

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

David L. Shapiro for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Mechanical Engineering presented on November 30, 2009. Title: An American College Experience: It Tastes Like Burning.

Abstract approved:

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Eric Hill

A collection of short stories in the style of flash fiction. The themes of the stories include relationships, legality, and friendship. The stories are connect by themes, cross self-referencing, repetition, fragmentation, and characters. The main unifying feature is the characterization of the narrator through his response and commentary. The styles of the stories include a list, a play, straight narrative, and vignette.

Key words: flash fiction, humor, short stories.

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An American College Experience  
It Tastes Like Burning

by

David L. Shapiro

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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David L. Shapiro, Author

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# Elmwood I

---

*“Hello Darkness, my old friend.”*

*- Simon and Garfunkel*

We ran. They knew where we were, so we ran through the dark. We ran from our pursuers – real and imaginary – we ran from cats and dogs, people and cars. It was the cars that we feared.

We hid. We ducked into driveways, we crawled across lawns, we dove into bushes, and we slithered through bark mulch.

We crept. We ghosted along the streets, avoiding the main roads, pretending nothing was wrong, pretending they weren't after us.

They were here. Their headlights almost caught us as we crossed the park.

# Dip

---

*“You’re doing bad things? Let me help!”*  
- *Anonymous*

DEER CROSSING

NEXT 1 MILES

“Really? Miles?”

“Back to first grade for them!”

The darkened coastline streamed by as Riley wound the Aerostar around the curves of Highway 101. The sun was long gone, replaced by the glare of oncoming headlights and the occasional

VACANCY

NO VACANCY

VACANCY

The road was plagued by construction, outbreaks appearing every two to three miles. Temporary signage listed symptoms.

ROUGH ROAD

“No shit! You think?”

“We've been all over the road!”

“You kidding? The road's been all over us.”

DIP

“Dip?”

“Dip!”

“Dipdipdip!”

And so it was decided: DIP would be ours.

We arrived at the campsite and met up with our fellow campers. They asked if we had the tents.

“Why would we have a tent?”

“YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO BRING THE TENTS!”

“Oh, shit. Really?”

“Wait, we were supposed to bring the tents?”

“Apparently.”

“You've gotta be kidding me...”

“You really didn't bring a tent?”

“We thought you were bringing them!”

“Good thing we brought ‘em then, huh?”

“...”

“You sons of bitches...”

The party around the enormous beach fire had started long before. With no chance of catching up, we went for a walk.

We walked south along the beach, back towards home. It was a beautiful evening: the moon shone down on the silent sand and screaming cars. We enjoyed ourselves, walking and talking.

The talk shifted. We remembered our plan.

We looked up the steep sand cliff that would come back to haunt us, looked up to the highway, looked at one another, and started climbing. Joe and I made good time, Aiden scrambled for grip, and Sierra wisely took her time. Riley was further back along the beach. We yelled ourselves hoarse getting his attention over the sound of passing cars.

We set out along the side of the road. We walked and we ran and we walked. A longer trip than we thought.

SLOW

“That’s *almost* as good as DIP.”

“Where *is* the damn thing?”

We tried to take the SLOW down from its post, but only managed to point it at the ocean. We let it serve as a warning to erosion.

Finally:

DIP

It was mounted on a tripod near a turnout. We stood around our future prize, examining it, deciding how to strike.

“Wait, how are we actually going to get it back? It glows in the dark...”

“We’ll come up with something.”

The first order of business was to amputate its legs. Riley did what any sensible person would have done: he grabbed the whole thing, picked it up, and ran headlong into the bushes, ripping his shirt from nipple to hip on a rusty bolt.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Hey, at least it missed your skin.”

The five of us looked at the rickety legs and mechanical bits holding our DIP prisoner. There was nothing we could do, the nuts were rusted solid. We stood awkwardly hunched over in the bushes, feeling foolish.

“Now what?”

“We can carry it the way it is.”

“Are you kidding? It weighs a ton.”

“Hey guys? What about this?”

I reached out my hand, lifting the top bracket slightly.

DIP

said the sign as it promptly fell at our feet.

“Well, *now* what?”

The small opening in the wall of foliage held promise. It was large enough for us to walk single file, but the light was bad and the slope was steep. Two LED flashlights from my key chain solved our illumination problem: I carried one in back and Riley carried one in front. Aiden followed Riley with the sign and Joe helped Sierra down the dark path.

“This is great! We’ll make it down to the beach no problem.”

Then the path ended. Or so it seemed. A barely visible animal run continued from that spot. It was small enough that we had to walk doubled over to fit. We were reduced to crawling when it only got smaller from there. Brambles caught our clothes; I was glad to be wearing jeans. Riley wasn’t so lucky.

“DAMMIT.”

“That’s what you get for being stupid.”

“How’s it stupid to wear shorts?”

“You should always be prepared to crawl down through the underbrush while committing a felony.”

“Felony?”

The animal run petered out and we found ourselves in a wooded area steep enough that we had to hang on to small trees just to keep upright.

"This is ridiculous."

"It just keeps on going, and going, and going..."

We took a quick breather when the slope finally leveled off.

"Well, let's get this over with then."

I took the lead. We traveled no more than twenty feet before:

CLIFF

A sheer thirty foot drop.

"Well, fuck. What now?"

"Joe, David, grab my arm."

Riley leaned out over the cliff, looking for a way down.

"It looks shallower to our right."

We hauled him back in, backtracked, and bushwhacked. Less steep, yes, but still a cliff.

"Can't we just go back?"

"We'll be fine!"

The sign flashed in the light of our key chains as we tossed it down, skidding, bouncing, rolling, and clanging to a stop on the beach below.

DIP DIP DipDipdip dip dip...

"Alright, here I go."

Joe slipped, climbed, and slid down, making it without incident. His light winked back at us.

"Come on down, it's not so bad."

Riley and I followed suite. Sierra made it down with some trouble, but managed to stay upright. Aiden had an adventure. We saw his light start to edge down the cliff.

"Coming down."

Suddenly it jerked and tumbled. Aiden slid to a stop at our feet.

"Nice one."

"Yeah, thanks guys, I'm OK. Thanks for asking."

We sat on the rocks – the rocks, that is, that Aiden had narrowly missed tumbling into – and caught our collective breaths.

"We did it!"

"DIP!"

"Dipdipdip!"

It was our moment of triumph: the sign was ours and nothing could stand between us and home.

Then the tide came in.

## Elmwood II

---

*“Like a bat out of Hell, you’re gone.”*  
- *Oxbow Drive*

We sprinted out of the park to safety in the dark alleys.

No one could follow us here, not when *we* could barely see.

We wound between houses, setting off the occasional porch light or Golden Retriever.

They would expect us to play it safe. Never, ever, play that game. Never, ever, do what they expect.

That's key.

# Scavengers

---

*“He wasn’t a bad guy; it depended on when you caught him or what you were doing when he caught you.”*

*- Anonymous*

The first key to a good scavenger hunt lies in the clues.  
 Think of it like a first date. No one wants to date a bore. Let her do some of the talking.

*You'll never forget this test,  
 That's not the SAT.  
 You'll find the book to improve your best  
 At the store that surrounds a country.  
 Third down, third to the right,  
 You'll find what we left there tonight.*

“The hell does that mean?”  
 “Damned if I know.”  
 “OK, tests?”  
 “AP? ACT? PSAT? MCAT? LSAT? GRE?”  
 “Too many choices.”  
 You can't make the clues too hard, or no one will ever make it there.  
 But do remember to make conversation. You have to be a person, not just a set of ears.

“It's probably the ACT, what else would you classify as 'not the SAT'?”  
 “OK, where?”  
 “Got it.”  
 “Whowhatwherewhenwhy?”  
 The second key to a good scavenger hunt is to make sure the clue leads interesting places. Where's the fun in finding things in the middle of an empty field?

And don't forget to keep the relationship exciting. Don't do the same old things over and over again.

“Borders.”  
 “Ah, clever!”  
 “Well, she is sleeping with him.”  
 “Let's get moving!”

If there's one thing your conscience hates, it's dubious legality. There's a feeling that you just can't quite shake. It doesn't matter that you aren't doing anything dangerous; it doesn't matter that you aren't doing anything unethical or immoral. And you can't just ignore it. Your internal compass is suddenly pointing not-quite-North.

You *will* be off kilter. It's hard to be yourself when you're nervous.  
 “OK, who's going to watch the bikes?”  
 “No prob.”

Doing it in public, makes it that much worse. You feel watched, like everyone knows what you're doing. And therein lies the key. No one *actually* knows. You have to remember that: they don't know anything and they never will. As long as you don't give it away.

Just relax, and remember that she's probably nervous too.  
 “Test Prep, Test Prep... Test Prep...”  
 “Here it is, ACT Test Prep!”

You feel like nothing you do is subtle and being a few drinks into the evening doesn't help. You can tell your six companions aren't doing any better.

Just try not to knock over the water glass. It's embarrassing.

"Test Prep! Test Prep! Test Prep!"

"Alright, there's nobody watching, let's do it."

"What's the clue say again?"

"Third shelf down."

"Third book to the right?"

"There's nothing there."

"What?"

"Nothing. There."

"Shit. Take 'em all out. Find it!"

When you're in a respectable bookstore, slightly tipsy, pulling SAT and ACT study guides off the shelf, you feel more than a little self-conscious. You wonder when the next Borders employee is going to wander by.

Unfortunately, the analogy runs out here: relationships are tricky, unlike scavenger hunts.

"Found it!"

"*Quietly*, please..."

The third, and most important, key to a good scavenger hunt is to hide exciting things.

Just remember to have fun.

"Wow."

"A bottle of tequila?"

"How felonious."

"We're not drinking it here."

"For once, I agree. Let's get out of here."

Sometimes there's nothing for it but to break a few rules and drink your alcohol elsewhere.

It's like sex on the beach: there's so many reasons not to do it – sand, voyeurs, sand, cold, sand, and sand—

But...

# Elmwood III

---

*“May you live in interesting times.”*

- Terry Pratchett

Elmwood. The street wound its way up the hill in front of us. But despite heavy patrols, blind corners, and steep embankments it led to our salvation—HEADLIGHTS!

We ran.

We stumbled across a path to our right and sprinted. The neighborhood swimming pool took us by surprise.

# Happiness

---

*“The moments of happiness we enjoy take us by surprise. It is not that we seize them, but that they seize us.”*

- Ashley Montagu

"Black belt *kata*, division 39. David up, Zack on deck."

I start in surprise to hear my name.

A panel of five stone-faced black belts glues its ten collective eyes to me as I stand up, straighten my *gi* and start the long, short walk to the stage. My shaking knees and the god-damned, bear-sized butterflies in my stomach remind me of my first experience with falling in love.

*I caught up to her as she left class, the people in the hallway receding into the background as the rushing in my ears grew into a roar.*

*"Hey. Would you like to go to prom with me?"*

*We kissed for the first time on –*

I derail that train of thought.

*Now is not the time. Concentrate.*

No matter how many times I compete, I never get used to this. I do my best to still my shaking legs, bow to the judges, and bark the name of my *kata* loudly enough to quiet the audience. I shift my weight, flow to the opening position, pause to take control of the adrenaline surge, and begin.

I bow, legs now shaking from exertion, and sit back down.

*I can't believe people say this part of karate isn't a sport.*

*"If it doesn't involve a ball, it's not a sport."*

*"Then gymnastics isn't a sport? What about golf? That's not really a sport, but it uses a ball."*

*"Well, boxing is a sport. Because you compete against someone to win."*

*"You compete in karate. Against someone. To win."*

*"But all you're doing is dancing by yourself out on the floor!"*

*"No. I'm killing people, I'm breaking bones, I'm throwing them to the ground, I'm kicking them, punching them."*

*"What are you talking about?"*

*"Dancing it may be, but dancing with a purpose. Kata is a state of mind, not a dance."*

And get back up, grinning sheepishly. They need to score me.

*Oops.*

Sweat has soaked through my *gi*, all the way to my embroidered black belt, leaving a black stain on the pristine, white cotton.

The golden lettering on Dan's black belt dances as he shifts his weight, seeming to make a mockery of my nervousness. I compulsively tighten the Velcro straps of my gloves and helmet *right tight, left tight, right tight, left tight* as I gear up for my first sparring match of the day.

Jumping into a ring with people who are capable of breaking bones with their bare hands never becomes a matter of course.

*Why the hell should I have to spar him first?*

Slowly, I take a deep breath.

*Calm down. Concentrate. You're sparring Dan and if you don't get it together, this will be your first and only match.*

The tiny ear holes in my helmet distort the cheers and murmurs from the crowd. Sweat is already trickling through my hair and down my temples, soaking the inside of this oven they claim will protect my head. I silently apologize to whoever will be wearing it next.

We're both ready.

*Alright. Fuck it. Let's get on with it.*

We bow to one another in the Japanese tradition and pound gloves as Americans. Excitement replaces worry; the desire to begin fills me with energy.

*Penetration. Evasion. Attack. Defense.*

*Dodging. Ducking. Weaving.*

*Punching. Kicking. Elbowing. Kneeing.*

*Grappling. Sweeping. Throwing. Tripping*

*Intimidation. Feinting.*

*Blustering. Placating.*

*Pride. Arrogance. Humility.*

*Agility. Strength. Speed. Quickness.*

*Patience. Aggression.*

*Peace.*

*My media. The brush strokes that define my art.*

*The lines of code that combine in innumerable ways to make each artist, each work of art different.*

*The lens through which I see the world; the celluloid on which my motions are recorded.*

*But most of all, they are my love, my devotion, the bases of my martial art.*

*My karatedo.*

*My muai thai.*

*My boxing.*

*My judo.*

*My krav maga.*

*My yamanni-ryu.*

*My Systema.*

*My wrestling.*

*My tae kwon do.*

*These are my disciplines, but my martial art is karatedo.*

*All the others fall within its bounds.*

We dance, the shaking of my knees a problem no longer, probing for weakness, ready for that first perfect moment of absolute power and exquisite control. There is a flurry of movement, a rush of adrenaline.

I lose but there is a smile I can't wipe off my face.

## Elmwood IV

---

*“Oh, the delicious thrill of hiding while the others come looking for you...”*  
- Jean Baudrillard

We hid.

The lifeguard chair stood watch. A roomful of children partied its way through the night.

They drove past, eyes searching, unaware that we crouched not 20 feet away.

# O'Porcelain

---

*“As long as there are no things less-worse than the Holocaust in my apple, I’m happy.”*

*- Anonymous*

Aiden had to pee. The party was finally winding down: Kasey was gone, there was no one else to hit on, his roommates were asleep, and the bathroom was free. He stumbled across the house, past the last game of beer pong in the garage, through the last few people drinking rum and coke in the kitchen, by the living room – oblivious to the smoke from the dying bonfire outside that was beginning to fill the room.

But the bathroom was a place of sanctuary, it was a place of release. He unzipped and looked down at the toilet.

It looked back.

Joe came by the next morning at eight. He didn't bother knocking. The former duplex was a mess. The beer pong table in the garage was still slimy with old beer, the floor no less so; the kitchen floor was sticky, the counters covered with empty beer and liquor bottles; and the living room smelled of smoke, no one had bothered to douse the fire pit in the backyard or close the windows at the end of the night. He made his way towards Aiden's room. Even the stolen road signs had been knocked off the walls: FLYING ROCK, 20 MPH, DIP. He passed a note on the bathroom door.

*Tucker,*

*There's an opossum in the bathroom.  
I'm not sure what to do about this, so I'm  
going to bed.*

♥ Aiden

Joe read the note, shook his head, and left, chuckling to himself.

The opossum was in a Strange Place. Curiosity had led him towards the Strange Light in the Night. Wandering towards the Steady White Glow, he had passed a crackling, Yellow Blaze. There was no food. But now he had been trapped by the Pink Animal that ran from him.

So, white porcelain towering above, he did what opossums do when the sun comes up.

Tucker made it back home at noon; he had left the party long before it was over. He opened the garage door to park his bike and was hit between the nostrils with the smell of stale beer. Beer pong or beer bowling? Beer was *everywhere*. The kitchen was no better, the remnants of Sailor Jerry's and Coke staining the floor.

He found Aiden sitting in the living room with all the windows open. He was wearing nothing but boxers. His head was in his hands.

“Did you see the note on the bathroom door?”

“No, should I?”

“There's a giant opossum in the bathroom. And I'm hung over as fuck.”

"There's a what?"

They steeled themselves to deal with the rabid beast, dressing in leather jackets, long pants, and donning gloves.

Tucker grabbed the doorknob. He pulled the door open. Aiden rushed into the room ready to give it hell.

When David arrived later in the afternoon the garage door was open and Aiden was halfheartedly pushing a mop. It smelled like old socks.

"What's up Aiden?"

"Oh, not much. Just hung over as shit."

"No band practice today then?"

The only answer was a look of horror. David laughed.

"Serves you right for hitting on my ex."

The kitchen was freshly cleaned, but the recycling was overflowing with cans and bottles. There was a trash can in the living room. David looked inside. He walked back to the garage.

"Why is there a baby opossum sleeping in a trash can in the living room?"

"Don't even ask."

## Elmwood V

---

*“...but what panic when, after a long search, the others abandon you!”*  
- Jean Baudrillard

We crept.  
The shadows no longer danced. The headlights had passed.  
They were gone.

## The New Year

---

*“You’re acting like you didn’t just say something terrible.”*  
- *Anonymous*

SUPEREGO

Why isn't she here?  
ID

You know why.  
SUPEREGO

No. I don't.  
ID

It's because Kasey doesn't actually like you.  
SUPEREGO

Yes she does.  
ID

No, she doesn't. She stood you up. She got drunk and slept in someone else's bed.  
SUPEREGO

We dealt with those things. They were accidents.  
ID

Last time she saw you, she practically kicked you out.  
SUPEREGO

Don't remind me. Why's it been so damned hard?  
ID

Why's it been so damned hard?  
SUPEREGO

I don't know...  
ID

If she really cared, she would be here tonight.  
SUPEREGO

Screw you.  
ID

I just report the news.  
SUPEREGO

What does *she* want?  
YOUNG WOMAN  
(to SUPEREGO)

Hi David.  
ID

Ooh, what have we here?  
YOUNG WOMAN  
(to ID)

I've never seen you so well dressed.  
ID  
(to YOUNG WOMAN)

You look great. Sometimes it's fun to dress up.  
SUPEREGO  
(to ID)

What are you doing? You stay out of this!  
ID

I'm just helping you out man.

YOUNG WOMAN  
(to SUPEREGO)

I was wondering...

SUPEREGO

Hmmm?

YOUNG WOMAN

If you would be my New Years kiss...

SUPEREGO

Ummmm, I'm not sure...

YOUNG WOMAN

Come on, it's New Years.

SUPEREGO

(to ID)

What about Kasey?

ID

What about her? She's not here.

SUPEREGO

You never cease to amaze me.

ID

Oh, come *on*. She's not here. You invited her, she's in town, but she's not *here*.

SUPEREGO

She might still show up.

YOUNG WOMAN

(to both)

Well?

ID

Kasey doesn't even want to talk to you, much less kiss you.

SUPEREGO

Not getting it from her doesn't justify taking it from someone else.

ID

It doesn't? Why on earth not?

SUPEREGO

It just wouldn't be right.

(To YOUNG WOMAN)

I'll get back to you.

ID

Cop out.

YOUNG WOMAN

(to SUPEREGO)

Don't keep me waiting too long.

SUPEREGO

Thank God. She's gone.

ID

Dear Lord, why didn't you say yes?

SUPEREGO

I shouldn't have to tell you.

What are you scared of? It's just a kiss. ID  
 She's drunk. And so am I. SUPEREGO  
 And? It's just a kiss; by definition it's a good thing. ID  
 Fuck you. SUPEREGO  
 Come on, it's New Years. ID  
 That's what *she* said. SUPEREGO  
 She's a smart girl. Go on, she's cute. ID  
 Oh no, here she comes! ID  
 For God's sake, just say yes. SUPEREGO  
 Why should I? She may have been talking to me, but she was looking at you. ID  
 Really? SUPEREGO  
 Yeah. YOUNG WOMAN  
 (to SUPEREGO)  
 It's almost time. SUPEREGO  
 (to ID)  
 How do I answer that? ID  
 Just say yes! SUPEREGO  
 No! It's not right. YOUNG WOMAN  
 (to both)  
 Come on, it's just a kiss. SUPEREGO  
 And she's not helping. MANY VOICES  
 5! ID  
 (to YOUNG WOMAN)  
 My pleasure.

MANY VOICES  
4!  
SUPEREGO  
Wait, what are you doing?  
MANY VOICES  
3!  
YOUNG WOMAN  
(to SUPEREGO)  
Alright?  
MANY VOICES  
2!  
EGO  
Oh just do it already. You two are giving me a headache.  
MANY VOICES  
1!  
ID  
(to ID)  
Come here.  
SUPEREGO  
Wait, what about me?

# Elmwood VI

---

*“Who is more foolish, the child afraid of the dark or the man afraid of the light?”*  
- Maurice Freehill

Running when it was safe, hiding when it wasn't, creeping to avoid being illuminated by street lights, porch lights, headlights, flashlights, making our way up the hill.

We terrified an old married couple sharing a cigarette.

## *Psilocybe Mexicana*

---

“Sure, you could eat grapes, but why bother when you could just drink wine?”  
- Anonymous

Smoke. It's the one thing I cannot stand about Europe. I *hate* smoke: it's foul. It fouls the air, fouls breath, fouls clothing, fouls health, and fouls my mood. Oregonians understand this, Europeans don't. I spent my time there biting back self-righteous comments.

But it's not just smoking that I hate: drugs in general, from aspirin to coffee, alcohol to marijuana, just don't cut it. Is there something so wrong with life that it needs to be enhanced? Is there something so wrong with you that you need external inputs to make yourself better?

"But yoo're een Ahmsterdahm," she said.

And Amsterdam was *boring*. There's nothing to do if you aren't getting high.

We crossed the inner city in search of the "I AMsterdam" sign losing our map in the process, getting rained on, lost, and finally walking all the way back to meet up with the others. My foot was swollen, a reminder of the infected splinter I had pulled out the day before. But, "am" apparently means pussy in Turkish. And that was reason enough to put me through Hell. A ten-foot tall, red, pussy-saying sign was reason enough.

"Come on, spleet a space cake weeth mee," she said, making a compelling argument with those pretty eyes.

It did nothing. Not only was Amsterdam boring if you didn't do drugs, it was equally boring if you did. What a bad trip.

We moved through several "coffee" shops, eating what little real food they had. She struck up a conversation with a fellow Turk behind the bar and he explained how to roll a joint. In Turkish.

I joined the others downstairs, feeling excluded and not a little jealous. The French guys were passing around the biggest joint I had ever seen.

"C'est presque une trompette!"

They offered me a hit; I took three. Just because I hate smoking doesn't mean I don't know how to.

"Ca va, David?"

It felt like the wires connecting my brain to my tongue had frayed and now – while talking wasn't impossible, or even difficult – it just wasn't worth the effort to synchronize myself with the newly slow-moving world that swirled with smoke, flashed with previously unnoticed color, buzzed with the gutturals of French, the slurring of Irish, and the—

("The thing about 'fuck' is that it's the most versatile word in the English language. Listen: fuck the fucking fucked fuckers. That five word sentence contains *only* the two most common English words: 'fuck' and 'the'.")

"Fuckin' fuck ze fuck fuckers?"

"Close.")

—more familiar strains of English.

All the same, there's something barbarically attractive about smoking. Not the smell, not the taste, but the *act* of it, of holding it in, of inhaling and exhaling cancer, of doing it even though it's poisonous, something simultaneously life-affirming and life-wasting. What is life without danger, without chances? Without waste, excess, and hypocrisy?

My feet didn't hurt anymore.

The lights! Are *growing*!

The boat was moving. The lights across the bay are growing. Shrinking. No, they're definitely growing. They call to me. My head fills with rushing, sex, overwhelming.

The lights shrink.

Blood flows to my brain! I can feel *individual* photons strike my eyes. I can *see* them too! The world lurches around me as I stay still. I am rock, I am an iiiiiiiisland. My heart pumps fire. And needles.

There's a fishing line attached to my left eye. Pulling me. Towards the lights. Growing...

But the lights are shrinking?

Our hostel is a boat. I knew this before we came, but the full significance hadn't hit me until last night. We spent most of the night tripping balls, sitting in our own personal spaceships watching the lights across the harbor. We could have all drowned, could have all fallen, high, into the frigid water.

Sleeping in a boat, sleeping on the water. Who thought that was a good idea? It smelled bad, the "captain" was surly, and it was still far too expensive to be worth it. The Turkish girls may have been the only smart ones. They pissed the cap'n off and then decided to sleep in the cars. The rest of us were too high to notice when we finally crashed.

And then the dreams came.

But breakfast. French toast, bread, bacon, eggs, Nutella, jam. Enough to make up for just about anything.

We were all strung out. Exhausted. Sleepy. Tired. Hung over.

It was a good time though. It was funny once.

"What do you mean we can't bring these 'shrooms back home?"

Jesus Christ. Fucking Americans.

What a trip.

# Elmwood VII

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*“The robbed that smiles, steals something from the thief.”*  
- William Shakespeare

We lay prone, black outlines gathering splinters from the newly lain bark mulch. Front yards offer fantastic cover if you know what to look for. Even a small sapling will break up the outline of a man and make him harder to spot.

Anyone can hide in the dark. The true test is whether you can hide while they can still see you, and move while they can't.

We were the envelope pushers, the edge that bleeds. No one ever saw us. Not one of the families in whose gardens we secreted ourselves would ever know.

We reached the top of the hill. We smiled.

## What About *The Merchant of Venice*?

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*“You seem like a really cool person. We should hang out sometime.”*  
- Anonymous

When I first saw you, it suddenly seemed that an entire term of Shakespeare wouldn't be so bad. You sat in the front row, I watched from the back. Your long, blond hair was divided into two braids running down your back. You turned and your green eyes caught mine.

I sat in the middle of the room next class. You sat, not by yourself, but in a bubble of isolation. You didn't know anyone in the class either. What was your name?

“Rachelle?”

“It's pronounced rah-SHELL, actually.”

Never have I been so happy about the process of taking roll.

I showed up early and sat in the front row. The seats next to me remained open. My eyes were glued to the clock above the door.

You finally walked through the door. I quickly looked away. There was nothing special about me. I was just the guy who said:

“Good morning.”

And smiled.

“Morning,” you said as you sat down.

And smiled.

It probably looked like I was taking notes for the rest of class.

I introduced myself next class.

“Morning. By the way, I'm David.”

“Rachelle. Nice to meet you.”

I found you on Facebook. We chatted online. I wrote little notes on the edge of my notes that made you smile and relieved the boredom of *As You Like It*.

I charmed you with my sympathetic reading of Shylock.

“I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?” I asked, “Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?”

“You make it impossible to hate you,” you said, shaking your head.

You followed me out of class to congratulate me on my group's performance of a scene from *Hamlet*. You got my attention with a kick in the ass.

“Hey now!”

“Nice job in there. You look good in black.”

I told you jokes to cheer you up when you were sick. They were terrible. You laughed all the same.

I invited you to our scavenger hunts, but you begged off. You were busy; I understood.

“Wait, we have to write *three* essays?”

“Yeah, you didn't know that?”

“No! I thought we picked *one* of the three. I don't have time for this!”

“I'd be happy to help you. I've already finished mine,” I said with a smile.

You were barely involved in the writing of your own final.

I never really heard from you after that.

# Elmwood VIII

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*“Arriving at one goal is the starting point to another.”*

*- John Dewey*

Downhill. It's a straight shot from here.

## *Les Champs Elysées*

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*“I never thought I would like Americans, but you guys are all right.”*  
- *Anonymous*

5:55:30 pm: La Grande Arche de la Défense – the biggest vagina in all of Paris.  
6:00:21 pm: Started walking East by Southeast.  
6:20:28 pm: Took an Indian's picture.  
6:20:59 pm: Took an Indian's picture – not enough buildings in the first one.  
6:21:10 pm: He took mine.  
6:25:37 pm: Noticed an old Jewish man following me – yarmulke, beard, depressed air.  
6:25:19 pm: Cute girl on a Segway giving out coupons – she smiled at my accent.  
6:28:01 pm: Almost run over by two small children on scooters.  
6:33:34 pm: Two Americans tossing a baseball.  
6:40:56 pm: Naked children in the fountain.  
6:45:09 pm: Finally lost the old Jewish man – who besides me walks along a highway?  
6:53:48 pm: Saw two Parisians almost get run over – damn European pedestrians.  
6:58:39 pm: Almost got run over – damn European drivers.  
7:02:57 pm: Saw a grandmother on a Razor scooter.  
7:12:30 pm: Left the beaten path.  
7:15:41 pm: Got lost.  
7:20:11 pm: Back on the beaten path.  
7:40:25 pm: L'Arc de Triomphe de l'Etoile – the second biggest vagina in Paris.  
7:45:50 pm: Heart torn to shreds every time someone begs for money.  
7:55:37 pm: Figured out how to take pictures in the middle of the street.  
8:03:17 pm: Place de la Concorde – third biggest penis in Paris; biggest Egyptian penis.  
8:06:32 pm: Hatred for roundabouts – please kill me next time I say stoplights suck.  
8:10:52 pm: Jardin des Tuilleries.  
8:11:00 pm: Passed a runner in a Michigan State T-shirt – does he know my best friend?  
8:21:42 pm: L'Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel – third biggest... need it be said?  
8:24:16 pm: Glass pyramids and the Louvre – damn you, Dan Brown.  
8:32:01 pm: On the metro home.

# Elmwood IX

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*“Never yield to force, never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.”*  
- Winston Churchill

The headlights came again, we were done for. No cover. Anywhere.

We were completely unprepared for the arrival of a second car. Cops spilled out.  
The third car just seemed like overkill.

# David|Kasey

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*“Don’t change yourself just because someone has hot tits.”*

*- Anonymous*

The third slap seems like overkill.

It's just too much. For him, monogamy at twenty-one isn't that bad. This could have been the best time to be together, but she'd found out.

An object of desire no longer, she stands there, warm, bundled, and insecure. She changed since she found him out becoming obsessive, angry, jealous. More interested in manipulating him than hearing him. Is he just now seeing her clearly? Or is he the one who changed? Does it matter?

Her first slap had caught him off guard.

But it was only the most recent first and he still didn't understand. She hadn't even let him get a word in. How could she hit someone she claimed to care about? How could she do that to him?

The backhanded slap had hurt.

What more is there to say? He doesn't have the energy, he doesn't have the time, he doesn't have the will, but most of all, he doesn't *want* to say anything more. He should have let her end it because he is *done*. He has accepted his failure and he wants to move on.

So, the third slap seems like overkill.

She says he ruined her chances of graduating, that he forced her to drop classes, to fail tests.

She says he ruined her fucking self-esteem. It hurts him to hear but she never took the things he said to heart. She no longer trusted him.

She dredges up old arguments: a New Year's kiss, his continuing friendship with Rachelle.

Finally she leaves, walking slowly away. He wants to call her back but he cannot. Things have changed.

He really does care for her, maybe even love her. He cared for her enough to put up with physical and emotional abuse, enough to sleep on the couch, enough to take the late night screaming, enough to put his friends on hold, enough to put his senior project on

The third slap feels just right.

She couldn't fucking believe that he was doing this. He was supposed to be such a nice guy. This should have been the best of their time together.

How could he stand there, cold, huddled, and unmoved? How could he seem so fucking different from the person she had met less than a year ago? Was this who he really was? A cold, unfeeling bastard? How could something that started so well have turned to such shit?

The first slap had felt so damn good.

But now her hand hurts. She'd overdone it. But he fucking deserved it. Why did he do it? He had fucked it up. He had fucked it right up. How could he do this? Did he really not love her?

The backhand had hurt. Like a bitch.

She's done with him. He's too much a pussy to make it work. He doesn't care enough. She should have ended it when she threatened to. She doesn't know why she trusted him in the first place. He's no better than the last. He'd begun paying his debt. But now he never would.

So, the third slap feels just right.

He says he will not take responsibility for her actions.

He says he cannot love someone who doesn't trust or respect him, and he is *tired*. He says that he has never been more depressed.

He complains about the way she treated him when they first started going out: getting drunk and sleeping in other peoples' beds, standing him up.

She can feel his eyes on her as she leaves. She wishes he would call her back and apologize.

She doesn't know where to go from here. She loves him. She loves him enough to overlook his indiscretion. Enough to hope that he'll change. Enough to be hurt by his refusal to talk to her. Enough to stick by him despite being so badly fucking hurt. That's

the back shelf, enough to take the late night screaming, enough to humiliate himself by not traveling alone with two other girls.

Almost enough to go on. But enough was enough. And she's too blinded to see the almost. Why did it have to happen this way? she loved him?

It's not as if he cheated on her.

what love is. She believes that he really does care for her, if only he could give her a little more time to truly forgive him. She was almost there. But almost wasn't fucking

enough for him. Couldn't he see how much Fucking cheater.

# Elmwood X

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*“You have to learn the rules of the game. And then you have to play better than anyone else.”*

*- Albert Einstein*

I did the only thing I could. I ran, a yell escaping my throat.  
“Best! Game! Ever!”

# The Game

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*“Didn’t mean to frighten you, we’re just playing a game.”*  
- Anonymous

The room is packed with my fellow fugitives, talking amongst themselves, and looking anxious. I sit with Joe, trying to remain calm.

My phone rings.

“EVERYBODY QUIET!”

The room falls mostly silent as I stand, pull my phone out of my pocket, and check the number.

“Hello? OK.”

I hang up.

“Alright! Everybody get out of here! The cops are coming! Remember, Elmwood park!”

Everyone heads for the door, but takes too long.

“Come on,” Joe said, “This way.”

We duck out the back door.

The night is dark, the sky clouded, and the streets empty: we see headlights coming but the shadows hide us. At this time of night only the cops are out.

“Alright, rule number one.

“Fugitives are required to be under their own power; they cannot use any mechanical devices to aid in their transportation.”

*We walked and we ran and we walked.*

“This means no rollerblades, bikes, bungee cords, cars, scooters, or planes. You may run, walk, swim, fly (but only under your own power), and crawl.”

*We ran. We hid. We crept.*

“Rule number two.

“We neither condone nor condemn trespassing.”

*Your internal compass is suddenly pointing not-quite-North.*

“We realize that in this game, sometimes it happens – but be smart about it. If they have an American flag and an NRA banner, don’t go diving into their bushes.”

*We wound between houses, setting off the occasional porch light or Golden Retriever.*

“Rule three.

“Tagging only. No tackling, punching, kicking, slapping, elbowing, pile driving, or licking.”

*There is a flurry of movement, a rush of adrenaline.*

“Number four.

“There is no limit on where you can go. No boundaries. No DMZs. Just get to Elmwood park in less than one hour.”

*Elmwood. The street wound its way up the hill in front of us.*

“So, that’s just about everything. Any questions? Comments? Concerns? Criticisms?”

“Alright. Cops, find your drivers. I’ll leave you to it. The rest of you come with me.

Tonight, I’m a fugitive.

A learning experience, Fugitive teaches you something about yourself. Socratic, it asks you how you react under pressure. Athletic, how fast can you run? Academic, where is the best place to hide?

*We hid.*

Driveways, lawns, bushes, a swimming pool, dark alleys.

*A place of sanctuary.*

Without them, we are nothing. But with us, when the headlights come, they lead an exciting life, however briefly.

*The headlights had passed.*

When they are gone, it's back to business.

*We dealt with those things.*

Back to the business of stalking. Back to the roots of human antiquity. Or so we would like to think.

*What a trip.*

The darkness is our ally, yet it raises old fears. No less so than the light.

*Streetlights, porch lights, headlights, flashlights.*

But our ally is the dark. And a powerful ally it is.

*No one ever saw us.*

We use shadows as clothing, masking ourselves in invisibility. But the light relegates us to mere blackness.

*You look good in black.*

We reached the top of the hill. We smiled.

*Downhill.*

It's a straight shot from here.

*Left the beaten path.*

The headlights came again, we were done for.

*No cover. Anywhere.*

I did the only thing I could. I ran, a yell escaping my throat.

*Why did it have to happen this way?*