

Zachary German
— Thank You

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The waitress says, “Another Coke?” and Michael says he’ll switch to water. Six years ago I was waiting for the subway home from a party near Brooklyn College when Lisa called to tell me that Michael had relapsed. At the party Lauren had poured Coors Banquet beer into mason jars, and on the phone – her mother had just died – Lisa said that such things don’t typically happen when everything is easy.

The first time I saw a certain kind of sink, wherein the sink is a bowl, like a large metal bowl, was at something called The Organic Restaurant, with Stephanie and Christopher, nine years ago. The restaurant was on, I believe, Tilton Road, although it may have been the Blackhorse Pike, or Delsea Drive. These are some names of main roads in that part of New Jersey. The town may have been Northfield, or Egg Harbor Township.

In the car with my parents, perhaps six weeks before my eating there and seeing the sink, I said that I wouldn't be continuing high school in the fall, and my father had pointed out, "The Organic Restaurant."

My mother said, "Dan, did you hear what Robert said?"

A few months later I was living in Philadelphia, doing bicycle delivery for a pizza restaurant off South Street called Francesca's, which had a sink like that. The restaurant would close soon after I moved to New York for the first time, following, I believe, the owners' divorce. The owners' names were Paul and Babs. They'd named the restaurant after their young daughter.

I wrote something years ago about how in my finding routine activities so debasing I failed any longer to empathize with the urge to produce and consume artwork about what is conventionally deemed prurient.

I was thinking of a young woman, in vogue that season for accounts of her adventures in violent sex. That she should seek out men who would make her vagina bleed seemed to me no more mysterious or shocking than that I and so many others should drive cars to Wholefoods to look for parking.

I slept through the stop at 30th Street Station and woke up in the White Marsh Mall parking lot. I looked through old emails on my phone, found Katherine's number and called her, the only person I thought I might know in Baltimore.

I hadn't seen her in two and a half years, during which time she had married and become estranged from Joseph, once my very close friend. She didn't answer, and I was shopping for a ticket back to Philadelphia when she called back, saying she'd meet me at the McDonald's in forty-five minutes.

On her father's porch swing we drank his warm, imported beer, and I feigned happiness about Joseph's recent book deal. We talked about the end of their marriage, and recalled fondly a time she and I had visited the Overstock.com outlet store near Druid Hill Park.

Around eleven AM we walked to a bar called DeMitre's where we drank Southern Comfort and played Keno. We made out at the bar and bought condoms at 7-11. In the late afternoon her father walked in as I was going down on her, to ask about some pain pills he couldn't find. It was later established that his roommate's son had taken them.

John asked what we were cooking for breakfast and when I told him I was trying to learn how to poach eggs he said he was very good at poaching eggs. He offered to show us the video that taught him. He brought out his computer and I paused the new Interpol album, which seemed no worse than we'd expected. He said that the guy in the egg video was weird, but that it was a good video. He said we could fast forward through the beginning.

I didn't drink for something like forty days shortly after New Year's, knowing that the lease I shared with Katherine would soon end, the money I had inherited from a friend of my father's would soon run out, and that clearing my head for a little while was not generally a bad idea.

I stopped drinking Heaven Hill all day and night and started drinking Cafe Bustello all day and night. I'd go to a café called The Dew Inn when it opened at four in the morning and read the paper, then go home and fall asleep watching Netflix on an iPad with a cracked screen that Keith had given me.

In mid-February my parents traveled to Florida. I looked after their dog and ate their frozen pizzas. One night I drove to Belco Liquors, in Mays Landing, New Jersey, where I purchased a beer called Coors Extra Gold, which I had long seen advertised in a certain bodega in Brooklyn but had never before seen for sale. I drank the six-pack on the sofa next to the dog, watching basketball.

The last time I saw Mark was at Bushwick Country Club, although now I can't remember if it was Mark or it was his boyfriend, Jean-Eric, that I saw there. It was only one of them, as they'd recently broken up.

Whoever was at the bar, Mark, or Jean-Eric, was there with a large group of friends I'd never met. They had accumulated too many cans of Pabst, which they offered us when they left, and we thanked them for, but didn't drink. That was another bout of sobriety. It was the night Rachel and I met Andrew, on the L platform at First Ave. He was holding a piece of crumpled up gift-wrap, or a bow, I forget. Rachel asked him about it and he said it was from a present he'd given a friend, or that she'd given him.

The next summer at a dinner party, one of Andrew's roommate's friends talked about working for Fantastic Man, which was then in the process of launching a women's magazine. I said, "But isn't Fantastic Man basically already like a standard women's magazine?" He said no and asked if I'd ever read Fantastic Man. I had, in fact, and didn't know what I'd meant by the comment. I still don't, it had just been something to say.

It was during the few weeks I lived with my parents in between living with Katherine and living with Rachel, both exes by that point, that my father sent me to Woodbury, New Jersey to pick up lumber. Because of, and as a necessity to, the nature of his business, he has an arrangement with certain of the region's wholesale lumber yards such that when an amount of stock is damaged, or returned, or just left to sit on the lot too long and go grey, he will pick it up, or at times have it delivered, for pennies on the dollar.

Long-term financial pursuits have not panned out for my father, as a rule. Describing the low prices he pays for lumber, as compared to the high prices one would normally pay, is perhaps the chief memory I have of his expressing pride, a satisfaction at having gotten the best of an unjust system.

He gave me rope and directions to the lumberyard. I used an FM transmitter attached to my iPod to listen to the FIDLAR album, and missed my exit. I turned around at a Canal's Liquor Store just before the Delaware Memorial Bridge, bought a liter of Evan Williams and asked for directions.

At the yard the man who I was to talk to was with another, ostensibly paying, customer, who seemed to be leaving as I approached. The clerk looked my way, as if to address me. When I identified myself as my father's son he announced that he knew who I was, brusquely.

I loaded the wood and tied it as well as I knew how. I don't remember my father ever using ratchet straps,

although in the time since I have learned their value, and would recommend their use on any similar transport of lumber.

I made no stops from the lumberyard's gate until a mile or two from my parents' home, where the Toyota Tundra was struck from the side by a Mercedes-Benz GLK which had run a stop sign. The other driver and I parked in front of an eighteenth century Presbyterian church and exchanged insurance information.

By the time I got to the house my parents had already received a phone call from the driver, who acted graciously in our brief dealings with him. The truck's damaged metal was removed and sold for scrap and, with the insurance money, my father was able to build a new truck bed, tailgate and racks, all of mahogany, on which he had the name of his business and his phone number professionally gold leafed.

Over the phone, having been out of touch for some months, Stephanie told me, with a cheerfulness that might have seemed more fitting were she to tell me that a band we liked was coming to town, that she had begun snorting heroin. This was my first idea that anyone I knew or came in contact with would do such things, and I didn't believe her.

Five years later Ashley texted that she'd bought some dope and that I could come over. I was with Lauren near Union Square, having just gone to the Trader Joe's wine store. I told Ashley not to do any before I got there, said goodbye to Lauren, who was meeting Mike at Grand Central anyway, and took the L train to the G train to her apartment and windowless bedroom, near Pratt Institute.

I asked her not to do the drug. She said she'd already paid for it, that it would be a waste. I said I'd give her the money she'd spent, which was, I think, twenty dollars.

I left having failed to convince her to throw out the dope. She texted later, having shot up, to say she was sorry about what had happened, that she'd thought we could have had a nice night, her high on dope and me drunk on wine. Now, I think we might have actually had a nice night, but only if it was today's me, or I should perhaps say an idealized me, drunk on wine, who wouldn't be scared, or judging of her drug use. But then, what "her" would she be, that year's version that – I started to write "that I got along with so well then but probably wouldn't now," but I think that's wrong. The girl

I knew those first months in New York was one of endless generosity and wonder.

I recall an unaffiliated minor league baseball game in Camden, New Jersey, where I alienated Katherine by asking her if there was anything the matter. She'd taken Xanax, which at that point I was saying I didn't mind. We left the game early.

Another game we left early was a first round playoff game between the Philadelphia 76ers and Chicago Bulls – the win that sent Philadelphia to the Eastern Conference semifinals. We were still figuring out how the abortion would occur, and Katherine left at halftime, telling me to stay. I didn't, and rode my bike to Bonnie's Capistrano bar in a light rain to watch the second half. The rest of the bar watched *The 40 Year Old Virgin* on cable, with the sound on.

I paid fifteen dollars for a ticket to see Martin Amis read and answer questions at the Free Library of Philadelphia. At Barnes & Noble before the reading I struggled to maintain focus on Amis's most recent book – it was a novel about, I think, sexual relationships in a Nazi concentration camp.

A few months earlier, when Brandon went to stay with his grandparents, I lent him “Yellow Dog” to read on the plane. I learned about it in Bookforum: the reviewer said something about how Amis wasn't taken seriously in England in the same way that Pynchon wasn't taken seriously in America, and that someone I hadn't heard of wasn't taken seriously in Russia, or France.

The night Brandon got back he met Tiffany, who was then renting the third floor of our house. They did cocaine, which had been part of the reason he'd left town in the first place, and had sex. A year later, at Tiffany's new place in the Berks Warehouse, I didn't listen to Ted when he warned me about a certain Belgian-style beer's high alcohol content, and woke up on a bare mattress, having peed or vomited, I don't remember, on the mattress and myself.

Before I left that morning Tiffany gave me a LaCoste tennis shirt that didn't fit me at all well but that I hung on to for some time. I imagine I sold it at Beacon's Closet or tried to.

Rachel and I were to meet Umberto, who was born in Italy in the nineteen sixties, at a garish, expensive steak restaurant in Mexico City. We arrived first and, not speaking Spanish, failed to properly explain that we were waiting for a friend, and wanted to eat in the garden. We stood in the entranceway until Umberto arrived, at which point we were seated inside.

During dinner we drank heavily. I went out several times to smoke cigarettes, including once, teary-eyed, after Umberto told a story about his former gallerist, and Rachel's former employer, a once powerful woman now confined to a nursing home. Umberto had spoken to her recently, and before she got off the phone she offered that there were some wonderful spaces in the place she was staying – had he been drawing? Perhaps she might organize a show.

Umberto paid the bill and Rachel promised we'd have him over for dinner when he came to New York. We walked to a nearby music hall, where Umberto had a ticket to see Devandra Banhart perform. He quickly sold it and we had a drink at the bar next door, then took a very long taxi ride to a friend of Stefan's apartment, in the north of the city, where there was said to be a party. Only a few people were there. We smoked cigarettes in the courtyard. Someone told us they were receiving financing to make an English-language horror film. Rachel and Stefan's friend disliked one another, immediately and not quietly. Umberto wanted to go clubbing, and I walked with him to where cabs might be. A young woman on

the street also wanted to go clubbing. Umberto and the woman split a cab as I walked back to the party alone.

In a cab back to Rachel's sublet, late, the driver seemed to intentionally be going in circles. We got out without paying, amidst threats of policía. We walked for a few minutes, unsure of our next move, and were met by the driver and a police officer. We paid the fare, and went into a 7-11. While Rachel bought cigarettes I saw that the restroom was ocupado, and peed on the parking lot, in plain view of another police officer, who put me in a squad car as I pleaded my innocence. Rachel, wailing, successfully begged the officers to accept something like two thousand pesos in exchange for my freedom.

Outside the squad car I told an officer that I would kill him, and spent the rest of the night berating Rachel for bribing them, arguing that she should have left me there, such that I might have killed my oppressors and escaped.

In the morning I bought us glass bottles of Coca Cola. I gave the counter woman a ten-euro note instead of a hundred-peso note, accidentally, and I left my bill-fold on the counter when I went back to the cooler for some sparkling water. The woman scolded me to be more careful with my money while in Mexico. At the apartment we found a glass figurine of a dog, that I faintly remembered picking up on the street sometime between our two police interactions, and I realized I was without the ill-fitting cardigan I'd worn the previous night, which Rachel bought me for Christmas five years earlier.

The following month we were relieved when, back in New York, Umberto canceled our dinner plans for the night after his opening. It would have been an interesting evening and Umberto is a good person, but we were both very tired.

The sweater made its way, through someone in town for the NADA art fair, to one of the owners of Beverly's, a bar on Essex Street, where I picked it up. I have not found occasion to wear it since.

My mother bought me a sports coat at the Salvation Army, to wear to my cousin's wedding the summer after I finished fifth grade. Or second cousin – I believe her to have been the granddaughter of my great aunt. I don't remember her name and do not believe I've seen her since the wedding. She has since bore children, and, I think, suffered with her health. Bone marrow transplants, there may have been a bone marrow transplant. At her wedding reception she played an instrument. Violin, harp.

My father and I were nearly late for the service; we'd gone to do some water activity. The wedding was in North Carolina, somewhere like that. We'd gone to do some water activity, some river activity. Canoeing, white water rafting. Something we'd seen advertised. We got soda from Bojangles', a regional fast food chain. We may have gotten food as well but I remember the soda because it came in a large plastic cup that we kept for years. We would use it to pee in, on the houseboat, dumping it off the side when there were too many boats around to openly pee into the river. And then back at the hotel we quickly showered and got dressed, and watched my cousin get married. I remember the sports coat was from Bill Blass, a label that inspired a level of respect in my mother but meant nothing to me. I thought her stupid for thinking that something that I didn't know about could mean anything.

Although the bus company's website claimed it was an option, I was very nervous about putting my bike in the luggage hold. I imagined it being full, and my having to go lock my bike up while everyone on the bus waited. The pickup was in a weird location. There might not be anything to lock it up to. I decided I'd tell the driver to leave without me, rather than feel the shame of causing a delay.

But it was actually quite easy. In New York I rode to the central branch of Brooklyn Public Library, where Anthony was finalizing PowerPoint slides for an upcoming bar night of Brooklyn trivia. When he got off work he took the train to his and his wife's apartment in Ridgewood, Queens. I got there twenty minutes before him, and reread an Ann Beattie story on his stoop.

When he got home I tried to fix his bike's flat tire, but didn't know what I was doing. Hannah came home – maybe we ate a salad together? Then we went to a bar, and back at the apartment Anthony and I played chess in his studio. I remember eating from a hunk of blue cheese I found in their refrigerator.

I rode to Nicholas's, on Palmetto Street, where I had a significantly longer wait. I brought back a six pack of Budweiser cans from a bodega and drank them on his stoop. One of the men loitering across the street came to ask if I was good. When I said I was waiting for a friend he knew I meant Nicholas.

Locking up his bike, Nicholas criticized American beer, and we walked back to the bodega, where I bought us Modelo. We crossed the street several times to buy

dope from the men. Hot 97 was playing from one of their car's speakers. "Stay Schemin" was a big hit that summer, and I remember singing along to the chorus, including the words "Niggas tryina get at me." Nicholas looked at me as if to say I'd made a serious error in judgement, but the men laughed, and, over a year later, when I referred to them to Nicholas as "Those black dudes in Bushwick," he at first seemed to not make the connection, and only after a moment affirmed that they were Puerto Rican.

I got phở with Eric after work, and on my way home I stopped at the gallery to use the bathroom. Maryam, an art book publisher and friend of Max's he'd had flown in from London to take over as director despite her having no sales experience, was in the main viewing room. She apologized for having made a mess. She said she had gone out to dinner but had had her period so came back to the gallery. She worried that she had bled on the floor. I told her that I hadn't noticed anything. I had placed Maryam in her mid-fifties, and found it surprising that she should still be menstruating.

I told Keith that Katherine's father would make a pot of coffee and then pour it into a mug and microwave the mug, and he said that his own father did the same thing. Or the other way around, or neither way. Katherine's father requested "a lot of cream" for his coffee at a diner once, and Katherine and I laughed about it for the rest of our time together. The diner was in the back of a drugstore. I was quite taken by it. It has since closed.

I bought a woman's watch at the U-Sell Flea Market in Vineland, New Jersey and took it to another booth in the market where an elderly couple sold replacement watchbands and batteries. They opened the watch, and told me that I would have to wind it every day. I considered buying a larger band, but decided no. I wore it on occasion, awkwardly.

Months later I set the watch six hours ahead and after dinner at a Thai restaurant on Elizabeth Street where I mispronounced the word Pernod, I gave it to Melissa, not gift-wrapped. We kissed in her bed and she whispered that she didn't have a contraceptive. I told her I wanted to start a family anyway – if she was amused she hid it well – and we went to sleep. Our courtship did not continue upon her return from Rome, where she was quite moved by the art.

I recall, as a small child, being informed that it was etc, not ect – as the word it was short for was *etcetera*, not *ectecera* – and making sure to take note of this new information.

My mother retired a few years ago from working in a hospital which was affiliated with a charity thrift shop called The Etcetera Shop, where my aunt – my father's brother's wife – volunteered for many years, and likely still does. My parents are estranged from my aunt and uncle.

Once, when I was shorter than usual with my parents during a visit, my father said that talking to me was like talking to my uncle. I told him that wasn't my intention, and we hugged and both, I think, cried. I told him that the young woman I'd been seeing and had uncharacteristically strong and unreturned feelings for had moved to Portland, Oregon, abruptly. This was in my father's woodshop. I was standing at the chop saw working on a desk I would never use.

Outside his parents' cabin Anthony told a long joke about Ghandi that ended with a series of puns, four or five or six of them, one right after another. We were sitting outside – it would have been pretty pleasant out, late summer. Quite late at night. We'd been driving for hours. And Anthony told us this long ridiculous joke. It was cold out, it felt good. And this corny joke, wearing a sweater in late summer. After Anthony told his joke, Steve told a story, a similarly long story that I held out hope would end, too, with a series of puns. Instead, the story ended with someone he went to college with – a pleasant enough young man I'd met and had had as a guest in my home several times – forcing, to some degree, a young woman to perform oral sex on him, in Europe.

At her house in Avalon, New Jersey, which my family sold months after her death, and years before that town's dramatic spike in real estate prices, I told my grandmother that the ambulance siren was my favorite sound. She said it was a horrible sound because it meant people were hurt. I had never put the two ideas together.

I thought later that I might have told her I liked the sound because it meant people were getting help, but it wouldn't have meant anything, really, and was assuredly not accurate.

In line for the elevator to the top of the St. Louis arch, Bill told me that the only thing in that city that had any ass was the hip-hop. He said that the last thing the local government would ever do was commemorate someone like Nelly, while they'd name a stretch of highway after Mark McGuire.

I might mention that by the time we spoke, the road had been renamed to honor Mark Twain. Not knowing that, then, I could only shake my head.

We drove separately from St. Louis to rural Illinois, where his family had a hunting cabin. He complained about certain technology hunters had adopted, wherein any degree of difficulty was removed from the sport. We ate a salad he'd made, with three different kinds of beans on it, then drove dirt roads in his Subaru, drinking beer. In a barn he showed me an antique pickup truck. It was beautiful, and in great shape. Back in the car Bill said he wished the beer was colder.

He left in the morning, with the understanding that I would lock up and slide the key under the door when I took off in a day or two. I drove into town, looked at arrowheads in a small museum, ate a roast beef sandwich at a lunch counter. From the cabin I swam across the Missouri River and back, felt how alone I was, took a shower and drove to Ohio to see Michelle, a girl who had graduated from high school in the month or so since I'd met her.

In her friend Bethany's Toyota Matrix, Michelle played the song "Ride Wit Me" by Nelly, on her silver Macbook Pro.

A mechanic pointed out the bubble coming from one of Katherine's Volvo 240's tires, and told us it would need to be replaced. We left the car and walked to the mall. Having perused the food options at length we decided to wait for the all-you-can-eat Mexican restaurant to open. We walked around Belk, a midrange department store I'd not noticed before. Katherine bought an imitation angora sweater I would never see her wear.

At the Mexican restaurant I wasn't surprised that all we could eat wasn't all that much. The other patrons seemed on their lunch breaks, and were generally obese, though happy seeming, with clean clothes and hair.

A few months later, at a bar in the Kensington section of north Philadelphia, Ted and I witnessed a man getting tased by a female bartender in exchange for a free drink, during the 2013 Belk Bowl, in which the North Carolina Tar Heels beat the Cincinnati Bearcats 39-17. I recall pulling, feebly, for Cinci.

There was a holiday party at my publisher's office the night of my twentieth birthday. I'd recently signed a contract for my first novel, which was to be released in a little over a year. Following the party I went to Chinatown with Joseph, then publishing with the same small press, and Matt, an intern with the New Yorker I'd only met that night. Heading to a noodle restaurant, I watched a cat get run over by a box truck. I walked to where it was struggling to breathe, and, pushing down on its neck, blamed my shoe's leather soles for my apparent inability to relieve the cat's suffering. Walking away I knew I had been intentionally too gentle, and I took the subway alone to Williamsburg thinking thoughts that I hated and would forever ruin my life.

At Harefield Road Rachel gave me a pair of Ray-Ban Wayfarers, which would outlast our relationship but eventually be chewed up by my parents' dog, the same one who would send Katherine to the hospital with stitches during game seven of the 2012 NBA Eastern Conference Finals between the Miami Heat and Boston Celtics. When my father buried the dog he had me shovel dirt to fill in the grave, as he had to go talk to a customer.

Thank you
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