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Abstract

This creative thesis is a novel about two boys named Chad Quinn and Leo Bishop and their adventures as the “Revengers,” a pair of semi-superheroic vigilantes. I started writing the book during the summer of 2009 and have spent the last two years rewriting and revising. This novel is my first and is not meant to be autobiographical, although certain characters and events may have been inspired by real life. The characters live in a Midwestern city and most of the story takes place in a period of four years that stretches from their sophomore year of high school, when they meet, to their first year of college. It’s a story about love, friendship and how one discovers what he or she wants to do with his or her life.
Acknowledgements

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# Table of Contents

1. The Revengers ........................................... 1
2. Megs .................................................... 16
3. Unconscious Holes in One ............................. 33
4. No Better Introduction ................................ 50
5. A Field Full of Knives ................................ 66
6. The Ill-Tempered Wasp ............................... 96
7. Dreaming of Montreal ................................ 118
8. The Camouflage Mob .................................. 137
9. A Trip Down the Road ................................ 152
10. Exercising Heads ..................................... 170
11. The Avenging Lark .................................... 189
12. Us, Now .................................................. 201
1. The Revengers

The Sex Press dispenser was a bright, obnoxious, maize color, with the words “Sex Press” written on the side in neon-pink letters. I found it particularly offensive because it was loud and drew attention to itself, upstaging the dispensers for the decent publications around it like our local paper and The USA Today, but at the same time there wasn’t anything overtly pornographic about it, so it wasn’t as if I could complain to the mayor’s office or something. How many innocent eyes had it captured as it sat there on a busy city corner, smug and self-satisfied like the annoying little brother who knows how to get under your skin without actually saying or doing anything?

Like most of our Acts of Vengeance, destroying the Sex Press box was Chad’s idea. I was the first to notice it since it was only a few blocks away from my part-time job at the paper and after I pointed it out to Chad he said that it was a disgusting blight on the cityscape. We
agreed to make the dispenser the next target of our Vengeance, and it was times like this I was grateful to be a Revenger. I’m sure most people who walked by it didn’t care for the Sex Press box and they probably wanted to see it taken away, but they just went about their lives, convinced there was nothing to be done. What if the images inside inspired a reader to cheat on his wife or commit rape? What if a future Ted Bundy visited the box every week? Then I’m sure those people who just walked by would wish they’d been strong enough to do something about it. But Chad and I, we were strong enough, and even though I didn’t always feel comfortable with our Acts of Vengeance, this one seemed worthwhile.

We sat in his father’s pickup truck downtown at 2:30 a.m. Normally, we would have used one of our cars, but for this particular operation we would need more cargo space. The night was dark, but not pitch black (it never is in the city). We’d been watching the Sex Press box for the past fifteen minutes from across the street, waiting to see how often pedestrians walked by. It shined its taunting, arrogant yellow as it reflected dim light.

“Should we go for it?” I said. No one had been by for the past few minutes.

“I think it’s time,” Chad said. He grinned at me as he opened the car door. The Sex Press magazine was little more than sixty-four, glossy photos of nude women broken up by the occasional typo-filled article. My original suggestion had been to take all those magazines out of the dispenser so there wouldn’t be any the next day, but that would have cost us $1.50, and as Chad pointed out giving money to people who published smut was counter-intuitive. Besides, they would just fill it up again with the next issue. Stealing the actual box was Chad’s idea.

“There’s no way the douche bags who publish this shit are going to miss hearing about it,” he had said. “They’ll be sitting in their studio, or on the set of some shitty porno movie
they’re shooting or whatever, and they’ll say, ‘Hey, did you hear that someone stole our vending machine?’ There’s no way they can miss getting the message.”

“But what if they just put another one right back up?” I had said.

“Then we’ll steal that one, too. Or maybe we’ll cover it in graffiti or something, I don’t know. The point is to send a message.” I didn’t dare ask the obvious question of “What if we get caught?” We were Revengers. Worrying about being punished for undertaking an action that was for the betterment of society was inappropriate and cowardly. In the end, I agreed to his plan and decided to be grateful he wasn’t married to another idea, like cherry-bombing the Adult Superstore just off the Intestate.

Chad and I jogged across the street and up to the yellow vending machine. I ran lightly on my toes to muffle any noise, as if a cop were hiding behind the corner, waiting to commence a sting operation. The dispenser’s metal was rust-free and new-looking, and I knew from some advanced scouting it wasn’t bolted to the pavement. As I clutched it I felt a quick pang of guilt. I was majoring in journalism and I was a reporter for the school newspaper. I worked part-time at the city’s paper. I was a Revenger, but I was also supposed to believe in the value of a free press, and Sex Press, no matter how low and odious it may have been, still enjoyed some First Amendment privileges.

But as I looked at Chad, bending at the knees as he prepared to lift, I knew whatever feelings I had were irrelevant. If he said the Act of Vengeance was on, then it was on. If he said it was off, then it was off. Sure, I could have my own feelings and opinions about everything from gas prices to old sushi, but Chad’s opinion always mattered to me for better or for worse. I never wanted to give him cause to think less of me. I stifled the feeling that I was being anti-American, rationalizing that it wasn’t OK to abuse the Constitution the way pornographers did.
Exploiting women and catering to humanity’s base urges was a sin, and the most important thing was to stop that. I could only give to Caesar what was Caesar’s, after all.

“Ready?” Chad said. “One, two, three.” He lifted up the vending machine base and I held the top portion, the actual box where the magazines were kept. To me, the apparatus was cumbersome and heavy, but Chad didn’t seem to think so. I was well aware of Chad’s physical strength, but as I looked at the taut muscles in his bare arms, I was grateful he was bearing most of the weight.

“All right, walk,” he said. We hustled the dispenser across the street (I felt like the Pink Panther theme should have been playing), and went to the back of the truck. In one agile motion, Chad hopped into the bed and backed up, gently laying his half of the machine down. I tried to let my end down, but I dropped it. The box head clanged against the metal truck bed, sending a loud boom across the city block.

“Shit!” Chad hissed, scuttling to the point of impact. He tenderly lifted the head up to reveal a large, unsightly dent in the truck bed. There were other dents, but this new one was probably the biggest. My face went hot and Chad looked at me, a peeved and unsettling glare in his eyes. I was prepared to offer excuses and promises to pay for truck repairs, but then he looked at the machine, caressing the display glass as if he were soothing a crying baby. I could see the new week’s copies of the smut rag scattered about inside the box.

“Sorry about that,” I mumbled.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, his voice surprisingly gentle. He looked at me, his eyes now disarming. “Let’s get out of here before someone sees us.”

He tied the machine down with cables in the truck bed and we jumped in the car. Normally this was the time for us to laugh and congratulate ourselves over another successful
Act of Vengeance, but I was still embarrassed, both for damaging the truck and for almost blowing the operation.

“Hey man, I’m really sorry about the dent,” I said as we swerved off the interstate, nearing my home.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. He waved his hand dismissively. “I’ll use the Ding King on it and my dad won’t notice.”

“Oh, good,” I said, not entirely assuaged but feeling better. “At least we didn’t get caught.”

“Hell yeah we didn’t get caught,” Chad said. “When you’re doing a public service sometimes God looks out for you, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said as we pulled into my neighborhood. “And now that fucking wart isn’t on the street anymore where little kids can see it.”

“Definitely,” he said. “I’m glad we did something about it.”

“Me too.” We pulled into my driveway. By now it was well past 3:00 a.m., but my parents were used to my staying out late at night with Chad, especially on the weekends when a Chad-and-Leo session of gallivanting was the norm, so I wasn’t worried about having to sneak back inside the house. I said goodbye, but as I hopped out I glanced at the Sex Press vending machine.

“Wait a second,” I said. “What are we going to do with, you know, the thing?”

“I was going to go dump it in the river. I know the perfect drop-off point on my way home,” he said.

“Are you sure you can do that alone?” I said.

“Yes, Mr. Butter Dick,” he snapped. “I think I can handle it on my own.”
“Oh, uh, OK,” I said. I shut the door and backed away. He pulled out of my driveway and drove down the block. As he turned the corner the Sex Press box caught the glow from the streetlight. It flashed, like it was winking at me.

I left for classes the next morning at an hour before my usual departure time. I drove to the dispenser’s old home on the street corner, curious to see if last night’s escapade was having any morning-after repercussions. There was a police cruiser near where the box had been and there was a small scene involving an officer and some other men whose jobs I couldn’t glean from their clothing or mannerisms. There was a general lack of urgency, so I guessed they had been there for awhile already. Instead, I parked and joined a small crowd of onlookers on the other side of the street.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I said to a short woman who appeared to be there alone. She had stark-white hair and a droopy mouth ringed by wrinkles, and she wore a blue-and-white headscarf. At her feet were two grocery bags full of cans.

“Looks like some vandal made off with a newspaper box,” she said, her voice soft and deep.

“Wow,” I said. I didn’t look at her.

“Oh well, it was the box with the pornography in it,” she said.

“Oh, really?” I said. “Why would someone do that?”

“I don’t know,” she growled as she bent down to pick up her bags. “But whoever it is deserves a medal.”

I felt like she may as well have said “Keep up the good work, Revengers.” The superheroes in the comics were always receiving affirmations that what they were doing was right and just, and when their efforts were ignored or spurned they carried on anyway until the
page came when the faceless, adoring public told them how great they were. Shouldn’t the Revengers get that same praise, even if just once in a while?

“Do you need any help with your bags, ma’am?” I said.

She squinted at me and turned her shoulder, saying: “I can do it myself, thank you.”

The snub notwithstanding, I had a fine morning. Classes seemed shorter, the discussions livelier and the night’s assigned homework more doable. I met Chad in the commons outside the library. His textbooks rested in a huge stack on the table, but to see his wide grin you would think those books had read themselves already.

“How’d the dumping go last night?” I said as I sat down.

“I hefted it out of the truck, smashed the glass with a rock and dropped it in the water. It sank like a fucking brick,” he said. “I’m almost sorry you didn’t get to see it. It was kind of cool watching the piece-of-shit magazines float away.”

“Huh. You mean you didn’t keep them?” I said, jokingly.

“Now why would I keep them?” he said. His tone was clipped and he slightly accented the word “keep.” The thought that maybe he had saved the pornography hadn’t occurred to me until then, but I dismissed it. That wouldn’t be in the proper Revenging spirit, and Chad took the Revenging Spirit very seriously.

“Relax, I’m just teasing,” I said. “How’s your day been?”

“Fucking great,” he said. “Guess who saw our Act of Vengeance on the morning news?”

“Wait,” I said. I stopped midzip on my backpack. “We were on the news?”

“It wasn’t anything big,” he said. He popped a can of Mountain Dew. “They mentioned a newspaper dispenser for the Sex Press was missing and they had some footage of the street corner.”
“So, it’s not like a hidden camera caught us or anything?” I said. This was the Digital Age after all and I knew pretty much how the world worked: you could be caught on camera anywhere at any time and in a few days the skeletons in your closet would be robed in flesh.

“No, no one saw us. Stop being a pussy,” he said. His nose flared and he rolled his eyes.

“You don’t even know the best part yet: Megs saw the story.”

I liked Megs, I really did, so I had a hard time explaining to myself why I didn’t like talking about her. She felt like a worn and tired subject, one we’d discussed too many times, like whether Ruffles or Lays were tastier. But Chad and I talked about many things more than once. We’d repeated old debates, dreams, opinions, jokes, fears and pieces of sage wisdom to each other dozens of times. I’m almost sure that once we repeated a conversation about the NHL lockout verbatim, one we’d had a year hence. So I couldn’t understand why I didn’t feel like talking about her.

“Oh, that’s nice,” I said. He looked at me eagerly, waiting for me to go on. “What did she say?”

“She said she was glad, and these were her words: ‘It’s nice to see someone else hates pornography.’ ” He smiled, looking very satisfied.

“You didn’t tell her it was us, did you?” I said.

“No, not this time. But still, isn’t it great that someone else has our back?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “Great.”

*  

Chad Quinn and I met in high school, long before he’d taken on the persona of the Avenging Lark, the masked vigilante with a violent streak. I can’t help but tune into “Lark Watch” every now and then, kind of like a Democrat who can’t help but watch Bill O’Reilly. I’m
sure you’ve seen it: it’s the program where the fat guy with the long hair who wears the T-shirts expressing love for heavy metal bands from the ‘80s sits for a half hour, filling in the audience about the latest movements of the world’s most popular, real-life superhero. It irritates me when that guy calls himself “The Avenging Lark’s Number One Fan.” He feels he has a right to that title because he “knows more than anyone else out there about the Avenging Lark.” This usually prompts me to say “bullshit” out loud to the screen when he says it.

We met in show choir of all places, hardly the place you’d expect to meet a superhero. At the time, I was a sophomore transfer at a new school, searching for an identity. My parents that summer had decided to move us to a newer, bigger home in a different neighborhood and school district. I didn’t know anyone at my new school, so the first few weeks of that fall semester were spent trying to find new people to call friends. I felt it was important to find a niche, a place where I could feel like I was making some kind of contribution to the school, a way to justify my existence in the social landscape. But I’m naturally shy and not very good about meeting people, which most find unbelievable when I tell them. I have a hard time explaining this quirk to myself, actually. Maybe it’s because I always get the feeling that, whenever I meet new people they’re already comfortable with themselves. They’re well established with friends, maybe jobs and, if they’re really lucky, purpose. Why would they need to take on the added responsibility of a charity case like me? I feel like the only way I have permission to make new friends, so to speak, is if they approach me, first.

I auditioned for show choir when I arrived at my new school because I like music, I didn’t know how to play an instrument and the regular concert choir, the one without the dancing, was an actual class that met during first period, one I couldn’t quit if I didn’t like it. I didn’t know what to think about singing and dancing to show tunes in front of large crowds of
people, but I joined in the spirit of wanting to try new things. To be honest, I don’t even remember the first time or circumstances when I laid eyes on Chad. I saw him at rehearsals and talked to him a few times, but we didn’t have a conversation of any considerable length or consequence. I probably should have recognized a kindred spirit, another shy student who didn’t have any social comfort zone, but even though I liked him well enough I wasn’t moved to spend time around him.

In the end, I only lasted a few months in show choir. Giving up Saturdays to perform in competitions our group never won didn’t endear me to it. Mostly, though, I didn’t get along with the tyrannical choir director Mrs. Tremayne, a severe, horse-faced woman with frizzy blonde hair who claimed show choir was her favorite thing in the whole wide world. I found that hard to believe since it always put her in a bad mood. Every morning we would start rehearsal, never making it far before she stopped playing the piano to yell at us, call us stupid and ask why we couldn’t dance and sing at the same time. Then she started playing, we stumbled and sang out of tune and then she stopped.

Rehearsals were at 7 a.m., before school started. I wasn’t comfortable waking up at the early hour to prepare for school, especially so I could go to an activity I was fairly sure I didn’t like, so I was rarely on time. On the morning when my run with the show choir came to an inglorious end I was fifteen minutes late, which was a little more than usual. Mrs. Tremayne was addressing the other twenty-four bleary-eyed students in a group, so there was no chance of sneaking on stage in the middle of the routine when she might have been busy playing the piano.

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you guys,” she said. She pounded a bladed hand into her open palm for emphasis. “You need to be more enthusiastic. Smile. Look like you’re having fun up there, even if you have to fake—” She stopped for a moment to glare at me
as I slinked up on stage and to the back of the group. The other group members, who looked annoyed and tired, also briefly glanced at me. She didn’t need to say anything, having yelled at me more than once for tardiness. I was a little embarrassed, but also grateful that I wasn’t getting the Evil Eye from anyone else other than Mrs. Tremayne. In particular, I noted Chad, huddled in the back of the group. Our eyes met briefly and he shrugged his shoulders as if to say, “Hey, what can you do?”

“All right, let’s take it from the top,” Mrs. Tremayne said. “I want to see some smiles this time, even if you don’t get all the steps right. And project out when you sing. I can barely hear you from the piano.”

It was a more-or-less normal rehearsal after that, which meant a half hour of being made to look like a fool in front of the school. There was no auditorium in which we could rehearse in comfortable privacy. Instead, the show choir practiced on the stage used for school plays in the cafeteria, and the cafeteria was where students early to school gathered before morning classes. Being yelled at while trying to sing and dance wouldn’t have been so bad if we didn’t have to do it in the sight of people who found us to be annoying, worthy of derision and of ambiguous sexuality.

With a few minutes left before the first bell and the merciful start of the school day, Mrs. Tremayne stopped and addressed the group again.

“All right, we have a lot of work to do before this weekend,” she said. She scanned her eyes over a sorry lot of performers who didn’t have a chance of doing well before this upcoming competition. “Quite frankly, you guys stink right now.”
Of course we do you stupid fucking bitch. Because you make us practice in the fucking morning and make us look like idiots. I fucking hate you, I thought to myself. Something about this morning made it feel like the perfect morning to snap.

“Now, we still have a lot to cover, but I really think we need to do ‘Puff.’” There was a nervous intake of breath from a few choir members. “So let’s take it from the top.”

My least favorite song (it was probably everyone’s) was a jazzed-up version of “Puff, the Magic Dragon.” As we sang and danced our way through a song about a magical dragon making a child happy, and as I wondered for the umpteenth time what had possessed Mrs. Tremayne to pick it for our set, I could see classmates I knew, and even a few teachers, snickering at us. At one point, someone yelled “Keep toking, show choir,” which drew a chorus of guffaws. The worst part of the routine called for me, in the middle part of the song, to pirouette with a female partner named Genina Smalls and then to turn and shake my ass at the audience at the words “Puff’s gigantic tail.” This particular morning I heard someone whistle and a girl call, “Ow, ow!” It wasn’t the first time I’d been teased, nor was it the worst, but I decided right then I had had enough.

“Screw this!” I said. I threw up my hands and walked off stage right. I didn’t look back. I was sure Mrs. Tremayne would be furious, but I was worried about what kind of effect this would have on my social standing. A large portion of the school had already pegged me as one of those stupid show choir types, but now I might be outcast from the music department, too. What would happen when word got round that I had walked off on my fellow performers? What would those other students I’d left behind think of me?

Twenty minutes later, I was at my locker gathering my books for my first class and still wondering what I would say when I showed up at the next morning’s rehearsal. Chad Quinn,
whose storage space wasn’t near mine and for whom it was a rarity to be in that part of the building at that time, appeared at my locker, a grin on his face. It was the first time I’d ever seen him smile at me.

“Leo Bishop, you’re officially my hero,” he said. “That was the coolest thing I’ve ever seen.” The feeling of being called a hero by someone who was still a virtual stranger was the same feeling I would get from the bag lady a few years later on the corner opposite the newspaper dispensers.

“Thanks,” I said with a grateful smile.

“I hate that stupid, fucking song,” Chad said. He rolled his eyes. “Almost as much as the other stupid fucking songs.”

“I know. I don’t even know what I’m doing there.”

“So, I was wondering: Are you going to quit after today’s stunt, then?” he said. I noticed his backpack was filled beyond capacity with books, making it look like a big, black boulder, but it didn’t appear to discomfort him.

“I don’t know,” I said, shutting my locker. “Maybe.”

“Because I’ve been thinking about it for awhile, but I didn’t want to just be the one guy. I mean, who wants to be that one guy, the quitter? Because if it’s one guy then it’s giving up and pussying out, but if it’s more than one then it’s a movement, you know?”

“Dude, that makes so much sense,” I said. It hadn’t occurred to me what a relief it would be to have someone to link hands with, to walk forward with as the bridge behind us turned to ash.

“So, do you want to do it together?”
“That sounds like a great idea, Chad.” He extended his hand and I took it. His grip was uncomfortable and crushing, like he didn’t realize how hard it was, but I didn’t care. It felt good to be in confederacy with someone else. We sat together that day at lunch, the first of many shared, casual meals. I watched him as he ate his tuna fish sandwich: he chewed on it thoughtfully, as if he wanted to catalogue in his mind exactly how tuna fish tasted so he could explain it to someone later. He also had a habit of constantly looking in his brown paper bag, as if food might have magically appeared since the last peek.

“So, Chad,” I said. “What’s your deal? Where’d you go to middle school?”

“Nowhere around here,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m actually from Albany, N.Y. My family and I just moved here this summer.”

“Really?” I said. “That’s funny, ‘cause I’m the new guy, too.” As I explained my cross-town move, I wondered how it was the other new student in my class and I hadn’t scoped each other it. Us meeting felt like one of those things where we should have seen each other and known for the first time that we should be friends, where an embarrassing ourselves in some stupid show choir shouldn’t have been necessary.

“I was in show choir trying to meet people, to get out of the box a little bit,” I said.

“Yeah, me too,” he sighed. “What a big fucking mistake that was, huh? Honestly,” he said, leaning in confidentially, “I’m not all that big into doing lots of Church activities, but I’m kind of religious, so if this school had a Bible study or something I might have tried that.”

“What denomination?” I asked. I sipped from my milk box.

“I’m Catholic,” he said guardedly, a nervous look on his face. I understood his fear: I’d run across some unpleasant anti-Catholics in my time as well.

“Cool. Me too,” I said.
He smiled back. “Awesome,” he said. “You wanna hang out this weekend or something?”

In a community of strangers, I felt I was finally on the fast track to making a friend. Saying yes to his offer of hanging out, in addition to walking out on show choir, was another good decision. But unlike walking off the stage, the decision here wasn’t difficult at all. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.
2. Megs

Over the next several months I learned that Chad and I had a lot in common. In me, he found someone with similar though rarely identical interests in music, movies and television. For example, he said I was the only person besides him who’d seen Plan 9 from Outer Space and it was a relief to finally find someone to share laughs with about cardboard gravestones and pie-tin flying saucers. We also both listened to New Wave music, especially The Talking Heads, and we agreed that The B-52s were a major guilty pleasure, though we disagreed about which of their songs was best. I also thought we had fairly similar senses of humor—we rarely made each other laugh, perhaps because we were often thinking of making the same joke. If someone, for some reason, were to say “chlorophyll” around us, we’d almost certainly say: “Chlorophyll? More like, bore-ophyll.”
Unfortunately, as so often happens to people with whom you’re close, we shared weaknesses and more than a few insecurities, and because we shared them I think that validated them in our minds. My great hangup was loneliness. I had no siblings, and my parents had never been ones for wanting to talk about Star Wars. I was terrified of drifting from one stage of my life to the next without ever receiving a call from an old college buddy who was in town for the weekend and wanted to see if I could grab a drink. So, naturally, once I found someone who was also lonely I clung to him, perhaps too much.

Chad’s great hangup, on the other hand, was women.

He was far from handsome, which was another thing we had in common. He had terrible acne and his face was scarred from years spent picking at troublesome pimples. His plain, unassuming brown eyes were spaced far apart, creating a no-man’s land between them for the reddest zits. A few guys in our class once tried to give him the nickname “Hammerhead,” but it never stuck. He had a square, jagged nose which was permanently disfigured in a pair of unfortunate childhood accidents, he said, in which he fell off his bicycle twice in the span of two weeks.

The only physical thing about Chad that high school girls may have found attractive was his body. Chad’s muscles have always been one of life’s great mysteries. He wasn’t exactly Herculean, but his school uniform betrayed their outlines, showing him to be someone not to be taken lightly in an arm-wrestling match. Outside school, his clothing was calculated so as to best show his frame, and he was usually more willing than me to spend time at the community pool. I assumed at first that he must workout often to cultivate his physique, but I soon learned he never exercised and ate more pizza than anyone I knew. I exercised on a regular basis and I always looked gangly and lanky no matter how many squats I squatted. It seemed unfair. In fact, it still
seems unfair, especially since I wasn’t any better-looking myself. My skin, though free of acne, was incapable of tanning. A pale complexion, combined with my natural lankiness, gave me a constant appearance of sickness. A high, nasally voice didn’t help, either.

What this meant was that we were both virgins, a fact that didn’t take me long to learn. I was over at his house one night, about month after we had quit show choir. We were watching Road Trip, a funny-enough movie in which a female character is attracted to a male character for some reason not apparent to the audience.

“They make it look so easy,” Chad said, more to himself I suspected.

“What? You mean hooking up?” I said. I propped up on my elbow from my sprawled-out spot on the couch.

“Yeah,” he said. He scratched his chin where some stubble had accrued. “I mean, how do some assholes get so lucky? I mean, it’s not like I would have sex, because it’s a sin and everything, but still, it would be nice to be wanted.”

“Well, you’re not alone in that boat,” I said, looking back at the screen where the main girl was removing her shirt. The look on the main guy’s face suggested that he couldn’t believe how lucky he was about to be.

“You’ve never had a girlfriend?” he said, a trace of relief in his voice knowing that he’d found we were kindred spirits in another area.

“Never even come close,” I said.

“You know how pathetic I am?” he said. “In the eighth grade I was at this party where we were playing spin the bottle. Some girl landed on me and she bitched out and wouldn’t do it.”

“That sucks,” I said. “I guess that makes us a couple of extra virgins.”

“What?” he said. He muted the television.
“Extra virgins, because we’re really pure. I just made that up,” I said. I grinned at him, but he didn’t smile back. I would continue to use the term “extra virgin,” but I think Chad took exception to the label, as if being called an extra virgin were doubly humiliating. Maybe, to him, “extra virgin” meant “one who is never ever ever ever going to have sex under any circumstances whatsoever.” I didn’t think it all that odd we were still virgins, but even then I could hear the desperation in Chad’s voice, the fear of sitting at a roulette table where everyone else was somehow winning on a wheel full of zeroes.

Even though I knew about his insecurities with women early on, Chad was surprisingly tightlipped about which women he preferred. I saw him in the halls on free-dress days scamming on some of the attractive, popular girls in low-cut jeans and shirts that didn’t quite cover their midriffs, but that was normal for all the guys at school and didn’t tell me much about his tastes. The only specifics I could drag from him were that he didn’t like red hair because a cheek-pinching aunt of his had flaming-red hair and that he wanted a woman with a good laugh, a laugh that was genuine and full, the one that could only come from a happy soul. Around most women, though, especially ones I thought were attractive, Chad tended to be quiet and sullen, as if their presence ruined his mood. I once tried telling him that he should probably be more polite and friendly around women, but this only elicited a shrug, a “maybe” and a quick change of topic.

Finally, though, Chad found the woman he was looking for, or he’d decided on her for awhile and was only letting me know his feelings about her then. I learned of his dream woman’s existence on a Monday, just as school was letting out. Again, as with the show choir incident, he met me at my locker to signal a major shift in the dynamics of our relationship.

“Hey, you want to stick around for a couple of minutes?” he said.
“What for?” I said. I didn’t have that much homework, but without an after-school activity or a sport I had no reason to stay.

“I want to see someone who’s in the play.” He fingered the strap on his backpack.

I shrugged and said “OK,” reminding myself that the evening was young and free and there would be plenty of time to relax.

We went to the cafeteria where rehearsal for “Bye Bye Birdie” was already in progress. Recently cast and early in production, the students fumbled through their lines, their scripts still in their hands. I bitterly wondered why the drama kids could rehearse in plain sight but didn’t invite jeering and heckling the way the show choir did. Maybe it was because Mrs. Tremayne didn’t direct the musicals.

“So who’s this person you wanted to see?” I said.

“She’s about to come on,” he said. As if on cue, the girl playing Kim MacAfee strolled on stage. In a way, it was like seeing a girl from the past, a pink, poodle skirt-wearing girl with a small amount of tasteful makeup who would meet you at the malt shop, but only if you promised to get her home by 6:30. Her blonde hair was done up in a bouffant and her high voice was melodious and pleasant, but I wondered if its sweetness would become annoying after awhile, like birthday cake with too much frosting and not enough batter.

“Is that her?” I said.

“Yeah,” Chad said, his voice quiet and distant, as if he were watching a really interesting movie. A contemplative half-smile was on his face.

“What’s her name?”

“Megan Hepworth. She goes by Megs.”
She was cute, that much was undeniable. She had a button nose, and she walked with a confident ease that had to be attributable to more than the fact that she was a good actor (she had all her lines memorized and, from what I could see, she was perfect for Kim McAfee). I could sense why Chad might think she was striking, but she didn’t turn me on. Maybe it was her cat-like eyes that didn’t suit her, or that she had a habit of standing with her hands behind her back, a pose I’ve always thought looks sneaky. There wasn’t anything really wrong with her, per se, but for some reason, as far as first impressions went, I wasn’t really attracted to her.

“We have a couple of classes together,” Chad said. He looked at me and smiled with a peculiar happiness. “It’s funny, because I didn’t really notice her at first, but then we had to be lab partners in biology. You’re doing the lab where we have to dissect the frog, right?” I said yes, so he went on: “She was really creeped out by it, so I stuck a Mentos in the frog’s mouth and she cracked up. Ever since we’ve been hanging out in class and stuff.”

“Is she a good student?”

“Yeah, and she’s as sweet as all-get-out, just a really, authentically nice kind of person. You want to meet her?”

I wanted to go home, but I wanted more to see what kind of girl could have such an impact on my friend, so I agreed. A few minutes later, the director, a teacher named Mr. Hannah, a man with thinning, combed-over blond hair and Buddy Hollies whose classes I had never taken and to whom I had never spoken, signaled for a quick break. Megs, who was onstage, broke character, but her smile didn’t vanish, nor did the spring in her step. Chad waved to her and when she saw him her smile widened. Her walk was just short of skipping as she came down from the stage to us. As she drew closer, I saw there was a slight discoloration between her eyes,
running from the bridge of her nose up her forehead. It wasn’t a scar, just a line of skin that was paler than the rest of her face. I wondered how it had come to be.

“Hey Chad!” she said, her voice still sugary. “Who’s your friend?”

“Hey Megs,” he said. “This is Leo Bishop, the guy I met in show choir. He’s the one who walked off stage.” I gave a half-wave I imagined looked casual.

“Oh yeah! Chad told me about that,” she said. “That was really brave.”

“Oh,” I said. I stumbled over my next words before slurring out, “Not really.” I wanted to play it cool, but I was honestly caught by surprise that a cute girl would describe me as “brave.”

“So, is Leo short for Leopold? Because then it would be like Leopold Bloom.”

“No, sorry,” I said, not knowing what she was talking about because I’d yet to hear of James Joyce. “It’s short for Leonard.”

“Nice,” she said with a nod. She turned her attention back to Chad. “What are you doing here then?”

“Just seeing what there is to see,” Chad said. He crossed his arms and, I noticed, flexed his muscles a little. “We were going to head out pretty soon, but I wanted to see how the play was going.”

“You know,” she said, dropping the smile momentarily and widening her eyes. “If you want, we need people for stage crew. You said earlier you were looking to get back into activities.” This information surprised me since Chad hadn’t mentioned to me that he was interested in doing school activities again.

“We were thinking about it,” he said casually.

“Well, if you’re interested, you should tell Mr. Hannah. I’d love to see you around,” she said. She gave Chad the flirty smile again. Mr. Hannah, meanwhile, was calling out in a soft,
wispy voice for the cast members to resume their places. “Gotta run. It was nice meeting you, Leo.” She hopped back on stage and soon was in a new scene, the one where she agrees to take Conrad Birdie out for a night on the town. But before she started acting again she grinned and twinkled her fingers at Chad.

“Since when are we joining stage crew?” I said.

“Don’t you think it might be fun?” he said. “I think I’ll do it.”

“I don’t know anything about building sets.”

“Look, Leo, I don’t know anyone here, and I’d like there to be someone I could hang out with,” he said, a soft, pleading look in his eyes. I glanced at Megs, who was asking Mr. Hannah about how to deliver a certain line. You’ll have Megs, I almost said, but I thought that might sound snarky and mean.

“Well, all right,” I said. It was important to him, and it would be good to make a sacrifice on behalf of the friendship, I thought. Plus, if he was going to do stage crew and I wasn’t it meant seeing less of him for a few months. We told Mr. Hannah of our interest and were tasked that day with picking wood out of the lumber pile to use in building the sets.

Because he could carry more lumber and build sets faster than anyone else, Chad turned out to be more suited to manual labor than me, so I was taught how to operate the sound board. That was OK with me as we still spent a lot of time together for the next few months.

One day after school, I went to Chad’s house. I find him down to the basement with Megs, watching Sixteen Candles.

“Hey Leo,” Chad said. He glanced at Megs and then gave me a wide, toothy smile as if to say Look at what I got!

“Are we all going out together then?” I said.
“Yeah,” Chad said. “The movie’s almost over. I just have to piss before we go out.” At the word “piss,” Megs giggled and beamed one of her smiles at Chad as he walked to the bathroom.

“So, you think the play’s going to be good?” I said to Megs, the two of us alone now.

“Yeah, I think so,” she said, her voice bright but her eyes bored as she looked at me. We stared at each other.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you,” I said. “Do you like sports?”

“No, not really,” she said. She gave a few short, quick shakes of her head.

“Really? None at all?”

“My parents tried to get me to play soccer when I was little, but I didn’t like it.”

“Well, there’s your problem,” I said. “It’s soccer.”

“Maybe,” she said. Megs and I were friendly, but we rarely had a lot to talk about. I was fine with being her friend without making her a bosom buddy, and I think she felt the same about me. Chad frequently invited her to spend time with us outside of school. I could tell he desperately wanted us all to be friends, for her to be our third Musketeer. I did see a lot of her in high school, and I spent more than a few Saturdays with her at Village Inn, but she wasn’t around us often enough that I would say the three of us constituted a “group.”

Eventually, we got to the point where the play was a week away, and I had to admit I was having a good time. The production looked polished and well-acted, the sets were finished and I had gotten to know some of the cast and crew. As I switched off the sound board, Jackson Fitz, the actor who played Hugo, came up to me. He was tall and skinny, but unlike me, who looked sick and bony, he carried his thinness well, lean and languid, like a perfectly stuffed scarecrow.
“Hey Leo,” he said. He smirked at me, but by now I’d figured out that smirking was just his natural facial pose. “Some of us are meeting up at my house on Saturday for a study group because we usually get behind in school during the play.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Sounds like fun.” This was the first time anyone in school other than Chad or Megs had invited me to do anything.

“Cool. I’ll Facebook you directions,” he said. We didn’t say anything for a few seconds, and I found myself wishing I had something witty up my sleeve, seeing as how the opportunity to make a new friend was at hand. Eventually, he said, “By the way, what do you think about Megs?”

“Megs?” I said. “She’s nice, I guess.”

“Cool,” he said, but now there was something I didn’t like in the smirk, like I was talking to a spy who was secretly interrogating me.

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” he said. He shrugged.

“Sometimes, I wonder if she’s too nice, you know?” I said. The potential friend now seemed like an antagonist, and I felt I owed it to Chad to discourage whatever feelings Jackson might have for Megs.

“If you say so,” he said. He smirked wider, as if to let me know that he was on to me and knew what I was thinking. “See you later.” He walked away, and as I stared after him, Chad came up to me and said he was ready to go.

“Is Megs coming with us to go laser tagging on Friday?” I said.

“No, she’s trying to catch up on some school work because the play has taken up so much time.”
“Oh, OK. Just as well,” I said. I wasn’t sure why I added the caveat at the end, but I guess it slipped out.

“Why? Do you not like her spending time around us?” Chad said, sounding defensive.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” I said. “I know she makes you happy.”

“Yeah, she does,” he said. By now we were in the parking lot, waiting for his dad to pick us up. The April night was pleasantly muggy, and I could hear cicadas in an angry chorus. It was the first time he’d explicitly admitted to me that he was attracted to her. “She really does.”

“Are you going to ask her out?” I said.

“After the play is over, when we’re not so busy.” A pause. “You think she’ll say yes?”

“Shit yeah,” I said. “She’s always so flirty when she’s around you.”

“Yeah, but she’s kind of like that with everyone,” he said, his face suddenly worried.

“She’s not really like that with me,” I said, which was true. “If you like her, you should go for it.”

“You’re right. When you’re right, you’re right. And you’re right,” he said. We were silent for a few moments, reflecting on the fact that one of us was about to make a brave leap of actually trying to win a girl’s heart. I didn’t mind he was trying first.

“You know what she’s like?” Chad said. He gestured with his hand toward some blank space in the air, as if there were a picture there he wanted me to look at. “I’ve been thinking this over for a while so bear with me, all right? I’m like this big, ugly demon or gargoyle or something sitting on top of a mountain, looking down into this valley. Remember that scene in Fantasia where they play ‘A Night on Bald Mountain?’ ” I said yes. “I’m like that, except I’m not evil like that demon: just ugly and alone and no one likes me.”
“Come on, you’re not like that,” I said. I felt it was appropriate to interrupt and offer my confederate some obligatory sympathy.

“No, I know, it’s just like that for the story,” he said impatiently. “Anyway, I’m sitting on my mountain and these angels are playing down in the valley. I can’t see what they’re doing, exactly, but they’re just kind of running around, and they’re really fast. Then one, and this one’s Megs, makes a big leap in a single bound up to my mountaintop. She hovers there and we stare at each other. She’s beautiful, naturally, and she smiles at me and says, ‘Hello. What’s your name?’ I tell her, then she giggles and bats her eyes, and says ‘You should come down and play with us sometime. It’s really fun.’ And I want to tell her she’s gorgeous and I want to be with her, but I’m stuck on this mountaintop, and I can’t play because I don’t fit in.”

“Why are you stuck?” I said.

“I don’t know. Because it’s just somewhere I have to be, I guess, and I can’t play because I’m not allowed in the valley for some reason, even though we’d have fun and the other angels would probably like me fine even though I’m ugly.”

“And why don’t you tell her that?”

“I guess because she wouldn’t understand it, because she can go up and down so easily,” Chad said. He shrugged. “And it doesn’t matter, because right after she invites me she just plummets back to Earth and goes back to playing her game. And I’m not sure when she’ll be back. But I think I might try to see about coming down from the mountaintop. I mean, there’s no harm in trying, right?”

“Huh, that, uh, kind of sounds like The Catcher in the Rye,” I said. I nodded my head slowly. I couldn’t be sure I knew what he was talking about and I didn’t know what I was supposed to learn. But the metaphor was important to him, and I guess he found meaning in it,
somewhere, so the least I could do was humor him as if it made sense. “You know, like Holden Caufield’s dream of catching little kids before they fall off the cliff. Remember?”

He stared at me quizzically for a moment. Then he frowned like someone who had just been inconvenienced.

“Damn, Leo,” he said. “I thought it was an original idea.”

* 

“Bye Bye Birdie” opened to a full cafeteria and closed with two curtain calls on the third night. Everyone agreed it was a wonderful show, and in his closing, post-play remarks to the audience Mr. Hannah called it the best show he’d ever directed and the only show in which none of his students had flubbed any lines. I wondered if that were true.

The cast party was after the final performance at Megs’s house. Her parents were out of town and had left her older sisters in charge, and since her sisters were “coincidentally” on a double date with some guys on the City lacrosse team, Megs’s house was a convenient meeting spot for a large group of high school students.

The house was large and colored like a green olive on the outside. As I walked in the door, I saw what must have been a 96-inch HD television in the living room which was currently in use by some of my classmates who were playing a game of “Mario Kart” and from downstairs I could hear loud rap music. The dominant color was a clean-looking off-white and every room burned with more halogen light bulbs than I thought necessary. The house turned out to be even bigger than it looked from the outside, with two stories, a huge basement and a large backyard with a pool which her parents had put a tarp on for while they were away. Walking into the spacious, exposed kitchen, Megs peeled away from a group of her friends and came to greet me.
“Hey Leo, glad you could make it,” she said. She was still heavily made-up with blush and foundation from being Kim MacAfee. “There’s food and drinks downstairs. Chad’s downstairs, too.”

“Thanks for hosting,” I said.

“No problem,” she said. With nothing more to say to her, as usual, I walked downstairs where Pizza Hut, Coke, Mountain Dew, a vegetable tray and several cases of Bud and Miller Lite were waiting on a poker table. Most of the partiers were dancing while a few others played pool and foosball, but I didn’t see Chad. I grabbed a slice of cheese pizza and, hesitating out of Catholic Guilt, a Bud Light.

It didn’t take much effort for me to locate Chad. I found him in the laundry room. He was leaning forehead-first against the wall, muttering to himself. A Miller Lite was at his feet.

“Hey Chad,” I said. “Miller Lite sucks.”

“Whatever,” he said offhandedly.

“What are you doing?” I said. I popped the top on my beer.

He straightened up and looked me in the eye. “I think I’m gonna go for it tonight,” he said.

“Good for you,” I said. I gave him a go-get-em pat on the shoulder. “When are you going to do it?”

“As soon as I see her,” he said. He breathed heavily. “It’s better to not wait, you know? Just get it the fuck over with.”

“Right,” I said. I took a bite of the pizza which was colder than I would have liked. “Plus, you never know. The longer you wait, the better the chance some asshole will swoop in and steal
your thunder before you get the chance.” I wondered as I said it if Jackson was somewhere in the back of my mind, smirking.

“Exactly,” he said. “Wish me luck.”

I did and walked away. A spot opened in the foosball game and I joined in, and after that, I milled about, made small talk, ate and drank some and tried in general to have a good time.

I had a teacher in college a few years later who served in Vietnam and said he’d smoked marijuana while he was there. The problem though, he said, was that he was one of these people who became really paranoid when he was high. He’d be smoking it in the hutch with the other members of his unit and having a good time, but there would be a gnawing worry that a rocket might land in their perimeter at any moment. For me, drinking underage was a little bit like that. I liked it well enough, but no matter how much I drank (which was never much) the Catholic guilt and the worry that an adult or the police might come busting through the door at any second kept me from ever feeling really drunk. After five or six beers that night I felt numbed and bubbly, but at the same time I felt the need to sit on the couch and look as if I weren’t buzzed. I made my way upstairs to the now-empty living room.

I sat on the couch and rested my head against the pillow. I counted backward from 100 and felt an odd desire to avoid blinking both eyes at the exact same time. When I was at 58, though, I glanced out at the back porch and saw Chad and Megs. There were no porch lights, but they were framed in moonlight so I could still see them. Chad was talking and Megs was listening intently.

Awesome, I thought. I grinned. Chad finished talking. Megs looked up into his craggy face and put her left hand on his massive forearm. As she spoke, her eyes were wide and she gestured with her right hand and her palm up. Chad nodded slowly and his face dipped gradually.
Eventually, she patted his arm one last time, he muttered something and she opened the porch door. She came back in the house through the kitchen, wearing her usual, bright smile. I tried my best to look away and pretend I hadn’t seen the whole thing.

“Hey Leo,” she said sweetly as she walked by me, but she didn’t wait for a response as she bounced down into the basement. Chad came through the porch door a minute later. I looked at him and he looked at me. I raised my eyebrows, silently asking how it went. His brown eyes looked pale and glassy and he shook his head. Wordlessly, he sat down next to me on the couch.

“Sorry man,” I said. I thought about patting him on the knee, but feared it would look awkward.

“Yeah,” he said. Then he shrugged and said, “She was a little drunk, so maybe… I don’t know.”

“Yeah, she kind of sounded like it,” I said. “You want me to call my mom and have her pick us up?”

“No,” he said. “I think I’d like to walk it.”

“I’ll just go downstairs and say bye to a few people,” I said. I wondered how it would feel to pine for a girl for months and to be so sure she thought the same way about you. Were you just supposed to go on, as if you hadn’t been feeling that way? Was it even right to feel sorry for yourself? How long did it take for a simple crush to matter, to be important? I didn’t know, and even now I don’t know to a certainty. I left Chad on the couch, hunched over and sad.

I went downstairs. I wanted to shake hands with a few friends I had made during the production. I was also going to thank Megs for a fun party, but I didn’t do either. When I reached the basement I glanced down the hallway that led to the laundry room. Megs was there with Jackson Fitz. He said something in her ear and she laughed and hugged him. Then she stood on
her tiptoes and swiftly kissed him on the mouth. It lasted less than a second, but that was enough time for me to duck behind the corner.

I didn’t know what to make of it, and I didn’t want to at that moment. Too much had happened and I would have time to think about it later. Chad was waiting for me upstairs, and nothing seemed more important than preventing him from coming downstairs on the off-chance he should want to do so. I rushed back up and found Chad still on the couch. I told him I was ready to leave and we left together, walking into the warm night.

On the way home we didn’t talk about Megs. In fact, we didn’t talk at all except for a little chitchat about the play. Mostly we were content to walk the miles back home in the safe darkness.
3. Unconscious Holes in One

Years later, after Chad and I had become the Revengers, we were at an outdoor Barenaked Ladies concert in Des Moines. There was an older guy there, maybe 25, in shorts and a white, sleeveless T-shirt. He had two gold teeth and a large tattoo of a tiger on his right bicep, but I think he may have just drawn it with a black marker. I could distinctly smell marijuana on his breath as he screamed obscenities and proclamations to all who were near that the Barenaked Ladies sucked and they had sold out a long time ago. Chad walked up to another concert patron, a man who was dressed up like a golfer, complete with knickerbockers and a full set of clubs. Chad politely asked for the golfer’s putter and then walked over to Gold Tooth and whacked him squarely on the kneecaps to the delight of those in our immediate vicinity. I was proud of Chad for doing it, but I often wonder why he, with his incredible strength, felt the need to borrow the
golf club when his own muscles surely would have been sufficient. Maybe he was hearkening back to the moment when we became the Revengers.

My sophomore year of high school drifted to an unspectacular close. I earned mostly As (except for Bs in Spanish and Algebra), signed up for classes and, after spending a few days catching up on sleep, faced the expected reality of an unexciting summer, one of watching movies, reading books, cutting the lawn when my dad asked me and otherwise hanging out with Chad.

I thought about trying to get a girlfriend. I felt sorry for Chad after his failure with Megs, but it made me realize I had no right to pity him. I wasn’t doing any better myself with women, and at least he’d been trying to find a girlfriend. If he kept at it, I was sure he’d find one eventually, and I’d be left as the single friend, the homely acquaintance Chad would have to find time for outside of his budding romance. But I didn’t know any girls my age all that well, at least not anyone whom I would feel comfortable asking to join me for pizza and a walk around the lake, and even the ones I did know probably wouldn’t say “yes” to a food-and-walk. In fact, the girl I’d probably spent the most time with over the last year was Megs, and I was fine with her being off-limits.

Instead, the summer brought about a different love affair: one with Batman. *The Dark Knight* came out in July that year. There were viral campaigns on the Internet, commercials on every channel and green-haired, white-faced images of the now-deceased Heath Ledger’s face on fast food cups everywhere. Like practically every other person in America I was excited to see it, but I missed the premiere because my parents and I were on the road back home after a family vacation in Wyoming. By the time we were back in town, the movie had been out for three days,
which at least meant the theaters might not be full beyond capacity. I called Chad to see if he wanted to go see the movie with me.

“I saw it the night it came out but I’ll go again,” he said over the phone.

“Really? Are you sure?” I said.

“Yeah, I’m not doing anything,” he said. I didn’t want to go alone, and whatever other friends I had were busy or out of town, so I agreed to meet him in front of his house so we could walk to the theater. Normally we would have had a parent drive us, but the summer weather wasn’t to be missed. As we strode down the block, the golden light made the world look hazy and brown, like a photograph from the 1950s. It was nice to have a friend to amble with and with whom to enjoy the summer breeze.

“Was the movie good?” I said. I scratched the back of my neck where a bug bite was bothering me.

“It was fucking great,” he said. “I can’t wait to see it again.”

“So you’re sure you don’t mind?”

“Not at all, buddy,” he said. He patted me on the back, and I watched him, a light sweat glistening on his forehead in the late sun, his head down as he looked at his shuffling feet as we passed over concrete speckled with white spots that were probably bird droppings or dead bugs. For the first time, it occurred to me that maybe I meant as much to Chad as he did to me. I rarely saw him with other people, and so often it was just the two of us on Saturday night. Come to think of it, he hadn’t said if he’d originally gone to see The Dark Knight alone or with someone else. Maybe he was here, going to see a movie he had paid eight dollars to see just three nights ago, because he really wanted to be here, with me.

“How everyone else seen the movie?” I said.
“Pretty much. Randy and some of his friends camped out in line the night before. Megs and some of the other girls saw it last night—”

“Oh, so you’ve talked to Megs since the party?” I said, not sure if I was surprised. I had been trying to be tactful for the last few months, so I still didn’t know what exactly she’d said to him beyond “let’s be friends.” I hadn’t told him about seeing her kissing Jackson.

“A couple of times,” he said. “We haven’t seen each other much, but we’ve instant messaged each other and stuff.”

“Well, at least she still wants to be friends,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s one thing I love about her. She’s being really cool when a lot of other girls would make things awkward,” he said.

“Is she seeing anyone, then?”

“No, she’s still single,” he said. He wasn’t looking at me, so he didn’t see my concerned mien. I’d been following Megs’s relationship status on Facebook. She didn’t list one, but I watched in case she updated it to say “In a Relationship with Jackson Fitz.” I’d been waiting for awhile to hear through the Rumor Mill that they were dating, but no one said anything to that effect, and Jackson hadn’t mentioned her at the study group or in the few times I had seen him since.

“So, what did she tell you then?”

“She likes me as a friend and she thinks I’m a good guy. She’s not looking for a relationship right now and she doesn’t want to make things weird between us by getting into something she’s not sure about.”

_She bullshitting you_, I thought. “Fair enough,” I said.
“I guess I can understand it,” he said. Then, when I hadn’t said anything for awhile: “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. She says she’s not big into relationships right now, but she might want to start dating in the future, right?”

“Maybe,” I said. The movie theater was in sight after the long walk. “You might still have a shot.”

“I mean, I can understand that I’m not her type right now, but I could be her type later.”

“I suppose so,” I said as we walked into the parking lot, which was almost full. Of the people outside, I saw several dressed in T-shirts with the Batman logo and two people wearing face paint that resembled the Joker’s. As much as I’d hoped to avoid it, the theater would probably be full. “But how much do you want to change for some girl? I mean, shit, isn’t it a little early in life to be getting into all this stuff?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Chad said.

The elevated seats in the back-half of the theater were full, so Chad and I sat down below, where we had to crane our necks the whole time. After a few minutes, though, I didn’t care. Everyone, I think, has a memory of some great movie he or she can remember seeing in the movie theater, when every emotion and surprise was fresh, when the time between movie’s end and the purchase of the DVD was nothing more than a waiting period, when the viewer realized in a prescient rush of emotion that he or she was watching a future classic. For a lot of people I knew, that movie was Star Wars, the only film my dad, a man with no patience for movies, ever saw twice in a theater. For me, that movie was the one I saw with Chad that night. The acting, story, camera work and special effects were all brilliant, but it was Batman himself who captivated me. The Joker dominated the screen, but with every bomb, murder and maniacal laugh, Batman would be there, doing his damndest to stop him. The citizens of Gotham wanted
him to be their hero in the typical fashion of heroes, always ready and willing to satisfy their every whim. But, in the end, he forsook that identity in favor of being something greater than their hero: someone who would work for the greater good and didn’t care what anyone thought of him. I wondered how much courage it took to shuck all concerns of societal perception.

“Hey, don’t get up after the movie ends,” Chad whispered when it was clear there wasn’t much movie left.

“Why?” I said. “Is there a scene after the credits?”

“Yeah, and I missed it last time.”

“OK,” I said. The movie ended and people around us were standing to leave. I felt sorry for them.

“Hey,” I said to Chad as the credits began to roll. “Shouldn’t we tell people there’s stuff after the credits?”

“No,” he said firmly. “I got up and left last time and no one told me to wait.”

“But all these people are going to miss the extra stuff unless we do something.”

“I don’t care,” he said. He sounded jaded and bitter, but his voice rose an octave as he said it, like a ten-year old who was mad about not being invited to a birthday party. “No one did anything for me.” I was surprised he could be so calm, and frankly mature, about Megs but so petulant about this. I wondered then if he would be so level-headed about Megs if he knew she had gone straight to the basement to make out with Jackson.

But at the time the people leaving the theater seemed more pressing. I felt a heroic swelling in my chest. In a way, it felt like a terrible car accident was unfolding in slow motion and I had the opportunity to stop it. Would Batman simply sit there and do nothing as soon-to-
be-disappointed people walked in ignorance? No, I thought. The poor, unsuspecting souls in the theater needed a hero. I wanted to be their hero.

“Stuff after the credits!” I yelled. Some still left, but at least a few people in the rows ahead of us looked in my direction and then returned to their seats and resumed staring at the giant screen.

Chad, meanwhile, was laughing to himself, trying to stifle the giggles as if it would be impolite for other people to hear them. “Dude, I can’t believe you just did that,” he said. He wiped tears from his eyes.

“It was the right thing to do,” I said. I sat back comfortably and waited for the credits to end. The air conditioning was starting to feel too cold after two-and-a-half hours, and someone in our row was giving off terrible body odor that smelled salty and fishy, but I was glad to be there, like I’d been pre-ordained to be in that seat so I could help the other moviegoers.

After five minutes a terrible thought came to mind.

“Chad, how do you know there’s a scene after the credits?” I said.

“Randy told me so,” he said. I felt my face grow hot. Randy was a mutual friend, the type who has a habit of telling stories, or at least reporting things he genuinely believed to be true but which have no basis in fact. If the Chicago Bears had traded their star linebacker, he’d say within fifteen minutes for certain who the replacement would be. If an animal carcass were found in one of the million cornfields somewhere near town (not that there ever was) he’d say it was proof of the Chupacabra. He was rarely right, but when he was he never let you forget it, especially when he had another piece of news to report.

“Randy said so? Does he know for a fact?” I said nervously.

This gave Chad pause.
“Wow, if there’s nothing after the credits then you’re really screwed, aren’t you?” He turned and grinned at me.

“All right, you know what? It’s fine. There will be something. There always is for movies like this. Ironman was like that, remember?” Even as I said it it felt like bullshit. I pleaded for there to be a bonus scene, anything at all. I had made a mistake and now I was hoping to get lucky, even though I didn’t really believe in luck.

The last of the credits rolled off the screen and it went black for a second. I held my breath. Then the lights came on.

I jumped up in my seat and spun to face the still half-full seats, which suddenly reminded me of the cafeteria during show choir rehearsals, except they weren’t jeering and catcalling me. Instead, confused moviegoers, expecting a reward for their patience, looked at me as if I were a visiting fan there to cheer against the home team. One woman even gave me a quick middle finger.

“It’s this guy’s fault!” I said, pointing at Chad. I ducked back into my seat and covered my face with my hands. I heard shuffling feet and low murmurs. Chad fidgeted in his seat, but I couldn’t tell what exactly he was doing.

“Dude, why’d you do that?” he said as we walked out of the theater. I hoped no one would recognize me. “You made it worse by jumping up and yelling.”

“Hey, it was your fault,” I said, trying to keep my voice down. “You’re the one who said there was stuff after the credits. I was just trying to be helpful.”

“I didn’t tell you to act like a fucking moron.”

A teenage boy, roughly our age, maybe a little older, glared at us as he passed us in the lobby.
“Sorry,” I said. I gave him a sick grin, not sure what else to say.

“That’s the last time I listen to some random idiot at a movie,” he loudly mumbled so we could hear. I sagged my shoulders.

Afterward, we went to Village Inn for a late dinner. The main topic of discussion should have been the brilliant piece of cinema we had just witnessed that had stirred my soul. Instead, we were mostly silent. I would have thought, since it wasn’t really his fault, Chad would be garrulous and laughing about my faux pas.

“Gee, I sure took us down the toilet on that ugly bitch, didn’t I?” I said.

“It was my fault, too,” he said. “If I hadn’t said anything, we’d have left.”

“I probably would’ve stayed anyway,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. He pushed melting vanilla ice cream around his plate with his spoon. He had a brownie pie and I had apple.

“You know what the hell of it is?” I said. “That theater was full of strangers we’ll never see, ever again. We could go out and become famous musicians, or great novelists or whatever. Fuck, maybe we could go out and cure cancer or something, but the people in that theater will never know that it’s us. They’ll just look back and think of us as the assholes who convinced them to stay and wait for some extra scene that never came.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he said. He spooned some ice cream and pie at once and automatically put it in his mouth.

Outside the restaurant, neither set of parents answered when we called them, so we’d have to walk some more. Since we lived in opposite directions, this parking lot represented goodbye for the night.

“So, I guess I’ll see you when I see you,” I said.
He crossed his arms and stuck out his foot, a pose that looked deliberately staged. He stared at the moon, which was winking from behind stratus clouds in the night sky. Then he looked at me and raised his voice suddenly. “Damn it, Leo. Why’d you have to do that? You made us look like douche bags, and I steel feel like shit because of it.”

“I’m sorry. It was just, seeing that movie inspired me, you know?” I said, drawing on a certain talent I’ve always had for improvisation. “Watching Batman be the selfless hero, it was a beautiful thing to see. It made me want to be a hero, you know? Because there are so many people out there who need help, and they don’t have anyone to look out for them. I felt like I was strong enough to help in that moment. I mean, if something has to be done, and you have the ability to do it, shouldn’t you be the one to do it? Shit, no one wants to step up to the plate anymore these days. It’s a world of selfish people who want to look after number one and they can only think about what they want and what they feel like doing. Don’t you just wish there were more people out there who looked at what needed to be done and not just what they wanted for themselves?”

At first, I didn’t know if I’d done an adequate job of explaining the heroic feelings from earlier. He didn’t say anything for a few seconds and just stared at the moon. Then I saw creases on his forehead and in his half-closed eyes I could see the flicker of a half-formed idea.

“Yeah. I do as a matter of fact,” he said at last.

“Oh well,” I said. I kicked a jagged rock that was bigger than the gravel in the parking lot. It looked like it didn’t belong. “At least it’ll be a funny story we can tell at school next year, right?”

“Yeah,” he said, absently.
The weekend arrived a few days later (not that the days of the week really mattered during the summer) and, as usual, we spent time together on Saturday night. We usually went to see the midnight movie, but on this particular Saturday we went miniature golfing at an indoor course in the basement of one of the local malls. The course wasn’t a typical mini-golf course in that it wasn’t loaded with water hazards and windmills. Rather, it was 18 holes of plain, green surfaces of differing elevations and challenging hole locations.

I was lining up my first putt on the 12th hole when Chad broke his silence on *The Dark Knight* incident.

“I don’t mean to distract you from your shot, Leo, but do you remember what you said earlier about helping people and being a hero?” He was sitting on a nearby purple bench, the type you’d be surprised if you didn’t find gum stuck to its bottom. He stood the putter on its head and rested his hands on the grip and he rested his chin on top of them.

“Um, maybe. What was it, exactly?” I said. I only pretended not to remember. I was still embarrassed and just glad he was remembering something from that night other than my stupidity. I wanted to drag it out and make him say more about it.

“You know, how you wish more people would look out for other people and shit?”

“OK. What about it?”

“Well, I was thinking. We’re both pretty fit, right?”

I stepped away from the putt and gave him a once over, even though I was familiar with his body type by now. “Well, you are,” I said. “Neither of us is fat if that’s what you mean.”

“OK, what I mean is that we’re fitter than most, right?”

“I think that’s fair.” I stood over the ball, looked at the hole one last time and putted. My shot ringed the hole, staying out, but it didn’t go too far, meaning the second shot would be easy.
“And we’re both smart,” he said, standing up. “And, I think this is the most important: we’re both, basically, pretty good guys. Morally, I mean, right?”

Now it was my turn to be contemplative. We were both practicing Catholics, and we tried to be good people, more or less. Maybe we swore a lot, and maybe we thought about sex too much, but who didn’t?

“You know, I think we are,” I said. I walked to my ball and lined up another shot. Most people alternate putts in miniature golf, but Chad and I preferred to let each other finish before the other player teed off so there was no chance of hitting each other’s ball and unfairly knocking it from an advantageous position. I tapped in for a two.

“Well, I was thinking.” He didn’t move to the tee to line up his shot. His eyes were wide and excited. It was clear he’d been thinking of whatever he was going to say for awhile, and now it was all coming together and out of his mouth. “I think we should be those heroes.”

I had one foot crossed over the other and I was leaning my weight on the putter in what I thought looked like a fancy golf pose.

“What?” I said.

“You know. Heroes, fight back against bad people, help the innocent, good shit like that.”

“Um, Chad, we’re not exactly Batman and Robin. I mean, I’m not a billionaire genius and you’re not my eager sidekick.”

“First off, I would be Batman and you’d be Robin,” he said. He putted his ball without looking where it went, which turned out to be right in the hole for an ace. “Second, we could totally do it. We wouldn’t have to do anything really big like fight the Joker or stop a bomb from blowing up a hospital, but we could do it.”
“Chad, I know it was a good movie and everything, and I agree with you on a lot of things, I really do, but this just seems kind of far-fetched.”

“No it doesn’t.”

“Yeah, it does. I mean, take this as an example: back in grade school, a group of friends and I decided we were going to invent a solar-powered car and save the world from pollution. We got a remote-control car and tinkered with it after school for a week, and except for dismantling the car we accomplished absolutely nothing. We didn’t have any fucking idea what we were doing, but it seemed real at the time.”

“Hey, what happened to my ball?” he said.

“You got a hole in one, remember?” I said, pointing toward the cup. He walked over to the opening in the green and pulled his blood-red ball from the hole.

“Sweet,” he said. He put it in his pocket. “But seriously, you don’t think it’s a good idea?”

“I’m just saying that we should be practical,” I said.

“Come on, man,” he said as we walked to the next green, a two-layered hole where the objective was to hit the ball in one cup and send it down a tube to another level. “When was the last time you felt like you did anything important?”

I thought about it for a few seconds. “I thought stage crew for Bye Bye Birdie was pretty important,” I said.

“But when was the last time you helped someone who was in trouble? And I mean a time when you went out of your way and helped a stranger who was in a jam.” This didn’t require any thought on my part.

“Honestly, never,” I said. “It’s your putt first.”
He stepped up and, again with barely a look, hit a great shot that hit the hole dead center. It trickled down the tube and rattled into the cup at the bottom for another hole in one.

“How are you doing that?” I said.

“I don’t know,” he said. He shrugged and admired his handiwork. “Anyway, don’t you think you, as an empowered person, have a responsibility to help the less advantaged? You said so after the movie.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with whatever you’re proposing.”

“We need to take the fight to the corruptive forces of society. They don’t have to be earthshakers, just whenever we can stop the bad shit from getting to good people, because we can. We have that power, and I think we should use it.”

“I’m still not sure,” I said. I hit my first shot, which also found the first hole, but stayed out of the hole on the bottom green when it came down the tube.

“Look, Leo, what you said that night really moved me, and thinking about Batman moved me,” he said. He now held the putter by the shaft in one hand. He reminded me of a maestro in front of an orchestra, ready to begin a new opera. This opera hadn’t been the toil of an entire lifetime, but rather the product of one short, burst of intense brilliance. “It got me thinking: What have I ever done with my life? When was the last time I ever kicked the shit out of some asshole who deserved it? Remember how you felt in the theater? That’s the way I feel now, and this is important to me. If you think about it, you’ll realize that this is important, and I think you’d want to join me.”

My parents often praised my good grades in school, but they often kidded me in condescending tones about my lack of “street smarts” to complement my “book smarts.” In a way, they were right. I was shy and liked comfortable, familiar settings like home and school,
and I was never good at reading people and being able to tell what they were thinking, especially women. But if I knew one person well, and if there was one person whom I could usually read, it was Chad.

“Is this a way of impressing Megs?” I said.

The way he swallowed and his cheeks reddened to the color of his ball I could tell I was right. “I guess I wouldn’t mind if she were impressed by our heroism,” he said.

“And you think she’d go for the hero type?”

“Who wouldn’t?” he said. “But this wouldn’t just be about her. We might tell her about it once in awhile, but I swear I want to help people.” I couldn’t tell which he wanted more: Megs or to be a hero. Either way, though, I knew he wanted me, and I wanted to be with him, too. I thought back on the past year at my new school and how hard it had been to make friends. Chad had gone out of his way to befriend little old me. Didn’t I owe it to him to act like his friend now and support whatever crazy scheme he’d cooked up? Didn’t I want to support him out of friendship? Besides, he was stirring some of the old sensations I had felt in the movie theater. It would be fun to be a hero, I thought, and if we could do it, then didn’t we have an obligation?

“All right, I’m in,” I said. I wasn’t sure how serious we were supposed to be about this new venture, but even if this was destined to be a full-on, for-real crusade against evil, it was just the two of us. We couldn’t get into that much trouble. “But I just want to make sure we do this for the betterment of society.”

“Yes, totally. Kicking evil’s ass comes first,” he said. Standing on a miniature golf course felt like a strange place to become an agent working for the betterment of society, but I suppose it had to start somewhere.
“I think it’s important we take some kind of vow now,” Chad said. “Something to seal the deal, you know? So we can’t back out.”

“Let’s do it as a prayer,” I said, thinking of the good Catholic thing to do at the moment. “The more solemn, the better.”

“Why don’t you say it? You’re better at improvising,” Chad said.

“All right. Let’s bow our heads then.” Chad bowed his head and folded his hands, so I did the same.

“In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” I said, crossing myself. “Lord, we are about to embark on a dangerous mission, but an important one nonetheless: To help the weak and destitute, who suffer at the hands of evil forces, forces that we mere mortals cannot possibly hope to comprehend. But we also know that, with Your strength and guidance, we can fight back against these forces. Let Your will be done, but we pledge for our part to never surrender, to always battle bravely against corruption and evil. When we see it, or when You make it known to us, we will fight it, and we will defeat it. We will never waver in our commitment to this cause, and for that we have faith You will be with us in everything we do. In your name, we pray ...” Then I said an Our Father, we crossed ourselves one more time and that was that. It felt like a good prayer, but a better vow.

We didn’t create our alteregos as the Revengers just then. The titles only came a few weeks later when Chad suggested we name ourselves the “Avengers” after he saw the IMDB page for the upcoming Avengers movie. I asked if that would confuse people, or if there were legitimate copyright concerns about which we should worry. After an impatient, breathy sigh because I’d shot down his idea, Chad suggested “Revengers” instead. I liked it a little better, but
it still confused me. Against what were we taking revenge? Chad said it was “the forces that
would do harm to society at large.”

I liked the idea of revenge, perhaps more than was healthy for a good Catholic, but
Chad’s theory on fighting injustice reminded me of a book of fiction I once read about the first
Battle of Bull Run, the first major battle of the Civil War. I read it in middle school, before I met
Chad, and it’s told as a series of journal entries written by several characters, some civilians and
some soldiers on both sides of the battle. One of the narrators is a young boy appalled at the
moral decay he sees in a Union camp. He writes something along the lines of: “My grandfather
once said that if I ever came across the devil, I should cut him in two pieces and walk between
the halves. But if I had done that, there wouldn’t have been a man left alive in the camp.”

The line has stayed with me over the years because of its truth. Sure, the devil may be
evil, but what if I saw him and he was selling lemonade by the side of the road to thirsty
strangers at a discount? Would it be OK to kill him then? And I wasn’t so naive as to believe that
Satan only appears as an ugly red demon with horns, a pitchfork and a tail. How would I
recognize him when I saw him? What if I made a mistake in my attempts to kill him and
accidentally killed someone totally innocent?

Chad assured me that we would only exact vengeance against those that deserved it. We
would wait and watch, and only reign righteous wrath over people we had watched commit
injustices against society. I believed in his promise then, and I’m sure he believed it himself. But
I couldn’t help but wonder what would happen if we made a mistake.
4. No Better Introduction

It took longer than I would have expected for our battles as the Revengers to begin. In the months following the prayer-vow on the mini golf course we looked to take the fight to the forces that would seek to do harm to society at large. Perhaps I wasn’t looking hard enough, but realistic opportunities for vengeance were nowhere to be found. Our school didn’t have the bullies or evil teachers who would have suited our needs perfectly, and even Chad agreed there probably wasn’t much we could do in the way of an unsolved murder or the string of armed robberies that hit the city for a short stretch late in the summer.

In lieu of vengeance, I found myself trying to be a better person. Rarely did I stop and specifically remind myself to do it, but unconsciously I started altering my behavior. I complimented my mother on her hair, didn’t complain when my dad asked me to clean the garage and I tried my hardest to make it to an early-morning Mass once a week before school.
One day in October, I saw a sophomore I didn’t know in the hallways struggling by himself to carry a diorama depicting a Civil War battle. Without being asked I lent a hand and helped him lug it to his class.

When I told Chad about it later, he rubbed his chin in a worried way. “That’s great Leo, it really is, and I don’t want to discourage it, but I don’t want it to become a pattern.” When I asked him what he meant, he continued: “I know that sounds kind of harsh, and I’m not putting it the best way. But I’d like to think we should be doing more, you know? I mean, anyone can just become a better person. We should be trying harder to find something that needs to be fixed.” I understood what he meant, but I didn’t know what else we could do. Chad insisted that it would eventually work out. All we had to do was wait for our chance. That chance, it turned out, came around Christmastime.

The Christmas during my junior year of high school is the last Christmas I would call memorable. For years, the holiday season was a time of anticipation, when I woke up in the middle of the night, went downstairs expecting to find evidence of Santa Claus, only to remember once I was in the darkened living room it was only late November. I was a member of my church’s choir through middle school and most of high school and we sang Christmas carols for two months in preparation for Christmas concerts. I looked forward to the night when my mother and I would drive through the neighborhood for the first time, looking at the first houses to put up their inflatable Frosties, giant Nutcrackers and strings of lights. Then I enjoyed the subsequent patrols when we monitored the neighborhood’s progress, to see which new houses had set up their decorations.

I then came to that late-high-school/early-college period of life when you learn that things are different now and will never be the same again. I approached it expecting changes in
lifestyle, but I didn’t foresee the changes to Christmastime. Papers, projects and exams all the way to the end of the semester were the focus of my attention and I spent more time at the library than I ever had before. When I went to college, I lived at home instead of the dorms, so the daily commute went from two minutes to thirty. Church choir fell on my list of priorities until I quit altogether. I only began celebrating in earnest about a week before December 25. Every year it came and went, and always just a little too quick.

The last Christmas season before any of that happened saw me, as usual, putting off my shopping until the last minute. It was December 22 and Chad also had yet to do his shopping, meaning that yet again our spending time together was being facilitated by a shared quality. By now we were both driving, but Chad was the one with a car, a white, 2000 Ford Fiesta he loved solely because it was his. Once in the crowded parking lot, we didn’t bother looking for an open space that probably didn’t exist near the entrance to the J.C. Penney and instead opting for one that was a reasonable hike to the doors. When we entered, the department store was playing “Little Drummer Boy” softly over its loudspeakers and the Greco columns were elegantly wrapped in gold and silver tinsel. The store was teeming with middle-aged women and it was loud, even though everyone seemed to be speaking softly.

“You know, I don’t care what anyone says, I kind of like it when the mall is crowded at Christmastime,” I said as we made our way through the masses.

“Oh, dude, I know it,” Chad said. “It just feels kind of right, like that’s the way it should be. That’s why I always wait to the last minute before I go Christmas shopping.”

“Absolutely,” I said. “It just feels kind of badass to do it now, right?”
“Oh yeah,” Chad said as we passed the perfume counter, where I distinctly smelled peppermint. “It kind of says ‘I’m too good to do it early, but I’m also being kind of humble because that stuff that kept me from doing it early was probably really important,’ you know?”

“And since we’re obviously students, that important stuff was probably schoolwork.”

“Definitely. I agree. The best word for last-minute Christmas shopping is most definitely ‘badass,’ ” he said.

“Definitely,” I said, taking the comfort that always arises between two people in genuine agreement.

We left J.C. Penney and there, looming before us, was a large, brown, cartoonish structure that was supposed to resemble a gingerbread house. We walked around it and I saw a long, red carpet running toward the house, like a movie-premiere carpet where the movie-going crowd is a gaggle of children. Poles shaped like candy canes lined the carpet and white, cotton fluff surrounded them. The children standing on the carpet were, for the most part, cute, well-behaved kids, all accompanied by their mothers, except for one little girl who had her father with her. They giggled and bobbed on their toes, and the parents looked happy that the children were giggling and bobbing. Employees dressed as elves flanked the crowd, and at the end of the carpet was a white throne. On the throne sat a man dressed as Santa Claus. His belly laugh echoed off the ceiling of the three-story mall as he talked to a little boy sitting on his lap.

“Check it out,” I said. I stopped and looked at the scene.

“What about it?” Chad said.

“What do you think of when you look at the mall Santa?” I said. I buried my hands in the pockets of my black winter coat.

“I never really thought about it. Why?”
“Is it weird that I have mixed feelings looking at the mall Santa display?” I said. “I mean, I guess it’s OK for the kids, and it makes them happy, but it seems kind of fucked up that we parade this guy out here every year and tell the kids there’s a Santa Claus when it’s all bullshit. I mean, isn’t anyone really upset when they realize there’s no Santa after being lied to for years?”

“No, I guess not,” Chad said, squinting an eye as if looking at me through a small lens. “You sound like someone who’s jaded about Santa.”

“Maybe a little,” I said. The truth was that I was very much jaded about Santa. He wasn’t my first experience with betrayal. I remember many times as a boy when my parents promised me ice cream, only to have them renege right before dinnertime. Or the time in the first grade when Archie Snell promised he would pick me first for his kickball team, only to let me twist in the wind before selecting me next to last. But being lied to about Santa Claus bothered me for a long time. It wasn’t just that I had been fooled into believing in a man who lived at the North Pole and made toys, but that also because that’s what had been expected of me. By the time I was in kindergarten I knew it was illogical to believe in a man who could deliver toys to all the Christmas-celebrating children in the world in one night, but I had gone along with it because all the adults I knew talked to me as if he were real. Between teachers asking “What does your family do to get ready for Santa Claus?” and store clerks handing me candy canes and saying “What do you want Santa to bring you for Christmas?” everyone else seemed on board. It felt so wrong then to be told “PSYCHE!” after a few years by the same people who’d propagated the myth.

“Come on, let’s go,” I said, rubbing my temples. “This is making me think too much.”

But Chad was staring at the mall Santa with a peculiar intensity. “You know, come to think of it, there’s something odd about him.”
“What do you mean? Santa?” I said, eager to be away from the display and to resume shopping.

“I get the feeling that I’ve seen him before.”

I looked at the mall Santa again. I didn’t recognize him, but he did resemble someone I couldn’t place. I said so to Chad, but he responded with, “No, it’s something else. I’ve seen him, specifically.”

“I’m sure it’ll come to us. Could we please just go?” I said. I tugged on the sleeve of Chad’s Montreal Canadiens jersey. With some hesitation, he peeled himself away.

After meandering for a few minutes we came across the Barnes & Noble. Books have always made for useful gifts since they’re moderately expensive and suggest to the recipient that you believe he or she is intelligent. We walked in and I left Chad to browse. I was roaming the True Crime section (my dad’s favorite) and was just about to pick up a book on Jack the Ripper when Chad came up to me, a newspaper in his hand and a grim triumph in his eye.

“Look here,” he said. The front headline read, “Smith pleads guilty in child pornography case.” I didn’t need to read it to know what it was about. The case had been going on for a few months and it involved a local man named Raymond Smith who’d been caught with hundreds of images of child pornography on his computer. As soon as I looked at the picture of Smith outside the courtroom in his orange jumpsuit I knew who the mall Santa reminded me of. They had the same doughy face and pocked eyes. However, Chad’s finger wasn’t resting on Smith, but rather on a blurry figure in the background of the photo.

“Who are you pointing to?” I said.

“That’s Smith’s brother, Jordan,” Chad said. “I knew I’d seen him somewhere. He was on the news a bunch of times. He was always at the hearings.”
“Are you sure?” I said. I couldn’t tell from the image.

“Of course I’m sure. I never forget a face.”

A pedophile’s brother was a mall Santa. Was something like that genetic? How likely was it that the mall Santa was a pedophile if his brother was one? As soon I had those thoughts, I realized they may not have been fair, but at the same time I worried about the dozens of children who were innocently waiting in line to sit on the man’s lap.

We went back to the gingerbread house display, but this time we went up one floor via escalator so we could look at it from above, as if a new angle would somehow give us more insight into the goings on. The crowd of children and adults wasn’t any smaller and had in fact probably increased since we’d left. The man who Chad said was Jordan Smith let out a belly laugh, a sinister imitation of Santa Claus’s “ho ho ho,” like the words were being coughed out. I squinted, trying to tell if it really was Smith, but I couldn’t see his face well enough, not could I precisely recall what Smith looked like. Still, I trusted Chad’s judgment on things like this. It wasn’t like he had any reason to lie.

“So, what do you think we should do?” I said to Chad who was leering at the mall Santa in a hawk-like way. “Tell security?”

“What are they going to do?” he said. “I’m pretty sure they’re not going to bust him because his brother’s a fucking sex freak.”

“You think his boss knows?”

“Definitely, but I bet Jordan would probably do something douchey, like sue if they fired him.”
I looked at the other shoppers in the crowded mall, milling about like ants and oblivious to the thing which, to me, seemed so important now. “Good eyes, by the way. You’d probably make a pretty good detective.”

“Thanks. Maybe this Revengers thing will work out.” Then he stopped, a shared switch pulled in our brains. He looked at me, and I looked at him, but where there was enthusiasm in his gaze I felt queasy. He said, “Leo, this is our chance.”

“Wait a second,” I said. I backed away from the railing. “That’s not right. He’s not doing anything.”

“But how fucked up would that be if something happened? We need to get off the schnide, and I don’t think we can afford to wait.”

I looked down at Jordan Smith one last time. He sat on his throne and I imagined him wanting to fuck every one of the little children. A fake Santa Claus who came down chimneys for the sole purpose of getting into little children’s homes, creeping up to their bedrooms to watch them while they slept. Everything about the scene below suddenly seemed wrong and dirty.

“You’re right,” I said, feeling Vengeance Time was at hand. “There’s a risk.”

“All right,” Chad said, all-business now that it was time to go to work. He set his face into a hard, contemplative look and said, “Let’s go get him.”

As we rode the escalator down I felt an undeniable excitement, a charge in the air. It was like there was a storm getting ready to break around us, but I was in a lightning-proof suit or something, meaning I could go forward bravely.

“Wow, here we go,” I said. I rubbed my hands together and bounced a little as we descended. “This is going to be our first big thing.”
“I know,” Chad said with a grin. “I can’t believe we’re finally going to do this. I mean, shit, when they write comics about heroes there’s always a first-exploit post-origin story like this, when the good guy swoops in totally unknown and unexpected and saves the day. This is going to be like that for us.”

“You really think so?” I said.

“Oh yeah, totally. And after that, we’ll do something else to get on the news and then people will see a pattern.”

“Like Batman.”

“Exactly.” We got off the escalator and fistpounded. Then we looked at the crowd and I realized we didn’t have a plan. I suppose I’d been hoping an idea would make itself apparent when we got off the escalator, but looking at the crowd it was obvious it would be hard to get the kids away from Santa without creating a scene. My eye strayed over the fire alarm on the far wall, and the very first idea that sprung to mind was to pull it and then run like fuck, but before I could even dismiss it Chad started walking forward in a deliberate way. I followed.

“Hey,” Chad said in a low voice. He stopped and pointed. “Why don’t we try talking to him?” The child Chad was referring to was a boy, maybe eight years old, who was standing apart from his mother. She had her back turned to him and was talking to another woman in line. He wore dark, square glasses and his black hair was separated by a part in the middle. It was a haircut I thought his mother may have given him. Also, he was reading a book while he waited in line.

“Why?” I said. “What’s the plan?”

“Maybe, if we try to reason with him, we can convince him to leave.”

“Um, OK,” I said. “How does that bring down the mall Santa, exactly?”
“It doesn’t, per se,” he said impatiently. “But it helps this one kid. And maybe it will start a trickle effect and convince others to leave.”

“Are you sure?” I said, still unconvinced.

“This will work, trust me,” he said. “Just follow my lead.” We approached the boy as nonchalantly as possible. He didn’t look at us as we sidled near him. “Hey, how’s it going, buddy?” Chad said. The boy looked at us blankly and then turned back to his reading.

“You excited to see Santa Claus?” I said, still not sure what we were doing.

This time he didn’t even look at us.

“What if I told you that Santa wasn’t real?” Chad said eagerly. I looked at Chad. The question’s audacious frankness shocked and impressed me, like someone who’d just sworn out loud in a museum. At the same time, it felt like someone walking over my grave. Had I actually told him about the exact cause of my bitterness about the myth of Santa Claus? No, I hadn’t. I was sure of that.

The boy turned to his mother and pulled at the back of her coat. Before I could think to tug Chad’s hockey jersey and run, the mother was staring into our eyes with a cold, protective instinct.

“What are you two doing?” she said, her voice deep. I detected a “Get the fuck away from my son” in her tenor.

“Relax, we’re just talking to him,” Chad said. His tone was defensive. Being a big guy, I knew Chad wasn’t used to being pushed around.

“I will not relax,” she said. “What are you two doing here?”

“Nothing ma’am, we were just leaving,” I said.

“We weren’t doing anything,” Chad said. “We have every right to be here.”
“I don’t want you talking to my child ever again. Now get out of here before I call security.” The boy, I noticed, was staring at us with his eyebrows raised, a feature that made him look haughty and amused by the spectacle.

“Why don’t you chill out you crazy bitch?” a red-faced Chad said.

“What did you just call me?” she said, raising her voice and drawing looks from other mall-goers. I wanted to run and I shuffled my feet like an impatient horse, but Chad and the woman were locked in an Evil Eye-staring contest by now. “I want you two out of here before I call security.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Chad said, but a fat security guard with a Fu Manchu mustache and a gleaming, bald head chose that moment to join us.

“Is there a problem here?” he said. He looked at Chad and me.

“These two are harassing my son,” the woman said.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the guard said before we had a chance to respond. “I think you two had better leave.”

“What the hell?” Chad said. “We didn’t do anything.”

“Leave now or I’m going to have to ask you to come with me. And feel lucky I’m not kicking you guys out of the mall altogether,” he said. His voice was accusatory toward us, which I thought was a little unfair. Still, I suppose he had cause by now to throw us out, and being grabbed by the scruff of my jacket and thrown in the snow was a humiliation I didn’t want to know. I imagined myself having to go home to my parents in a salt-stained coat and explaining why I could never go to the mall again.

“OK, we’re going,” I said. I grabbed Chad’s arm in case he wanted to shoot them the middle finger. I gently pulled him away, toward the large open center of the mall where the
corridors converged. The security guard stared at us sternly and the woman continued looking at us as if she hoped her gaze could turn us to stone. The boy had resumed his reading.

What we were experiencing was undeniably our first setback as Revengers, which, I thought, called for a retreat and reevaluation of strategy. We went to the Auntie Anne’s in the food court where I bought a jalapeno pretzel. We sat at a table as I tried to enjoy my spicy snack. Chad fumed.

“Geez, what a psycho bitch,” he said through his teeth. “I mean, we weren’t even fucking doing anything.”

I looked at the food court with its Burger King, Cinnabon, Taco del Mar and hundreds of disinterested customers, all buying food they knew was bad for them. I wondered how close I had come to never having the chance to look at all of it ever again.

“What a fucking bitch,” Chad said. He shook his head and was left without anything more to say, his anger sufficiently expressed by those four words.

“So, have we put the kibosh on the plan?” I said, regretting asking it instantly. Chad looked at me with a surprised, almost horrified expression.

“What’s wrong with you?” he said. “There’s no kibosh. Not by a damn sight. That pedophile douche bag is still going down.”

“Come on man,” I said wearily. “Maybe we should just go home.”

He looked at me for a moment, and then he said, “Come or don’t.” He stood up and started walking, in the direction of the mall Santa. I knew that if I sat there and finished my pretzel, my mall privileges didn’t matter. I could be admitted to every mall in the world, but Chad wouldn’t go with me to see any of them. We probably wouldn’t see another midnight movie or the inside of a Village Inn together again, either. I didn’t want to lose him, and if that
meant going forward with this Revenging thing. And as I got up to follow him, scarfing down
the rest of my pretzel, I realized that this probably wasn’t going to be my last brush with abject
humiliation on account of the Revengers. But whatever Chad wanted me to do, I would end up
doing it.

I hoped he might explain whatever he was thinking on the way, but he didn’t. I felt like a
gladiator going to his arena and I wished time would stand still. I felt like an idiot for having
made that Revenger vow. Why had I gotten myself into this stupid mess? Why were we doing
this?

We were back in front of the display. By now, being here felt like a masochistic addiction
I couldn’t break. I looked at Chad. He looked at me.

“All right, we start yelling it out at the tops of our lungs,” he said.

“Wait a minute, what?” Was this the plan now? What were we doing? What exactly was I
supposed to yell?

“And if the fuzz comes after us, I’ll fight them off as long as possible while you run. No
sense in us both getting caught,” Chad said solemnly. How much trouble were we about to
experience? Even in my confusion, though, the thought that Chad was willing to take the fall
provided some small comfort. Maybe he still cared about our friendship. The security guard with
the mustache, perhaps on patrol, emerged from behind the gingerbread house. He saw us,
frowned and walked toward us. Chad saw him, too. Now we were committed, past the Rubicon.

“Ready?” Chad said to me. He held up three fingers and counted off them. “One…
two…”

“HEY! SANTA CLAUS IS A FUCKING FAKE!” The break in the general peace caused
me, Chad and everyone around us to stop and look about. I was confused, and my heart beat fast.
“You kids are all retarded!” a different voice yelled. I turned around and saw two boys, wearing gray, hooded sweatshirts, standing on a bench. Immediately, I thought of them as Unabomber One and Unabomber Two. They were younger than Chad and me, perhaps freshmen, or maybe even middle-school age. Unabomber One had blonde hair and Unabomber Two had black hair. The way they jumped and laughed I wondered if they were high.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the fat security guard move faster. The children and their parents, for the most part, looked confused and frightened. I saw tears well up in the eyes of at least two little girls, and I could see one mother, clutching her child to her breast, getting ready to yell something back at the youths.

The Unabombers, laughing manically, jumped from the bench and ran away, toward the center of the mall where the guard would surely lose them. Chad’s jaw was set in that same, determined look I’d seen earlier when we’d resolved to bring down Jordan Smith. He broke into a sprint. Instinctively, I followed him, running as fast as I could, but Chad’s velocity was amazing. He ran like a red-and-blue missile, so amazing that he couldn’t be missed. Mall patrons parted like the Red Sea, so there was space for me to run in his wake.

Up ahead, I saw him reach out and jump on Unabomber Two, pulling the misanthrope down in a sudden, spectacular fall.

“Go!” I said. I dove on top of the fallen jackass. “Get the other one!” Without a word, Chad ran off and I buried my knee in the small of the boy’s back and pinned his arms to the ground.

“Get off of me you stupid fuck!” Unabomber Two said, but he was still laughing. I wondered how he could find the situation funny. I didn’t have long to wonder, though, because
the security guard, huffing and crimson-faced appeared a few second later. He shoved me aside as he hauled the boy up.

“Thanks,” he said gruffly. Up ahead, I saw Chad had pinned the other one in a similar manner. Then more security guards, none as muscular or imposing as Chad, showed up and apprehended Unabomber One. Security hauled both boys away, to where I wasn’t sure, perhaps headquarters, or wherever it was mall cops congregated. Chad walked up to me, grinning. He wasn’t sweating or breathing heavily.

It was then that I noticed most of the mall patrons were staring at us, and in the sudden quiet I could hear “The Twelve Days of Christmas” playing over the loudspeakers. Most of them looked impressed as they smiled at us. One guy nodded in our direction. I gave a half wave and Chad grinned back, holding up his hand as if to say, “No need to thank us.”

We walked back toward the mall Santa display through the corridor of instant fans. The crowd of children and parents stared at us, many mouths hanging open in stunned admiration.

“Just to let you guys know,” I said out loud, still bewildered by our sudden change in fortune and not fully cognizant of what I was doing. “It’s OK to believe in Santa Claus, and those guys are the stupid ones. So, uh, nothing to worry about.” The crowd burst into applause. There were claps and whistles. I saw mothers mouthing the words “thank you” at us. I scanned the face for the intelligent-looking boy and the bitchy mom from earlier, but I didn’t see them. Chad smiled and waved in a way that reminded me of the Queen of England. I wondered if he might take the opportunity to introduce us to the world as the Revengers or something like that, but instead he basked in the applause. It felt like a good time to leave, so we walked into J.C. Penney like cowboys into the sunset. I was starting to enjoy the applause myself until I saw
Jordan Smith, still sitting on his throne, two little twin boys in his lap. He squinted at us as if he
needed glasses, but he gave us a thumbs-up.

By now we were deep into the department store and nobody recognized us, so we could
talk.

“Uh, Chad, what about Smith?” I said, pointing over my shoulder with my thumb.

“Huh?” he said. He looked like I felt: just starting to realize again where he was. “Who?”

“The mall Santa?”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” he said. He shrugged, but then he smiled. “Well, there’s probably nothing
to worry about, anyway.”

“So, we’re not going to do anything about him?” I said. I looked over my shoulder one
more time. The entrance to the main mall was no longer visible and I couldn’t hear any more
cheers. I was also gradually aware of one other thing: I still hadn’t bought any Christmas
presents.

“No. The plan probably wouldn’t have worked anyway,” he said, taking out his cell
phone. “But, man, can you believe it? I’m posting this all over Facebook. Our first Act of
Vengeance and we knocked it out of the fucking park! Introductions don’t get better than that!”

“I guess,” I said.
5. A Field Full of Knives

Chad did exactly what he’d said he would do and broadcast the news of our success on Facebook. His status read, “Leo and I just beat up some punks at the mall who were bothering little kids.” He and I didn’t have many friends on the network, but in a few hours he had eleven “likes” and a few comments in the vein of “way to go!” and “detailz, pleez.” The first person to comment on his status was Megs, who wrote, “Awesome! I’d really like to hear about it!” Some of our mutual friends wrote wall posts of congratulations on my wall, too. My modesty was real when I replied to them (“It wasn’t really anything, I swear, but thank you anyway”), but it was still flattering that casual acquaintances had taken the time to respond to something Chad and I had done. I didn’t even mind that Chad had embellished the story a little since we hadn’t really beaten up the Unabombers.
The felicitations stopped after Christmas and I drifted through the rest of the break without doing anything of importance. A large snow storm made driving difficult, so Chad and I hung out only a few more times before school started, but when I did see him he was still excited about our first successful Act of Vengeance.

Just before New Year’s Eve, when my parents deemed it safe to drive, my mother dropped me off at Chad’s house. Since we hadn’t had the chance yet, we had agreed to treat this get-together as a celebration for what he was now calling our “victory.”

“‘Victory?’ Really?” I said, nursing a Dr. Pepper.

“Why not?” he said. He sipped a Mountain Dew.

“Don’t you feel bad that we didn’t do what we set out to do?” I said. “I mean, it’s not even like a real Act of Vengeance.”

“Actually, I have some good news about that,” he said. He stood up and walked to the mini fridge next to the television. “It turns out that mall Santa wasn’t Jordan Smith. I read in the newspaper that the real Jordan Smith moved to Minnesota because people kept harassing him about Raymond. Isn’t that great?”

“Then who was the mall Santa?” I said.

“Fuck if I know,” Chad said. He took out a carton of eggnog. “The point is that what we did counts as a real Act of Vengeance because we dealt with the real threat.”

I didn’t say anything for a few seconds. I was thinking of how best to voice my objections about the relative merits of our first Act of Vengeance. Chad went on: “Now, I know we thought the mall Santa was a problem and everything, and we didn’t do anything about him. I get that. But look at it this way: He wasn’t doing anything. Those two pricks, on the other hand,
were doing something. Now, between the two, the maybe-freak who isn’t doing something and the definite-douche bag who is doing something, who’s the bigger threat?”

I didn’t say anything as he opened the eggnog and poured it into a glass on the coffee table. I hadn’t thought of it that way before. But still: didn’t he care that we’d tried so hard to ruin the reputation of an innocent man?

“So whatever happens,” he said, “we did our best and I think we did a pretty damn good job, and I say we celebrate. We just need to be a little more careful next time in identifying the forces who would seek to do harm to society at-large, that’s all.” He then took his can of Mountain Dew and poured it into the half-full glass of eggnog, making a yellow-green broth.

“Dude, that’s fucking disgusting,” I said.

“Maybe, but it tastes delicious,” he said. He sipped the drink and grinned, as if to convince me that it really was good. “Megs likes them, too.”

“Huh, maybe you’re soul mates, then,” I said, ironically.

“Yeah, must be,” he said. He had to have picked up on my sarcasm. Was he being sarcastic back? “She’s actually the one who introduced them to me. They’re called ‘Nuclear Nogs.’”

“I saw her comment on your status,” I said to change the subject from the drink. Watching him down the creamy slime was like watching someone drink his own vomit. “Did she like hearing about the big win?”

“Yeah,” he said. “She things the idea of being the Revengers is really cool.”

I stopped my can of soda a few centimeters from my lips. “How much did you tell her about the Revenger-thing?” Part of me thought it was embarrassing to let someone else, anyone, know about the Revengers, especially since I still wasn’t sure how seriously we were treating our
newfound superherodom. Also, the idea of Megs being the one to know our secret identities was a little disconcerting. I didn’t like the thought of her having that kind of power in our group of three.

“Here’s the thing,” he said, putting the glass back on the coffee table and sitting on the couch. “I thought it would be OK to tell people about the thing at the mall, but I haven’t told anyone yet about us doing it in the name of Vengeance or anything. I mean, when Batman kicks ass, he does it in public, but the citizens of Gotham don’t know who he is or what drives him to do it. There’s a balancing act between what’s a secret and what’s public, you know, so sometimes we can tell people what we’re doing as long as they don’t know we’re the Revengers.”

“So why are you telling Megs?” I said, sufficiently confused. Wasn’t his logic backwards? Wasn’t the identity supposed to be secret and the hero persona public?

“She’s going to be like Alfred, you know? The one person who’s in on all the secrets but isn’t actually involved in the whole operation. I mean, you can pick an Alfred too, if you want. Megs is going to be mine,” he said.

“Wait. So if we do it in public does that mean it’s not a true Act of Vengeance?”

“Damn it Bishop!” he said. “It was a real Act of Vengeance!” And so ended, for the night, any talk of the Revengers. We watched The Dark Knight, one of Chad’s Christmas gifts and the perfect movie for this particular celebration, he said. During the part where Bruce Wayne kisses Rachel, I looked at Chad, sipping another Nuclear Nog. He was fidgety, constantly shaking his foot and drumming his fingers on the stained, blue couch cushions. It occurred to me then, for the first time, that he might genuinely be in love with Megs. I don’t know how I knew it precisely, but he was bending the laws of heredom for her. Who was I to stand in the way of
high-school love? I wouldn’t object to Megs’s knowing about our identities as the Revengers in the future if it was that important to him.

After a few more uneventful and mostly snowbound days school rolled around again. It was the second semester of my junior year of high school now, the sixth term of eight. I tried to think of some meaningful milestone reached, or some reason for thinking that the second half of junior year was an important time in my education, but I couldn’t.

I was early on the first day back, which meant sitting in the cafeteria. The show choir was there, as usual, practicing a routine. They were dancing and stumbling in a circle, singing Huey Lewis’s “Hip to be Square.” I was momentarily envious of them, that at least they were performing to a decent song and not “Puff the Magic Dragon.” Then Mrs. Tremayne stopped playing the piano and stood up. I could see that familiar, furious look on her face. I knew what was coming next and I wasn’t envious of the show choir anymore.

Chad was at the back of the cafeteria, sitting by himself at a table, looking somewhere between half asleep and fully awake. His chin was in his large palm and his eyelids drooped, but his sharp eyes darted back and forth, watching the show choir movements as they started their dance afresh.

“Can you believe we used to waste our time with that?” I said, sitting down heavily.

“To be honest, no,” he said. He yawned. There wasn’t anything else to say, nor was there much to look forward to from the school day. I was about to say something to him about just how spectacularly unexciting the immediate future seemed when I was interrupted.

“Hey, are you guys Chad Quinn and Leo Bishop?”

I looked over my shoulder at the owner of the gruff, confident voice: Dale Brazley. Just like everyone else in school, I knew Dale as the quarterback of the football team, a forward on
the basketball team, the star closer on the baseball team and always ready for a pickup game of
anything. Aside from that I didn’t really know him and he didn’t know me at all (he was a senior,
so we weren’t even in the same class), but I didn’t have any problem with him. I wasn’t naturally
prejudiced against jocks. They didn’t bother me and they did what made them happy. Still, I had
no idea why, of all days, he had decided to talk to us.

“Uh, yeah,” Chad said, frowning and sounding surly. His look reminded me of how he
acted around pretty girls not named Megs.

“You were the guys who beat up those punks at the mall, right?” he said. Dale was big,
not as ripped as Chad, but as tall and almost as broad. He frowned as he looked at us, as if he
were talking about an important piece of business with people whose aims were in conflict with
his own and with whom he needed to compromise.

“Well, sort of,” Chad said.

“You made some speech telling all the kids that Santa was real?”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling obligated to speak once he brought up my part in the story.

“I’m Dale,” he said, like we didn’t know who he was. “My little brother and my mom
were there and they told me all about what you guys did.” He extended his hand to us. I was
stunned as I took it, imagining that this handshake was a coveted sign of status in school and that
to receive it was a great honor. His grip was strong and hurt my fingers. Then he shook Chad’s
hand. Their handshake lasted a little longer and I could see them squeezing each other’s fingers.

“Anyway, my mom said they were about my age and one of the guys was in a Montreal
hockey jersey. I thought I saw you wearing one on free-dress days,” he said. He crossed his
forearms and looked solemn, like a stone-faced bouncer turning away non-V.I.Ps. “I appreciate
you guys looking out for my little brother like that.”
“No problem,” Chad said. He shrugged and played it cool. “Just looking out for the kids.”

“I have a regular poker night on Saturdays if you guys want to stop by,” Dale said.

Chad and I looked at each other. “Yeah, sounds great,” I said.

“Cool,” Dale said, nodding. He gave us his address and cell phone number and then left.

“Well, I guess I know what we’re doing this weekend,” I said, yawning.

“Yeah, guess so,” Chad said.

In all honesty, though, I wasn’t sure what to think of poker night with a jock. I didn’t really know any of Dale’s friends and I didn’t like the idea of spending time with people who for all I knew might expect me to beat mailboxes with a baseball bat, but I liked cards, and it would be a shakeup to my usual Saturday night. If his friends were all jocks, like him, then I supposed I could talk about sports, and if they pressured me into doing something I didn’t want to do, then I’d say no, leave and never speak to them again, simple as that.

That Saturday I drove to Dale’s house. I didn’t see Chad’s Ford Fiesta, so I assumed I was there first. I considered calling him, but decided not to. I didn’t want him to think I was uncomfortable walking into a relative stranger’s house to meet a bunch of new people.

Dale answered the door about a minute after I rang the bell. He was dressed in jean shorts, a striped polo shirt and he wore a backward baseball cap. When he saw me, his grin seemed genuine.

“Hey Leo, glad you could make it,” he said. He gave me another of his firm handshakes.

“Come on in, bro.”

I took off my shoes and tossed them in the large pile of flip-flops and sneakers by the door (I’ve always liked houses where guests were expected to take off their shoes since it was
always my family’s rule). In the kitchen there were eight guys sitting at the table, mostly seniors I didn’t know. Everyone had a beer sitting in front of him.

“OK Leo, let me introduce you,” Dale said. He named off everyone at the table and I repeated them back. “Buy-in’s five dollars. Is Chad supposed to show up, too?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I said, taking my seat and keeping my hands in my lap as I felt the eyes on me.

“Can I get you a beer?” he said. “We got anything you like.” I asked for a Sam Adams. I still wasn’t completely comfortable drinking, but everyone else had a beer. Now that I had been introduced, I hoped the conversations would resume where they had left off, but everyone at the table looked at me with polite interest.

“So, we heard you beat up some guys?” a senior on my right named Jared said after Dale left to get me my drink.

“Well, kind of,” I said.

“What happened to them after you knocked ‘em around?” another said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess they got kicked out of the mall or something.”

“And you really got up in front of a bunch of kids and told them Santa Claus was real?” Jared said.

“Yeah,” I said. “It made the kids happy, so, you know.”

“Has it gotten you laid yet?” he said, which caused a collective guffaw among the group.

“Chicks go for shit like that.”

“Not yet,” I said. I grinned and shook my head. “But, you know, maybe later.”

The game started and I folded my first few hands. I spoke little and did nothing to betray the image of the cool, easy-going guy that had been everyone’s first impression of me. Chad
showed up a few minutes later and sat at another end of the table. The guys asked him about the adventure at the mall. He downplayed it for the most part, though if I knew him he was happy to be soaking in everyone’s attention. The people were quiet and straightforward on the whole, talking about uncomplicated things like the NBA and the Oscars ceremony that was still a few months away. It wasn’t a hard group to blend into and I had a few more beers as I enjoyed myself.

Everything was fine, except for two hands where I went heads-up with Jared, who it turned out liked to engage in some gamesmanship. While I was thinking about what to do, he drummed his fingers loudly on the table and muttered loudly about how he had me beat and that I should just fold and run away. I folded on each occasion because I only had small pairs, but both times he then smacked the table and said, “Excellent lay-down, sir.” The other guys laughed. I understood that the ribbing was all in good fun, but he had succeeded in making me feel nervous every time we were in a hand together.

Eventually, I was dealt the ace and king of diamonds as my hole cards, so I decided to stay in the hand instead of fold this time. In the first round, six other players limped in and called the opening bet. The bets on the flop, turn and river were small as the other six and I stayed in the hand. An ace on the river gave me a pair of aces, but nothing else. I expected another round of checking after the final card was played. Perhaps a pair of aces would be good enough to win.

But then Jared, who was first to act, looked at his hole cards, thought for a moment and pushed half of his stack into the pot.

A murmur went up around the table and the players behind him systematically folded until I was the only other one left. I looked at my cards again, even though I knew what they were. There weren’t any straight or flush possibilities, nor were there any pairs, but he could
have easily hit two pair or three of a kind. I looked at Jared. For the second time that night, all
eyes were on me.

“So, what’s it gonna be, Leo?” he said with an evil smirk. “Are you gonna be a pussy
again, like last time?”

Everyone other than Chad laughed while I chuckled nervously. I really wished I had
something witty to say in response.

“Hurry up and lose, motherfucker,” Jared said. There was a round of shocked belly
laughs and Dale said “Whoa.” I couldn’t tell if Jared was baiting me into calling or if he was
trying to scare me out of the pot. Calling and losing would cost me most of my chips. I was just
about to fold, but then I looked at Chad, who had folded in the first round of betting. His eyes
widened as he looked at me, and I think he wanted me to call. I thought about being a Revenger.
For the first time, it felt like a real secret identity, and the only person who held me accountable
for that distinction was waiting for me to do the brave thing. I felt like I owed it to Chad and the
vow we had made to make the gutsy move.

“I call,” I said, which immediately made Jared laugh and groan at the same time.

“Oops,” he said. “Nice call, buddy.” He turned over a seven and a two, unsuited. The
table went “oooo” and I turned over my pair of aces, collecting the large pot. Dale clapped his
hands and threw his head back in laughter. The person next to me slapped me on the back. I
cought Chad’s eye and he smiled in a proud way. I raked in my winnings, and I smiled, knowing
that no matter what happened the rest of the night, I would have my one moment in the sun.

I didn’t win many more hands and I ended up in fourth. Chad played a little better and
finished third, going out a few hands after me. We agreed to leave, and Dale thanked us for
coming. He extended the same invitation for next weekend, and the others in the group nodded in
stoic, impressed ways, expressing approval of our presence. I caught Jared’s eye and he gave me a thumbs-up.

“Dude, it’s been a pleasure,” he said. I nodded back at him.

“So, did you have a good time?” I said once we were outside.

“Yeah, I think I did,” Chad said. We didn’t explicitly make plans to go back next week, but we did and had another good time. Then we went back the week after, and pretty soon playing poker with Dale and his friends was our new routine on Saturday night. We rotated where we played every weekend, always to a house where the parents would be out, and if no one’s house was available we did something else. One time we piled into Dale’s jeep with a cooler full of beer and drove to the State Park. Another time we went to the midnight premiere of *I Love You, Man*. I didn’t like it, but everyone else thought it was hilarious.

Most of the guys, I learned, were athletes, but they didn’t ostracize Chad and me because we weren’t. They were a fairly typical group of high school boys who liked chasing girls, watching sports and listening to rap music. I definitely wasn’t friends with any of them the way I was with Chad, but I enjoyed their company and looked forward to our weekends together. There were also things about them that I considered surprising, even though unconscious stereotypes I had about jocks contributed to that sense of surprise. One of the juniors, Roger Schoendiest, was a 4.0 student who was being recruited by Johns Hopkins for a lacrosse scholarship. Peter Aardsma, a senior, could speak Dutch, the only person I’ve ever met who could. Two others had little brothers with autism and volunteered regularly at Autism Speaks. I liked being around them and they liked being around me, and best of all I was spared any uncomfortable prying into my personal life, prying that may have dragged my extra virginity to light. They simply preferred to play cards and not know either Chad or me very deeply. That was fine because, for the first time
since going to high school, Chad and I could claim to be part of a larger group, and it was nice to be something other than lone wolves for once.

The senior prank, like almost everywhere else in America, was a tradition at our school, with some years being better than others. Some classes contented themselves with spraying graffiti or setting off a small stink bomb. A group that graduated a few years before I was a freshman set the benchmark for last-year hoodlumism by taking all the chairs out of the building and putting them on the football field, which everyone agreed was brilliant since it was original and didn’t result in any permanent damage. Some students, I think, justified their entire four-year existence on the quality of the senior prank. To me, the ritual was a curiosity, only relevant for about a week or so when its time came around in late spring.

But my junior year it was hard to ignore its looming presence, even in March when it was still supposed to be some weeks away. There were whispers in the hallway, floating when there were no teachers and certified goody-two-shoes students around. I heard words like “big” and “legendary” in the hushed conversations of students who were trying to keep secret something so delicious it couldn’t be completely silent. I wondered what plan might be in the works, but I also assumed that at least a few teachers must have heard it by now, which meant if the prank became too ambitious it was sure to be stopped before it could be carried out.

I heard actual details for the first time, though, in late April in a bathroom. I thought I was by myself in one of the school’s public restrooms and feeling a sense of relaxation, a mood I always have when I’m alone in a bathroom. That sense, though, was broken by loud whispers coming from the far stalls.
Eventually, the two sources of the noise came out of adjoining stalls and walked to the sinks. They were two tallish guys, both wearing navy-blue sweatshirts with our school’s logo on them. I didn’t recognize them and I didn’t know their classes.

“So, anyway, they’re going to take all the pigeons, put them in the gym and then spend a few minutes taking some target practice,” said one. He had curly-blonde hair.

“I wouldn’t want to be the poor bastard who has to clean that shit up afterward,” said the other one, who had cheeks covered in pink acne. He then looked right at me as I stood over my urinal. He should have seen me staring at them, but for some reason his eyes never locked on me, as if I were invisible.

“Yeah,” Blondie said, snickering as he ran his hands under the water. “Then they’re gonna finish it off by sticking a bunch of plastic knives in the soccer field.”

Pinky frowned. “Isn’t it supposed to be with forks?”

“Yeah,” Blondie said, wiping his hands on a towel. “But they want to do it with knives to be more original, you know?” Then they left without ever acknowledging my presence. If they hadn’t looked right at me I would say they didn’t see me.

At lunch that day I sought out Chad and found him at a table near the stage. Megs was also there. She didn’t usually sit with us at lunch, but in the last few weeks it had become more common. Chad and I were in stage crew again, this time for The Sound of Music, and Megs had the lead this year, playing Maria. I suppose she was more inclined to eat with us since the regular contact at rehearsals meant, in her mind, we were closer confederates. Also, because we didn’t see her on Saturdays as often, this was what she called “catching-up time.”

“So, did you hear about the senior prank?” I said, excited to share a little bit of gossip.
Chad raised his eyebrows and shook his head, but Megs said, “Sure. It’s going to involve pigeons and killing the grass on the soccer field or something.”

Chad and I looked at her in surprise. “You know about it?” I said.

“Yeah, everyone does,” she said, grinning in her usual, flirty way.

“Do you know which seniors are behind it?” Chad said.

“No, but they’re probably some of the stupid, childish ones, you know?” she said. She took a small bite of her turkey sandwich. “I think trying to destroy the school is stupid.”

“Yeah, I agree,” Chad said in a loud voice, as if to be heard clearly even though wasn’t that noisy in the cafeteria. Still, I agreed with Megs. I didn’t know why someone felt the need to damage so much school property. I also thought, whoever they were, they were dreaming if they thought they’d get away with it. “Maybe that could be our next Act of Vengeance.”

This caused Megs to laugh, a short, loud squawk where she threw her head back and looked at the ceiling. “Are you two still doing that?” she said.

“Yeah, it’s still kind of our thing,” Chad said offhandedly. I almost added that we hadn’t actually done any Revenging for three months.

“You two are funny,” Megs said, giggling again. I still didn’t know if I liked Megs knowing about the Revengers. We’d only talked about it with her a few times and every time I got the feeling she wasn’t taking it seriously. She would laugh (in much the same way as she did during that lunch period), ask a few questions about us and what we were doing, like “When are you going to tell your parents?” or “Do you carry mace?” Then she would shrug her shoulders and say something like “Oh, OK” or “sounds exciting.”

“Do you seriously think we should do it?” I said to Chad.
“Well, you know, we should see if we can find something out,” he said. “I mean, if we can help stop the school from being damaged, you know.”

I looked at Megs, but she didn’t appear to be following the conversation. She was sipping from a carton of milk and looking more through us than at us. I still occasionally checked her Facebook relationship status to see if she was dating Jackson, but I hadn’t seen them together since the after-party at her house. I waited for her to give some sign of approval or dismissal, but the only sound from her was the slurping of disappearing milk.

“Sure, I guess,” I said. There couldn’t be any harm in keeping my eyes and ears open.

Keeping my eyes and ears open, though, proved less successful than I would have thought. I had no idea how one was supposed to go about finding the leaders behind a conspiracy. It wasn’t as though I could just ask anyone for the identities of the people planning the senior prank. I didn’t know anyone who would know, and those who did know probably wouldn’t tell me.

As I drove to Saturday-night poker, once again at Dale’s house, I thought about asking the seniors at the game. But they would want to know why I wanted to know. Would that mean telling them about the Revengers? They were nice, down-to-earth buddies, and I didn’t want them to think Chad and I were strange or different from what they thought we were. Besides, they would probably be more loyal to their classmates than a couple of pseudo, part-time, superheroes.

I rang the doorbell and Dale answered. He had his usual backward baseball cap, but tonight he was in jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. His eyelids drooped and he blinked slowly.

“Hey, Bishop. Come on in, the gang’s all here,” he said. He paused and took a deep breath, as if to speak again, but he didn’t. I walked in, took off my shoes and went into the
kitchen. Like Dale, everyone seemed pretty far gone, including Chad. They were definitely louder, with lots of laughter and raised voices as all the different lines of conversation tried to be heard over one another. There was also more touching than usual, in the forms of slapped backs and punched arms. The table was littered with bottles of hard liquor, some still half-full but most near-empty.

Chad looked at me with sleepy eyes and grinned broadly.

“Leo,” he said. He patted the seat of the empty chair next to him. “Come sit right here.”

I’d seen him drunk before. Actually, I’d seen him far more intoxicated on other occasions, but he’d never been drunk before at Saturday-night poker.

“Why’s everyone in such a good mood tonight?” I said. Peter frowned and nodded, as if I’d just delivered expected bad news. Then he said something in Dutch.

“What did he say?” I said.

“We’re celebrating a little early,” Dale said. He came up behind me and squeezed my shoulder. I was starting to feel uncomfortable. “Baseball season is over and soon I’ll be out of this hell hole forever.”

“Oh, OK,” I said, not aware that the school’s baseball season had finished so early.

“Congratulations, I guess.”

“Drink this,” Dale said, putting a plastic cup down in front of me. Then he filled it about half full with rum and then splashed a small amount of Coca-Cola on top. I didn’t like hard alcohol and would have just preferred some beer. Even then, I thought about saying no, but then Chad slapped me on the back, hard, with perhaps more of his strength than he had intended. I took a ginger sip and Dale laughed at me, at some facial expression I probably had conveying displeasure.
“Be cool, Leo,” Dale said. “You’re usually pretty cool, so don’t spoil it now.”

“Thanks,” I said. I smiled and took another sip, a bigger one this time. He might not have known what he was saying, but no one, not even Chad, had ever called me “cool” in any context. “I will be.”

“Good,” he said, walking to the head of the table and picking up his cup, containing some amber-colored liquid. After a few loud shushes to quiet everyone else down, he said: “Well guys, a lot of us here are going to be graduating. Now, as you know, I’ve given a lot to this school, playing for every, fucking sports team under the sun, but soon they can all kiss my ass, because—” Here he paused and took a moment to stifle a laugh. “I’m gonna be playing football at State.”

Some of the guys barked a couple of State cheers and some “You da man” ovations for Dale. Peter said, “Go Spartans!” in Dutch, a phrase I actually recognized because I’d heard him say it before.

“And for those of you who will still be in high school, all I can say is I’m glad it’s not fuckin’ me. So my advice is to drink heavily.” Then he raised his cup in a toast and drank. Everyone else did except me. I wanted to play cards, even though the chances of doing that now seemed remote. “Also, start thinking of a good senior prank, because it’s gonna be a tough act to follow.”

Again, the group hooted and hollered, but this time Chad joined me in not joining them. He looked at me blankly, a stupid, drunken expression on his face.

“So, does that mean you’re involved?” I said to Dale. I wondered what my voice sounded like to him. To my sober ear, it sounded almost too innocent.
“Shit, I’m running that ship,” Dale said. He slammed his cup down authoritatively on the table. “I got a million fucking plastic knives in my uncle’s storage unit that are about to find a new home with all the shit and worms in the soccer field.”

“Soccer’s for pussies,” someone said.

“But hey, don’t tell anyone, OK?” Dale said, winking at me. I wonder if it occurred to him that I might actually do just that. I guess not since he thought of me as “cool.”

The next few minutes of seat squirming and pretending to drink my rum and coke eventually gave way to my leaving a half hour later with Chad in tow among loud protestations from the group to stay. But I insisted that we had to go and I promised to get Chad home safely, and with that we were out the door. As soon as he hit the warm night air he seemed to sober up considerably. Or, more precisely, he turned into a different kind of drunk. He didn’t stumble as he walked, and his speech came more naturally. But he hung his head and muttered to himself under his breath. I heard words like “fuck” and shit.”

“I can’t believe Dale is behind the prank,” Chad said from my back seat as I drove us home. “I didn’t know he hated the school so much.”

“So, you were aware of the conversation as it was happening?” I said. I did my best to drive the speed limit.

“Kind of. It took a few seconds to process,” he said. I looked at him. He still looked sleepy and his eyes still drooped. The question of what we were going to do with our newfound information hung in the car, unasked. It was hard, yet at the same time not hard, to think that the laid-back, star athlete of the school, the guy who’d invited us into his home, who’d admired an Act of Vengeance, could be planning destruction on such a scale.
I dropped Chad off at his house. I thought as I watched him skulk up the walkway to his front door that if I knew him at all he was probably working on a plan right now. As I drove home, I thought I would forget about everything for the rest of the weekend, go to school on Monday and discuss whatever scheme Chad had in mind.

But Chad didn’t have a plan by Monday. In fact, he looked pale and sleep-deprived, and had I not known better I would have said he might be sick, or maybe still hung over. I heard more talk in hallways of pigeons and knives, and also something about an exploding microwave (I never learned for certain how that was supposed to work). I had visions of school being cancelled for a week, of teachers crawling on hands and knees through dead grass and squirming centipedes, pulling plastic knives from the field. I also imagined people in NBC suits hosing down a gym floor covered in feathers and bird crap.

We sat at lunch on Friday and Chad still looked sick.

“So, are we going to do something about the senior prank or what?” I said.

“I don’t know, maybe,” Chad said. His untouched, brown paper bag sat on the table, and inside I could see an unmicrowaved Hot Pocket.

“Didn’t we say we would?” I said. Even though I wanted to avoid a conflict where my only non-Chad buddy was involved, Chad’s indecisiveness annoyed me a little. It felt like he should at least want to follow through with this latest Act of Vengeance.

“But, come on, what can we do, exactly?” Chad said. “Are we just going to stop a whole group of guys by ourselves?”

“Batman would,” I muttered

He started to speak, but just then Megs walked up to our table carrying a tray of Chinese food that was catered from Hy-Vee.
“Hey guys. What’s up?” she said. As far as I could see there wasn’t anything particularly special about Megs today. She was wearing a little more foundation and blush today (she’d mentioned that, with the play coming up, she was sleeping less, so maybe she was compensating for that), but her hair was done up in a tight bun, she wore the regular school uniform with the white polo and blue skirt. Her face was passive and relaxed, waiting to hear whatever news we had to offer.

But Chad was staring at her. He waited a few seconds, opened his mouth and still didn’t say anything. I looked back and forth between them.

“Not much,” Chad said eventually. “Just excited for the play. You think the cast’ll be ready?” This led to some idle chitchat that I didn’t join. As he spoke, color returned to Chad’s face.

We didn’t have any afternoon classes together and I couldn’t find him after school, but he sent me a text message at 4 p.m. It read: “My house 1 hour.” I was there just after 4:45 and used the sliding door to the basement, the entrance I had come to prefer after so many visits to the house. Chad was there, sitting in his armchair and drinking a Nuclear Nog.

“Are you still drinking those?” I said.

“It’s a bit of a bitch finding eggnog this time of year,” he said, not smiling. “I’ve been thinking it over, and I’ve got an idea.”

Now that I was going to hear his plan, I couldn’t help but fear he had something outrageous and complicated in mind, like cordonning off the school with police tape or calling in a bomb threat. I also vaguely wondered why I’d even wanted him to make the decision at all since his plans usually made me feel queasy. He stood, rubbed his hands together and took a
deep breath. “This is what we’re going to do: We’re going to be there in the school parking lot tomorrow night. And when those seniors show up, we’re going to convince them to stop.”

I stared at him.

“Well?” he said.

“That’s it?” I said. I’d been expecting a more elaborate plan, but at that moment I’d have settled for one that was simply better. “How the hell are we going to convince them to just set some birds free and go home?”

“I don’t know. You’re the one who’s good at the improv thing,” he said. He drained the last of the slime. “We’ll reason with them, threaten bodily harm, whatever.”

“No,” I said, feeling my face grow hot. “I’d sooner call the cops.”

Chad looked at me. The expression on his face was one of shock, almost hurt. “Excuse me?”

“We could tell them in advance, and they could stop it before it happened. It would be the smart thing to do.”

“It’s the pussy thing to do,” Chad said. He hadn’t blinked for awhile now. “We’re Revengers and you want to just bitch out?”

“Well, I don’t know,” I said. I didn’t think it was entirely fair to put it that way, even though I knew I was being the coward in this situation. I couldn’t explain it to him, but showing our faces would mean letting Dale see us. I didn’t know why that bothered me so much. He wasn’t even technically a friend, just a buddy, if anything. But Saturday-night poker had become important to me, and if we were going to stand against him I frankly would rather have done it from afar, where he couldn’t see us. “I just don’t think it will work,” I said.

“And what would our friends think if they heard we pussied out?”
“Which friends?” I said. I wanted him to say Megs, if only so he’d be honest.

“You know, our friends, the people we know,” he said. He sat down, crossed his arms and rested his leg on his other knee.

“They’d probably applaud us for doing the smart thing,” I said.

“Bullshit,” he said. “I’m going there tomorrow night, no matter what.” He then stared at me in an accusatory way, daring me to go through with calling the police. I realized though with a touch of frustration that if the police showed up while he was there they might arrest him, as if he were one of the delinquents. And I knew, as I’m sure he did, I wouldn’t want that.

“Asshole,” I said, surprised by how bitter my voice sounded.

“I’d like some backup,” Chad said.

“Whatever,” I said quietly. Something big was going to happen tomorrow, and even though I didn’t have a good feeling about it, I was in too deep by now. I had to be there.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said, a self-satisfied tone in his voice. It felt like a good time to leave, and I was feeling the natural embarrassment that comes from losing an argument, so I mumbled a goodbye and went home. For the rest of that night and the following morning and afternoon, I felt like I had an upcoming test for which I hadn’t studied and for a teacher who expected a good grade from me. I was also worried for Chad. He was being reckless, just like with the mall Santa before we’d gotten lucky. What if he did something rash?

I drove to the school parking lot just before 7 p.m. It was another warm, pleasant evening, one I would have liked to spend hitting a wiffle ball in the yard.

*At least the weather will be nice for sticking knives in the ground,* I thought sarcastically. I could have taken solace in the thought that we were doing the right thing (and believe me, I tried taking solace), but I still didn’t like the plan and I didn’t see any way it would end well. I
should have fought harder against it, I thought, but Chad was in love with Megs, or if not that something close, and he was doing anything he could to impress her. How could you reason with someone like that?

I reached the student lot at the school, but there were no cars, and I wondered if I had beaten Chad there, or, even better, if he’d chickened out. But then I saw him in the staff parking lot in front of the school’s main entrance. He had his back trunk door open and he sat on the bumper with half of a Subway sandwich in his hands. He looked calm and comfortable. I parked near him.

“Hey,” he said. He reached into the trunk and pulled up a bag with another sandwich in it.

“I got you one.”

“Is there mayonnaise on it?” I said.

“Mustard, just the way you like it,” he said, handing me the bag. “It’s the least I could do,” he said.

“Um, thanks,” I said. I took a small bite of the turkey and spinach sub and swallowed.

“Sorry for acting like a douche yesterday.”

“I kind of provoked you,” he said, his mouth full. “And I appreciate you coming out here, so I thought I’d do something nice.”

If his goal was to disarm me, it worked, as my experience has been that it’s impossible to be completely angry with someone who has just bought you a sandwich. I sat next to him on his bumper and we ate. We talked about the final exams that were still weeks away, which led into a conversation about the hot biology teacher Mrs. Chanson, which in turn led to a conversation about the best Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, which we agreed was *Predator*. It almost felt like another night of Chad and Leo just hanging out, the same one we’d had dozens of times and
would have dozens of times more. With the addition of the sandwich and the weather, it was
nicer than most, even.

Eventually the sun went down and the streetlights came on, though, and as we
approached our second hour of sitting in the parking lot, I felt antsy. What if it was all a joke and
no one showed up? That would be OK, I thought, if a little anticlimactic.

“You think they’ll come?” I said.

“We’ll see, I guess,” Chad said, standing up and stretching.

“Have you thought about what you’ll say to them?”

“Yeah. I’m going to explain that it’s not cool to damage school property and there’s still
time to think of a new senior prank.”

“What do you think Dale will think?” I said, also standing up and popping my knees.

“If he’s a good guy he’ll listen,” Chad said. I must have looked unconvinced and
troubled, because Chad looked at me for a few seconds as if he pitied me. He gently gripped my
shoulder, as if passing on a piece of wisdom to someone much younger than him. “Just
remember, Leo: Revengers aren’t friends with the forces that would seek to do harm to society at
large.”

It was the first time mentioning the Revengers all evening, and I knew he was right in
what he said. We’d made a vow, after all, and what kind of person would I be if I ignored it
now? Even then, I knew that whatever happened I would never go back to Saturday-night poker,
and I found myself already missing it. Was having one friend worth losing a group of buddies?
Did I really value my friendship with Chad that much? Sure, he was being nice now, but I’d seen
his bad side a few times now. When I really thought about it, I couldn’t really explain why I
liked hanging out with him so much, yet here I was, ready to do his bidding. It felt like the most
useless moment of self-realization imaginable because even though I knew what kind of effect he had on my, I was powerless to do anything about it.

Then the cars started to arrive. A line of near-silent vehicles rolled off the street and into the parking lot, their headlights coming one after another like lanterns moving in chorus. Some of them were rusted-over, older cars from the 90s, but most were expensive-looking SUVs and sports cars, their paint jobs sill bright in the dusk. I had no doubt many were gifts from parents.

The pranksters drove to the front of the parking lot. They parked, and there was a silent, terrible moment when none of them moved, as if waiting.

Then the pranksters started piling out. They were all wearing black, and even in the dark distance I could see them laughing and carrying on in excitement for the upcoming deed. Many of them had small boxes in their hands, and a few wore ski masks.

“OK, here we go,” Chad said, taking a deep breath and making the Sign of the Cross. I did the same. Then we walked forward, and I tried to stand tall. I imagined a puppet master holding a string over my head, keeping me straight.

As we approached the parking lot, some of the pranksters looked our way. Someone yelled “fuck” and some re-opened their car doors, as if to make quick getaways. But their momentary panic melted away when they could see we weren’t adults. Some of them wore eye black that inched up their faces as they squinted at us. When we reached their vehicles, Chad and I stood there and they watched us, and we all waited for someone to do something.

“Leo? Chad? Is that you?” a voice said. My stomach dropped as I recognized Dale in black jeans, a black sweater and a black beanie. I cringed. “What are you guys doing here?”
“We’re here to stop this prank,” Chad said. By now the seniors had crowded near us in a half circle with Dale in the center. They were starting to look less confused and more pissed off at the juniors who had no business being there.

“Where are the pigeons?” I said stupidly.

The intimidating eyes swung to me. “What pigeons?” someone said.

“Never mind,” I said, looking at the gravel between my feet. A bug too small to be an ant went between them and disappeared behind me.

“We can’t let you go through with this,” Chad said.

“Is this a joke?” Dale said. The other members of his group were starting to look impatient, glancing in the direction of the soccer field. “What do you mean you’re going to stop us?”

“Destroying school property isn’t cool,” Chad said. “You guys should—”

“Whatever,” Dale said. “Let’s go. Get the fuck out of here and mind your own fucking business.” He walked away from us, toward the soccer field, and the others followed. One student, whom I recognized as an offensive lineman on the football team, smirked at us.

“Wait! Stop!” Chad said. He sounded angry, like the time he argued with the woman at the mall. I wondered if he had a whole speech prepared and saw his opportunity to give it slipping away. “Don’t do this! I’m warning you!”

No one said anything, and the black-clad students were gradually fading out of sight into the darkness. I felt insignificant. We may as well have just not shown up, and we were helpless to stop the impending destruction. I felt as if I should say something, but a lump in my throat made it impossible.

“I’M GOING TO CALL 911!” Chad said.
I looked at Chad. He scrunched up his face and bit his lower lip, immediately regretting his decision. But when the figures stopped, turned back and looked at us, as if expecting us to follow, he and I knew it couldn’t be taken back.

“What?” someone yelled back at us.

“You do it and we call the police,” Chad said. They walked back to us, and I fingered the keys in my pocket, prepared to run if they threatened us. Their mouths were agape and their eyes were wide.

“What the fuck?” Dale said, disbelief settling into every corner of his tanned face. “Are you fucking shitting me?”

“Don’t test me,” Chad said. “You’ll be suspended, at least.”

“You can’t be serious,” he said. “Quit fucking around.”

“Anyone who plants a knife is toast,” Chad said, only looking at Dale.

The seniors didn’t stand so tall now, and some of them rolled the boxes over in their hands.

“Fuck them, let’s go,” one of the three girls said, but the group responded with halfhearted murmurs.

“I don’t know,” said the other football player. “I never thought about the risk.”

“Geez,” she said, but the doubt was palpable in her voice, too. They shuffled their feet, not sure what to do. They glanced over their shoulders in the direction of the field in a sort of longing, then some started walking back to their cars, and soon they were all leaving. They gave us dirty looks, but the best word for their demeanor seemed “sad.”
Someone in a ski mask walked up to us. I recognized it was Peter when he said something harsh-sounding in Dutch before throwing his box down. The plastic knives spilt out in a small heap.

Soon, it was just Chad, me and Dale. The other seniors were driving away, and as they rumbled out of the parking lots their cars seemed noisier, less stealthy. Dale stared at us, but his attention was mostly focused on Chad. They didn’t say anything, and Chad stood straight and defiant, a semi-sneer on his lips. Dale looked as sad as his friends. His eyes were glassy with disappointment, as if he’d just been dumped. Then he bent down, picked up the stray knives and put them back in the box, taking his time as we stood there. I expected him to say something, or maybe I only wanted him to, but he didn’t. When he finished, he glanced at us one more time, got in his own car and drove off.

As he rumbled away, Chad sighed and wiped his forehead. I saw for the first time that he was sweating.

“So, does this mean we win?” I said.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Chad said, sighing.

“I guess we’ll be in some pretty deep shit Monday,” I said.

“Well, fuck em then,” Chad said. “If anyone gives you shit, tell me.” I tried to tell myself that deep shit wasn’t a terrible place to be, as long as we were in it together.

Monday at school was just as bad as I’d feared. By noon it felt like everyone knew one of my embarrassing secrets, a skeleton that I’d never bothered to put in the closet. People didn’t stand near me and traffic in the halls seemed to part around me. I caught more than a few people staring in my direction before they could avert their gazes.
Between second and third periods I saw Chad at his locker and stopped to talk to him. We had plenty of space around us. It felt like I was trapped by a big rock in the desert without a camel.

“How bad’s it been?” I said.

“Pretty bad,” Chad said, looking around him. He scowled in the direction of a group of girls who had been peeking at us. His gaze prompted them to strike up a loud conversation amongst themselves.

“Hey guys.” Megs appeared from the crowd. She approached us unashamedly, and I thought I heard a gasp somewhere.

“Hey,” Chad said, looking warily at her. I thought, for once, he was suspicious of her, unsure of why she was so brazenly committing the faux pas of approaching us in public.

“Did you guys really stop the senior prank?” she said. She looked up at us with cautious wonder.

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “But there weren’t any pigeons or anything.”

“So you actually went through with the Revenging thing?” she said.

“We said we would, didn’t we?” Chad said.

“Wow,” she said. She nodded and wrinkled her nose before giving us one of her smiles that could have been in place in a commercial for toothpaste.

In the coming days, Megs was one of the few people at the school who didn’t forsake us completely. She was never around us enough to make people think she was still friends with us, but she wasn’t afraid to be civil, and she even kept sitting at our lunch table occasionally. I suppose she had an adequate number of friends and was popular enough that being seen with a couple of Snitches Who Were Probably Going to be Virgins Forever wasn’t much of a risk. Still,
she didn’t abandon us, and for the first time I started to like her, and not because it was what Chad expected.

I used to think my social standing didn’t matter much in high school, and I suppose it still didn’t, but becoming a total outcast was harder than I would have thought. I went from being on good terms with most people to being a passing acquaintance, at best. Parties went from rarities to non-realities and I eventually learned to carry more pencils and pens than I needed (I couldn’t bear asking to borrow other peoples’ if I ran out). When Chad and I decided to become Revengers, I built it up in my mind that we were lone wolves fighting a battle only we could fight. It felt like us and no one else against the world. But for that last year, I didn’t need to think of the Revengers to get that feeling.
6. The Ill-Tempered Wasp

Chad was the one who suggested we make the spring break during our senior year “one to remember.” I think he was inspired when we were watching an old episode of *Seinfeld* together, the one where George proclaims his upcoming summer to be “The Summer of George,” because the next day he sent me an e-mail saying we should spend our last spring break of high school going around town and doing all the touristy things we locals never did, like going to museums and eating at restaurants we had never tried, a vacation without the travel.

I liked the idea. It had been almost a year since we’d ruined the last class’s senior prank and I still felt the unwashable stain of fuckup on my face. Chad and I were the prudish Exiles Within the School, and anytime I’d thought our infamy might have subsided, I was reminded with the occasional “faggot” written on my locker in marker. Anything to help make the end of high school more enjoyable was OK as far as I was concerned. Maybe it would be one of those
things where we’d look back and tell our grandkids about the time when everyone else sat at home and did jackshit over spring break while we bounced from one attraction to another, like Ernest Hemingway characters with less drinking.

A few weeks before the break, Chad and I met at his house and had a vigorous, exciting half hour of brainstorming which produced a nominal itinerary of things to do.

“You know what, Leo?” Chad said. He loudly slurped a Mountain Dew, which somehow made him seem excited. “I think this is going to be good.”

“Yeah,” I said. I imagined Chad and me, going on an adventure for the hell of it, like a stress-free Act of Vengeance. We hadn’t had one in nearly a year now, but I still regretted the last one. “I’ve never been to a minor league baseball game before.”

“Me, neither,” he said. “And I looked up the art museum’s hours and it turns out we get in free with a student ID.”

“Sweet,” I said. I would have high-fived him, except I was sitting down and he was almost across the room.

Chad walked over and looked out the sliding door. I followed his gaze, but I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary in the backyard. “I’ll ask Megs what she wants to do this week.”

“Oh,” I said, scratching the back of my wrist. “She’s coming along?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t she?” Chad said. He didn’t look at me.

“I’m fine with it,” I said quickly. “I just thought this was only going to be us.”

Chad turned back to me and frowned in a surprised way. “I’m sorry, but I thought she was part of the group.”
The thing was that he was half-right. Lately he’d been asking her to spend more time with us and I’d relented because I didn’t get the feeling that, like everyone else my age at school, she secretly hated me.

“No, it’d be good if she did this with us,” I said.

“Sorry I didn’t run it by you,” Chad said, snapping his fingers while slapping his fist, like the Blues Brothers. “I mean, it’s important she’s involved, because I think I want to try asking her out again.”

I’d always been against asking a girl out again after a rejection. If she really wanted to date, why didn’t she just say yes the first time? I started to blink rapidly and I had to force myself to stop. He’s your friend, I thought. Support him.

“Cool. What do you think she’ll say?” I said.

“I don’t know, but I have to try, right?” he said. Before I had the chance to tell him that he wasn’t obligated at all to ask Megs out a second time, he continued: “I mean, everything is really cool between us right now, and she knows me even better now. We’re all going to be going to City next year, so maybe she’ll figure, ‘I’m gonna see him for four years anyway.’ ”

The local college was colloquially called “City” and was the post-high school destination for most of us. A few went to the state university, a few more went to the school in Hemingdale, a farming town in the western half of the state, and another few went out of state. Like Chad, I was going to be part of the majority. “I mean, it could work, right?” I didn’t know if it could or not. Megs was so friendly to us, but if she liked him romantically, why hadn’t they hooked up yet?

*Just remember: He’s in love, I thought. Let him go for it.*

The first morning of break, I stood outside my house at 7 a.m., the sky misty-gray and the air humid. I adjusted the brown fedora on my head, a Christmas gift I was trying out for the first
time, and waited for Chad and Megs. The first thing we were going to do was go to the top of Pollingham Tower, the tallest building in the city. Once there, Chad and I would recreate the scene from Ferris Bueller’s Day Off when Ferris and his friends go to the top floor of the Sears Tower, stand on a railing, stick their foreheads against the glass and stare down at Chicago. I didn’t know if there was a railing for us to stand on, nor did I know how impressive our hometown would look that high up, but recreating the scene was something Chad and I had once talked about doing if we ever had the chance.

Soon enough, his Ford Fiesta appeared in my driveway.

“Hey buddy,” Chad said from the driver’s seat as I climbed in back. He was dressed in jean shorts, a horizontally striped blue T-shirt and a bandana colored to look like the American flag. I’d seen plenty of fat, out-of-shape people wear similar-looking clothes, but as usual, the outfit on Chad just showed off his taut frame.

“Hey Leo!” said Megs brightly. She wore khaki pants and a silky shirt that didn’t quite cover her midriff but didn’t show her belly button. That bare patch of skin caught my attention. It wasn’t immodest exactly, but she was usually pretty conservative in how she dressed. “Nice hat!” Then we were on our way downtown.

“Thanks for inviting me along,” Megs said. “Your spring break idea sounds neat.”

“No problem,” Chad said. He then sipped an early-morning Mountain Dew. “Just glad you can come and help us kick ass.”

“You guys are life savers, by the way,” she said, running her fingers through her hair. “A bunch of my girlfriends are going to some rodeo out by Denver and left me here, and I thought, like, I’m not going to do anything fun all break.”

“So, we’re the, what, the back-up friends?” I said.
“No,” she said. By the way she laughed I could tell she didn’t notice my acerbic tone. “They asked me to go, but I couldn’t afford a flight.” There was nothing defensive in her voice, but I still felt like a bit of a louse for immediately assuming the worst from her. I promised to myself that I was going to try my hardest to be especially friendly toward her for the next week.

“This will be better than Denver,” Chad said. “They’ll only be going to some rodeo while we’ll be doing all kinds of fun stuff.”

“That’s what I’m counting on, handsome,” Megs said. She laughed and caressed his forearm, and from my spot in the backseat I could see the tops of Chad’s ears go red.

We parked downtown and rode the Pollingham’s elevator to the top, the 30th story. I wouldn’t have thought the building was that big an attraction, so I was surprised to see the floor crowded with church groups in matching T-shirts, elderly couples squinting at travel brochures and middle-aged people in shorts, flannel shirts and baseball caps.

The three of us walked through the crowd for a little bit, trying to find an opening by the glass where we could get a full view. Off to our right, a mother and father were trying to hold on to a screaming girl with frizzy, blonde hair who was by now cherry-red in the face. That, combined with the unexpected crowd, was starting to give me a headache, and I wondered how much of an Act of Vengeance it would be if I walked up to them, grabbed the girl and threw her in an elevator down. It would probably make everyone else around us happy, I thought.

“Dude, over here,” Chad said. He pulled on my arm. “Now’s our chance.”

I looked where he was leading me and smiled. Not only was there a railing by the glass, but there was an open spot. “Let’s do it,” I said.

“Are we doing the Ferris Bueller-thing? Let me get someone to take our picture,” Megs said. I stopped.
“I thought it was just going to be Chad and me,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound too whiney. Megs and I looked at Chad and we waited for a ruling as he looked at us. He chewed his lower lip.

“Well, Megs, could you take a picture of us first?” he said after a moment. “Leo and I have been talking about doing this for, like, the last two weeks nonstop.”

“Sure,” she said, her voice low and her eyes half-shut. I didn’t care what she thought. This was going to be a Chad-Leo moment. The two of us looked at one another, grinned and stepped up on the railing. We put our foreheads against the glass, and I looked down on the city, trying to make out the distinct people and cars moving below.

“Would you two mind stepping down, please?” Chad and I took our heads off the glass and looked at a thin, 50-ish building employee who looked bored with his job of stopping people from doing exactly what we were doing right now.

“Sorry,” I said. I climbed down and tried to avoid eye contact with the guard. Chad also stepped down, and at first I thought he was going to argue with the man, but he squeezed his mouth shut in a fine line and didn’t speak. We both looked at Megs, who had her camera out and was glaring at us. I expected her to be mad with me mostly, but it was Chad she stared at.

We walked around for another minute and then rode the elevator back down. Back on the street, a gray-faced man walked by who was wearing a fedora that looked like mine, but if he noticed he didn’t let on as he sauntered out of sight.

“That was fun,” Chad said with a smile. Then he said to Megs: “Didn’t you think so?”

“Whatever,” she said, and that was that.

In its way, the Pollingham Tower experience became a microcosm for the whole week: kind of exciting at first, but always tinged with just a little disappointment. Later that day we all
tried falafel for the first time. The first few bites were delicious, kind of like a crab cake, and I was convinced that falafel was about to become my new go-to food. But halfway through it lost its taste and it felt like I was eating cardboard. Also, I ordered a side of fries dusted with curry and soon discovered that I didn’t like curry. It seeped into my pores and made my hands smell, and the spice seemed to live and writhe in my stomach like an angry snake. Chad said he didn’t have the same problem with the curry, but he hated the taste of the garlic dressing that came with the falafel. Later in the week, when we went to the art museum, apparently everyone else in the city with a student ID went, too. The massive crowd made it impossible for me to fully enjoy myself, and even though I looked I couldn’t find the original *Nighthawks* that was supposedly on loan at the time. As per Megs’s suggestion, we were supposed to go see some French movie at the local art house movie theatre none of us had ever visited, but it turned out there weren’t any subtitles for some reason. The weather was always too hot, or too overcast, or too muggy. It seemed that every day there was something that didn’t quite go according to plan, some small annoyance with a surprisingly big shadow.

In the late afternoon of our last day I picked up Chad at his house so we could go to California Park, which was located in the far-northeast section of town. We’d never been there before, and it was the last thing on our itinerary. As Chad sat down in my front seat, he looked glum, his eyes glassy.

“Are we picking up Megs?” I said.

“No,” he said.

“Why not?” I said when he didn’t continue.

“She said she’s sick. Something about being allergic to the chickpeas in the falafel, but she wants to meet us tonight at Village Inn,” he said.
“Really? That’s too bad,” I said. I genuinely meant it, too, considering how this news was making him act.

I drove in silence for a few minutes as we approached the park. “So, I guess we’re back in school tomorrow?” I said.

“Yep,” Chad said.

“Well, I had a lot of fun,” I said.

“How long ago did we have the falafel?” he said. When I responded with “about a week,” he said, “I mean, can you be allergic to something and it takes a few days for you to show symptoms?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Did she sound sick over the phone?”

“Well, she actually told me over Facebook,” Chad said, frowning. “But the message seemed genuine, I think.” I stopped myself from asking him how he could tell if someone was telling the truth over Facebook. The truth was I had been worried about Chad over the past week. I was acquainted with his bad temper and I feared that after a while the spring break bad luck might grate on his nerves. But he kept smiling, periodically saying things like “I’m glad we’re doing this.” Megs, on the other hand, didn’t appear to be trying so hard. Over the last few outing her enthusiasm had noticeably dampened. She didn’t seem her usual bright self, not having much energy for our jaunts around the city. This, however, was the first time she was refusing to accompany us.

“I hope she shows up tonight,” Chad said. “I was going to ask her out when we get a free moment.”

I groaned silently. Why did not having Megs around have to make him so depressed? What made her so damn special? Wasn’t I enough for him?
Why can’t he think about me the same way he thinks about her? I thought.

As soon as I thought it my cheeks flushed with embarrassment, as if I’d said it out loud. Of course I didn’t want Chad to like me the exact same way he liked Megs. It was just an issue of improperly wording my feelings. That had to be all it was.

California Park was something of an urban-legend hot spot in our city, and Chad and I had always been a little curious to see what the fuss was about. It was the bordered by a large, nameless forest that was supposed to be a popular sight for murderers when they needed to bury their corpses. The park was also rumored to be haunted and the annual meeting place for Satanic worshipers on Halloween. What was an established fact was that a pair of albino lovers who were wanted in Connecticut for running a meth lab were found and arrested in California Park. I remember watching the news report on TV and seeing their mug shots with their hate-filled, red eyes that seemed to linger on the screen even after I had turned off the television.

As we ambled down the jogging path, the chilly Spring air contrasted with the heat from the low sun. The road was lined by several dead trees that were bent at the trunk. They leaned out over the path, forming a kind of perverted arch. Loud rap music was playing somewhere, unseen. A man wearing two coats and a beanie slept on the ground under a ratty blanket. I liked the park less and less as we went on. Normally, I would have counted on Chad’s muscles to scare off trouble, but he had a dispirited sulk about him this evening as he thought about what a tragedy it would be if Megs didn’t come to Village Inn tonight. His posture made him look weak and unconfident.

After walking around for about an hour my fears proved justified when we saw a short man in navy-blue shorts and a white T-shirt. He walked toward us purposefully, his flip-flops
clacking on the walkway. He carried a clear, spray bottle and a cloth. I looked at my own dull-brown shoes and wished I had worn sneakers instead.

“Evening, sir,” the man said. He immediately dropped to one knee at my feet. He had a high, nasally voice that wobbled as he spoke and his body shook unhealthily. He couldn’t have been much older than us. “Mind stickin’ out your foot?”

I sighed and edged my right foot forward. I didn’t want to make trouble, but Chad chose then to snap out of his doldrums. He looked at me angrily.

“I’m Toby. Ya’ll Cubs fans?” he said, stretching out and stressing the word “Cubs.” He sprayed my shoe and rubbed it furiously with the rag.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, even though I wasn’t really.

“They gonna win the World Series this year? Next shoe, please.”

“Maybe,” I said. “It depends on how good the Cardinals are.”

“Hey man, fuck the Cardinals!” Toby said, suddenly very angry.

“Come on Leo, let’s go,” Chad said.

“Chill the fuck out honky,” Toby said. He glared at Chad as he rubbed my left shoe. “I’m talkin’ to my man here. Just tryin’ to run a respectable business here.”

“Chad, shut up. I can handle this,” I said. Toby could have a knife as far as I knew and avoiding a fight seemed paramount.

“Get out of here you fucking junky,” Chad said as he reached down and lightly shoved Toby’s shoulder. “We’re not paying for your shit.”

“Fuck you!” Toby said, standing back up to his full height, which only came up to about Chad’s chest. “I’m gonna slap your bitch ass down you keep talkin’.”
“Chad, don’t talk to him,” I said. I took out my wallet and looked for something, anything to give the shoeshiner.

“Leo, don’t give this junkie anything,” Chad said. He took a few steps in the direction we’d been walking, hoping I would follow, but I knew Toby would just follow, in which case he would be mad at both of us.

“Shut your fucking mouth!” Toby screamed. “We just doin’ business here. If he wanna pay for his services, you ain’t gonna do shit ‘bout it!” He thrust his teeth out in a threatening way. Chad shoved him in the chest, a little harder than before, and all I wanted was to throw some money at Toby and get away.

“Is there a problem here?”

The new voice was an awkward baritone, the voice of a man intentionally lowering it for effect. We all looked behind us, and standing there was a very tall man, at least six-and-a-half feet. He wore black cargo pants and a black leather jacket, and under it was a black-and-yellow shirt, striped horizontally. He also wore a black mask that covered his eyes, like something you’d see at a masquerade ball. He stood with his fists on his hips and his legs spread apart.

“Fuck are you?” Toby said.

“Are you harassing these gentlemen?” the stranger said sternly.

“Just providin’ my service,” Toby said, striding angrily toward him.

“As am I,” the stranger said. He put out his hand in a way that reminded me of a traffic cop and stopped Toby. “Leave this park now, sir.”

“Man, fuck you!” Toby said.

“Do not make me ask you again. Otherwise I will alert the proper authorities.”
Toby whipped his shoeshine towel at the man in the costume. The stranger caught it and wrenched it from his grasp. Then he cast the towel down on the pavement and adopted a karate-like pose where his hands were blades and a forearm was positioned at chest level to block a counterstrike. He did it all in one fluid, practiced motion.

I often wonder what Toby was thinking in those moments, if he was still capable of thought in his state of mind. Maybe he was deciding what to do. Whatever it was, he spat on the cement, picked up the towel, made some indiscernible noise and walked off into the park.

“Are you boys all right?” the man said. He wasn’t quite smiling, but there was a definite benevolence in his voice.

“Yeah, thanks,” Chad said. For his part, he sounded calmer. “Who are you?”

“I am called the Ill-Tempered Wasp,” he said. “They also call me It Wasp for short. Has a nice ring, don’t you think?”

“What are you doing out here?” Chad said.

“I’m on patrol of this park tonight,” It Wasp said. He adjusted his mask after it had slipped down his face a bit in the altercation. “You two should be more careful. Walking around at this hour can be dangerous.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” I said. I took a quick look in the direction Toby had just stalked off in to make sure he was gone. “Since that’s the case, you mind if we walk with you a little bit?”

“I usually go solo,” he said, trotting past us. “But I suppose some company would be nice for a change.”

Chad and I walked behind It Wasp for awhile in silence. Chad looked at me and grinned. I understood what he felt: We were in the presence of a superhero. I had decided to call him a superhero because that seemed like the best term for someone who walked around in a costume
helping strangers in peril, and in doing so I almost felt ashamed of thinking of myself as a superhero because I was a Revenger. Chad and I were only pseudo superheroes. This was a real superhero. I didn’t care that, as far as I could tell, he didn’t have above-average strength or speed, a power ring, the power to talk to birds or anything like that. I was going to call him a superhero and I didn’t care if anyone wanted to disagree.

Had someone described his costume to me beforehand I would have scoffed and called it goofy. Superheroes needed presence more than a costume, I would have said. But to see It Wasp, walking through California Park so unashamedly in an outfit that proclaimed his vocation to the entire city, didn’t strike me as silly or childish at all, especially since he’d just saved us from a possibly violent confrontation. As the sun was setting on the city, though, I wanted to think of him as a sort of colleague, too. But was I allowed to think of him that way if we hadn’t undertaken any Acts of Vengeance in nearly a year?

“So, is this what you do? Go on patrols?” Chad said eventually.

“One of my jobs is to keep drug dealers and the like out of the park, but I do other things, too.” His voice wasn’t deep and staged anymore. Now it was more relaxed, the comfortable conversational tone of someone who makes friends easily.

“Do you work for the police?”

“Not officially, no. But they know about me and let me operate, just so long as I don’t instigate violence or carry a gun. They’re more worried for my safety than anything else.” At this he laughed, as if this were funny, even though it seemed perfectly reasonable to me.

“Do you feel safe without a gun?” I said.

“Don’t need one. I’ve got some mace and a bulletproof vest, but I’m pretty good at keeping things calm,” he said. Then he stopped and pulled a cell phone out of an inside pocket of
his jacket, checking the time. “Speaking of which, it seems my patrol is complete for the night, but you guys can keep tagging along if you want.”

“Sure,” Chad and I said simultaneously. We left the park and soon found ourselves in a more urban setting. As we walked down the streets, It Wasp drew many curious looks from passersby and more than a few laughs. Three times someone walking by us in the opposite direction high-fived him (locals who knew him perhaps?) but one woman riding her bike past us shouted “Weirdo!” Normally, someone showing such disrespect for someone like It Wasp would have upset Chad and me, maybe even provoking a response, but it didn’t seem to faze the superhero. His back arched backward slightly and he swung his arms so his forearms were almost parallel to his chest. There was a rhythm to his walk that made it look like he was marching to some invisible tune.

“Are you by yourself, or are there other Ill-Tempered Wasps out there?” I said.

“I’m the only It Wasp,” he said. “But I’m part of a larger community of people who do the same sort of thing. There’s a big registry and everything. You just have to pick a name, wear a costume and start helping the world anyway you can.”

We walked into a Jimmy John’s near Northwest High School, one of the inner-city school I had never visited. I was greeted by the familiar sight of large mayonnaise jars and posters that said things like “Free Smells” and “Your Mom Wants You to Eat at Jimmy John’s.”

“Hey It Wasp!” said the employee behind the counter. “What’s up?”

“Not much Sheen,” It Wasp said. “Just give me the usual.”

“You got it,” Sheen said as he started making a ham sandwich.

“Well, I guess superheroes have to eat too, huh?” Chad said, smiling.
“Sure,” It Wasp said. He accepted the wrapped sandwich from Sheen, gave him a $5 bill and led us out of the store. “But this one isn’t for me.”

“Who’s it for then?” I said.

“You’ll see,” he said. “I do a lot of park cleanup, but most of what I do is service.”

He led us about another block to a homeless man wearing a thick Chicago Bears jacket, sitting with his back to a wall in an alley. As we approached, he grinned at It Wasp in recognition with a mouth that was missing several teeth.

“Hey, my man, what’s up?” the homeless man said, making as if to stand but not actually coming to his feet.

“Hey there Tyriq,” It Wasp said. “I brought you something.”

“You’re the best, man,” Tyriq said. He gratefully accepted the bag. Then he looked at us. “Who are these fine gentlemen?”

It Wasp gestured at us with an upturned hand as if to present us, but he didn’t say anything. I then realized we’d never actually told him our names, so we introduced ourselves to Tyriq.

“That there is a great man,” Tyriq said. He unwrapped the sandwich. “Anyone else go around dressed like that would be a damn fool, but not this man here. He’s a fine man.”

“Thanks,” It Wasp said. He grinned in a way that suggested he was used to hearing compliments. “Enjoy the food. You have somewhere to stay tonight?”

He couldn’t speak because his mouth was full, but Tyriq nodded happily, so It Wasp said goodbye. Chad and I waved and the three of us walked in another direction.
“I guess you’re pretty popular, huh?” I said. I was beginning to feel like I was part of a movie star’s entourage, or at least like I was walking with a cool older brother who had a lot to teach me about picking up girls and hiding booze from parents.

“Maybe,” It Wasp said. He stopped on the street corner and turned to face us again. He smiled a smile that looked sleepy and relaxed, and I thought there was a chance he’d been stoned the whole time without my noticing. “But honestly, all I care about is helping people and doing the right thing. I do what I love and it helps make the world a better place. How can you go wrong? Am I right?”

Chad and I looked at each other again. We realized then that this was a kindred spirit, if not quite in practice at least in philosophy. I was almost ashamed of myself for having shunned my Revenger duties for so long when there was someone else out there, so dedicated to the principles we professed to hold.

“Say, how would you boys like to meet my wife?”

The question felt shocking, as if he were asking us if we wanted to see his Uzi.

“You’re married?” I said.

“Sure,” he said. “She’s the power behind the throne, so to speak. I live right around here. It’s not far.”

“I’m not sure,” Chad said. I knew why I was hesitant (my mother had warned me about situations like this, after all), but I couldn’t say for sure what Chad was thinking. “We should probably think about getting back.”

“Come on,” he said. “She loves meeting the people I help out.” His eyes softened behind his mask and his mouth drooped ever so slightly, and I found it hard to refuse him. We followed him another five blocks, to a different neighborhood. The streets were narrowed by the unending
number of cars lining the sidewalks, and I could hear sounds coming from the aging townhouses, screaming babies and televisions turned up to decibels that had to be causing a fair amount of noise pollution.

“This is it,” he said. We were outside a red-bricked building that looked a lot like the other buildings in the neighborhood. Sitting on the stoop was a frighteningly thin woman with gold-colored ringlets on her arms and brown hair done-up to look like Farah Fawcett’s feather cut. She had her chin in her hand, and she gave It Wasp a tired stare.

“Hey Amber,” It Wasp said with a cheerful wave.

“Matthew, I made Shepherd’s Pie,” she said, her voice deep and slow. “It’s gone bad.”

“I’m sorry honey,” It Wasp said. “Patrol went a little longer than usual.”

“Yeah, sure,” she said. She sighed. Then she looked at us dispassionately. “Who are they?”

“These are my new friends, Leo and Chad. Chad, Leo, this is my wife.”

We nodded to her.

“Great, more adoring fans,” she said. Then she sighed again: “Are you coming inside? We need to discuss a few things.”

“Sure am. Come on in boys,” It Wasp said. The thought of walking into a complete stranger’s home wasn’t terribly appealing, but if this was some kind of trap to rob and murder us it felt overly elaborate. I didn’t think someone would dress up as a superhero just to lure us to his home and kill us. Besides, Chad still had bigger muscles. Glancing at each other one last time, Chad and I followed It Wasp into the house.

He led us through a dark front hallway to a living room where there were no lights on and the rays of the dying sign filtered through lace curtains, making the room appear gray. There was
a grand piano in the corner of the room, and on the walls were dozens of pictures, most of them small, no bigger than eight-and-a-half by 11 inches. Almost all of them, I noticed, were smiling pictures of It Wasp (not in costume) with his wife. There were none of any children.

Chad and I sat on the couch and It Wasp sat in an armchair on the other side of the coffee table. Amber stood in the doorway that led to what looked like the kitchen. The two of them stared at us, It Wasp smiling and Amber frowning in her tired way. I waited for one of them to flip a light switch but neither did.

“Do you boys want something to eat?” It Wasp said after about a minute.

“I told you the Shepherd’s Pie went bad,” Amber said.

“But you can make something else, right?” he said. He twisted in his seat and smiled at her, a smile she didn’t return.

“How long have you guys been married?” I said.

“Five years,” It Wasp said gaily. Amber nodded in confirmation. “Very happy years, too, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yep. Real memorable since the superhero-thing,” Amber said.

“Any kids?” Chad said a moment before I was about to ask it, even though I knew the answer.

“The Mrs. and I decided to hold off on kids. We’re not quite ready.”

Amber didn’t say anything. She glared at us, as if whatever was wrong were our fault. Strangely, I was starting to get the feeling that it was.

“How about a soda or something?” It Wasp said.

By now, I felt it would have been awkward to refuse him on something else. “Do you have any Diet Dr. Pepper?”
“Nope,” he said with a chuckle. He stood up and started walking out, and as he did so he said over his shoulder, “All we’ve got is RC Cola.”

With that, it was just Amber, Chad and me. Now that her husband was out of the room, I wondered if she might sit down, but instead she stayed where she was, leaning against the door jamb and staring at us in an accusatory way, as if to say *Why aren’t you talking some sense into him?*

“So, what’s your last name?” Chad said after a few seconds.

“What’s yours?” she responded. We got the message and didn’t say anything else. I found myself dreading what the scene in this room was going to look like once we were gone. I pitied Amber, that she should be so upset as to adopt that awful, accusatory look.

It Wasp came back with a RC Cola can in each hand, but before he could hand them to us, Amber said, “Matthew, would you get them out of here?”

“Honey, we have company,” he said. “They haven’t even gotten the tour yet.”

“Goddammit Matthew!” she shrieked suddenly. I was afraid he would drop the cans the way he jumped at the sound of her voice, but he didn’t.

“All righty,” It Wasp said as he set the sodas down on the coffee table. For the first time, he frowned at his wife, as if he couldn’t understand why she was upset. I wondered how many other people It Wasp had brought over, how many people like us Amber had seen and spoken to. “I’ll show you boys out.” We followed him out, and just like that we were back out on the street.

“Sorry about that, boys. I don’t think the Mrs. is feeling quite up to snuff tonight.”

“Yeah, we should go anyway,” Chad said. He shook the superhero’s hand and I did the same. “Who knows? Maybe we’ll see you again.”

“Oh really?” It Wasp said. He raised an eyebrow. “Why would that be?”
“We’re into the hero business a little bit ourselves,” Chad said, pointing at me with his thumb. It Wasp was the first person other than Megs we had told about the Revengers. I didn’t mind Chad doing it since another superhero seemed as good as anyone else to confide in. “We’re the Revengers.”

“Do you wear costumes?” he said, his voice going slightly higher with excitement.

We shook our heads.

“Why not?” he said.

“I don’t know,” Chad said. He frowned slightly. “We just never have.” Come to think of it, why hadn’t we? Were we too proud to wear superhero outfits?

“Oh well,” It Wasp said. He shrugged and smiled, and when he dropped his voice by a note I got the feeling he was being a little condescending. “What kind of things do you guys do?”

“Little things, here and there,” Chad said. He moved his hand from side to side as if “here” and “there” were nearby and visible. “We mostly focus on things where we can take revenge, you know, against the forces that would seek to do harm to society at large.”

It Wasp’s smile lost a bit of shine just then, the corners of his mouth slackening. His look changed in a way that was hard to describe, but somehow it went from gentle to pitying.

“Revenge, huh?” he said. His voice had gone back to the staged baritone he’d used with Toby. “That’s a tough racket.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Just that it has a way of coming back to you,” he said. He tugged at the lapels on his jacket. “More power to you though if you can manage.”

Chad and I looked at each other once more, but this time quizzically.
“Well, I’d best be going inside,” It Wasp said. “You think you boys can make it back to wherever you’re going safely?”

“Uh, yeah,” Chad said. “Sure. Thanks again for the help with the junkie.”

“No problem. Best of luck with your vengeance.” We waited for a few seconds for him to turn and walk away from us, but he just stared at us and smiled until we turned our backs and walked off. When I glanced over my shoulder, he wasn’t there.

“Pretty crazy, huh?” I said as we rode a city bus back toward the park. We had to pick up my car, and when I checked my watch I saw that we would probably be late in meeting Megs.

“Yeah,” Chad said. He was frowning. “Do you think vengeance is tough, like he said?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Do you?”

“No,” Chad said firmly. “He has his shtick and we have ours.”

“Exactly,” I said. I leaned back in my seat and tried to read some of the graffiti written over a map of the city. I suppose it caught my attention because one of the words looked like “wasp,” but I couldn’t be sure. I wondered if we would ever cross paths with It Wasp again. We never did, at least not yet, but since Chad and I don’t live in our old home town anymore it’s hard to imagine us every seeing him again.

We arrived at Village Inn and found Megs already there in a corner booth, looking out the window with her forehead resting against the glass. She was ashen faced and I wondered if, maybe, she really was sick. As we sat down I thought Chad might tell her about our encounter with the Ill-Tempered Wasp. He didn’t, perhaps because he wanted to maintain the illusion that we were somehow original in our personas as the Revengers.

“Glad you could make it,” Chad said to her. He reached out and squeezed her shoulder, a gesture to which she didn’t respond. “Now you can help us end spring break in style.”
“Sorry I couldn’t come with you to the park,” she said, her voice hoarse.

“Maybe next time,” I said. I wondered why I said it since I didn’t plan on going back to California Park ever again.

“I was thinking,” Chad said as he picked up the menu. “We should make this an annual tradition, you know? The three of us, when City lets out for spring break, doing fun stuff all around town. Or maybe we could all go to another town, together.”

Megs lifted her face off the glass and gave Chad a dazed look. “City?”

“Yeah,” Chad said. “Next year.”

“I thought I told you guys,” she said, a confused look on her face. “I’m not going to City.”

There was a long pause, a pause I’m sure was a lot longer for Chad than for Megs and me.

“What do you mean?” Chad said quietly.

“I’m going to Hemingdale. They have a better physics program there,” she said.

I knew she hadn’t told us. I wanted to call her a fucking liar, but I thought it was Chad’s right to say it, if it was to be said at all.

“No, I don’t remember it,” Chad said.

“I hope you guys understand,” she said, which is exactly what I’d expected her to say.

“It’s cool,” Chad said, looking at the menu quickly. “It’s cool.”

Megs didn’t order any food when the waiter came by to take orders. Chad didn’t order any either. I wasn’t all that hungry, but I asked for a bacon cheeseburger and a chocolate milkshake just so we wouldn’t all be sitting there, drinking water and doing nothing else of consequence.
7. Dreaming of Montreal

*I wonder what it’s like to be in a cornfield at night*, I thought as we drove down the interstate, ten minutes from town. Like many of the roads outside the city limits, it was lined with cornfields. With no moon and our headlights only illuminating the highway I couldn’t see the stalks. I imagined myself lost in the darkness, surrounded by scratching cobs, dust in my eyes.

It was October now. Chad and I were in college and it didn’t feel all that different from being in high school. It seemed like all my other high school acquaintances (the few who were still talking to me, anyway) graduated, spent their summers doing whatever and then treated the transition to college like it was some life-changing event. They left home with eyes that were wide, minds that were open and stomachs that were either queasy or destined to be filled soon with alcohol. As for me, I woke up on the first day, went to classes, hung out with Chad during
my break period, went to more classes and was then home in time to watch *Raging Bull* on Turner Classic Movies. The first few months were little more than a string of entry-level classes like World Literature and Introduction to Philosophy, classes that weren’t much harder than what I was used to from high school except that there was little more homework. I joined the student newspaper as a copy editor, but that only meant going to production on Wednesday nights, fixing typos and writing headlines for that week’s edition. The other staff members didn’t see much need to talk to me and I mostly kept to myself. Even though the majority of the population didn’t hate me, which was a welcome change, I still wasn’t very good at making friends.

As usual, my frustrations were also Chad’s.

“Is it me or is college kind of boring?” he said one day about a month after the beginning of the semester. We were sitting on concrete ledges that lined the campus mall. The mall ran the length of the university and most of the major buildings opened out to it. It was a brisk, Indian Summer day, one of the last of the year where sitting outside would be comfortable.

“I don’t know,” I said, even though I did.

“How many people have you hung out with yet besides me?” he said. He swung his legs back and forth so his heels bounced off the concrete we were sitting on.

“A couple.”

“See? It’s the same with me.” I looked at him, but he didn’t elaborate. I couldn’t say for sure what he was thinking, but if I had to guess I would say it was probably about Megs. Since the previous summer and the beginning of school Chad had seemed a little off, as if he were distracted by something. I was sure that something had to be Megs, who was off in Hemingdale and, according to Chad, was having a great time meeting new people and participating in a club that did nothing more than try new flavors of ice cream. I think it bothered him that she was
getting along so well without us, without him. I’d noticed a tendency of his lately to stare in a
glazed, sad way, less of a willingness to fill the air when our conversation hit a dead spot. When
we’d seen her during the summer he’d been his usual, friendly self, and when she wasn’t around
he didn’t talk about her often. But every time I thought he might have learned to cope without
her, he’d say something to remind me that he was thinking about her, something like “Yeah,
Megs told me she’s reading *Canterbury Tales*, too” and “Did you know the only Chick-fil-A in
the state is at the college in Hemingdale?”

To break the monotony we decided to take a short road trip. We skipped our Friday
classes and went to Des Moines to see the Barenaked Ladies in concert, which is how I ended up
looking at a cornfield in the pitch-black darkness. It was past midnight and we were almost
home.

“All in all, I have to say it was an excellent decision. I’m glad we went,” I said, partially
to make conversation for the sake of conversation, but also to make sure Chad was still alert. I’m
not sure how much the Megs-pining was affecting his day-to-day functions, but he didn’t have
my full confidence as a driver anymore. He’d been involved in two minor wrecks in the last three
months, neither of which he claimed was his fault, and he’d been sucking down Mountain Dews
for the past two hours, trying to stay awake.

“Yes, definitely,” he said. “I mean, yeah, it was Des Moines, but whatever.”

“Not the most scenic of locales, but yeah, the concert was good. And that was pretty
awesome when you whacked that loudmouth on the knee with the putter,” I said.

“Yeah, well, he deserved it. A Revenger is ever-vigilant, am I right?” I couldn’t tell if he
was being sarcastic. Ever since meeting It Wasp I had been thinking a lot about how much of a
right we had to call ourselves superheroes, even part-time ones. Aside from tackling the
Unabombers in the mall and breaking up the Senior Prank I couldn’t think of any legitimate Acts of Vengeance we had ever undertaken, and those had both been so long ago. When was I supposed to stop being a Revenger? Was it a commitment I could ever really quit?

We were silent for another minute before he spoke again. “You know what? I like this, just you and me, seeing sights and whatever.” I looked at him. *You and me?* Was this him getting over Megs, just a little? It would be healthy for him to finally move on. Anything that steered him in that direction had to be a good idea.

“Yeah, I like it a lot, too. It’s the kind of thing real friends do,” I said.

“Exactly,” he said. He lightly slapped the steering wheel for emphasis. “We should go on a real road trip sometime, somewhere cool. And you know where it should be?” he said. He grinned at me.

“I have a guess,” I said. “But I’ll let you say it.”

“Montreal,” he said, confirming my hunch. Chad lived his life from years three to twelve in Albany, N.Y., and his family had taken many trips across the border for vacations and weekends. He often talked about the city, about excursions to the Planetarium, baseball games at Olympic Stadium and shopping in Old Montreal. I didn’t understand the appeal having never been there myself. It probably would be fine, but I wonder if it would be better than any other big city.

“We totally should go,” he said. “All the charm of Paris with none of the pollution or snobby assholes. And you can function perfectly if you only speak English.”

“You know where else I can get around only speaking English?” I said. “Anywhere in the United States and most of Canada.”
“Sure, but it wouldn’t have Montreal’s charm. You could go there and try to get a job with the Gazette,” he said. I assumed he was joking. “We could go to a CFL game, and you’d finally see some Canadian football.”

“I don’t want to watch Canadian football,” I said. “I’d rather watch the NFL than a bunch of NFL washouts.”

“Fuck off,” he said. He laughed, his enthusiasm not dampened. “You don’t have any idea what it’s like.”

I was just about to tell him to do likewise and fuck himself, but then I saw he was squinting in the rearview mirror. I twisted in my seat and looked out the back window to see a car with its brights on coming up behind us in our lane, gaining ground with each second.

“Fuck’s this guy doing?” I said.

“I don’t know,” Chad said. I was ready to suggest switching lanes, but before I could the car was right behind us, showing no signs of slowing down. Chad yanked the steering wheel hard and we lurched into the next lane to our left. I closed my eyes and held my breath, waiting to be shaken. My stomach dropped out as the other car sped by us with an angry whoosh. Chad honked the horn and gave the unseen driver the middle finger.

“Calm down dude,” I said. I laid a gentle hand on Chad’s arm, the one with the extended appendage. I was asking him to compose himself, even though I could hardly breathe myself.

“That asshole almost ran me off the fucking road!” Chad said.

“Let’s not get in a fight. We don’t want to get pulled over by some psycho killer in the dead of night.” It was a moot point anyway since the other car was long gone, leaving us alone again on a deserted highway.
“Fucking bastard,” Chad said. “How fucked up would that be, to come this far, almost be home and then get killed by some asshole who can’t fucking drive?”

“I agree man. The guy’s a fucker,” I said. Now that the other car was gone, it felt safe in agreeing with him. “I hope that guy gets his tires slashed.”

“No kidding,” Chad said.

I would have forgotten about the incident, or simply remembered it as an event of no particular importance, a brush with death that anyone who lives long enough is bound to encounter at least a few times. I assumed Chad forgot, too.

But then I saw him a week later for what I thought was a spontaneous night of meandering about town.

“Where are we going?” I said as we entered a neighborhood I didn’t recognize. The twisting streets, where the only side roads led to cul-de-sacs, took us further and further away from any landmark I recognized.

“You’ll see,” he said. I trusted him enough to not ask anymore. I sat back, relaxed and looked at bright-green and weed-free lawns, visible in the glow of the streetlights.

“All right,” he said at last. “We’re here.” We were in a cul-de-sac with six houses. He pointed toward a white house that was virtually a clone of the others except for the fact that its garage door faced the street whereas the garage doors on the other houses were on the sides of the houses. A white sedan was in the driveway of the house Chad was directing my attention toward.

“Notice anything?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I bet the neighbors hate whoever lives here. The garage is bound to drive down the property value.”
“Not that, dumbass,” he said. “What about the car?”

I looked at it, but I didn’t see anything special about it, so I told him so.

“What if I told you that the dipshit who owns that car almost ran us off the road last week?” he said. He sounded impressed with himself and I gave the car an anxious third glance, but I still didn’t recognize it.

“Are you sure?” I said. “How can you know?”

“Because it’s got the same license plate number.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “How could you have possibly seen the license plate number?”

“It was XCK 127. It was right in our headlights. How could you not see it?” Now it was his turn to be incredulous.

“Chad, I don’t know anyone who can see that well in the dark.”

“Well, I can, and it was easy. Anyway, the point is this: I saw the fuckwad’s license plate number and I looked it up online.”

“You can do that?” I said.

“Not for free, but yeah. So then I looked him up to see if he had a record.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” I said. I was starting to believe it myself. “Remember the thing with Jordan Smith?”

“One, yes I am, 100 percent. Jordan Smith was a mix-up, but this one’s legit. Two, even if it isn’t, which it is, this guy has been cited numerous times in the past for reckless driving and speeding.”

“So, what are you thinking?”
I could see Chad’s face in the faint glow from the dashboard light. There was a gleam in his eye as he said, “Open the glove compartment.”

I opened it. Inside, on top of the proof of ownership and insurance papers, were a large, old kitchen knife and a screwdriver.

“Fuck me,” I said. “There’s no fucking way we can do that.”

“Yes there is,” Chad said. “You even said so yourself that you wished somebody would slash his tires. Don’t you want to do it?”

“You know I do,” I said. “But we might get caught.”

“As far as I’m concerned it’s a risk worth taking,” he said as he reached over me and plucked the knife from its resting spot. “This guy is a danger to everyone who drives. You want him to kill a family of five because he can’t stay under ten miles above the speed limit? I’m taking the proactive approach on this one.” With that, he opened his door and hopped out of the car. I knew he would do it whether or not I joined him, so I grabbed the screwdriver and got out of the car. I wouldn’t have him saying later that I didn’t have the balls to do what needed to be done. Also, being reminded of the car speeding past us made me physically hot with a desire for revenge. I remembered how scared I felt as that car, unthinking and unheeding, had blown by us, how Chad’s quick thinking when he swung the wheel had probably saved our lives. It wouldn’t be enough to watch Chad cut the tires. I had to do it myself. Besides, he was right. Wasn’t it our duty to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves? Unsuspecting drivers wouldn’t be able to prepare themselves for maniacs like this guy. Even if he wasn’t the guy who nearly killed us (and the more I thought about it, the more I remembered a white car driving past us) he was still a danger to the road.
I looked up and down the street. It was the kind of neighborhood where no one was awake after 11 p.m. Chad reached the sedan first and, with one powerful stroke, punctured the back right tire with his knife. I took a deep breath to settle my stomach.

“Don’t stab yourself,” Chad said. I jabbed at the tire four times before finally breaking the rubber. I heard the soft hiss and I felt a pleasant chill in my body. I couldn’t believe I was actually here, committing a fairly serious crime.

“All right, let’s go,” Chad said. Once in the car, Chad slowly turned the ignition, as if that would dull the sound of the engine. The car started and we rolled off the curb, driving a near-silent ten miles an hour out of the cul-de-sac and into the twisting neighborhood. It probably would have been safe to drive faster once we were a few streets away from the house, but Chad kept us at a slow cruise.

As soon as we were out of the neighborhood Chad and I grinned at each other, both too excited to speak. My body felt pleasantly chill, a chill that was almost made more satisfying by a small, nagging guilt. I was slouched down in the seat, my knees almost resting against the dashboard.

“It’s sweet because we might have saved a life tonight,” I said with a sigh.

“Maybe,” Chad said. “And who’s to say we can’t save more lives on other nights?”

“Dude, are you serious?” I sat up straight.

“Absolutely. I can keep looking up bad drivers and we’ll keep slashing their tires. How’s that sound?”

The chill in my body made shiver, after which there wasn’t a chance in the world of me saying no.
Over the next month, Chad read the public record in the newspaper, looking for serious driving violations. When he found one, he looked up the driver online to see if there was a history of citations. If there was a long list of dangerous-sounding offenses, like a woman we tagged who’d been issued nine speeding tickets in three years, we went to that person’s house on Friday and slashed his or her tires. We wore black, waited for vampire hours to make sure no one would see us and we used the same kitchen knife and screwdriver, tools that had come to feel right in our hands as instruments of justice. One of the cars was a black Ford Avalanche. The Avalanche’s owner, who had three accidents on record, actually lived in the same neighborhood as the owner of the sedan, but several blocks away. I often wonder if they ever made a connection, if they ever thought that there was a serial slasher was targeting cars in their neighborhood.

It felt good to be back in action, to be Revengers again, and slashing tires was kind of fun. But gradually it lost some of its luster. As we went on, the act of slashing was pleasing when before it had been exhilarating. When Chad and I talked about it, Chad suggested maybe we were missing the vengeance aspect. The sedan’s driver had wronged us, personally, so there was more of a thrill in defacing that car. I didn’t want to agree with him because, in our roles as protectors of society, we couldn’t let selfish, personal revenge color our work, but he was probably right. I didn’t have a better explanation as to why the next few times didn’t delight the way the first time had.

Another thing bothering me was the Ill-Tempered Wasp, whose assessment of revenge still nagged me. I knew he wouldn’t approve of the job we were doing if he could have seen it. He’d called vengeance a “tough racket.” Did that mean we were going to be caught eventually?
Had he been there, with us, I would have liked to have told him to fuck off and leave us alone, but then I wondered why I was still feeling so defensive.

Late in November, when the cold air made it seem like the first snow was a real possibility, we were spending another Saturday night together. We sat in Village Inn and planned on going to the midnight movie.

“So, any leads yet on a new slashing?” I said.

“Yeah, I think so,” Chad said. He was watching the front door of the restaurant, but I didn’t know why. “There’s one really bad guy I was thinking we’d hit up on 32nd near Grover Park.”

I paused before speaking. “Isn’t that near the police station?”

“Yeah,” he said. He looked at me and arched an eyebrow. “So?”

“Do you think it’s smart to commit crimes near a police station?” I said.

“If we do it right it shouldn’t matter.”

“What about response time?” I said. “Are you saying there’s no difference between police that are five minutes away and police that are half an hour away?”

“No, I’m not saying that, but they have patrol cars and shit. Why are we pussying out because the guy’s in an inconvenient location?” he said. “And keep your voice down.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I was thinking about It Wasp, imagining him sitting at our table with his stern and somewhat-vacant face. “It’s just I’ve been thinking—”

“Hey guys,” said Megs, interrupting my upcoming confession. As she plopped down in our booth next to Chad I wished she would get up and go away. It felt like the table was already too crowded with people who knew our secret, if you could call it a secret anymore. When
choosing between the specter of It Wasp and Megs, I would have preferred dealing with It Wasp. At least he didn’t constantly drive Chad crazy.

“Hey Megs,” Chad said. “Sorry I didn’t tell you she was coming, Leo.”

Megs’s eyes went wide. “Oh, I’m sorry Leo. I thought you knew.”

“No, it’s cool, I’m glad you’re here,” I said. Maybe I was able to hide my feelings because her appearance wasn’t much of a surprise. We hadn’t seen her in a few months and it was the weekend. She was bound to show up sooner or later.

“Great,” she said. She smiled. “What movie are we going to see tonight?”

“Harold and Maude, I think,” Chad said. “The IMDB rating has it in the top 250 movies of all time. Has anyone ever seen it?”

Megs and I shook our heads. “What’s it about?” I said.

“I don’t know,” Chad said. “I guess we’ll find out.”

“Yeah,” Megs said. We looked at each other and experienced a lull in conversation which I used to take stock of Megs. In the last few months it looked like she had gained, if not a Freshman Fifteen, at least a Freshman Five or Ten. Her face was a little rounder and her white jacket hugged her a little closer. But she was still Megs: innocently sunny and just a little too ready to say something nice.

“So, how’s Hemingdale?” Chad said after half a minute, filling the space with a question to which he already knew the answer.

“It’s wonderful. I love it,” she said. She then told us all about her ice cream club, the details of which I already knew and which she knew that Chad knew. Then she talked about her awesome roommate from India whose family members she had met through Skype. And then she talked about all the interesting classes she was taking, how fascinating it was to study
distribution of force in her physics lab and that twenty-one Styrofoam cups could hold her weight.

“If there’s one thing I don’t like much though it’s the parking,” she said. She shrugged her shoulders and turned up one corner of her mouth, making a dimple.

“What’s wrong with it?” I said.

“All the student parking is, like, off campus, and the spaces are really tight and narrow,” she said. “I mean, even today some guy gashed up the side of my car because he swung into a spot too fast.”

Chad and I looked at each other. His eyes narrowed and I knew what he was thinking.

“Did you get his license plate number?” Chad said.

“Oh yeah. He left a nice note where he said he was really sorry. I was going to take it in on Monday,” she said. She gave us a lopsided smile, as if to say Hey, what can you do?

“Well, that’s good,” I said. “But you must be a bigger person than me. I can’t stand bad drivers.”

“Oh, dude, I know,” Chad said. “I wish bad shit would happen to bad drivers. I mean, it could be a slogan on a bumper sticker: Bad Shit for Bad Driving.”

“Really? You think so?” she said.

“Absolutely,” I said. “Remember that line in Pulp Fiction? It goes something like, ‘What’s more chickenshit than fucking with a man’s automobile?’ I agree with that wholeheartedly.”

“Eh, I don’t know,” she said. “It was an honest mistake.”

I felt my face heat up. Was it like I was talking to my conscience incarnate? Had I stifled my sense of right and wrong up until now so not even I knew it was bothering me? I looked at
Chad. He stared at Megs, unblinking. If he was thinking the same thing I was, then he wasn’t showing it. We didn’t continue the conversation because the waiter took our orders and we moved on to some other topic, but Megs’s words haunted me for the rest of the night. She was off having a grand-old time at college, probably staying up all night sharing rum raisin ice cream with her roommate from India. What did we have back home? We had our pursuit of justice, and she’d seen fit to mess it up by questioning the rightness of our actions, albeit unintentionally. And the hell of it was that it was bothering me.

The next afternoon I was studying for an economics test and simultaneously trying to call sources for a story I was writing for the newspaper about a new parking garage being built on campus. The regular news staff was bogged down filling up content for a 24-page issue, so I’d volunteered. In addition to being my first-ever journalism assignment, it was a fairly important article, I had yet to make progress on it and there was a Monday staff meeting I needed to attend. I didn’t want to face the editors with nothing to show for the past week. As I re-read the part of the textbook explaining why a high minimum wage hurts the economy, I got a call from Chad.

“Leo, be ready in ten minutes,” he said without saying hello. “We’re going after the guy.”

“Who?”

“The one by Grover Park.”

“Oh,” I said. Then I paused. “Tonight?”

“Yes, tonight.”

“It can’t wait until next weekend?”

“What if he squashes some old lady or runs a bus-load of orphans off the road in that week?” I think he was exaggerating on purpose, but he sounded so earnest.
“All right, I’ll be waiting,” I said. After I hung up I sighed. Again, I was getting that feeling where a bus was slowing down and this was my last chance to catch it. I crammed for my test for another few minutes and sent e-mails to my potential sources. Chad pulled up in front of my house in his car and pulled away from my house with me in his car. As we drove, Chad seemed in good spirits, laughing and telling me new blonde jokes he had heard, or repeating old ones he thought I had forgotten. I couldn’t be sure, but his laughter sounded forced.

“So, why are we doing this now?” I said, bringing up the matter at hand for the first time.

“Because it needs to be done now,” he said.

“Does this have anything to do with what Megs said?” I said.

“Eh, she doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” Chad said. “And to answer the question, no, it doesn’t have anything to do with what she said.” I listened to him and watched him carefully. He seemed so sure and easy.

“So, you’re sure?” I said.

“Leo, we don’t have to answer to anyone,” he said. Was my soul really that transparent that everyone could see through it these days? “I know we care a lot about what she says and thinks, but maybe this Act of Vengeance could just be for us, you know? I mean, who cares if Megs doesn’t approve?”

He was bullshitting. He had to be. I knew we wouldn’t be here right now if Megs hadn’t spoken up about it yesterday. But to hear words denouncing Megs come from his mouth was, in a way, wonderful. For now, this night was going to be for us. Fuck doubts and reservations. We were the Revengers, and we didn’t eat shit from anyone, and even if that wasn’t the case I could pretend like it was for a little bit.
We pulled onto a side street, into a cramped neighborhood with small houses, many of them vacant with boarded-up windows and lawns choked with crabgrass. The streets were long, straight and narrow. Even if I had wanted to press him more on the situation, I didn’t have time because we pulled up in front of our destination. It was a small white abode with peeling paint. The property’s tall grass had snared a red tricycle. There was a garage, but it wasn’t big enough to fit the big, black Chevrolet in the cracked driveway.

“All right,” Chad said. “Let’s do this.”

“Awesome,” I said. I felt excited, like the first time, and in my zeal to do our duty I didn’t look up and down the street. I didn’t notice Chad do it, either. We got out of his car and walked toward the offending vehicle. As I stabbed the back right tire with the screwdriver and I heard the air escape, I felt the cool, familiar pleasure. I was sorry it was done so quickly. Chad was on his knees with his ear next to the hole he had just created, listening to the sound, grinning as if he were trying to soak as much satisfaction from the punctured tire as he could. Then he looked past me, dropped his grin and stood up.

I turned around to see a man dressed in jeans, a Chicago Cubs hat and a loose, open jacket over a T-shirt that read “It’s 5 o’clock somewhere.” There was a black, spiky tattoo on his neck that may have been a spider, but for some reason I found the black, Frank Zappa mustache more intimidating. I twitched in my spot for a moment because an instinct told me to run, but a separate, conflicting instinct told me to stop and play innocent. I slipped the screwdriver into my back pocket and was relieved to see Chad do the same with his knife.

“What’s that you’re doing?” he said. Chad stared at him calmly and coldly, but didn’t say anything.
“We’re actually a little lost,” I said, improvising. “We’re, uh, from out of town and we’re trying to get to the university.”

“What’re you doing by that car?” the man said.

“What do you mean?”

“You were just bending down by it.”

“Yeah, but we weren’t doing anything to the car,” I said. I was sweating and hoping he hadn’t heard the hissing noise earlier. He brushed past us, bent down on his haunches and looked at the back tires. I turned to Chad, too frightened to speak, looking for some sign as to what to do next.

The man stood up again and faced us.

“Now why in the world would you boys go ahead and do that?”

I opened my mouth to speak again, but Chad beat me to it.

“Because the guy deserves it,” he said firmly.

“Is that so?” the man said. He crossed his arms.

“Do you have any idea what the owner of that vehicle has done?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“He’s been ticketed for offenses over the past ten years ranging from illegal parking to driving thirty miles per hour over the speed limit near an elementary school. He’s a danger to himself and society. How would you feel if your child was hit crossing the street after school because someone refused to slow down and obey the law?”

“I have no idea how I would feel,” the man said in a monotone. He didn’t blink as he looked at us.
“It’s up to good citizens to do something about the bad citizens. So we slashed his tires and we’d do it again if we had to, because we will not sit back and let other people solve our problems for us. Call the police if you want, but just know that if you do, you’ll be standing in the way of those who wish to fight the forces that would do harm to society at large.” When Chad brought up calling the police I felt like throwing up. I had often thought about what would happen if we were caught, but I hadn’t considered what would happen after that. In that moment, I pictured going to a prison, or paying a mammoth fine that would put an end to my college education.

Instead, he stared at us for what felt like a full minute. Just when I was about to suggest that he let us walk away peacefully, he said, “So you boys like being good citizens, huh?”

“Yes, we do,” Chad said. He stood up taller and the man seemed to soften, his shoulders drooping slightly.

“I kinda respect that. I really do,” he said, more to himself I suspected. Then to us: “Throw down whatever it was you used to do this.” Chad immediately took the knife from his pocket, held it straight out and dropped it defiantly. I was worried about the man maybe using our own tools against us, so I wasn’t as quick about it as I took out the screwdriver and let it fall to the gravel. He picked up Chad’s knife and walked to our car. Then he bent down between the back tires and in two motions cut them both. I heard the air as it escaped and I went limp. Chad’s mouth dropped and his eyes went wide. The man walked back to us and cast the knife on the ground at Chad’s feet.

“I’m not gonna call the cops, but I will call us a tow truck. Then you two can get the fuck off my property. Deal?”
I nodded weakly. Chad just stared at the man in silence. Then the man turned his back on us and walked into the house.

Chad and I waited in the cold for the promised tow truck. I paced back and forth, trying to keep warm. I couldn’t believe I’d felt any enthusiasm fifteen minutes ago. Chad sat on the curb and stared at the house in brooding silence. I guess he was thinking about Megs. Had I been in love with her, the way he was, I would have prayed that she never learned about this incident under any circumstances.

“I tell you,” Chad said after a few minutes. “When we get to Montreal, we won’t have to deal with this shit.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Because Montreal is the perfect city. We wouldn’t have to fight evil forces or do Acts of Vengeance or anything.” I couldn’t tell if he was being serious.

“Aren’t the drivers in Montreal terrible?” I said. “I thought I heard somewhere that drivers in Quebec are really bad.”

“Fuck off,” he said. He gave me a dark look. “That’s a stereotype. I didn’t see a single car accident in my time there.”

I didn’t have the inclination to argue.
8. The Camouflage Mob

By the time Winter Break came around, having our tires slashed didn’t feel so much like a humbling defeat. We forgot about the man with the tattoo on his neck, at least in part, after we stole the Sex Press a few weeks before the end of term. My qualms with violating someone’s First Amendment freedoms persisted, but soon passed because I could see that our most recent, successful Act of Vengeance had put Chad in the best mood I had ever seen him in college, and for that I was too grateful to be concerned about a pornographer’s right to freely express airbrushed body parts. When we hung out on Saturdays he laughed louder at my jokes. When we saw Pineapple Express at the midnight movie, he said, “You know, I hated that movie the first time I saw it, but it was actually kind of funny seeing it again.” When he walked, he would make this little, excited jump every hundred feet or so, and when I asked him why he did it he smiled, shrugged and said, “I don’t know. No reason.”
To commemorate the occasion, Chad suggested we should go ice skating as soon as we were out of classes. The local rink was a popular winter hangout for young adults in town, but the suggestion puzzled me. We’d never been there and I didn’t know how to skate. It was almost like asking if I wanted to go to a sperm bank, or if I wanted to go shopping for power drills. It wasn’t the most outlandish suggestion, but it wasn’t something we normally did. Still, we hadn’t celebrated a successful Act of Vengeance for awhile, and I genuinely wanted to hang out with Chad when he was in such a good mood, so I agreed.

I drove to the rink that night around 7:40 p.m., twenty minutes before we’d agreed to meet, because I thought it would be crowded and hard to find a parking spot. Sure enough, all the spaces were full, and I recognized Chad’s Ford Fiesta as I circled the lot. If he was inside already, that meant he was waiting for me. I felt my face go hot with embarrassment, like I was driving to school and knew I was going to be late for class. Had I misheard him? Were we supposed to meet earlier?

I drove and drove, becoming increasingly frustrated as spots refused to open. When my phone rang and I saw his name on the caller ID I knew he had to be calling to ask where I was. I was ready to apologize several times over. Even if he told me it was OK, I planned to continue apologizing for misunderstanding what time we were supposed to meet.

“Hey Chad,” I said when I answered. “Sorry, I—”

“Hey man,” he said. I could hear muffled music in the background, as if he were in one room and loud music were playing in the other. “I can’t make it tonight.”

I looked in my rearview mirror and saw the Ford Fiesta again, just where I’d seen it four times now.

“Why? Where are you?” I said.
“I’m busy,” he said. His voice was in a deliberate monotone, like he was trying to keep all emotion out of it.

“Why?” I said.

There was a definite pause on the other end. “Stuff came up,” he said. “Besides, don’t you think two guys just going iceskating is kind of weird?”

“What’d you suggest it then?” I said. I frowned and wondered if he could sense it over the phone.

“It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. We can do it later if you still want to.” He sounded impatient, and the music in the background died down.

“Oh,” I said. Then I didn’t say anything for a few seconds. “What’re you doing?”

“Nothing special,” he said. “I just can’t chill tonight, that’s all.”

“OK,” I said. “Sometime during the week?”

“Yeah, definitely.” After one last awkward pause, he said good-bye and hung up.

I sat in my car, the motor still running and pumping noxious gas into the air. It didn’t take me long to decide that I should go inside and see what he was up to. He didn’t often tell me what exactly he was thinking or planning, and I was used to that by then, I suppose. But he was rarely this cryptic. Could he be hanging out with someone else? I decided that was possible, except then I didn’t know why he wouldn’t invite me to tag along with this mysterious third party, if indeed that was the case. No spaces had opened in the parking lot yet, so I fed a meter on the street and walked into the ice rink.

The building with the rink was part of a larger complex of tennis courts and picnic areas that were no longer in use during the season. It was a short, round structure with a spire-like thing sticking up in the center that made it look, to me anyway, like a smaller, shorter version of
the Mormon Temple in Provo, Utah. Inside, the well-lit lobby area was filled mostly with people below the age of twenty, the only adults being some rink attendants and parents who were trying to supervise rambunctious children. I saw a large group of teenagers, some of whom I recognized as students at local high schools, standing by a NASCAR-themed pinball machine. In the corner there were some girls closer to my age in leg warmers and sweaters by a television tuned to Cartoon Network.

I didn’t see Chad, so I went to look through the large glass windows at the far end of the lobby that looked out over the rink. I saw Chad among all the skaters. He wasn’t hard to miss because he was wearing his distinctive red and blue Montreal Canadiens hockey jersey. I didn’t even have to doubletake to know it was him, but I did doubletake when I saw he was holding hands with Megs. She was wearing a brown beanie, a purple scarf and a black sweater, and I had to admit that, to someone who didn’t know them, the scene probably looked very sweet. It was Chad and Megs all over again, him trying to charm her into loving him. I had hoped that after the spring break fiasco from half a year ago that I was done with watching them play their little game. For the first time I really questioned what Chad thought about our friendship, how he felt about me compared to her, and I had an overwhelming desire to put him to the test at that moment. I strode over to the rental counter, paid for a pair of skates and then marched out to the rink.

Inside, large banners of red and green hung from rafters above the ice, displaying various hockey championships and figure-skating titles won by local competitors. The skaters wore all manner of colorful sweaters, hoodies and jackets, and there was even one man in a Santa Claus outfit who executed a backflip while skating, which drew a small but enthusiastic round of applause from those nearby. In some ways, with the colorful banners and the happy people
wearing costumes, it almost reminded me of a Renaissance fair, where the only thing missing was a giant May Pole in the center of the ice for the skaters to go round and round.

I laced up the skates, and as I stood at the door leading to the rink I hesitated for the first time. I took a few tentative steps on to the ice and shuffled my feet. It was a few seconds in and I hadn’t fallen yet, which I suppose was something of a victory in itself, but my legs felt wobbly, as if a stiff breeze would be enough to make them buckle. I stayed out of the main crowd of skaters, feeling my way along the wall as I found my footing.

“First time?” said a voice at my elbow. I looked over my shoulder at a girl with long black hair who looked to be at least part Japanese. She was wearing a hoodie with a Chicago Bears logo on it.

“Yeah,” I said. She wasn’t quite my age, but close, a year or two younger maybe. I was just about to mention that I was a freshman at City when she threw back her head and laughed. I could see for a moment a gold stud in her tongue. Then she glided away, rejoining the larger body of skaters.

I frowned and stopped, leaning my back against the glass. I waited for Chad and Megs to come by again, which they did about a minute later. They were still holding hands and Chad didn’t notice me at first. He was staring at Megs, transfixed by whatever it was she was saying. Then she looked over at me and smiled.

“Leo! Hey!” she said. Chad saw me and swallowed, a swallow where I could see his Adam’s apple quiver like a wet cat. He weakly grinned at me, lifting only one side of his mouth.

“Hey guys,” I said. I let go of the ledge behind me and shuffled over to them. I stumbled a bit but kept my balance.
“How’s it going?” Megs said. She placed a gloved hand on my arm for a moment before withdrawing it. “What are you doing here?”

“Chad invited me,” I said. I looked at him as I said it and his nostrils flared for an instant.

“Is this your first time skating?” Megs said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Still trying to figure out how it works, you know?”

“Yeah, Chad, too,” she said with a laugh. “Why don’t you skate with us for awhile?”

“Sure,” I said. Chad didn’t frown or glare at me, but from his slightly flushed face and heavy breathing I could tell he was upset as we joined in with the crowd, going counterclockwise. I didn’t care, though. I had just as much right to be upset with him, and I made it a point to chitchat with Megs about school and her first semester as we went along.

“So, were your grades pretty good?” I said. Some Katy Perry song, a new one I didn’t recognize, was playing over the loudspeakers, and just behind us a group of teenage girls was singing to it in whiny, screechy voices. Chad’s skating was, like mine, jerky and awkward, whereas Megs moved in graceful, easy strides, never taking her feet off the ice.

“All As,” she said. Chad rolled his eyes. I suppose he already knew that and perhaps was peeved to be repeating an earlier conversation.

“Are the classes in Hemingdale hard?” I said.

She shrugged and scrunched up her nose. “Not really. They’re kind of like high school.”

“Yeah. It’s like that at City, too,” I said.

“I think they’re supposed to get harder, though,” Chad said, speaking for the first time since my arrival. “I’m taking Advanced Astronomy next semester for a science requirement.”

“Well, aren’t you just a smarty pants, then,” Megs said in a tone that I thought was kind of nastily sarcastic. She lightly punched him on the shoulder, maybe to let us know she was
kidding, but Chad’s face blushed anyway. I felt bad then, and I wondered if Megs had talked that way to him before I’d shown up. As I thought about that I felt a bump on my left arm. It was enough to send me falling down on my backside. I heard a person with short red hair wearing a gray hoodie mumble “sorry” as he (or maybe she) skated by. I felt water seep through my jeans.

“Whoops,” Megs said. She held my arm as I struggled to my feet, but when I looked into her face I could see she was trying to hold back some chuckles. Chad looked at me blankly and I was glad to see he at least wasn’t taking any amusement in my falling.

“I think I need to stop and dry off for a bit,” I said. I tried to laugh, but it came out sounding like a cough.

“OK,” Megs said. Then she looked at Chad. “Do you want to sit with him Chad? You’re all sweaty.”

He was red-faced and perspiring a bit, but not in a way that made him look tired. His eyes softened and his face fell. “Sure,” he said.

“Good,” Megs said. “I need to practice my moves for a little bit.” Chad and I shuffled away, and now that we were gone, Megs started skating faster and with more even more grace, weaving between other skaters as if she were a talented bicyclist at the Tour de France.

I sat on the bleachers next to Chad. We watched the crowd and we both sulked. I was embarrassed for having fallen, but mostly I thought about how I was still angry with Chad.

“So, yeah,” I said.

“Thanks for showing up,” he said sarcastically.

“I’m not the one who was dishonest.”

He looked at me as if I were the person next to you on the airplane who smacks his or her gum right in your ear. “She called me this afternoon. What was I supposed to do?”
“Not blow me off and lie like a bitch,” I said. I deliberately didn’t look at him and instead stared at the rink. Megs was now pirouetting and drawing admiring glances from nearby boys. The skaters had parted around her, as if she were a stone in a stream.

“Would it be so awful if I got to spend some time alone with her?” Chad said. “Just me, for once?”

“Sure,” I said. “Just don’t do it at my expense.”

He snarled and shifted his upper body toward me. “I’ve barely seen her all semester. Don’t be such a fucking jerkoff about it.”

“All you had to do was tell me the truth.” This itself wasn’t true, because I still would have been mad anyway for him blowing me off, but if I could just stick to his undeniable dishonesty, then I would win this argument.

“Fuck off,” Chad said. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him slap his palm against the bleachers, making an ugly clanging noise that rose above the level of the music. His temper was starting to flare, a sight I never liked to see. I didn’t like being mad at him, but I sensed we would have to let the bad feelings simmer for a bit without talking about them. I could always try again later.

“You ready to go?” I said after another minute. My pants felt drier now.

“Whatever,” he said. We got back up and skated up to Megs, who had just completed a figure eight. She smiled and motioned for us to follow her over to one of the corners where the wall rounded off. We did, and the three of us stood with our backs to the glass.

“Do you guys want to do anything after this?” Megs said.

Chad and I looked at each other, waiting for the other to say something first. Who would be the first to budge, the first to take steps back toward reconciliation? I tried not to blink my
eyes and failed, and Chad’s cheeks went rosy. I guessed that he didn’t want to give in, but doing so was the only way to keep Megs around for the evening.

“Hey!” said a new voice. “Montreal sucks!”

The three of us looked up. Skating by and sneering at us were four boys who looked about our age, wearing ripped jeans and camouflage hoodies with the John Deere logo on them. All were thicker than me, but none appeared to be as big as Chad. One was wearing a trucker hat and another had golden studs in his ears, twinkling at us in the white light as he shifted his weight on the ice.

Chad scowled at them. I knew better than to cross him on anything pertaining to Montreal. “Whatever,” he said. “Twenty-four Stanley Cups.”

“It’s not worth it if you have to be French, too,” said the same voice. I could now see that it belonged to the one with studs. “Go Penguins!”

“Fuck you,” Chad said, a little louder than I would have liked. Several people nearby swiveled their heads and made disapproving, you-shouldn’t-swear-in-public glares in our direction. One mother put her hands over her little girl’s ears, even though her daughter was already wearing purple earmuffs. The four boys laughed as they skated away and Chad gave them the finger.

“Calm down,” Megs said. “It’s not worth it to get in a fight.”

Chad said nothing, but he continued glowering to himself. He didn’t like being told to “calm down” over a public slight against Montreal hockey.

As for me, I was tired of bottling up my own anger, and I knew I could make him react with just a little provocation. I shook my head and snorted loudly so he could hear. When he glanced in my direction I deliberately avoided eye contact and made a mirthless chuckle.
Chad looked at me. “What the fuck are you laughing about?” he said.

“I don’t have a damn thing in the world to say to you,” I said.

“Leo, shut up,” Megs said. Now her voice was harder, more authoritative. I wondered how familiar she was with Chad’s easily provoked temper. From the sound of her voice, she must have been. “Ignore them, Chad.” But it was useless now because, for once, I’d won him over.

For a tense minute we waited, knowing the Camouflage Mob would be back around soon.

“Do you guys want to go now?” Megs said, but Chad didn’t answer. Sure enough, the malcontents appeared again, grinning like pre-pubescent teenagers telling sex stories. Chad, with awkward, lumbering leg shuffles, skated toward them.

“Chad! Stop it!” Megs yelled, but it was too late for that. Chad stuck out his leg and tripped one of them. The boy, one with a very high forehead, tumbled to the ice, landing with a hard thump on his face. There would have been more poetic justice in it had the leader, the one with the studs, been the one to fall. Instead, after bending down to check on his friend, Stud Boy turned on Chad with a wide-eyed, angry stare. High Forehead picked himself up heavily and pretty soon all four members of the Camouflage Mob were in front of Chad in a row.

Had we been on solid ground, I would have bet money on Chad in that fight any day, but he looked unsteady, and I was worried that these goons might have a chance of hurting him. I immediately felt guilty for what I’d done. It crossed my mind for a second to let him fend for himself. I was still mad that he hadn’t invited me, choosing some girl who would do no more than give him the time of day in a friendly voice. But he was my friend and a Revenger, for better or for worse. I wanted to help Chad as he made them suffer, and I was partially
accountable for what was about to happen. I probably wouldn’t be much in a fight, but I had a responsibility to do what I could and help even the odds a bit, so I skated up next to him.

The four malcontents glanced at me for a moment, but Chad and his muscles had to be their first concern. Chad looked at me, amazement in his eyes to see me standing by him. Then he reached over and patted my back.

“You’re going to regret that, motherfucker,” Stud Boy said.

“Bring it on, pansy,” Chad said. He cracked his neck and, as best as he could, assumed a fighting stance with his fists up. I did the same, making sure to keep my center of balance. The four of them came at us at once, the one in the trucker hat going for me and the other three attacking Chad. Chad reached out and shoved one of them down, but that was the last I saw of his fight. Trucker Hat reached out and placed me in a headlock. I fell to my knees and he squeezed, trying to put me in a sleeper hold. I flailed my arms, trying to land a punch. I could hear screams from some of the other skaters, most prominently Megs yelling, “Stop!”

Trucker Hat then grabbed my head, covering my ears with his hands, and slammed my forehead into the ice. Tears welled up in my eyes and it felt like a cold needle was scratching my brain. I wondered how I must look to everyone watching. Whether the onlookers were scared of or angry at us, one thing had to be apparent: I was losing, badly. I felt a miserable rage in my stomach. I couldn’t stand the thought of being beaten by this Redneck bastard in front of everyone. I would have given anything to hurt him, to save face in front of these faceless, anonymous people. I got my chance when, with my forehead still on the ice, I elbowed behind me as hard as I could and caught him in the stomach.

He made an “oof” noise and let me go, and in a frenzy I reached behind me and ripped the skate off my left foot. I turned around and saw him clutching his ribs, a look of stunned pain
on his face, and in that moment I lunged at him. I swiped at the back of his hand with my skate blade and a thin, red gash appeared across his knuckles. He clutched it to his body. It was an insignificant scratch, but I was still shocked I could do such a thing. I wanted to do it again, worse this time.

But as I was prepared to cut him a second time, a loud whistle blew. I saw Chad, with one of the malcontents, one with an angular nose, holding on to his arm as Stud Boy was about to land a punch. I turned around and saw a rink attendant skating up to us with a frown on his bushy, bearded face.

“You people are gone,” he said. He stopped short, spraying me with a cascade of ice.

“Turn in your skates and don’t ever come back.”

“It’s these guys’ fault,” Stud Boy said. His body slackened in the face of authority, but I could hear the annoyance in his voice.

“I don’t care,” the rink attendant said. He jerked his thumb backward toward the exit.

“Get the hell out of here before I call the police.”

Mumbling, and in my case humbled at being evicted in front of a large crowd from a family-oriented establishment, we did as he asked and left. Chad, Megs and I went one way and I saw the Camouflage Mob go the other.

“Fucking douche bags,” Chad said. I nodded, but Megs, with tight lips, didn’t say anything as she walked ahead of us. Chad and I followed. I felt a large welt on my forehead, and I didn’t look forward to explaining the future plum to my parents. Then Chad said, “I wish they’d come back over here.”

“Yeah, I bet you would,” Megs said in front of us.

Chad looked up, surprised. “What the hell?” he said.
Megs turned around. Her eyes were narrow, her mouth was set in a firm line and her arms were crossed. “I think your behavior was very immature.”

“What was I supposed to do?” he said. I felt a tap on my shoulder and without thinking I turned around. Chad did the same. The Camouflage Mob was there, sporting their own scratches and bruises, and Trucker Hat still clutching his hand to his body. Before either Chad or I could react, Stud Boy cold cocked Chad across the face. He crumpled to the snow into a fetal position, clutching his cheek. Stud Boy looked at me for a moment and jerked quickly as if to hit me, too. I flinched and prepared for the blow, but he didn’t swing, maybe because I hadn’t injured him personally, or maybe because he saw my bruise and decided I had had enough. Whatever the reason, he sneered and spat on my sneakers.

“And you stay down, faggot,” he said to Chad, to which Chad responded with an anguished, unintelligible mumble through his fingers. The other three smirked and Needle Nose gave us the finger. Then they turned around and sauntered off as if they’d just won a fair fight.

Chad struggled to his feet and I could see he was going to have a nasty bruise similar to mine. The right side of his jersey was now stained with dirty, black slush, and some of the snow had mingled with his already sweaty hair. It was more painful for him, but the scene was pretty bad for me too, to see mighty Chad laid out on the ground and then to rise, dirty and defeated with a prominent disfiguration on his already craggy face. He worked his jaw back and forth and rubbed his chin.

I half-expected him to go after the Camouflage Mob, that is until Megs said, “It serves you right.”

Chad stopped feeling his face and stared at her in disbelief. “You can’t be fucking serious,” he said.
“You should have let it go.” She spoke to him only, as if I hadn’t been involved in the incident. “If you’d been a bigger person then none of this would have happened.”

“Fuck that,” Chad said, spitting out the words and glowering at her. I’d never seen him so angry with Megs. It felt uncomfortable and unnatural to watch, like a teacher and student in elementary school yelling at each other in the middle of class. “You think I should just stand there like an idiot? You think I deserve to get jumped by a bunch of fucking punk-ass pieces of shit?”

“I expect my friends to control themselves, not to be brainless Neanderthals in public. And now I can’t skate there anymore.” There were light tears in her eyes.

I shivered in the chilly night. Chad still looked angry, but also humbled after what Megs had said. I couldn’t tell if being punched by Stud Boy or stung by Megs hurt him more.

“Look, I just don’t like—” he said.

“I’m too mortified to talk right now,” she said, cutting him off. “And you’re just a little too bad-tempered for my taste.” Then she turned her back on us again and strode away from us. “Don’t talk to me ever again.”

Chad didn’t respond as she got in her car and drove away. He looked down at the black, grimy snow by his feet, the place where he had recently lain. I was bruised and sore. I knew I’d given into my anger by cutting Trucker Hat, and now the Catholic Guilt was starting to punish me along with my wounded pride. I felt beaten all over my body, and I didn’t want to stand there in the cold any longer. “So, what do you want to do now?”

Chad looked up at me with a tired face, as if he’d just finished a good cry, even though his eyes were tear-free. “I don’t have any fucking idea,” he said.
It only took us about a minute to call it a night, so we parted and I went home. When my parents saw my face they made me explain how it had come to be. They then grounded me for the rest of Winter Break, barring me from Facebook and from leaving the house except for Mass and some supervised trips to the college bookstore to pick up the texts for next semester. I spent the next few weeks feeling guilty and small, and I wondered what the scene would look like when Chad inevitably tried to make up with Megs.
9. A Trip Down the Road

The next few Megs-free months went about as well as could be expected. Chad’s temper didn’t flare up as often and he stopped giving me little updates about what her life in Hemingdale was like. He also didn’t suggest any new Acts of Vengeance. I let myself wonder, for the first time since our year-long hiatus from superherodom at the end of high school, if this was the end of the Revengers. I figured, almost from the first Act of Vengeance, that we would have to stop eventually. If you had asked me when we would quit, my answer would have depended on when you asked. I may have shrugged and said “Soon, maybe” or “I don’t know.” I also may have stared you down, puffed out my thin chest and said we would never stop, not until every last scumbag of society was either in jail or made penitent on bent knee. Whatever I would say, though, I secretly assumed that either someone would take issue with our Acts and put a stop to them, or one of us would move away to start a career and family somewhere else.
I guess the end of the Revengers started in late February. It was a Saturday and I was running late for a regularly scheduled hang out with Chad. I accidentally had fallen asleep for a few hours of what was supposed to be a cat nap. Driving slowly down the street in a strong, cold downpour, I thought about turning around and going home. I was earning a C in macroeconomics and my parents were pressuring me to study harder, and the previous Wednesday we had pulled an all-night session at the student newspaper, where I had been promoted to an assistant news editor now, putting together a 24-page issue. By the time we were done, it was 8 a.m. Thursday morning, so I didn’t bother sleeping, and even a few days later it felt like ants were crawling on the insides of my eyeballs. I didn’t feel like spending a late Saturday night out of the house, but Chad was also working hard through a tough first year. He hadn’t asked for time off of our friendship, and it would be rude to cancel at this late hour, so I sighed, tightened my belt and set out for our usual Village Inn.

I arrived at the restaurant and I could see him through the window, sitting in the big corner booth. Megs was there, too. I stopped in the rain for a moment before walking in, hardly believing that it was her. As if being cold, sleepy and wet weren’t enough reason to be pissed off, I now had to deal with yet another unannounced tryst with Megs.

She’d been gone for all of two months. She’d called him “brainless” and “bad-tempered” and said she didn’t want to talk to us ever again. Why couldn’t she just stay away? It seemed so unfair that she should talk to Chad that way, only to find her spot at his side open. What if I had spoken to him that way? Would he be so forgiving of me?

But as I walked in and approached the table, the two of them seemed somber. She was wearing eye shadow and it was smeared.
“Hey Leo,” Chad said. He only glanced at me when I sat down. He was looking at Megs, wearing a knowing, sympathetic half-smile. She cleared her throat. I could see a single tear streak through the makeup on her cheek.

“What’s going on?” I said.

“Do you want to tell him or should I?” Chad said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“You should tell him,” she said. She looked at me, but she kept her head lowered, as if she were ashamed.

“She’s been having some boyfriend troubles,” Chad said. I found this surprising since, without even an update from her on Facebook, I didn’t even know she was in a relationship. I was sorry for being mad at her earlier, and if she was having problems with her boyfriend then it would be good and Christian of me to comfort her. But even then I didn’t feel genuinely sorry. The contrition I felt for being angry was more automatic than real.

“What kind of boyfriend troubles?” I said.

“She’s been seeing this guy named Brandon for a few months and he calls her names like ‘Little Shit’ and ‘Stupid Bitch.’ ”

“What? Really?” I said. Now my sympathies were real. I was conflicted in my opinions of Megs, but she still had that hard-to-describe charm, the affability that kept me from ever outright disliking her. I couldn’t imagine the kind of person who would call her things like that.

“Yeah,” Chad said. “He also gets mad if she doesn’t tell him where she’s going but he gets mad if she calls and asks him where he is. He’s really good at playing mind games and intimidating her. Like, he’ll show up at her dorm room unannounced and start asking her questions about where she’s been all day. And he gets really upset if she doesn’t call him every
few hours. Just today he accused her of seeing someone else, so she came out here for the rest of the day, to get away from him.” She nodded slowly as he spoke.

“Why don’t you just break up with him?” I said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Because he won’t let me, I guess.” She didn’t need to say more for me to understand.

“Well don’t worry. We’re here for you,” Chad said. He moved his hand from her shoulder to her back and gently rubbed it, but rather than pull away she inched closer to him in the booth. “You don’t have to take that kind of treatment, and you can always depend on us if you ever need help.”

“Thanks Chad,” she said. She looked him straight on in the face and her eyes suddenly were very wide. “You know, just last week he yelled at me because I said I didn’t want him to drive me around Hemingdale in that stupid car of his.”

Chad, hypnotized by those eyes, could only nod.

“Oh, is that right?” I said after a few seconds.

“Yeah, it’s this midnight-blue PT cruiser with a vanity plate that says ‘Pipehit, ’ ” she said, not looking at me while she cast her spell on Chad. “It’s so ugly and embarrassing, and he’s too cheap to pay for a parking sticker, so he parks it away from campus.”

“That’s fucked up,” Chad said softly. His brow furrowed.

“I’m sorry about what I said at the ice rink,” she said.

“You don’t have to apologize again,” he said.

“But I feel bad about it. You’ve always been such a sweet, great friend and I shouldn’t say things like that to you.” She pulled back and brushed away some hair hanging over her forehead.
“Really, it’s OK,” Chad said. Then Megs reached over and felt the muscles on his arm. I thought Chad might pass out, but he didn’t. His eyes went watery and I heard him take a quick, short breath.

“Thanks,” she said. “I almost wish I could tell Brandon you guys are superheroes. Then he’d behave himself.” I looked at Megs and felt like she had just announced that my mother had herpes to a dining room filled with strangers. She pulled her hand away and gave Chad a sidelong glance.

“Don’t you ever tell that asshole about us,” I said. Both looked at me.

“Come on Leo,” Chad said with an awkward grin. “She didn’t mean it like that.”

“We’re not supposed to tell people about that,” I said. I was angry, and this time I would let her know it. It was bad enough that she knew all about us and what we’d done as Revengers. I hated the very thought of her telling anyone else about us. “And I don’t think it’s funny.”

“Fine, sorry,” she said. She rolled her eyes.

“Leo, her boyfriend’s an asshole. She doesn’t need us yelling at her,” Chad said. I opened my mouth to argue with him, but Megs cut me off.

“No, I shouldn’t do that,” Megs said, lowering her voice and scooting back toward Chad in the booth. “I know how important that is to you guys.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Chad said. I didn’t think she was interested in him romantically, but I couldn’t figure out why else she was trying to get on his good side. It bothered me later when the three of us were sitting in the theatre and watching Clue. I tried my hardest to not look at them, but every so often I saw them out of the corner of my eye, her head on his shoulder or their hands too close together on the armrest.
When I got back home, I took a hot shower and looked forward to a peaceful night’s sleep after a craggy, cold evening, but I wasn’t in bed for five minutes before Leo called me on my cell phone.

“What?” I said when I answered.

“I think we should drive to Hemingdale and do something about that asshole,” he said. He was talking in his normal voice without any trace of grogginess.

“It’s 2:30 man,” I said. “Don’t call me now.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” he said. “And I wanted to talk about this now without Megs around.”

I groaned and sat up in bed. “What do you mean then we should ‘do something’?”

“I mean we should send the douche a message, let him know he can’t treat Megs like that.”

“Like what kind of message, exactly? What would we do?”

“She said she hates his piece-of-shit car. Maybe we could fuck it up.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “The last time we messed with someone else’s car we had our tires slashed, remember?”

He snorted over the phone. “Yeah, but we had a good thing going before that, didn’t we?”

“You want to drive two hours one way specifically to destroy some guy’s vehicle?” I said. “It sounds like something the Mafia would do.”

“Don’t you think he deserves it? After the way he treated Megs of all people?”

“I guess, but I don’t like it when we do these Acts of Vengeance that are semi-illegal.”

“All right, fine,” he said. “Mega, the sweetest, nicest girl in the whole world is being abused by some two-bit fuck. When he ends up putting her in the hospital or some shit, just
know that you could have helped, but instead you did nothing because you were afraid of feeling like a criminal.”

I’m Catholic. He was appealing to my sense of guilt. I could feel him succeeding.

“Well, would we do it when he’s around?” I said slowly.

“If that’s what it takes to let the fuckwad know who’s boss.”

“When would we do it?” I said. I wasn’t able to shake from my head an image of Megs, one of the few people who actually considered me a friend, in the hospital attached to a ventilator.

“Next week. Leave the planning to me. Does that mean you’re in?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess.”

“Cool. See you on campus on Monday.” Then he hung up and that was that. I was again in an uncomfortable situation, one where I liked the ends but was ambivalent about the means. I hoped he would call back and yell “Psych!” or something, anything to let me know he’d been facetious, that he didn’t really want to deface another car, no matter how despicable the owner. I waited for him to call back until I fell asleep an hour or so later.

The next week I felt like I was being watched by some stern judge in a big wig who was making notes in a ledger about my recent conduct as a Christian. I saw Chad a few times. He didn’t share any details about the exact plan, and when I asked him if there was anything I should do to get ready, he said: “No. Just be sure to where black.”

Saturday came and, as usual, I woke up around noon. I slept fitfully the previous night, waking up every few hours, feeling like there was someone in my room. At times, I thought it was Chad. Others, I thought it was some faceless girl, someone I had never met. My stomach churned for two hours as I waited for Chad to call. When the call didn’t come, I hoped maybe he
had forgotten about the plan. Maybe he would leave me waiting and then laugh his ass off when I saw him later tonight. I would be angry and I would feign disgust with his unfunny humor, but I would be happy to be angry. Or maybe he would call and tell me he’d come to his senses and he would see me later.

I would have been fine with either scenario, but instead I heard the doorbell ring at a few minutes after 2 p.m. Naturally, it was him.

“Hey, ready to go?” he said. He was wearing black pants and a black turtleneck, the same thing he wore when we’d been slashing tires.

“Uh, yeah,” I said.

“Megs told me what he looks like and where we can find his car and everything,” he said, offering it without my asking as we walked to his car.

“She told you all that?” I said pointedly.

“Well, obviously she doesn’t know what we’re going to do. I just got it from her casually when we were talking on the phone. Do you have a ski mask?” he said.

“No. Why would I need one?”

“Just in case,” he said. “It’s OK anyway. I brought an extra one you can use.”

“What does ‘just in case’ mean?” I said. I opened the front passenger-side door and climbed in.

“In case someone sees us,” he said impatiently as he buckled his seat belt. “Have you got everything you need?”

I held my palms open to him, as if he needed convincing that they were empty.

“Then let’s boogie.”
The drive to Hemingdale was a barely tolerable two hours. The flat highway was lined with corn- and wheatfields, all looking healthier after the recent rain. Exits and rest stops were few and the only towns were ones with populations of less than 500. Inside the car, my lower back muscles started to ache after an hour, so I shifted in the seat every few minutes, never getting comfortable. I wanted to turn on Chad’s CD player, but he didn’t do it himself and didn’t give me any indication that he wanted it on. For most of the drive, we didn’t have a conversation that lasted longer than two minutes. Instead, he gripped the wheel and stared down the road, as if he were straining to see a town that was still several miles away.

With about half an hour left in the trip I was desperate. Just when I was about to plead for a stop on the shoulder of the Interstate so I could stretch my legs, Chad said: “So, Leo. How go your operations on the female front?”

It was an old topic of conversation, one that I was becoming less comfortable with by the day. I still wasn’t entirely unsatisfied with my extra virginity yet, but opportunities where it would have been at risk were non-existent. I was surrounded by women my own age almost every day of the week, and after nearly a year of college that first brush with romance was still nowhere on the horizon.

“Oh, same old, same old,” I said with a sigh. “I haven’t asked anyone out since that cute photographer from the paper. You know the one I mean?”

“Yeah, you told me about her once.”

“I made the mistake of asking her near the end of last semester, so she gave me the high hat about how she was busy and she wasn’t interested in dating.”

“That’s too bad,” he said. He cast an obligatory look of mild sympathy in my direction before returning his attention to the road.
“Oh well, she wasn’t that great anyway,” I said.

“Yeah, most women are bitches,” Chad said. “That’s why I’m glad we’re hanging out with Megs again.” I didn’t say anything, but then he said, “You are glad she’s back, right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Because I didn’t like the way you snapped at her last weekend.” It was the way he said it that bothered me, a soft, low tone, as if he were scolding me for misbehaving at Mass.

“What the fuck?” I said. I sat up straight in my seat and immediately wished I hadn’t from the pain in my right butt cheek. “She’s the one who was talking about spilling our secret.”

“You hurt her feelings,” he said. He growled it, and I saw him grip the wheel harder.

“And I don’t like it when people talk like that to her.”

“Whatever,” I said. I slouched back in my seat and put on my best angry face, but I felt my face turn crimson with embarrassment. He continued staring at the road, and I was liking less and less how I was being kept in the dark about his plans.

“Can you stop bitching me out for one second and tell me what your fucking idea is?” I said.

“You’ll see soon,” he said simply.

When we reached Hemingdale it was 4 p.m. and still gray outside. The campus, which was half the size of ours, seemed to be one large parking lot. I suppose that since Hemingdale was a farming town I expected to see more cornfields, more green and brown. This was my first time here and in my imagination I had always seen a few tumbleweeds and a steer walking across a dirt road. Instead, everywhere I looked, I saw cracked, old concrete in need of repaving. After driving around for a few minutes, we pulled into a mostly empty parking lot that was
actually about a block away from campus. It didn’t surprise me that few people were parked here, considering the bevy of parking options closer to the campus.

“Thar she blows, the little fucker. Just where she said it would be,” Chad said, pointing dramatically at the midnight-blue PT Cruiser Megs had described. From a distance, it appeared to be in fine shape without any noticeable dings or scratches.

“Do you want to do this now, then?” I said.

“No, let’s wait until it gets a little darker.”

“Then I’m going to get a snack,” I said. I opened the car door and stepped out into the refreshing air. I didn’t ask him if he wanted anything to eat or drink, and I hoped he would notice because I was still mad at him. But he stared at the PT Cruiser as if it might move at any second. I slammed the car door, but he didn’t notice that either.

I remembered Chad telling me something that Megs had told him, that Hemingdale had the only Chick-fil-A in the state. I enjoyed their food the few times I’d had it before when my family vacationed in Florida, so I thought I would try and find it. I walked down the street to the campus, to a black, boxy-looking building that I assumed must be the student center. Immediately on my right when I walked inside was a bookstore and a coffeeshop called “Hot Beans,” but no sign of a Chick-fil-A.

The center was divided into three levels with the main entrance on the second floor. I went up to the third floor and found a lounge area with a row of couches and a pool table currently in use by two guys in sweater vests with Greek letters on them. I also saw a girl sitting on one of the couches, reading The Great Gatsby.

“Excuse me,” I said to her. She looked up at me. “I’m not from around here. Do you know where the Chick-fil-A is?”
“The what?” she said.

“The fast food place that sells chicken strips and nuggets and stuff?”

“Sorry, I don’t think they have one here,” she said. She smiled. “There’s a KFC in town, though.”

“Oh. OK,” I said. I sat down heavily. I wondered why Megs would say there was a Chick-fil-A when there wasn’t. As I thought about that, though, I looked at the girl again. She had the quiet, yet bright eyes that come when one is enjoying a great piece of literature. She had medium-length brown hair and wore plain blue jeans and a red sweater. She was neither thin nor fat and had a respectable tan this early in the year.

“That’s a great book,” I said.

She looked up from her reading again and smiled at me. It may have been genuine.

“Yeah, I know. There’s a lot of stuff you pick up the second time you read it,” she said. I wondered why this type of situation was so hard for me. I wanted to talk to her, but I felt like there was some secret incantation I was supposed to say right here. I didn’t know what it was, but she would be magically attracted to me. That’s the way they made it look in the movies, anyway. Why couldn’t it be easy? Why, just once, couldn’t she look up and feel some mild interest in the skinny, pale guy? Was that too much to ask? I wanted to tell her that I felt the exact same way about *The Great Gatsby*, that I too had read it twice and noted many treasures missed during the first reading. I wanted to say, “My name’s Leo, by the way.” Most of all, I wanted to ask her for her phone number. I imagined there was a voice inside me, screaming, “Ask her for her number, dumbass! You don’t have anything to lose! Come on!” The owner of the voice was a close cousin to the guy in the crowd who called for Jesus Christ to be released
instead of Barabbas. He had honorable intentions, but he had to know there was no chance of his pleas being heeded.

I said nothing. Fifteen minutes later, she dog-eared a page in her book, picked up her backpack and left. Naturally, I never saw her again. Feeling more pissed off than before, I went down to “Hot Beans” and bought a banana-nut muffin that tasted like it had been sitting in its glass case all day. After eating and feeling unsatisfied, I looked out a window. The campus was almost shrouded in darkness and I remembered the reason why I was here in the first place.

I walked back to the car. I couldn’t be sure, but I don’t think Chad moved while I was gone.

I opened the car door but I didn’t get in. “Hey. You want to do this now?”

“Yeah, in a few more minutes,” he said. He opened his car door and finally shifted his gaze from the PT Cruiser by looking at me. “Do you see anyone around?”

“No,” I said. Except for us, there was no one there and only a few more cars. “By the way: there aren’t any video cameras around here or anything like that, right?”

“I knew you would ask that,” he said, smiling at me. It was the first I had seen him smile in some time. “No, there aren’t any.”

“Are you sure there’s no surveillance? Do you know that?” I said.

“Yes, I’m sure,” he said. He unlocked the back door, reached in and pulled out two ski masks and two pairs of black gloves. He threw one set to me. “I got out and looked around while you were gone.” So much for my hunch that he hadn’t left the car. My fears were somewhat allayed, but there was no chance of me being as confident about the operation as he was. Closing the back door, he popped the trunk and took out a pair of baseball bats, giving one to me. Then he reached in again and picked up something I couldn’t see.
“What did you just grab?” I said.

“The baseball bats.”

“But what was that thing you picked up after that?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t like being lied to, Chad,” I said.

“It’s nothing, I’ll tell you later,” he said. He pulled the ski mask over his head so I could see only his eyes and mouth. He held his bat by the handle and tapped the barrel against an open palm. “All right, let’s do this fucker. For Megs.”

“OK,” I said, pulling on my own ski mask and gloves. I crossed myself and instantly felt unclean for it, for I knew that God wouldn’t comfort me tonight. The only thought that might provide some relief was that we were, maybe, better human beings than the person we were about to terrorize. We walked over to the PT Cruiser. Chad raised the bat over his head and, with all of his incredible strength, brought it down on the hood of the car. I used my own bat to bust out the back taillights and put a few dents in the trunk door. Chad smashed the headlights and jabbed his weapon through the front windshield, creating spider webs in the glass. A few more swings and the glass, now in pieces, tumbled into the car and on to the driver’s seat. I used my bat and feet to make more dents in the back side of the car. The act of destroying the car became much easier after the first few swings, when I let adrenalin take over. When I did think, I thought of the asswipe who called this car his. No one in the world deserved the kind of treatment Megs was getting from him, and the more I thought it, the easier it became to lay waste to the vehicle.

In a few minutes, the car was beaten to the point that no one would probably ever consider driving it again, when taking it to the body shop and explaining what had happened to it.
would be too complicated and embarrassing. Chad and I stood side by side, admiring our handiwork.

“Kickass,” he said, whispering.

“What the fuck is this?” a deep voice yelled from across the parking lot. I turned. The lot was mostly dark, but coming into focus behind us was a guy with long blond hair, running at full speed.

“That’s him,” Chad said. In the next moment, he hurled the bat at Brandon like a javelin, catching the furious boyfriend by surprise. The bat struck him squarely on the temple, after which he swooned and dropped to the pavement, his hands covering his forehead.

“How do you like that you fucking bitch?” Chad said, growling in a voice that was much deeper than his own. He strode over to him and started landing kicks in Brandon’s stomach. A few seconds later, I joined him. I kicked the crumpled man squarely in the shins. It couldn’t have hurt as badly as Chad’s blows, but to watch his legs jump back like burned snakes gave me an instant jolt of pleasure. He had a girlfriend and called her a “stupid bitch.” Why was he allowed to have one in the first place and not me?

“That’s what you get for being a fuck-ass piece-of-shit douche,” Chad said. I was readying myself to land another kick, one that would surely cause more pain, but then Chad reached under his shirt to the waistline of his pants and pulled out a gun. It was short and stubby, the barrel not extending far beyond his fist. It gleamed silver in the faint light and Chad held it gangster-style so the side of the gun faced the ground.

“Holy shit man,” I said. I stumbled backward, my rage vaporized. Brandon looked up from where he squirmed on the ground and froze stiff. Now that I could see him more clearly, I
saw he was, as I suspected, a handsome man. He had a square jaw, blue eyes and a straight nose that ran like a sturdy sailboat mast down toward his mouth.

“You see this? You see this you piece of shit?” Chad said to Brandon.

“Come on man, this is getting serious,” I said. I should have run up and pulled on his arm, but I was afraid. I didn’t think Chad would turn the gun on me, but I was worried it might go off if I fought with him for control of the weapon. All I could do was clutch my baseball bat.

Chad didn’t even look at me. He leaned down on his haunches and pressed the gun to Brandon’s temple, where he’d hit him with the bat. Brandon winced and tears welled up behind his closed eyes. ‘Give me a reason why I shouldn’t waste you right here?’

“Please, don’t,” Brandon blubbered. “I don’t want to die.”

“I bet you don’t,” Chad said.

“STOP!” I screamed. It wasn’t that I was overcome with emotion, all though I was plenty scared. It was just that yelling was the only thing I could think of to get Chad’s attention. He looked at me. I softened my voice as I said, “Please, stop. Don’t do this.”

Chad frowned at me, but it wasn’t an angry frown. I couldn’t tell precisely what it was through his ski mask, but if I had to guess his frown was mostly one of confusion, like he’d just read something in a book he didn’t understand. Then he looked back at Brandon.

“Feel lucky, this time,” he said to Brandon. “I’ll be watching you, and if I don’t like what I see then I’m going to come back and shoot you in the fucking head.”

Brandon could only nod.

“Remember, we’ll be watching.” Then Chad reared back and brought his hand, the one without the gun, high above his head. He paused for just a second, and it reminded me of a painting where St. Michael is holding a spear, ready to drive it into a prostrate Satan. Then he
brought his fist down on Brandon’s face with all the force he could muster. I half-expected his head to come off, but it didn’t. Instead, I saw a thin trickle of blood run from Brandon’s mouth. Chad stepped over Brandon and picked up the baseball bat. Then he turned, tucked the gun back in his waistline and walked to the car, with me following a few steps behind. We pulled out of the lot and I looked back at Brandon, who was still lying on the pavement, sobbing.

We left Hemmingdale and made the drive back toward town. It seemed we couldn’t drive away from that parking lot and that crumpled, pathetic figure fast enough. Chad, for his part, drove at a normal, safe, law-abiding pace, but he clenched his teeth and squinted his eyes so it looked like he had a headache. He was a good friend, but for a few minutes I felt more kinship with the broken man we’d left on the ground than with the one driving the car. The person driving the car was a scary stranger, someone I had never met. But I wondered if maybe he’d been there all the time, waiting to come out and make a dramatic, violent entrance.

“Where the fuck did you get that gun?” I said.

“You don’t want to know,” Chad said.

“I do want to know,” I said, trying to keep my voice from uncontrollably squeaking like a boy going through puberty.

Without another word, Chad pulled his car to the side of the road. The night was clear for now, but I could see the February clouds on the moon-lit horizon. I wanted to yell at him, “You idiot! Keep driving! We have to get out of here, now!”

He stepped out of the car and walked onto the gravelly shoulder, then lurched forward so that he was almost on his knees. I thought he might throw up, but then he stood back up and he had the gun out again, pointed at an anonymous cornfield. He fired it several times and his arm jerked clumsily, clearly not used to handling guns. It didn’t sound how I would expect gunfire to
sound, more like Christmas ornaments breaking than the loud booming noises I had come to expect from war movies, but it was still awful. I pressed my hands to my ears as hard as I could.

After he had squeezed off six shots, he reared back and threw the gun as hard as he could into the cornfield. When it was found, we would be long gone.

He stood there for another minute as I watched fearfully from the car. He was silhouetted against the moon, the wind blowing his hair. I couldn’t see his face, but I imagined he had a contemplative look on it as he considered the gun, the gun whose origins were a mystery to me and whose fate would be unknown to both of us. He looked dark and dangerous.

He got back in the car and looked at me. His eyes squinted and his face scrunched up in an “I’m sorry” kind-of look.

“I just thought if we were going to have a gun it should be fired, you know?”

I didn’t say anything. He waited for me to respond, but after a few seconds he put the car in gear, looked out at the road and started driving, calmer now than he’d been before. I curled up for the drive home.
10. Exercising Heads

Chad and I went back to our routine of classes during the week and hanging out on the weekends, but talking to him was a lot harder, as if movies, politics or whatever topic was at hand didn’t interest him anymore. There were some things I really wanted to discuss, like what Megs was doing now that we’d beaten Brandon and left him in a pool of blood, snot and whatever else his body had discharged. But every time I tried to broach the subject Chad would give me an icy look and answer vaguely with something like “Haven’t heard much yet.” Any discussion about the gun was completely out of bounds. Whenever I brought it up Chad refused to tell me where and how he’d gotten it, only saying, “Let me deal with it.” I could have pursued the answers with more drive, I suppose, but in truth I was still a little scared of him. Even then I knew we couldn’t go on like this. What was between us would have to break eventually, like a tornado slicing through a field of withered cornstalks.
Aside from our regular weekend haunts, we saw each other at wiffleball practice. About a month after our trip to Hemingdale some of the other staff members at the school newspaper had formed an intramural team and they asked me to join and bring friends to fill out the roster. I asked Chad because he loved sports and I assumed his muscles and keen vision would make him a natural, even if being around him wasn’t quite so satisfying anymore. I was half-surprised when he agreed and not surprised when he did, in fact, prove to be a good wiffleball player.

Our team was called the News Hounds (I’m proud to say it was my idea) and Chad was our best player. He earned his nickname “Big Ugly” (which wasn’t my idea) after he belted three home runs in the first practice. He didn’t seem to like the moniker, and I was worried it might sour his disposition even more, but he grudgingly accepted it when it stuck with our teammates.

After our third practice, our last before the News Hounds’ first game of the intramural season, Chad and I left the fitness center together. It was approaching dusk and the weather was warm. More importantly, it had been warm the night before, suggesting that winter might finally be over. The grass and trees lining the mall weren’t green yet, but maybe they would be soon. Chad had had another great practice where he’d hit two home runs and made two diving catches, and he seemed pleased with himself. As we walked he would periodically stop, jump up and snag an imaginary ball out of the air. When he wasn’t doing that, he smiled as he hummed “Don’t Stop Believing” and tapped his yellow wifflebat like a cane against the ground as he walked.

“So, how’ve you been lately?” I said as we walked across the mall.

“Fine. How about you?” he said. He flipped the bat in the air and caught it by the handle.

“I’ve been doing well, I guess,” I said. I stopped, and he stopped too. “So, have you heard anything from Hemingdale?”
He looked at me with the familiar, cool gaze. “There aren’t any warrants for our arrest if that’s what you mean,” he said. Those twelve words were more on the subject than I’d heard him speak up to that point. I pressed on.

“I was mostly wondering if you’ve heard anything about Megs.”

“Megs is doing just fine,” he said. He placed a slight emphasis on “Megs.” “At least I’m pretty sure she is.”

“What do you mean by ‘pretty sure?’ Don’t you know?”

“She’s been busy lately and it’s been hard to find time to talk,” he said. He then made an awkward shrug, as if to say that their lack of communication wasn’t a concern. “But she did mention that she dumped that stupid asswipe.”

“Oh, really,” I said, not entirely surprised to hear this news. “Well, I guess she got what she wanted then.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he said, raising his voice, putting his hand on his hip and positioning the bat so it rested on his shoulder.

“Nothing at all,” I said quickly. “It’s just the douche bag seemed to be really bothering her and I imagine it must be a relief for her that she’s done with him.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he said. He grinned. “She’s doing great now that she’s not seeing him. It’s nice to know she’s safe.”

“Yeah, definitely,” I said. We started walking again. “What about him? How’s he doing?”

“I don’t know and I couldn’t care less,” he said. “Megs and he don’t talk anymore.”

“Oh. That’s good,” I said. I felt some guilty relief for a moment because we apparently weren’t in danger of going to jail. I hesitated, wanting to ask another question, but I didn’t want...
to anger him. Would he pummel me the way we’d pummeled Brandon? No, it wasn’t that. What scared me was the thought of losing his friendship. Chad and I had been comrades for years now, and while almost everyone else had come and gone in my life, Chad had always been there. No one is perfect, and he could be stubborn and violent, but the truth was he meant a great deal to me, a lot more than Brandon anyway. I didn’t like what we’d done in Hemingdale, but if I had to choose between being sorry and having Chad, I knew which option I preferred.

“Hey, check it out,” Chad said. I turned to see what he saw. Across campus, by the Communication Arts building, were two students, a boy and a girl, neither of whom I recognized. The girl wiped her eyes and her face shone red in the dying light. The boy had his hands in his jean pockets and his back was to us, not reacting to the girl’s tears from what I could see.

“Let’s go take a look,” Chad said, not waiting to see if I would follow. I walked behind him, curious to see what was happening. If I had thought about it, I would have realized that the situation was none of my business. But I was still a Revenger then, and if someone was in trouble, I wanted to be there to help. It felt like I had a duty to at least eavesdrop for awhile.

The library, which sat on a small hill, loomed over the Communication Arts building. A set of wooden steps built on the hillside led from one building to the other. The boy and the girl were at the base of these steps, so Chad and I positioned ourselves at the top.

“—don’t know why you have to be like this,” the boy said. He was handsome and vaguely reminded me of David Byrne with his big eyes and neatly parted hair. He was dressed in a leather jacket and I half-expected him to be wearing the singer’s white tennis shoes from *Stop Making Sense*. He was wearing sneakers, but they were black.
“I just feel like I need some space,” the girl said. She was tall, tall enough so that the two were almost the same height. She had a diamond-shaped face and her hair was dyed in alternating stripes of black and maroon. She wore an over-sized winter coat that was no longer in season. “Things haven’t been the same lately, and, you know, I just don’t feel you... you can, you know, appreciate that.”

“Sweetie, I understand, I really do,” he said. He sounded mostly sad and a little angry. “It’s just I don’t think you’re seeing this from my angle. I love you.”

I had been looking at the couple out of the corner of my eye, but now I looked at Chad, who wasn’t trying to act inconspicuous. He glowered down at David Byrne and the girl. His mouth was curved in a half smile as he hung on their every word.

“I can’t talk about this right now,” she said, brushing past him.

“Wait a minute,” he said, raising his voice. He grabbed her forearm and yanked her back toward him as she tried to walk away.

“Stop it!” she said. Fresh tears welled up.

“Listen—” David Byrne said, but Chad had taken his cue. He made his move, brandishing the wifflebat in a way that made me queasy with déjà vu.

“Hey pal, the lady says she doesn’t want to talk,” Chad said.

David Byrne blinked in disbelief that someone would intrude on an intimate moment. He let go of his girlfriend’s arm and she didn’t look at us as she turned the corner of the building.

“Who are you?” he said. He took a step back.

“We’re a couple of guys you don’t want to get on the bad side of,” Chad said, his muscles visible underneath his T-shirt. As if to prove his point, he walked up to David Byrne and shoved him against the brick wall, perhaps (or perhaps not) harder than he had intended.
“Get the fuck away from me,” David Byrne said. “I’m trying to talk to my girlfriend, asshole.”

“Well obviously she doesn’t want to talk,” I said. “That’s why you should walk away and give her some space.” As I put on my most intimidating leer, I mentally pleaded for him to run. He had no idea what we could do to him.

“Creeps,” David Byrne said. He walked away, looked over his shoulder and gave us the middle finger before going down the mall and out of sight.

“Nicely done there, sir,” Chad said to me with a self-satisfied sneer.

“Likewise,” I said. I breathed easier.

“I can’t fucking stand that when a guy touches his girlfriend like that, you know? As far as I’m concerned that’s abuse, plain and simple.”

“Yep,” I said. I didn’t disagree completely. “I hope that’s the end of it.”

“It won’t be,” Chad said. He dropped the smile and shook his head. “I know the type. The guy’s a piece of shit who’s nothing unless he’s got a girlfriend he can bully around. He’s just like Brandon.”

“Yeah, probably,” I said. I stopped breathing easier when he mentioned Brandon. “Let’s get out of here.”

“He’s not going to leave her alone. I guarantee it,” Chad said. I hoped he was wrong.

The next week and a half was uneventful for the Revengers. We won our wiffleball game, mostly thanks to Chad. I turned in a twenty-page paper, had the same paper returned to me with an “A” written in red on the back page, and caught up on some sleep and reading over the weekend. All in all, life was fine, if not good. The important thing was that it was calm, and maybe the inbound tornado I had sensed was destined to miss us after all.
That Saturday, Chad and I skipped the midnight movie (it was *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which neither of us liked). We felt like doing something different for once, so I suggested we go running in the fitness center. Normally, he was averse to the idea of exercise, but we were both in a sporting mood with the recent wiffleball victory. Exercise felt like an appropriate activity for a newly successful athlete, so he agreed.

We arrived at the fitness center just before 8 p.m. The track for joggers, which circled volleyball and basketball courts, usually had a few students running on it, but tonight it was deserted. There wasn’t anyone playing basketball, volleyball or dodgeball either. We had the space to ourselves, and our sneakers squeaked on the hardwood, making shameless echoes in the rafters.

“Is it always this empty at night?” Chad said as we did some warm-up stretches underneath one of the baskets.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I kinda like it.”

A practiced hand at jogging, I had my usual sweat going after two laps around the track, but Chad, running side-by-side with me, didn’t seem tired.

“How are you doing?” I said.

“Great,” he said, grinning. “You never told me how easy this was.”

“It’s not supposed to be,” I said with a laugh. I usually stopped after thirty minutes, but Chad was still going strong. I pressed on for a little while longer, not wanting to be bested by someone who never exercised, but after nearly forty minutes, I couldn’t continue.

“Stop,” I said. I gasped for air as I pulled off the track and crumpled to a nearby bench.

“Really? I can’t believe you’re that tired,” Chad said. He jogged in place as if to taunt me. “I thought you did this all the time.”
“I do, every day if I can,” I said. “How do you keep going?”

“I don’t know,” he said. He shrugged happily. “Maybe I have a lot of energy because I’ve been storing it up.”

“That’s not the way it works,” I said. I coughed phlegm into my fist.

“I thought it would be a lot harder. It seemed like it was when I was a kid in gym class, anyway,” he said. “Maybe I can do this more often, you know? Get an iPod and pass the time, maybe find a treadmill near a TV or something.”

“That would be good, I think.”

“Are you going to run anymore?”

“No,” I said. I rested the back of my head against the cool concrete. “I’m done for the night.”

“You mind if I keep going then?”

“No, go ahead. I’ll be here when you’re done.”

“OK,” he said. He grinned again and jumped back on the track like a kid splashing in the water at a pool party. He ran and ran, increasing his velocity with each lap. I sat on the bench, catching my breath and wiping the sweat off my face. Whenever he passed my spot I could see an open-mouth smile as he tasted newly discovered air.

I wondered why seeing Chad happy pleased me so much. To see him beam made me feel light and bottomless, like a roller coaster where you’ve just gone past the highest point and where the ride is about to go really fast. He could be such a bastard, but it felt like he was my bastard, in a way. What kind of person did that make me? How was it I could be so enamored with someone like him?
He pulled up and joined me on the bench after another ten minutes. “I’m getting a little tired,” he said, even though I didn’t see much sweat on his brow. “You want to head out?”

“Sure, let’s go,” I said. We changed out of our sweats in the bathroom and left the fitness center. The night was brisk and pleasant after the workout. I was ready to suggest a late dinner when he grabbed me by the forearm to stop me.

“Look who it is,” Chad said. I looked where he was staring and saw two people I didn’t want to see: David Byrne and his girlfriend. They were standing near one of the light fixtures from the student center.

“Oh, look at that,” I said.

“I knew he’d be after her,” he said, frighteningly serious all of sudden. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“Yep, you definitely called it,” I said. I wanted to placate him as quickly as possible. “It’s not like there’s much we can do about it at this point, though.”

“Like hell there isn’t,” he said. He started walking in their direction. “We’re going to tail him and the second he so much as raises his voice to her we’re going to kick his ass. Come on.”

“No Chad,” I said, uselessly. “Let’s leave them alone.”

He wheeled and stared at me in disbelief.

“Are you serious? Do you remember how he talked to her last time?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Don’t tell me this isn’t a problem. We have a job to do now, and I’m going to do it. Are you coming?”

“All right,” I said with a sigh. I felt a lump in my throat. I feared for David Byrne’s safety, and I had to try and hold back Chad in case the couple had a spat. “Let’s go.”
David Byrne and his girlfriend were in the parking lot by now. We reached the lot just in time to see them get into a car and for the headlights to flash on.

“Quick,” Chad said. “We’ll take my car.” I was still more than a little uncomfortable with what we were doing, but the chase was undeniably thrilling, and my heart pumped with involuntary vigor. We raced to Chad’s car and followed David Byrne out of the parking lot. His car headed toward the downtown shopping district.

“Be sure to keep some distance,” I said, whispering for some reason.

“I can’t lose them,” he said, even as he slowed down to put a few car lengths between us and the other car. We followed them a few blocks from campus to Zippy’s, a popular downtown ice cream shoppe and a preferred hangout for City students. David Byrne and his girlfriend left their car and walked into the store, holding hands. If they knew we were watching them, they didn’t give any sign.

“Should we follow them in?” I said. My stomach grumbled silently for want of a dinner I hadn’t yet eaten and I was hoping to buy a vanilla malt as long as we were here.

“No,” Chad said. “We can’t let him see us or he’ll recognize us.”

Disappointed but convinced, I settled into the familiar car seat and wondered how long we could be on stakeout. Not long, it turned out, because they came out a minute later, each with a small Styrofoam cup of ice cream. As she walked through the front door, I got a good look at David Byrne’s girlfriend. Her face was no longer red with tears, but her cheeks retained some of the blush that I had thought pretty when I first saw her. Her small pointed nose was the perfect shape for her features, but its skin was browner than the rest of her face, as if it belonged to another girl.
They sat at a picnic table outside the store, each nibbling at their desserts. After a few minutes of talking and giggling, the girl delicately put her finger in her cup and swiped it across David Byrne’s nose, leaving a white dollop of ice cream. He smiled, said something and she burst out with another round of joyous cackles. Then she leaned across the table and placed a gentle lick-kiss on his nose, sipping up the melting sweetness.

“Fuck,” Chad said. “Does that make you want to puke or what?”


“These two are fucking pathetic. They’re sitting here living this fucking lie.”

“I know. I mean, nosing in public? Come on.” I didn’t know if “nosing” was the right word for what they were doing, but both “kissing” and “making out” didn’t seem to fit.

“But it’s more than that,” Chad said darkly. He frowned at the couple who still didn’t seem to be aware we were watching them. “I’m starting to hate the whole idea of relationships in general. I mean, it’s like with Brandon and Megs. She shouldn’t have even been with him in the first place. We risked our asses to protect her, and we shouldn’t have had to.”

“Oh, come on,” I said, eager to discourage thoughts of Megs and comparisons between the couples. “These people aren’t anything like them.”

“But they are,” he said, looking at me with fiery wisdom. “They think they’re in love, but they aren’t. All they’re doing is lusting for one another, which is a big fat fucking sin, and when that runs out they’ll just hurt each other. I think that’s why so many people have been hostile to us, Leo. No one likes it when people like the Revengers come along to shatter their delusions. They like being in lust and they’re mad when someone unmask it for what it is.”

I looked at David Byrne and his girlfriend, and for a moment I kind of agreed with Chad. I wondered why I cared about these people so much. They were a couple: happy, content and
perfectly shameless in letting the rest of the world see how great their lives were. Did they really deserve that much happiness? Would it be so bad if someone knocked them down a peg? If Chad had rushed out of the car and started pulverizing David Byrne right then, I don’t know how quick I would have been to stop him.

Then I thought of David Byrne as a bloody corpse on the pavement with his nameless girlfriend sobbing over him, and my Catholic guilt snapped me from my trance.

“Let me ask you something then,” I said. “If you had a relationship with Megs, would it still just be lust?”

He blinked a few times, as if trying to clear dust from them. He looked at me, giving my question serious thought. He opened his mouth to speak, but didn’t say anything. Then he glanced out the windshield.

“Shit, where’d they go?” he said. David Byrne and his girlfriend had left their spots at the picnic table and his car was nowhere in sight.

“Did you see them?” I said.

“Fuck,” Chad said. “They were just there.”

“Let’s go back to campus,” I said. “Maybe the date’s over.” Chad opened his mouth, perhaps an instinct to argue, but he didn’t say anything, most likely because he didn’t have a better plan. We made the short drive back to campus and entered the same parking lot we’d left twenty minutes ago. We searched, but their car wasn’t there.

“I knew coming back here was a mistake,” Chad said. He looked out at the lot with his hands on his hips. “I mean, they’re out on a fucking date. Whose idea of a date is just going out for ice cream?”

“What were we supposed to do?” I said defensively.
“Go anywhere but here,” Chad said. I wished he had ignored my advice earlier so we could have gone his way and not found them. Then I’d be bitching him out instead of the other way around. “What time is it?”

“Late. My parents want me to take a practice exam for the LSAT.” It was the first time I’d hinted at any desire to go to law school, but Chad didn’t respond. He looked at the lot, as if the car would be there with a second glance.

“We’ll find them again,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. I hoped we wouldn’t.

I went home and took that practice exam, getting maybe a quarter of the answers right before going to bed. I thought about David Byrne and his girlfriend as I lay in the silent dark. I hoped that they would just disappear, or prove to be hallucinations, any explanation other than their real existence and presence in our lives. Then I thought about Chad’s theory on romantic relationships. I wondered how badly it would sting to adopt a philosophy like that after pining for some girl for six years. But that made me think about Megs, and then I thought about Megs and Chad, and then I didn’t know what to think.

The following Tuesday I was sitting in the library. I was killing time, reading ESPN online about the upcoming baseball season, when one of the students who worked the library desk announced, out loud to the general population that there was, of all things, a bat lurking amongst the shelves in the lower levels. This felt like a task worthy of a Revenger, so I offered my services to help catch it. I assumed I’d be asked to prowl the shelves for the rodent, though the duty I was actually assigned was to stand by one of the lower-level entrances while the maintenance staff tried to flush it out. Still, I didn’t complain because I felt like I was being
helpful. I stood by the exit, earnestly watching for the bat, when my cell phone buzzed on vibrate.

“Hey Leo,” Chad said when I answered. “Where are you?”

“Library,” I whispered.

“I need you to come to the food court in the student center. I found the fucko and his girlfriend again,” he said.

“Can it wait?” I said. I felt sick. “There’s a bat flying around in the library and I’m supposed to help find it.”

“I need you here. I’m sure they can do without you.”

“Well, yeah, I’m sure they could. But I promised I would help.”

“All right, stay in the library if that’s what you want,” he said. “But you’re going to miss the fireworks.” The word “fireworks” arrested me. What if he’s found another gun? I thought. I would never forgive myself if Chad accidentally (or purposely, for that matter) killed David Byrne while I was waiting for some bat to fly by.

As promised, Chad was in a small booth on the outskirts of the food court. Most of the seats were occupied, but I saw David Byrne and his girlfriend, the figures I recognized so well by now, sitting almost in the exact center table, their heads close together. Chad was looking at them, a burning, hateful hunger in his eyes.

“I’m glad you came,” he said. He barely glanced at me as I sat down. “I think something big is about to happen.”

“What makes you say that?” I said. The two of them were so close I couldn’t see their reactions to one another.
“They haven’t been giggling and shit like they usually do. He said something earlier and she got all upset. Look at them. Does that look like a happy couple to you?”

“Maybe they’re breaking up,” I said.

“After how they were all over each other the other night? No way. Besides, fucko doesn’t want to break up. He said so the first time we saw them.”

“Oh, OK,” I said. I then concluded that Chad had gone completely batshit and I really had no idea what he wanted. When I thought about it for a second, I didn’t know for sure what I wanted either, except that I wanted Chad to say anything in the world other than what he said next.

“I’m just waiting for the right moment. Shit’s going down and when he lays a hand on her I’m going to rip his arms off so he can never touch her again.” I had no doubt he meant it and less than no doubt he could do it.

“I don’t think that’s necessary, do you?” I said, but he didn’t hear, or maybe he ignored me. He was slouching forward over the table, staring at the couple, like the police chief in the movie who’s begging for the chance to send in the SWAT team to massacre the bad guys. Then David Byrne stood up from his chair and I could see the girl’s face. She had tears glistening in her eyes and her hands covered her mouth. My heart pounded. I had sudden visions of Chad, a slouching, unstoppable beast, walking up to an unsuspecting David Byrne and either beating him to death or shooting him in the forehead at point-blank range. I would throw myself on him, or beg for mercy on David Byrne’s behalf on bended knee, but nothing short of a miracle would remove that hateful glow from Chad’s eye.

“Here it comes,” he said.
“Attention everyone, I have an announcement,” David Byrne said. Most of the students stopped their conversations and looked at him. My heart thumped. “This woman, sitting here with me, is named Rachel Cresimo and I think she’s the most wonderful person in the whole world. She’s beautiful, smart, funny, loving and compassionate. I never asked God to send me a woman this perfect, but He did anyway. And all I want is to spend the rest of my life with her.” Then he knelt on his right knee with his back to us and took one of her hands in his. “Will you do me the honor of becoming Mrs. Rachel Byrne?”

In the tense moment that followed, my heart skipped a beat, and the first thing I thought was: *His last name is actually Byrne?* Or was it spelled Burn, or Bern? Whatever it was, it wasn’t important to Rachel because she nodded and said, clearly and with confidence, “Yes.”

The room burst into applause. Some students whistled and others banged on the tan-colored tables. I also saw someone throw his Baltimore Orioles hat in the air. Byrne stood up, as did Rachel. He took her face in his hands and kissed her. Then the other students gave them a standing ovation.

I made a perfunctory glance at Chad. He was no longer eagerly crouching over the table. Now he sat back in his chair, a tired, beaten, dead look on his face. Most of all, he looked humiliated even though he hadn’t, to my knowledge, hinted to anyone other than me what his plans for Byrne had been.

“Fuck this,” he said. He stood up and walked away, turning his back to the happy scene. I felt a mixture of relief and concern for Chad. Instead of the trigger-happy policeman, he now reminded me of the defeated bad guy in a romantic comedy whose goals are solely his own, cursed to walk off screen to some small, meaningless fate the audience doesn’t care about.
When we left the student center it was a clear, cold day. We walked down the mall, in the direction of the library.

“Hey buddy, are you OK?” I said.

He turned on me with venom in his eyes. “Fuck you, Bishop. Fuck you totally.”

I was surprised by his vitriol, and also partially by the fact that he was using my last name for once.

“What did I do?” I said.

“You got exactly what you wanted, that’s what. I know how you think, and now you’re mentally rubbing it in my face.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I said. How dare he presume to know what I was thinking?

“You wanted those douche bags together all along, just to spite me,” he said. He took a step forward so he was right in my face, but I wasn’t going to back down, not this time.

“Do you want them apart and miserable or together so you can antagonize them?” I said. I wondered now if we were drawing attention to ourselves. “What the fuck do you want? Why do you even care?”

“Fuck you,” was all he could say. He turned his back to walk away.

“I mean, sometimes I think you like beating people to the point of death just for the hell of it.”

Now he wheeled on me again. “At least I’d be willing to do it!” he said. “You’re such a pussy you wouldn’t raise a hand to take vengeance against corruption unless I dragged you along.”
“I don’t have to take that from you.” I was finally ready to say something I’d wanted to say for a long time. “At least I wanted to help people in the first place. You’ve been doing it to impress some girl this whole time.”

His eyes went narrow with mortification. “Leave her out of this.”

“Why should I when you’re always bringing her up? Megs hasn’t cared about this Revenger thing once in all this time, and then she manipulates you into beating up her boyfriend?” I said. “How sick is that, honestly?”

“She didn’t manipulate me!” he said. He reddened in the face. “I did it because it had to be done!”

“Horseshit. You’re too proud to see that she doesn’t give a two-timing shit about you or taking vengeance or anything!”

“Fuck you asshole!” he said. “I’m going to call her, and I’m going to tell her how I feel about her once and for all. And she’s finally going to love me!”

If I could go back and do this scene over I would take back what I said, but before I could even consider that possibility he turned his back on me and stomped off. I was glad no one on the mall got in his way as he marched out of view.

The News Hounds had a game the next day. We waited for our star player to show up, but he never did. Some other team members tried calling his cell phone, but he didn’t answer. We played without him and lost, badly, but I didn’t care about the game. I wanted to see him and apologize for saying that Megs didn’t care about him. It was deliberately cruel and I knew it would hurt him. I wanted to know what had happened when he’d finally confessed the depth of his love to her. Later, I tried everything I could to get in touch. I called him, sent e-mails and
even visited his house a few times, but he was always somewhere else, somewhere out of reach. I stopped trying when he unfriended me on Facebook.
11. The Avenging Lark

May arrived and the school year ended. The weather was warm and beautiful again, and up and down the Mall there were signs to commemorate the nearing end of classes: students in sunglasses lying out on picnic blankets, booths and tables promoting service trips to El Salvador, shirtless Ultimate Frisbee games. Campus Safety even had to detain an Accounting major who was standing outside the library, tearing the pages out of his textbooks one by one. I covered that story for the paper. He’d been battling depression for a few years.

Two days after my last final exam, my editor in chief had a party in her condo where she invited all the staff members, which apparently was some kind of tradition. She said “Bring whoever you want and I’ll bring the beer.” Without Chad, I didn’t have much of anyone to bring, but it was Saturday, and since Chad and I didn’t hang out on Saturdays anymore, I had nothing else in the world to do.
Inside the condo it was dark, cramped and smoky, even though I could see the windows and the sliding door to the balcony were open. Loud Kanye West music blared from a tiny iPod port, and even though I saw plenty of people I knew from the paper, there was nowhere to have a comfortable, quiet conversation. I forced my way into the kitchen and picked a Leinenkugel's from a cooler. It had been a long time since I’d had a beer and it tasted good on my dry lips. That, and the fact that the kitchen wasn’t quite so loud and was more spacious than the living room, improved my mood a bit.

“Leo! Hey!”

I turned to the owner of the familiar voice. Megs was unpeeling herself from the crowd, towing a tall guy along by hand. He walked softly and gently, as if afraid of stepping on ants too hard. Megs looked at me with the same bright smile, as if I were a cute 5-year-old kid hadn’t babysat in a long time.

“Hey Megs,” I said. I sipped my beer. Megs let go of the guy’s hand and hugged me. I was surprised by how hard she could hug. For such a small person she could definitely squeeze the shoulders. I half-reciprocated with one arm.

“My gosh! I wondered if I’d see you here,” she said after she let go.

“Yep, I’m here,” I said. “Why are you?”

“Battina Michaels invited me,” she said. Battina was a graphic designer, someone I didn’t know very well. Then again, I didn’t know any of the graphic design people very well. “Wow, it’s so great to see you! How’d the first year go?”

“Fine,” I said. “How was Hemingdale?”
“There’s someone I’d like you to meet.” She turned to her tall friend. I guessed his age to be around twenty-five, maybe. He had shy, brown eyes, neat, sideswept, black hair and, miracle of miracles, an acne-free face.

“I’m Tom,” he said. I shook his soft hand.

“Leo,” I said. “I knew Megs in high school.”

The two of them laughed, though I wasn’t sure if it was at something I had said. They hugged and he softly kissed her on top of the head.

“Yeah, she told me about you,” Tom said. “She said you were a great guy.”

“If she says so,” I said.

“Sweetie, I’m going to run to the bathroom,” Tom said, speaking to Megs.

Megs smiled. “Sure. I’ll catch up with Leo a bit.”

Tom gave me a two-finger salute and then made his way back into the crowd, gently steering dancers out of the way with his forearm.

“He seems nice,” I said.

“He’s wonderful,” she said. She ran a hand through the hair over her forehead. “I don’t know if I told you, but I broke up with my last boyfriend awhile back and Tom has been so nice.”

“How’d you and your last boyfriend come to split?” I said.

She paused for a second before she said, “I just felt ready to move on. Remember how I said he was a big jerk who called me names?”

“OK,” I said. “Have you seen Chad lately?”

“It’s so weird. I haven’t talked to him in, like, months!” Her eyes went wide when she said “months,” as if this surprised her. “How is he?”
“He’s been kind of hard to find.” This was the solemn truth: Chad had gone totally missing from my life, nowhere to be seen on campus. I hadn’t expected to see him at one of those tables on the Mall, pledging the next few months of his life to building houses in Guatemala, but I thought he had to be somewhere. After awhile, I was forced to come to the only other reasonable conclusion: he’d dropped out of school. But even after that prospect occurred to me, I couldn’t believe it, but not because it wasn’t a legitimate possibility. I had to go on hoping that I would turn the corner of a shelf in the library basement or a corridor in the Administration Building and there would be my one, real friend in the whole world. But after I took my last final exam, and I no longer had any reason to go to the City campus, I gave up. He wouldn’t answer my messages or e-mails, no matter how heartfelt they were, and if I couldn’t find him at school, then there was no finding him anywhere else.

“That’s so weird,” she said. “I thought you two were inseparable.”

“Yeah. Do you have any idea what happened with him?” I said pointedly.

“No. I mean, he’s, like, a little sensitive, maybe, but I just don’t know.” That was all she had to say, and I thought about pursuing it further, but it felt too meaningful, as though it were more a Chad-Megs conversation than a Leo-Megs conversation. I looked into her wide, innocent eyes, and my first thought was “LIAR!” But then it occurred to me that this was one of only a few conversations I had ever had with her without Chad around. I realized I didn’t really know her as a person, and she probably didn’t know me. I always got the sense that she was lying to me about something, but maybe that was because I wasn’t close enough to her that I had the right to learn all her secrets and desires. I’ve always thought that you can only really love or hate people once you know everything there is to know about them, and for that reason I could never hate her, even if I didn’t actually like her.
Tom came back and smiled at us.

“Hey honey,” Megs said. “I want to see some more people, and then I want to dance.”

She took Tom’s hands in both of hers.

He looked at me. “Work, work, work. Am I right?”

“I wouldn’t really know,” I said. They laughed and then left the kitchen, heading through the crowd in the direction of the balcony. I finished my beer and left.

I woke up the next day at eight in the morning, even though now that classes were over I could sleep as late as I wanted. I ate a bowl of Apple Cinnamon Cheerios by myself, my parents having left for work already, and then went to the bathroom and used this plastic pimple-zapping thing that was kind of shaped like a miniature parking meter head. I would place it on my red zits and it was supposed to use heat to reduce the swelling. (I used it a few more times after that. Sure enough, it didn’t work.) Each application took about two-and-a-half minutes per blemish, and as I stood there, staring at myself in the mirror with the sky-blue piece of plastic pressed to my face, I wondered what I would do with the rest of the day. Then my cell phone rang on its charger in the dining room. I walked to it, keeping the pimple zapper in place, and looking at the caller ID I saw it was Chad. I felt a quick rush of excitement in my stomach.

“Hello?” I said as casually as I could.

“Hey Leo, it’s Chad,” he said. He sounded tired, like his throat was full of gravel.

“Long time no talk,” I said.

“What are you doing right now?”

“Nothing. Why?”

“There’s something I want to tell you. Can you meet up?”

“Now?”
“Yeah, now.”

“Why now?”

“Because it’s important,” he said. “And I’d rather talk about it in person.”

I said yes and we agreed to me at Zorinsky Lake. I went upstairs and put on some older jeans, a striped polo shirt and a new baseball cap I’d yet to wear. I was curious to clear up the mystery of his recent whereabouts, but more than that I was happy I was going to see him. Maybe we would hang out and grab some lunch, like old times.

Zornisky Lake was a landmark within walking distance of both our homes, a relatively small body of water popular for people who liked boating. It also had a cement walkway around the lake for joggers and bikers. On nicer days when I needed to get out of the house, I would jog there instead of on the treadmill at home. I mused that if I had done it more often, I might not be so pale. It was warm with no trace of a breeze, and bright enough that I was glad I had brought the hat, though I was constantly taking it on and off, adjusting the brim and scratching my scalp as I tried to get used to the new headwear.

I waited in the parking lot for half an hour. I was a little miffed that he’d asked me to come to the lake immediately and now he was late, but when I saw him on the edge of the lot my mild hostility melted. He was dressed in faded, rumpled jeans with tears in the thighs. He had a plain, white T-shirt that looked, for the most part, clean. He also wore a brown, leather jacket I had never seen before. He had sunglasses on, but he took them off as he walked toward me. His face was unnaturally pale and his eyes, ringed by dark circles, were reddish. His hair wasn’t combed and, as he drew closer, I could see pale hairs on his upper lip from where he had failed to shave.

“Hey,” he croaked. He reached out to shake my hand. “Sorry I’m late.”
“No problem,” I said. “Are you feeling OK?”

“Peachy,” he said. He put the shades back on. “You want to go for a walk?”

We started along the path around the lake. “So where have you been?” I said. “I haven’t seen you at school.”

“That’s because I dropped out,” Chad said. When I heard that, I immediately thought of him as my college-drop-out friend, and my first, involuntary thought was that this now meant that his life was over. I had to remind myself that plenty of successful people never earned degrees.

It took a second for that to process in my mind before I said, “How come?”

“I’ve been busy, doing a lot of thinking,” he said.

“Is that what you wanted to tell me? That you dropped out?” We had reached a point in the path bordered by pines and evergreens, but a gap in the trees allowed for a view of most of the lake. There was a solitary rowboat on the water and puffy white clouds reflected on the surface.

“Kind of,” he said. He coughed into this first. “Can I ask you something important?”

“Anything,” I said.

“What do you think of the Revengers? Really?”

At first, I thought of ways to avoid the question. Differences in what constituted the proper Revenging spirit had led to our last ugly encounter, and I thought he might be trying to start another fight. But I didn’t see anything malicious in his heavy, sad jowl.

“I guess it was all OK,” I said. “I think we screwed up a lot.”

“But was it important?” he said. “Was it worthwhile?”

“I suppose,” I said.
“Because I think I want to go to full-time,” he said. At that moment I thought of Chad as a freshman in high school in show choir, singing off-key and tripping over his own feet during a dance sequence to “I’ll Fly Away” from *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* He stood there with tired eyes hidden by sunglasses, a face made of granite.

“You want to do what?” I said.

“I think it’s time to be a superhero, a real one,” he said.

“Like the It Wasp guy?”

“No, like Batman,” he said. “One who actually goes out and fights crime.”

I sighed, loud enough so that he could hear it and know what I meant by it. “Why in the world would you possibly want to do that?” I said.

“Can we sit down? We’ve been standing for awhile,” he said. We walked down the path until we found a rusty, metal bench. He sat gingerly, like he was a fat man sitting down in a chair he was worried might break underneath him. He sighed before he resumed talking. “Things didn’t go over well with Megs, so I was kind of pissed.”

“What happened with her, exactly?”

“I don’t want to talk about it too much,” he said. “I said everything I wanted to say and she still doesn’t want to be with me, I guess.”

“So, what happened after that?”

“I went out walking, and I was saying all kinds of curse words and stamping my feet, just generally, really pissed, you know? And for awhile I hoped something really bad would happen. I wanted to see some guy snatch an old lady’s purse or something because I was really frustrated. And I then I thought, ‘Why is fighting crime my release?’ Because it makes me happy, I thought. And then I guess I had an epiphany or something. Remember when we first thought of being the
“Revengers?” I did, of course. “It was kind of like that, just plain inspiration. And I thought, ‘Man, you’ve wasted the last four fucking years on some girl and it’s made you miserable. When have you been happy in all that time?’ And I realized, Leo, the best times were when you and I were the Revengers.”

“Really?” I said quietly.

“Yeah. So I thought then, ‘What do you want to do with the rest of your life?’ I hate school, I don’t want a career and I’m sick of chasing girls,” he said. “I want to be a superhero.”

I still didn’t believe him, but I’d heard him say this much, and even if he hadn’t been my friend, I felt like I owed it to him to hear the rest. “So, how would it work?” I said.

“I’m going to move to a big city and be like Batman without the money,” he said. He stood up and cracked his knuckles. “I’ll work some shitty job in the daytime delivering pizzas or something, and then I’ll go out at night. I’ll fight crime in some big showy way so I can get recognized, strike fear into the hearts of criminals everywhere, some shit like that.”

“OK,” I said slowly. We started walking again. “So it’ll be like Kickass is what you’re saying.”

“Yeah, I guess,” he said. As I followed him, I noticed that he seemed livelier, with more bounce in his step. “And I’ll call myself the Avenging Lark.”

“The Avenging Lark?” I said.

“Yeah. Because it will be like a nod to the Revengers, and I liked the idea of a lark because of the Montreal Alouettes.”

“The CFL team you like so much?” I said.

“Yeah. ‘Alouette’ is French for skylark.”
“You don’t think that’s some kind of clue for criminals that’ll make it easier for them to figure out who you are?”

“I thought about that, but really, is a bad guy going to figure out who I am and where I live because he knows I’m a Montreal fan?” he said.

“I guess not,” I said, conceding. “I guess it’s a good name. I like the avenging part.”

“I thought you would,” he said.

We reached the parking lot, the same one we’d left at the beginning, unchanged by all that had happened on our walk around the lake.

“Would you please answer me one question?” I said.

“What?” he said.

“You’re not really doing this are you?”

“Hell yes I am,” he said. He frowned at me, as if challenging me to question him further.

“What are you going to do? This is your life we’re talking about,” I said. “What about your parents? What about your future? Me?”

“Well, that’s the other thing,” he said. He breathed in deeply and let it out slowly, deliberately. “I want you to come with me.”

The world stopped for a moment. The wind died and even the cicadas, always eager to offer commentary, were quiet.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Remember that night we beat up that douche bag, Brandon?” he said. “I came close to killing him. I mean, I’d been planning it out the week before. For that week, I thought that all I wanted was to scare him, but when I was there and I had it pointed at his head, I really wanted to do it.”
“So where’d you get the gun?” I said.

“It belonged to a friend of my dad’s. I kind of stole it from his house.” I was relieved to hear he hadn’t stolen it from a police officer or bought it off the street from a criminal. Sure, he had committed a crime, but knowing Chad I supposed the best I could hope for was to have him commit a slightly less-serious crime than the worst one I could imagine.

“So you were really going to kill him?” I said.

“Yeah. I don’t know how close I came, but I definitely thought about pulling that trigger. But you remember when you yelled for me to stop?”

“Yes,” I said.

“That was what did it for me, Leo. I didn’t think about him or Megs or anybody. I thought, ‘What would Leo think of me?’ How could Leo ever want to be my friend after I’d done something so awful? I can’t be a hero without you, man. I need the other Revenger.”

“But what would I do?” I said.

“I need someone to help me plan things out,” he said. “And rent’ll be expensive” He was serious about everything, and he was going to go off, with or without me. If I said no it could be the last I would ever see of him. What would life be like without Chad? But what would life be like as a college dropout with no job, aiding and abetting some vague plans of superherodom? Could I really just pick up and leave everything behind?

“I don’t know…” I said.

When his strong hands touched my face, I knew what was coming. I felt my stomach become a smooth egg ready to hatch, and at the same time there was a rising hotness in my throat that crawled up my face to the top of my forehead. His hands, for once, were soft and gentle, and his lips were tender on mine, as if I could eat them. I felt a blissful happiness, a happiness for
having attained something I hadn’t even known for sure I’d wanted but now had no idea how I’d ever lived without it. I closed my eyes and reached up to his face. I let my fingers drift over every jagged, beautiful edge in his visage.
12. Us, Now

The two of us moved to Chicago. Technically, we live in Oak Park, but with an El line it’s practically Chicago. We wanted at first to move to New York City because, as Chad pointed out, most superheroes lived either there or some fictional representation of it, but the cost of living was too high for two college dropouts with no job prospects. We’ve lived here for about a year now, and in that time since leaving my home town I haven’t spoken to my parents once. I’ve tried, but they don’t approve of Chad and me living as a couple. Chad hasn’t talked to his parents either, not to my knowledge at least.

On a cold night in November, with the sun low enough that there’s still a pink glow in front of me and a royal-blue night sky behind me, I stand in a neighborhood near Bauler Park, about one block away and on the opposite side of the street from a one-story building with spaces for three offices. One unit has been leased to a dentist and another to a tattoo parlor. Chad
is in the third one, which is the headquarters for a neo-Nazi organization that moved into the neighborhood a few months ago. The locals have staged some kind of organized protest every day and there’s a rumor that a potential Pita Pit is supposed to open nearby but the franchise is thinking about moving somewhere else because it doesn’t want to serve food to Nazis.

As usual, I’m the lookout, in case the police show up. An operation like this is fairly typical for us. By now, the Avenging Lark is pretty well-known as someone who helps women being mugged and beats pedophiles after they move into neighborhoods where there are a lot of children. Chad is the one who takes action, and I’m pretty much the sidekick. If we ever get a Lark Mobile, we’ve agreed that I’ll be the driver. (We’ve also talked about getting a blog set up, but I’m worried about us accidentally letting something slip where we’d give away our secret identities.) We’re just always on the lookout for people who would seek to do harm to society at large. You’d be surprised how easy such people are to find if you are really vigilant. I think that’s the biggest difference between our days as the Revengers and now. Back then we were too worried trying to live our lives like normal high school and college students, too busy wasting our time with Megs. Now we’re much more focused on helping to make the world a better place.

I try to look casual with my hands in the pockets of the new Cubs jacket Chad bought for me. He really shouldn’t have since we need the money, but when I told him so he laughed, patted me on the cheek and said, “We’ll get by.”

He’s right. We will get by. The apartment we share is small, but Chad prefers to call it “cozy,” and it only costs us about $600 a month. Chad’s original idea of delivering pizzas didn’t really work out because most pizzerias want him to work nights and we need that time for Avenging Lark duties, but he did find some nice, part-time work as a security guard at a local bank. I work at a Jimmy John’s downtown, and on the side I also do a lot of paid volunteering
for medical tests at the local hospitals where they have me do things like try new vaccines, take tests with lots of caffeine in my body, and stay awake for a couple of days while simultaneously remembering sequences of numbers. It’s more interesting than you would think, and it’s a steady source of income. Chad and I have talked about taking some classes next spring at Oakton Community College in Skokie, but we’ll see where we are financially. Besides, I feel like we’re doing pretty well right now. What future career would we train for? What would we rather do with our lives?

A teenage-age-looking girl in a white sweater with a light-pink backpack passes me on the street. I wonder why she’d be out with her school things at this hour. I smile and nod at her, and she responds by averting her gaze down and walking by faster. I don’t blame her. I am, after all, a stranger, and this is downtown Chicago. That doesn’t mean I regret being friendly. When Chad and I first started going on our nightly missions I thought of ways to look more badass. We’re a proper, serious, superheroing team now, so I thought exuding a sense of danger might be appropriate, but leather jackets and sunglasses just weren’t my style, and I always felt bad whenever I sneered at the passersby. I’m often in a good mood these days, so I can’t help but feel friendly.

I see Chad come out of the office a few minutes later. He is dressed in jeans, a black hoodie and a white mask that, if it had more color, looks like something a Mexican wrestler would wear. We talked about him wearing a costume, like It Wasp, but we decided the mask was enough. The Avenging Lark should be a shadowy presence, an idea designed to give comfort to people who dreaded the daily trek down the mean streets of the city, not the next year’s most popular Halloween costume among elementary school-age boys. He looks up and down the street once before walking up to me. We then walk in the direction of the nearest El station.
“How was it?” I say.

He grins at me and does a quick eyebrow raise. “Trust me. The skinheads are going to want to find a new office.”

“And we’ll be there at the next location,” I say.

“Fuck yeah we will,” he says. We fistpound.

“Did you leave something to let them know it was the Avenging Lark?” I say.

“Not this time,” he says. “Just in case they’re like the Nazis from The Blues Brothers.”

I’m fine with letting this Act of Vengeance stay anonymous. Sometimes we like to leave a token to let the citizens know that they’ve been helped by the Avenging Lark. During one of his more dangerous missions, Chad stopped a knife-wielding robber at a bowling alley. (It wasn’t a coincidence. We’d been following the guy all day after we saw him yelling profanity at some tourists near Soldier Field.) After Chad jammed the perpetrator head-first into a ball return he wrote “THE AVENGING LARK WAS HERE” in black Sharpie on the floor. We got a lot of press after that one.

We take the Green Line to Oak Park. It’s dark and cold when we get off and Chad blows into his hands. He rubs his muscular arms.

“You wanna get a cab?” he says.

“Walking’s cheaper,” I say.

“Come on,” he whines.

“We need to save that money for winter when it’s really cold,” I say. Chad frowns because he knows I’m right, and with just a little bit of pout in his posture he starts walking in the direction of our apartment. I stand up straighter and walk side-by-side with him. I feel like I win more arguments these days.
“I suppose I shouldn’t mind the weather too much,” Chad says, stepping on a pine cone. I hear it crunch in a very satisfying way. “It’s colder in Montreal.”

“Do you still want to go?” I say.

“Yeah,” he says. “I mean, not now, but maybe in a few years.”

Chad’s comment makes me think. Where will we be in a few years? Still fighting the forces that would seek to do harm to society at large? I suppose it ultimately depends on how serious we are about superheroing. I mean, if Chad and I got jobs in Montreal or somewhere else, would we just move there and forget about the Avenging Lark? Or would we keep being the Avenging Lark and sidekick (I don’t actually have a name) in the new city? Would we even go if that chance came our way? I don’t know, but I suppose it doesn’t really matter, because right now we’re happy. We’re in love. We’re together. We can’t ask for more.

Back in the apartment Chad takes off his shoes, sits down on the sofa, leans back his head and closes his eyes.

“It’s your turn to make dinner,” I say. I go into the bathroom to wash my hands.

“What do you want?” he says. “We have a bunch of frozen pizzas.”

“That sounds good,” I say. Chad hops up, as if he’s eager to do this particular chore tonight. I go to our laptop and open up the homepage for our home town’s newspaper. I like to keep up to date on what’s going on. I’m not entirely sure why since we’ll probably never go back, but you never know.

A story in the local news section catches my eye because I see the words “old newspaper dispenser” in the headline. I click on the link and read the story.

In a spot by the river, near where Chad and I used to live, a family was having a summer picnic. The dad, using a metal detector, had found an old newspaper dispenser buried underneath
the sand and rocks by the riverside. It was a little rusted, but under the grime the apparatus was bright yellow and had the words “Sex Press” written on the side in pink.