

VARIABLE

DEVIN

ROGAN

1.

Gideon was set to return home to North Carolina the next day. His friend from college had died suddenly. This was the type of thing that Gideon could not understand and so did not try to parse through what, if anything, it might “mean” - if such a word would be appropriate. He lacked the relevant context for, in short, “the world.”

That evening prior to his departure he got his bags packed and went out alone to dinner as he had taken to doing in the last few months when he could not be bothered to cook or text anyone to make plans.

His impression was the staff enjoyed him coming in alone- though he could not determine any rationale for that. After ordering salmon- which he did about 40% of the time he came to this place- he opened his phone to continue reading a book he started that was highly recommended and a best seller and was being adapted into a movie. His impression of it was that it was mildly pleasurable to read and that’s about it.

Scrolling past a few pages in which the main character connected an event that took place 154 pages prior with one that took place 20 pages prior he saw a text from his sister, Elizabeth, that she heard his friend had died and that he would be back in North Carolina for a week and that she also would be taking some days off of work to go to the funeral and visit the family.

Gideon responded that that sounded good and he would see her then. He did not enjoy texting with his sister as her texting style never seemed correlated with her speaking style. He could not pinpoint why this was true. Something about her directness not translating, he thought.

She followed up by asking if he had any news about their brother, Reid, who had been alternating between sobriety and alcoholism and Gideon said he had not. Gideon had ceased for a few years to keep close track of that- drinking or not drinking. There appeared to be no formally accepted method for their family contending with this and they seemed to prefer to just allow him to do as he pleased. Despite the horrible wreckage addiction could have on individuals and a family- his brother’s alcoholism was pretty mild and contained to a few problems that mostly impacted his brother, including impoverished romantic prospects and difficulties with job retention. To the family it mostly meant witnessing idiosyncratic behavior but never violence, theft, or anything that would ordinarily cause something dramatic like an intervention.

His behavior was mostly tolerated as one variation of their family’s genetic and sociological pattern. Gideon thought there was something reasonable with this response- since all sorts of people arrive and are molded by experiences. In contrast, his sister was an

exacting person with high self-efficacy to the point it warped back into neuroticism. Gideon split the difference between them- having (to his mind) a measured and/or oscillating relationship to his own life that was neither reactive nor excessively controlling.

As he ate his salmon he thought about his job- which involved fish as well. As a researcher his main subject was isolating aspects of the natural world via fish behavior. In this case, as he had been doing for several years now, he was working on a project he labeled to himself and others as “the fish project.” What this entailed, essentially, was that he recorded, analyzed, and extrapolated from a massive set of data points around the behavior of fish in tanks. The project had isolated a few main variables relevant to concepts like ‘hierarchy’, ‘power’, ‘collaboration’, and ‘survival’. Studying variations in fish behavior entailed they set up various situations (ie three fish in a tank, limited food, or, two fish in a tank, food excess, or eleven fish in a tank with an expanding environment). The project was excessively well funded by an eccentric millionaire who was keen on understanding basic principles related to life. Gideon had gotten into this field - limited though it was- through both his expertise in data science, which he studied in college, and also a strong ability to interpret meaning and conclusions from patterns. Some of his close friends, although it has been a while since they had done this, would call him “Fish.”

He finished his meal and paid and went back to his apartment where he noted the woman on the first floor who perhaps had agoraphobia or did not speak English stared at him with fear, again, which happened fairly regularly for the past one and a half years since he moved to this building- the second of two New York City apartments he lived in since he moved to continue his career as it became further specified in this strange direction. He had followed his former primary investigator from college. The PI, his former professor, had basically enlisted him to participate along with several undergraduates for course credit. Mostly the students would watch videos of fish behavior and tally them and record what category of activity they fell into- and the one thing Gideon had done that was- if not revolutionary to the project- then at least massively influential to his life direction- was to import the tallies into a spreadsheet and then import it into his data program and run some correlations on them and come up with an explanation for what he witnessed. The data science component was being done by his PI, but the results were not shared yet, and so despite the lack of complete data he had been able to demonstrate he could analyze and interpret and show initiative. He had hypothesized and demonstrated that a ‘random’ shift in the fish’s hierarchy was not an aberration, but rather an epiphenomenon of the alpha fish decreasing in aggression as it maintained its power position for several weeks. This greatly impressed his PI, and so he had remained part of the project as it grew.

His first apartment was nasty and paid for through a combination of this role and some odd jobs he took- which required a level of energy that had leveled off since turning 30 - and so he was lucky that The Funder increased his funding after two publications had been produced in a philosophy and zoological journal respectively.

In his one-bedroom he took the three pills he took to go to sleep and put on a TV show he had started due to a recommendation from his sister a few months ago. He never got fully into the show- yet watching it gave them one topic to discuss and so became, in a sense, something of a pro-social activity for the two of them.

The pills began to take effect and he found himself double checking everything he had packed in a kind of bizarre sleep-stupor that was sometimes the effect of not sleeping within 90 minutes of taking the pills. On a delay, he was able to articulate to himself, or at least register, that nervous energy had kept him awake.

When he did fall asleep he had several dreams of varied intensity, tone, and reality- approximation, about his friend. They had not kept in touch too much of the last few years- but his friend had been nice, had had friendly demeanor, and had checked in at semi-regular intervals. His friend had taken up travel and hiking as hobbies in the last few years in some kind of unclear new persona that averaged all dating-profile hobbies. They were friends from college that both started in data science although his friend made way more money working in tech- or fintech- or whatever field his job would fall under. Gideon was never that sure about what he did, as many were not sure about what Gideon did.

He awoke in a gradual fade that dissolved in slowly from a dream of just a hiking trail- the sun from the blinds bridging to the sun from the trees. He took his shower, changed into sweatpants and took caffeine pills to shake off the effects of the sleeping pills and put both into his luggage bag.

His uber neared and he went downstairs. He took one nicotine pouch and placed it into his mouth and felt a sick wakefulness return to him that jogged his dopamine for just long enough to envision a feeling of human connection at the funeral, and then to think about the book he was reading and feel an atypical generosity towards the plot-twist and the human responsiveness to novelty, and then thought back to his favorite book he read which was years ago, and then thought about the TV show his sister recommended and some observations he had around a character- and then his uber showed up just as this brief spell was winding down.

On the way there his uber driver asked what he was going to the airport for, and where he was going, and the reason Gideon gave did not actually make the small-talk cease but

rather ramp up. His driver launched into a tragic story about his nephew and a car accident- and Gideon felt unclear how to respond to a sad story recalled so easily to a stranger in a way that suggested both sadness, but also matter-of-fact-ness that were hard to square away and he modulated his emotions as much as possible to meet the proper tone for the situation that remained ambiguous.

He then arrived at the airport and thanked the driver and rolled his baggage to the check-in spot. The security line moved quickly and TSA only had difficulty with one person who neither had nor seemed to understand new ID requirements. He moved through to the gate where his flight was scheduled to take off. He sat in his seat - reading more of his book and having trouble concentrating- he went to the airport shop and looked at the magazines which reported on current events, current topics, current celebrities etc. From this sampling of current life he could make no reliable observation content wise- and just denoted the tone of the world which was sort of ineffable intellectually but clear stylistically.

His group was called and he boarded the plane. Sat next to him was a couple who discussed gossip they had around someone who had a secret family that he was maintaining in an apartment across town. Gideon had heard of such things before- apparently it was a trope- but it was unclear to him how people were affording such secrets- financially- and to what end they devoted their lives and energies to this. How many did this and why? The cost would involve devotion to the work to maintain the secrecy and the two living spaces. If pressed on this what would they say- what made it worth it? It sounded like a headache.

He got tired again and dozed on and off until the plane landed- having ignored questions about food or water from the flight attendants. The plane landed with a little jolt that made people laugh with relief.

At his destination- a small airport in North Carolina- he felt a series of neuron connections activate that he was unclear about- and the narrative of his life shifted to a different position in which him and his life were elsewhere and he was in a temporary zone that was also his origin zone. He got the next uber to his parents place and texted his parents to say he would be arriving soon. This uber driver was even more talkative- with a major focus on some piece of news that may or may not have been true- he was not sure- and he engaged with the man through disinterested affirmations that did nothing to deter the continued conversation- yet he was indifferent entirely to whether he was responding in a rude manner, polite manner, etc. Texts came through from friends that still lived here- a couple- asking if he wanted to go out that night and he said yes he was just going to stop by his parents and drop off his stuff and they said cool.

He arrived at the doorstep of his parents house- which seemed to him to be larger than he remembered it. Mentally he noted he would be here for about one week- having taken PTO for the trip- a longer trip than he “needed” to- and the motivation to do so was not articulated rationally to himself except that he felt he should do that. He thought about various explanations- but no singular one was forthcoming. As best he understood it if he let his unconscious speak first- it felt like he was both pausing his life and taking a detour that destabilized something that had calcified in his sensory experiences.

2.

His mom answered the door and asked how was the flight and Gideon said fine and she asked if he slept and he said no for some reason. She said his dad was in the kitchen and his sister's old room would be where he was staying since his childhood bedroom had been converted into a home office of sorts. It seemed unclear to Gideon why they needed a home office since both of them had retired from work a while ago. His mom and dad had run a video rental store in the area and sold off the property for a good price over a decade ago after which it became a health food store and then a vape store which his mom would refer to as a drug den dismissively. His sister always stayed in a hotel when she visited- something she had been doing since college for reasons unbeknownst to Gideon who preferred to save money on lodging. He walked into the kitchen and his dad was counting out pills for a medicine pill container and placing them in with intense concentration that he only broke after completing "Thursday" and then he shook Gideon's hand and said hello.

His mom asked if Gideon was hungry or tired and Gideon said tired and went up to "his" room with his luggage and said he would probably take a shower. Once he laid down he felt physically heavy and wished he had not made plans that evening to meet up with his friends Julie and Bill. He thought he would sleep but mentally he was not relaxed enough and instead looked around the room to see what remained from the past - and yet despite the room containing his sister's old furniture that includes a dresser, a desk, and a closet there was nothing in them except for the closet which contained two winter coats and a giant plastic container that held what appeared to be a combination of less important documentation of purchases like a new mattress, a printer, etc as well as two photo albums that Gideon recalled rediscovering with his siblings every 4-5 years and looking through and somehow seemed to contain a new photo or two that they could never recall from the previous review. For example, though they had gone through the albums at least three or four times as a sibling group - they had somehow found a picture of their childhood dog Chocolate that nobody could remember seeing before.

He thought about looking through the photos but thought maybe they would do that as a group at some point and he just thought about some memories growing up like being at the video store, walking through the woods behind their house, playing video games, and watching TV.

He thought about knocking on his brother's door even though he assumed he was not home- his brother's permanent "home" was never clear. He rented a room downtown, stayed at his parents, and would stay at whatever girl he was seeing's place. Gideon was pretty sure but not abundantly confident Kelly was the girl he was seeing, but it had been eight months and turnover for these girls was quick- often relationships would last 6

months, sometimes a year at most. His brother would have a series of odd jobs like uber or task rabbit, sometimes no job if he was “finishing school,” which was a permanently delayed process of making up about 12 missing classes for his college degree. Most of the time his brother worked at his friend’s sandwich shop except when they would have conflict or he would ‘go back to school’ or he would say uber was more profitable. The math and logistics of his life were ever changing and contradictory- but Gideon understood this volatility was not an incorrect- but just a more notable form of a deeper truth about life. It never quite made sense on the day to day, but Gideon could intuit in it a kind of charming chaos and novelty that he himself lacked.

He came back downstairs and asked if there were dinner plans and his parents said they didn’t know and asked what he wanted and he said he didn’t know. They suggested Chinese food and he said okay and his dad ordered- via phone- their food. They sat watching a home renovation show that his parents seemed to enjoy.

What are they doing here? he asked. His mom said the people on the show had houses with potential, and the people on the show actualized it and then sold the house and then found them a new house. He asked why the extra step instead of just living in the renovated home and his mom said that was a different show. His dad said this was a new show. His mom said the home renovations and aesthetics were not tailored to the participant but to market value and the house flipping then permitted the second part of the show. Gideon maintained- why didn’t they just make the original house more like what they want and she said she didn’t know and his dad said that show already existed. Then the food came and they ate. His sister texted saying she would be there at 9:30-10:00, and he said he was going out and she said fuck whatever. He said bye to his parents and that he was meeting Julie and Bill.

He took an uber to the barcade where he was supposed to meet them and looked around at the clientele and sensed the chances he would know someone were non-zero. He did not however- from a survey- and read some more on his phone while he ordered a beer. The barcade was “new” to him- the downtown area had undergone several renovations since he left, ostensibly to try and retain some of the younger population of the area. Having been to a few of these new locations he noted the pricing was outrageous for the area and they created simulacrum of some other place- he didn’t think New York but maybe Austin? Maybe Portland?

Somehow since he left the town it also now contained gay people, etc. It must have before of course, but not visibly. To his knowledge only him, his ex, and then 4 people from high

school were gay here etc but in his life time things had shifted to an incredible degree on this topic.

Julie and Bill arrived and greeted him.

It's horrible this is why we get to see each other, Julie said.

Yeah, Gideon said. Did you keep in touch she asked. Here and there Gideon said. His friend George was a close friend for several years- mostly high school through college because they both attended the same university. They maintained friendship for a few years after- but drifted apart. George had found new community by reconnecting with the Catholic Church and Gideon found less community via being increasingly insular. They maintained a friendly relationship via social media and occasional texts with some meetups here and there over the prior ten years. Julie and Bill knew him from high school and saw him occasionally around town.

What are you drinking? Bill asked him. IPA Gideon said. Oh gross Julie said. IPAs aren't too bad Bill said. I guess Julie said. They ordered two other drinks that were not IPAs.

First they went to the claw machine game and Bill said he was going to win Julie a prize. The trick is, he said, you have to think of it as scooping not grabbing. Julie said that didn't work last time and he said it does work just not always. The prizes were various stuffed emojis. He played ten times and won on the third and eighth attempt and gave her an emoji of a smiling face and an emoji that was laughing.

How is work going Bill asked him. Gideon said it was going. Bill asked him to explain again what he did- and this was a conversation many people would have with him even though he sensed they mostly wanted to perform confusion around it and not try and understand. Or perhaps they wanted to understand but sensing they would not actually understand were performatively self-effacing to save face. Gideon asked Bill how his job was going- Bill sold cars- and Bill said things were going good after a sector wide supply chain issue for a few years. Then Gideon asked Julie and she said her job- she was a teacher of social studies for eighth grade- was going well and then launched into complaints about her students.

After the claw machine they ordered a second beer and Julie asked to try his IPA and said it was not bad actually and Bill asked to try it and said it was good actually. They asked about his family and Gideon said they were doing okay- his sister was coming home later that evening and his brother he said he didn't know and Julie said his brother had a wild streak and Bill said he did see him out at the bars about a month ago but he seemed fine although he heard he had broken up with an ex and that it was apparently messy and included making a scene at a chain restaurant when he would not show her his phone.

They went over to a racing game and Gideon laughed saying it was like drunk driving and Bill chuckled politely and Julie seemed quiet- perhaps offended- and Gideon felt he may have said the wrong thing while trying to think about if she had some reason to be hurt by the comment which would be understandable if he could remember if she had any experience with a loved one being hurt by a drunk driving accident.

The racing game involved a series of terrains that combined to create some kind of dystopian city. Oh no why am I going so slowly Julie asked and Bill pointed out she was stuck in a lower gear that she did not realize was a control option and when that failed to materialize in a quicker pace Gideon mentioned she did not press the boost button which meant she would only go at the regular speed.

Bill won all three rounds they played and Gideon felt grateful to have the small respite from thinking in the form of simply controlling a vehicle in which the goal was clear but the stakes were non-existent. When they finished playing they went over to the basketball hoops and Bill asked him if he thought he would move back here and Gideon said he didn't know. Julie asked if he was seeing anyone and he said no. Julie then asked Bill if his friend's brother was still single and he said he didn't know which friend she meant and she said who she meant and he said he didn't remember and Gideon restated he didn't live here anyway.

They got one more beer and Julie said it was so sad George died and that it made her feel awful for his family because he was so young. Gideon felt that was already fairly clear so wasn't sure why she stated it. Bill looked uncomfortable and then they switched topics and discussed a movie that they had all seen recently about a space expedition and the two of them mentioned plot points and visual scenes that looked cool and Gideon thought about if he could remember any themes from the movie and the only ones he could readily identify were general Joseph Campbell style hero's journey themes and then wondered why he was doing this and he realized he had a tendency to justify enjoyment of movies through intellectualizing them- in this case it didn't particularly need it and so he just agreed and then got a little quiet. His sister texted him she would be at her hotel in 5 minutes and asked if he was still out and he said yes he was still out.

The final game they played was small-scale bowling. Bill and Julie were pretty good and Gideon was bad and got better and he reasoned they probably had practice with this and not only that but he probably had more trouble concentrating as he could feel the night was going to be over soon-ish and that gave him anxiety for some reason.

Bill said it had been unusually warm and Julie told a story about their dog flopping on his back and panting because it was very hot and they didn't yet have an AC installed in their place.

They gave him a ride back to his parents' place and he thanked them and they said they would be there tomorrow and to text if anything- if he was bored or sad etc during his stay here and they should hang out at least once more before he left.

At home his mom was asleep upstairs and his dad was in and out of sleep watching a black and white movie that was about some sort of pilot. Gideon remembered growing up around all sorts of movies playing on the TVs in his parents video store. His parents were not film people per se- but were open minded to any movie in so far as the whole notion of having put together a product that was individual and singular and would end up in their store was a fascinating idea for them. The people who made these seemed so impossibly far away- the sheer amount of creativity but also money and coordination belonging to a different type of experience- and at the end of the chain they stood as providers of this to the masses. His dad asked if he had fun- Gideon was momentarily shocked by his father being awake enough to talk and he said yes.

He went to his room and he scrolled on social media instead of reading as he felt too tired to digest anything more complex than brief stupid triviality. He went through the profiles of many of his acquaintances from North Carolina and it seemed to congeal in his mind that the type of life they lived involved less superficial complexity- nobody could really account via numerous details for the depth of life as a whole- but in the aggregate these details made up more than one life and in fact made up a whole typology that he extended beyond even his hometown to all humans. But he could only do this intuitively- he couldn't refine it down to any insights- it just felt like a bunch of details, personal 'news' and shared content that seemed to aggregate into the fact that people's lives were loosely narrativized series of events and visuals and feelings and received sensibilities.

The next morning he awoke to the sound of his sister's voice and he checked his phone and she had said she was coming by and would take him to the funeral. He could hear she was speaking in a critical tone about something related to logistics- one thing he noted about her was she was constantly scanning for inefficiencies to the point that sometimes it seemed that was its own exercise and not always productive to outcomes.

Hey Gideon said he was coming downstairs. Hi she said back and gave him a non committal hug- I was just telling mom and dad that Mikes Cabs are almost twice as much as uber. You don't use that when you visit right. No, Gideon said, I haven't used that in a long time. But we know Mike, their mom interjected. But it's not a charity situation his sister

said, technology moves on. We don't even- how often do we take it- his mom asked his dad and his dad shrugged and she said not often. His sister said okay and gave up.

The funeral was in four hours so they all sat down to eat a meal of indeterminate categorization and content- in which his mom opened the fridge and offered a combination of leftovers and quick supplemental foods to them.

His mom asked his sister how work was going and she said it was going horribly and she was stressed and looking for a new agency but the job market was horrible and so she would probably stick around and then cited some recent reorganizing that changed up departments such that she was unable to even identify the proper stakeholders for projects. His mom said well that sounds stressful and his sister said it was. Their dad asked if she was still seeing her boyfriend and she said no, and that she told him that before and he said okay. You're always pushing anyone, she said, so I can be married. I was just asking their dad said. Yes, she said, and I told you before. But you forgot subconsciously because it runs counter to me getting married. No, their dad said, I forgot. But that's your subconscious, she said, and their dad said he didn't know what she was talking about and she said do you even think you have a subconscious and he said he didn't know and she pressed the point a little further and their mom said oh stop and their dad said I guess I do but I forgot. Gideon said if it was subconscious they could drop it because it wasn't on purpose and their sister pressed the point that people are responsible for things they don't intend due to consequentialism and their mom started cleaning up plates. Then their dad shifted subject matter to asking Gideon how his night out was and succeeded in diverting the conversation although his sister gave him a look. He said it was good. His dad asked where they went and he told them the barcade and he said he didn't even know it existed and then talked about arcades growing up and started a story that was maybe two or three stories rolled into one about going to the arcade as a youth.

After eating his sister said they should go for a walk and so Gideon said okay. On the walk his sister asked if he knew where their brother was and he laughed. Jesus, she said, but he's okay I think because she said he responded to her before she arrived so he was at least charging his phone- something that sometimes he wouldn't for a day or two at a time. She asked him if their brother was going to the funeral and he said he had no idea and she said he really should but it wouldn't be too bad if he didn't she guessed. She knew his friend George more than their brother did because she had dated his friend in high school. She asked if he thought their dad was forgetting she broke up with her ex and Gideon said not on purpose and if it was subconscious their dad didn't really have the tools to interrogate that. His sister- Elizabeth- had taken psychology courses and though she went directly into advertising she said psychology was her main interest in life and advertising

just paid the bills and hobbies are not meant to be jobs and there are barely jobs anyway. Sometimes when asked if she felt guilty about advertising, like if it manipulated people, she would say everything is fucked anyway and she viewed the world as a competition not for egoic reasons but just as a fact even if she lamented it though Gideon was not sure that she did.

She asked if he was dating and he said no and she laughed and said yeah don't do it. She asked if his parents asked if he was dating ever and he said they didn't. Then she suggested a new dating app and he said she said he shouldn't date a second ago and she said but if you wanted to that is what I would suggest I'm putting options out there. Then he asked if that was her subconscious and she said no- she was just testing how he would react to the suggestion to see how *he* subconsciously felt,

After a bit they went back to the house so they could change and get ready to drive over there and she said she wanted to stop for coffee too and she hated their parent's coffee machine.

Gideon changed while she walked their parents through a few options she had read about for people who retired early. They got into the car and she plugged in her phone the address of the church and added a coffee stop on the way.

On the way there they talked about the news and Gideon had trouble determining her take on it as she had a way of phrasing things that was ambiguous although he suspected only via the context of the type of stories she shared and what facts she presented where she probably stood in relation to these events. I don't know, Gideon said, I mean I know but I'm just burnt out on it I guess.

They arrived at the church 20 minutes early and Gideon felt his cortisol spike- somehow it had not occurred to him that he would potentially be running into people he had not spoken to in a while and that it would take the delicate balancing act of social etiquette and emotional sensitivity to navigate multiple competing impulses which were a mix of surprise at seeing someone from his past, either excitedness or anxiety over that meeting, and the sadness of the occasion which paradoxically was dwarfed in this exact moment through the ritual of grieving rather than grieving outright.

They walked up the steps and an old classmate nodded to him and he nodded back and his sister saw someone and said hey how are you holding up and she said okay in a way that sounded too frail and then Gideon saw another old classmate who came and shook his hand and said so sorry for your loss and Gideon said thanks even though Gideon himself felt his grief was almost vulgar and exaggerated compared to what George's family must be feeling.

The service was the usual Catholic service which Gideon recognized - except it had extra steps he had forgotten about such as incense which recalled nonspecific but semi strong scent-memories. The priest discussed George's life and said stuff about the mystery of life, living according to God, and God's insight into the depth of one's character and ultimate judgement. Gideon felt this part was a bit strange- the priest seemed to not weigh in on George's character and this felt almost insulting via omission or the deferment of responsibility to say something reassuring about George. But Gideon had learned there was a decoupling between cultural Catholicism and literal words- and people often just let technical rules and conceptualizations be suggestions or flavors rather than taking the word as - well- gospel. That was the dominant approach he noted at least for a large percentage today.

George's brother spoke and recalled memories and maintained a pretty solid composure during his speech. George's parents went up together and shared his college essay which included his hopes and this hit a strong emotional chord with everyone and people cried.

After that was over the service wrapped up. Gideon felt he should pray or at least think about George. His memories with George were often hanging out, laughing, riding around in car, getting food etc. He felt himself trying to come up with a clear metonym for their friendship but there was no immediate one which he could recall that would provide a strong archetypal example.

A reception was being held at George's parents place and they started to walk back to the car- but first approached George's parents and said they were sorry for their loss and George's mom said Gideon was always a wonderful friend to George and he felt guilty they had not kept in touch as much in the latter years of his life but said thank you- and she added you too speaking of his sister and she said of course- but it felt like an afterthought or some slippage in not knowing what to say as primarily she knew him via other people and they were not close on their own.

In the car his sister said that was tough to get through when his parent spoke and Gideon agreed and they drove in near silence between them, remarking only here and there on people they had seen there- except the noise from the radio which played songs that oscillated between feeling tonally incorrect and somewhat appropriate even if the lyrics of songs on the radio were predominately about romantic love and loss.

They got to George's parents' place and Gideon felt out of place again. Though he knew people from way back he was unsure how to approach people and so he let people come up to him and tried to gauge who should be more sad than whom in order to calibrate his

sympathy or grief. He felt like a sociopath but social anxiety had overtaken him. A few old acquaintances from high school came up and said they heard he was living in New York City and asked what that was like and Gideon said it was much different and they asked if he liked it and he said yeah and asked about his job which he tried to keep vague but upon being pressed for details told them about fish research and their responses were confused- perhaps even thinking he was joking- and implicitly their follow up questions about what he's observed about fish seemed incredulous to the fact that such jobs exist and that his life was some inflated salary ruse- and Gideon didn't necessarily agree or disagree but wanted to leave the conversation.

Julie and Bill arrived and greeted him and Julie said two things- his ex was going to arrive shortly and his sister was flirting with George's friend she used to date. Gideon felt that could not be true as his sister never indicated any lingering nostalgia for her exes. Looking over he noted her talking to him and though he was not certain, seemed to come to the conclusion she was- at most- measuring up where he was in life to imagine an alternative life for her in which she stayed with him, not flirting. He also felt flirtation would be a weird vibe at the moment- and his sister always had a strong sense of etiquette and was better at it than he was.

His ex Tom did arrive then. Tom looked good. They had broken up years ago and Tom- Julie informed him- worked as a handyman now.

He could see Tom having a few separate conversations and then glancing at him and almost waving but then returning to the conversation and they played this glance game for a bit while Julie and Bill said they would provide cover and mostly they just watched Tom and noted what was happening and then would start a sentence to look as though they were talking about something but then return to glancing at Tom. Gideon felt annoyed- the whole thing seemed unnecessarily gossipy and petty. He excused himself to go talk to Tom.

He stood next to Tom and Tom said hi and hugged him and said he was so sorry for his loss and the woman he was talking to said the same and excused herself.

How have you been Tom asked, all things considered. Gideon said he was fine and they both talked at the same time and Gideon said no go ahead and Tom said things were more or less the same- can't complain- and that he was living with two roommates close to the city center and Gideon mentioned the barcade and he said he loved the barcade and also loved another spot nearby.

Tom didn't ask about his job- he was thankful for this- although he suspected it was because Tom already knew and word got around pretty quickly - even if people moved away there seemed to be an endless accounting of what people were up to. This type of small

town gossip was something that always bewildered Gideon because rarely was there something that was actually interesting- and when things were interesting they were usually exaggerations via the rumor mill- and most accurate information would be for those close enough to already know- and so the details were not distant enough to appreciate as gossip proper.

Tom said, would it be crazy if tomorrow night they went out to the spot he liked. Gideon said no, and he felt it would not be. He did not have much dating life to speak of- and he had no ill will towards Tom and if anything it would add some novelty to see what chemistry existed still.

His sister came up to them and said hi and asked how Tom was doing and he said, again, can't complain. She mentioned she was probably going to head out and asked Gideon if he wanted to stay or take the ride. Gideon said he would stay and Tom said he would drive him back.

For the next hour Tom and him reminisced on certain things. Their relationship had been decent if uneventful - and since it was a first official relationship for both of them it held a kind of mysterious quality that first relationships do since they lack comparison and feel impossibly new.

They had gotten together in his freshman year and despite Tom not having any college he was able to experience some of the college life via Gideon through visiting him. After Tom and Gideon and it seemed several former classmates had 'come out' around the age of 18 a new world had opened up that seemed impossible before in which suddenly a new type of person with new options existed among people they already knew. Tom was not somebody Gideon knew very well- he seemed to have a limited friend group and would spend (he later learned) the bulk of his free time in high school working and saving money. Gideon had been- not popular- but decently well liked and at one point had been considered funny even. This was a skill he picked up through watching standup comedy in high school and allowing some of his thoughts to drift to ways jokes were constructed. That first year of college they would walk around campus, drinking at parties, and drive around to various shops and restaurants. Gideon recalled this being a very happy time in his life in which novelty seemed endless and in a delusional and rare sense felt he had simply made it to the part of life that would be good- adulthood- and that it yielded so many options and opportunities. They broke up late in sophomore year- Gideon had made more friends in college and felt Tom decreasingly fit in with his new friends who were suddenly literate, political, or at least went to their school which gave them a whole frame of reference that Tom lacked in terms of understanding history and stakes. He did not break up with Tom over this consciously- but rather began to sense his life would be taking him elsewhere.

Hanging out with Tom felt more and more like it was taking time away from the even more aligned friendships and clubs he had joined. Once he joined some plays he had less free time- this group seemed to always hang out together and between multiple friend circles and after watching some movies and literature on breaking up he broke up with Tom and was depressed but also had a heightened sense of destiny and novelty yet again for months in which he experienced the 'breakup' which was all things considered fairly critical to human experience. Since then his dating life did not exist in any concrete way- a series of short lived relationships would come into his life for a few months but Gideon never had the sense they were correct. Either they were too boring or too messed up and it seemed nobody was capable of articulating themselves enough that Gideon could see a long-term, years long relationship being anything other than an experience of having to spend increasing amounts of time thinking about how to be either not bored or not stressed.

After the two of them talked about these various memories Tom said he'd drive him home and did so.

Upon arriving home his sister was watching TV with their parents and they were watching reruns of shows from the 1960s and she was asking questions about the shows and the time period and his parents seemed unaware that the major differences culturally and why they were interesting- that was just then- but his sister sounded fascinated and Gideon joined in thinking about what he read and saw from that time period and their memory of those 'classics' he felt were pretty spotty or did not reflect what he thought it was probably like at the time- and so maybe it was another time but not like it was in his memory.

His sister texted him discreetly that their brother was sleeping upstairs and Gideon said Reid is here? and his parents said yeah and he said how is he doing and they said fine- and he asked what happened and they said they didn't know he just comes back sometimes.

After a bit Gideon went to bed as did his sister and she texted him saying her ex told her Reid, their brother, had broken up with his girlfriend *again* a few days ago and was crashing at a friend's place for a bit and then when she got home he was here but still sleeping and their parents said he said he was tired from Uber driving all day.

Before falling asleep proper Gideon took his sleeping pills and involuntarily thought about his job and was trying to think of tasks he had to do- they had been stuck on a problem for a bit around how to interpret a strange pattern in the data and he was wondering what unaccounted for variables could explain findings that did not accord to prior theories and hypotheses they had.

He then did fall asleep.

3.

Gideon arose and took a caffeine pill and looked at his phone for a bit - he saw his friend Tara asked how North Carolina was and he thought about responding and drafted a few responses but didn't say anything since he felt he would not really know what to say.

He went downstairs. His sister Elizabeth and brother Reid were talking with his parents.

Gideon: Hey what's up.

Reid: What's up bro.

Gideon: Nothing, what are you eating.

Mom: It's breakfast.

Elizabeth: That's what he was asking.

Mom: I made it.

Elizabeth: Yes it's-

Mom: It's just eggs and bacon I didn't think about anything special.

Gideon: When did you get in?

Reid: Last night.

Gideon: I didn't know when or if you were coming over.

Reid: I'm in and out- I'm in the middle of a breakup.

Gideon: Yeah.

Elizabeth: This is why I don't recommend dating.

Mom: Stop, no don't say that.

Elizabeth: I'm half kidding.

Reid: Yeah, she's probably right.

Mom: No she's not right- that's horrible.

Elizabeth: Now all of us are single.

Mom: That's fine but not forever

Gideon: Why not forever?

Mom: No stop, that's horrible.

They ate a bit and Gideon watched Reid to try and determine what mood he was in.

Elizabeth: After this we have to look at the photo albums.

Gideon: Why do we have only two?

Elizabeth: Mom and dad are minimalists.

Reid: You know they have every VHS they ever owned.

Dad: We weren't photo takers.

Mom: We have pictures we just lost some of them.

Gideon: Our childhood memories?

Mom: No, you have your memories, the photos just got lost.

Elizabeth: How did they get lost?

Mom: You don't remember the fire?

Gideon recalled then when the garage caught fire from the dryer.

Gideon: And it only destroyed the albums?

Mom: No, the whole dresser we had the albums in and we combined the photos that survived.

Elizabeth: So we have a random assortment?

Mom: Yes, I think. Or no we have the best ones. We kept those in our room.

Reid: You had the greatest hits collection.

Mom: Yes haha.

They finished eating and their dad told them incorrectly where the photo album was although they all knew already and then asked Reid how long he would be staying and he said probably a week.

They went up into the room Gideon was staying in and found the albums.

Elizabeth: Look it starts with me. Oh then Gideon but then just me again. The order is weird.

Reid: This is how they did movies too- it was sort of alphabetical but then not really.

Gideon: Do you remember the X-rated section- was that porn?

Elizabeth: Yes

Reid: No it was just NC-17 stuff.

Elizabeth: No I remember spying on it

Gideon: Wait was it or not?

Elizabeth: I don't know and I'm not asking them.

The first page also included their former dog, Chips, who was before Chocolate.

Reid: It's Chips.

Elizabeth: He was so nice.

Reid: I miss him.

Gideon: You barely knew him.

Reid: I remember him.

Gideon: You remember the pictures you were only three

Reid: No I do.

Gideon remembered Chips passing away when he was seven and being unsure what that meant exactly. He understood he was in heaven as they told him, but he didn't understand how it worked to get there and where he was on earth.

Elizabeth: That's Disney.

Gideon: I hated it

Reid: I loved it.

Gideon: Why didn't we have other vacations?

Elizabeth: I think they saved for this one.

Gideon: Can you guys tell what their financial situation is?

Reid: They're good.

Elizabeth: Based on what?

Reid: Savings and they sold the store.

Elizabeth: That doesn't accrue value they're just draining.

Reid: They have like social security.

Gideon: But that's not much like if you retire right it's just okay.

Elizabeth: You pay into- oh look the school play.

Gideon: I think I liked acting. Why didn't I act more?

Reid: Some of their money is invested.

Elizabeth: In what?

Reid: Stock and bonds and stuff

Elizabeth: Why are you going to bat for their finances?

Reid: I'm saying they're good. Gideon your acting wasn't good.

Gideon: I said I liked it not I was good at it.

Reid: You liked the plays

Gideon: Yeah

Reid: I guess they were fun.

They discussed who potentially was the worst teacher from their old school- but all three couldn't agree.

Elizabeth: This section is when Gideon was mean haha.

Gideon: I was?

Elizabeth: You were moody at this age and it kind of continued. Actually you were cranky and then you were more normal angst.

Reid: What about me?

Elizabeth: You were fine because mom and dad were more lenient.

Reid: How?

Elizabeth: They didn't micromanage.

Reid: That's why I came out the best.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

They made it through the first album which was (for Gideon) about ages 0-12.

As Gideon recalled their childhood he thought about how he had been well adjusted at one point and the family unit seemed functional and stable. At this point whatever base stability he perceived in the world seemed a given and he lacked thoughts that were either anxious or excitatory. Like a pleasant but boring dream the flow of time and events happened effortlessly and without reflexive thought.

Reid: Now we get to the trouble album

Elizabeth: Yeah monsters

The three of them had around this time rebelled in various ways that are typical and had generally negative attitudes and combative personalities.

Gideon: Grandma and grandpa anniversary

Reid: Dad got drunk

Elizabeth: Yeah he never got drunk and then did that one time haha

Reid: Why?

Elizabeth: I have no idea

Reid: This is when I got into guitar see

Elizabeth: What was I even doing at this point I just look like shit

Gideon: Yeah fuck we look worse than then now

Reid: But it was good

Elizabeth: Okay I'm skipping look you were dating that girl

Reid: Brittany

Elizabeth: What happened to her?

Reid: I've seen her

Gideon: You have?

Reid: I do but I don't really even think about it too much we dated briefly

Elizabeth: It felt like forever

Reid: That is just because mom and dad took it really seriously for no reason

Gideon: Yeah true

Elizabeth: I think Harris is towards the end and then they stopped with the pictures.

They continued for a bit until they reached Gideon ages 12-19 and then the photos stopped, ostensibly moving to digital stored somewhere on the computer.

Elizabeth: Do we look at the digital pictures?

Reid: No, nothing is interesting.

Gideon: What now?

Elizabeth: Let's go out and get lunch because there's nothing to do.

They told their parents and got into Elizabeth's car and drove around town to get to a lunch spot they sometimes frequented.

In the car Reid played his demo of songs he had recorded and asked what they thought and Elizabeth said she didn't know about music and it was good and Gideon found some of them to be kind of interesting so said he loved it.

At the diner they ordered what they usually got when going to this very spot.

Reid: I miss coming here.

Elizabeth: You're the only one of us who could come here regularly

Reid: Yeah but I don't

Gideon: You don't cook do you?

Reid: No

Elizabeth: Did Kelly usually cook?

Reid: Sometimes

Gideon: You want to ask about her?

Elizabeth: No, not especially.

Reid: There isn't much to say- it happens.

Gideon: I heard you broke up I'm sorry

Reid: Yeah, again, it happens.

Elizabeth: Anything in particular?

Reid: No not really a specific thing

Elizabeth: You realize if none of us get married mom and dad are going to be pissed

Gideon: I don't know if I see it.

Reid: Really?

Gideon: For me I guess I don't know.

Reid: I'm thinking of going to Chicago or New York maybe.

Gideon and Elizabeth were quiet for a second.

Elizabeth: Well but, you've got so much going on here.

Reid: What do I have going on here?

Elizabeth: I don't know like, friends, history, mom and dad

Reid: You think I have a lot going on here. You just want me to look after mom and dad.

Elizabeth: I do

Reid: History

Elizabeth: You're roots are more. . . You've got more ties here.

Reid: What?

Elizabeth: You don't agree?

Reid: No, I get it.

Elizabeth: But New York is close- just expensive.

Gideon: It is

Reid: I know that

Elizabeth: Chicago is. I don't know.

Gideon: Do you like it there?

Elizabeth: It's fine. I don't know. I guess now it feels like my roots are partly there.

Gideon: You with the roots.

Elizabeth: Like starting over is tough I don't know if I could do it at this point.

Reid: I think I'm going to run out of women to date.

Gideon: So you dated them all?

Reid: No, just like, that are open to it.

Gideon: To dating?

Reid: I mean everyone has a certain cap.

Gideon: Hmm

Reid: This town is smaller than you remember it.

Gideon: I remember it.

Reid: It's easy to feel bored.

Gideon: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Are you bored?

Reid: It's easy to feel bored sometimes I think I meant.

Elizabeth: Well that. I don't know. Everywhere.

Reid: I guess yeah. I'm just making up stuff. I wasn't serious.

Elizabeth: Hmm?

Reid: I couldn't. I mean it's expensive in Chicago.

Elizabeth: Yeah,

Gideon: It's as bad as New York?

Elizabeth: I don't know.

Reid: Bored is like. It comes and goes.

Gideon: I get bored.

Reid: Grass is greener etc

Elizabeth: I think Chicago is comparable to New York but New York may be the worst.

Reid: I don't work in advertising or fish.

Gideon: Fish haha.

Reid: Can you explain what you do again?

Gideon: It's really just data analytics it's just the subject matter is weird.

Reid: You analyze the fish?

Gideon: Yeah, the fish are like, they have certain conditions.

Reid: Why the fish?

Gideon: I didn't pick.

Reid: But why did your boss pick?

Gideon: My boss- no not my boss- the guy that funds it has some theory.

Elizabeth: I don't know this.

Reid: What is the theory we want to know.

Gideon: It's not really a theory. He just thinks like fundamental truths of life or social life or something can be derived from basic components.

Reid: Like what?

Gideon: I don't know. Hierarchies, competition, collaboration, stuff like that.

Reid: Do you agree?

Gideon: I don't think so. I don't know. In some ways maybe.

Elizabeth: Hmm.

Gideon: Yeah

Reid: That's cool.

Gideon: Do you think you'd want to come to New York?

Reid: I'd visit.

Elizabeth: Do you remember when you cried because you lost that orange ball??

Gideon: Who?

Elizabeth: You!

Gideon: No

Elizabeth: We had to all look around the video store for it.

Reid: How old was I?

Elizabeth: Oh, young, so if Gideon was five

Reid: I was like . . .

Elizabeth: I just brought it up because look at the machine, it sells those.

They did in fact look at the quarter vending machine- and in fact they were there- and though Gideon didn't fully remember it was familiar.

They finished eating and drove back to the house. Elizabeth said she would be back later and Gideon said he had plans. She rolled her eyes at him having plans with his ex and said have fun in a teasing way.

Reid: I thought we'd hang out?

Gideon: After then?

Reid: Nah it's cool, tomorrow then?

Gideon: Yeah.

After Elizabeth left he said.

Reid: Oh shit so it's the parents and her tonight. I'm definitely going out.

Gideon: Yeah

Reid: Haha.

Gideon lay down in his bed to take a nap. He listened to Reid play guitar for a bit. He dozed off for a bit. His parents asked for his help setting up some streaming shows and his dad showed him a miniature model he was building.

Reid came down later and they all sat around watching some TV show that involved a singing competition. Gideon had an hour or two until he was supposed to meet Tom. His mom pointed out the singing person had a tragic story and Gideon countered they always do and his mom asked if he thought for some reason they were lying about it and Gideon said no. Elizabeth agreed with him that they always seem to find these people and his mom countered again that what do they want them to do not tell their story? Gideon speculated however that many such people exist, but that it's not organic they are featured. His mom pressed him on this. He said the stories are true but it's just weird they select a few to present for narrative reasons and make it seem like an organic discovery and ostensibly many more have similar or worse stories but they are less intelligible, communicative or flashy for TV. His mom said forget it. Reid said the story- about an orphan with a stutter- should be stacked against all other sympathy stories and that should be the competition. His mom said stop so they dropped it and she didn't want to hear more.

Then they switched to a second show which was a game show in which teams competed to knock out team mates on the opposing team which gave the other team less people to answer questions but more agility in terms of progression in the game when they did answer correct.

Gideon thought about the concept of games. Games included express rules and purposes and defined categories of winning, and losing and thus some actions were- probabilistically- more correct. To some degree, he could see games like he saw the fish, although game theory had been tested as a hypothesis but didn't appear to readily explain every phenomena. He thought about how much we could reduce motivations and actions to set principles. But he couldn't think about this too long since it was an open ended debate and his job depended on assuming consistent patterns and logic.

When it was time to go out he called an uber and got in and got there five minutes early. He texted Tom who was already there apparently.

Tom: I think it's cool we met up.

Gideon: Yeah, of course.

Things were silent for a bit. Gideon wasn't really sure where to go with the conversation. Apparently either Tom was not either or he was unbothered by silence.

Gideon: How is work?

Tom: It's fine.

Gideon: Do you like it?

Tom: Yeah. I think so.

Gideon: My job is weird. I feel like I'm thinking about it on vacation even though I don't want to.

Tom: Well try not to.

Gideon: Yeah I mean I am trying not to.

Tom didn't follow up that line of thought. They ordered food and Tom said the food here was good- he was happy this place opened. Gideon said that was good the town was getting more spots. Tom said yeah.

Gideon: Do you like living here, overall?

Tom: Sure. I mean where else?

Gideon: Like you could move if you hated it.

Tom: But I don't.

Gideon: Right.

Tom: You like New York?

Gideon: Yeah I think so.

They ordered drinks and Gideon hoped this would help the conversation flow a little bit more. He wasn't particularly sure what he was hoping for here actually- in fact he became aware probably he was hoping for something unclear and Tom was probably not operating based on any specific or vague expectations and he felt a little jealous of that openness.

Tom: Are you seeing anyone?

Gideon: Ha. No.

Tom: Me neither.

Gideon: It's tough.

Tom: Yeah.

The drinks came and Gideon drank quickly before monitoring how much and trying to attune his pace to Tom's pace.

Tom: Did you and George stay in touch much?

Gideon: We did for a bit. We did sometimes. I think we didn't as much for the past few years.

Tom: I think that's normal.

Gideon: People's circles get smaller I guess.

Tom: I think people get busy.

Gideon: I'm not even sure how busy I am. I guess.

Tom: You must be with that job.

Gideon: My hours aren't crazy I guess. I just feel like I don't do much outside work. Or like it's less than I'd like.

Tom: Yeah? I thought maybe there would be lots to do.

Gideon: There is lots to do I think I just don't do it because I'm tired or something.

Tom: From using your brain?

Gideon: Yeah haha. Like mentally.

Tom: Are you going to work there forever?

Gideon: It's very funding contingent. The funding is very dependent on one guy. So when it ends I don't know.

Tom: Where else would you work?

Gideon: Like wherever.

Tom: So you don't love it?

Gideon: It's interesting in a lot of ways I think. No, I don't know. I can see how it is interesting but I don't know. I don't know I experience it as such.

Tom: Do you remember when you started at college?

Gideon: Yeah. Like what?

Tom: I felt like you were always going on about something. Some idea. That's when I thought you'd do something wild and new.

Gideon: I think that's just what people are like in college.

Tom: No. Not everyone.

Gideon: No, I guess not. But a lot of people.

Tom: Would you ever move back here?

Gideon: Umm. No. Maybe but no.

Tom: Which?

Gideon: Like if I had to I guess.

Tom: But I'm confused.

Gideon: What?

Tom: It doesn't sound like you enjoy the city that much.

Gideon: No it's not that. It's not the city. It's not the job either. I think it's just I don't know.

Tom: What?

Gideon: I don't know. Don't you kind of feel whatever?

Tom: Bored?

Gideon: Yeah.

Tom: Sometimes but only if things are boring.

Gideon: I don't wanna say like. I don't know.

Tom: What?

Gideon: Yeah no that's stupid. I mean essentially like are people supposed to be like not bored?

Tom: I try and stay entertained by doing things.

Gideon: Yeah

Tom: Like this spot is cool. I like the barcade.

Gideon: I went there the other day with Julie and Bill.

Tom: Do you want to go there after?

Gideon: Yeah it was fun.

Tom: See so it sounds like here is more fun.

Gideon: Do you want me to move back?

Tom: Haha. I think it's fun here. Mostly. Maybe you'd like it.

Gideon: I feel like I've been talking about moving today. Like my brother was talking about moving.

Tom: To New York?

Gideon: Yeah but I don't know if it was serious or what?

Tom: Is he okay?

Gideon: What?

Tom: Like does he have alcoholism?

Gideon: Oh, yeah I guess probably.

Tom: Is he going to get help?

Gideon: I don't know. He said he might move to New York or Chicago but I don't know if that would be better.

Tom: Do you remember my cousin was an alcoholic?

Gideon: Oh. Yeah I think.

Tom: So he got treatment and I think he's been better mostly.

Gideon: My sister I think didn't want him to move to Chicago.

Tom: Why?

Gideon: Like I don't think it'll help or whatever. It'll just be expensive.

Tom: Hmm. Okay I'll get the check and we can go to the barcade.

Gideon: We can just split it.

Tom: No you get the drinks.

Gideon: Okay.

They paid and went over to the barcade. They played the claw machine and Gideon felt Tom was trying to win him something and he wondered if there was some lingering chemistry- but besides physical chemistry he couldn't really tell exactly what was the reason they had dated to begin with. He thought about it and he felt like he was just a different person and he tried to think about how he had changed and he realized he just felt like life was very expansive at one point- full of unknowns- but over time the novelty actually had a limit and particular recurring patterns emerged and they were recurring and therefore depreciated in each iteration. In this realization, he thought again about the fish and felt annoyed he was thinking about work again so he drank his drink quick and felt his mood improve. Suddenly

he felt a larger interest and generosity towards Tom which he didn't attribute to the drink but rather to the barcade or the game or something in the immediate environment.

Tom did win a stuffed frown emoji toy and Gideon laughed at it and thanked him and Tom said he had gotten good at the claw game. They then went over to the basketball hoops and Tom challenged him and won.

Tom: You aren't good at it.

Gideon: I didn't say I was?

Tom: I'm just saying.

Gideon: Let's get another drink.

Tom: And then we can do the racing game.

The next drink hitting and the racing game dovetailed to create a sensation of time moving faster.

Gideon: You could be a professional racer.

Tom: You know I thought about it.

Gideon: No you didn't you never mentioned that one time.

Tom: I thought about it I didn't speak about it haha.

Gideon: So why didn't you do it?

Tom: How would I have done it?

Gideon: I don't know because I didn't want to be a racer.

Tom: You could have been my manager.

Gideon: Why?

Tom: I'm good at driving and there would be money in it.

Gideon: What would you do with a million dollars?

Tom: Get a house I think. And then probably own my own business.

Gideon: Nothing crazy?

Tom: A million dollars in this economy isn't even that much.

Gideon: Yeah that's wild.

Tom: What about you?

Gideon: I'd like. Just live off of it I think.

Tom: Forever?

Gideon: I won't live forever. I don't know. I'd probably save and work part time or something.

Tom: Doing what?

Gideon: Racing manager.

They moved over to bowling.

Gideon: So I do remember you're good at this.

Tom: I remember you being good at this.

Gideon could feel something of their old dynamic returning. It was as if something was clicking into place via muscle memory and association.

Gideon: Okay hold on.

He hit four pins only, but then got a strike on the second one.

Tom: See you're good!

Gideon: We used to bowl at the proper bowling lane.

Tom: That doesn't exist anymore.

Gideon: Yeah I think I remember it closed.

Tom: It was old school.

Gideon: I might actually beat you.

A few rounds went by and the winner shifted seemingly every round.

Tom: Do you want to smoke pot?

Gideon: Can we leave the game?

Tom approached a couple and asked if they wanted to bowl one round for them and they said okay.

Outside Tom produced a joint and they smoked it in the parking lot.

Gideon: I don't even remember if I like weed.

Tom: Oh shit, are you okay?

Gideon: I mean it's cool.

Tom: Now I feel bad.

Gideon: Why?

Tom: Nothing.

Gideon: What?

Tom: Are you gonna be good?

Gideon: Yeah.

A few rounds of smoking went by and Gideon could feel several overlapping interpretations of the situation competing in his brain. At the most pessimistic he thought this was probably a horrible idea- and here he was with his ex unsure of what the dynamic was, unsure of how he was coming across and generally thinking he had made some massive

miscalculation so severe he couldn't even comprehend it. Overlaid with that, was also the feeling this was genuinely fun, that perhaps he had been harsh in his judgment about the situation, about his own life, about everything, and he could feel a resolve to live every moment to its fullest. In between those two extremes he felt middle-ground interpretations competing, such as that this was mildly pleasant, that this was bittersweet, that this was only a small mistake, that it was strategically value-neutral, etc.

Tom: The other day. Ummm. I saw this woman who was homeless and she screamed at me.

Gideon: What?

Tom: Yeah it was random.

Gideon: Yeah. What made you think of that?

Tom: It was over there.

Gideon: I didn't know-

Tom: Yeah I don't remember a lot of homeless people growing up here.

Gideon: I can't remember if you went to my parents video store.

Tom: I actually went to the competitor. But I think I went there once or twice.

Gideon: Because you were umm

Tom: My parents live closer to that store.

Gideon: What was your favorite movie?

Tom: I don't know. Gremlins.

Gideon: Yeah that's a good one. That's a funny one.

Tom: They have they can't like eat water.

Gideon: Eat water?

Tom: Haha, wait no.

Gideon: Oh fuck have we been out here a long time?

Tom: No. I think.

Gideon: Let's bowl.

The next few rounds they had huge variations in their performance. Gideon felt he could sometimes lock in and sometimes it was a gutter ball.

Gideon: You can tell from the scores we're off our game.

Tom: Yeah haha. But it's more fun.

They finished up the game- with Tom winning but only slightly.

They left the barcade and Tom suggested they hit up one more spot before calling it a night and Gideon said okay.

They went to one bar and Tom noted it was crowded which apparently was never true (according to him at least) and so they ordered an uber to another spot. In the uber they talked about some memories around parties, friends they recalled, some memories about George and the time he pissed himself, and some funny details about his sister and her personality which was intimidating to Tom and Gideon sort of agreed but said she was his sister so it impacted him less so than others.

At the bar they got beer and sat in a booth and Gideon said to look over at the other table in which a bunch of people were dressed in almost identical outfits and Tom said yeah kind of.

Gideon: I'm glad we could catch up or whatever this is.

Tom: Yeah it's catching up!

Gideon: I didn't want it to be awkward.

Tom: No, it's not.

Gideon: I guess I thought there might be tension.

Tom: There can be- but I've gone out with exes before.

Gideon: What?

Tom: My ex Ron.

Gideon: Ron?

Tom: Yeah he's like forty minutes upstate though but we catch up sometimes.

Gideon: Who is Ron?

Tom: My ex.

Gideon: When did you date Ron?

Tom: For two years like two years ago.

Gideon: I didn't know that.

Tom: Yeah.

Gideon: Oh okay yeah I didn't know.

Tom: Yeah I mean I don't know who else you dated.

Gideon: I haven't really.

Tom: Oh. That's fine.

Gideon: Yeah why wouldn't it be fine?

Tom: It's cool.

Gideon: I'm saying why wouldn't it be cool? Where did you meet?

Tom: Online.

Gideon: Yeah.

He learned a little bit about Ron but he felt like he didn't particularly want to know the details but felt a little trapped by the conversation and unable to think very clearly he was unable to steer the conversation away from it.

Tom: So then we broke up but we stayed friends which I think is cool.

Gideon: You're good at that.

Tom: What?

Gideon: Keeping friends I guess.

Tom: Yeah I guess.

Gideon: I feel like I lost touch with George. I guess I feel bad. I mean it's fine I guess.

Tom: I believe in heaven you'll have a chance to meet again.

Gideon: Hmm?

Tom: Like you'll be able to talk about all this.

Gideon: Um. Yeah.

Tom: Do you think so?

Gideon: Um. Yeah I guess.

Tom: You don't.

Gideon: I just wish I kept in touch more.

They finished their beers and got Ubers. There seemed to be- Gideon intuited- a sense Tom was trying to get him back to his place saying he was ordering "the" uber but he ignored this and just got his own uber.

He went back home and in a stupor searched for Ron on social media and then googled various philosophical topics and scrolled through Wikipedia and then reposted several stories and then felt a headache coming on and googled if he could take Advil and it said no and so he just suffered for a bit and fell asleep.

4.

He woke up the next morning feeling awful. It was not clear what specifically was the cause- it was an amalgamation of drinks plus uncertainty about how he had behaved and presented himself with and to Tom. There was also a deeper but unclear sense of the vacation feeling unclear in its purpose. Something about the extra days tacked onto George's funeral had felt sensible at first but now he wondered what his own logic was here- as he appeared to be reactively allowing fate to fill the details of his trip rather than figuring out- time-wise, priority wise, etc what he should do.

He went downstairs to get water and his parents were on their phone watching AI videos and his dad showed him one and he asked if it was real and his mom said her whole feed was AI and he got water, drank it, got more, drank it, and then took more up to his room. As he slowly felt better - having now taken water, caffeine, and a nicotine pouch, he then rethought his earlier impression he was somehow wasting his trip and felt he was just being dramatic and nothing crazy or wrong had transpired and he was here to just do whatever. It didn't really matter. He was catching up with people- what did he expect to be the "proper" way to do that?

His sister came by and he heard her saying AI was good but with some specific moderations and their parents didn't engage and passively agreed. His brother came downstairs too and Gideon forced himself to get up and hang with them all.

Elizabeth asked how it was last night and he said fine, nothing crazy and his mom asked him what he did and he told her and she seemed uncurious. Their parents had zero interest in any of their relationships if they were not imminently headed towards marriage.

Their mom made breakfast and they all discussed a recent political development- Gideon felt out of the loop and he didn't really keep up with the news as much as he should although he had gone through periods of higher engagement with it sometimes. He tended to have weak opinions- always unsure if he really had all the facts and feeling unable to be certain enough to weigh them against one another and come to a reasonable conclusion and by the time he felt perhaps he had a grasp on something- attention had moved on already to a new topic. He wondered how people felt in the loop with this- or maybe people just parroted news takes that they heard elsewhere. Gideon tested this and asked where people got their news from and his parents just said the news and his brother said social media and his sister chastised both of them and recommended independent news sources and his brother wrote them down and his parents just said okay and she pressed the issue

to their parents because she said cable news was dumbed down and they didn't take the bait and dismissed her.

After they ate his sister asked what they were doing today and Reid said Gideon and he were hanging out- and Elizabeth sensed maybe she was invited but maybe her presence was not preferred at this particular event and she said she was going to hit up her friend to make plans since she would be leaving in a few days.

After eating Reid asked if anyone wanted to go take a look at a new apartment he was considering moving into and everyone was silent so Gideon volunteered.

They got into his car to drive there and Gideon asked what about his other apartment and he said they do month to month and he was going to drop it. He said he was having some issues with his roommate and friend and cited a story about unclear responsibility for repairs, rent, etc- basically financial stuff that Gideon didn't follow as they felt convoluted. He extrapolated maybe the situation wasn't so great if their relationship and roommate situation had unclear boundaries.

Reid asked if anything wild happened last night and Gideon said no although he was surprised by the nightlife in the town which was more alive than he remembered or thought and Reid said it was all semi recent- for years people would just drive around to random spots or people's houses but the downtown now contained many more people either in their 20s or who had recently started a family and he also mentioned that this had caused a spike in incidents in which people's drama increasingly played out in public and fights broke out and then word got around. Gideon thought about bringing up that he had heard something about this happening to Reid but decided there was not a good reason to do that and just noted it.

They went to the spot which was a split-level house and Reid rang the wrong bell and they instructed him upstairs to where there was a ring camera bell and the person showed him the space- his name was Mark- and Gideon tried to think if he knew who Mark was. Mark didn't appear to know them. Mark showed them the room which was small but the space of the house itself was nice and when he mentioned the rent it was more than Reid ostensibly had been paying but not unreasonable. After they left the place Reid asked if he knew who Mark was and he said Mark had moved here to 'start over' and Gideon asked how he knew that and he said he had heard it around because the rumor was Mark was in a hit and run but that might have just been a rumor and Gideon asked how people came to this conclusion and Reid said Mark didn't drive but had parents with money who lived in the rich town close by and people speculated they got him out of a case there and he moved here. Rumors from the nearby town came here- but nothing much was validated as the crossover

was low although increasing as generationally people were moving downward on the socioeconomic ladder and thus moving here.

Reid then drove them to “the cliffs.”

They walked not very far before Reid said he was already out of breath and they climbed up a medium sized rock formation. Gideon’s body responded to being in nature in an odd way- and suddenly it was as if he felt much calmer- and he felt cliché for thinking that but it was true.

Reid said he was going to smoke a joint and Gideon said he wasn’t interested and Reid pushed and Gideon accepted but planned to not seriously inhale but just give off the impression of doing so because he didn’t think he liked getting high most of the time.

Reid said Kelly called him fourteen times last night and Gideon asked if he thought they might get back together and he said totally not- and he was looking to make changes in his life and Gideon paused and asked what changes and Reid said he was considering going back to school and Gideon asked for what and Reid said probably anthropology since he was interested in the history of civilization. Gideon asked him about that and he said he saw some documentaries on streaming about Ancient Rome and Ancient Egypt and the Dark Ages of England and he was captivated by it. Gideon asked what he would do with that education and Reid said maybe teach or maybe write. Gideon asked if he would like teaching and Reid said he didn’t know- but he never completed his business degree. Gideon asked what he liked about those historical periods and Reid said he liked that they had big dramatic arcs and huge advancement. Gideon said we kind of have that now and Reid said no, now is stupid and boring.

After smoking they left the rock formation and went back to the car and Reid said they should go back to the house and shower and change and then day drink and Gideon felt like he was interested although he wondered if that was a bad idea having so recently recovered from his last night out.

Reid, anticipating this, said he knew he went out last night but that he might be busy tomorrow since he was going to be Ubering a bunch to make the first month rent on his new place. So Gideon agreed.

They went back to their parent’s house and their parents asked what they did and they told them they hiked and they said Elizabeth was out and they said she said she might be seeing a friend and they said oh yeah. After they showered and changed they got in an Uber.

Gideon hadn't asked where they were going but ostensibly he figured- and was proven right- the downtown area.

Once they got there Reid took them to a spot Gideon had not noticed before which was a little wine bar and lunch spot off the main strip. The bar played goth music but had an upscale vibe and had posters of music shows and movies.

Reid: This is the coolest spot.

Gideon: Do they umm like do shows?

Reid: Yeah they do.

Gideon: Do you ever play?

Reid: I haven't performed in a long time.

Gideon: In general like the guitar. Still? I think I heard you.

Reid: Oh, yeah, sometimes.

Gideon: Should we look at the menu and then order and then look at the record collection?

Reid: I've seen it- you wanna look?

Gideon: Yeah.

They ordered and got wine and then went over to look at the records. They made small talk about what bands they liked and what albums were their best albums.

They returned to their seats when the food came and Reid said he wasn't moving to New York- he had thought about it- and Gideon said he figured since he was looking at apartments.

Reid asked if he should make a dating profile and Gideon said he didn't know and Reid said good point and laughed.

After eating they got another drink and walked around and mosquitos attacked them and they came back inside and Reid said what's up to someone. It was his friend Cyrus and his other friend Jesse. The four of them sat together and Cyrus told a story about how last night George's brother got into a physical fight at the burger spot and it was apparently over

something someone said that he interpreted as meaning George had been careless. It was fairly clear he did not mean that- but also Jesse said it could be interpreted like that if someone was looking for it.

They launched into some other gossip and Gideon felt a little lost on the characters and plot lines - and sometimes people he knew appeared in the stories but overall he began to just get a negative impression that many of these people were involved in near constant dramas of slights, accusations, self-justifications and emotional dysregulation.

After this went on for a while they said they should hit up the barcade and offered coke to Gideon and Reid and Gideon said no and Reid said yes and he waited for them to snort it, then they went over to the barcade.

Reid was now talking to Gideon and the other two friends were discussing some UFC match and Reid was talking about how a rapper had died recently and discussed elements of his music and Gideon felt it made sense mostly, but a lot of the descriptors were maximal (ie “best,” “greatest” etc).

They played the racing game and Gideon felt embarrassed that Cyrus and Jesse were loudly cursing and gesturing and being competitive in an attention courting way, shoving and pushing as someone would get first place.

After this the gaming continued in this manner until the two of them ran into another group of four that included more people Gideon did not recognize and they all got more drinks and left to do more coke and Gideon waited.

Reid asked if he was sure he was good and he said yeah and afterwards he mentioned they should go to this house party that was happening across town.

Gideon said sure whatever and they all got into an Uber XL and one of the other group members talked to the driver in a way that felt passive aggressively hostile for no reason.

They arrived at the house party of many people and Gideon was pleasantly surprised there was a pool and hot tub although he didn't bring a bathing suit.

People immediately all launched into loud conversations Gideon couldn't follow which recounted people who did wild things the previous 1-5 nights. Reid seemed absorbed in the details of these stories- including someone who crashed a car into a tree, someone who owed 10,000 dollars to someone, and someone who broke his foot.

Person: He busted his ass sliding down the big ass railing

Person: He went- boom!

He made a drink but felt his attention being diverted in too many directions and felt unable to latch onto any one particular conversation. They passed around a joint and Gideon absent-mindedly puffed it and then regretted doing it because he didn't really want to smoke and then felt he was really out of place.

Reid was checking out the guitar collection of whoever owned the house.

Person: I fucking hate that dude

Person: Max?

Person: Fuck him.

Person: What did he do??

Person: He makes shit up

Person: That's the thing, they won't tell you it's a nootropic

Person: Yeah all this shit

Person: Word you have to go online

Person: She's got this nasty dog that hates people

Person: She can't train that dog for shit

Gideon felt the sensation of being out of his body and watching this unfold and had to concentrate to tether himself back to the situation at hand, and he decided he was probably going to leave once he could feel more clear headed because the idea of ordering an uber and making small talk felt impossible and he definitely didn't want to encounter his parents in this state.

Rather than engage with people he walked over to the hot tub area and a woman said go in and he said he didn't have clothes to go in and she said nobody gives a shit just go in in his underwear and he said no and then thought maybe and then decided whatever nobody cares probably.

He stripped down to his underwear which caused her to cheer- which he was slightly irritated by. He sat in the hot tub and moved water to his head and felt a lot of cortisol decrease at once- feeling somehow he was sweating out toxins and/or alcohol and/or anxiety. She did the same and got in and said thank god someone went in and he said yeah and she started talking about some other time she was here and people started having sex and then said they cleaned the tub since then.

Another guy came up and said hi to her and she said hey babe and he also stripped and got into the tub.

She asked how he was doing and he said fine. Gideon discerned his name was Adam.

Adam: Who do you know at the party? I don't think we've met.

Gideon: I'm Reid's brother.

Adam: Oh, Reid. Yeah. Cool.

Gideon: You?

Adam: I know Aurora here.

Gideon: Okay- who is that?

Adam: She's probably talking to Jesse.

Gideon tried to see inside through the sliding glass doors but gave up.

Adam: Do you live around here?

Gideon: Not normally. I mean I'm visiting- I grew up here.

Adam: Yeah, I know, cause you're Reid's brother.

Gideon: Right. Sorry I'm stupid. I'm high still I think.

Adam: Did you smoke a lot?

Gideon: No I just don't normally.

Adam: What do you do normally?

Gideon: I guess drink but not so much. Not as much as I have been.

Adam: I think this place makes people drink.

Gideon: This house?

Adam: Kind of, or like, just people I think.

Gideon looked at the other woman who was in the hot tub who had been quiet and she was texting with a nervous or even angry face and this made him feel anxious again.

Adam: Do you want a drink?

Gideon: Do you have water?

Adam: Do I have water?

Gideon: I mean like could I have water.

Adam: Oh, yeah haha hold on.

Adam got up out of the tub and the woman called to him to get her a drink if he didn't mind and he said okay and she called someone really quick and had a brief tense interaction and then got out of the tub to continue fighting with someone on the phone.

Adam came back and asked where she went and Gideon said he didn't know.

Adam: How long are you in town for?

Gideon: A few more days.

Adam: And then?

Gideon: Back to New York

Adam: Cool. I haven't been I've always wanted to go.

Gideon: Why don't you?

Adam: I don't know. I feel like it sometimes but then I just don't.

Gideon: Yeah.

Adam: Like I think sometimes I'll do more things but then I just end up back here or doing something lame.

Gideon: Lame

Adam: I know haha

Gideon: Like what?

Adam: Just stupid. I don't know. Nothing. Basically this or just like I don't know. Nothing.

Gideon: Do you chill with Reid?

Adam: Sometimes.

Gideon: He's moving I think we saw the apartment today.

Adam: Oh, yeah, cool.

Gideon: Do you know Mark?

Adam: Ummm. Maybe. I think no but maybe.

Gideon: Who do you chill with?

Adam: I feel like I'm either with Aurora or at Sparky's.

Gideon: Where is that?

Adam: Like forty minutes away near St. Francis.

Gideon: Oh, I know some people there.

Adam: Have you been to Sparky's?

Gideon: No.

Adam: It's okay.

Gideon: I don't know- yeah I don't think so. I have some friends there I should probably text them.

Adam: You should go to Sparky's

Gideon: Maybe. But you don't really like it?

Adam: I mean it's a stupid gay bar.

Gideon: Oh, yeah. I mean sometimes it's like that.

Adam: Yeah it's whatever. It's chill I guess.

Gideon: Is it new?

Adam: I think so. Or it moved or something.

Gideon: Moved?

Adam: I think so or something. Revamped itself. I guess it's just like. I don't know it's whatever it's just something to do. New York probably has more to do.

Gideon: Yeah, it's cool.

Adam: What do you do?

Gideon: Like for fun?

Adam: Yeah

Gideon: Sometimes I go out, sometimes I go to the movies or um a museum but sometimes I'm tired or something from work.

Adam: What is work?

Gideon: Oh haha. Research.

Adam: What kind?

Gideon: Fish. Animals.

Adam: Oh, do you discover things about them?

Gideon: Yes and no. Yeah I think so.

Adam: Like what?

Gideon: Um like fish hierarchies are dynamic rather than static, and in fact hierarchies themselves may be less rigid and more contingent or have other ways of modeling and conceptualizing them. Also that the survival drive may be- I don't know- a similar thing a kind of bundle of base drivers and more complex drivers. This plays a role somewhat. And then introducing new fish or removing other fish, or changing the ecosystem etc these things introduce an element of chaos but we're trying to figure out what- there are key quick things that reestablish order even if they are suboptimal kind of like they prefer order

unconsciously or disorder even if it's disadvantageous or goes against other drivers or maybe competes um I don't know stuff like that.

Adam: So you're smart?

Gideon: Um. Yeah I guess.

Adam: That sounds complex.

Gideon: Yeah I don't know. I guess I don't think about myself that much.

Adam: But if you think about you you can have realizations.

Gideon: Oh. Yeah I guess it's like fish. Or maybe not. I don't remember. I'll think about it.

Adam: You don't want a drink?

Gideon: No, I think I've been trying to leave but not leaving. I mean not because of you. Just before I was like trying to sober up.

Adam: You could stay for a bit. Unless you had somewhere to be I'm just bored here.

Gideon: Yeah I could stay for a bit I guess I was just bored also.

He accepted Adam's offer and got a drink from him and drank albeit slowly and carefully to tightly control any levels of inebriation.

Adam: So since you're smart what do you think about. . . I don't know. Things.

Gideon: I don't know what you mean?

Adam: Like what is going on like in the world?

Gideon: Oh I don't think I know enough to even speculate.

Adam: Do you think the past, present, or future will be best?

Gideon: Umm. No, I don't know. Future could go lots of ways.

Adam: Pick one.

Gideon: Maybe near past? Modern period but not as fractured.

Adam: Oh wow. Okay. I think future.

Gideon: No you don't haha

Adam: I do! I think we're just too early.

Gideon: For what?

Adam: I don't know. Some people think we're too late I think we're too early.

Gideon: In what sense?

Adam: I'm actually not sure.

Gideon: Cool. So you don't know.

Adam: I don't know anything.

Gideon: Me neither.

Adam: Yeah

Gideon: We're stupid.

Adam: Yeah.

Aurora called to Adam and introduced herself and the three of them talked briefly about her feelings about Jesse which Gideon felt like he didn't particularly care about, not knowing either of them. He decided to go upstairs and Reid told him he could shower if he wanted nobody cared so he went upstairs and showered and thought about what he should do next. Adam then came into the bathroom and asked if he could hop in and Gideon said okay and they hooked up in the bathroom.

Afterwards Adam asked if he wanted to go down to join the party and Gideon said he was probably going to head out and Adam said no don't go.

Gideon: I'm sorry I'm tired.

Adam: Okay, well take my number.

Gideon: Okay. I'm only here for a bit I don't know what plans I have.

Adam: No pressure.

Gideon: Yeah okay, I'll hit you up.

Gideon went up to Reid who was doing more coke.

Reid: And this is my brother, who is fucking wack. No he's awesome.

Gideon: No I'm whack I'm gonna go home.

Reid: No you can't!

Gideon: Reid, I'm tired, I can't stay out like this.

Reid: Do one shot with me.

Gideon: One and then I go?

Reid: Yeah.

They did one shot together and Cyrus came up to them but Reid waved him away.

Reid: Tomorrow we'll get dinner with Elizabeth?

Gideon: Sure.

Reid: By the way I was totally kidding about Chicago or whatever.

Gideon: Whatever you want man- it's your life!

Reid: i know- I'm good on that though.

Gideon: Yeah just whatever you know, whatever you think is best for you I got you.

Reid: You got me?

Gideon: Yeah.

Reid: That's fucking right! That's why I love you!

Gideon: Okay, do your thing or whatever I'm going to head out.

Gideon walked outside to wait for his cab and Adam came out to smoke

Adam: Have a goodnight

Gideon: Yeah you too

Adam: I'll try.

Gideon: Yeah, I guess what else can you do but try.

The cab came and he got in and it took him home. His parents were asleep and he dialed up his best friend in New York, Sam.

Gideon: Hey

Sam: What's up?

Gideon: Nothing I'm chilling

Sam: Ha. How is it back there?

Gideon: It's weird.

Sam: Yeah that's how I feel when I'm in San Jose.

Gideon: I feel like I'm regressed

Sam: Yeah I get that

Gideon: What're you up to?

Sam: Oh man, I'm just getting ready to crash.

Gideon: It's that season are your job right?

Sam: Yeah, but when you're back do you want to see that horror movie?

Gideon: I can't even remember which movie.

Sam: I forgot too I just remember you said I'd like it.

Gideon: Okay yeah I just don't remember the title.

Sam: Haha word.

Gideon: I'm sorry dude I'm not really sure why I even called I'm drunk.

Sam: That's cool- I'm just going to bed but you'll get adjusted. And then basically then once you are you'll have to come back.

Gideon: Yeah, I feel like I'm ready already.

Sam: That's how it happens- but you have to get away sometimes.

Gideon: Yeah true.

Sam was his good friend in the city. They met at a trivia meet up and were both pretty good at trivia and similarly bad at making friends. But they had grown to be good friends over the past four years- arguably Sam was his best friend although Gideon was never sure he had a definitive best friend. Sometimes he thought about all the people he knew and wondered if it added up completely to a full life or not. Whatever case, he felt like he wished he could teleport back and forth right now. Suddenly he wanted to chill with his New York friends around whom he felt more articulate. He felt like the past few days he could barely speak. He didn't even know the main factor in that. The last week was just unusual and George's death made him feel weird. He was sad but he couldn't determine the other feelings. Unable to sleep right away he wrestled in bed thinking about George and then Reid and then Elizabeth and his mom and dad and then Sam and then a bunch of people he had known or knew currently and people whom he didn't really know any longer- people who seemed almost completely alien at this point, people he had seen at the funeral who felt at one point to be of some import and now were fairly peripheral to his life. This type of slippage between people in his life seemed to swirl in his head in a psychedelic way like a really long and unclear story with various people shepherding him through various parts. This sensation made his sense of personhood feel contingent and porous. He made a resolution he would get back into acting, and he thought about how much he loved acting, but also felt suspicious of his own enthusiasm and follow through on this, even in his slightly altered state.

5.

He woke up horribly hungover and resolved to not drink anymore on this trip if possible.

It was almost 11am and his sister was already downstairs and asked if Reid and him got in late and he said he came back before Reid. She said she had texted him a few times this morning but then figured he was still asleep.

Their parents made them play a card game and Elizabeth seemed invested- asking questions- but Gideon felt it wasn't like her to randomly be like this and wondered why she was putting on this enthusiasm. She asked good questions that had strategic implications to win the game and he wondered if she was actually being competitive, or interested, or he was just not sure what wave length she was on.

He kept getting up to get water, then Advil, then slowly worked his way up to solid foods.

After the game, nearing 1PM, Elizabeth discreetly texted him to ask if Reid was probably okay and Gideon said he probably had a much rougher night than he did. She asked if he wanted to go to the mall and he said sure and they got into her car.

Elizabeth: I want to get a jacket everything I have is disgusting

Gideon: But it's getting warmer

Elizabeth: That's when to buy cause its on sale

Gideon: Oh, I never buy anything

Elizabeth: Yeah I noticed you should buy something you wear the same shit

Gideon: For like years yeah

The parking lot was surprisingly full for a weekday. In fact Gideon wondered who the clientele was for malls. Growing up malls were a bigger deal he felt. He remembered going there with friends sometimes- you would see other people from school etc. Once or twice he would go there alone just hoping to see someone from school and on those occasions he rarely did. He remembered the year he had very few friends - basically none- he would imagine going to the mall and making a best friend. For a brief second- despite his own

shortcomings- he considered it lucky he developed into a somewhat socially adept person and was thought of as funny. He thought about people that remain too weird to really do that.

They got out of the car and headed to the entrance.

Elizabeth: Did you read about this new disease potential pandemic thing?

Gideon: No.

Elizabeth: You're not concerned.

Gideon: I mean what could I do about it either way.

Elizabeth: Zen, I guess. I just don't want to be caught off guard.

Gideon: That's most of life anyway

Elizabeth: Sure, if you don't look up stuff that's most of life because you're not ready for anything to happen.

Gideon: So you're ready?

Elizabeth: More than you are.

Gideon: Specifically how?

Elizabeth: Psychologically.

The first store they went to was the most generic store Gideon could imagine.

Elizabeth: Is this one good?

Gideon: It's whatever.

Elizabeth: If I made you determine?

Gideon: It's whatever so it's fine but I don't know.

Elizabeth: So in advertising - and most of fashion is advertising cause its mimetic desire- this would be an easy sell because I feel it's downstream of two trends because you can see it's got the length and this color is in. So no, I hate it.

Gideon: What is the most important psychological concept in advertising?

Elizabeth: It's mimetic desire- people want what others want.

Gideon: Okay. Yeah in my work there's something like that too. But probably much more primal. Mimicry. Maybe not desire. Actually I don't know what I'm talking about.

Elizabeth: Do you like this one?

Gideon: I'm looking around I don't know if this store is the one.

Elizabeth: Yeah true but let's just look.

She tried on a few more items before they decided to call it at this store and went over to the map to locate the other stores she wanted to see.

Elizabeth: What did you want to look at?

Gideon: I'm getting something?

Elizabeth: I don't know, you could. You should.

Gideon: Maybe. I don't know. You tell me where to look.

They went to another store for Elizabeth and she decided the coats were doing something aesthetically she didn't like. She asked why this was in style- oversized- and Gideon said every style capitalized on something subjective. Elizabeth said no there is good and bad and Gideon asked her if she really thought that and she laughed and said she didn't know but for her right now yes.

She put on a jacket from the store and said really like is this it? This is what we're doing and Gideon said to be quiet it was rude and she said fine and took it off and walked to the map again to find the next store.

She picked out a store she said would probably be the one. Gideon asked her why they didn't start there and she said that's not what you do when you shop for clothes.

Gideon checked his phone- still nothing from Reid. He didn't bring it up to Elizabeth but he was wondering what happened to him.

Elizabeth: Look

Gideon: What?

Elizabeth: They sell records and stuff

Gideon: I'm tempted but what would I do with one I guess

Elizabeth: We can just look.

They went into the store and Gideon felt the consumerist rush at the idea of having physical versions of music he liked- and he remembered this to be not dissimilar to what being in his family's video store was like.

Gideon: Yeah this is like mom and dad's store

Elizabeth: No?

Gideon: I mean cause physical copies and stuff

Elizabeth: I guess

They both flipped through records and then left and Gideon said he felt bad they didn't buy anything since physical media was disappearing but Elizabeth said that's capitalism and Gideon said yeah she would know being in advertising and she said everyone knows that.

At the third clothing store Elizabeth picked up three jackets to try on and she did in front of the mirror and she didn't even ask his opinion- she seemed to know exactly what she wanted and how these measured up and Gideon felt a little envious of this.

Elizabeth said okay this one and they went and paid for it.

She then said they should get Gideon something and Gideon said okay figure out something for me and she said yeah that seems fun.

The first store they tried she picked up two shirts for him that were nice button-downs and he tried them on and she asked what he thought and he said I don't know they're fine and she said they're fine, yeah, not great so they tried another store and she told him to try on three and one seemed potential for her.

Elizabeth: What about this one and don't say fine

Gideon: It's good I just don't know if it seems like me

Elizabeth: Why?

Gideon: Yeah I don't know

Elizabeth: It's because it's a nice piece of clothing and you feel like a fake in it

Gideon: Okay, psychoanalysis or whatever

Elizabeth: Yes, because you hunch over and stuff

Gideon: I don't like. . . Have bad self esteem. I just don't like that I'm sending messages about myself via the clothes - clothes could communicate that I am sending a message. It's not even the particular message.

Elizabeth: Let's try another store.

They tried one more and did find a blue shirt they both liked and neither had anything negative or complex to say about it. It was clear this was the right fit for him so he bought it. Elizabeth suggested they go to the food court to eat and he said okay and she said it's probably fast food and crap but she didn't care.

They got fast food Mexican and sat down to eat.

Gideon: What does the rest of your week look like?

Elizabeth: I get back and then it's back to work. Q3 stuff.

Gideon: What do you do while travelling?

Elizabeth: What?

Gideon: To pass time.

Elizabeth: Audiobooks or podcasts.

Gideon: What did you listen to?

Elizabeth: Mostly true stories, history, or science.

Gideon: Is Trespassers still going?

Elizabeth: No, you need to catch up.

Gideon: I am. I think I'm behind maybe 8 episodes.

Elizabeth: Who is your favorite on the show?

Gideon: Maybe Elaine.

Elizabeth: She's good. I like Jax.

Gideon: Yeah he's funny.

Elizabeth: I feel bad for him.

Gideon: Because he lost his business?

Elizabeth: Oh, yeah. But then other stuff.

Gideon: Oh, okay, spoilers and stuff.

Elizabeth: He just is always wrong-place wrong-time.

Gideon: Hmm yeah

They finished up eating and got in the car; it was getting dark. Elizabeth called Reid and he didn't pick up.

When they got home they asked their mom and dad if he returned and they said no. Gideon looked at Elizabeth and she shrugged.

That night in bed Gideon texted his friends that live in St. Francis to see if they'd be down to hang and they said sure, but not tomorrow but the next day.

That night Gideon slept very soundly, and his dreams had a satisfying quality akin to things falling into place perfectly.

The next morning Elizabeth and his parents gathered to say goodbye to Elizabeth and eat a last breakfast together. Elizabeth said wow he's really not going to show up, and her parents didn't respond and so she gave it up and they talked about Christmas plans- even though it was the same every year really. After they ate he helped her get her stuff into her car and she said to text if Reid came back and Gideon asked if they should be worried and she said mom and dad said it happens all the time anyway.

After she left Gideon watched the car become small in the line of vision and then turn.

He went back into the house and watched one hour of news with his parents asking them questions about the stories and he could feel the sensation things were getting worse in the world, but then again, he wasn't sure what he was even comparing to. His dad mentioned something Gideon didn't notice on the news and said what but his dad didn't extrapolate.

He asked his parents if he could borrow the car to see if Reid was at his new place, which he said he had checked out with him two days prior and his dad seemed to not want him to, but his mom got interested in the new place and asked details about it that Gideon tried to remember but her questions included minutiae he didn't really notice much such as the stove being electric or gas. Her enthusiasm seemed to silently lead to affirmation of him taking the car. He drove to the part of town he remembered it being in, and then got a little lost. Looking around he thought about people and their lives and how strange it was that to everyone, obviously they were 'them' - but the contours of their lives were taken as a given rather than a specific randomized set of variables and choices that manifested in lives that were, in some sense, what people were like in this town in this day and age, and in another sense completely universal to humans but he didn't know what that really entailed after all.

He managed to recall the turns to get to the new place and knocked on the door and Mark answered and said he had not seen Reid although Reid had texted him to confirm he would be moving his stuff in sometime soon and had already paid first month's rent.

Gideon then drove to Reid's old place to see if he potentially went back there. He noted that everything was new but in a way so as to give the impression it had simply been renovated via using 'older' looking brick and 'rustic' aesthetic.

He knocked on the door for three 'rounds' before noticing the ring camera that had fallen and been placed standing upright on a box. He rang and Reid's friend opened the door. Gideon asked if Reid was here, or had been here recently and his friend said he had not seen him but some of his stuff was still here so he had not yet moved out fully and said if Gideon saw him to tell him he is cutting it close because someone else was moving in soon.

Gideon could come up with just one more idea and decided to message Kelly on social media. He drove back to his parents place and waited on his bed. No response from her yet.

He thought about how to get from his hometown to his friends town, looking up if there was any public transport available and finding out there was not. He walked downstairs to ask his parents if he could borrow the car and they said no, not if he was going overnight, but his dad said if he spoke to Mike, the car service man they used, he could get a deal for the 40 minute drive and Gideon said okay.

That night his dad barbecued and they played some card games. Gideon asked how they got into the video store business and they said they simply filled a need that existed on this side of town since people were driving 20 minutes to rent a video and their store was more convenient.

Kelly messaged Gideon back that no, she had not seen him, and he could rot in hell. Gideon messaged back thanks.

That night he read more of his book, and felt confused about the plot points after having left it for a bit during the trip. He scrolled back several pages to try and get proper context and then gave up and instead went onto social media and then closed and opened it several more times. He went to Kelly's account and was surprised to see Reid in many pictures based on what was ostensibly a bad breakup or troubled relationship. He did note, nevertheless, they had chemistry or looked like it, and he thought about how it was never clear to him how Reid could have chemistry with multiple women given that he thought chemistry was a rare combination of factors and not something that could be readily generated multiple times in sequential order over a decade or so.

He felt deficient in this area, and yet reasoned that Reid paid the price of charisma in his troubled nature, and Gideon paid the price of analytic skills with a socially specific nature, and thought of how people's personalities and character were never abundantly clearly optimal or suboptimal but included trade-offs such that he could not imagine a perfectly functioning person, and from that reasoning he imagined what that would even look like and realized it would also take external circumstances to be attuned, and unlike the fish in the tank the world for many humans and wild animals and maybe all sorts of sentient life was not isolated in terms of its variables and not a perfect match between personality and environment. It would probably be at some point destabilized or inharmonious and at the mercy of random luck. The amount of people who could sustain perfect attainment and luck such that life would be a smooth and sensible journey, perhaps with some bumps that were attuned to 'growth' in a sense, probably numbered very low among the general

population now, and certainly historically, and he thought about why things were as they were since it seemed poorly designed or at least what could be said of the design did not readily make sense and he looked up on Wikipedia the problem of evil, which was a theological position, and looked up related articles and he felt even these attempts to describe it were generalizing even if true for the most part, and yet social and historical contingencies and data were never clear cut. It was from this line of thinking he thought that, ultimately, if the fish experiments were to yield something incredibly useful it would have to be in discovering a latency principle of novelty- and that in fact controlling conditions would be best served to just net out the effects of what is observable- and this microcosm, if it could yield anything that could be analyzed, had an indeterminate principle mathematically, theoretically or philosophically.

When he exhausted this line of thinking he looked at several more people's social accounts online and tried to piece together what the last ten years would have been like if he had just stayed here.

When even that felt too complicated- as his pills were kicking in- he watched the TV show his sister and him had been watching and felt his focus return to something concrete and relatively unchallenging and he slowly fell asleep.

He had between four and eight dreams of decreasing complexity.

6.

The next day he woke up and packed his suitcase for the overnight trip and thought about his friends in St. Francis, and he thought about what they could do or if they had plans and he imagined conversations he would have with them and what he would say and what they would respond and rehearsed a narrative of what he has been up to since that is a common question. His two friends were roommates and had two other roommates he knew and everyone there worked for some kind of technology company in one way shape or form. He recalled they were into video games and though Gideon didn't play them much he would appreciate the effect of concentrating attention on a singular, well defined goal to 'win' as he had experienced with the racing game.

The sun was bright in the sky, and hovered above the earth and ground and gave light to the planet at various times.

When Mike the cab driver came his parents talked to him about the weather for 10 minutes and then they were off to St. Francis.

Mike: What's out there?

Gideon: Some old friends

Mike: You're young, you don't have old friends

Gideon: Yeah I guess

Mike: My wife has one friend in her eighties

Gideon: That's cool

Mike: She remembers everything

Gideon: Cool

Mike: We just listen to her talk sometimes

Gideon: Yeah

Mike: Am I picking you up too?

Gideon: Oh, yeah I guess. If you can.

Mike: Give me a call I remember.

Gideon: Yeah

Mike: Today is hot

Gideon: Today is hot

Mike: Hot, the sun is like right here

Gideon got out of the cab and texted his friends Dave and Shane that he was there. He went up to the door as he looked at the house which appeared to need some kind of upkeep but he couldn't determine what- it just seemed as though ostensibly someone should have been maintaining something.

He knew this place was a rental- and probably one of a few in the area. He couldn't recall the names of their roommates. Dave opened the door and said yo, Fish and Gideon said hi and they went inside where Dave said he was just finishing making coffee and asked if Gideon wanted coffee or was hungry and Gideon said he would take coffee but he was not hungry at the particular moment.

Dave: Yeah and sorry to hear about George.

Gideon: Yeah it's sad.

Dave: Did you two keep in touch much?

Gideon: Less so over time.

Shane came in and said hi and the topic of conversation changed to a recently released hip hop album.

Shane: 'STFU' and 'Wheels' are the best two.

Dave: 'ATL Channing Tatum' is good too.

Shane: What's that one?

Dave: The one that goes 'ATL Channing, ATL Channing, ATL ATL'

Shane: I don't remember that one

Dave put the song on and Gideon then just realized he had read about the album online but hadn't been checking out any new music on the trip. Even a short duration of time without

being online felt like he was completely out of the loop- such was the speed of how new things came into being and disseminated these days.

Shane: Yo

Shane pointed to a spill on the counter that seemed as though it was only partially cleaned up at best. Dave said the fuck and went over and cleaned it and they laughed and Gideon wondered what they were laughing at exactly.

Dave: We have haha

Shane: We got these two other roommates

Gideon: Oh, are you all friends?

Dave: Yeah

After they drank coffee Shane said he had to send out a few emails for work and Dave showed Gideon where he would stay, which was one spare room with a mattress on the floor. The room had some kind of discarded or in progress carpentry and/or metal work project.

Gideon: What's that?

Dave: Honestly dude I don't know Vinny does some work in here.

Gideon put his bag of stuff down on the bed and then thinking again took out his nicotine pouches.

Gideon: So what's the plan?

Dave: Honestly dude I don't know we were just going to probably chill and watch a movie.

Gideon: Cool.

Dave and him went back downstairs and Dave and him switched off music videos of rappers that had been listening to.

Shane came downstairs and asked what's the move and Dave said they should hike and Shane said okay and smoked a bowl and offered it to Gideon and Gideon said nah it was too early and Dave laughed and they waited for Shane to finish smoking and then Shane said they should pack water and Dave said cause dry mouth and Shane said cause they were going to hike and then they did some kind of playful shoving thing that turned into a play fight and then they left the house and Gideon tore a piece off the bottom of his pants that had been bothering him.

Today was humid but had become slightly overcast.

Shane: What's new at work?

Gideon: Nothing

Dave: Dude I'm so done with working

Shane: It blows we have to work

Dave: I'm going to retire and just take pills

Shane: Works crazy wild

Gideon: How many hours would you work if you didn't have to?

Shane: Zero

Dave: Zero

Gideon: Yeah true

Shane: I'm trying to get this promotion

Dave: No you aren't

Shane: I am

Dave: You don't even do shit

Shane: I'm trying to make that bread

Dave: Bread money cheese cheddar

Gideon: I always feel broke

Dave: Money moves

Shane: Making money moves

They walked uphill for a significant portion that didn't seem to end. Gideon realized he was probably comparatively out of shape which surprised him since he used the gym but he wondered if he targeted the wrong muscles.

Dave asked Shane for water and Shane said no it's only for dry mouth and Gideon said drink the puddles and they laughed.

At the top of the hill they cut through some brush and trees to get to the edge of the path to look at a view that overlooked a highway.

Dave: Kids throw shit from here onto cars

Gideon: That's fucked

Dave: Yeah people are fucked

Gideon: I don't think we did shit like that

Dave: Not as bad- people's brains are just broken

Shane: It's fucked

Dave: You got the bowl?

Shane: Word

They were apparently stopping here for a minute to look at the view and smoke. Gideon didn't feel like smoking but felt kind of left out not doing so - so he accepted and just smoked a hit or two which was probably a mistake since he felt even more weirdly out of place and time so early in the day. He made a note to not smoke again. He thought about how this would be like having a bad trip, and then started to feel like he was having a bad trip, and then he held his breath and that felt kind of better.

Shane and Dave talked about sports for a bit so Gideon zoned out and thought about if he had to pick his favorite player from a sport who would he pick and instead he got lost just thinking about various names he could name and trying to think how he knew those names.

After they disagreed about some kind of point Shane said Gideon would get bored and Gideon laughed a little self-consciously.

Shane: So our roommate Vinny

Dave: Yo

Shane: He's had this girlfriend for a minute and he keeps saying he's going to marry her and it's like yo you make 65k tops

Gideon: There isn't like a limit to getting married

Shane: She makes like six figures in marketing

Gideon: So she's bread winner money mover

Dave: She wants him to make more

Shane: But he wants to get married

Gideon: So it's a standstill?

Dave: But he isn't gonna make six figures low key, so I don't know what they're doing.

Shane: He's sprung though

Dave: Yeah

Gideon: When are you two getting married?

Dave: To each other?

Shane: We already are.

Dave: There's no girl out here to be with like that. And honestly I'm not even ready anyway.

Shane: Yeah shit is just fucked up

Dave: Maybe at 40

Shane: Can't afford shit

Dave: Gotta make money moves

Shane: Bread

Gideon: Baking

Shane: Oh shit he said baking

Dave: Baking

Shane: Baaaking

Gideon: Baking bread

Shane: Baking bad

Dave: Baking bud

After a bit more they continued their ascent up the hill and Gideon thought about in college how often the three of them would get into screaming fights and then the next day it would be chill. He thought about how they had become friends because they smoked and listened to music and he realized even though he didn't smoke like that anymore they probably just assumed he did and he never made any kind of counterevidence clear. Oh, he thought, I may not even know new shit about them. But how to even ask? You can just ask what's new and then people don't even know half the time.

Once they got to the top of the view he saw they had some kind of plan and they were going to a portion of the hike that had railings and led down to a little creek and tiny waterfall.

Gideon: That's kind of sick.

Dave: Yeah look at the rocks

They went down into the little creek area and picked up various rocks and Shane said some fact about rocks and Gideon felt suddenly really hungry but picked up a couple rocks and Shane said steal them, do it, and Gideon said steal? And Dave laughed and said they could take rocks they're literally rocks.

Gideon picked up a few rocks and put them in his pocket.

Dave saw a fish and pointed to it and said like work and Gideon laughed and said I'm working overtime and Dave said no but for real what's up with that job and Shane laughed and Gideon said it's a crazy job he knows that.

On the descent back down the hill Dave asked if he was hungry and wanted to get lunch and Gideon said yes so they walked back to the place and Shane said their other roommate was named Obie in case he was around and Gideon asked what's his deal and he said he was into psychedelics and Buddhist shit or something and Gideon said word and Dave said he's enlightened and Shane laughed and said sometimes Obie seems enlightened and other times just dumb as rock and Gideon said Obie and took out the rocks from his pocket.

At the bottom of the hill Dave said what should we do now and Shane said they could put on a movie- Gideon somewhat bristled at this- forecasting they would put on a movie and not watch it with much attention at this hour and this stoned. Shane said and lunch and Dave pulled out his phone and named some lunch spots and Gideon distractedly agreed to almost every one until Dave selected a generic spot and they ordered food from it.

Back at their place Shane said he was going to shower and Dave said Gideon should go first and Gideon said okay and took a shower. While in the bathroom he finally felt not high and went back to the spare room to change and he heard someone else get back to the house and tried to guess if it was Obie or Vinny just based on what he knew about them and trying to discern if what he had heard about them could fit the voice in a vague way.

He then investigated the project Vinny had been working on and yet it was still not clear what it could be- although the size and what he knew told him it may be a piece of furniture unless it was some art project- but despite the abstract form he felt Vinny, knowing almost nothing about him, was probably in the early stages of creating some kind of furniture piece and not an art piece.

Once he changed he came downstairs and Dave said he was going to put on some thriller movie and Shane said he was going to shower and Gideon said but the movie is on and Shane said they'd both seen this before multiple times and Gideon said they didn't have to watch it if they'd seen it and they said no its cool they like it and Gideon felt the pressure of now watching for the first time the movie they liked but had already seen.

While 'watching' the movie Dave had his phone out and was doing something on it and Gideon wondered about the plot and asked some leading questions so as to not have too

much dead air, and then went back to being silent and watching. He couldn't really determine how much he was supposed to be engrossed vs. active socially vs. present as a guest vs. enthused, etc. Gideon assumed when watching movies people watched them with semi-consistent attention but now he learned the truth about how people might watch movies especially if they had already seen it.

The plot revolved around a man trying to solve a mystery and the mystery had several clues throughout the town that led him on various micro-adventures to gather information and the mystery itself was sort of vague but revolved around an unclear conspiracy that morphed in scope with the clues. Gideon, to his surprise, actually became engaged with the movie even though at first he was hesitant and Dave said it's good right and he said yeah and then Shane got out of the shower and the food came and they ate while watching it and then Dave went to take his shower. Shane said that the movie kind of blew his mind and Gideon asked what he meant and he said he had trouble focusing on movies but this one kept his attention and on his first watch actually made him think about how cool it was someone could come up with this and that it signaled some kind of wild level of ability to create a concept that he wished he had created himself but was happy to witness and be around for- and Gideon thought then why didn't he watch the movie more intently- but then again Shane said they had watched it- either together or separately about ten times and Gideon said damn and thought about if he had ever seen a single film that many times and realized almost certainly not- maybe the maximum for movies that recurred at holidays. . . . maybe four times or five times depending but that was probably it and then maybe his favorite movies around three times or four times and he wondered if this was low and people actually constantly reexperience their favorite movies but he always felt he preferred to just have memories of them. But then he realized how different this was than music in which the best experience is replaying because certain musical movements make more sense over time and combine the novel with the expected shifts. Enjoyment peaks at some indeterminate middle point of novelty and predictability - and he realized pop songs capitalize on predictability and experimental music on novelty with most falling somewhere in the middle of the two- and that also any particular piece of music that combines novelty and predictability probably yields its best reexperience at three to ten repeats, and in contrast certain movies he recalled tended to be a one time experience- especially if leaning heavily on a singular 'twist' or 'reveal'.

After Dave showered he came downstairs then a second set of stepping which was in fact, yes Obie, and Obie said you're watching this again and they said hell yeah and he laughed and left the house again and Gideon said where's he going anyway and they said they didn't

know he would just enter and leave rooms, forgo greetings and introductions and said he was feral like an animal in that way- unsocialized. Shane said since he did LSD three times in a month he was permanently like that and Dave said no he just increasingly over time became more like that but was always like that.

The movie ended and then they said what now and Gideon shrugged and Dave said they could play a video game and Gideon said which and Shane said a sports game and Gideon didn't respond so Dave suggested a racing game and Gideon said okay and said he was good at racing games because he had been playing it at the barcade and they said which one and he told them and they said oh yeah true word.

After the game it was closer to dinner time and they suggested they go out to a Mexican place and Shane and Dave debated if they should ask Vinny if he wanted to come because he should be finishing up work and also because potentially he would be at his girlfriend's anyway so he probably won't come and Gideon said sure whatever and they gave a call and Vinny said he would be down so they got into Shane's car and drove about 10 minutes to the spot.

Vinny met them there and they all got burritos and Vinny introduced himself and Shane and Dave asked if Vinny wanted to chill with them later and he said no he was going to work on building and Gideon asked if he meant in the spare room where he had seen the item and Vinny said no he has a piece he's working on at his girlfriend's place and she's been getting pissed it's not finished and it's making a mess and Gideon asked what it was and he said he's making a coat rack at home and a table at his girlfriend's place and Gideon said he forgot people use coat racks. Vinny asked him about his job and he explained a bit.

Vinny: What's the end goal?

Gideon: Of the research?

Vinny: Yeah

Gideon: I suppose he wants to continually refine or prove his theory about environments

Vinny: Which is what?

Gideon: I think there's a certain axis or intersection of variables and he thinks this explains hierarchies and survival impulses

Vinny: But don't all things just want to survive?

Gideon: Yes but even that can be broken down into, I don't know, intensity or drive, strategy, I don't know. It can manifest in weird ways and also sometimes that drive can decrease.

Vinny: The fish are suicidal?

Gideon: I don't think that applies it's just like they can subconsciously slow in that area.

Vinny: So they have a subconscious?

Gideon: In the sense that, like, they don't have a conscious it's all kind of subconscious for them.

Vinny: Do you think it's DNA or in their soul?

Gideon: Their soul?

Vinny: Like the impulses to survive.

Gideon: It's probably in their DNA and if there is a soul probably in that but who knows.

Vinny: So you won't know?

Gideon: I'm not attached to the answer

Vinny: You don't care?

Gideon: No, I'm just not attached to the answer because I like, I don't know.

Dave: Vinny, enough with this boring ass shit

Vinny: These two are atheists- are you an atheist?

Gideon: It's like, I don't know.

Vinny: Agnostic?

Gideon: I don't know I guess.

Shane: Jesus. Oh shit haha.

Dave: Alright, hard stop on this.

Then they moved onto other topics such as sports and the movie they watched and then dinner finished up and as they were driving back Gideon asked if Vinny was super religious or something and Dave said his girlfriend was so he had been weaving it into conversations but in such a way to deny he previously did not believe much and somehow had come up with it on his own and Gideon was like oh and Shane said these types of debates go in

boring circles and noted he never engages Obie in them and Dave said because Obie is his own divinity and they laughed and Gideon asked what's his deal again and they said both our roommates are losing their minds but Obie's chill and Shane said Obie's crazy but chill.

When they got back to the place they lit up a bowl again and Shane said he had to shit and left and then they said should we watch something and Gideon said yeah and he said you pick and Gideon scrolled the options and was overwhelmed- as he usually was- with the plethora of choices and also this time he had to consider what all three of them would like and he couldn't really seem to figure out what that could be- he thought about the movie they watched before and if there was one similar and thought yeah I think there was a cool mystery movie I saw like a year ago and picked that one and the three of them watched and the two of them paid rapt attention- dispelling Gideon's concern they would not like it, or not pay attention.

When it was over they continued smoking and Gideon - who was semi-pretending to inhale at this point- said he was getting tired and they were like alright that's chill and he went to the spare room and knocked out. He slept incredibly deeply and dreamlessly and woke up more rested than he had felt in many months if not years.

Today he would go back and pack his stuff. Tomorrow he would be on the plane back to New York. He tried to think about his trip and couldn't really come up with anything interesting to think about it but felt something like: yes, that happened and it was something. He tried to think about George and thought about how it did not yet feel real. Since they did not keep in regular touch he seemed far away and yet now he was dead and dead was much darker and more permanent.

He had breakfast with Dave and Shane who said it was chill he visited and asked when he was leaving and he said tomorrow and they said they'd hit him up they may come to New York for a wedding next year if it happens which they said the couple had already broken off one date and got back together.

Then Gideon called Mike and Mike said he'd be there in an hour and so the three of them sat around playing the racing game again and Gideon felt dopamine being released while playing and realized he was very into racing games and this had not been the case before his trip but he had now formulated a new neural pathway that recognized the goal, concepts, controls (at a generally applicable level) and sensation of it and wondered if he would end up buying a video game system and he remembered being young and playing video games and that he wasn't sure when he had ceased to play video games but that part of him still existed was somehow still within him.

Mike picked him up and on the way back Mike talked extensively about some news story Gideon didn't know about- almost ceaselessly monologuing about the person 'on the run' because his ex-wife was found missing or dead or something.

On the way back Gideon received a text from Adam asking if he wanted to meet up and Gideon thought about this- it was in fact his last day and figured he should probably spend it with his parents- but he was also curious- but he also thought to what end would he meet with Adam who lived in another state and whom he had a nice but brief conversation and hookup and what would be the point? He thought, let's say Adam lived in New York would he see him? Yes. But then again he did not. But maybe it would be fun- but what about spending time with his parents? He went back and forth on this for a bit and then he arrived at his parents place.

He walked in and his parents were watching the news in which they were covering a story on a financial scandal involving billions of dollars and two to ten corrupt figures- although Gideon was lacking context to know who was being named as implicated vs. involved in prosecution.

His mom asked how Dave and Shane were doing and Gideon said oh yeah you know they're good. His mom said his brother was upstairs and Gideon said: what!? And she said yeah he came in late last night and was sleeping - he was picking up a few things to bring to the new place she said he came over with a box or two. Gideon said why didn't you text me she said it was late and you were going to see him when you got back. Gideon said what if he had made plans and she said did you make plans and he said no.

Gideon sat down to watch the news with them and his dad asked how Dave and Shane were and Gideon said he had said good. His dad and Dave had bonded once at a football game and his dad asked, almost exclusively, about how Dave was doing when Gideon saw Dave but rarely other friends. His mom said I just asked him that and his dad said he wasn't here and she said you were sitting there like always and he shrugged.

Gideon: Is the news bad?

Mom: The news is always bad.

Gideon: You don't get depressed just watching the bad stuff all day?

Mom: No

Gideon: Why not?

Mom: I'm keeping up

Gideon: What does that have to do with it?

Mom: I'm staying up to date

Gideon: Um okay.

Mom: We'll go to lunch when your brother gets up.

Gideon: Sure- whenever that is.

Mom: Yeah that is very true.

Gideon texted his sister to let her know his brother was there and she texted back okay good. He texted her asking why mom and dad aren't even slightly concerned when he leaves and comes back and she said they're more used to it. We just get the larger headlines but the day to day looks like this. Gideon said should we think rehab or something. His sister texted we're way not there yet. Gideon said true. His sister said I think we'll just kind of watch and see. Gideon said what's the deal with AA? His sister said it's kind of cultish but it's fine. Gideon said it's a cult? His sister said it's almost kind of religion but then that line gets thin. Gideon said Dave and Shane's roommate asked him about religion. His sister said nominally Catholic agnostic not caring is the family religion and that's rude and Gideon laughed. He asked how she was and she said good, she has a date and Gideon said good luck and she said lol I know.

As it approached eleven Reid did get up and came downstairs and his mom said how did you sleep and he said good and Gideon said hey I texted you and he said yeah my bad I got it but I was working and moving at the same time I've been tired. He said he had a couple of boxes he threw out and a couple of boxes of stuff he was getting from here and he just crashed and Gideon asked what was here and he said almost all his shorts were here from last summer. Gideon said wait are you working at the sandwich shop and he said no he was just doing Uber and TaskRabbit and the sandwich shop sucked.

They went out to lunch and his dad didn't know what to get and his mom said she didn't either and Reid said they were always going to this spot and she said but I want something different and he said I don't know if I want breakfast or lunch.

Gideon asked his mom and dad if they had seen Reid's new place and they said no and Reid said he would have them over - his new roommate Mark was much more responsible and the place was much more befitting having them over and his mom said she saw his old place once and it was a pig sty and his dad said bacon and Gideon laughed and then realized his dad didn't tell a joke- it was a non-sequitur with good timing and then he laughed more and his brother was like yo and his mom was like you found that really funny and his dad, amused, said it again.

He texted Adam saying he was probably staying in tonight and thanks for the offer but the timing wasn't right and Adam said no worries have a safe flight and Gideon 'liked' message.

After lunch his parents said they were going to go food shopping and go to the store to get a new shower curtain and bathmat and Gideon and Reid said they would stay here.

Reid: What did you get into on your last few days?

Gideon: Elizabeth and I went to the mall and then I went to Dave and Shane's.

Reid: Maybe you'll move in with them.

Gideon: So now you want me to move here?

Reid: You could move close by.

Gideon: Nah, I don't know.

Reid: Dad has dementia.

Gideon: He - what? He does?

Reid: No I don't know he's making less sense

Gideon: He seems kind of okay?

Reid: I don't know why I said that I don't know. He just seems old.

Gideon: He kind of is old.

Reid: Actually we're kind of old.

Gideon: That's true.

Reid: I'm hype for this new spot- you liked it right?

Gideon: Yeah it was cool.

Reid: I've got some good ideas sometimes.

His parents got back and they hung around until dinner and his mom made steaks and after dinner his mom said they should watch some movie she heard was good - it was some middling sci-fi movie on streaming and afterwards she asked if they liked it and they said sure. Reid said he would drive Gideon to the airport tomorrow and his parents said how nice.

That night Gideon felt anxiety about work. He thought about how he perceived his life when he was working vs. not working, in North Carolina vs. New York and he felt it was like having multiple modes of existing. This felt strange and then he realized that's probably just everyone's experience and he was like okay cool it's whatever- but he realized he didn't want to work he wanted to do . . . something. He didn't know what. Then he realized that's just what everyone feels sometimes.

The next day his parents said goodbye and that despite that the circumstances were not happy under which he came it was nice to have him here for a bit. Gideon agreed and thanked them and his mom said haha thanking me for letting you stay here. Reid drove him to the airport and said text me and Gideon said you text me sometime and he said yeah I will and Gideon said haha okay you better.

He was early for his flight- which was good. He walked around rolling his suitcase to kill time. Time can be precious, he thought, but also so boring and actually time is just a container and it's very hard to come up with something to think about it. Instead, he focused on being bored and realized there was nothing to do about it but just wait.

7.

Gideon had never escaped the notion that work was not what he was meant to do on this earth- and this superstition persisted despite that in truth Gideon wasn't sure what the criteria or basis for "meant to do" really meant- it seemed to imply either 1. Some design existed for reality, which he was unclear on how one could have authority over that decision in an absolute sense that was not simply a function of power- but also seemed to imply the authority who had that power could not simply correct a mistake while being unclear how a mistake could enter into the system. The alternative explanations were that it was not a mistake (therefore he was already wrong) or no such basis existed. The other thing it implied was 2. His desires for his own life (ie not to work) carried significance and should have ultimate bearing on his experience- but it seemed obvious he did not live in a solipsistic reality and pretty quickly imagining a world in which everyone got what they wanted lead to logical, practical, or structural incoherence or contradiction.

So in a truer sense, work was just a fact of this particular time and place in which he occupied reality. This sometimes seemed acceptable relative to say, a much more horrific alternative like if he was born in a time and place where he could do nothing to prevent an onslaught of continual suffering - though where to draw the line on what constituted 'that time/place' was unclear- he thought of being a sickly child who nonetheless must work and work more than he did now, probably manual labor, with black plague continually degrading his own life and everyone around him and would persist without even the barest hint of medical and scientific sense-making let alone existential meaning.

So, fine, he thought, there are much worse things, and he is to the *right* of that line (ultimately, whatever it's fine) rather than to the *left* of it (unending horror). He sometimes thought this should provoke gratitude but instead felt more as though it was a simple assessment and not a gifted position.

At work he was restructuring data on fish aggression against other fish. A binary 1 marked an act of aggression, a 1-7 scale somewhat more subjectively demarcated severity, and a nominal category demarcated structural intensity, a variable he had the most trouble with. While the events were time stamped, the players were logged, and the hierarchy sorted via math, this category reflected the most squishy assessment that nonetheless tried to capture if in fact an event was unusual in quality, duration, intensity, hierarchical rupture, ambiguity in intent, etc. The particular coded response for long duration of ambiguous activity ("Aggression of unclear duration/significance" subtype "Structural flag") could of course produce correlation with duration X aggression and influence results. His work had

taken on the task of trying to figure out the latency of these subtypes to map them more cleanly onto the data such that the effects were accurately captured and leveraged.

He had one coworker of equal status, Scott, who had been promoted for showing a clear mathematical brain, and was best able to match statistical methods and functions to data. Most of the others on the team were likely to remain research assistants unless they demonstrated some kind of particular strength. Each of these research assistants were successful in the aggregate- cross checking work to ensure the validity of the data that gets pushed out to senior analysts - but each had individual flaws that made them less reliable when it came to maintaining data integrity and objectivity. For example, one seemed to overuse the label “Act of Unknown Purpose” which was meant to flag truly exceptional but unclear actions- and he used this for cases that would better be coded as “Aggression of unknown significance” or “Insignificant Activity” or “Hierarchy buffering” subtype: “Slight deviation.” Act of Unknown Purpose was meant to be a rare event flagged for future checks, but instead it seemed often his teammates would just recode this in their cross checking. Another research assistant seemed to be too sparse with coding, allowing too many events to have missing values. Another coded events as categories with names similar to but not exactly as designated and on occasion this led to missing information, etc.

This morning Scott was working through how to model deviations from future projections and account for an indefinite research design time span. This work itself had been going for years now, and was likely to continue for as long as their eccentric benefactor, The Funder, lived or perhaps longer if his will intended so.

Scott: How was your vacation, Gideon?

Gideon: It was. Oh. It was for a funeral.

Scott: Oh, I’m sorry.

Gideon: So, yeah. It was good to see people back home but, you know.

Scott: I’m sorry to hear about your loss.

Gideon had thought he had mentioned the funeral but maybe not since he and Scott didn’t socialize much and when they did it was almost never personal life related. Scott was quiet and work-focused and when he did become chatty it was often about neutral non personal territory like movies or TV or games, articles, etc.

Gideon's boss, Dr. Egan, used this chatter as an opportunity to leave his cubicle and come out and say glad to have you back Gideon and then informed him on what had come through via emails in his absence, namely that they are keeping an eye on potential hierarchical shifts - the top 2 fish in the tank seven had never had a long stable period of hierarchy and were being heavily watched for this period of instability.

Work, as it did on most days, took the form of Gideon typing away on the computer, looking up theories, thinking through the latest data refresh, exploring the recent video stream, and then "zooming out" and crunching the numbers on trends at various points to try and eyeball anything worth further investigating. This was Gideon's strength: intuiting story and patterns at a high level and zooming in and developing frameworks.

At lunch time he went to a food truck and got chicken and rice and ate it sitting on a partial brick wall that separated the library from the sidewalk. Then, predicting he would feel full and tired shortly, he went into Starbucks to get a coffee. The line was incredibly long and while he waited he scrolled the news and learned there was some ruling that could have many effects on the country and subsequent rulings or laws but he wasn't sure if this was a big deal, if it was framed out of proportion that would be annoying, but he also returned to his earlier feeling that, if indeed (as the news appeared to posit) things were getting chaotic and bad at an alarming rate- was it true that nobody could really do anything about it? For some amount of years he felt as though the news was forecasting down-the-line negative effects at a constant rate and though he was not sure of this, he felt the impression of the journalists was something like ". . . And therefore it should be stopped" but nobody could ever explicate how. There were elections, sure, but the pace at which things developed seemed insanely fast compared to electoral cycles and so he had the sensation of driving an incredibly fast car through a forest with an unresponsive steering wheel. Frustrated by this feeling he turned instead to the book he had started which was Hemingway and it had a pleasant authorial voice which felt, much like in a dream, despite that content may vary in interest, the true pleasure derived instead from the fact that the ship was in fact being steered by someone else.

Then he ordered a red eye coffee and he drank it fast and started to walk back to work. He passed by a man who seemed troubled either via drugs and/or mental illness and again, the sensation that nobody was able to do anything appeared and he averted his eyes while hearing in his head how people should not avert their eyes to the suffering and he argued with his imaginary debate partner what should he do and he didn't know the answer but he felt the answer would feel something like: now you start turning the unresponsive vehicle in this direction so it can start avoiding a patch of trees. But by the time the vehicle was responsive- if it even was- how many trees would have smashed into him already?

So he went back to work and continued his day, and continued trying to make sense of the aggression variable which had major explanatory power but was not a new observation and he tried to think at a more meta level that bands of aggression levels (perhaps 1-2, 3-4, 5-7) were perhaps not in fact just different in their severity but varied or distinct strategies of fish living, or perhaps personality subtypes, and maybe they had been going about it wrong. However, the carbs overpowered the coffee and he felt himself becoming more and more sleepy and he went to the break room to make tea and two of the research assistants who were chatting stopped and then continued in a stilted fashion when he came in to make the tea.

The rest of the day he felt unable to truly work. The 9-5 structure of intellectual work made no sense since it truly happened in spurts and sprints rather than at a continual and sustained level. Sometimes there was rote work to do but perhaps everything would just be machine-led tomorrow.

The hours passed slowly now, and in between half-hearted attempts to work he felt his dopamine dip and turned inward imagining various scenarios that would spike his dopamine such as getting incredibly good news that he won the lottery and he realized that that would actually solve every problem he had because in terms of levers to pull in life money does it all. That fact made him truly feel insane- if he was incredibly lucky suddenly things that felt like deep problems- things he rationalized as the stuff that makes up life's inherent difficulty- which is the ability to control limited variables and to leverage them to the best outcomes would just be totally distorted like a video game he had suddenly become overpowered in.

With two hours left in the day he wondered about his sleep, and if he would go to bed early and realized he probably would not. His pills didn't have many side effects but they could only really truncate falling asleep as a process and not knock him out completely.

He thought about the movie he wanted to see with Sam, and imagined he was in the movie and he had to study a part and act and he thought about if he won the award and had to give a speech and then kind of thought about approaches to the speech- funny, serious, etc.

He spent the final hour preparing some things he would do tomorrow- hoping somehow tomorrow he would become a totally new person with a refreshed energy level and ability to solve these problems in the data.

He took the train home and listened to some music on the way and felt a headache coming on so he took an Advil from his bag. He got off at his station, walked home, and began trying to see what he could make for dinner. Having failed to defrost any meat he just made a random mix of a microwaved veggie burger, microwaved rice and microwaved broccoli.

After eating his food he sat on the couch feeling burnt out and scrolled through potential TV shows, adding a few to his queue but nothing particularly stood out and he ended up just watching the newest episode of the show he and his sister had been watching.

After three episodes he took his pill and laid down in bed and scrolled on his phone and then read a chapter of his book and then finally became tired.

The next morning he woke up and didn't feel very rested but took a caffeine pill and made coffee and waited for the effects to kick in. In the shower he thought about work and felt some anxiety that he couldn't really attribute to anything of substance- a free floating kind of nervousness seemed to be oriented around the whole process of having a job, or making money, or being around other people, or something else he couldn't identify as particular to any one element and he tried to feel and clarify his feelings around this and it didn't really yield anything and he thought about what could alleviate the anxiety and he didn't come up with anything so he just continued to shower and accepted it and that didn't help but he didn't know what else he could really do.

He picked out his clothes for work- he needed to do laundry but had been procrastinating that since the laundry was not in his building and the process was irritating to him. Then he selected the simplest combination of clothes he could- essentially all blue. On occasion he tried to dress more professionally or nicely but he was never sure what color combinations worked and he tended to overthink what clothes were communicating and so often the easiest selection he found was to just nearly match his pants and shirt to be almost the same color and this tended to simplify what he was communicating to just be a single color and a single color was ostensibly something very easy to interpret and didn't make him feel paralysis in his choices.

Then he got on the train and listened to music- he tended to select the same ten albums on repeat - unlike his taste in books or movies his taste in music had become less adventurous and he found himself returning to the same few albums that he liked from ages 15-25, and rarely did he find something liked enough to be top tier in terms of his favorites anymore and he thought about an article he read that this was something of a fact about how people make neurological connections to music as an art form that tends to latch onto people's taste at a particular time and perhaps due to less neuroplasticity the appeal later in life for something new is lessened, and he wondered how much this applied

to life generally when thinking about new experiences and he thought about how newness, even new things, didn't feel 'new' as they once did when he was younger and the older one gets the more hardened one is to senses in a particular way that is both a little boring but also ostensibly protective because, as he noted, his range of emotions, though more flat, is also stable compared to when he was younger and he applied this logic as a broad observation around preferences regarding everything. Tradeoffs are part of how things are judged and pure optimal choices are illusions and also ones that come with drawbacks and this makes selection never an easy decision because it involves trading one thing for another- and though one can have preferences one must let go of something and things are not replaceable, or cannot be replaced completely, or cannot be replaced to be what they would have been at a particular point in time because of the passage of time and this is just how life is and even more importantly he realized it was tough to evaluate his life- relative to what? What should one do or feel - and though there is much advice in the world- how universally applicable is any of it? How much could one make life into something optimized- and how much is it out of one's hand and then he got interrupted in his thinking by accidentally skipping to the next song which started with a discordant synth.

The rest of the week continued in a similar fashion - Gideon tried to sort through new ways of categorizing the aggression score and yet despite thinking up how it might work it became difficult to find meaning in the data as it was and he figured an interaction variable between aggression and another variable would probably be the right move but his head, heart, or something else was not in the correct space to muster enough enthusiasm or effort to be able to figure it out.

More evenings passed as the previous one did, with bland dinners and TV binges and he texted Sam to ask if he wanted to see the movie that weekend and Sam said sure and they made plans for Saturday afternoon and this at least gave Gideon something to do and he hoped the movie would be good enough he could feel invigorated and excited about something in the future - in the rare instances a movie was incredible he could feel a rapturous feeling- but the hit rate for this intensity was inconsistent and hard to predict.

By Thursday night he felt exhausted and thought of how much time he had spent working and how much time he had spent doing other things- and it felt as though his life was only about work but even work was boring to him. But being bored was also not the worst thing in the world and he thought about how in the context of the world and of history there were much worse problems- people who worked to death, people who could not work, people who could not afford food or who were exploded in war, or generally faced unbearable situations in life and how people who talked about being alive in the abstract and what one should were actually giving observations around specific historical and social contexts.

The reasons one survived were varied and he supposed this meant people had a reason to keep going that was vague and unclear to them- and there must be some marginal calculation it is worth it, or at minimum an impulse that guides them so. Except then some people do give up, he thought. The news had reported on people seeking assisted suicide and he thought about that as well. It seemed then that people mostly had an impulse to survive, with some exceptions, or rather perhaps there was a spectrum of survival instinct and this made him think then about the fish- and perhaps they had been assuming things about the survival instinct they did not understand fully. And then he realized of course that fish do not have conscious motivations and it was not clear if even they had the right a priori assumptions around motive and then he thought about how well established zoology is as a field and then he thought about if perhaps the whole enterprise was, in controlling the context, distorting everything in the research. But then, another idea, that perhaps like the fish it would be impossible for him to ever have full context of what they were doing and trying to understand and create complete knowledge was limited to what conceptually they could hold in their brains and mathematically compute but what if this was simply something they could only compute up to a certain limit point. So what was the limit point of this project in which it appeared they were trying to understand everything by reducing it to fish but suddenly he realized project of looking incredibly granularly and looking vastly into the entirety of the universe were equally approaching finite limits of human knowledge. So then a separate question came to him: what was the best piece of knowledge though it may be limited that they could extract- they should be working towards that and suddenly the hubris of The Funder and his underlying assumptions felt real to him, and he realized there was perhaps an overestimation of human knowledge capabilities. And then he realized perhaps he was wrong. And then he realized he truly had no clue about anything fundamentally. At minimum he realized the great mysteries of the universe were not likely to be solved within his lifetime.

So he made a point to himself to email the benefactor and discuss this and he wrote this all out but then he considered that the man himself had probably thought of these questions already and this was probably the type of thing he thought about often. So he didn't send the email.

Friday at work he felt completely lost- as if overnight the distance he had between himself and the work had been removed and even though it was his job he now felt acutely that what he was doing was continuing to spin the wheels of a car that had lost its way in a forest.

He could not bring himself to work that day at all, and his coworker said hey any updates and he said no not yet and he hoped somehow this clarity on the place of this work in

epistemology would subside and that he had become too aware of everything and needed to not be so aware. He had made a grave mistake.

After work on Friday he felt insane and he drank some wine and watched TV and he hoped the whole nightmare would go away.

Then Saturday came and he went to the gym and some of the anxiety subsided, and he texted his sister about the show they were watching and he could begin to feel he was more grounded and not spiraling and this was a significant improvement.

At around 3PM he started getting ready to meet Sam for the movie.

He showered and put on clothes and took them off and put them on again until a few pairs of shirts and pants lined the bed. Finally selecting a pair that felt semi comfortable but also decent to go out in, he rethought if the movie theater would be cold and decided to bring a hoodie just in case. He put on his headphones and walked to the train where he regretted the hoodie as it was insufferably hot- and he played a few new songs from a playlist that was put out on streaming that Friday. On the train he sat and looked around at the various people who also shared this city with him and thought how interesting it was they all shared various reasons for arriving at approximately the same destination in time, and how he had the same thought in North Carolina. But he remembered he liked this about the city: the reasons here for arriving at this point were probably truly vast. Then he noticed a crazy person rocking back and forth with an indeterminate look in his eye- and he felt pity but also felt fear and he sensed some kind of cosmic event had happened to remind him to stay grounded and aware of his body and not be swept up into reveries.

Getting off the train he noticed he was a few minutes early and texted Sam and scrolled on his phone and his sister texted him that his brother had a new girlfriend and he texted back asking if she had details and she said not really, she just heard from their mom and he asked if their mom said anything and she said no just that she seemed nice but that could really mean anything or not even be true.

Sam arrived and they said hey and bought tickets and sat down in the theater.

Sam: They changed up the seats, right?

Gideon: Yeah I think so

Sam: They were old seats?

Gideon: The old ones

Sam: When did that happen? Has it been that long?

Gideon: I think. No I don't know. Maybe it changed.

The movie trivia came on the screen and Gideon got 3 of 3 right, naming actors who appeared in films and Sam said he was good at trivia and Gideon said yeah they should do trivia sometime and Sam said yeah true.

The first preview of the movie was for a romantic comedy that Gideon had never heard of- it was about two people who kept running into each other and couldn't sleep that night unless they did see each other.

The second preview was for a movie that was about a lab experiment gone wrong that produced a virus that compelled people to ceaselessly run towards some central part of the world that was not captured by cameras.

The third preview was for a horror movie about werewolves that attacked a group of friends.

The fourth preview was an action movie that had an unclear plot and Tom Cruise.

The fifth preview was about superheroes.

The sixth preview was about superheroes.

The seventh and final preview was about a journalist taking on a big corporation that was hiding a secret and then it turned out to be based on a true story to some extent.

The movie itself was from a director they both enjoyed who had slowly been expanding his movies to be more mainstream but retain some non-mainstream elements but also utilized the higher budget to produce sequences that were visually dazzling, so for instance this movie had a spectacular science fiction segment but the dialogue remained understated and the theme of the movie was about unconscious motives impacting robots at the margins but in such a way that it slightly altered people's personal lives rather than being apocalyptic. In one scene a character ends a relationship because an ethicist working on the robots had been skeptical of qualities this man had and the robot had introduced this to the person via subtle conditioning while assisting the person's doubts about his fitness as a partner since he was lazy - and what began as optimization of particular segments of her life increased her frustration and skepticism of him.

After the movie Sam asked what he thought about the movie.

Gideon: I liked it.

Sam: I'm happy a movie like this is just playing at a normal time in a normal theater.

Gideon: Yeah it's good to see he can get stuff out into the world at this scale.

Sam: It's continuing his kind of contemporary unconscious theme from his other work.

Gideon: But it also feels more socially critical I think.

Sam: I think there were elements of that in his previous movies but I think he's leaning into it. It also felt like maybe a parody of certain movies.

Gideon: Yeah like his last movie reminded me of some stuff that came out before like in the last few years.

Sam: Yeah- but do you like it more than his other work?

Gideon: Umm, maybe not more.

Sam: I think I need to sit with it.

Gideon: Yeah true.

They went out to dinner then to talk about things in their lives etc.

Sam: What's new?

Gideon: I don't know. I guess coming back from the trip.

Sam: How was that?

Gideon: The funeral was sad but weird. Actually that was sort of the whole trip. It was just like wow I lost touch with George and I lost touch kind of with others but then time continues on.

Sam: Yeah that's how I feel when I go back to California.

Gideon: I felt bad about George but it's almost like I should have felt more bad?

Sam: I mean it is what it is.

Gideon: It was sad but then it was like a background sad thing and then it was like other things start demanding attention and it kind of just becomes a little sad fact.

Sam: Hmm. I guess that makes sense.

Gideon: It's depression maybe I don't know.

Sam: I mean it's just. It's what it is.

Gideon: How are you?

Sam: I lost my job.

Gideon: You lost your job?

Sam: haha Yeah.

Gideon: What happened?

Sam: I think it's just layoffs and stuff because everything is going to shit.

Gideon: Like with the company?

Sam: Yeah I think.

Gideon: What are you going to do?

Sam: I mean find a job and hope somehow I do or else I don't know.

Gideon: Shit, sorry.

Sam: Yeah I don't know. How is your job going?

Gideon: I don't know. I don't wanna say now.

Sam: Why?

Gideon: I'm not feeling it really but it is whatever.

Sam: What's wrong with it?

Gideon: I'm kind of over it I guess.

They ordered food and Gideon realized he was hungry after he ate and often he would forget or not realize he was hungry which was something that impacted his mood sometimes and then would realize after a meal.

Gideon: I feel like my life is a long list of movies and books and TV and stuff.

Sam: I guess so.

Gideon: And then people too.

Sam: Yeah that's kind of what it is, no?

Gideon: Is your food good?

Sam: I guess yeah. Also life is food too?

Gideon: What?

Sam: I don't know. Life. I'm just naming things now you could put everything in that category I guess.

Gideon took the train back and they had plans the next weekend to go to trivia and he texted his friend Tara if she wanted to go - Tara had been away for a few months for work but he realized she was probably back now or would be soon- they had met at a concert for a punk band and shared a bunch of cigarettes when he still smoked on and off and stayed in touch and she knew Sam sort of well- Sam may have liked her at one point but then he kind of dated someone else and so they were friends of a sort with some tension but then she started dating Bradley and the whole thing kind of fell off. She said she was down.

Back at home Gideon felt exhausted, and tomorrow was Sunday and he hoped somehow he would get so much rest he would feel motivated again to be productive at work.

On Sunday he went to the gym and did some shopping. He came home and sat on the couch reading on his phone when he decided to log onto a dating app and see who was in his area. After a few hours matches came in and he had a date that Thursday with a lawyer who worked on copyrights or something. He wasn't sure what to make of dating as a whole since he had learned over the years most dates were disappointing and his ideal partner would be someone who would check several boxes that he didn't feel like people did often and it was not necessarily their fault per se, but it did mean he was likely to be alone and that was fine. But occasionally it got the best of him to wonder if he should try again. And the cycle kind of went on of dating and disappointment. Mostly what didn't work for him were people who seemed to not be able to think in ways that were clear let alone interesting. On the occasions he did meet someone like this, then the problem would become some sort of logistic or lack of interest on the other person's part and he would think fair enough and move on.

That Sunday he read the remainder of his book and he felt one step closer to some sort of goal he couldn't identify. He watched TV while texting Tara about the show she had recommended and he was likely, if he kept watching at this pace, to be up to date on the

episode that would air that night. He almost made it before seeing it was closer to 9pm then he thought and he took his pill and laid in bed and felt he was in a haze where he tossed and turned but did not get to sleep until 1AM.

The next morning he got dressed and went into work. Scott asked him if he had made much progress and he said some, sure, and then he sat back at his desk and did try and disaggregate the variables and run some models but each act felt like an impossible task he had to drag himself through. He thought about Sam no longer having a job and wondered why he couldn't just be okay having a job. It would pay his bills. It was not the worst job one could have. But this was to no avail as it felt hollow to him. Attempts to reframe were not forthcoming so he just went to the kitchen and made more coffee and joined in with two RAs talking about the show and they seemed eager to have him leave the conversation so he did. Then they came to him to hand in some work and he skimmed it, making some changes, and then left the rest on his "to do pile" while he went on the computer and stalked people on social media, remembering as many people as he could and trying to find out one new thing about each one of them and he wasn't sure why he was doing this but it ate up some time until lunch.

At lunch he went to the sandwich shop and got a sandwich and thought about the past and some people who he could have theoretically reached out to on his last trip but there was never enough time or energy to do everything and some people would just remain people who he knew at some point and he wondered about if the people in his life would still be there years from now but it felt like a scary thought he was already exhausted by so he just thought about his date and trivia.

The rest of the day continued in a similar fashion and by the time he got back home he napped for an hour which ruined his sleep schedule.

On the dating app he chatted with more people and felt somewhat more excited in that it introduced some kind of novelty into his life.

Tuesday and Wednesday were similar but he slowly found himself becoming accustomed again to working. He slowly did some of the tasks he needed to do, including the variable work he didn't necessarily believe was that important, insightful, or accurate but which needed to get done. So many years of work, and yet, in resigning himself to it now, he felt a numbness enter into him during work hours that was better than the anxiety and he thought about movies that stressed to not be numb, doing what one loves in life, taking the risk and thought how stupid it was to assume the labor market and economy would bend itself to you, and it seemed like a delusion based upon people who did go for it and it worked out - but would not for many people and then one would find themselves like Sam but at least

Sam was aware he was in a tough spot. The dip in the economy had been causing many issues, he was reading about this too that morning, and thought the whole deal felt unfair and he couldn't do much about it and he thought Sam deserved to at least have a job that paid his rent even if it was crappy or boring. Deserve was a funny concept, but yet he stuck with it in analyzing it, people deserved certain things, did they not? Why would they not?

On Thursday he finished work and though he was exhausted he prepared to go out on his date. He showered and got ready to meet his date Matt at the Thai restaurant they had determined. Matt was still the only one he had talked to extensively because Matt seemed capable of carrying on a conversation and asking questions and as a barometer of people's ability to at least feign interest or keep the ball in the air conversation wise that went a long way these days.

He was on the train thinking about the indignity of the whole ordeal- this was how people met in contemporary times and yet there seemed to be nothing left of mystery and coincidence and he felt things had become so mediated through the phone and yet also alternatives seemed impossible to think up anymore so it was whatever- there was nothing to do about it.

He walked in and Matt greeted him with a hug which he did not like- this type of false intimacy to grab another person as a casual greeting that took much longer than a handshake and yet was less "bro" than a dap and yet somehow people had not been able to come up with the most simple and clear cut solution that you just could say hi to them.

Matt: Did it take you long to get here?

Gideon: No, nothing takes long to get to.

Matt: What?

Gideon: I just think most of the city could be traversed quickly but consistently.

Matt: Alright, how was your day?

Gideon: It was fine my job has been annoying but it's whatever.

Matt: What do you mean?

Gideon: It's just been annoying.

Matt: But how so?

Gideon: It's tough to explain.

Matt: But that's one thing I was curious about was you research fish?

Gideon: Essentially yes, but there are, I don't know, layers to it.

Matt: What layers?

Why Gideon was feeling interrogated and not wanting to talk about this was a kind of mystery to him – he should have expected this.

Gideon: It's a lot of, um, there's data stuff I guess and stuff that's annoying.

Matt: And did you always love fish?

Gideon: Did I always love fish?

Matt: Because you research them.

To explain why this question was off-base seemed confusing to explain too. In fact the whole explanation would need several concurrent explanations of the roundabout way he got into the research, introduce the eccentric Funder, introduce the meta theory, and then explain data science, any one of which would be a topic that could spiral outward and Gideon didn't have a problem per se with getting into it, but the issue was truly, he found it boring and himself unwilling.

Gideon: No, I kind of did it by accident. Umm. What law do you do?

Matt: Copyright, mostly for music.

Gideon: Oh cool. What types?

Matt: Of law?

Gideon: I asked that but I don't know what I meant. I guess what does that entail is my question.

Matt: A number of us are kept on retainer by record companies to deal with frivolous suits in which people claim copyright infringement of their own work to get songwriting credits- which for major artists offer substantial returns should credit be granted- and people who have produced similar work just make up somehow it was taken from them by these artists.

Gideon: How would they have heard it?

Matt: In most cases the whole thing is a pipe dream crazy, it's coincidental overlaps in generic lyrics or melodies.

Gideon: Is it ever true and it was stolen?

Matt: I guess it could be possible but it's probably an incredibly small amount of the total.

Gideon: How did you get into that?

Matt: I've always been interested in music but I really lack musical talent to a level to do it professionally.

Gideon: So you. . . but why law?

Matt: Oh, so it orbits around intellectual property, entertainment, contracts etc.

Gideon: But why. . .

Matt: Oh, oh, but that's what I wanted to say, I got interested in law that covers entertainment because I thought law school because medical school was not for me- but then I tried to think what interests me most and landed on music and law.

But Gideon noticed the causality of his story retroactively fit love of music to law, but then it was actually money that motivated the career (with the other option being medicine) and then he had mentally gone back and imposed a through line in the form of his love of music.

Gideon: Do you like it?

Matt: Yes! Do you like your job?

Gideon: I neither love it nor hate it.

Matt: So how did you get into it?

Gideon: I was just good at data and theory, and then I was recruited as an undergraduate assistant and then funding came through and there's like, I don't know, an eccentric man that funds research into a bunch of things like survival so I don't know it's not about the fish.

Matt: It's not about the fish haha.

They talked about hobbies and Matt had several normal hobbies like hiking and movies and they talked about family and both were middle children but Matt was the middle of five vs. Gideon of three, and they talked about several points of trivia and there were some awkward pauses that made Gideon want to run away. Somehow they got into the question of the afterlife, and Matt said he believed in a theory that you never die, and at the point of death you quantum jump to another timeline in which you live longer, but Gideon thought that seemed unlikely based on the fact that nobody seems to be 200, 300, 10000 years old and in order for that to work you have to factor in old age and the implication was old age wouldn't kill you so you'd be immortal but even in your subjective timeline nobody appears to be older than 120 years old at the extreme margins, and the notion that you and only you would be 400 years old and living would immediately flag you even in your timeline as a medical mystery- and so just at a basic level of thinking about this the idea that essentially everyone has a normal life until 110 or so and then slowly becomes a decrepit but living medical mystery that would probably be a world known figure forever seemed simply on its face to be stupid. He did not understand the quantum physics element but surely that didn't check out and was an incredibly overreach of what they know- he assumed at least but it was a likely assumption- and he wondered how people could persist with that thinking- was he serious? He told Matt why that seemed unlikely and Matt said hmm oh that's true and then Gideon wondered if he actually believed what he said. Was that actually what he thought or not? Because if it was and he had never interrogated it for more than seemingly 5 minutes that was insane to him. So already he felt this was not going anywhere but he stuck around to finish the meal.

Matt: Are you watching anything good on TV?

Gideon: My sister recommended some show I've been watching called Start a Fire about this town I guess with various secrets or whatever.

Matt: I've heard of it, is it good?

Gideon: I like it I think.

After the date Matt said text me if you're interested in meeting up and Gideon said sure and he got on the train and felt instantly free- somehow things did not translate offline which happened sometimes and it was 'fine' so he thought 'whatever' and went home and got in the shower and took his pills and felt almost high on the freedom of having tried and failed and now he didn't have to think he didn't try.

That night he slept soundly and woke up to his alarm. Friday was finally a workday that felt normal. Suddenly he was able to compartmentalize and think of his job as just a job and the end goal of ‘what they were doing here’ was very simple- executing The Funder’s bizarre vision. When he zoomed out he could see this was fine- many jobs were not self-determined and were about executing another’s ‘vision’ which was usually just making money. Here, instead of money, they were generating pleasing ideas for The Funder to think about and play with and test and they didn’t have to solve the big question of everything. Their job, ultimately, was to satiate his curiosity, something they all did in their own lives when pursuing a specific interest.

It didn’t make it not boring, nor did it ultimately make it preferable to other jobs he would have had in theory, nor did it make sense to him he would be doing a job indefinitely. It just made it so he wasn’t as horrified by the idea.

After work he went home again and got ready for trivia with his usual routine of being unable to but then finally resigning himself to selecting his outfit and he texted everyone to check they were all still down and they were.

He was the first to arrive at the bar for trivia and picked a spot near the front by the announcer. Eventually Sam came through and said what’s up.

Sam: Hey, what’s good?

Gideon: Another week done

Sam: Yeah, nothing much.

Gideon: Are you good?

Sam: I guess. It just feels like a clock is running re: money.

Gideon: Sorry- I don’t even know what to say to be honest.

Sam: Me neither.

Then Tara and Bradley came through.

Tara: Hi there, hi Sam, hi.

Bradley: What's up guys?

They got the first round of drinks and Tara showed Bradley and then the two of them the categories she saw online which included 90s hip hop, movie sequels, international exports, and sports.

Bradley: Okay I've got sports for sure.

Sam: I think Gideon has movies.

Gideon: It depends what movies.

Sam: Nah you definitely got it.

Tara: 90s hip hop- I think maybe we can do?

Bradley: What is that like Biggie?

Tara: Yeah and like Missy Elliott maybe.

Bradley: International exports I don't know.

Tara: That's a mystery to me.

Category one they did well and came in second place- the songs were fairly recognizable and pinning down the title was difficult but Gideon felt able to recall most of them and the others pinned down the rest.

Category 2 Gideon did it again- they came in first for this one- he could recognize every movie based on star, year, or a factoid, including the subtitle of the sequels.

During the intermission between the first two rounds they were in second place overall but not far behind.

Tara: What's new Gideon?

Gideon: Nothing

Tara: Did you go on the date?

Gideon: Yeah

Tara: And?

Gideon: I mean, no, nothing there.

Tara: Aw damn.

Gideon: Statistically that's just how it goes.

Tara and Bradley had met online but this was a few years ago and things seemed to somehow work better back then for online dating.

Sam: It's tough.

Tara: Are you on there Sam?

Sam: Online?

Tara: Yeah

Sam: On and off.

Bradley: Sports could be anything

Gideon: I don't know if I'll know anything

Sam: What's the prize anyway?

Tara: That team is ahead by only 2 points. Look at that team.

Sam: They don't seem knowledgeable about sports.

Bradley: They won't know shit.

Gideon: Let me see. Yeah, they don't know anything.

Sam: Well they know something I guess they're ahead.

Tara: International

Sam: They don't look international

Gideon: They don't know there are other countries maybe.

Sam: Yeah they don't even know there are other countries

Tara: Brad, should we get drinks?

Bradley: Yeah

They ordered another round. And Tara talked to Bradley and Sam talked to Gideon.

Sam: Look at all the spam emails about “jobs”

Gideon: Jeez

Sam: Spam and scams are like 99% of the world now.

Gideon: Ads

Sam: Spam and scams, Sam’s and . . .

Gideon: . . .slam?

Sam: What about slam?

Gideon: Slam poetry

Sam: True

Tara came up to Gideon and asked if he had heard a new album that came out and Gideon said he didn’t, he was behind on keeping up with new music, even from bands he liked and she said to check it out and he said for sure.

The third round was sports and they got all the questions right and the other team missed one and so they were tied overall leading into the last round.

The final round on international exports asked about bananas, oil, coffee, etc.

They were not confident in the answers but they had no idea if the other teams were any better.

They handed in the forms to the guy to count them.

Tara: I asked what we get if we win and we get a gift certificate to here lol

Bradley: We’ll just spend it right now

Sam: I'm down

The score had been counted and they announced- their team had won. The gift certificate was for 50 dollars and they went to the bar and immediately spent it on their third drink.

Sam: Maybe I'll work here

Tara: Yeah work here lol

Sam: Hmm?

Tara: I was just going with what you were saying

Bradley: Did anyone notice that guy's shirt?

Gideon: What?

Bradley: What's the joke?

Gideon: Oh, the shirt is Italian footlong sandwich. Dick joke.

Bradley: Oh, fuck haha

Tara: That's not even a joke it's just a picture of the menu item.

Sam: That's the joke - I mean I guess?

Gideon: No cause look it points down so it's . .

Tara: Yeah it's saying that I guess

After trivia they said goodnight and Bradley and Tara went to Brad's car and Tara reminded him to check out the album and he said okay and then Sam and Gideon took the train back towards their respective homes.

Sam: I'm so tired.

Gideon: Yeah me too.

Sam: Just increasingly tired forever

Gideon: Yeah true

Sam: What if you went on Jeopardy you'd be good.

Gideon: It depends on the category.

Sam: True, but damn get that money.

Gideon: Okay I'll go on jeopardy.

They said goodnight and Gideon went home and was so exhausted he didn't even need to take his pills.

This was how another six months passed. Gideon worked his job like usual and slowly progress was made on the project in which the interaction variable between categories of survival and other forms of motive expressed themselves in various actions that reified or challenged hierarchy, and though he no longer had faith in the project as a whole, which he was not sure he ever bought into really, he just did what he had to do to get paid and make rent and money was the whole reason to do it and that was not a great or romantic idea but it was not as if something else was possible. He and Sam went to many more movies and trivia nights and he checked out the album and it was okay and other things happened too and this is how hours, days, months, years, lives, etc go and he alternated in moods, thoughts, etc etc as the world kept going bringing more news, more ways in which things appeared to be moving in directions that seemed somehow inevitable and revealing but also random, wrong, etc etc etc and Sam did get a job towards the end of the six months and it was fine though he struggled at various points in the process, drinking too much and nearly having a mental breakdown and Gideon loaned him money when possible and feasible although it was less than he wished he could give.

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His sister visited one weekend and they were able to catch up and she told him her job was also going through strange overhauls and reorganizing due to all the technological shifts and she maintained what she could bring to the table was superior to AI and she - for once - drank too much and spoke at length about her psychological insights into the consumer that was (in her words) “nearly clairvoyant” and Gideon laughed and she agreed she was overselling it and she told him that their dad’s memory was going but slowly and made a dark joke about him being blacked out like their brother and then she said wait, he hasn’t called right and Gideon said no and she informed him, with much build up and dramatic emphasis, that his new girlfriend was pregnant and Gideon could not believe this news had not reached him and she said she just heard two days ago and Gideon had not spoken to him in maybe one month or two months and he asked if it was on purpose and she said what do you think and they talked about if it was a good idea or a bad idea and though bad idea was probably where they would have landed they played devil’s advocate enough to convince each other it was ultimately fine in some sense - people procreate all the time and that’s just how life comes into being and they joked how the two of them would never have families and Gideon said she probably could if she was interested and not picky and she said the same and they reached a somewhat tentative but interesting conclusion that they were incapable of having a true life partner and would be bad parents actually, and they reasoned this through noting that they were generally cautious, exacting (though Gideon felt her more than him) and this type of cognition did not lend itself to getting pulled into long term relationships, making irrevocable choices on whims etc.

Gideon’s brother did call and tell him a few days later and Gideon congratulated him and meant it, having realized why not - good idea bad idea etc.

Gideon attended a talk given by The Funder of the fish research. The team and he were recognized for their hard work and The Funder shook his hand and said thank you and talked about the research and what they had established based upon it and how far they were going to go and he said the research would outlive him, and be passed down in perpetuity and announced his successor who did work on bat research in a more strictly zoological sense but who shared his vision to extract all information on life, survival, hierarchy, relationship, etc from their work and he quoted William Blake’s thing about ‘heaven in a wildflower’ and said he believed the true key to all knowledge lay in stripping things down to the most basic elements and going from there rather than making sense of the complexity, we simply had to know what was and this was not, in his opinion, the atom, or the monad, but the basic form of relations and movement.

Gideon did get to talk with him briefly, still unconvinced, but admired him nonetheless (good idea? bad idea? Etc) since he did something when it was easy to do nothing.

The Funder: I wanted to thank you personally for your work, I've been informed what insights were yours, and looked into the white papers and you are incredibly valuable to this work.

Gideon: Thank you.

The Funder: What do you think is the most important part?

Gideon: That's a good question.

The Funder: I put you on the spot!

Gideon: I think. Hmm. I think it has levels to it. I think we're discovering the levels and I think that's cool.

The Funder: Yes, it's cool.

Gideon noted this world was much bigger than even this team- and in fact The Funder was plugged in with many people of obscure philosophical movements who had similar pet projects and he saw the project really fed into this upper echelon of people who felt perhaps they could change, explain, or be the world itself.

Etc etc etc etc etc etc etc

It was nearing Christmas and soon it was time for Gideon to visit North Carolina once again.

9.

Gideon packed his suitcase again. He took care to ensure he would have enough nicotine pouches and sleep pills and various things he might or might not need like gloves, caffeine pills, and some Christmas cards that he had bought.

The sentiments on the cards seemed overly sincere to a degree that made him almost uncomfortable and anxious and sad even thinking about the version of life they projected that was simple, loving, uncomplicated etc.

He clocked out of work that day and wished his coworkers a good holiday season and they wished him the same, and people had been generally pleasant towards him after The Funder event in which some of his achievements were recognized and it seemed everyone had a renewed zeal for the project except Gideon although he was fine with that as it was.

He took pills for his headache, pills for sleep and drank a bunch of water feeling suddenly uncontrollably thirsty. Within an hour he was within the range of sleepiness to fall sleep but not quite there yet and he scrolled on his phone for a few minutes feeling almost pleasantly zen while digesting the news, gossip, etc of the online world. It seemed to be something he felt he would check out of soon enough and would be put on pause during his trip and he generally preferred when he forgot it existed and just read his books and he had picked up a new book for the trip from an author he liked and he thought had written an interesting novel about some kind of cult,

Then sleep overtook him and he dreamt insane dreams that night that left him reeling the next morning thinking about the various incidents that took place in the dream and there seemed to be a million problems to solve but he couldn't completely remember them but carried that over for about 10 minutes of waking before realizing basically he just had to go to the airport and take a plane today and that was it- and it was a nice sensation to forget the dream problems and just have one thing to do.

In the uber to the airport the driver chatted with him extensively about the mayor, and governor, and policies related to uber in ways that were ambiguous if he hated, supported, accepted, or was neutral about any of the topics.

At the airport he went through security and texted his family group chat that had been started recently that he was going to land at 3:05PM. He got lunch because he had forgotten to eat that day and on impulse picked up a magazine related to actors and acting and he remembered he kept putting off trying to do acting as a hobby again and again.

He waited for them to call his section for the flight and observed the people around him flying into North Carolina and thought his recurring thought about their lives but this time thinking about how many like him had come to New York for various reasons, such as to start a job, to start a new life, or to experience the dynamism of a big city. Others may have went to Chicago, or even Raleigh or Charlotte, or perhaps Los Angeles or Austin or something. But this group was, like him, was likely North Carolina / New York. People were always charting new paths via decisions and again he thought how people move, and change, but one could never experience life in all the places at the same time, and people had to make peace with choices and at some point the whole thing would be seen in reverse as a life lived that would end and one couldn't make heads or tails of it.

Once they boarded he felt impatient to get there even as he realized it was pretty much going to happen when it was going to happen and he didn't have control of that.

He landed and got off at the airport and his brother came and picked him up.

Reid: Well howdy there brother

Gideon: What's up?

Reid: Chilling

Gideon: Haha are you?

Reid: Yeah dude, why?

Gideon: It's fucking crazy you're gonna be a dad soon

Reid: Yeah but I'm also like, it's cool, I'm psyched.

Gideon: Good. Actually that's good. But like umm where?

Reid: We're moving into a new place.

Gideon: Oh, shit, where?

Reid: Out past mom and dads actually a bit further out like 20 minutes there's a house we're renting.

Gideon: Oh, cool, that. Yeah. Wow.

Reid: It is wild.

Gideon: Yeah true but wow. Yeah I'm just. I don't know it's wild. It's cool.

Reid: What's up with you?

Gideon: Um nothing.

Reid: That's it?

Gideon: Really nothing I think being an uncle is probably the biggest thing. Nothing really else.

Reid: Mom's been hype.

Gideon: Yeah, true, grandma soon.

Reid: Sarah and her get along.

Gideon: Oh shit yeah that's good.

Reid: You remember Kelly with mom?

Gideon: Yeah haha fuck.

Reid: So that's good.

Gideon: Is Sarah coming for Christmas? Or what're you doing?

Reid: She is. Her family is fucked.

Gideon: Oh word. Like. Umm. How?

Reid: Her dads like mean and shit.

Gideon: Her mom?

Reid: She's dead.

Gideon: Oh, and no like, other family?

Reid: Not significant ones. Actually her half sister is chill and I think she has a cousin in South Carolina they're close.

Gideon: Yeah like, sorry, how did you meet again?

Reid: So she's actually a nurse

Gideon: Yeah

Reid: And I told mom and dad we met out around town but I actually sliced off my finger tip cooking

Gideon: Oh shit

Reid: Yeah and it was pretty bad but we hit it off

Gideon: Like at the ER?

Reid: Yeah haha

Gideon: How do you hit it off in the ER?

Reid: I think my adrenaline was going and I was just on it

Gideon: You were on one.

Reid: Yeah word.

They got to the house and Elizabeth was already there.

Elizabeth: Hey

Gideon: Hey

Elizabeth: Mom is trying to get something she DVR'd

Mom: No, it's not DVR, it's Replay

Elizabeth: But functionally it's

Mom: It's Love Actually, have you seen it?

Gideon: Yeah

Elizabeth: I'm not watching that as a family they shoot a porn in the movie

Mom: You don't have to watch that part

Elizabeth: Okay, I don't know how we will watch the movie but not that part.

Mom: We're not 'Watching it as a Family' I'm just putting it on.

Dad: Hey Gideon

Gideon: Hey dad how are you?

Dad: Living

Elizabeth: Dad's very nice today.

Dad: I'm always nice. What do you mean? What is she talking about?

Mom: She's just being nasty, she's got an attitude.

Elizabeth: I'm kidding around.

Mom: Okay kidding around, just find the movie.

Elizabeth: I am

Gideon: Is Sarah not here?

Reid: She's going to come through tomorrow she's nauseous

Elizabeth: She didn't want to meet us.

Reid: Yeah, she didn't want to meet you.

Mom: Oh my god. See how she is.

Elizabeth: This is me being happy and mischievous.

Mom: I don't know what you mean.

Gideon went upstairs and put his stuff away.

This was the 23rd of December, with the plan to stay through New Year's Eve and return on the 2nd.

He peeked around at what was Reid's room and it had been kept essentially the same except Reid's stuff was gone and it was mostly just spare with a bed and some containers of papers. He looked through the papers and they contained paper work, notes, etc related to early stage dementia, and then some related to finances, the house, etc. For the fourth time or so he googled how long dementia takes to become bad and he still couldn't look at the results of the search, deciding again to put it off until later.

He went back downstairs to everyone and his mom had put on Love Actually.

Reid: Did you see?

Gideon: What?

Reid: Officially moved out.

Gideon: Are you staying here tonight?

Reid: No, I'm staying with Sarah.

Gideon: Okay that makes sense.

Mom: She is welcome to stay here.

Reid: Mom, that is a twin bed.

Mom: We have an air mattress, we have to twin beds we can push together and the air mattress.

Gideon: So I'd get the air mattress?

Mom: He's not doing it I already asked.

Reid: It's because you like Sarah.

Mom: Yeah I do like Sarah.

Elizabeth: What do you like about her?

Mom: She helps people. She's polite.

Elizabeth: I'm helping you right now.

Mom: I wasn't implying she does and you don't you just asked me what I like about her?

Elizabeth: Dad do you like Sarah?

Dad: Hmm?

Elizabeth: Do you like Sarah?

Dad: Yeah

Reid: Sarah likes everyone too.

Elizabeth: She hasn't met me or Gideon yet.

Reid: Well she's going to.

For dinner their mom just ordered Chinese food and they talked almost completely about baby names.

Elizabeth: Which are you thinking of?

Reid: For a girl, Kathleen, for a boy Christopher.

Mom: I like Kathleen. I like Christopher too.

Elizabeth: Is that like final final selection?

Reid: At the moment, we have another few months things could change.

Elizabeth: How did we get our names?

Mom: Elizabeth I decided when I was very young, I had a best friend who moved away and I always liked the name.

Elizabeth: I'm named after someone?

Mom: No, no. Maybe that was what I thought at first, but no I just stuck with it.

Gideon: How did I get stuck with Gideon?

Mom: Your dad.

Gideon: Dad why Gideon?

Dad: I liked the name.

Mom: No, tell them why.

Dad: I thought it was a good name.

Mom: Rocky Raccoon they sing Gideon's Bible and he always loved that part.

Gideon: No! You're kidding?

Mom: I mean no, no you're not named after the song. Then you'd be Rocky.

Gideon: You just said. . .

Mom: No, it's biblical we looked it up.

Gideon: What does Gideon in the bible do?

Dad: He's a warrior I think.

Mom: I don't know, yeah something like that?

Gideon: It's because he liked the song.

Elizabeth: They're changing the story.

Reid: Reid?

Mom: Red. Red hair. I was convinced you were going to have red hair.

Reid: Jesus, what?

Mom: I had a feeling when I was pregnant you'd be a redhead.

Reid: This is crazy.

Mom: What?

Elizabeth: These names are so random, you guys, what?

Mom: Oh my gosh, names are random. You earn your name after being born anyway.

Elizabeth: Absolutely insane.

Mom: I hate to tell you, but if a name is not directly from a parent or grandparent, it's random.

Elizabeth: Fine, true.

Gideon: I got Gideon.

Mom: It's a good name.

Reid: I like the name.

Gideon: Uncle Gideon, Jesus.

After dinner the three of them went out to see Reid's place and meet Sarah.

They drove out in Reid's car past the western part of town towards the mountains as Gideon played music from his phone which Reid told him to go ahead and play whatever he wanted, a sign Reid was trying to signal a new maturity via not hogging the music.

His sister asked preliminary questions to Reid such as how long she'd been a nurse (8 years) age (30) what was wrong with her dad (yelled and was neglectful) why she became a nurse (helping people was rejected as the reason, and Reid added she could work and make money at an earlier age) why not a doctor (loans he said) what she did for fun (sometimes painted, sometimes nature walks, dogs) what they had in common (they both felt like outsiders he said) if marriage was on the table (yes, eventually) and then finally was it an accident (they were neither trying nor preventing pregnancy actively).

Satisfied with what he could give her she asked for her last name to stalk her on social media and Reid said I have a feeling you already have that and Elizabeth said yes and asked about a meme she posted.

They arrived at her place and he introduced them.

Sarah: I'm so happy to meet you all finally.

Elizabeth: You too.

Gideon: It's nice to meet you.

They went into the living room and she offered them wine and they declined and she said it was fine if they drank she just obviously couldn't and they said it was fine so she offered them snacks and they accepted even though they had just ate in order to be polite and she said she was going to eat a bunch of snacks having suddenly moved from feeling ill to hungry.

Sarah: How often do you all come up here?

Gideon: I'm here maybe a few times a year

Elizabeth: Christmas and maybe one other time. Sometimes Thanksgiving.

Gideon: I don't think we've done thanksgiving in a while.

Elizabeth: Not this year, maybe it's been a few years actually. Maybe next year now that we'll have a niece or nephew? Do you know?

Sarah: I don't know! It's going to be a surprise.

Elizabeth: Wow I hate surprises but that's cool.

Sarah: I kind of like not knowing right now. I feel like they are some kind of undetermined being taking shape.

Gideon: Yeah I guess it's like how do you picture them?

Sarah: I think just like a spirit.

Reid: It's crazy. I don't care boy or girl.

Gideon: Yeah true

Elizabeth: Now I'm imagining a spirit.

They ate some snacks and talked about Reid and her a bit, including some dates they had been on, how she thought she was sick but then immediately intuited she was pregnant and she said it was probably because she knew her cycle and her subconscious knew it too.

Elizabeth: I think Reid has always wanted to be a dad.

Reid: I mean actually yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah you just didn't realize it fully.

From the conversation, they were able to piece together that Reid was working for his friend again and had also taken extra uber shifts and had also been trying to get certified as a Medical Coder which Sarah had suggested to him. He seemed attentive to her, and she seemed eager to get to know Gideon and Elizabeth and asked a bunch about how they liked living in NYC and Chicago, their jobs, etc and she seemed surprisingly not surprised by Gideon's job in a rare response to it.

After a bit Reid did bring out the wine and Gideon had one glass with him and Reid said he was quitting smoking but asked him to take a look at something on their balcony and asked for a hit of his vape and Gideon gave him one and he said the cover story was that he was showing him the view which overlooked a lake and they went back inside and Elizabeth was asking Sarah questions about being a nurse and how they planned to handle maternity leave which was (relatively) generous at her hospital and she said she may or may not go back because they didn't have as much help as she would like- just Gideon's parents and maybe her half-sister and Elizabeth and Gideon kind of froze, feeling somewhat guilty they were not closer to the two of them but unsure of how to respond and Sarah said but it'll be fine, she'll be a good mom and Elizabeth said oh of course.

As it got a little later Reid offered to drive them home and Elizabeth said no they can uber and Reid said he is uber and she said no she's pregnant just stay here.

In the uber on the way back Elizabeth asked what he thought and Gideon said she seemed nice.

Elizabeth: No major red flags.

Gideon: No

Elizabeth: Just Reid flags.

Gideon: Haha

Elizabeth: So whatever. We'll see. Horrible family apparently.

Gideon: Right Reid had mentioned.

Elizabeth: So she's probably got some damage, but probably just inner turmoil. Or she's low in neuroticism and just doesn't get impacted as deeply as some.

Gideon: What?

Elizabeth: Some people just don't dwell. Neurotics dwell and do other stuff.

Gideon: We don't know I think?

Elizabeth: That's what I'm saying. It's that or inner turmoil I think. I'd need more information but seems fine. Reid could do much worse.

Back at home their mom also asked what they thought.

Gideon: Nice

Elizabeth: Very nice, mom.

Mom: Yes that's what I thought. Dad too.

Dad: Yeah.

Elizabeth took her car back to her hotel, leaving only Gideon and his parents. They watched TV until Gideon's dad fell asleep on the chair watching reruns of old sitcoms.

Mom: That's good you all got along.

Gideon: I feel bad I think

Mom: Why?

Gideon: Not being closer to you all.

Mom: Everything will be fine somehow.

Gideon: Uh-huh.

Gideon didn't know if that was true. It depended what one meant by fine and what could happen. He closed out the browser window on his phone that looked up dementia progression without looking at the information.

He was back in 'his' room and he texted Sam an update on the situation and asked how Sam was doing and Sam said fine, the holidays are always weirdly charged and Gideon said yeah but not bad and Sam said no not bad just heightened in some way and Gideon said true.

Gideon went through his phone thinking of how long he would be here and who he should try and make plans with and felt overwhelmed by choosing where to spend time, including the fact that his family was here, but also some friends. He couldn't decide who to see. He decided to decide later.

He then googled dementia and read the results- 2 years mild, 2-4 moderate then severe. Suddenly time felt short and precious. He let the information just sit with him, as if should he choose to not really let it sink in or lead to any decisions right away it would just metabolize in his body and he would know a right set of actions and thoughts.

He then realized he had not bought Christmas presents only cards and would have to go tomorrow on Christmas Eve. He took his pill and fell asleep.

The next morning he said merry Christmas Eve to his parents and mentioned he had to quickly run some errands and his mom asked if it was for presents and he said yes and she suggested he go to the mall because parking multiple times across multiple stores could be dicey and lent him her car.

He drove through the traffic feeling today was interesting just by virtue of it being holiday even though he didn't attach much value to it ultimately.

He looked for parking in the lot for about 10 minutes and luckily found a spot and got out and pinned the location of his car so he could find it again.

Entering the mall he had the pleasant sensation once again of having a clear directive that was low pressure and of being able to spend money guilt free since it was for gifts for others.

He entered the mall by the stand that sold pretzels and other snacks and looked for the map and avoided someone trying to sell something that looked like expensive 3D printing or something. The map was confusing but he picked out a few potential stores and mentally made the route he would take as best he could remember it to try and hit up a few

stores that had potential but decided he would kind of just browse and try and get as many things as he could from wherever.

He walked first to a clothing store and couldn't decide what to get for anyone- he was thinking his sister but he felt totally lost since her taste was exacting. Then he pivoted thinking that the easiest purchase would be for Reid since he could get something for a new parents and he googled what would be a good gift for a new parent and he landed on a monitor or sound machine or something of the sort and went back to the map and located a store that would likely have it and went up the escalator directly to that store.

On the way there he noted how many people were frantically doing last minute shopping like him and he felt a sense of kinship with them.

He went and bought a baby monitor and the man showed him how to use it and he thanked him and said he'd try and remember but it was a gift and the man said yeah I thought so and Gideon said yeah okay so I'll try and remember I guess.

He then went back to the clothing store and got a gift certificate for his sister since she would be particular and he couldn't make a good guess for her gift and she was overall not sentimental and would prefer generic/practical to clever/unique.

He then decided the electronic store would be best for his dad and went back to the same store and asked for the easiest set up for parents that watch TV who can be easily confused by technology and the man tried to sell him on something a bit too complicated he thought so he said he would be right back and avoided continuing the interaction.

Instead he went to a few stores and found a bathrobe, a mug, slipper etc and just thought he would combine them as a gift for his dad since his dad was impossible to shop for and he was not clear on what would be best for him and he felt bad for a second but then thought it's okay it's the thought that counts and stuff.

While shopping in the aisle that had various scented bath products he saw George's mom walk into the aisle and pause.

George's Mom: Hello Gideon

Gideon: Hi Mrs. O'Reilly

George's Mom: Merry Christmas Eve

Gideon: You too

George's Mom: Thank you, tell your family too, okay?

Gideon: Of course.

Then Gideon watched her look at various items and she seemed lost, as if the items and the store were shifting in meaning and quality as she looked at them and when she dropped some items on the floor while moving her basket she looked distressed and he helped her move them back to their spots and she said thank you and then she went to purchase the items and he listened to her tone and she seemed somehow superficially fine but subtly frazzled.

He stuck around to pick out a few bath products and called it a day for shopping. He took his bags back to the car and loaded the backseat and drove back home.

When he got home his mom was already cooking and his dad was sitting there and he said don't look and then said do you have wrapping paper and she said yes and then got him two giant rolls and he took them upstairs to wrap the presents and then went into Reid's former room to find a marker and labeled the presents appropriately and then put them back into his room.

He laid on the bed for about an hour feeling tired although he had not really done much other than shop.

He then went back downstairs and helped his mom set up and fry some things and put food out and it was nearing four pm and his sister arrived again and said she was hungry and her mom said almost time.

Gideon asked if anyone else was coming this year or it would just be them and she said just them and once they set up it was 5pm which was the official start time but Reid and Sarah didn't arrive yet so they sat around for a bit and his mom browsed several Christmas movies that were on TV and they settled on It's a Wonderful Life which she said was actually her favorite and Gideon said I guess it's one of the best and his sister said it's depressing and their mom said no he lives at the end and his sister said yeah obviously but still and his mom said no its nice and she said okay.

About 45 minutes to an hour late Reid and Sarah arrived and Sarah apologized saying it was her fault she couldn't find something to wear and felt sick again and then found something to wear and his mom said it was okay and her being pregnant with Reid was horrible and they asked what about Elizabeth and Gideon and she said no it wasn't bad and Reid said wow and Gideon said yeah that's shady and she said no it's the truth it's random it has nothing to do with him and he said I know and Sarah said three kids is the perfect amount and his mom said yes it is.

They ate dinner and Sarah complimented the food and Gideon's mom said she was very polite and she said no she's being honest and there were agreements made and his mom then deprecated various dishes in various ways.

Then they shared stories of various past Christmases and the gifts that mystified their mom including various fads of the 90s and 2000s toys and games and how the rush used to be for last minute purchases or even just hot seasonal items and Sarah said her dad would sometimes come through with gifts and sometimes reject the idea of gifts and when she was 8 she got the toy she wanted and when she was 9 she got cash that she didn't know what to do with it and ended up spending it years later and she kept it under her mattress for the longest time because she didn't know what to do with it and sometimes her dad would borrow it but give it back.

After they ate they retired back into the living room to watch the final few minutes of *It's a Wonderful Life* and their mom asked what the potential baby names meant and people said they actually don't know what any of them mean and she looked them up and Kathleen meant something like 'clear' or 'pure' and Christopher something about Christ and they were like oh duh.

The movie ended and Reid suggested bringing out the photo album and they did so and went through the pictures and seeing them again through Sarah's eyes was a weird experience in which Gideon realized they had lived a real life that from the outside seemed much more inevitable and less contingent and random, and Sarah commented on almost every picture and found something to say that was kind or semi-funny in an inoffensive way and their mom said she should bring her family photos next time and she said she doesn't know where they are but she should locate them maybe and their mom said yes and Gideon was struck by one photo of himself where he could see he kind of looked like other members of the family in certain ways and though he usually just thought he looked like himself he could see how they were related and contained similar features, or maybe he was retroactively fitting his features back onto the others but in any case it was an interesting almost psychedelic realization.

As it got later, nearing midnight, people said their goodbyes and their mom said should we open one gift each and Elizabeth said they never did that before and their mom said she used to do that as a kid and Elizabeth said they had never done that even once as a family and they would just open the gifts tomorrow and their mom said okay okay fine fine fine.

They all collected their gifts and put them under the tree and said merry Christmas and Elizabeth, Reid, and Sarah left and their dad said he was tired and their mom said so as well and they all went to bed for the night.

Gideon thought about the year that was coming to a close and everything from last Christmas until this one and it felt incomplete, like this year was only an arbitrary division of calendar years, and he instead thought to his last birthday in February in which he got too drunk and asked people in a kind of focused stupor about their lives and cornered people with deep but incomprehensible questions such that he felt embarrassed the next day, but he now turned the impulse inward and instead thought about himself from birth until now. He didn't recall much, if anything, before Reid so he thought about the carpet of the video rental store and how the cleaning products smelled and various childhood friends and times he was more social, or more shy, wondering how or why he had developed different ways of relating to his peers over time and at the core of that- what did he really think? Feeling inconclusive he continued, remembering sleepovers in which him and his friends had watched movies and played video games until late in the night and he realized he had not had a sense of self- the notion had not really occurred to him to be self-reflexive and then, he thought of himself a bit older, teenage years in which he recalled thinking Elizabeth was stern and Reid was uncontrollable with anger outbursts and emotional volatility, and his mom and dad too and how his dad had once seemed formidable and full of knowledge and practical wisdom and his mom had once seemed less lively but more cautious. He thought about high school friends and how he had trouble relating to others during this time and would performatively agree with others to get along, forming friendships by being a chameleon among others, by performing funny bits, and yet from this, either before or during college began to understand himself as someone slightly different- sensitive even to forms of art and beauty in the world which made the world seem large and contained variations in tone, story, ideas, etc that could not be reduced to earlier years of his life- they revealed to him a strange diversity of underlying assumptions and qualities as if he had known only two colors and then a palette of various shades had emerged, and then from that: shapes of all sizes and contours, and from that: thousands of complex arrangements until he understood that underneath things taken for granted as a basis or standard were not solid things but continued ever deeper and deeper unearthing ineffable roots that flowered into the most bizarre forms and he could recognize in this that the world itself was largely unknown and unmapped and zooming out further and further refined every possible calculation and at a certain tipping point and the whole became incomprehensible in concept but splendorous in affect. From this new scope Gideon felt he was able to befriend people and develop relationships- though they varied in levels of closeness and understanding, for various amounts of time, and he could see them through

years of changes and morphing as people themselves grew in new ways or situations changed, and yet they still interweaved into something he could comfortably call narrative. Gideon himself, at one time even, falling in love in what felt like it was another version of him in time and space, one he could remember clearly but thought he did not actually see clearly, and in fact he did not see clearly any of these interwoven relationships except in retrospect when they seemed to have meaning via distance, closeness, evaluation, and context. He remembered a time with George where they ate pizza and George threw a slice at someone's car for no reason. Why that memory? What about the things they had talked about? He didn't recall them as anything but metaphorical photographs here and there and even then only sporadically, and yet, there was the clearer still the more recent past of moving to New York, meeting Sam and talking about art felt more real and Gideon felt like someone could allow him to use words and sentences that were different than ones he could have used before except to himself- and this person of Gideon grew out of that. And in focus now, his job, hours and hours given away and he could not feel grateful, but nor could he feel ungrateful, and then something came to him in the form of another parallel version of his life in which things that had been difficult and boring and stressful, at times even heartbreaking felt just as true and emblematic of the nature of his life as the story he was telling himself before.

And then it occurred to him his impressions of the time he grew up, and the times before he was born which he had seen in movies and stories from his parents, and before that in history books, and beyond his immediate environment now- across multiple generations and people and towns and cities and people who did not live in cities in relatively recent history, but who lived in huts or along dirt roads, or were transient- whose families and cultures were different, and thought up potential stories and facts about the people that lived lives of difficulty but which he did not know in their complexity, and in the reverse people who lived lives of luxury he did not understand in their complexity, and in turn people's concerns, problems, ideas, etc he could only see via the lens of "not him" or "not his life." And then, shocking himself, he thought about animals, fish and camels, and monkeys, and octopi and birds and even more surprisingly plants if there was such a thing it was to be like a plant, but even if not then, varied scientific sounding pieces of earth, and the Milky Way, and things beyond what he was familiar with, until even the billions of things he aggregated seemed small, provincial even.

He moved between two poles- that he was approaching the main point- or moving further from it- but then what did he hope to accomplish here anyway besides reflecting to kill time and move the clock a little closer to the future that was still unknown to him anyway with the exception of the notion that what he really wanted right now was to get to sleep and do

something else tomorrow. There would be an indefinite number of tomorrows and then no more. And that was not the point either, though.

He thought to himself, he was bored by this thinking, and he slammed his head into the pillow and was asleep within 15 minutes.