



'You remember when we wanted to get some weed, so we went and found those little Mexican kids outside our house who somehow had some and then brought some over, and we smoked with them?'

Aaron's eyes wide, his black-hole pupils the size of saucers. Sweat glistens slick and unnatural off his flushed face. His unruly hair a mess, oily. He's too excited, and can't stop fidgeting. Across from him, slurping down a tall plastic cup filled with French milk and ice, sits Richard. Richard's also buzzing, tripping and looking a bit like an inflated cartoon balloon. 'Oh yeah!' responds Richard. 'Those kids were *crazy!*' He can't help rubbing his chapped hands together, involuntarily entangling his fingers, prying them apart in an endless cycle of anxiety.

'They were like twelve,' Richard goes on to say. 'Remember how we asked them if they knew who Nirvana was and they didn't know who they were?'

'They were too young, dude. We're old.'

'Yeah, and then they...then they rolled those blunts that were so perfect and they were these *little kids* with backwards hats and those big, puffy jackets, remember? They were like *twelve* and they were selling us weed and rolling blunts that were so fucking tightly rolled and they were chilling with us in the living room when we were watching TV!'

'I know. It was such nonsense. Too much, too much.' Aaron can't stop bopping his head to the sound of the whispered music playing softly off the speakers nested in the ceiling corners. He's in a few places at once, but bursts out with 'How did we even find those kids? Do you even remember?'

'No! I don't even remember how we found those little bastards. I remember we just really, really wanted some weed and then we didn't have any, so somehow we ended up outside our house and we were like wandering around for a minute or something and I think those kids came over to us and asked us if we wanted any...' He sucks on his straw, the level of creamy whiteness in his clear plastic cup lowering. He pops back up 'Oh, wait! No. I think it was that Ty knew the kids somehow. I think one of us called Ty when we were looking for weed and he said that he didn't know anybody who had any on them right then, but that he knew some kids down the street who always sold some.'

'Or, was it that drug house down on the other corner where all those guys were always selling acid and everything and we would go there sometimes with Raver Becky and she would chill with their little kids running around?'

Richard busts out with a blast of laughter, loud but quick. 'Oh, shit! I forgot about that place!'

Orgiastic, Aaron reminds his old friend 'Yeah! Remember? They were over down by the other corner on the way to school and they would always be outside? There was that one guy who was real short, with a completely shaved head, and he always wore glasses and those baggy jeans? They were totally nice.'

'Yeah, they were. Didn't they catch some guy who was mugging some student on his way home one night?'

'Oh yeah! That was so funny because the drug house guys who everyone liked anyway because they were so nice caught some guy who was mugging a student on his way home and then they got some kind of commendation or something from the neighborhood association or whatever.'

'We had a neighborhood association?'

'No. But, I think that crazy landlord guy, who kind of lorded over the whole area and made some of his younger chick tenants sleep with him when they couldn't pay rent and who everyone seemed to hate, went over there and told them they were good for the neighborhood. Or something like that.'

Then silence.

Just like that, neither says a word.

The energy cut, both pouring sweat, flushed, eyes wider and wider. Their onyx pupils as though in some kind of old-time comic strip.

They can't stop moving, Richard bopping uncontrollably, rocking back and forth in his seat, faster and faster; Aaron rubbing his hands together, not thinking about anything in particular and everything at the same time. All sorts of realities and lifetimes coming and going, flashing before his eyes and parboiled mind.

'What's Ben been up to?'

'*Ben!* Aaron smiles bright. 'Holy shit. I heard that Joel saw him in *England* with some big mountain-man beard. I think Alan's over in England now, too. Working at a bed-and-breakfast or something like that. He still talks to Charles' parents for some reason.'

'You remember when we were at my aunt's house up by Mendocino with Ben and he kept freaking out?'

'Oh, that place was *awesome!* With the go-carts and everything? We'd get all stoned and then go riding around in those awesome go-carts that were pretty fast and it was all in the forest and everything. That was *amazing*. I loved it up there. And those crazy old friends of your aunt and uncle who kept telling us to steal cars! They were *crazy!*'

'And Ben kept spasming whenever we'd smoke. Remember when we were down by the lake one night at the bottom of my aunt's house and across the lake there was that gay retreat place and it was all dark—'

'Oh yeah!' Aaron stops the rocking instantly, tightly grabs the both sides of his chair, strains, his muscles flexing. He holds himself there, electrified and paralyzed. 'And Ben wouldn't stop talking about it and talking about the gay camp across the lake and how that guy we thought was in the water from over there kept getting closer and closer to us and Ben wouldn't shut up about it and we kept going 'Shut up, Ben!' but he wouldn't!'

'And then he would just start spouting out gibberish and have his little seizures there in his chair.'

'For like *an hour!* Remember that? He'd just be shaking and saying crazy shit and we'd just sit there and not know what to do.'

'He had a lot of problems. I never really liked that guy.' Richard cringes a bit at this, stops rubbing his hands for a moment. The right side of his upper lip curls at the faded memory of Ben. 'And then at that Peach Restaurant, I think it was called, over by—'

'Well, obviously; of course we can't talk about Ben without bringing up that place—'

'And we kept fucking with him with the menu and kept changing our orders so that he would change his orders and we did it without even talking to each other or planning it or anything.'

'Yeah,' recalls Aaron. 'We just did it without even talking about it. Suddenly you and I had Ben in this broken malfunction place where he couldn't order anything except what we were ordering, but we kept purposely changing our orders just to fuck with him.'

'Oh man,' Richard leans back in his chair. 'Those were some fun times.'

'I wonder how much some of the stuff we did to Ben made him that way.'

'Nah. I mean, it probably didn't *help* him, but he was already fucked-up anyway. Besides, he was a jerk.'

'Yeah, remember how we had to *physically* kick him out?'

'After you cut his alarm clock wire with those huge orange scissors.'

'It kept waking me up,' Aaron submits as though in court. 'I told him not to do that anymore, especially because he was always gone in the morning anyway when he'd be out with his clique of disgusting girls all night all the time. The fucking alarm clock would go off at like six in the morning every morning and he was never even there. It got to be too much.'

'Too much, too much.'

'And now we'll probably never see him again.'

'It's funny how it seems like just any other memory. Like a movie. All that craziness and weird stuff and yelling and fighting and we probably completely fucked him up for life and it's like it never even happened.'

Nothing, no talking.

Richard rocks back and forth to the music in his chair, faster and more intense, looks around the coffee shop. Aaron stares at the table, off into blank space. He does not blink.

'Isn't it a shame how the only conversations we can have is about movies or recollections of shared memories from the past?' Aaron asks.

Richard lowers his head in inglorious acquiescence to the fact. 'I feel bad about it, yeah.'

'Sorry for bringing it up.'

'Eh, it's what you do. Really good at making sure we both remember stuff like that, even if it's unsaid. 'Cause you're Jewish.'

'I was thinking about how Jews are like boy scouts: we're always prepared. Everything in its place, where it belongs. There's always enough of everything, or we make sure that there's *more than enough*—just in case. America.'

Richard—his fingers twiddling on both hands that levitate over the table—leans down over his cup, as though bobbing for apples, and sucks on his straw. ‘How long are you going to stay on this ‘America’ thing?’

‘I know. Aren’t you proud of me? I’ve been doing it for like over a year now. Everyone’s finally noticing. Normally, I give up on my little epigrams or phrases after like three months. Remember ‘The Real Stuff From Back In The Day?’

‘No.’

‘Maybe you weren’t around for that. That might have been after we graduated.’

‘So, now everything is ‘America’ or ‘American?’

‘Yeah, pretty much. I even got an American flag for a curtain over my window in the new place.’

‘Why?’

‘Cause it’s so *American!*

Richard shakes his head, turns away for a moment, stares off into space, turns back to Aaron, who looks down at the table, completely immersed in his own head.

‘*The* merica?’ Aaron asks himself. ‘*This* merica.’ He continues the little one-man show, ‘*That* merica.’

‘What?’

‘*A* merica,’ Aaron finishes.

‘What are you saying?’

‘*The* merica? *This* merica. *That* merica. *A* merica.’

‘Is that what you do now in your spare time?’

Aaron looks up to Richard. ‘Look up to the ceiling.’

Richard raises his head to look to the ceiling above them. ‘Why?’

‘What does it look like?’

‘A ceiling.’

‘Does it look like it’s moving or anything?’

‘Not really.’

‘To me, it looks as though we’re under some kind of canvas tent, with the ceiling undulating and flapping in the wind.’

‘I don’t really see anything like that. It just looks like fake bricks.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah.’