"This is really sweet of you Charles, thank you so much."

Though seeing I'm still excited, she asks,

"Is there something else?, smiling, now unsure of what's to follow -

I take out my phone, and pull up a song, entitled, "Jane - Dada Art Edition", as she begins to connect the song with our flight to New York:

She saw that I was working on a piece of music, on my laptop, and so she asked to listen, though when she did, she thought it positively awful, nearly certain she heard a kazoo, but nonetheless nodded, while quietly listening, without saying anything, simply handing back my headphones, after what she decided was polite in terms of timing.

It begins to settle in, that I took the time to write a fake, and thoughtfully

terrible, piece of music, that upon reflection, was purposed to hide the real thing, so that I could work, right in front of her, on an airplane, though she's nonetheless comically annoyed, since I knew she wouldn't say it sucked, even though it plainly did -

Then she remembers the title, gleaned from along the file bar, at the top of the screen on my laptop, which she now announces:

"The Beast Sonata?", to which I reply,

"Yes, for you, of course from the beast, to the beauty."

"I cannot, for the life of me, understand why you do these things.", as she leans in, her words growing louder as she does, visibly flattered on balance, the both of us kissing for quite some time.

When we stop, I say,

"Can I play it for you now?", to which she replies,

"Of course.", and so I push play on my phone, already connected to the room's sound system:

She can hear I've recorded it on my phone, though she also notes the sound is quite good, imagining me scrambling to hide the fact that my guitar had been used, working on the song, like some top secret project, though hearing the simple guitar lines, recognizing right away a thing reflecting my sincerity, plainly unpretentious, in my simple love for her.

Reading along,² she hears the line, "memories of life lost", and since she knows that she's not dead, she gathers that I'm referencing my childhood, then recalling pictures of me as a kid -

She appreciates the song on a personal level, but was nonetheless evaluating by habit with some dispassion, despite being drunk, though the song starts to strike her as candid, which takes her back a bit, as she continues to read along, with the context now changed, far more personal than she anticipated, she hears the words, to the chorus:

"I understand what Love is now, because of you.", and she looks up at me and says,

"This is so beautiful Charles, thank you."

She continues to read along during the second verse, hearing, "Cuts through every bit of hate in my heart", so she looks at me and smiles, and as I smile

²The lyrics are set out on Page 93.

back, grabbing my calf muscle, her fingers moving gently along my hairy legs, as the song continues to play, and she says,

“You angry monkey-man.”

Though as the flute comes in during the second chorus, she is visibly surprised, and instantly starts to cry, her tears landing on the page, as she reads along, the viola and spoken word then enter, elevating from folk, and into the peculiar, her tears blurring the blue ink below, now able to see the music through the page, as it rests in its folder -

And she looks as though she’s about to say something, appearing almost upset with me, but then stops herself, and now I can see that she’s actually extremely drunk.

She again starts to say something, but upon hearing me say the words, “New York” in the spoken word track, her grip on the page slips, and she instead lets the lyrics fall down to the bed beside her, as she falls into my arms, sobbing, and says, speaking into my shoulder, articulation broken by intermittent sobbing,

“Charles, ... why, do you do these things.”

On the downbeat, she squeezes into the skin of my ribs, pressing her body against mine, crying uncontrollably, as tears pool on the skin of my neck, so I feel guilty, for not taking into account, the fact we’re both extremely drunk, so maybe it was too much, in context.

The Empire State Building, now lit up beside us, entirely in blue, the light of mankind, breaking through clouds, reminding exactly, where, we are -

Again, lit up cutouts, from a distance, illuminated in the lights of our designs, one set of windows in a column of glass, opposite an icon of the human ocean, below.

This is New York.

Elderly woman on a small corner in Soho

We're in bed the next morning, and I am brutally hungover, though too lazy to vomit, instead fighting the sensation, and settling for quiet, relatively motionless, discomfort.

Our hotel room is completely filled with sunlight, though the temperature is quite nice, and cool, so I'm cowering under the blanket, literally moaning out loud, rolling around a bit, in what at times seems like legitimate anguish.

I open my eyes, just enough to look outside, and see the glare of an airplane, at an extremely high altitude, able to see it only because the sky is perfectly clear, allowing the faint reflection to make its way to me, coming in and out, causing it to look like a blinking, flying transponder -

Apparently not the code to feeling better.

Seeing that I've opened my eyes, she leans her head in, obstructing my view, as she's otherwise seated upright, close to the center of her side of the bed, which is closer to the window, her hair brushing up against my skin, drastically changing the scene from my drunken perch.

In my neediness, I enjoy the sensation of her hair, and the smell of her hair and her skin, so I deeply inhale, which she notices -

"You are a total creep," she says, then moving away from me, leaving me back where I started, though with the memories of some temporary relief.

Now bordering on disgusted with my condition, she says,

"Wake up you loser", poking me through the blanket.

"No."

"This is your fault.

I'm not spending all day in bed -

This is my trip as well, get up.", she continues, this time, while back to being seated upright, her ability to sit up adding consternation.

"No."

Apparently in perfectly fine shape, she begins her merciless infantilization:

"Poor Charles -

Do you remember what you did on the walk to the car?"

“Somewhat.”, I reply.

“It was not your finest moment, but the elderly woman you took to dancing with was clearly enjoying herself, so, well done, overall, I suppose.”

I pull the blanket totally over my head, partially in response, as she says,

“Fine, fifteen more minutes, then get up and take a shower, you stink.”

I hear moving, so I peak over the blanket, seeing her lean over the edge of the bed, her clothing taught around her body, exciting me, though I’m too lazy to do anything about it -

She grabs her phone, which is resting on the floor near the bed, and disconnects it from the charger.

Though I can’t see what she’s doing, I can hear her connect to the room’s system, and, “Para Mais Ninguém”, by Marisa Monte starts playing, so I pull the blanket fully off of my head, and the room is so bright, my eyelids don’t do the job, as I can see the back of my eyelids lit up, in an inconvenient, fleshy color.

Nonetheless, I love the song, so I don’t give a shit what’s happening -

I hear the samba guitar, somewhere between classical, jazz, and flamenco, waking my mind, despite my body, so I smile, and she leans in, kissing the side of my forehead, but stops, and says,

“You smell like a tank of gin.”

“I know.”

“You’re such a loser.”, she says.

“I know.”

She pauses -

“Thank you for the song Charles, I really love it.

And I really love you -

It means a lot to me.”

I open my eyes to acknowledge -

“You’re welcome, I love you too.”

After a while, she starts to sing along, and I remember how beautiful her

voice is:

I open my eyes to see her staring out of the window, as she sings, quietly, to herself, with a gaze fixed outward, as if no one else is around, looking out at the Empire State Building, now lit up in the light of the Sun, the windows now reflecting at points, just like the plane I saw minutes ago.

Not quite keeping up with Monte's subtle vibrato, but not trying, either, instead with the clarity of a proper choir singer, leading me to tear up, because it's all so beautiful, and I'm emotional when I'm hungover.

Before the song is over, she senses me watching, and quickly turns around -

"You fruit!", she says, upon spotting my moment of weakness, due to over-consumption.

"Shut up, I love you."

"Get up.", she says, pushing me again, this time, under the sheets, repeatedly grabbing me, randomly, in spots where she knows that I'm fattest, as if my weakened state could be exploited to coax action through insult -

"No." †

Christmas together

She's Christian, whereas I border on some depraved mix of Buddhism and shamanism -

Make that the only joke, and comb the essay for unintended comedy.

But I grew up celebrating Christmas, and I enjoy it:

Every year, I take it seriously, not doing anything outrageous -

Small, thoughtful gestures, simple things, that anyone can do:

I make her breakfast, before she gets up, and bring her something to drink in bed.

We go to church together, one year watching a children's choir singing, "Mitt hjerte alltid vanker".

These moments are branches in relationships -

The devil is a joke that breaks an unrelated stranger, too clever to make its intended target known, perhaps unaware itself;

The awful grace of God, no different in a world like ours, routing out and drawing to the surface what is worst, and destroying it, leaving only our unadulterated origin, from an unrequited generosity, and unconditional love. †

The incident

It's Syttende Mai, 2017, and we're near Aker Brygge, with a group of friends, at a bar on the water.

I am ludicrously drunk, as is Ida, with my own personal bottle of vodka, that I refuse to share with anyone else, only partially out of irony.

I'm wearing cheap, pink, imitation wayfarer sunglasses, bordering on a self-aware parody of an American.

Some random guy that Ida knew from high school shows up, and while I really couldn't care less, I attempt to be polite, and throw my arm around him, as I do with pretty much everyone that falls within one degree of friendship, under the presumption that he was a mutual friend of the group.

The music is blasting, and I'm dancing like an idiot, with this random person that I've known for just a few minutes, who is suddenly my best friend in the whole world.

I could see her discomfort, which is unusual for her, and as drunk as I was, it took me a bit out of the moment -

This was another branching point in our relationship, but in reality, I didn't have any options, because our entire network was there, so a blow up was not a possibility, especially given the absence of any hard evidence of malfeasance.

So ultimately, almost as reflex, I just pretend that I didn't notice, though suspecting the possibility that she cheated on me with him, before he took off, I made sure to pat him on the ass, and say,

"Nice to meet you, buddy."

When we got home, I was totally blasted, and she was a bit belligerent towards me, giving me a hard time for being so drunk, which is fine, but in context, it made me even more suspicious -

So I just threw it on the table, and said,

"Look, if you cheated on me with that lesbian, at least promise me that you used some kind of protection, presumably suitable for lesbians."

"Fuck you, Charles."

We sleep on opposite corners of the bed. †

The investigation

Our first day back to work afterwards, I come back to the apartment, during work hours, and tear through everything imaginable:

Email, Facebook, old phones, diaries, receipts, photo albums, her camera, suit cases, whatever -

It's a complete investigation, and I'm convinced that she's cheated on me with this idiot.

If it were possible, I would have broken into her childhood bedroom, and rummaged through her socks, looking for some evidence of indiscretion.

As I ruthlessly violate her privacy, potentially ruining our relationship as a consequence, the picture that emerges is not at all what I had expected, but I quickly realize, as a wave of bitterness washes over me, that it's one that I should have anticipated as a possibility -

The last message she sent to this guy closed with,

"You broke my arm, so don't you think you should at least apologize to me?"

She was 21 at the time.

My internal response is so complete, that I think that I might have had a stroke, as I see a flash of light in my left eye. †

Hangover

I'm standing over our kitchen counter, staring at a photograph of you, in an old silver frame, waiting for water to boil, so I can make myself some coffee.

I see the silhouette of a tree, projected on the lefthand wall of our living room, lit up by the street lights below, moving in the wind.

It's 6:00, still completely dark, I'm still completely drunk, and I look straight out of the windows separating me from the outside world, into absolutely nothing.

I can feel my dependency upon you in my stomach, belittling, the fumes of my drunkenness, in the bleakness of your absence, nothing is happening -

I don't know what I'm supposed to do. †

My painting for Ida

I make her a painting, and I buy myself a painter's smock, and hat.

It's a single, white peddled flower, with a yellow, egg yolk center, green stem, each drawn with a wide, thick, soft brush, and generous layers of paint, that have a sculptural finish, with a thickness that is significantly raised off the surface of the canvas, showing the motions of the brush:

A more contemporary version of Van Gogh's, Two Cut Sunflowers.

There's watercolor under it, with blues from the sky, some whites, and some faint floral colors to create contrast, allowing the pedals to be discerned from the white canvas.

The watercolor is almost entirely limited to the area of the flower bud.

The painting is large, nearly the height of our ceilings, and has a long green stem, also drawn with the same brush and style, equally heavy, that reduces to nearly a single point at its base, executed by twisting the brush till perpendicular to the bottom of the painting, at the end of each stroke.

Each component is a single, premixed color, or group of colors, mixed onto the brush before application, creating homogenous blocks of colors -

There are however, some very faint, thin lines of violet and pale blue iridescence in some of the pedals.

There are accents of naturally occurring greens throughout, also drawn with a heavy hand, as if a single flower had been placed upon a flower shop counter, above fine, translucent, colored paper wraps, with their leaves generally, naturally falling nearby.

I work on the painting in secret, renting a small space in a local artist's loft, regularly lying to her, saying that I'm at the gym.

I sign it, "C. Davi", in black oil ink, with the knob of the brush used as a pen, undated, on the bottom righthand corner of the painting.

I never tell her this, but I also write on the bottom left of the back of the canvas, in the same ink -

"Jeg elsker deg, Ida."

I also hide a small okiagari doll, fashioned after Bodhidharma, resting on the bottom of the frame behind the canvas.

The frame is a natural, unfinished wood, baroque frame, that I also paint,

with small gold and white dot accents, modest in number, significantly distanced from one another, randomly scattered about the frame.

When the painting is finished, before I come home, I hand wash the smock and hat in a small basin at the studio, and leave both there to dry.

I come home to mount the painting myself, before Ida gets home from work, where I saw the silhouette of the tree that morning, alone, so that it never happens again.

She comes home that night, spotting the painting, immediately understanding why I've made it for her, begins to cry upon seeing it, and forgives me for knowing why. †

My artwork for Charles

Nihilism is not a belief system for me, but is instead an unfortunate, occasionally physically real experience that I despise, creating a terrible need for her company -

It's the leveraged depression of a hangover, written everywhere, creating a uniform signal of nothing.

Scandinavians are a bit naive, but they can afford this because they live in an insular, safe, wealthy part of the world.

As a result, basically everything you want to know about someone can be found online, including their address:

I send Andreas a friend request on Facebook the day before my performance, to make sure that he knows what I look like, and that I'm dating Ida.

I follow this up hours later, sending him a single, kissy-face emoji, and a solitary capital, "R", isolated on a new line.

It turns out that he notices this, and he responds -

"Hey, cool, what does that mean?"

He accepts my request:

So I show up outside of his house the next day to explain, before work, wearing the painter's smock and hat, because I hate him, and I want the next 5 minutes of his life to make no sense at all:

He's about to get into his car, and I've already opened my car door to avoid making noise, as I quietly get out of my car, which is parked down the street from his driveway, slowly and unremarkably walking towards his house, waiting for him to open his car door.

Before he's completely seated, with his left leg still sticking out of the driver's seat, I run towards him as fast I can, and jump into the air, kicking the door shut on his leg, with my left leg, falling to the ground, sliding on my back, and I scramble to kick the door a second time, while still on my back, because I hate him.

I stand up, completely livid, smash the rear passenger window with a wrench that I've clung to the entire time, shouting, and as he's screaming in pain, I calmly walk over to the rear of his car, and carefully draw an upside down human nose on his rear window, using the edge of the wrench, etching deeply into the surface of the glass.

The noise is positively awful, and I can tell that he thinks that the noise is somehow contributing to his physical pain, though it's obviously not -

Nonetheless, he starts to scream even louder, perhaps realizing that this is shaping up to be an unusual part of his life, full of unfamiliar sounds and experiences.

I wore my painter's hat to partially obscure my face, but I want him to see my face eventually, so when I'm done with my glasswork, I throw the front door to his shitty car open, and I squat in front of him:

Pushing him with my right hand in the flesh of his shoulder to get his attention, I point to my eyes, making a capital "Y" with my pointer and middle fingers, directing him to look at me -

Then I spit in his face, stand up, and shout,

"This is what it means."

I am crying hysterically, shouting these words inches from his face, grabbing the bottom of his chin, and like his ugly mother, I give him a kiss on the mouth, and squeeze his face afterward, hard enough to hurt him, and grab the top of his head to make him think that I might actually rape him -

His face level with my crotch, I grab the buckle on my belt with my left hand.

I lean in, scream for no reason, again inches from his face, and I can see my spit land in his shitty eyeballs, as he blinks, and shakes his head to get my spit off of his face, in total horror at what's happening to him, and I eat it all up:

I smush my hat onto his stupid head, rubbing it around to ruin his hair, staring at him the whole time.

I step back from his shitty car, spit on his lawn, and standing perfectly upright, I can feel the wind blow across my back, hearing the trees moving behind me -

My eyes wide open, I look up at the sky, but I don't see anything, and I know that he sees all of these things happening, because I'm already inside of his head -

I've infected him, in return for infecting my life, and infecting my family:

I lean back, again, shouting again, desperate for him to understand -

My nose running all over my face, crying like a baby, I throw my entire bodyweight into kicking him, like a fireman knocking down a door, I connect

forwards, flat against his chin, and his entire body lifts and snaps upon contact.

. . .

I walk away, leaving him unconscious, his body awkwardly draped over the barrier between the two front seats, and with some distance, I again scream like an animal, this time staring forward, again into nothing, for no one, not saying anything at all, otherwise calmly walking towards my car.

The birds are chirping, which pisses me off.

. . .

He's almost certainly going to call the police, given the facts, but I'm banking that he won't say it was me, given the facts, since I've given him an out, as this was all designed to make it look like some kind of new, poorly understood hate crime, or perhaps ritualistic violence, in either case, the sheer spectacle will deflect any sensible theory, because they'll be forced to address the giant upside down nose etched into the rear window of his car -

It is a symbol of my total disregard for this maggot, that I won't waste anything at all on:

Nothing, not even the possibility of carrying meaning -

It is an upside down, nonsense thing, just like him.

Moreover, if caught, I don't want to be associated with actual racism, so I invent a new symbol of hatred, just for him:

The upside down nose. †

The coffee shop, “hello”

I know where and when this fruit loop turned gimp gets his coffee every day, and apparently his shattered tibia and stupid foam boot don’t hold back his sense of entitlement to overpriced coffee, so I decided to say hello, twice.

I make sure to get behind him in line, and just as he’s about to pay, I start whistling the tune of, “Greensleeves”, with deliberately homoerotic overtones, repeatedly scratching my eyebrows, ostentatiously.

He hears me whistling, turns around, and looks at my eyebrows first, prompting me to scratch them even faster, as I do bit of a dance, leaning in towards him -

I can see that he recognizes me, and I can also see that he’s getting nervous.

I take my credit card out before I’ve ordered, tapping it on the counter, quickly, and aggressively, until he looks at it, and I plant it down, face up, expecting him to make a mental note of my name, while I order.

The barista seems to think I’m an anxious jerk, merely signaling to get the barista’s attention, so I roll with it, ignoring Andreas going forward. †

Baby powder

I call her, “my baby” during some incredibly desperate, emotionally codependent sex, and she snaps to a positively livid state, stopping everything, sitting upright, as if a high speed train had hit a twisted piece of track -

The whole thing goes airborne, and everyone dies.

I instantly get a free, but incredibly hostile education in feminist theory.

Then, episodically, for months, I randomly discover baby powder in things:

My loafers - baby powder.

My shampoo - baby powder;

My food - baby powder.

This, continuous, for months, with no forewarning -

All things are subject to baby powder.

I press the steam button on the iron, and then wet baby powder explodes all over my pants, leaving permanent stains.

So finally, I say something, and Ida explodes into a totally incoherent tirade, but the main takeaway is -

She’s mad about the baby comment, and so now everything is baby powder, constantly:

This is my punishment, which she’s judged to be appropriate.

So I say, “And if you’re right, what should I do?”

She says nothing, and I can see that she instantly hates me, and sleeps on the couch that night.

The next day, I notice that she doesn’t get up for work, I say nothing, for fear of baby powder reprisal, and while I’m gone, she attempts to rip the painting off the wall, but she can’t manage to dismount the frame, which drives her totally insane, reminding her of my constant, infantilizing nature, and now she feels trapped in some kind of rubberized playpen -

She’s convinced that I’ve somehow cleverly robbed her of the ability to express her outrage in an unsafe manner in her own home, and that nothing operates as expected, because of premeditation on my part.

When she finally realizes that all I've done is instal gliders behind the frame, so that the painting can be easily lifted, and then removed, she completely loses her mind, screaming at the top of her lungs, lifting the painting, above the requisite height, and slamming it down on the floor like an animal -

Hours later, she eventually sees what I wrote on the back of the canvas, and sees the small okiagari doll, which is now standing upright on the back of the canvas, laying on the floor, face down, she can see before her my undisturbed opinions, notwithstanding what I might occasionally say or do -

That within her lives something unreasonably relentless, surrounded by love, that is simply physically incapable of giving up, by design.

She loses it again, this time saying, "no" to herself, repeatedly, sitting near the painting on the floor of our living room, desperately and clumsily turning it back over, collecting the broken shards of the wood from the frame that are now scattered about, calling me repeatedly, though I don't answer -

Baby powder.

I come home to see her seated on the floor near the painting, with a pile of wood shards assembled nearby, and she looks positively awful, with her hair completely frazzled, possibly the worst I've ever seen her look, inexplicably wearing something that looks like a wedding dress, and I'm honestly worried about her, for the first time.

So I just say,

"Ida, I'm sorry."

The painting hangs for a week, as is, as a shitty reminder of the outside world, which both of us are not terribly fond of at times.

She fixes the frame herself, over time. †

Ida goes to work

She's drinking coffee by herself, already dressed for work, wearing a black skirt, with a somewhat visible decorative white cotton lining, like a miniature fine tablecloth, with the opening resting just above her knees, one leg crossed over the other, her bare feet moving about a bit under our small kitchen table, with a sharp, white cotton, button down shirt, with thick, smashed pearl buttons, pressed neatly, the pleats running down her long arms, with a bit of thin gold jewelry showing under her cuffs, reading the local newspaper.

She turns a few pages to find a sale on Joike balls that she's decidedly uninterested in, a bus crash in Bergen, a local politician that's been spotted cheating on his wife, and then she sees the Andreas story, in the center of some page, featuring a large picture of the upside down nose, with a sensational headline:

"Var Det Hat, Eller Sex?"

There's a panel below the main photo, with rotated instances of the nose, supplemented with other visual media, ultimately trying to reconstruct the intended final state, as the running conclusion is that it was an incomplete work of vandalism, though one analysis reaches the correct conclusion:

"Er det en nese?", reads one caption, under an upside down version of my glasswork, with a textbook photo of a human nose to the right, for context, labeled, "nese".

They interview the neighbors, who uniformly report what they believe to be the shouting of a man in the throws of some kind of sexually charged rage -

Only able to make out the silhouettes of the scene, they all saw a man first squatting near the driver's seat, episodically shouting, kissing the other man, later standing and reaching for his crotch, with bizarre and unexplained actions taking place earlier in the rear of the car, accompanied by truly disturbing screeching noises.

It's amazing how removing some information can completely change a story, without changing the facts.

One neighbor is confident that it was a consensual encounter gone too far, and that the assailant was having sex with the muffler of the car while carving into the window -

He noted that he had heard of similar things happening in Austria, and that perhaps the assailant was foreign.

Though she feels guilty, she hates him enough to afford herself a bit of

laughter, at his admittedly severe expense, and she is in fact laughing quite loud at this point, as the story grows ever more ridiculous.

Recalling the date that I made her the painting, and given the reported date of the incident, she realizes that this was almost certainly my doing, also because it's completely mental, and seems calculated to produce absurd, and petty consequences.

She doesn't care at all -

She views it as proportional, with extra points for being funny.

She looks at her watch, puts the paper down, picks up her keys, and goes to work. †

The Roman Forum

I see her from some distance below me in The Roman Forum on vacation, in a simple white cotton dress, as I've gone off to take pictures -

In flat, tan leather sandals, her naked feet covered only by laces that wrap up high along her shins, prompting me to stare up from her muscular calves to her thighs, tracing their path, upward, as I walk back towards her, like a predator, imagining the soft touch of the skin along her inner thigh, as the cotton of her dress brushes over my wrist and forearm, and her hair touches my face.

Her blond hair, barely moving in the slow heat of the city, she's sweating, basically everywhere, including her face, and I become so aroused, that I want to kill every man that I see, just so she can understand the magnitude of my desires for her at the moment:

I would deliberately impregnate her on what remains of the grass, shouting like an animal, and raise a family right there, hunting tourists with a hand-fashioned shank for sustenance, for so long as we both shall live.

I settle for the nonetheless inappropriate option of walking towards her, leaning in and kissing her, squeezing her wonderful behind, and I can see her eyes open, because I never close my eyes outside of bed, and she says, with some sincere condemnation,

“Charles . . .”

And I instantly regret it -

Baby powder.

I realize in that moment that I value her company so much, that I tolerate the risk of psychological mania, without even questioning it:

In about one minute's worth of time, I transitioned from towering Roman upon a hill, willing to hunt human beings and raise a family on a rock, to anxiety over being yet again subjected to constant baby powder terrorism.

Most of this is of course my fault, but she knows at this point how I respond to her presence, and she does nothing to accommodate it, and in fact, I suspect she deliberately antagonizes it -

We walk off together, and she randomly smacks my ass quite hard, squeezing it afterwards, and I yelp out of legitimate surprise, jumping a bit, and though she clearly did this in jest, she also pinches the skin between my thumb and pointer finger, biting her lip as she does this, staring off, suggesting that she was also legitimately excited by the prospect of a bit of spontaneous B.C. sex,

as a sort of immersive history:

I imagine myself standing atop the hill above the forum, as she looks up past a sea of fluted columns, and sees this beastly, bearded man, sweating, my mediocre hair flailing, like a modern Gilgamesh, both legitimately aroused, and amused by me. †

The wind farm transaction

We're at the pharmacy, talking about work -

She's explaining some wind farm transaction, and I'm taking it quite seriously, because I'm paranoid, and so by nature, if someone offers information about what's going on at work, I listen -

And she farts, audibly.

And I laugh, right in her face, so she hits me on the shoulder, incredibly embarrassed, quickly looking around, finding no one close by, laughing, she skips away from me, shewing me off, as if it makes a difference, since we're both going home together afterward.

...

Rather than simply leave this comedic gem unattended, I decide to use it as the inspiration for further comedy -

I buy an alphanumeric pricing gun, with the same labels as the pharmacy, which costs me \$250 USD, and use it to produce a brand new, spectacular pricing possibility of, "**\$FART**", in all capital letters, bold-faced and underlined, deliberately using the U.S. dollar sign, to make it completely absurd.

...

One month later, she goes back to the pharmacy, buying her usual items, this time alone, and while waiting to pay, she looks at her basket -

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

She looks over, at other people's baskets, seeing the same labels, seemingly everywhere, now surrounded, she feels a rush of anxiety, she can feel her face turning red, briefly considering simply walking out.

She's relieved to see prices scanned at the register, so her anxiety fades, though there is a moment where the cashier struggles with an item, rotating a bottle of ointment, as an old lady points at it, attempting to help the cashier, causing Ida to shrink, convinced they'd know the American did it, thereby implicating her.

She can imagine the performance, now laughing to herself -

I'm wearing a balaclava, holding the pricing gun with one hand, hanging from the ceiling with the other, like Spider-Man, descending only to vandalize carefully preselected merchandise. †

The terrarium

I come home first, and it's insanely hot in our apartment, both of us having left the windows closed on a warm, extremely sunny day, giving the apartment the feel of a moist, terrarium.

I desperately have to take a shit, so I quickly lower the temperature in the apartment, blasting the AC, leaving the bathroom door wide open, to let the cold air in.

Then suddenly, she opens the door to the apartment, and it's just too hot -

I leave the bathroom door open.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Charles, close the door, you disgusting freak." †

The y-chromosome

It's the middle of August, and our first time at the beach together -

We've rented a small house in the south of Sweden for the weekend, since the beaches in Norway are significantly colder.

As we walk to the beach from the house, I look down at my right hand, remembering that I have unusually shaped nails, which are highly circular, with some of my fingernails even forming nearly perfect circles:

I realize that I'm likely just running through the typical anxieties that you have at the beach with others, especially in a new relationship -

My chest hair is probably a bit much for Sweden, my stomach is not its best, but my biceps look legitimately awesome in my jet black, Mountain Dew T-shirt, with cut-off sleeves, so I'm feeling pretty good about my overall situation.

We get to the beach, and it's not terribly different from the beaches out in The Hamptons, with a really long shoreline, and sand that extends out quite far perpendicular to the shore.

The main difference is the presence of a significant boardwalk, and though there are great restaurants in the Hamptons, the quality of food in Sweden is world class, in my opinion on par with France and Italy, this beach being no exception, with excellent representation from basically every genre imaginable, as if they had transplanted Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and laid it upon a beach.

We pick out a spot fairly close to the water, since the tide is calm -

I lay down an oversized, rough khaki sheet, with an elaborate, but thin, blue floral print, that I bought in a small shop in the north of India, placing our towels down upon it, spaced out a bit, since the relationship is new, and the fact that she's my colleague is always coloring our time together -

Two, white cotton, hotel style beach towels, that we've taken from the house.

I reach further into the plaid interior of my Herschel bag, removing a set of small, Bluetooth speakers, that nonetheless have excellent, balanced low end sound, sunglasses for both of us, and before the spread is complete, I turn the speakers on, which makes a low frequency popping sound that shakes the unit in my hand, then pulling out my phone, ultimately kicking off a playlist that I've curated specifically for this occasion, that begins with, "Feed me Diamonds", by MNDR (RAC Remix), and as the song begins, I place the speakers in the top center of the blanket, equidistant from each towel, with the full display being crafted to convey my shamelessly pretentious tastes in absolutely everything imaginable, and that I really just want her to have a good time with me.

“I’m going to hit the loo, but I’ll be back in a minute.”, she says.

“Sounds good.”, I reply, as I tweak the spread a bit more in her absence.

I’m still wearing my artisanal tank top, because I feel a bit fat, and I’m quite anxious in her absence, though I’m convinced it doesn’t show through the shielding of the Mountain Dew logo across my chest.

About five minutes in, I see her starting to walk back towards me, and while still walking, with the confidence of a concrete beam, she begins to take off her already somewhat see-through, white cotton sundress, and I can see her fit, but nonetheless plum body come into view, like I’m watching a beer commercial, and I realize that she is bonkers hot -

I am so proud of myself at the moment, that I forget about my slight chubbiness, concluding that I must look pretty good to have pulled this off, but nonetheless keep the top on for a minute.

I take off my leather Brooks Brothers sandals, that have little palm trees on the straps, gesture for her to give me her Havaianas, that have a decorative bow across the top, which I complement, and with that and my backpack, three of the four blanket corners are now secured, holding down the fourth with her rather sizable beach bag, made of a finely woven, decorative straw, with a thin yellow print that matches notes from the bows on her sandals, the contents of which are a total mystery to me, given that I’m nearly certain that I’ve carried all objects of any utility.

I reach again into the backpack, this time revealing a Nalgene bottle, with a thick, grey, rubberized top, filled with a cocktail that I’ve made for both of us, consisting of Hendrix gin, fresh grapefruit juice, some mint, sparkling water, and a splash of limonata soda.

She’s selected the towel closest to where I’m standing, sits down, and while organizing herself, she grabs the back of my left calf, looking off into the water, as I shake the bottle aggressively to circulate the ice, and even out the temperature, pouring it into the classic red solo cup that I’ve brought, with two cups stacked, one into the next, completing my updated American cliché.

I lift the top cup out with my finger tips, which is fizzing a bit due to the sparkling water and limonata, but at no risk of spilling, and hand it to her -

I kneel, and again, reach down into my backpack, withdrawing a small ziplock bag containing torn mint, that I then use to dress her cocktail as she holds it, and I can see that she enjoys the spread, as, “Eddie”, the Oliver Nelson Remix, begins to play.

. . .

About thirty minutes have passed since we sat down, and while sitting up a bit, resting on my elbows, I look at the water ahead, and as she's laying on her back, I can see that her eyes are closed through one of my many cheap pairs of wayfarers, this time featuring a glossy black frame, with the name of some shitty bar in Nantucket emblazoned on both temples, close to the lenses, at an angle, the text pale blue in color, fit for a frozen margarita cup, complete, with an italicized font, ultimately displaying the name, "The Chicken Box" -

A masterpiece.

I notice her sandy foot in my view, with her left knee raised, and her right foot perched atop, not annoyed at all, that some portion of sea has been obscured by her frame, as "Dreams", by The Cranberries starts playing -

I really like her, so this is good -

Completing the scene of the day at the beach, with the lovely girlfriend, beautiful weather, music I love, playing with a magnificent clarity, just waiting for a vodka slogan to appear in the sky, blasting out from the exhaust of American fighter jets scrambling above, confirming my impulses for empire, of which I am clearly an ambassador.

Then I notice her toenail is exactly the same shape as mine -

"Look at your foot.", I say excitedly, quite loud.

She holds up her right foot into the air, pointing her toes forward, staring at them for a moment, with her gorgeous leg fully extended, like a flying gazelle, then taking off her sunglasses, extending her arm, her palm up, blocking the Sun with her right hand, perhaps expecting to find a bug, she wiggles her toes, sand falling off a bit, and looks at me, smiling.

"Now look at my foot."

I lift my right foot to the side of her's, in roughly the same position, but with a bit of distance, held perfectly still, for comparison.

She leans in to observe, and then says,

"OK, that is a bit weird."

There's some discussion about the frequency of this in nature, and apparently, she hides the ball a bit, perhaps embarrassed, as I insist on seeing pictures of her family, convinced that I'll find a doppelgänger:

I instead find out that her mother looks exactly like her, just older, which only adds to my concerns, and as I stare at her, now instead worried that we're all slightly permuted versions of the same person, producing deliberately

engineered, scientifically calibrated incest -

Some kind of secret project to produce hot, bright, belligerent people, scattered about the surface of the Earth.

She confesses that her mother does not have the foot in question, but that her father does, leading to one of those discussions that overly educated people have, that sound convincing, referencing articles from *The Economist*, but are nonetheless unscientific gibberish, ultimately leading us to the conclusion that this type of foot is likely carried by the y-chromosome.

As we both nod in agreement, with confidence, but modest professional apprehension in our conclusion, she puts her sunglasses back on, and takes a sip from her cocktail, again wiggling her toes, staring at them, then smiling at me.

This is what happens when you pay people too much money.

. . .

I'm still bothered by this, so I decide to lean in and give her a kiss, as she's resting on her elbows, staring into the sea, she turns towards me -

As I gently remove her sunglasses afterwards, I can see that she's freckled a bit near her eyes, which I stare into both romantically, and clinically, to find that they are nearly identical to mine in color.

I run my fingers through the right side of her wet hair, doubling back to remove some sand, to deflect from the intrusions that I've imposed upon her, then leaning back to examine her frame, I realize that she has a smaller version of my unusually broad shoulders, built like a capital "T", and I'm left feeling a bit gay, dating someone that intersects substantially with my own physical appearance.

She sees where I'm looking, and laughing a bit, she notices the same things in me -

"Howdy!", she says, feigning the accent of an American bumpkin, looking directly into my eyes, shaking the same foot -

I impulsively grab her, kissing her quickly, then roll over her, without putting much pressure on her body.

When to her right, I scoop her up, snaking my left arm under her back, ultimately pulling her onto my body.

Her face now directly above mine, I can smell the ocean on her lips, and as the wind blows, her wet hair flails, as we stare at each other with some seriousness -

I place my right palm on the side of her face, my thumb gently resting near her eye, laying with my back in the sand -

She sneaks away, inching her wet body down a bit, and falls asleep on my chest. †

Acceleration

You both decide to cook dinner at home after the beach, and drive into town to pick up groceries.

As you're driving, you reach down to your phone, and put on, "Across the Universe", as arranged by Fiona Apple, and after listening to the words for a bit, she says,

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

You reply, smiling, but without looking at her,

"That was pretty good.", continuing to stare at the road ahead.

She's a bit disappointed in your response to her joke, and you seem overly serious:

Looking at you, she now sees the person that she works with, with the strange addition of a ballad playing -

Nonetheless, she's annoyed that you didn't fully appreciate her joke.

After the song ends, you grab your phone again, and play, "Dig", by Incubus:

She looks at you again, this time a bit suspicious, as her ex-boyfriend would always play that song while driving.

Now tan, built well, she can see your profile with an animal gaze into the road ahead -

She can see the lens above your pupil illuminated as the Sun starts to set a bit behind the forest to the left, and as she looks from the top of your eye down to the bottom, she sees the lit up surface of the lens lift forward away from your eye, in the shape of a parabola.

You look like a machine:

An exaggerated representation of the person that she sees at work.

Then she continues to look down, seeing the tattered cloth around the shoulders of your shirt, and sees that you deliberately started with an already totally stupid thing, and consciously pushed it completely over the edge, by cutting off the sleeves -

She imagines the psychology at the moment of purchase, as you spotted it, at some horrible store, imagining you carefully selecting the right size, after an unreasonably hard day at work, and your sincere, quiet enjoyment upon finding,

“the right one.”

She realizes that your ridiculousness could be something that you do automatically to distract from the fact that you’re simply not normal, sizing you down a bit.

Before the downbeat of the chorus, you take her hand and say,

“I think you should hold onto something.”, and then roll up all of the windows.

Exactly on the downbeat, you lean into the gas pedal, staring into the visibly empty highway ahead, with the acceleration steady, but increasingly noticeable:

The Sun receding further behind the forest that bounds the outer lanes of the highway, with shadows rapidly painting the interior of the car, she hears the engine roar, and she feels the entire frame of the car start to vibrate -

Breaking her introspection, again, as if you knew something that you couldn’t have known without looking first.

You look over to her, and because she’s smiling so much, you again lean into the gas, this time out of synch with the music, the same pattern repeating, only out of synch, creating some apprehension of a third -

The entire car at this point rocking from the combustion of the engine, she sees even the dials in the dashboard moving at unfamiliar speeds, producing noises inside the cabin, with the wind pounding against the windshield.

She sees the melted ice in her drink churning in the cupholder, occasionally spilling, but she is nonetheless not afraid at all, other than by the realization that she trusts you, perhaps too much -

You take her hand and squeeze it, as she finds additional comfort in your denim shorts, and bare feet below, seeing a simply ridiculous man, that seems to really love her -

Like a proper hillbilly that’s stolen a rich man’s identity, seeing your hairy legs covered in goosebumps, concluding that you are obviously sharing in her excitement.

You look at her just long enough to make sure that she’s alright, with her smiling back, terribly excited, neither of you saying anything at all, with everything now appearing overexposed from the low angle of the Sun, as she sees only the outlines of an abstraction in you, in which she has quite plainly entrusted her personal safety -

You squeeze her hand again, she finds relief, and you turn back to the road,

putting both your hands on the wheel, continuing at what is now an absurd velocity.

She focuses on the music, as the lyrics set into the context, she realizes that all of this says something that you couldn't possibly otherwise articulate:

That you see nothing else in this world when she is with you -

That there are only two of you, with no obstacles, as your mind accelerates, with no inhibitions, other than her wellbeing, like a car roaring down an open road.

"Ida ... ", staring forward.

"Yes ... ", she replies, as if asking a question.

"Ida I love you." †

Who are you?

We show up to the market, disturbingly professional in our shopping:

You point at a parking spot, which I barrel into, in one continuous motion.

We both get out of the car like *The Matrix*, and walk through the automatic doors to the market like we might rob the place, quickly agreeing on exactly what we want for dinner, and the consequent ingredients, being politely aggressive to everyone around us, managing the situation like we're closing a deal as quickly as possible, so as to avoid imposing undue costs on an important client.

Mundane considerations, such as which one of the many indifferentiable brands of Swedish produce that we should purchase get ruthlessly processed by two towering automatons, their confidence alarming ordinary shoppers, as we point at things, mercilessly throwing them into our cart, inspiring others, immaculately executing upon a menu that we conceive of on the spot, looking more like a pair of football players than shoppers.

Only the classics are ultimately permitted:

Gravlax, pickled herring, toast Skagen, Jansson's temptation -

Boom, done.

We pass the beer isle, and I grab an armful, stacked full of six-packs, of Mikkeller beers, because I like them.

The checkout becomes reduced to a nothing, as I load items from the cart onto the belt, and you organize them on the belt, the consummate team, with your credit card already out, immediately ready for payment once all items have been loaded, both of us watching the prices, for any sales that may have been missed.

I drive us home, not as fast as the way in, but fast, with no music playing, barely talking:

We're going to make love before cooking dinner, and it's going to be extreme, because car -

Baby powder.

We are both plainly in love with each other at this point, which is now no longer a secret of any order -

We are desperate people.

We get back to the house, leaving the groceries in the car, because something

far more important might expire, and so we bolt the moment I open the front door to the house, with my keys already out the moment we exit the car -

Running through the interior of the house, we know the common area we both have in mind, which we agree upon by looking at each other as we're running.

As we're running, I pull up, "Maps", by The Yeah Yeah Yeahs, on my phone, and hit the play button, carrying my phone until I see the large couch in the center of the common area that I know we both have in mind -

I toss my phone into the right corner of the couch, just as the song is just getting started, and dive into the left corner, twisting my body around mid-flight, so I can finally, really see you, separating the section that I've landed on a bit due to the concussive force of my impact.

You follow shortly after, jumping in as well, landing to the right of me, with your beautiful legs on top of me, smiling, pushing the couch back as well upon landing, both of us moving, and I turn into you, grabbing the back of your head, under your hair, with every last bit of psychological well-being that I have left in me.

The house's bluetooth speakers pick up the signal from my phone, causing the song to circulate, positively blasting, with happenstance adding ever more to our favor, as the evening sunlight cuts through the entire room, into your eyes above me, and suddenly, you appear to me, your face inches away from mine, with the blue echoes of the house lights bouncing around behind you, in straight horizontal lines above and beside your head.

Substantial time passes, and we don't bother to take each other's clothes off:

Our hands and arms snaked around each other's backs, heads, and bottoms, grasping for the silhouettes that we saw earlier burned by the Sun into the middle of the air, now occasionally uttering nonsense, but none of it works.

Ultimately naked on a stranger's couch, lost in an environment that would almost certainly not protect what we've found, we plum what time allows -

Lurid desires haplessly recreating the indelible realities we experienced hurtling along the surface of the Earth, at velocities our Creator might eventually frown upon, in a tiny, fragile, little thing, holding our futures in an eggshell, settling for what we have:

Far more than anything we've ever expected. †

Sketches of the Inchoate

Musical references

Note that song titles are hyperlinks

1. César Franck, “The Violin Sonata in A-Major, Mov. 2.” (1886).
2. Hooverphonic, “Renaissance Affair” (1998).
3. Marisa Monte, “O Bonde do Dom” (2006).
4. Franz Liszt, “Liebesträume” (1850).
5. Johannes Brahms, “Six Pieces for Piano, No. 2.” (1893).
6. Erik Satie, “Je te veux” (1897).
7. Mikhail Glinka, “The Lark” (1840).
8. Maurice Ravel, “String Quartet in F-Major” (1903).
9. John Coltrane, “Blue Train” (1958).
10. Ray Noble, “Cherokee” (1938).
11. Jimmy Van Heusen, “Polka Dots and Moonbeams” (1940).
12. Miles Davis, “So What” (1959).
13. John “Dizzy” Gillespie, “Salt Peanuts” (1942).
14. Dorothy Jeanne Thompson, “Essence of Sapphire” (1965).
15. Alexander Scriabin, “Etude in C-Sharp-Minor” (1887).
16. Lukasz Sebastian Gottwald, “Till the World Ends” (2012).
17. Richard Rodgers, arr. by John Coltrane, “My Favorite Things” (1961).
18. Charles Davi, “Jane - Dada Art Edition” (2020).
19. Marisa Monte, “Para Mais Ninguém” (2006).
20. Hans Adolph Brorson, “Mitt hjerte alltid vanker” (1731).
21. MNDR, “Feed me Diamonds (RAC Remix)” (2012).
22. Everywhere, “Eddie (Oliver Nelson Remix)” (2013).

23. The Cranberries, “Dreams” (1993).
24. The Beatles, arr. by Fiona Apple, “Across the Universe” (1998).
25. Incubus, “Dig” (2006).
26. The Yeah Yeah Yeahs, “Maps” (2003). †

Sketches of the Inchoate

Jane

The outline of your face,
The vague scent of your skin,
Awakens something buried deep in my mind.

It only takes one glimpse,
And the thoughts come rushing in -
Memories of life lost,
Within my mind.

I understand,
What Love is now,
Because of you.

I understand,
What Love is now,
Because of you.

The iris of your eye,
Like a harpoon in my skin,
Cuts through every bit of hate in my heart.

Blood-let, soft with Love,
Broken and done in,
Knotted up in every inch of my guts.

I understand,

What Love is now,
Because of you.

I understand,
What Love is now,
Because of you. †

Sketches of the Inchoate

For, “Anna”, in Denmark.