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COLONOSCOPY

by Alex Colon

I shit my pants in the South of France.

-Jonathan Ames

INTRODUCTION

E.B. White wrote, “The essayist is a self-liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest... Only a person who is congenitally self-centered has the effrontery and the stamina to write essays.”

That sounds about right. I, for instance, have always considered even the smallest, most banal bits of minutiae that pepper my day-to-day existence to be worthy of someone’s attention. Usually, this someone happens to be my mom, but I can make exceptions, expounding the deeds of my day upon whoever else happens to be around. But there inevitably comes a point when no one else is there to listen and I am left alone with my stories. When this happens, I can make one of two choices; I can either talk to myself, or I can write an essay.

That doesn’t mean I spend every moment of free time writing about myself. Generally, I devote my scant few alone-moments to catching up on trashy reality-television, or picking up the red Netflix envelope and watching the movie that has been sitting on top of my DVD player for the last couple of weeks. But sometimes I do find myself motivated to put my undergraduate English degree to use and sit down to write something. And more often than not, this is the kind of stuff that generally comes out.

So, I figured that I might as well go with it. After coming up with the idea to write a series of essays, it made sense that it would become my senior thesis. And after spending the last four years in anxious anticipation, I have finally completed this

seemingly insurmountable project. Not only that, but it was actually pretty easy. And enjoyable.

I think that if I learned anything, aside from a general improvement of my writing technique, it's the idea that projects like this don't exist solely for reasons of torture. The truth is, I wouldn't have written any of the following pages if I hadn't been required to. But I did write them, and I really enjoyed the entire process.

I feel as if I've somehow been able to exorcise a good portion of the crippling neuroses that I've been carrying around for quite a long time. I'm not sure if this will make it any easier for me to use a public bathroom or no longer feel a stab of bitterness anytime I see a pumpkin, but it's nice to dump my burdens onto the page and into the mind of whoever chooses to read this.

And so for the most part I'd have to agree with White's belief that personal essays are inherently self centered. Everything written down here is about me, and all I can do is expect the reader to be able to relate my experiences to his or her own life. But as I sit here, looking at these eight essays, I also realize that they are just as much an examination of me as they are of the people and the world around me. After all, without all of the interesting situations that result from my relationships and other surroundings, the following 40-something pages would seem pretty damn boring.

TOMORROW BELONGS TO ME

I have done the impossible. After 21 years of confusion and deliberation, I have finally found some sort of direction in life. For someone who has yet to pass their road test (I regularly use my driver's permit to enter bars, which usually elicits the same sort of look reserved for pregnant 14 year olds) direction is a very powerful metaphor.

I entered college without a major. Knowing that I would eventually wind up in the English department, I still decided to press on for as long as I could, because taking two years of classes without a clear path of study is what passes for rebellion in my life. When the day finally came that I handed in the form declaring my allegiance to my native language, I felt a mixture of emotions. My initial reaction was one of happiness – I still had a few semesters to take some classes that I was genuinely interested in. After this passed, however, I was faced with the dreaded existential question that every English major will face at some point in their undergraduate career – What the fuck am I going to do with this shit?

This is a problem that spans a whole range of college majors, specifically focused on those enrolled in the field of art. Business majors tend to get signed for jobs before they even graduate. I'm not sure what biology majors do, but I like to imagine they find themselves looking into microscopes and earning millions of dollars for the next twenty years after graduation. But majoring in the arts carries no such guarantee. Aside from the unwavering delusion of theater majors, everyone knows that to concentrate in any sort of artistic field is to take a risk.

So I took a risk, because, again, these are the kinds of risks I can take. Freebasing black tar heroin never proved interesting enough, and I think that skydiving is for people with a death wish. I can get my kicks on the ground, thank you. But when I decide to major in English, it is my idea of “cutting loose.”

Not that there was any other option. I have always been a very good student, but that is only because I devote hours and hours of free time trapped in a room studying things I don't care about. I'm sure I could major in business if I wanted to, but the simple fact is that I don't and the older I get the more stubborn I become. I have already sacrificed my high school dream of going to SVA to study film in an attempt to become the next Paul Thomas Anderson, only to fail miserably and resort to filming amateur porn on a digital camera, earning a few hundred dollars for every mini-DV tape that I can spit out. So I feel that English is sort of the Goldilocks and the Three Bears equivalent to my artistic aspirations – film is too risky, business is bullshit, but English is *just right*.

But now that I am in my final semester I realize that all of these thoughts, while still nowhere near as delusional as those of the average *Hairspray*-hopeful, are still too buoyant and optimistic. Who am I kidding? I am not one to take a risk. The last real risk I took was deciding to switch from Kiehl's Tea Tree shampoo to Kiehl's Lavender Rosemary shampoo, because I felt that changing brands entirely could yield potentially devastating results. And while I am pleased with the results of this change (my morning showers are now pleasantly filled with thoughts of purple fields and sunny freshness), I cannot say I feel the same about my choice in major.

As I said, there is no other choice. Although suicide has never really been my thing, if I were to major in anything other than English I would probably need to self-

medicate with the same combination of drugs my roommates use in order to comfortably stay inside all day, playing Nintendo Wii and pretending that it is some proactive form of life. So I am stuck with English, but I just find it incredibly difficult to know that some of my friends, also graduating, will soon be starting jobs with both high salaries and a clear conclusion as to where their education took them.

But there is a small beacon of hope. As I said, I have done the impossible. While I haven't made *the* decision, the decision that will decide where I will be in 10 years from now, I have made *a* decision, which will hopefully keep me occupied for at least a little while.

I have applied to the New York City Teaching Fellows program. If accepted I'll spend the summer learning how to teach. Then beginning in September I will actually be teaching in a high-need public school. While teaching I will simultaneously be enrolled in graduate school to earn my master's degree in education. The coolest part is that I don't have to pay for anything. Although I have yet to take out any real student loans, the thought of spending upwards of \$80,000 to go to graduate school for journalism or more English seems kind of self-defeating. Clearly, what I am writing as this very moment must represent the apex of my talent.

Considering that I still have no idea what I actually want to do with my life (I could barely even pick out an outfit this morning), becoming a teacher seems like a pretty good plan. Between teaching and grad school I will be constantly occupied over the next few years, so I will not have the free time to ruminate on what my life could've been, Madonna's upcoming album, or any of the other matters I usually find myself thinking about.

There are, however, a few things I still find scary. I have now formulated a life plan that will take me through the next three years, but this is entirely dependent on my acceptance into the program. Considering that they only accept about 10% of all the people that apply, I am fairly freaked out. To my credit, I have a pretty damn good GPA (so far it could have been a solid 4.0 if it hadn't been for that ridiculously horrible Earth Science class). And, in my opinion, I taught a sample lesson during the interview that was vastly superior to that of the eight other would-be teachers in my group.

Also, the vast majority of people that apply to the program tend to be quite a bit older than me. At the informational meeting I recently attended, hardly a full head of hair was present in the room. Fingering my delicate dark brown locks, I began to formulate the idea that the people who run this program would want a fresh faced young cherub such as myself, with rosy red cheeks and not yet beaten down by life. However, the phrase "beaten down" brings me to the other reason that I am scared.

If accepted, I will be teaching in a "high-need" public school. Now I'm not sure if Michelle Pfeifer's experience will serve as any sort of mirror to my own, but "high-need" certainly sounds like some *Dangerous Minds*-type shit to me. Although I have widely traversed all of New York's wonderful boroughs (except for Staten Island, which I still plan to never visit), I always tend to feel a bit uneasy in exceptionally scary areas.

I am, generally, a fairly skittish person. I tend to imagine that every shadow encroaching upon mine as I walk towards Bloomingdales is surely a knife-wielding sociopath preparing to kill me. I look over my shoulder as I walk down the block to my apartment and I live on 36th Street on the East Side.

I'm pretty sure that my fears are completely unfounded, but I like to think that gay people have an inborn fear of being attacked at any given moment. This is probably the same way that Jewish people must feel, but unfortunately, I am also a Jew. I don't follow any sort of religious practices, but the neurotic Jew blood is still there. Anytime I see someone do something so drastic as light up a cigarette, the flame reminds me of my ancestors' tragic past. I break into a cold sweat and fear that some leftover Gestapo member is coming to grab me, immolate my body and then scatter my ashes in a pile of burning rainbow flags whose flame is used to cook pork. Then the little boy from *Swing Kids* will come running to see if he can find any ashes left before throwing his hand in the air and proclaiming "Swing heil!" So working in a "high-need" area will probably be a bit scary at first.

But at least I've found some sort of direction. While it is unlikely that I will get my driver's license anytime soon or learn to correctly navigate the outer boroughs, at least I have found something for the moment. If I'm accepted into the program and able to overcome my fear of death then I'm sure I will come out as a better person. If not, at least I will be a person with a job, which is all I really want right now.

GLOVES

I just walked home from work and it is cold outside. I work right across town from my apartment so there's no good way to get home on the train or by taking a bus. I've taken a cab back before, but that is only when I'm really, really hung over. So I just made the twenty-minute walk through the unfashionable ugliness of the Fashion District, across the barren, cultural wasteland of Midtown and past the pretty brownstones that pave the between Park and Lexington. I've taken off my jacket, gloves, scarf, and earmuffs but I probably should've left them on. I'm freezing. I can still feel the bitter sting of wind on my ears, and my cheeks are burning with blood. The heat has been on and off in my building for the last couple of days. It's been two mornings since I've had a real hot shower. I can vaguely see my breath as I type this. I am surrounded by cold and it is a mirror of my disposition.

Last semester everything seemed full of hope. I was taking a full load of classes and doing well in all of them. I'm still doing well, but it doesn't seem to matter as much anymore. School is finally coming to an end. I'm sure that what I'm feeling now is probably the same sort of fear felt by all undergraduates in their final semester, but I didn't expect for it to feel like this. I keep looking towards to the past. I think of the very first day I moved into a dorm room, before freshman year even started. I envy the unbridled enthusiasm I had. Cliché as it seems, I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew that something good was going to happen.

And all of my memories seem bathed in warmth. Even when I think of past winters, there is still an overriding sunny pleasantness to it all that feels comforting. I

remember countless nights out in the cold, drunk and warm with whiskey in my stomach, laughing. In reality I had a pretty average college experience. There were ups and there were downs but all I remember is what was happy. It's funny how time can distort things.

I find myself becoming nostalgic for conversations I had yesterday. This last winter break seems like it came and went unspeakably long ago. When I do stop thinking about the past I am often confronted with a scary, unsure present. My immediate feeling is cold. My fingertips feel as if they are frozen. I look to the computer screen and remember that even though it's almost done, I've still got work to do. Just last semester I had classes to pick, grades to earn, a strange but entertaining magazine internship, a pseudo love affair with a semi-famous man, and a hopeful post-graduate opportunity. This semester I've got classes to finish, grades that I expect but still must work for, a stressful trip to San Francisco with the magazine, a complete disinterest in any sort of romance, and a less hopeful post-graduate opportunity.

I think that college prepares you for a lot of things. The real world, sadly, isn't one of them. I entered college without a clue of what I wanted to do. After two and a half years I was finally able to decide that it's English and I don't regret that choice. I love writing and I'm ready to keep doing it – but for what? Once I graduate, it'll no longer be for a grade. For all I know, it could be for a living.

I know that things aren't as desperate as I make them seem. Even though it's already February there is still time for me to figure out what I want to do. It's the process of getting there that's going to be tough.

I know that winter eventually fades. Spring will come, the days will get longer, leaves will grow and I may figure out what I'm doing. I'm looking forward to that. But for right now, I'm going to put my gloves back on.

SMASHING PUMPKINS

I experienced my first run-in with the law at an early age. To the best of my knowledge, many of this country's most hardened criminals haven't even felt the bitter sting of justice during their supposed wonder years. But I know what it feels like to be placed in the backseat of a cop car, to be brought back to a frantic household, and to feel the shame of being caught breaking the law. Many people will never have this terrifying experience. But I did, right after entering puberty no less.

And of course, I was innocent.

It all started simply enough, at a place with which I was all too familiar – the bus stop. I grew up on a pretty nice block almost exactly in the middle of Long Island. With the allure of the city just to the west, and desolate farmland only slightly further east, the bus stop seemed to be represent a symbolic middle ground. Going to school and furthering my education would allow me to travel west, to the city I always loved, while failure almost certainly meant that I would be stripped of my electronic devices, sent all the way down the L.I.E., and forced to live with the good 'ol boys on the farm. That none of my family ever lived a life of agriculture didn't seem to matter; I knew better than to even tempt this sort of fate.

So each day I arrived at the bus stop, ready to be carried off to school and educated. It was no small sign of the neuroses to come that I could always be found there a full 15 minutes early, without fail, everyday. Though the bus operated on a fairly routine schedule, I was always there ahead of time, prepared for an emergency. I was like the eighth-grade version of a postal worker – regardless of sleet, snow or rain I'd be

at that bus stop waiting. Even if it were acid rain I'd be there, thermonuclear rain jacket in tow. And I'd be early.

On this particular day, I made the four minute hike down the block and found myself at the bus stop right on time, about 16 minutes before it was set to arrive. It was only November, but it was already chilly. It was one of those days where the cold makes your nose run involuntarily and the liquid freeze on your upper lip before ever reaching your mouth. So I stood at the bus stop, frozen snot glistening above my lip, prepared for another day at school. It was Friday, so there was a sense of hope, but it was also a gym day, which usually served to cancel out any other happiness.

I would typically wait about ten minutes before the lone girl, Jen, would make the one minute trek over from her house. Seeing Jen walk down her driveway, onto the busy roadway and up towards the bus stop would always put a smile on my face only the way that expectant company can. We would stand off to the side of the block and talk about whatever seemed to be new and interesting – most typically this meant that she would discuss the Backstreet Boys while I would desperately try to explain that 'NSYNC clearly had a higher production value. Sadly, Jen was absent this day.

So I stood alone, on the corner of the block, dreading the moment that the other boys would show up at the bus stop. Though I lived in a relatively affluent area, these were the type of boys that felt as if they were betrayed by their bourgeoisie origins, thus compelled to counteract their hopeful upbringing as best they could. Still, I was unable to see any forward-thinking fashion sense in oversized jeans worn below the testicular area and triple XL t-shirts on medium frames, this was the uniform most typically adopted by those in search of the street-credibility that the million dollar houses on the

block could not afford. Needless to say, in junior high, they were all much cooler than me.

Slowly, unsurely, they each made their way to the bus stop. First there was Iggy, who lived directly across the block from me. Though our physical proximity somehow united us, we were mentally far, far apart. Today seemed to be a good day for Iggy, as he was making it to the bus stop before the bus had left. There were many days where we'd all be happily loaded onto the bus and ready to leave, when the tell-tale shimmer of Iggy's bald head would first make its appearance at the end of the block, apparently in no hurry to catch the bus that was all set to go.

Although he smoked cigarettes and sort of scared me, I found Iggy to be the most immediately likeable of the bus stop boys. Firstly, there was his name, which always managed to intrigue me. Had he been named Iggy at birth? If not, why now? At what point does one become Iggy and for what reason? It was all quite mystifying. The other thing I liked about Iggy was his outlook on life. I found some sort of honor in his steadfast approach to failure. When you are failing nearly every subject in school and still manage to miss the bus on an almost daily basis, there is a definite commitment to underachievement involved.

Iggy reached the end of the block and was clearly happy to see me there. He knew I'd already been standing there for about ten minutes, so my presence meant that the bus hadn't already come and gone. He snarled hello and lit a cigarette.

In the house on the corner, the front door opened. As far as the homes in the neighborhood were concerned, this one was sort of a flop house. The only one without a

steady team of landscapers, the overgrown lawn was an immediate visual representation of the dreadful sense of lost hope kept shuttered inside.

Jason lived in this house. Even at the age of thirteen, he already had a full moustache. Tall, dark, and silent in the most intimidating way, I was pretty sure he could kill me, but that was no difficult feat. After scoring depressingly low levels in the Presidential Fitness Test, it was quite clear that nearly anyone could kill me. The reality was, I was pretty sure he *would* kill me. One day, I was certain, my gaze would accidentally linger on his perplexing moustache for just a moment too long, and that would be it.

From Jason's house another man sporadically emerged. I assumed this man to be Jason's father, but have never been sure. He seemed to be about 30, which would mean that he had Jason at the age of 17. That seemed about right. This guy was sort of like Lenny from *Of Mice and Men*. Though not entirely oaf-like, there was clearly something missing.

Also missing, it seemed, was our bus. I had now been standing down-wind of Iggy's cigarette, bathed in a fresh wave of second hand fumes every time he took a drag. The smoke made me nervous. I was sure the smell would linger on my carefully chosen clothing and my teachers would think *I* was a smoker, thus equating me with the bad kids. Not only that, but I had to keep still and focus my eyes to the ground, lest I catch sight of Jason's moustache, growing steadily even as we waited for the bus.

Jason's dad came down from the house, across the raggedy weed that grew in place of grass, and towards us, the kids. He would sometimes offer important life lessons, like "School really sucks. I hated that shit," or, "Fucking school man, yeah." I

tended to discard this information, but my bus stop brethren were widely receptive, treating Jason's dad with such unabated attention you would think he was actually offering them some delicate pearl of wisdom.

Since our bus was late today, there was a palpable sense of excitement among all of the boys. I, on the other hand, began to feel uneasy, with a slight pang of nausea beginning to surface, which is my general physical reaction when something does not go as planned. I attempted to stand firm and put on a fake smile while Jason's dad approached his unmowed podium. After turning on his car to heat it up, he continued his journey towards us, apt pupils ready and willing to swim in his vast sea of knowledge.

Tony, the growth-stunted 14 year old from around the block, had just arrived and was ready to partake in the offering from Jason's dad. But Jason's dad was not ready yet. Before handing us the apple of wisdom he first needed to bum a cigarette from Iggy. After this strange transaction occurred he was finally ready, and so were we.

"Fucking cold out," he said. "That bus keeps you waiting on the coldest day. I gotta get some coffee. Go to 7-11 and get some coffee 'cause it's too fucking cold out."

We stood transfixed. I in fear, the others in rapture.

"You know," Jason's dad said, as he picked up a pumpkin that was on the lawn, a leftover from Halloween, "when we were kids we used to roll these motherfuckers at douche bags whenever they passed by." He looked off into the distance of the street while he said this, his infinite knowledge winding down the road toward his coffee.

And with that cryptic bit of information, Jason's dad ceremoniously handed a pumpkin to Iggy. It seemed to be some odd sort of thank-you exchange for the cigarette. Then Jason's dad got in his car and left.

Iggy held the pumpkin and looked at Tony. Tony muttered something in his strangely high voice and Iggy threw the pumpkin at him. Tony held the pumpkin for a moment and then began cradling it between his arms, making it look easy even though the pumpkin was half his size. Jason silently smiled at both of them. Terrified, I looked back at the ground.

Moments later, all three boys were on the lawn, behind a group of trees, facing the busy roadway. Although our bus was late, that didn't stop the otherwise steady flow of morning traffic. I watched in horror, roughly 100 feet away, as the boys began to roll pumpkins out into the street. At first they seemed to enjoy the mere color juxtaposition of the orange pumpkins rolling along the black pavement, but naturally, the game progressed.

It only took a few moments before they were timing their pumpkin rolls with the passing traffic. The supply of pumpkins seemed infinite as they each took turns sending them through the street, cars sometimes swerving to avoid the orange masses. While they were hidden behind the trees, I must have looked like some strange telekinetic child, awkwardly smiling at the passing cars before using my mind power to whirl pumpkins down the small incline at them.

I wanted to cry and walk home but I was worried I'd miss the bus. I knew my mom would drive me to school, but it seemed like such an unnecessary hassle. While I contemplated my fate I looked at the next car coming down the block. It was an ugly, boxy car. It was grayish brown and I locked eyes with the woman driving. She had shoulder length curly brown hair and I thought she smiled at me. Just as soon as we locked eyes, she had already driven past me when I heard a crash.

I saw Iggy, Jason, and Tony run from out behind the trees and down the block. I was confused, turning to look in the direction of the sound. At this very same moment, I heard something else, something familiar. It was a high pitch siren, accompanied by the tell-tale flashing of blue and red lights. To my right was the boxy grayish-brown car, turned sideways in the middle of the road with a smashed pumpkin and cracked front window. To my left was a police car that just happened to be passing at the exact same moment.

I didn't know what to do, so I just stood there. It still strikes me as being odd that before the cop even attempted to assess the accident and help this poor woman, he instead pulled down the block I was on, asked me where everyone else was, and then proceeded to park. What happened in the next five or ten minutes is a blur. At this point in my life, I was a completely straight-laced honors student. I was the vice president of my class. Becoming an accomplice to a potentially lethal crime was not something I had planned for that morning and I think the shock made me blackout for some small amount of time.

I didn't fall down or completely lose sight of the situation the way these things happen in a movie, but I distinctly remember standing on the corner at the bus stop one moment, and being handcuffed the next. The woman driving, the woman I locked eyes with, told the police man she had to go to work. I didn't know where she was rushing off to with pumpkin bits everywhere and a cracked windshield, but apparently it couldn't wait. I begged her to tell the police officer that she saw me. That I didn't throw a pumpkin. That I was in honors English. But she told him she didn't know.

Somehow the other boys were huddled around me. Iggy told the police officer, "Alex didn't do it. He wouldn't do something like that." Tears streaking down my face,

I was crying less like a pubescent child and more like newborn. At this point, the bus pulled up and the driver turned it off. Everyone rushed to the side windows to see what was happening.

Regardless of Iggy's help, the officer persisted. "I saw him right here on the corner. If he didn't do it, which one of yous did?"

It was at that moment I realized I was fucked. I was going to be late for school. Everyone on the bus was watching me, handcuffed. And on top of that I was dealing with a completely irrational police officer who felt it grammatically correct to use the term "Yous." I let the tears rip even further. At this point I was crying for the pointlessness of the situation, the most-likely irreparable psychological damage being done to me, and now, for this atrocious perversion of the English language. The officer yelled for a few more moments, took down the names of the other boys at the bus stop, and sent them off to school. I was still in handcuffs.

The bus rolled off and Jason's dad pulled in. I told the cop the entire story, how this man on the corner suggested that the boys roll the pumpkins into the oncoming traffic, and I must admit, it sounded completely bizarre and utterly fabricated. But as we tend to learn in life, sometimes stupid things are completely true.

Naturally Jason's dad denied it all. He told the officer I was a good kid and he was sure I didn't do anything, but he also denied having been the one to incite the incident.

So I was placed, hand on top of my head, into the back of the cop car. For a brief moment, I regained composure and looked around. I was sure that this would be the only time I'd ever be in such a position, so I wanted to see what it felt like. Just like a movie, I

thought, with a partition to separate me from the officer in case I somehow tried to attack him using my calculator fingers.

The officer got in the car and drove me back to my house. My mom came to the door in her robe, shrieking. Naturally, her first assumption was that I had died, even though I was clearly standing in front of her. My mom and I are essentially kindred spirits, so I didn't have to convince her, she immediately knew I was innocent. Though nothing official ever came of this incident, the officer yelled at me some more, making sure to get in a few good quips in front of my mother and really scar me for life.

And he did. It's now eight years later and I remember most of these events more vividly than anything else that happened in junior high. It was all a pretty shitty experience. I thought that junior high would be a time of magic, where I broke away from the childish confines of grade school. I thought it would be a time of wonder, if you will. But looking back, I realize that all of my good memories are either from high school or before junior high.

I know I didn't actually get arrested, but the whole experience triggered a horrible, unshakeable guilty feeling in me. Sure, I didn't roll those pumpkins into that car, but what had I done wrong? Everyone else had gotten onto the bus and was already in homeroom, but I had to take the day off. I sat in my room all day, crying. I knew I was crying about something, but I just couldn't place it, and it wasn't just about missing school.

AFTER SCHOOL LESSONS

As time passes, I am slowly coming to realize that I enjoyed the latter half of my high school experience. Feeling smarter than most of the class, living entirely off my parents, and the sense of freedom that came after my first college acceptance were all pretty high points in my life. But when I think back to some of the minute, easily forgotten details, I also realize that high school sucked.

Every morning I would rise to the painful sound of my alarm clock, set to go off long before 6 AM. This would allot me the hour and a half necessary to shower, eat breakfast, do my hair (which easily encompassed the largest sum of time), and pray that I wouldn't have to go to the bathroom during school. I would then wait for my friend to pick me up due to my still-crippling lack of a driver's license, and I'd be seated in my desk and ready for homeroom well before the bell even rang at 7:30.

I have always been a diligent, conscientious student, except for that short period of time after being accepted to college. Knowing that only a few months and some busy work separated me from my lifelong dream of living in the city, school seemed to matter far less than it ever did before. During those blissful moments of complete educational apathy, I was so used to going to bed sometime after midnight and waking up sometime before 6 that I often wouldn't notice I was barely sleeping. Almost every afternoon I would fall asleep sitting on the couch, watching television after school. Naturally, my mom thought I was on drugs. I had never fallen asleep so easily before, and apparently 17 must be the age when everyone starts dabbling in heroin, or taking sleeping pills in the afternoon. I was shocked by the accusation.

At that point in my life I was cleaner than Liza fresh out of rehab. I think I had tried to unsuccessfully smoke pot once or twice, and, considering high school students today, my levels of drinking were embarrassingly sub par. Although I have always had a wonderful relationship with my parents, as well as my family in general, I realized that it was time to move on. I needed to be in a place where I could fall asleep to MTV's trashy afternoon programming without my mother reaching for her always-handy copy of the Oxford Medical Journal to look up the symptoms of narcolepsy. I needed a greater cultural outlet than the Starbucks drive-through window. I needed to go to college.

And then I went to college. I'm still in it. And it's great. The city provides much of the action, excitement, and cultural stimulation I was looking for. I can sleep wherever and whenever I want without scolding (though I have already come to a sadly neurotic point in which I feel guilty if I wake up later than 7 AM). I can have conversations with other people about whether they prefer Julian Schnabel's work in painting or in film. In fact, it seems as if college is the place I am meant to be for the rest of my life. That's why it's so sad that this is my last semester as an undergraduate student.

I've already been through the denial process. A few weeks ago I'd almost convinced myself to take on another major, just so I'd have more time to hang around. I really like college. I can't pinpoint exactly what is so great about it, but now that I can see a definitive ending point on the horizon, I've been thinking about my experience here these last 4 years more and more.

What does college mean? In general, college is supposed to be a place where you learn stuff. So what have I learned here over all this time? This question has been plaguing me. I know I must have learned a lot of stuff, but none of it feels completely

concrete. I do my best to avoid comma splices. I know I've learned that. But there's got to be something more.

Here then, are a few of the things I've come up with. Between English classes, these are some of the less-academic lessons I've learned throughout my college experience.

Lesson 1: Waking Up is Optional

As I have previously alluded to, the action of sleeping has always played a largely traumatic role in my life. What provides a period of rest for some tends to create more anxiety for me. Am I getting too much or too little? Is 6 hours a night enough? Why do I feel like shit if I sleep for 16 hours and skip all my classes? NyQuil or Ambien?

Before college, sleep was a fairly regimented process for me. I'd go to bed and wake up roughly the same time Monday through Friday, and the weekends would only vary slightly. In college, sleep has manifested into something else entirely. For some, it is a daily 12-plus hour necessity. For many of my friends, class, work, life, or death will not get in the way of an extra minute's quality sleep time. For others, like me, sleep becomes a goal. If I can finish this essay while I am at work, for instance, that easily buys me the few hours I'd spend writing it afterwards. In that time I can go out and experience the wonderful waves of culture this city has to offer, or I can go home and get to bed early. Sadly, I often choose the latter.

But what I do like is the idea that there is a choice involved. Should I wake up and go to class tomorrow? Of course I should. Will I? Yes. Do I always? Absolutely not. Although my feelings of guilt seem to grow correspondingly with my age, I can still

push them aside every once in a while for a morning spent sleeping in. Whether that be just for the hell of it, or because I am accidentally waking up in someone else's bedroom in Brooklyn, it is always nice to know that I have options.

Lesson 2: It's Easy to Get Drugs

At no point in my life have I ever been addicted to drugs. With that said, there have been plenty of times over the last few years in which I've administered myself a Xanax at the start of an overwhelmingly stressful day, or found myself hunched over a tablet of Adderall attempting to grind it between two sheets of paper. Although I have successfully managed to get high since high school, I've found that marijuana just isn't the sort of drug for me. Considering that I normally check around my room before I go to sleep (what, exactly, I am checking for is unclear even to me), added paranoia has never been a quality that I've actively sought out.

But obviously, the wonderful point is that all of these drugs, and many more, can be had quite easily now that I am in college. I remember sitting with my friends at gas stations in high school, waiting for some kind oil patron to buy us beer. But all that has changed now that I'm in school. I can make some calls right now, for instance, and assemble of veritable pu-pu platter of pharmaceuticals. Though I tend to be much more of a drinker than anything else, I think that some casual experimentation is a fairly healthy approach to life. College has taught me to open myself up to a realm of expanded possibility. We shouldn't always pick the blue pill when there's an orange one right in front of our eyes.

Lesson 3: College Doest Not Change You for the Better

I often hear that upon graduating from college, you emerge a changed person. This seems to be a fairly standard cliché. Now, I don't think I am a worser person for having been in college nearly 4 years, but I am certainly no better than when I started. Every time I learn something new about writing, I forget something I used to know about history. I recently discovered that I can barely place New York State on a map. If given a blank map of the United States and asked to label it, I can probably approximate the locations of Florida and California. After that, all bets are off.

I don't mean to equate knowledge with goodness, but I do consider it in the overall ranking scheme. Still, there are plenty other aspects that demonstrate my unchanged-ness. Although I am still a conscientious student (perhaps bordering on obsessive and nerdy), I tend to lack the same focus I once had for my work. In high school I was able to sit in my room for hours on end, reading, making index cards, creating outlines. But the only reason I did all that was to get good grades. I still like to get good grades today, but now I tend to focus on personal satisfaction over a standardized grading system. Perhaps that is why I tend to put less effort in – my standards are in no way as high as those held by the people who created AP exams. In high school I would highlight as I read. Today I drink beer as I write.

Lesson 4: Drinking Beer Does Not Make You Smarter

Ever since I was 17, I've been searching for some sort of meaning through alcohol. Getting drunk was fun in high school and it was fun freshman year of college. Of course there was always the occasional night of the accidental black out, the

horrifying prospect of becoming even fatter, and the sadness of spending money to kill brain cells, but I've always managed to overlook those ideas and keep on drinking.

In fact, I've often held the idea that I can become one of those hard-drinking, fast-talking writers that we all study in high school. But as I further work to hone my writing technique, I have discovered two rather annoying setbacks to this ideal – I am not straight and when I am drunk I write like shit. Ernest Hemmingway and Charles Bukowski, two of my favorite spirit-infused writers are both pretty manly men. I think I lack that same hard edge necessary to pound booze and produce prose. I don't even like cats, and Hemmingway lived with six-fingered mutants crawling all over his house. Clearly this man is tougher, and a much better writer, than I.

And more importantly, I don't write well when I drink. My writing process is a bit different from most – I tend to write a sentence or two, reread everything I've written back from the beginning, write another sentence and repeat. Drinking lowers the high-anxiety levels that I find necessary to write. I've tried it of course. I'm trying it right now, if only because this is my last semester and I'm going to slosh my way through it as best I can. But I can't help the lingering suspicion that this piece becomes less cohesive as it carries on.

And that is pretty much the way I see it. I'm certain that many more lessons than these have been learned, and there are still probably a few new ones that I will encounter in the next few months. But for right now there is television to watch, cigarettes to smoke and beers to drink. I'm still in college, after all.

MY HUMPS

I am a man, biologically speaking. I've got the Y chromosome, a penis, and I have body hair in excess amounts. Years of feminism and gender studies, however, have taught me that I really shouldn't limit myself to the social constructs implicit in gender. But speaking strictly by way of biological sex, I am a man.

While I have always been comfortable reveling in the stereotypical mainstays of manliness, I have always had one small problem. Actually, make that two.

I have man boobs.

Ever since the age of five, my upper torso has been home to a pair of steadily developing breasts. It seems that fat has no desire to accumulate elsewhere on my body. Though I don't work out, my legs are as skinny as can be. My arms, while not defined, look perfectly acceptable. I admit my stomach can use a bit of work, but there is simply no logical explanation for the enormous globes that rest above it.

To the casual observer, I probably don't look like the hideous freak I perceive myself to be every time I glance down. But that is only because a painstaking amount of careful consideration has been placed into the clothing I wear, the degree and angle of my slouch, and, of course, the sheer vanity that keeps us too busy looking at ourselves to notice the flaws of others. But upon close inspection, the simple fact remains: I've got some pretty big jugs.

On each Halloween for the last few years, I've dressed up as one of my idolized, singularly-named disco divas from the past. My favorite costume so far has been Cher. Inspired by the "If I Could Turn Back Time" music video, I wore black lace panties,

garters, a black bra and a black leather jacket. While a large portion of my testicles rested outside the confines of the panties and they rode all the way up, exposing my entire ass nearly every five minutes, it was still a damn good costume. After Cher came Bette and Bette begat Liza.

Each year, amidst the whirlwind of excitement that comes along with donning black fishnet stockings, I would encounter an unrelenting feeling of dread. As much as I enjoy the occasional game of dress up, I like being a man. I know that doesn't sound like a strong feminist standpoint, but it is one of my hypocritical truths. When I put on these fabulous costumes, they are just that - costumes. These sparkly dresses and stiletto heels are not what I want to wear on a day to day basis, which is a good thing, because I look terrible in them. But when I slip on one of my friend's bras I am always shocked and saddened by the fact that I don't need to stuff them – my man boobs can actually fill them entirely, and suddenly I no longer feel as if I'm in costume. When I can sense the considerable weight of my boobs comfortably shifting towards my back, it is a yearly reminder of something that constantly rests in the back of my mind – I should probably wear a bra.

I don't want a bra to push my man boobs closer together and higher, just to keep them in place. That way they won't jiggle back and forth when I walk too fast and they won't hurt after I run, on the unlikely occasion that I do.

This issue was much more prevalent in junior high I, where I was constantly made fun of in gym class. This was mostly due to my stunning physical inability, but, on occasion, it was sometimes directed at my man boobs. One day, while getting ready for school, I picked up a large stretchy headband that I found lying in the hallway. In front

of the bathroom mirror, I stretched the headband out as far as I could, far enough to fit over my body. I pulled it down just under my armpits and right across my chest. It smooshed my boobs in such a way that they simply stuck out slightly above and below the headband. I put my t-shirt back on and turned to view my profile. For the first time ever I saw my shirt rest flat against my body. From my neck on down, it made a nearly perfect horizontal line. It looked so different I was stunned. For my entire life I'd grown accustomed to seeing two fleshy little masses jutting out in such a way that it actually pushed my shirt forward, causing the lower portion of it flow outward breezily rather than hug my stomach. I smiled at my new flat chest in excitement.

Later that day in gym class we were getting changed in the locker room. I hadn't anticipated this far into the day. What was I going to do with my supportive headband? I couldn't take my shirt off to show everyone that I had done the next best thing to taping my boobs down. I would've just gone out there in the same shirt I was wearing, but unfortunately, you had to get changed in order to receive credit. I thought I could wiggle the headband upwards and around my neck, but then realized it was secured under my arms.

Later that gym class, as I sat on the bleachers for having to miss class, I realized that the headband idea wouldn't work. If anyone saw that I needed to keep my boobs held down it would have been far worse than if they had grown a full cup size. I sat back on the bleachers trying to figure some way around it, but I was stuck.

Of course I've never actually tried to get rid of my man boobs. Any attempt I make at a diet or exercise is typically thwarted in less than a few days, mostly due to my own laziness. There may be a breast-free world out there for me, but I have yet to take

the initiative to experience it. Instead I complain. I constantly ask my parents for the permission, and money, to liposuction my boobs off. As graduation swiftly approaches, I gently remind my parents that now is the perfect time for a minor surgical procedure. My mother is convinced I will die on the table, and my father thinks I should exercise and see a psychiatrist. I think that they both don't understand.

But when I'm not complaining, I'm joking. I bring my man boobs up to people that I've just met, calling attention to the disaster area before their eyes inevitably wander there and silent judgments are made. Of course I realize this is kind of crazy. Even when I see man boobs on other people, I never judge them. Maybe this is because I can share in the experience of lifelong hurt and pain they feel, but more likely it's just that I don't care. Lately I've been realizing that more and more – I don't care if anyone else has man boobs, so why would they care if I do?

In some strange sort of way, my man boobs have become something like my trademark. My friends affectionately twist my nipples and often ask how my girls are doing. This might be embarrassing for some people but it actually makes me feel pretty good. They are not being malicious. They just don't care how big my boobs happen to be and the more we joke about it, the less important it seems.

I was recently going through stacks of old photos with my mom. Although I have grown considerably, it's kind of strange to see that my body has always looked the same. Chicken legs, round stomach, and man boobs. But there was something comforting in looking at the pictures. I never looked self-conscious in them. I was always caught up in the moment and enjoying myself. In picture after picture, I was all laughs and smiles, which, now that I think about, probably made my boobs shake. But I didn't care. And I

don't care that much anymore. I've realized that my man boobs are probably here to stay, but things could be a lot worse than that.

As I sorted out the pictures I found one of myself around four years old. I am wearing a bathing suit, outside on the beach on what looks like a beautiful day. I am thin as a rail, not a single bit of fat anywhere on my body, including my chest. My mom is to my left and my dad to the right. I am sitting with one butt cheek on my mom's shoulder and one on my dad's. They are both smiling into the camera, the happy smile of parents blessed with a boob-less child. I, on the other hand, am frowning.

POTTY ISSUES

When I was two years old, my mom saved a bag of my shit and vomit. In a two-prong assault of defecation and reverse-peristalsis, I excreted so much waste from my body that my mom decided something had to be wrong. Rather than clean me up and feed me some formula, she instead decided to gather the shit and vomit in a diaper. Spilling out of the sides, onto her hands, off the changing-table, and pretty much covering everything in a five-foot radius, she placed the shitty-vomit-diaper in a plastic shopping bag, scooped me up and carried me to the emergency room.

Though I have handled my mother's neuroses relatively well throughout my adolescence, I am glad that I have no memory of this incident. Being placed in a car seat next to a bag of my own excrement in order for a doctor just to look at it would have been permanently scarring had I been a few years older. Still, whenever I have a stomach ache, I am forced to endure my mother's torturous story about my shit/vomit.

I am told that after we arrived at the hospital and the doctor examined my mother's plastic bag surprise, he assured her that I was fine. It just happened to be an excessive amount of shit and vomit, but, on the whole, nothing with which to be concerned. Still not happy, my mother pressed on. She reasoned that this *Exorcist*-like portion of excrement could not be normal. I, meanwhile, dangled from her arm throughout the conversation. In my developing brain, it is possible that I made a quick mental association – doctor and shit/vomit. Before ever even experiencing the process of potty training, I was forced to endure this public display of an otherwise private it, and it somehow changed me. From that moment on I would never be the same.

By the tender age of two, gone were the days of carefree defecation. I spent my entire childhood terrified of going to the bathroom – I still sort of am. The problems first began to consciously manifest themselves as soon as I had moved on from diapers. Though I was quite capable of using the bathroom and did not experience much shame while doing so, I could only complete this process while entirely naked. This would continue until I was about 11. I'm not entirely sure what prompted this. I think the unpleasant sight of the drippy shit vomit on my mother's hands frightened me from getting the stuff anywhere near me.

Rather predictably, I had issues with throwing up as well. There were many times that I would wake up in the middle of the night, with those tell-tale pangs of nausea. As my stomach turned, I would sit up in bed, sweating, dreading the inevitable moment in which I'd leave the comfort of my blankets and make the solemn journey to my parent's room in order to announce my problem. Then I would make my way to the bathroom, mother in tow, and sit on the floor near the bowl. It would sometimes take hours for me to finally conjure up the still-digesting dinner that was upsetting my stomach.

Still, these incidents were relatively minor since they took place in the comfort of my own home. At home I was free to use the bathroom naked or to sit staring at the toilet for hours before throwing up. Out in the real world, however, my problems became much worse. Going to the bathroom in school was torture. Up until fourth grade, bathrooms were located right inside our classrooms. Even as a kindergartener this notion struck me as preposterous – that we were forced to attempt defecation with classmates in reaching distance filled me with such existential dread that I briefly considered running away from home so that I would not be sent to school again.

And even when I did reach the age that I could use the big-kids public bathroom, going there could not be done without the aid of a buddy. Needless to say, I was never able to accomplish much more than a pitiful attempt at urination for my entire elementary school career. I could barely pee around other people, nonetheless find the time and comfort level to get fully nude. I'd wake up extra early on school days and pray to God for the ability to go to the bathroom. I was never raised as a religious child, but every morning, at 7 a.m., I would find myself on the toilet bowl, naked, praying that God would allow me to go now so it wouldn't happen later.

And if it did happen later, I was screwed. I never once successfully number two-ed in elementary school. If it got to be really bad I would fake sick. Sitting in the nurse's office, I realized that my stage fright in the bathroom was completely relegated to that area alone. Quite simply, I was a natural actor. I put on so many carefully-nuanced performances while sitting in that office, I'm surprised she never gave me an Academy Award. Sometimes it took a little extra convincing, but in general I was sent home because of stomach aches so many times, it is no wonder that my mother slowly became convinced I had a tumor growing in there.

While faking sick typically proved to be a reliable means to my end, it did not always come without repercussions. One day, after convincing the nurse of my devastating illness, my mom came to pick me up from school. In the car I was ready to get home, get naked, and get on the toilet. This was probably the seventh or eighth time that my mom had picked me up early that school year. In the car, I eagerly awaited the turn that would signal our impending arrival home. But on this day we drove right by the

stop. I clutched my stomach and attempted to hold in as best I could. I asked my mom where we were going.

Minutes later, in the waiting room for the doctor, I thought I was going to pass out. I still hadn't gone to the bathroom, which was the reason I faked sick in the first place – not to get a check-up. Somehow, I made it through the appointment. Back in the car and armed with a white sheet filled with scribbles, my mother proceeded to drive. Unfortunately, it was not to our house. My eyes filled with tears. I asked her again, where were we going?

I found myself seated in a cold, harsh chair in an alcohol-scented room. I had a tourniquet wrapped around my arm and a fourth vial of blood being taken. I still had to go to the bathroom terribly. As I sat there, I looked at the blood being extracted from my arm and then at my mother's worried face. I began to wonder – was this worth it? The psychological and physical trauma, the unrelenting negative suspense, the lies? All just so I could go to the bathroom?

At that moment I decided it wasn't worth it. Starting the next day, I silently declared, this would all be over. I was going to face my bathroom phobia and win. But at that very moment all I could do was sit, paralyzed. My blood was still being taken and I had just shit my pants.

RUMINATIONS ON URINATION

I have peed my pants twice in my life. The first time was a relatively pain-free, novice experience. I was in first grade, and I had worn my favorite orange corduroy overalls to school. My mom had warned me against my decision, citing the difficulty I sometimes had in undoing the straps. But even at the age of six, I knew that style triumphed over ease and comfort when it came to matters of fashion. And while forsaking the advice of my mother has never been a good idea, I stood firm in my vision - orange overalls, with a green alien t-shirt underneath.

Although stage fright at public urinals has since equipped me with the ability to walk around with a full bladder for hours, in first grade we had our own little private potty, right in the classroom. Thinking about it now, this situation must have been just as bad, if not worse, than a urinal. Peeing with your entire class mere feet away is certainly discouraging for someone like me, who needs the utmost privacy to even force out a single drop. In first grade, though, before the bathroom became such an awkward social situation, I was able to pee freely, wherever I pleased. Unfortunately, with this freedom came great responsibility and the option to wear overalls.

My mother was right. I stood in the bathroom, desperately attempting to unlatch the metallic overall prong from the button it was clasped around. I was able to unhook the left side because I could use my right hand. But when it came to unhooking the left strap it was too late. The orange corduroy around my crotch slowly turned a burnt sienna as the pee began to spread outward like an exploding bomb. I wasn't sure what to do.

My entire class was right outside the door and I was trapped in the bathroom in wet overalls.

In my elementary school, the standard procedure for peeing in your pants was to be picked up by a parent. Though they could easily bring a change of clothes and send you back to class, it was generally understood that a kid just wants to go home after an experience like that. Although I remember the utter embarrassment of walking out of the bathroom to make the announcement that I had an accident, I also remember getting mexi-melts from Taco Bell on the way home. Luckily, the attention span of a first grader is relatively short, and I was able to overcome my embarrassment soon after taking the first bite of my taco and watching daytime soap operas with my mother.

The second time I peed my pants was a bit trickier. It seemed that the social climate had changed quite a bit; peeing one's pants in first grade is considered a relatively minor faux pas when compared to peeing them at the age of twenty. In my defense, I did not actually pee *in* my pants. Rather, I peed *on* them. It was less a case of uncontrollable bladder and more a case of poorly guided aim.

I was at a party at my friend Ahmer's new house in Queens. The ability to live in an actual house as opposed to sharing a cramped one-bedroom apartment seemed alien to me, a relative stranger to the far outer boroughs. Ahmer had just been accepted to law school, his parent's life long dream for him, so we were celebrating what would be his last few months of relative freedom. There easily must have been a hundred people there, and it seemed as if I knew all of them.

It was a fairly typical evening as far as undergraduate college parties are concerned. In the basement there were people playing beer pong atop of an old door

propped up by beer kegs, and I had to nervously dodge beer-slicked ping pong balls in order to make my way to the keg that was actually tapped, placed under a staircase seemingly because it was the least convenient spot. Between the whizzing balls and overt displays of masculinity that come along with landing said balls into red plastic cups, I figured that my place in this party was surely somewhere else.

Upstairs in a slightly more sedate version of civilization I drank and talked with my friends. We all sat around listening to music and drinking for hours. For some reason whenever I get together with this group of people, I almost always find myself drinking far too much. I don't mean for this to sound cool at all; I'm not the type of person who feels that finishing a case of beer is some sort of triumph. I only say this because on this particular night I happened to get really, really fucked up. At some point tequila shots were taken, pot was smoked (though I generally abstain), Adderall was ingested and more beer was consumed.

Next to the first time I got drunk after raiding my parents' liquor cabinet in high school and drinking 3 glasses of Jack Daniels, this had to be the drunkest I had ever been. At one point near the end of the night I was sitting in Ahmer's room with a few of my other friends. I'm not sure if the party was still going on. I heard people speaking, but I didn't know if it was coming from us or somewhere outside the room. Ahmer had lit a hookah and placed it on the floor so we all sat huddled around it in a circle. At some point shortly after smoking the hookah, control over my most basic functions had seemingly given way. I lost all sense of language and the ability of verbal communication. If I had been asked something relatively easy, like what an apple looks like, I wouldn't have been able to explain. I may have been able to identify one in a line-

up, but other than that I was a complete vegetable. I just sat there trying to focus my vision. The room kept spinning slightly to the right so I kept adjusting my eyes to the left.

At one point I somehow got up and walked to the bathroom, luckily only a few feet away. I looked at my face in the mirror and wondered who it was. My bathroom-related stage fright was apparently back stage as I unzipped, aimed and fired. I began to make faces at myself in the mirror. I smiled. I laughed. I felt my pants becoming warm. I looked down. Rather than peeing into the toilet bowl, I peed down the entire right leg of my pants. And these weren't even jeans, in which case the wash might be dark enough to hide the pee. I was wearing brown pants, and the pee made the fabric look black in every spot it touched.

I thought about it for a moment. Although I still couldn't think clearly, a small burst of diluted sobriety peeked through at the onset of my panic. I tried to convince myself that no one would notice, but then looked down again to see that the pee had almost made it all the way to my shoes. Even though Ahmer was my best friend and he once had to wade through a puddle of my vomit after I threw up at his house in high school, I still couldn't bring myself to tell him I had just peed my pants.

I turned on the sink and began to splash water across the pee stains. I'm not sure what I had hoped to accomplish by doing this. Even when drunk, it seemed that my impulse to clean was still in tact. While wetting myself, I had the idea that I could pour water everywhere to change the color of my pants. I began to splash water around frantically. Someone knocked on the bathroom door.

I panicked. My pants were soaking wet, and I looked even more bizarre than if I had just gone out covered in pee. Someone knocked at the door again but I didn't answer. I just checked to make sure it was locked. I was still very, very drunk and confused. I briefly considered opening the window in the bathroom and crawling out, but then realized it would be some 10 feet to reach the ground.

I had no idea what to do so I started to get naked. I took off my shirt and then my pants. Heavy with water and pee, they clung to my legs, not wanting to come off. After a moment of struggle I was able to pull them down. The knocking at the door had stopped. Luckily the house had more than one bathroom. Now fully nude, I turned on the shower. I stepped in and realized I was still wearing socks. I wasn't sure what to do so I began to wash my hair.

After a few minutes I came out of the shower. I rolled my clothes into a ball and stuffed them into a corner of the bathroom closet. I took out a towel and walked back into Ahmer's room. Luckily, everyone was just about as drunk as I was. They all laughed, seeing me standing there in a towel, dripping, asking Ahmer for clothes. Considering the state we were all in, taking a shower must have seemed almost normal, or at least no one thought to question me about it. Ahmer asked me why I couldn't put my clothes back on, so I told him they got wet when I turned the shower on.

The next morning I woke up on the floor in the living room with a hangover that felt as if I had been drinking gasoline. Confused, I looked down to see that I was wearing Ahmer's jeans, far too tight for me. Then I remembered what had happened. It seemed like a strange dream. I got up and went to the bathroom to find my clothes rolled up into the same ball they had been the night before.

Later, waiting for the bus to come, holding my pee-soaked clothing in a plastic bag, I couldn't help but feel as if I wanted my mom to come pick me up. But I knew that wasn't possible. I was no longer in first grade and from now on peeing my pants would be my own responsibility. I'm not sure if I handled the situation well, but I did the best I could. The subway ride home was long enough, and I couldn't bear the thought of having to take a second bus across town. I got off the E train and began to walk. After no more than a block or two I stopped. There, in front of me, a fluorescent sign flashed two small words of glory: Taco Bell.

RICE AND BEANS

I really like food. I know that most people do, but I like it in that junior high, puppy-love sort of way, which is to say, I *like* like it. Some people really like cars. Other people really like sports. While all of these other hobbies and preoccupations are fine with me, mine has always been, and always will be, food.

Although I am only 21 years old and certainly not the target demographic, I have been an avid subscriber to *Food & Wine Magazine* for the last two years. When I wake up and logon to the computer every morning, an essential bit of my daily routine involves reading food blogs – before I even check my email, I do a quick perusal of nycnosh.com. If I find myself between seasons of *Project Runway* on television, then I am almost certainly watching the *Food Network*. Simply put, I dedicate myself to food. I have spent countless hours of my life searching for the perfect hamburger and french fries. I know where to go in Chinatown for the tastiest shrimp dumplings depending on factors so specific as the exact time of day. Although my palette has an inclination towards the common, greasy, and unhealthy, it doesn't stop me from sampling anything – within a beat I can effortlessly name both my favorite vegan restaurant in the city right alongside three places to find particularly innovative use of foie gras.

Recently, this love of food has transcended to a love of cooking. While I cannot claim to be the most accomplished chef, there are few things that give me pleasure more than browsing the aisles of Whole Foods, assembling flavor combinations that I hope won't suck, and then going home to prepare it all. Working within the cramped confines of my apartment's tiny kitchen doesn't provide me with an optimal space in which to

create little bits of culinary genius, but it has allowed me to master my use of both the microwave and toaster oven. Never before have such daring, esoteric dishes been prepared solely through the use of radio waves. And now, when I go back to my parents' house on Long Island, I am able to look past the lack of things to do and look forward to their comparatively palatial, immaculate kitchen.

While I was there over the short Easter break, I offered to help my dad shuck some of the clams we'd be eating later that evening. My dad was stunned – not only was I willing to touch raw food, but I actually offered to help prepare it. Walking into the kitchen and witnessing this touching scene nearly brought tears to my mother's eyes – though not for the reasons one might assume.

From my infancy until about the age of five, it was nearly impossible to make me eat. It would take my parents hours just to force a few spoonfuls of baby food into my mouth and make sure that it went down successfully. Now, 16 years later, teary-eyed in the kitchen, my mother still felt compelled to act like my interest in food was some sort of Easter miracle. As she sat on a stool at the counter in the kitchen watching us, she told me a story that I had heard many times before.

As a baby I regurgitated nearly everything to pass through my mouth, apparently deriving only enough nutrients for me to continue my struggle of sending back my food. I loosened up considerably around the age of four, accepting macaroni and cheese, and sometimes, if my parents were lucky, grilled cheese. But then, when I turned five, we moved from Brooklyn to Long Island, fairly close to my grandparents. My father and his side of the family is entirely Puerto Rican and my grandmother has always been an excellent cook of Spanish food.

After moving to Long Island, we would have dinner at my grandparents' house once or twice a week. At first my parents were terrified. They had enough trouble forcing me to sit down with a bowl of macaroni, and now I was expected to eat something which, generally, wasn't the type of food upon which you could sprinkle cheese. But when I first tried my grandmother's rice and beans at the age of five, some sort of miracle truly did occur. Perhaps my palette had gone through a favorable bout of culture shock. We really don't know what exactly happened except for the fact that I began to eat pretty much anything from that day on. Gone were the fights my parents struggled through to land a forkful of food in my mouth. After tasting my grandmother's rice and beans, I had finally found what I had spent my first five years searching for.

At the conclusion of my mother's story, my dad placed the final shucked clam down. He paused for a moment, then said, "You know, Ella wants us to come over later tonight. She's going to show us how she makes her rice." We call my grandmother Ella. When I was a child, I was never able to properly say abuela, the Spanish word for grandmother. After first hearing my poetically-licensed take on the word, my grandmother lovingly adopted my mispronounced version, and it has stuck ever since.

I thought about what my dad said for brief moment. Although he tried to offer the suggestion casually, I knew what he was really trying to communicate. My grandmother is old. She's not sick, but she has diabetes. Lately she's been having some particularly bad episodes that have sent her shuffling back and forth from the hospital. Although she is fine right now, I understood the metaphorical significance of my father's suggestion. I told him I'd go whenever he was ready.

I see Ella about once a month, making a visit to say hello whenever I go back to Long Island. It's always a pleasant time and I look forward to going. Going to my grandparents' house is like being home again, since we've moved a little further away from our initial house on Long Island.

But this time something felt different. The familiar scent of my grandparents' house hung in the air, but something seemed off. Ella seemed smaller than she ever had before. Although she has always stood well under five feet tall, she seemed to have grown smaller still. And her skin, usually much darker and more olive than mine, looked a bit more pale than I had remembered. The whole situation seemed strange for a brief moment, until Ella began to speak. In her familiar raspy voice, she let out a combination of English and Spanish that instantly made me feel at home again. She told us to follow her into the kitchen.

There, my dad sat down at the kitchen table. I was still standing, next to the stove. Ella moved to the refrigerator and took out some cloves of garlic. She told me to chop it very fine. She then pulled out an onion and handed it to my dad. He got up and stood at the counter next to me. Ella sat down and began to tell us that we weren't going to use too much salt, because it wasn't good for her, but we could add more after if we wanted to. I glanced at my dad, and I saw his eyes water before he had even chopped the onion.

After these ingredients had been chopped to my grandmother's desired specifications and placed into a pot lined with olive oil, she took out a package of dried beans. "These ones," she said, "are the ones you need to use. Not the other kind. Necesita comprar a la Compare." Although we knew it was the only place she'd shop at,

my grandmother reminded us that Compare Foods is the only grocery store at which we'd be able to find the proper ingredients.

After the beans and some other ingredients were placed in the pot, Ella showed us how to make the rice. Although cooking rice sounds like a fairly simple task to the casual chef, in practice it is very difficult to cook it just right, the way she does it.

After the rice was in the pot and the pot was on the stove, the three of us sat in the kitchen. I heard the Spanish television station on in the living room and I asked Ella how her películas have been lately. Película means movie, but that's what she calls her soap operas on the Spanish station. We sat in the kitchen, chatting for about an hour.

We spoke about when we first moved to Long Island, a pretty common discussion. At the time, my dad was still working in the city, and my mom would work until the late afternoon. I would take the bus home from school and back to my grandparents' house. There, Ella would give me a plate of rice and beans, and we'd watch her películas. She always brings this up because she likes to remember how things used to be before one of my uncles died. In a way, my grandmother was very much like a second mother, so I share a bond with her that feels very much like the one I have with my parents.

As our conversation came to an end, the beans finished cooking. The rice had finished cooking about 20 minutes earlier, and we took out plates to try it.

"Necesita menos garlic," Ella said. She thought I put in too much garlic, but it tasted good to me. It wasn't quite the same as usual, but it was definitely very good. As we ate, Ella began to speak to my dad in Spanish. While I can understand a good amount, I can't completely grasp every word my grandmother says at her bilingual, rapid

clip. I knew she was talking about her health and she said “not good.” I guess even now that I’m technically all grown up there will still always been some things that are kept secret from the “kids.”

After they finished speaking Ella turned to me. She said, “You keep cooking it. You’ll learn how to make it just the same way that I do.”