

niles and the other 5%

J.R. went away for a month or so with his folks. I don't remember where he said he was going. I think it's good for him to get away, after his car accident and all. He sorta milked that thing for all it was worth. Don't get me wrong, I dig the kid, but he's a bit of a drama queen. To get so worked up over a girl just isn't right. I didn't know what to say about it. Steve was correct in thinking another girl would be a good thing, but how many "another girls" are going to be out there?

Steve is working at Round Top swim club for the summer. I don't have a job. I'm on a hiatus from working at Ed's. The boss, Ed, Eddie to those close to him, is all pissed at me for slacking off and junk. I don't think the food service industry is my thing. Steve offered to get me a job at the snack shack at Round Top, but we all know how that would turn out.

I tried collecting change from people in the parking lot of the Valley Mall. I put up a sign saying I was broke and in need of money for surgery. I spelled "surgery" wrong, thinking that would get them all sorry for me and more willing to shell out a buck or two to help a boy out. I would say junk about how I'd appreciate the money that clangs, but how I'd really like the money that folds. I took that from somewhere.

I don't know how much of this is true.

At the Valley Mall, I met this girl named Quinn. She was kinda thin, more thin than I'd usually go for. I don't wanna say I'm less picky these days, but the well is sorta dry and it's a desert out there. I noticed things I didn't usually notice on a girl before. Her skin. I liked her skin. It had this olive tint, definitely Italian blood in her. Why is everyone in this area Italian? It's like Belleville South.

Her eyes stood out. I know everyone says things like "oh, you have lovely eyes." Quinn did, no joke, I won't lie to you. They were big, really big ovals. Picture one of those girls in a Japanese anime movie. If you don't wanna rent one, I'm sure Steve has plenty he'd lone you if you're willing to talk to him. He's a good kid, you should talk to him some time.

I wanted to look up a Shakespeare poem, a sonnet I think, to describe how she looked. *She had this straight black hair that was tied back.* That was iambic pentameter, right? Ten syllables. What could rhyme that? *And her pants so tight showed a butt I'd smack.* That's ten too, but hardly romantic. I'll leave the poetry to the writers. I liked everything about Quinn.

We met when she dropped a dime into my cup. I thanked her and introduced myself. She told me her name was Quinn. She had just moved to Warren. She was from Somerville, which isn't all that far away, but she didn't really know the area. I said I knew the place really well. She told me that was great and hopefully she'd run into me again.

I really enjoy the feeling of 5 p.m., out by a pool after spending the whole day lounging. I'd hang at Round Top as it was closing up and Steve was trying to get people to leave. The sun would still be out, but not so bright as it was around 2 p.m.. The air is chillier. You know it's time to get out and dry yourself off, but you just can't bring yourself to. You don't want to. You want the day to last forever even though you know it won't.

I don't really feel that way.

Steve does and he did a better job at describing it. I'm usually inside by five, playing video games with J.R. or someone. Steve is the one who is outside practically from sunrise to sunset. You just have to cut out those earlier hours and the later ones. The hours in between, Steve knows those hours.

I wanted to run after Quinn and ask her out or get her number or her last name so I could call 411 and get her address. Instead, I kept Steve company while he dragged the skimmer across the pool during one of those "sad hours" as he put it.

"I met this great girl," I might have said to him. I described her and he seemed to already know her. He knew someone from Somerville that fit that description.

"I used to have such a crush on her," Steve probably said back. "She's somewhat out of your league."

When I think of Quinn, I think about a painting J.R. did. It was called, Does A Blue Girl Dream in Black and White. It was the face of a girl asleep, she was entirely blue. Quinn is kinda colorful, to me anyway.

I asked what league Steve was talking about, I wasn't one for baseball. He pointed to my outfit. My *Dickies* were all ripped up and my t-shirt needed a wash ages ago. As for my *Alien Workshop* hat, tape was holding it together in the back, that plastic snap thing had broken. Steve wasn't one to comment on clothing. He was working at a swim club, yet wearing long sleeves into the summer. They were long sleeve t-shirts, but still, I didn't know he was so worried about UV radiation. I'd ask him about it and he'd have witty comebacks for me. He thought they were witty, I thought they were stupid and gay.

But even with Steve's fashion faux pas, he was right about one thing. I looked like a jerk. I knew the skater thing was over and done with. The punk scene in the area was hurting. There wasn't anything left. I knew I should just fall into the GAP and be done with it, but I didn't want to. That wasn't me. Steve would even wear American Eagle.

Sid sang it best, "Much more than this, I did it my way."

Steve is sad because he knows who he is and he doesn't like it. I don't know who I am. Should I be upset about it? I shouldn't be defined by other people. They define me all the same. I'm Niles. I'm gonna make you laugh, I'm good at that. But what else is there?

I don't understand 5 p.m. at all, but I know what it feels like to drive on Sawmill Rd. right after it has rained. It's cloudy out, but the greens of the trees seem greener as they hang down, burdened by the rain.

Where am in the larger scheme of things?

- 1) James Dean
- 2) Sid Vicious
- 3) Holden Caulfield (later disqualified due to fictional nature)
- 4) Brandon Lee
- 5) Niles???

I was at Quinn's house the same week I had met her. Steve swung that deal for me. The boy had connections I didn't even know about. "Good lookin' out," I told him as we made our way over. Yeah, he came along too, but it was part of the deal. He knew Quinn, it would be less awkward if he was going to see an old friend and bringing his good buddy along. Steve was in one of his more asshole moods. I was trying to make myself look appealing to Quinn. Steve was completely not backing me up. I don't know what goes on in that boy's mind.

If McDonalds is all about the new all-white-meat chicken nuggets that are healthier, what were they serving us before?

Quinn is even more amazing when she talks. She blows my mind really. She was talking all about college and what she wants to be. She told Steve and me that she was really getting her hopes set too high, but she'd love to go right from college to Columbia med-school. I can't even think of what classes I'll take when school starts up. I don't even know if I was going to apply to college. I took the SATs, and comparatively, I did fairly well. I don't know who I was comparing it to though. I was too scared to tell Steve or J.R. my scores. My folks weren't mad and didn't make me take the Princeton Review or anything.

Steve suggested I tell Quinn my rationale for becoming a doctor. This was one of those times he wasn't helping me out. I think I came up with the whole thing after drinking one night. In the right context, it would have been funny. Steve found it funny that night. I was glad he was laughing, but it blew for me.

"Tell me, tell me," Quinn badgered. She hadn't yet realized I'm a complete idiot. She thought I had something insightful to say on the matter. I refused to tell her. When she actually appeared upset, I conceded and allowed Steve to tell her.

Looking back on that situation, I wonder how Descartes would have handled things. Probably better than Plutarch would, but I really wouldn't know in either cause. I just knew Steve owned books on both of those guys.

"One day, Niles and I were having a conversation on what we could do with our lives," he said with a chuckle, "when I suggested that Niles should become a doctor, his educated response was, 'Why should I be a doctor, if I want to screw around with people's body parts, I'd become a serial killer. Besides, there is less chance of being sued. If you're a serial killer and you cut off the wrong foot on someone, who fucking cares, you're going to kill the person anyway, right? If you're a doctor and you cut off the wrong foot, you might just have a law suit on your hands.'" Steve couldn't stop laughing. I slumped down into the couch further as I saw the disgusted look on Quinn's face.

I defended myself, saying I knew exactly what to do with my life. Steve asked if it was "an Astronaut or Fireman this week." That made Quinn laugh. She was no longer so visibly bothered by my drunken medical theory. We didn't stay much longer after that. Quinn needed to get back to unpacking. She thanked us for coming by and said she'd like to see us soon.

Some people look good in person, but that's about it. It's the yearbook syndrome. If you saw their Junior year picture, you might say "oh Lord," but in person it's not all that bad. It goes both ways too.

I like how things are so much more truthful with the later hours of the day. It's actually night when people are real. Steve and I would drive around for hours, looking for some trouble. We were actually looking for a field to throw a party like that one in *Dazed and Confused*. Our town used to have fields, but they became housing developments. Any open area was visible from the road. A cop could easily see what was going on.

Steve didn't mind not being able to ever find a field. He told me he just wanted to keep driving. But he wasn't the one driving, I was and I was tired.

He actually said, "Please don't take me home, I don't want to feel alone."

What the hell does that mean? Why do people have to be cryptic while being open? What's wrong with Steve? Isn't hanging out with him enough? It worked with J.R., all we had to do was cause some trouble and he was all past his post-car accident funk. Since there was nothing that set off Steve's rut, I didn't have a fucking clue how to fix things. I wouldn't ask J.R. even if he was around, because he'd be all "woe is me" like he was just a month ago. I didn't wanna deal with it. I brought him back to my house and we watched the movie *Martin* because I was ashamed Steve had never seen it before.

I had taken a break from the skating thing in order to try out that whole Goth culture thing two years back. That's when I found *Martin*. I was wearing black for like a month and listening to *Anti-Christ Superstar*. I didn't hang out with J.R. or Steve. There were a bunch of goth kids at the mall. We stood around and looked Goth-y. Rev. Rickie was the main kid. He wore all black and black make-up... and a black dress. He wasn't a real reverend, and he was 15, but we thought it was cool, aside from the dress thing. I went back to being a skater real quickly. Being a Goth was boring. Not as boring as trying to be a Rude Boy, but then again, what is?

I went back to Quinn's house all by myself while Steve worked. She was happy to see me. "I need to take a walk, get out for a while," she said when I asked if she had a free minute.

I took her to the Duderstadt's old farm. Four brothers had been raised there, lived on the farm all their lives. As the years passed by, the conditions of both the farm and the brothers began to decline. The past summer, the last of the brothers went and died. The land was sold to the town. The remaining barns would be preserved, a little piece of history in a small town. Until recently, the mailbox was still overstuffed with mail they never got to open. Every single time I passed by, I wanted to take it, but when I finally went to, it was cleared out.

All their belongings, all their broken trucks, the refrigerator that sat on the front porch, everything had to go. The house remained, as did some of the barns. That was it. No cows were grazing in the fields. No chickens were in the middle of the road, acting as potential targets for me and the boys. The closest object to a sign of life was the large tree in front of the house. The fall had made the leaves turn red, giving the impression of a smokeless fire setting the house ablaze.

Quinn looked at me in awe as I told her about my town's history. I don't use words like "awe" a lot, but it felt right for this moment. Quinn was interested in what I had to say. I liked that. And she liked me, she told me so.

"I like you Niles," she said, "You're sweet... and you don't try too hard to impress me."

“Actually, I’m just doing a bad job at it,” I joked. It made her smile. I didn’t count the seconds we stood without saying anything, but if I had, I’d say it was forty-three.

How different are people than roads? The roads never seemed to stay the same. When on Mount Bethal for a long enough time, it becomes Warrenville Road. Mountain Boulevard wasn’t much better. As the miles go on, it’s called Washington Valley. You could turn off Washington Valley, making a left onto Morning Glory, but that becomes Mountain Ave as you cross the town border. They are just different names. But it makes all the difference. If roads can change, can I?

“Can I ask you a question?” Quinn asked. I didn’t point out that she was in fact asking a question. It wasn’t right.

“Can I pick the question?” I asked, unable to help myself. She didn’t let me. I said she could go ahead and ask.

“I want to know, I mean, the guy I met in the parking lot wouldn’t care so much about an old farm. Who is the real you?” Her voice was so soft. No one else could pull off asking such a question. From Quinn, it was sincere.

I told her there is no real me and I’m just a fuck-up. Then I told her about how I wasn’t part of the other five percent. She didn’t know what that was.

I believe that ninety-five percent of the population of the world does nothing with their lives, they never go anywhere or do anything. The other five percent does do something. They might even contribute to the greater good of society. Well, I’m comfortable being part of that ninety-five percent. I see no reason why I should disrupt the percentage by crossing over.

Pros and Cons of the other five percent

Pros

Alexander the Great
Joan of Arc
Einstein
Elvis
Socrates
Shakespeare
Michelangelo
George Romero
Jesus

Cons

Hitler
Uni-Bomber
Nixon
Stalin
Andy Warhol
Jack the Ripper
Jesus

Quinn wanted to know where I thought she fit in. She looked almost disappointed when I said I didn’t really know yet because I didn’t know her all that well. I assured her that she definitely seemed like a good candidate for the other five percent. Quinn was happier to hear that.

I’m going to embellish what happened next.

“So you don’t think I’m wasting my time wanting to be a doctor instead of a serial killer?” Quinn asked. Her head was tilted to the right and downward. She wasn’t really looking at me.

“Hey, whatever interests you,” I remarked.

“Right now, you interest me,” she said as she stepped forward towards me. I’m sure she felt my heart beating from where she stood. The Duderstadt brothers could have heard it from their graves.

Mustering up the nerve, I said confidently, “I suggest you pursue your interests.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” She said as she inched closer to kiss me. And I didn’t let her. She was too good for me. I said something about having a sinus infection caused from allergies and didn’t want to give it to her. She looked disappointed again.

While sitting at home, as I did in the middle of the afternoon on a nice warm summer day, I got a call from Steve. It was the better Steve, not the 5 p.m. Steve. He said he needed a favor and that I had to drive over to Round Top immediately.

“Get these copied,” Steve said to me as he tossed a set of keys

“What are they?” I asked.

“The front gate, the office, the supply room, and the snack shack,” he told me. “The boss had to run out, I have to watch the place.”

“I’m holding gold in my hands,” I responded as my eyes lit up. “Pure gold.”

“I need them back in a half hour.”

I made it to the hardware store and back. I’ll admit, I was nervous. Those keys were to a gateway of multiple broken laws. I had enough trouble with the Warren PD in the past. Now, I had four shiny invitations more to see them. And I didn’t care. We could have so many great parties at Round Top.

This was the last summer I’d have to do summer reading. That was a good feeling. I planned to do it this summer for once. No film adaptations, no Barron’s Notes. I wanted novels, thick ones, with allusions and alliterations. Allusions and Alliterations would be an awesome name for an Emo band. Maybe, Allusion and the Alliterations, with their hit single, I’m Gonna Be (in AP English). Yeah, I called the school, I said I’d like to try to be in the Advanced Placement class. Quinn had nothing to do with it. My grades were good enough. My guidance counselor said he would see what he could do. That would be great to surprise Quinn on the first day by being in the same class as her. I had to borrow the summer reading list from Steve to know what to buy. For some reason, I don’t think anyone sent me the list.

I would have liked to take Quinn to Linda’s Deli. For most of the years it had been open, it wasn’t even owned by anyone named Linda. Her nephew took it over, but never changed the name. I knew the owner, I think Jim was his name. But I never knew Linda. I always wondered if she was a real person, or just another Uncle Ben, Mr. Clean, or Little Debbie. Anyway, I couldn’t take Quinn there, it was no longer even called Linda’s. Some other person bought it once Jim closed it down. New name, new lay-out, not the same place I used to steal smokes from. I couldn’t even tell Quinn that. I didn’t want her knowing I smoked. The new place didn’t even have cigarettes. It was an actual deli. Back when Linda’s nephew owned it, the place was more of a convenience store. No one seemed to mind.

She says, "I think that I like you... and I think that I'd like to see where this can go."

He says, "I think that I'd like to... be just that guy who... could waste my life with you."

I didn't have anything to waste. I've accumulated a few scars, but they're not that deep. I read *The Beach*. I'm going to compare it to *Red Badge of Courage*, how both lead characters need a war in their lives in order to have self-worth. Scars were medals. I once needed stitches from banging my head on a counter top after funneling three beers in a row.

I have a few concerts I want to go to this summer. There's a Face First show coming up. And in a few weeks, there's a Frozen Radio show. I like these bands that not a lot of people know about. I can wear shirts, sporting their logos and it's always a great conversation starter. I don't wear them all the time, cause the stuff I wear tends to get shredded when I'm out on my board. I think I like falling more than doing tricks. Fuck the 360 degree kickflip. Not landing it gets more of an applause.

If Quinn and I began to date, would I have to change the way I dress? I'd look like an asshole in a sleeveless sweater with a button-down shirt beneath it. And khakis? Fuck that.

She liked what I had to say about *The Beach*. She read it too, for fun though, not for school. It did give her advantage, as I pointed out, because it meant one less book to read.

"Oh, I'm reading other books for my summer reading," she told me. "I have them all picked out already."

"Getting ahead of yourself?" I asked. Good thing about talking on the phone, she didn't have to see my expressions. They may have just been blank. Before she could even say anything back, I asked, "What do you recommend next?"

It's like that song, Steve is happier when it rains. The pool is closed for the day. We're sitting in the pool, on lounge chairs. I'm not going to lie and say the chairs were in the pool when we got there, we threw them in. We tossed a table in too. The table had one of those big umbrellas over it that protects us from the rain. The two of us are drinking Scotch... on the rocks. My dad can yell at me later for taking it. It doesn't taste all that good, but it's working pretty well.

"So what's up?" Steve asks me.

"Not a whole lot," I respond. "What's up with you?"

"Not a whole lot." He looks over at the high diving board. "Wanna see if the umbrellas will slow the fall?"

"You read my fucking mind." And with that, I pull the umbrella out of the table and make my way to the diving board. Steve is two steps behind me.

I want to remake *Grease*, but take out the musical numbers and make it about me and Quinn. I'll be Travolta, she'll be Miss Newton-John. I'll dress all preppy and she'll go all skater-punk and then we'll ride the Ferris wheel together and everything will rock. Well, the music can be playing, but we don't need to be singing. We'll have that Less Than Jake cover version of the *Grease* soundtrack blaring while we're at the Warren Expo.

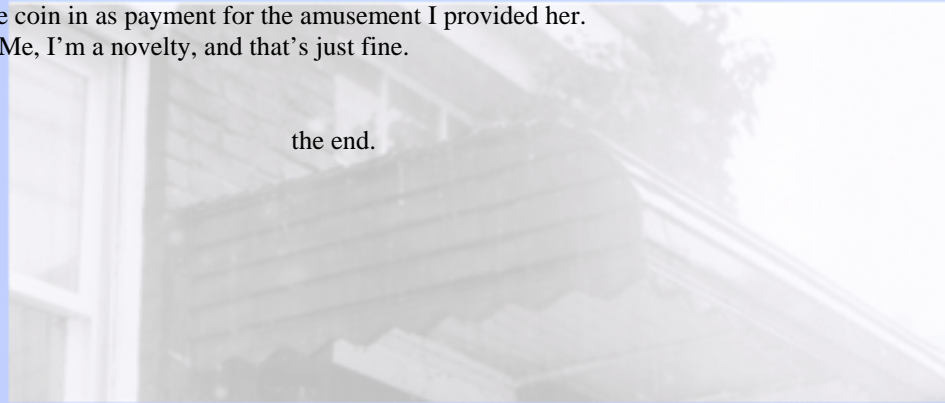
Before Quinn approached me that day in the parking lot, I was spinning on my head like a circus monkey for one person. I said I needed money to feed

my son, who was at his mother's house, starving. And the person actually said they'd give me five dollars if I spun around on my head.

I did it, I have no problem with things like that. But it never occurred to me before that Quinn could have been watching the entire time. Maybe she tossed the coin in as payment for the amusement I provided her.

Me, I'm a novelty, and that's just fine.

the end.



the undefined use of this



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