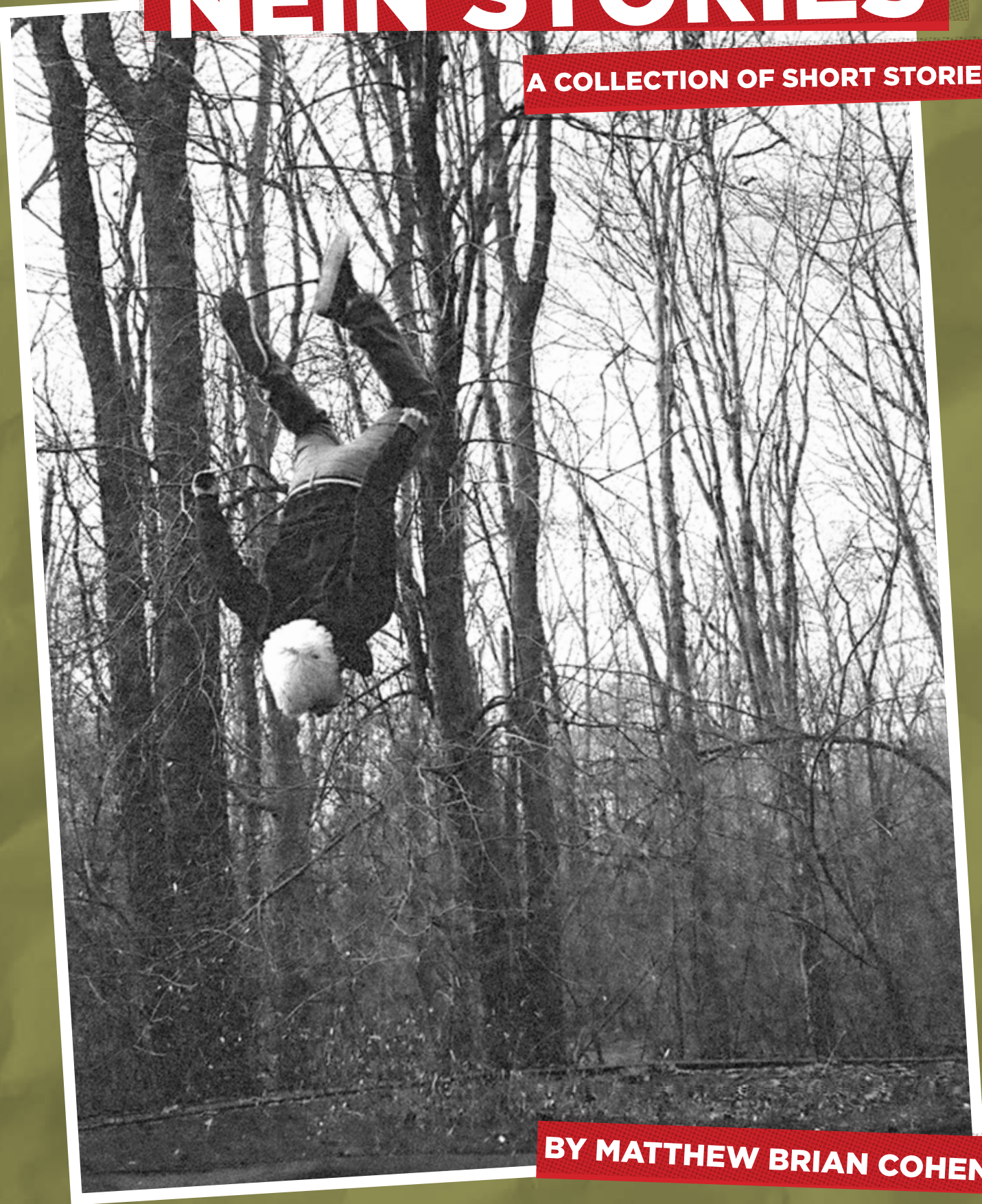


NEIN STORIES

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES



BY MATTHEW BRIAN COHEN

NEIN STORIES

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To my wife, Mary, and my dog, Scooter.

FORWARD, OR, HONESTLY

Hello. Welcome to my short story collection. If you made it this far, congratulations! You're in for a roller coaster ride of very short to short-ish fiction pieces, mostly written in a first person perspective.

I'm calling this collection *Nein Stories*. If you translate that first word from German to English, the title becomes "No Stories" which I think sounds kind of punk rock and makes me seem cooler than I am. I'm also calling it *Nein Stories* because there are literally nine stories. Eagle-eyed readers will notice that there are only eight stories—this is because I cut the ninth one right before I put this out. It wasn't as good as I wanted it to be and there was another story that was tonally similar. Good writers make hard cuts, I'm told, even when it messes with their title. *Nein Stories* is also a joke on JD Salinger's classic "Nine Stories." Well, it's not really a joke. Nobody is going to read it and laugh out loud. But for literature, this honestly counts as a joke.

Some of these stories are funny. Not laugh out loud funny, but funny-ish. Funnier than some *New Yorker* thing but less funny than a beagle getting bopped in the head by a kitten. Amusing is probably the better word to describe them. Feel free to laugh at these funny stories, but again, this is literature, so if you laugh it's gonna be more like "ahh, clever" than "hahahaha!" Some of these stories are sad. Well, they made me feel sad writing them. These are serious pieces and you are not supposed to laugh at them. You are supposed to read them with a furrowed brow and nominate them for prizes. For the third time, this is literature! But most of the stories are somewhere in between. The tag line for the videogame "Mother 3" is "Strange. Funny. Heartrending." and that's kind of the vibe I was going for. The perfect review for this short story collection would be something like "reminds me of Mother 3." The worst review would be something like "this sucks." I'll settle for a review that's something like "it's fine," or "I killed some time reading it." Honestly, though, I

don't really need a review at all. I mostly did this for me, to prove that I could. And also, honestly, to kill some time.

I'm giving these stories away for free, or so cheap that they are practically free. Not because I think my writing isn't worth money—it is, but if I try to put an accurate dollar amount on it, it would depress me—but because I want people to read it more than I want to get paid. It makes me feel a little punk rock, honestly. I'm thinking right now about this time in college where my professor brought in this one writer to speak to us. This guy was the coolest guy in the world—just incredibly sardonic, with a dry wit and a perfect mix of quiet confidence and self-deprecation. He looked like an extra in a Sonic Youth music video, which at the time I thought was incredibly cool, and honestly, still do. This writer told us we should write during our day jobs and steal shit from chain stores to get by. He said college was kind of stupid and artists live weird lives. He tried to convince us not to pursue writing, but everything about him and everything he said made me want it more. It's funny to think that he probably was in a similar position then that I am in now—struggling, scared, not sure why this writing thing didn't make any money, tired, a little bit angry, drunk more often than he should be, and so on. One time I was in San Francisco and I found his book at an independent book store. I picked it up for eighteen bucks and it was great. I can't remember what it was called or what it was about, but I remember what I loved about it was that he wrote like he talked—humble and matter of fact, with zero pretension and a healthy dose of working class rage. But honestly, what I liked best of all was that underneath all the sarcasm, it was obvious he poured his fucking heart and soul into each and every word, even though I can't imagine more than a thousand people read it. I wish I could plug his book, but I honestly don't remember his name anymore, and I lent the book to an ex-girlfriend twelve years ago. I never got it back.

I guess the point of this anecdote is that I could honestly do a lot worse than having you lend this short story collection to your ex-girlfriend, remember it fondly, if not vaguely, and eventually, forget my name entirely. Which, honestly, is probably never going to happen since this is digital and you don't need to lend anything to anyone anymore, but hey—the world is different now. Though honestly, if you really break it down, “the world is different now” is kind of what these stories I wrote are all trying to say. So if you're short on time, that's honestly all you really need to know. But if you've got some time to kill, sometimes it's honestly nice to hear the same

thing in a bunch of different ways.

DOGS

Here's the scenario: aliens have come to Earth. But they don't conquer us, they don't kill us. They don't even ignore us. Instead, they treat us the way we treat dogs.

Planet Earth is their adoption shelter. Some take the cutest humans, others the sick ones that need the most love and care. They speak to us in a language we cannot comprehend, but we intuitively understand they don't mean us harm. They whisk us away to another galaxy and bring us back to their homes. It is obvious that these places were not designed for us—in this unfathomable architecture, we cannot get our bearings, and we feel lost and afraid. Their children (or smaller versions of them, anyhow) squeal at the sight of us. Some of them are too rough with us and pull too hard on our noses and ears, but when we scream at them to knock that shit off, they oblige.

The days pass. Our alien owners go about their lives, sometimes going hours without paying us mind. But we are not ignored entirely. They feed us in the morning, afternoon, and night. They give us a bed—just a full size and not the California king we were used to, but this one is soft enough, and will suffice. They do not clothe us, but we do not mind.

We live a life of strange leisure. Each day our alien owners leave their homes at approximately the same time. Each day, we have the sneaking suspicion they will return, but we can never be sure. Sometimes they leave for what feels like weeks; others, just minutes. When we are alone, we have a house full of toys. Our alien owners have left us PS4's, indie rock albums, and fidget spinners for our amusement. We binge watch things on Netflix. Some of us, out of sheer boredom, start to make art, using makeshift tools we found around the house. Our efforts go unappreciated by our owners, though, and we suspect they cannot tell the difference between human creativity and when we go bathroom on their floor.

We do not mean to go bathroom on the floor. We simply cannot find a device that

resembles a toilet anywhere, and we are left with no other choice. When we do this, our owners yell at us for being bad. At first, we are not sure what we did wrong, but slowly, we begin to understand their word for bad. We cannot pronounce it, but we recognize it with context clues, like how we used to pick up bits of conversational French on our European vacations. We learn to only go bathroom outside. Our owners are proud that they taught us something. They teach us more tricks, like sit, stay, roll over. That last one is hard, because it's not something we would ever do in nature. Nevertheless, we roll over, and we are showered with praise. They give us salt and vinegar potato chips. They learned we like those the best.

This total loss of agency or control may sound like hell, but it's not. Overall, we are happy. Our owners are glad we are around. If we ever feel trapped or restless, we are taken out for walks. We love our walks. Even though we are put on leashes because our owners cannot trust us not to run away, the exercise feels good. This alien world is so fascinating to explore, so different than our old Earth. Behind each corner is something unpredictable and new, some sight or smell that bombards and overwhelms, something beyond surreal.

Occasionally, we will find another human on a walk with their alien. Like us, they are naked and leashed. It would be comical if it did not make us self-aware that we are also nude, save a collar around our neck. We bark, "what's going on? Are you OK?" They respond, "everything is fine! Can you believe this is my life?" We would love to talk more, but if our owner is in a hurry, we are forced along, and that's the last we see of them. But if our owner permits, we stop. In this moment, we brush the back of our hands against the other's face, both a confirmation that this is real and a comfort to feel another person's skin. We'll make small talk, like we used to back on Earth, chatting about the crazy weather here, and how we're looking forward to the next season of Game of Thrones. If we share a strong enough connection, we might kiss, sometimes passionately, with tongue. We can tell our owners like when we do this. They coo and awe as thick white goo secretes from every one of their innumerable pores. They think the kiss is romantic, but it's really something else, something our alien owners cannot discern even through their telepathy. The kiss is the last truly human thing we are allowed—sloppy and imperfect, a single raw, untrained emotion, a choice. The kiss is over quickly, but we carry it with us, as we loop around the block to return to our new benign domesticity, slaves in paradise.

It still sucks that we're neutered.

THAT FAMOUS TOWER IN PARIS

Not to brag about my amazing honeymoon, but if you haven't seen the Eiffel Tower at night, let me tell you—it's incredible. There's thousands of these miniature lights that sparkle and flash around the entire tower, punctuating the night sky like fireflies performing a choreographed dance routine. But what struck me most about the Eiffel Tower was the size of it. It's smaller than the Empire State Building, but when you're looking up at it from the ground, it feels like the tallest building in the world. It has an aura of significance and history in a way few things ever do. Somehow, in this planet of destruction, it has lasted the test of time. Walking underneath it, I kept thinking of how many tourists over the years must have been here on their honeymoons just like me, holding the hand of their spouse just like I was, experiencing the same newlywed bliss I was feeling, all the while craning their necks up to take in the sheer majesty of it, hoping they'll carry this view with them until the day they die. It's impossible, of course. You can't place a marker in the ocean of memory. Everything shifts and sways with time. Everything gets swept away.

Walking around the base of the tower, my wife and I got to talking about life shit. You know the kind of shit I mean: about kids and how we'll raise them, about religion and traditions and what parts we'll keep and what parts we'll throw away, about capitalism and how it's unequivocally bad. We started talking about death. My wife told me that if she died first, the one thing she would want for me would be that I not become too hardened by the loss, that I don't turn inward and retreat from the world.

"You can give up very easily," she said. She didn't want me to spend the rest of my life holed up alone in a messy studio apartment, drinking too much whiskey and watching YouTube videos of Japanese professional wrestling and obnoxious twenty two year olds playing videogames.

There's a reason she's my wife—she gets me.

I told her if I died first, I'd want her to stay passionate, to continue to fight for the

right thing, to do her best to be moral in an amoral universe. I had to think about that one for a bit. One, because I wasn't sure there was anything I could tell her to make her a better person. Two, because I couldn't, and still can't, imagine myself dying first. Losing her, having to face this broken, ultra-capitalist world without her, is so much worse than death to me. Honestly, losing her *is* death to me. In my grief, I would build myself a comfortable prison out of whiskey and YouTube, immunized from feeling anything about anyone ever again.

It's extreme, for sure, but I've never felt this extreme about anyone—not even the girlfriends who I told I'd love forever. I didn't lie to them, but with my wife, there is a new depth and clarity to this feeling that the things we love are all impermanent. They degrade. Even the Eiffel Tower is not immune. It will take longer, for sure, but it will happen. We'll build taller structures. The iron will rust and decay. At first, there will be attempts at upkeep, but other things will take precedent. Bombs will drop or humanity will flee the planet entirely. Centuries from now, in schools of the future, kids will learn there was once a famous tower in Paris. It was nice, they'll be told. It represented the magic of light.

In an uncharacteristic move, I decided to do something spontaneous. I told my wife I wanted to go up to the top of the tower. "We may only be here once," I said. "And I don't want to regret it."

We paid far too much money and went on the two elevators necessary to get to the top. Once there, we read the plaques on the tower's history and laughed at the idiots spending twenty five bucks on a glass of champagne. We took photos: one where we were kissing, and several where we were not. Looking out on to the city, I could see not only the Louvre and the Champs-Élysées, but also my wife, clutching the railing. She was getting nervous about how high we were. "It's safe," I told her as I tried to hold her hand, "I'm here with you." But it didn't matter. You can't assuage those kind of fears. After a few more minutes of looking out on to the City of Lights with a mixture of dread and wonder, we took the elevator back down.

In truth, was it worth it? Nah. Like my sister told me before we left, there are a lot better views of Paris, like Notre Dame or the Panthéon. But before we even went up, I knew I had already gotten my money's worth at the bottom, gazing up at the Eiffel Tower, not trying to hold on to this feeling of gratitude, but basking in it, letting it wash over me like a wave. I was in Paris with a woman I loved; and while it's true that one day, she will die, she wasn't dead yet. But I had to take the climb to

pull back and see my life for what it was—an ocean of memory, the currents of the past and the future flowing in out of one another as one singular mass of being. I saw the husk of a man I could become, the regrets I have and the chances I took, the girlfriends I didn't marry and the one that I did.

Anyways, if you still want to see the top of the Eiffel Tower, I recommend you do it late at night—the price is the same, but the lines are way shorter. But go as soon as you can. I don't know how much longer we have left.

WITH LIMP ARMS

There's someone I like and I'm making them a mixtape. Well, it's not a tape. It's a CD. I could just make a Spotify playlist, but there's something more personal about handing someone a physical CD, you know?

I love making mixtapes. I make them for everyone I like. They're easily the smartest way of expressing how you feel. It's not as vulnerable as writing a letter or a poem, you know? And in terms of artistry, a mixtape is guaranteed to be better than whatever crap you'd write, as long as you pick good bands. And with a mixtape, you can be really subtle about your emotions, because sometimes the lyrics are hard to understand or they're just singing really quietly. You don't have to risk sticking your neck out being all like "hey I like you—like, *like you*, like you." And while you're making it, you get to listen to really good bands, which obviously rocks.

A thing people get wrong about my mixtapes is that it's just a list of my favorite songs. Not true. It's actually all the songs I like that say a lot about the person I'm giving the mixtape to. I'm not trying to give the person a bunch of good songs that I like—although I'm doing that, too. What I'm actually trying to do is describe someone with the songs that I like, which is way harder than it sounds. That's why I have a bunch of go-to songs that I try to throw on every mixtape. Here are some of them.

The Microphones – I Felt Your Shape – all time classic mixtape song. It's sweet, it's sad, it's desperate, it's hopeful. I've put this on a dozen mixtapes and I love it every time. The best line is when he sings "with limp arms I can feel most of you." Most of you! That's genius. I love the idea of telling someone that I am feeling them, but I can't say that I really know them, not all the way, anyway. There's a cool bit of distance and uncertainty to that that feels so true to me.

Sufjan Stevens – A Loverless Bed (Without Remorse) – this song is sad but it’s also tender. When I hear this, it makes me think about making love—not like, having sex, but holding each other closely and touching each other gently, you know? It feels like the way I want my first time to go. I like to put this song near the end of the mixtape so they know that I can see so deeply the image of us together in a bed. I think this song might actually be about God or a ghost, though, but at the end of the day it’s like, the artist doesn’t get to control what the song is about when you put it on a mixtape, you know? We have a lot of power that way.

Page France – Junkyard – perfect mixtape song. Page France is a small enough band that it’s like, “who are these guys?” and you look really cool for putting them on. But this song is rocking enough that it’s like, “hell yes, I’m into this!” even if you’re giving the mixtape to someone who doesn’t really like good indie music. Some mixtape songs are test songs, where if they don’t like it you know that they’re not worth pursuing. I once gave a mixtape with this song on it to a girl and she played it in the car and when this song came on she didn’t really react to it and it bummed me out so hard I lost all interest. It sucks, because she was really cool.

The Soft Machine – I Should’ve Known – I don’t really like these guys that much, but they’re pretty classic and it’s good to have something classic on a mixtape to show your range, you know? Plus, it gives the mixtape—and thus, your feelings—an air of authenticity. You obviously don’t want to show off too much because then you look like some classic rock snob instead of someone with real genuine love in your heart, so just this one Soft Machine song is good enough. It’s also kind of an angrier song about love not lasting, so it breaks up the pace and doesn’t make you look like a lovesick dork. And trust me, the last thing you want when handing over a mixtape is to look like a dork.

Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin – Oregon Girl – this is a song of multitudes. It’s a great song if you’re making a mixtape for a girl, but a terrible song if you’re making a mixtape for a girl who lives in Oregon, or is even from Oregon, or even spent some time in Oregon before she moved away. It’s just too on the nose, you know? If you’re making a mixtape for a boy, it’s still a good song to put on, and in some ways, it’s even better. The kind of boy who would be weirded out by the gender

reversal isn't the kind of boy worth giving a mixtape to, you know? I don't think it's too on the nose to put this song on a mixtape for a boy when you also live in Oregon, but definitely don't put it on if he's from Oregon or spent time in Oregon before he moved away. That's like, way too weird and makes you look desperate.

Sondre Lerche – Siffused With Love – sometimes this song won't make the cut if I have too many artists that start with the letter "S." It just looks like I just dug a bunch of records out of the "S" crate at Princeton Record Exchange and gave up, you know? But it's good and sweet, and it's got "love" in the title so whoever you give it to will know what's on your mind.

Titus Andronicus – In A Big City – "I grew up on one side of the river / I was a disturbed, dangerous drifter / Moved over to the other side of the river / Now I'm a drop in a deluge of hipsters." Holy shit, is that me in a lyric?! Maybe not the disturbed and deranged part. And I'm not really a hipster. But I'm sitting here on one side of the river and I feel so small and full of fire and ready to prove myself when I finally move to the city. Some songs on a mixtape have to be about you and not about them. If they don't understand your passion to make it as an artist or a critic or whatever, how are they gonna love you for who you are?

Fleetwood Mac – Second Hand News – you might be thinking, "everybody knows Fleetwood Mac." There's a reason for that—it's because this song rules! It's the perfect pick, too, because it's not obvious like "Go Your Own Way" or "Landslide" and it's still rocking. It's also a song that's little sad if you think about it, but not too sad. You gotta let your crush know the real you. Otherwise, you're being unfair.

The Marches – Sometimes Sex Isn't About The Money – I don't know how I found out about this band. I think I stole their promo CD from somewhere. I'll be honest, my favorite part of the song is the title. It looks so cool on the liner notes, you know? But the beat is really rocking and the girl that is singing is so sultry. You want a song with "sex" in the title to let them know you are a sexual being. Even if you're like, not all that into sex yet. It just sets a good precedent.

School Of Seven Bells – Half-Asleep – I know, it's another "S" band, but this song

is just so awesome. This is the song I go with when a girl knows The Postal Service, but I want to let them know there's an even cooler band that sounds like The Postal Service, but there's a girl singing, instead. I think girls really appreciate that. It's weird to me that boys don't have the same reaction to The Postal Service as girls do. It's not like, less severe or anything, but all the girls I like, like, LOVE The Postal Service. If you like someone and they think The Postal Service is "over" or are "too big" or are "too indy," you know they're as dumb as a sack of rocks, and ultimately, it would never work out. If you're not going to fall in love with me or cry while listening to The Postal Service, or better yet, that Dntel song "This Is The Dream of Evan and Chan," we're done.

Father John Misty – Please Don't Die – oh my god, when he sings "I'm feeling older than my 35... years" I practically die inside. I'm not, like, *that* old, but I know what he's saying. I know what that feels like. This song is more of a wish song—I wish someone would feel this way about me, even though I know they won't, not for a long while, anyway. I like putting wish songs on mixtapes. Mixtapes in general are kind of like a wish, right? Like, I wish you would love me. I wish you would like the things I like. I wish things would be different, that I was older and cooler, with a full beard and a job at a record label or a music magazine. Would you like me then? Would I like me then? I wish.

Liz Phair – Shatter – you gotta close with this. You just gotta. There's never been a song so majestic. Nothing swells like it, man. The bass line growls and the guitar is so slow and plodding but yet steady and clean. It's a car wreck personified, or I guess, audio-fied. You gotta end with this one because this will let them know, even subconsciously, that everything is gonna end in disaster, but it's gonna be beautiful the whole way. It's also good to have some girls on there to show you're down with feminism. I got way into feminism this year.

These songs make it on to practically all of my mixtapes because they're so good at saying how I feel. Some people might say that this means my feelings are less genuine or more cliché or whatever, but I think it's that I end up liking the same kind of people and feel the same way about each of them. I guess it's kind of like how I like fifty different bands that are just one dude with a laptop and an acoustic

guitar. They're all kind of the same, but if you take the time to get to know them, there's something special and unique about each of them, you know? You love them all with limp arms and hope for the best.

THE WEDDING RING

He looked down at the wedding ring on his finger. When his wife placed it on him, he took note as to which finger she put it on, because he wanted to make sure that when it was his turn, he did it right. Left hand. Between the pinky and the middle. The ring finger.

The wedding ring was lighter than he expected. It was made of titanium, according to the jeweler. One of the lightest metals, apparently. When the jeweler told him this, he said, “ahh, yes,” pretending that he had a baseline of comprehension for that fact. Buying a wedding ring was new to him, and he was completely lost. He began to see the ring as a symbol of his marriage—which it was.

This was not his first choice of wedding ring. He had originally wanted one three times the cost. Made of a nicer metal, although by now, he has forgotten what that was. The jeweler said it looked snazzy, sophisticated. He agreed. His wife talked him out of buying that ring. She said that money was best spent elsewhere. He realized he only wanted a more expensive ring to show his wife he was that much more committed. He also realized that throughout his entire life, his first choice had almost always been wrong. He began to see the ring as a symbol of his marriage—which, of course, it always was.

The first week of wearing the wedding ring, he obsessed over it. Would it be damaged if he got it wet? No, his wife said. Still, he worried about the ring. Scratches, the color dulling with time, tiny imperfections and the like. When he noticed a scratch on one side, he twisted the ring so that part would be palm side, so he could hide the blemish by making a fist. He cursed himself for not buying the more expensive ring, the one made of silver or gold or meteorite. He took it off when he took a shower anyway. It was his ring, after all, and he wanted to treat it right. He began to see the ring as a symbol of his blah blah blah, you understand.

The ring was lighter than he expected, much lighter. So light, in fact, that very

quickly, he forgot it was even on at all. Occasionally, it would bang against a coffee mug, or poke him in the eye when he was washing his face in the shower, and he would be reminded of it, and it would make him happy. When he was doing nothing, he would twist it clockwise, and then, when that got old, counter-clockwise. Sometimes, when he would go in the ocean, he would try to take it off, only to find it stuck. It required much more force to take it off. When it would come off, he worried he would lose it, and would stress over it until he put it back on. When he told his wife this, she said that in the worst case scenario, he could always buy a new one, maybe even the more expensive ring that he liked. With this revelation in hand, he began to see the marriage.

POWER

I learned about power when I was in high school, the day I told my gym teacher to suck my cock.

My gym teacher was a funny guy. He was one of those former jocks who didn't have the build or the athleticism to go pro, so he pivoted to teaching gym. I think he liked to drink with the other teachers and shitty cops at my town's bar and grill, but I don't want to put an alcohol problem on him.

My gym teacher liked to joke around with us students. It probably made him feel young, but again, I don't want to put that on him. One time before we went outside to play softball, he made a big show of slapping everybody's hands. When he got to me, he didn't slap my hand. Instead, he said, "I know where that hand's been," implying I masturbated a lot, I suppose. Like I said, he was a funny guy.

I was a funny guy, too, but I wasn't athletic. My love of sports went away after my Little League coach moved me from first base to right field. I had fun playing first, but the coach thought me playing at first hurt our chances of winning. He was right, I suppose. My first baseman's mitt mostly collected dust after that. Anyway, one of the things I did to make gym class fun for me was to take it super seriously. I was hyper competitive. I threw myself into each game with reckless abandon. I talked tons of trash, especially to the jocks. It was endlessly entertaining. Nothing was funnier to me than verbally clowning on some dude as he effortlessly crossed me up and dribbled by me for yet another easy layup. My gym teacher loved my trash talk, probably because he was the same kind of bully I was pretending to be, but for a third time, I don't want to put that on him.

One day, we were outside playing softball. My gym teacher was the pitcher. He was always the pitcher, because he didn't want some kid who couldn't reliably hit the strike zone slowing the game down. He also probably loved acting like he was this ace starter with a sub 2.00 ERA and ten strikeouts on the day. I'll put that one on him,

no problem—who wouldn't love that?

So he was pitching and I was trash talking him the whole game. I was telling him he couldn't pitch, that he sucked, that even I could hit a homer off him. He laughed it off. So I kept needling him. I started calling him Krzysik (which is his real last name), with no "Mr." honorific in front. "Nice fastball, Krzysik," I said. That got to him. For such a funny with a great sense of humor, he was really into the whole respect thing.

"That's Mr. Krzysik to you," he said.

"Well, Mr. Krzysik can suck my cock!"

It was the biggest laugh I had ever gotten in my life, and I can't imagine getting a bigger one. The game was instantly over—it was chaos on the field. Kids were literally rolling on the ground with laughter. No one could believe I had the guts to say that to a teacher—even a gym teacher—let alone scream it on the softball diamond.

Krzysik's eyes got narrow. He wasn't having fun anymore.

"Cohen—see me after class."

Later, after the vice principal called my mom and I had to serve an in-school suspension, Krzysik told me it was no big deal—he wasn't offended and knew we were just razzing. "I had to do it," he said. "It was in front of students." He told me that I'd laugh about this one day, and when I graduated, he'd take me out for a lobster dinner and a beer. I told him we were cool, even though we weren't. I had to explain everything to my mom, who only heard from the vice principal that I had told my gym teacher to suck my cock randomly out of left field (I was actually in right). As you can expect, she was an absolute emotional wreck, but once I filled her in on the backstory and she was sure I wasn't a psychopath who liked to verbally assault teachers, she calmed down. She didn't think it was appropriate, or even funny, but she wasn't a funny guy like me or Krzysik. She didn't understand why Krzysik told me he "had to do it," though. Even though she wasn't angry anymore, there was still one thing she didn't understand.

"If he didn't care," she said, "why did he get you in trouble?"

I couldn't articulate it to her as a fifteen year old, but here's the gist of it. On the surface, he did it because he realized he had gone too far and blurred the lines between teacher and student, so he needed to assert his authority to remind everyone of his power. But really, he did it because he wanted to keep treating other people differently than he liked to be treated. A lot of arrogant people want this, but when

you have power, you get to back your arrogance up with consequences. You get to dictate the terms. You blur the line. I guess in some ways we're lucky that for most of these guys, power really comes down to who gets to make the dick jokes.

I didn't ever go back for that lobster dinner and a beer. I didn't think a coward like him would ever follow through on his promise, but I don't want to put that on him. Also, why would I want to spend a whole fucking evening with that guy?

THE FUTURE OF ONLINE

“It’s getting worse,” you say out loud.

At the party you’re at, this comes off as a revelation. People are looking at you expectantly, with wide eyes, and you realize that this means you must have unintentionally said something true. “It’s a toxic culture,” you add, and all the murmurs and nodding of heads make you feel like you are a prophet.

You take a sip of your beer, which the bar sells for your state’s minimum hourly wage, and continue. You tell everyone that you’ve noticed websites load slower than they used to, even though Internet speeds are supposedly faster than ever.

“It’s because of all the Javascript. And the social networking trackers and things like that,” someone with a vague understanding of technology says.

“And Net Neutrality. Or, that they got rid of Net Neutrality,” someone else says.

“I don’t know if that’s gone into effect yet,” you say, as you wonder whether it actually has gone into effect or not. “But they’re definitely monitoring all your traffic. Everywhere you go you are being followed. All your interests are being recorded. They’re building a profile on you, with metadata. And they are using it to sell you products.”

Everyone at this party has heard about metadata, and none of what they heard has been good. Someone goes into a long-winded anecdote about searching for a picture of flip flops only to have their Facebook feed dominated by ads for flip flops for the next few months. Everyone agrees that is crazy and shouldn’t be allowed.

“It’s like they are tailoring the web to be this hyper-specific thing designed only for you,” you say. “And that’s this double-edged sword... like, that was always the dream, right? You get to have a reality that reflects your every thought and feeling. And it’s like, cool and amazing that they can even do it at all, but it’s so creepy.”

Everyone takes a sip of their beer. They agree that deep learning and analytics are cool and amazing, but they are kind of creepy.

“We spend so much time online now,” someone says. “It’s so weird to me how computers are essentially worthless if they’re not online.”

You feel strongly about this, so you chime in. “When I was a kid, I feel like there was so much I did on my computer without the Internet. But now if the Internet is out at work or whatever, that’s it. The office shuts down. No one can do anything. It’s insane.”

Everyone thinks that is insane. A Father John Misty song comes on. It feels serendipitous, but all the bars you go to play Father John Misty songs now. You pull out your phone and tweet “hipster bars are required by law to play Father John Misty songs after ten PM.” It gets four likes within ten minutes of you posting it. One of the likes is from one of your friends sitting across from you, which feels a little strange to you, since you didn’t even see them take out their phone. The rest of the time you’re at the bar, you take out your phone to check how your tweet is doing. You do this without thinking about it, and every new like makes you feel good.

“Like, what can you even do with your phone when it’s not online?” someone else says. They say some other stuff, too, but you were only half paying attention, so you didn’t catch all of it.

“Totally,” you say. “When I’m on a plane and I don’t pay for WiFi, I can listen to podcasts, or watch Netflix movies I’ve downloaded, or maybe play, like, an old chess game. But that’s it.”

“It makes me feel so anxious!” someone says. “I can’t not know what’s going on. God, I’m so sad. I physically need it.”

“Like an addict,” someone says. There is a pause in the conversation, because everyone agrees that was a very obvious thing to say, and nobody wants to be obvious.

“But like, when I’m on my phone scrolling through Twitter,” you say, “and it’s just bullshit hot take after bullshit brand co-opting a social justice movement or turning a fun meme into an ad, I’m begging for an off switch.”

“How great would that be if there was an actual, real life off switch,” someone else says.

“I would flip it in a second,” you say.

“I just want it to all go away,” someone else says. “But really, I guess I don’t?”

“That’s the paradox of online,” you say, surprising yourself at how wise you just sounded. You could have left it at that, but you continue. “People are social animals,” you say. “We crave physical intimacy as much as we do food and water.”

“It’s so sinister, what they’re doing,” someone says. Nobody knows for sure who “they” is, but everyone has a rough idea. “They’re preying off our nature.”

It is getting late and everyone is feeling sufficiently sad, so those with young children are going home. Though no one says it out loud, everyone who has stayed behind is slowly realizing that this bar, even with its dim lighting, sticky floors, and wobbly wooden tables, is far nicer than their apartments. You remember your rent is going up soon. You start to process that this means you will have less money to spend on nights like these. You finish your beer.

“When you say the Internet now, I think of social media,” someone says. That’s where I spend most of my time.”

“Totally. It’s like what AOL was trying to do in the nineties,” you say. “Everything in one portal. We laughed at it then, but it’s all in one portal now. Facebook. Twitter. Google. Everything goes through them.”

“That’s three portals,” someone says.

“I guess,” you say.

“Someone will dethrone them eventually,” another person says.

“Will they, though?”

No one answers. It’s a future no one can imagine. You order another round, even though you’re already way too drunk. Your beer tastes like nothing. You drink it quickly.

What if they start charging on a per-tweet basis?” you ask.

“Like, twenty five cents a tweet?”

“I mean, we’d do it, right?”

“What’s the alternative?” someone says.

“We sit with our thoughts longer, for sure. Less takes. Less trolls. Less harassment.”

“Nah.” someone says. “It’d just be rich people doing it. Paying for trolls. Paying for likes. That last shred of egalitarianism? Gone.”

“Rich people don’t care about social media,” you say, while you’re looking up egalitarianism on your phone.

“That dopamine rush? It’s worth more than money.”

You hold your phone up to your mouth. “Siri, Google how dopamine works.” After several tries, it finally recognizes your voice. It takes you to the Wikipedia page. There is so much information there and you don’t know where to begin. After a quick glance, you put your phone away. You think about the Microsoft commercial

with Common where he says that this generation has all the knowledge and power at the tip of their fingers. You've seen that commercial a lot, and it makes you feel restless and bored. You feel something cogent bubbling up inside of you, but the second you try to put it into words, it slips away.

The night wraps up. You take an Uber home. It arrives right outside minutes after you call—everyone is driving for Uber now. Your driver, like every other driver, asks how your night went. “Good,” you say. You make small talk about how he likes driving for Uber. He says it's decent work—he likes setting his own hours and making money on the side. He sounds like an Uber ad, but it fills the space. You pull out your phone and check out your Father John Misty tweet. Nobody new has liked it. These companies think they can come in and disrupt the market by skirting labor laws and union regulations, you think. It's just like Amazon. They're going to open up something in your city soon, but what it is exactly, you're not entirely sure.

When you get back to your apartment, you're careful not to wake up your three roommates. You're not tired, so you sit on your couch, alone in the dark. You don't feel like turning the lights on. You think about Postmates-ing something when you hear footsteps coming from outside. You're scared for a moment, but then you remember the apartment next door is an Air BnB. People come and go at all hours. You try to imagine what their lives must be like, but none of it feels real.

The other day you saw a woman staying over there. Early twenties at most. You passed her in the hall. She was coming in and you were leaving. You didn't smile, because that would be weird, but you tried to let her know through your general demeanor that you were not a threat. You don't know why you're thinking of her. You can barely remember what she looked like. It'd used to be that people knew their neighbors, you think, reminiscing about a time you don't remember. You lament that there's no way to look her up on Facebook and message her without her name. They'll figure that one out soon, though. It's the one axiom of technology—everything gets better with time. You plug your phone in and scroll through Tinder. It's amazing all these people are wide awake and ready for sex. You imagine them all lined up in the same well-lit room instead of where they actually are—in their tiny apartments with bad ventilation, sweating their asses off in their full-size beds, bathed in the light of their phones, scrolling. Apropos of nothing, you think you would like to have a child one day. But with whom?

NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

It was a term Laurie learned in therapy. Laurie's therapist taught her that negative thoughts were automatic negative thoughts that Laurie's brain has without her even realizing it. There was no better way to define it other than using the phrase in the definition, Laurie's therapist said. Things like "I'll never get the promotion" or "of course that guy won't go on a second date with me—nobody ever likes me" are examples of common negative thoughts, Laurie's therapist told her.

"I don't think those things," Laurie said.

"That's fine," Laurie's therapist said. "They are just examples."

Laurie's therapist told Laurie her goal for next week was to make a mental note whenever she was having a negative thought. "What's important right now is that you're aware of them when you have them," she said.

"How do I do that?" Laurie asked.

"You think to yourself, that's a negative thought," she said. "Or you could write it down, if that's easier."

"It probably isn't," Laurie said. Laurie's therapist agreed, and said that just being cognizant of negative thoughts would suffice.

"Can't I just learn to stop the negative thoughts before I have them?" Laurie asked.

"Let's try playing Chopsticks before we jump straight into Mozart," Laurie's therapist said.

"Asshole," Laurie thought.

"Makes sense," Laurie said.

Laurie, like a lot of you, said things that were different than what was on her mind. You and Laurie have a lot more in common than you might think. Laurie is about your age and likes a lot of the same music and TV shows you like. She's funny, but not one of those people who hog the spotlight and demand to be the center of attention. She is smart, but constantly feels bad that she isn't smarter, and hates that

everyone she hangs out with seems to know ten times more than she does on every little thing that comes up in the news. She used to love reading fiction, but now she doesn't for no real reason, and she occasionally wonders why that is. She's got a tattoo somewhere, but she's not gonna show it to you until she feels more comfortable with you. She's the kind of person you'd meet at a friend's birthday party and instantly have a crush on, or talk to her for five minutes and want to be her best friend. She's not the most obvious author stand-in character in the world, but it's like, come on. We all know the score.

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Laurie's first negative thought was about her recently self-published novel. Laurie is a writer, like a lot of protagonists. The thing about writers is they like to write about writers in the hopes that they accidentally end up learning something about themselves. It's a self-obsessed exercise that I'm clearly not above.

Laurie's first negative thought was that nobody was going to read her self-published novel, and that she had wasted three and a half years of her life writing it. Like most writer protagonists, Laurie's fears are my own fears, but exaggerated just enough so I can maintain some healthy distance and plausible deniability. I don't know who I think I'm fooling, though.

When Laurie had the negative thought, she was in her car driving to get groceries. She was stuck in traffic and listening to a particularly boring stretch of a podcast, which caused her mind to worry about her novel. "That's a negative thought," Laurie thought. "It'd probably be more helpful if I said it out loud."

"That's a negative thought!" Laurie said. It *was* more helpful! Laurie felt lighter. She started smiling. She switched off the podcast and put on the radio. It was playing one Laurie's favorite songs and she started to sing along. "With limp arms I can feel most of you / I hung around your neck independently / and my loss was overwhelmed / by this new depth and I don't think I ever felt / but I don't know / the nights are cold / and I remember warmth / I could have sworn / I wasn't alone"

Laurie was unsure why they were playing a Microphones song from sixteen years ago on the radio, but I'm writing the story, so I get to wave it away by saying it was a college radio station.

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Laurie's second negative thought came inside the supermarket. Laurie was already a bit annoyed, as she had to go back to her Toyota Camry (such a Laurie car) after she was already inside the supermarket because she forgot her reusable bags in the car. I always do this, so Laurie does it, too.

"Get some summer produce," Laurie reminded herself. She picked up a few tomatoes and avocados and put them in her basket. "I want something sweet. It should be fruit," she thought. She looked at a peach, decided it was bruised, and put it back. "Maybe I'll just spring for some blueberries," she thought. She went over to the blueberries, but they were way too expensive. "Maybe I'll just get some candy. Ugh, I'm such a piece of shit," she thought.

"That's a negative thought!" she said. She covered her mouth, instantly aware of how weird it was to excitedly shout that out loud. She hurried to the candy aisle, but I don't need to bore you with her entire grocery trip. Like Laurie, I often think I'm a piece of shit, usually for things just as small as buying some candy instead of fruit. It's such a stupid thing to get down on yourself for, especially since Laurie is, like, really healthy even though she constantly thinks she's overweight, and looks really good even though she hates how her stomach looks. It's funny how much easier it is for me to be sympathetic to Laurie. Something I learned in my therapy is that we treat other people better than we treat ourselves. This applies to our characters too, I suppose. I don't think Laurie is a piece of shit. I am looking back at the ways I wrote her, especially the part about everyone wanting to be her best friend. She's not a piece of shit. She's just not.

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Laurie came home to her boyfriend, or her girlfriend, or maybe even her husband or her wife. Laurie's sexuality or relationship status doesn't matter, but it's important that she's with someone, because I'm with someone, and I need Laurie to help me figure this out.

Laurie's live-in romantic partner was sitting on the couch. Their cat and dog were there, too. Laurie has pets that she loves and that love her back. Laurie's live-in romantic partner was watching something on Netflix or Hulu or Amazon Prime

or any of the other streaming services they subscribe to. What they were watching doesn't really matter. It's something binge-able, but not very good. It will run for a couple seasons, because that's what everything does now. This makes Laurie feel indifferent most of the times, but sometimes, when she thinks too hard about her writing career, it makes her feel defeated. She tweeted this sentiment once and it got four likes within the first ten minutes of her posting it, and that erased her negative feelings entirely.

"You're watching without me?" Laurie said as she put away the groceries.

"Sorry, I just got really into it," Laurie's live-in romantic partner said.

"Asshole," Laurie thought, even though she loved her live-in romantic partner very much. Laurie was clearly more upset about the fact that she's always the one who buys the groceries and puts them away while her live-in romantic partner just goes ahead and watches mediocre television without her, but it's easier to see from my perspective.

"Did you run the dishwasher?" Laurie said.

"No, sorry," Laurie's live-in romantic partner responded.

"You can't just sit around all day. You have to do something," Laurie said. She was referring to her live-in romantic partner's habit of getting deeply depressed and lying around, not going to work or taking care of herself. Laurie hates when her live-in romantic partner gets like this. Laurie secretly resents the fact that her live-in romantic partner can afford to go through these depressive phases because she comes from money. You didn't know that about Laurie's live-in romantic partner, but now that you do, does it change how you feel about them?

"I don't want to have this conversation now," Laurie's live-in romantic partner said.

"You never want to have it," Laurie said. "I want to have it. Doesn't that matter to you?"

Laurie's live-in romantic partner grunted something nonsensical, causing Laurie to throw up her hands.

"You're such an asshole!" Laurie said, her words finally lining up with her thoughts.

"What do you want me to say to that?" Laurie's live-in romantic partner said.

"Nothing," Laurie said. "Forget I said anything."

"Why can't I help her?" Laurie thought. "If only I was a better partner." It was a negative thought that she failed to recognize, but I caught it. It's easier for me to recognize that one because it's one I'd never really have, which is surprising to me,

because I thought for sure Laurie was supposed to be like me in this story. If I'm being really honest, I'm far more like Laurie's live-in romantic partner than I am like Laurie. It's clear to me now that Laurie is far too giving, far too kind, and far too cool to be my stand-in. I mean, she wrote a novel, for Pete's sake. That's more than most people ever do—who cares if anyone reads it? And she's doing so many interesting things that I can't wait to tell you about. She's working on a piece of experimental theater and she's got an idea for a podcast that probably won't get a lot of downloads but it will creatively make her feel good. Did I mention that she's funny? And she loves to ask people questions about themselves, like where their family is from and what's the one thing they want to accomplish this year? She doesn't interrupt people like I do, she never feels stupid in front of her peers like I do, or lie because she just doesn't feel like helping. She remembers the important things, like her parents' wedding anniversary (April 4th, same as her father's birthday), and the name of the writer that spoke at her college and the title his book that she bought for eighteen books in an independent book store in San Francisco (Al Burian's "Burn Collector") But maybe I shouldn't beat myself up too much. I may not be Laurie yet, but I'm trying, and like simply recognizing the negative thought, it'll have to do for now.

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