

The first thing I saw when I entered the American Apparel in Chicago was a girl (who obviously worked there) carrying a clutch of soft t-shirts. The store was a small empty box like SuperCuts, but with racks of clothing on the walls.

It was starting to rain outside, the wind splattering raindrops and cum tree blossoms against the storefront. I'd told my brother to go drive around for an hour before picking me up. I don't remember what I expected to happen in that hour, just that my expectations were painfully high.

It took me ten minutes to look at everything in the store, then I forced myself to go over to the checkout counter to ask if there was an application for a job.

"Uhh," the girl said, "I don't know...Seth is coming back soon, he should know."

The girl looked back at her computer, her blonde scene-hair hiding her tiny face. She looked like a retail version of one of the models from the ads.

I looked at everything again. The clothes were so soft, but I knew they wouldn't look good on me. I don't have dysmorphia or anything – I know I'm normal looking. I've only ever wanted to look like my mom, who I associate with Miss Honey from Matilda. Up until middle school I literally thought my mom was Miss Honey and that I'd grow up to be perfect like her. Realizing my mom wasn't like Miss Honey, and that I was even worse, was part of what made me vulnerable to stuff like American Apparel.

Finally Seth arrived through the back door with a bag from Pret a Manger.

"Want to come out back?" he asked, shaking the water from his coat. "It's dry by

the dumpster.”

“Okay,” said the girl, pulling on her jacket and walking towards the back of the store. I thought I was going to be left there alone.

As Seth turned to leave, he saw me and said “Hey, can I help you find anything?”

“Oh yeah,” said the girl. “She wants a job.”

“Oh, cool, haha,” said Seth. “Come out back with us then.”

I followed them to a narrow area between the cinder blocks and fences.

Seth passed a drink over to the girl, then knelt to roll a cigarette against a wet plastic lawn chair. He cupped his hand to light it, then offered it to me.

“It’s a spliff,” he said, voice somewhat overwhelmed by the sound of wind and rain.

I took it and inhaled a few times without saying or thinking anything.

I felt that I was finally where I was supposed to be, with Seth and this girl out behind the store, smoking weed.

“What makes you, uh, want to work at American Apparel?” asked Seth.

I thought of my MySpace friends from Rockford. I’d never met them, but from their photos, I knew John from SALEM worked at this American Apparel. Or used to work there, before I started listening to SALEM.

But maybe I should say something about the clothes? I ended up saying “Music, I guess. I’m into SALEM and that stuff.”

"Oh yeah, I heard one of those guys worked here. He got fired, right?" Seth said.

"I'm not...like that," I said.

"Yeah, I can see."

"Well, we don't have any open roles right now," he said, looking over at the silent girl, "but you should submit an application. I'll send it to you. Are you on Facebook?" Seth pulled out an iPhone.

"Uh, yeah, one sec, I don't use my real name," I said. Actually I didn't even have Facebook, so I frantically went to create a new account. Because it was taking so long on my stupid feature phone, Seth and the girl started talking, making inside jokes.

I thought you needed a college email so I used my new Northern Illinois University email.

"How do I friend you?" I asked Seth. He took my phone, and added himself as my first friend.

"I'll send you the application," he said.

I spent the month before my first semester of college writing answers to the questions on the application and taking pictures of myself in the bathroom mirror.

I was on my mom's schedule, sitting next to her on the couch with my laptop while she talked to the TV. She made me mixed drinks, obviously relieved that the hardest part of being a mom was done: I was graduated, my brother wasn't getting in trouble anymore. She got me into *Real Housewives* and I showed her

the music I liked.

I finally emailed Seth my application the night before my first day at NIU. Of course I didn't tell anyone I was applying. I had a painful sense of my own potential, that going to college and working at American Apparel was a second chance for me.

I quickly realized NIU was like high school but worse, harder to romanticize. It's humiliating even just remembering how I was back then. My brother dropped me off at my freshman writing and accounting classes, was I constantly listening to my Coby MP3 player thinking I was "Witch House" but I'm sure everyone just thought I was goth.

Soon I was skipping class, telling my mom that it was canceled, so I could sit on the couch with her "doing homework" when I was actually just looking at Seth and his friends on Facebook. Neither Seth or the girl ever messaged me or liked my posts, but I felt like I was learning a lot about myself by looking at their feeds, adding their friends.

Guys messaged me. One guy from Rockford had a music blog and I listened to everything he posted.

Halfway through a twelve minute shoegaze track (it had less than 100 plays), I realized I was listening to something very, very special. Hunched over my laptop next to my mom, I experienced the internet equivalent of love at first sight: I knew I'd be totally obsessed with the person who made the music I was listening to.

I found him tagged in an photo album of an early SALEM tour, a tall hippy-looking guy in a baseball cap staring at the camera with a mean smile. "Matthew Mat".

I messaged him, asked him what he did for SALEM, etc. He didn't really explain things clearly. It was related to graphic design and merch.

The night before my first midterm I drank a two liter of Mountain Dew and after I gave up on studying I lay in bed thinking about how Matthew didn't really seem interested in me.

In desperation I asked him a question I'd always wanted to ask someone: "was there one moment in your childhood when you realized your life was going to be disappointing no matter what?"

I don't really remember exactly what Matthew said – something about killing a rabbit – but I remember messaging him until my phone overheated, telling him my story of how I started feeling fucked out of nowhere on a class field trip to Lake Michigan in middle school.

I was standing apart from the other kids on a big dune looking out at the light on the lake when it happened very suddenly, like a glow stick breaking in my head and the cold loneliness spreading through every part of my brain. I felt like I'd never be okay again and I started panicking, confused. I couldn't move, I was frozen, I wanted to call for help, but even though I could hear the voices of the other kids over at the picnic table it was like there was no one else in the world. I felt embarrassed, like I'd peed myself.

Eventually someone yelled my name, yelled that we were leaving. I climbed up onto the bus, and my teacher (bitch that she was) asked if I was okay. I must have looked like shit.

I've constantly looked for someone (or something or somewhere), that could undo that moment, make me feel un-fucked.

That night, as I finally fell asleep, Matthew said that we should meet. We could meet at the animal hospital owned by his cousin, about halfway between between my mom's place and Rockford.

I told my brother I'd let him play his favorite music (Unreal Tournament 2000 soundtrack) if he drove me there instead of my midterm. I was so nervous and exhausted during the long car ride I kept biting my tongue falling asleep and jolting awake every few minutes.

Walking across the massive empty parking lot towards Matthew, I felt like it all might be a big mistake.

But he grabbed my hand, hard, without saying anything. He led me inside a sterile barn where we sat down in a big cow sling. He started talking and everything was fine, just different than I expected. It felt like he was testing me. Then he kissed me.

After meeting at the animal hospital a few times, then at his place in Rockford, Matthew said I was his girlfriend. Around Thanksgiving, he got me an office job at the vet clinic, so we could hang out more. I told my mom that I was going to fail all my classes except accounting, but – I had a job! I told her about the animals. (I didn't say they were farm animals though.) She just teared up a bit and made me promise I'd try again next semester.

Over winter break my brother drove me out to the animal hospital every day. He

liked going there because he got to play with the chickens, pigs, and computers while Matthew and I did stuff in the construction trailer out back. I wanted to do my job, but Matthew said it was more important to work on our EP. He wanted me to write the lyrics but I could only write in the most blunt and unappealing way because that's how I see the world. I was more into making videos, using my mom's old VCR camcorder to record Matthew working on music or talking to people outside shows. That's what was beautiful and important to me. When my mom got mad because I was taping over the videos she'd made of me and my brother as toddlers, I was hurt: she had hundreds of those tapes.

On Christmas Eve Matthew used the microwave in the break room to turn a vial of ketamine into a big plate of shards. It was the first drug I really liked: it made me feel normal and it made Matthew act crazy in a way I liked.

We went into the grain silo because of the resonance and pigeon noises. Matthew had the idea of turning the silo into a big drone instrument, and got my brother to wire it up with the 240V drop.

On New Years Matthew brought a shotgun in there. He pointed the shotgun up at the top of the silo and fired it, the muzzle flare illuminating the roosting pigeons for a moment, burning their shadows into my eyes. There were echoes and a burst of pigeon noises in the darkness: the whooping alarm feathers my brother told me about, then pigeons blindly bashing down the corrugated sides of the grain silo.

Suddenly the lights turned on. My brother was standing by the circuit breaker.

"Don't do that again," he said, his voice unusually clear. "The right way to remove pigeons from grain silos is with a high-powered air rifle."

I expected Matthew to call my brother a faggot but he just said, okay, got it, and put the shotgun back on its mounting. We watched as the pigeons flew back up to their roosts, then my brother turned the lights off, talking about the pigeons seeing the electromagnetic fields.

After that, my brother wouldn't drive me to the animal hospital anymore. My mom didn't like Matthew either, wouldn't let him come over at first. Sometimes he'd camp out in the woods behind our house.

This all makes Matthew seem lame, and yeah he was, kinda: he never had any money, etc. But he was a lot stronger than me (occasionally in cruel, cheating ways), and he kept making music.

I finally gave up on college when someone did a mass shooting on Valentine's Day.

(I wasn't on the NIU campus then, I was up in a deer stand with Matthew drinking Everclear and apple cider from a thermos.)

He let me move into his big room in Rockford, and my real adult life began. I think I was pretty happy then, for reasons that are hard to explain to normies. I got a job as a bookkeeper, and after work we'd hang out with his roommates. Drinking beer with those guys, doing Adderall and showing each other stuff on YouTube was basically heaven for me.

At least I wasn't living at home like my brother, who got fatter and fatter each time I visited. My mom told me he had my old job at the animal clinic but he wasted all his money on new graphics cards, stayed up all night playing games with his "friends" from the Alibaba agricultural products discussion forum.

I was happy that my online friends were turning into "real" friends, friends in different cities, smarter and cooler than my high school friends.

My twenties passed. It felt like swimming down, past where I'd be able to make it back up to the surface. But the water got warmer instead of colder.

We moved every few years, going to places that were supposed to be relevant. It didn't feel like we were missing out on anything, living in Detroit or whatever. Matthew could predict where culture was going better than most people with real creative director type jobs anyway.

I stopped caring so much about music, became more normal. I even talked with my dad a few times, but he just wanted to talk about how private equity was ruining the HVAC industry.

When COVID happened, a bunch of our friends moved to New York. I felt sort of betrayed, because most of them said they'd never do that. Even my brother moved away for an IT job.

We decided to go stay at my mom's for the Fourth of July weekend because there was nothing else to do. I stopped at Aldi's after picking up some stuff from work, so Matthew got there first. He was waiting in the kitchen listening to Vivaldi on his phone.

"Bum me a cig from your mom," he said.

"She'll get mad," I said.

"No she won't," he said. "Just ask."

I said fine whatever and went upstairs.

I looked at my mom. She had purple lips and my first thought was she was wearing some weird lipstick, then I started screaming MOM, MOM, MOM, over and over and ran downstairs to get my phone to call the cops.

Matthew came upstairs and said "dude she's dead" I said "shut the fuck up shut the fuck up" and he left.

It was from alcohol and roxicodone.

My brother wasn't responding to my texts, so I had to deal with everything. He sent someone to clean out the house, I don't know where all the stuff went.

Overnight I became a total alcoholic (if I wasn't already). A few months later I got a big life insurance check. I put most of the money into crypto.

I was truly fucking devastated. Everything felt dead to me, I was disappointed in myself and my mom and almost everyone I knew.

I was stubborn enough to want to try something drastic to make things better. I knew Matthew was my best chance at not ending up like my mom, almost because how fucked he was. I'd suspected that the successful, happy people I knew were kinda cold, kinda sociopathic. And Matthew was like that, deep down, under his

defenses and degenerate habits.

I told him we should move to New York. We could get jobs there, from the people we knew.

After a year of bullshit we somehow got our shit together and moved to an apartment in Ridgewood.

It was fall, and as the weather cooled I began to feel at home. I felt like I was getting another shot at being nineteen.

I felt old, but I told myself: at least I'm not in Rockford, I'm with Matthew, in New York.

I could go to bars six nights a week with my boyfriend and a bunch of other friends, I wasn't alone or bored.

I did notice a growing difference between me and other girls my age, they were getting fucked up for fun and I was just getting as fucked up as possible and hoping something new would happen. This difference wasn't obvious until later in the night. Part of it was that other people had real jobs while I had trading crypto. Which did make lots of money but people would always low-key shit on it, or talk about their stupid startups that I knew were dumb, because I knew how the internet really worked.

New things did happen: the best moments I had were outside smoking unfiltered cigarettes at like 4AM, with someone I'd just met, both of us dissociated to the point where our consciousness was reduced to little points, little flames flickering

close to each other.

At least I felt close to someone then, intimate. I felt like my mind was so small I could feel how my mom felt, big gluts of time browning out and slipping away, months and years.

Matthew went on a trip to Rotterdam to visit the production company he was working for.

He extended his trip, then missed a flight. I guess staying in Europe was his way of breaking up with me, without really breaking up with me. He promised he wouldn't do that. He messaged me all the time, sent me Dutch dissociatives in the mail.

The mystery drugs gave me like a second, third childhood. I felt grounded but light, heels perfectly balanced on the earth. I wanted to walk and walk, see the world through my shimmering protective bubble of dissociation.

This is how I ended up alone at a fancy pizza restaurant in Park Slope, arranging a bunch of napkin scraps with different words written on them. A woman came over to my table, introduced herself as Annicka, and asked what I was doing. I told her I was trying to figure out my place in "all this". She thought this was cool and asked me a series of questions.

I liked her because she seemed both excited and knowledgeable, in a sort of grown up rockabilly way. I don't know. Over the course of a few drinks she told me about her KonMari cleaning consultation business. I'd already read "The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up". No matter how degenerate Matthew and I got, I always kept

our place clean. I freaked out if it was a mess, couldn't enjoy our little benders.

For Annicka, the KonMari book was literally magic (I thought it was okay). I was more into the natural cleaning products she said she provided her employees. She had samples with her and she let me smell them and explained which suited different types of clients. As the pizza place closed she asked for my number. I wondered if she was into me.

When she texted me the next morning, offering me a job, I was stupid enough to respond. I'm not stupid enough to get recruited into a cult, but at that point I was willing to do whatever to fix my horrible sleep schedule and I didn't want to sell my Ethereum.

In my "shadowing sessions" I realized the whole Kon Mari method thing was kind of a gimmick. Some clients took it seriously, we'd talk over how they wanted their space to 'feel'. Other clients were just like "I'm in a rush" (fake rush movements towards door) "I'll leave you to it!".

Having a job in New York was not like having a job in Rockford or Corktown. It didn't make me feel normal. Instead the job seemed to disrupt my schedule even more. At least I got to drink at new places in random parts of the city.

I'd tell people at the bar that I had just finished moving out, that's why I was dressed in soggy sweatpants and had a backpack full of spray bottles. Sometimes I'd ask to use their showers.

At home I had a whole jewellery box full of Netherlands Post packaging and plastic bags labeled with chemical formulas and hazard pictograms. Some of the bags

had sticky notes with the names of Matthew's friends. I was supposed to arrange pickups, but I think most of those guys were kinda afraid of me, so most never asked.

I often did a keybump in the park or bathroom before showing up at clients, in the elevator if I was late. It helped me open up to people, made me actually care about the stuff in their apartments. It made the Marie Kondo method feel important and real to me, like I had a special futuristic job, bringing meaning into people's homes.

Some of my "clients" were older, maybe rich or important, but a lot seemed like me, with dumb jobs and not enough time. Also maybe drinking problems too, I could smell it even in big nice apartments. Basic bitches with a little layer of manatee body fat and pink shower slime. Often it was this type of client who didn't really want to do the Kondo method, they just wanted me to clean while they "took a call".

So much of what these people owned was trash anyway, there wasn't much point in going all Kondo on it. I had to get emotionally involved with their Ikea stuff, pretend to set up Craigslist curb alerts. No one would find anything with the hundreds of identical black trash bags blocking the sidewalks outside "luxury" buildings.

Maybe the Kondo thing was just a way to make having a servant feel principled and new.

A few of the people I cleaned for did seem truly better than me. In my opinion

these people actually deserved a cleaner, a chef and driver too. But they seemed in control of their lives, so that if they had to do everything themselves they could manage that anyway.

Like there was a woman with a ground floor apartment in Fort Greene. Her and her husband had a toddler, his room was already so clean, I sat on the floor and played with his wood and wire bead toys. On the door there was a little velcro calendar with the correct date set. When I googled the woman's name I saw art reviews by her, and I found her Egyptian husband, also a writer.

If it wasn't for these clients I would have totally lost belief in good quiet families, due to my daily-increasing bitterness. Maybe the writing family did make their living from writing, what do I know. They were nice, but they didn't schedule another cleaning. Maybe Annicka sent them someone else.

I'd accept jobs at weird times or places, covering for other people, telling myself it didn't really matter.

If Annicka fired me for being late to appointments or whatever, it'd be so humiliating, it'd crush my fragile little vanity world. Besides my job, I didn't have much besides the videos I was still making, uploading them to dead Facebook groups, editing them all into one giant thing.

If I really stop and think about it, it's all so small and sad. Obviously in a lot of ways I was better off in Rockford, where at least I had a walk-in closet and central AC.

The next summer, the humidity made me think about getting a bookkeeping job or

something. But then the economy got bad and weird. So I just looked forward to winter, my favorite time to do drugs.

It was clear I was spiraling to somewhere unimaginably worse. Because I was still unstable. I know girls with dog walking jobs, guys who do art handling, who seem stable, on time, they'll be fine.

I was constantly trying to convince myself I knew better by knowing things, knowing facts I didn't need to know. After a day cleaning out the UWS apartment of some former frat bros with their girlfriends watching me, I'd get drunk at a bar near the train station and start reading the bitcointalk forum on my phone, and I'd get home past midnight and fall asleep with my shoes on and my phone in my hand, dehydrated and face greasy.

After about two years of this, I realized I was transitioning to being a totally undesirable person, with the associated irreversible psychological damage. It felt like choking on my own vomit.

On the subway to jobs early in the morning I'd see middle aged women and old women with probably shittier jobs than mine, and also maybe kids to deal with too, and I just felt like I wasn't strong enough to do that.

So I decided to "ask for help". The next time Annicka invited me out I told her things were bad, told her about my mom, Matthew, the research chemicals.

I remember the first thing she said was "It's called PTSD and it's totally normal." She was yelling into my ear because we were at a club.

She told me: step one, she was giving me the week off from public transit, I was in fight or flight mode. She told me “she’d been on that type of medicine before,” I’m not sure if she really understand what I meant by research chemicals but whatever.

“Let’s give your brain some rest,” she said. She told me to go to the river and watch the water, watch birds circling to land.

“When do you feel most relaxed?”, she asked me.

“Sucking dick,” I said, thinking of Matthew.

Annicka sniggered into her drink.

It realized it was crazy to still be texting him every day. I was finally less afraid of people, had developed a sort of religious, animal-like certainty. It didn’t take much courage to DM guys, starting with the names on the drug baggies.

At this point I was trying to stop doing the drugs on weekdays. I’d try to be normal for a few days, but eventually a pressure built up, and I just couldn’t take it anymore.

In a client’s bathroom, I emptied a stray bag into a large Dunkin’ Donuts iced coffee and opened Instagram. I looked up the name on the empty baggie.

I drank the iced coffee sitting on the toilet looking at his pictures: it was clear he lived in Greenpoint, near where I was. Soon my head was pleasantly simmering. I was lucky to know such nice normal people, even tangentially. I DM’d him and said I was around: did he want to get a drink? It was 2pm, but a Friday. Maybe it

would rain, but it wasn't humid, it was the beginning of autumn.

I'd been in the bathroom for half an hour already. My vision was going from super smooth high 60fps to choppy like an old film. I added water to my bottle of peppermint essential oil and wiped down the shower. I could smell myself very clearly, as well as a vague indefinite smell from the shower, so I poured some diluted vinegar down the drain.

Then I sprayed the big mirror, a fancy one with warm LEDs beneath the glass. I got lost staring at my face, running a super fine microfiber through my hands thinking about the nose job I was going to get after moving to New York. I fantasized about calmly using a jigsaw to slice away of a bit of jawbone.

My phone buzzed against my leg. It was a DM from Patrick. I sat down on the toilet. He was asking what I was up to. I wanted to be honest with him, so I took a picture of myself half visible in the mirror, like a devotional icon. "Haha nice," he responded. He said he was working on music but would be free in the evening. I asked him to send some of his stuff and I played the Bandcamp link with my phone.

It sounded really good. I tried standing up to clean, realized I was fucked up beyond my usual levels, slid down to the floor. I cleaned the base of the toilet.

The light from the small window was gray, ambiguous light from an air shaft. A pigeon was standing on the sill, resting. I watched the light cycling from midnight blue to the golden yellow of a beautiful morning.

My phone vibrated. 3pm. A new message from Patrick appeared and then

glitched out, disappeared. My phone was hot, my skin was dry. I started hearing rapid tapping noises, maybe some sort of auditory hallucination.

I tried to stand up again, feeling anxious.

I didn't want to watch Patrick working on music, I'd had enough of that with Matthew, it was like watching someone jerk off. I tried to text Patrick but my phone was emergency locked or something, like I'd broken reality and something was preventing me from contacting others.

I pulled myself up using the sink, and then over to the window, where the tapping noises were coming from. It was the pigeon: it was tapping its beak on the small window, in short regular bursts like someone banging on a door.

I clacked my nails twice on the window, seeing if the pigeon would scare away. It pecked back twice. Suddenly my phone got even hotter, burning through my sweatpants to my hips. I managed to get it out of my pocket but it fell and I clearly heard the male Siri voice say: "Beautiful woman, open the window, I need to get in."

"Come on, open the window," my phone said. "I have a big pile of things to do today."

The pigeon pecked more insistently at the window.

At this point, after years of experience with accidental megadoses of designer drugs, I knew that I should just roll with things so long as there didn't seem to be much risk of bodily harm. Trying to claw my way back to reality would just result

in a major headache, nausea, maybe puking into the toilet I'd just cleaned.

I could either try to be rational about the talking pigeon, or I could have fun and try to figure it out later. Usually there was an explanation, a video playing in the background or some shit.

I pushed up the small sliding window and the pigeon immediately scurried in. I jolted away in surprise and slid back down to the floor.

The pigeon flapped up onto the toilet rim, at my eye level.

"Well, here's how it is," said my phone, or the pigeon. The pigeon was making intense eye contact.

"You have people who care for you. They are busy with important work, but they feel hurt, hearing lately how you have been."

The pigeon kept adjusting its gaze, like pigeons do, but I was seeing him in a way I'd never experienced with a person. He was a healthy, handsome pigeon, all puffed up.

"When I learn she lives in Brooklyn, my district, I decide to find her, probably also very amazing personage. But, result, she is loser, doing drugs all day. Not healthy."

The pigeon plopped down from the toilet and marched over to my tote bag full of cleaning stuff. It jumped up and pecked at the wax paper from Dunkin' Donuts, ripping off bits of a crushed plain glazed donut.

"This bread is not good." The pigeon shook the donut around its head like a dog

with a toy, then flung in on the floor.

"Already soon winter, need to eat protein, leafy green. Peanut, thin-rind nut, aramanth, purslane. This is rich people house, probably many organic foods, let's go refrigerator?" The pigeon jumped down off the bag.

(A few weeks later, I tried aramanth at Whole Foods. It's like quinoa but somehow worse.)

"Get up," the pigeon said.

My center of gravity was somewhere a few feet under the floor.

"No? I know, you can't move, take too much drug. Good, listen."

The pigeon walked across the bathroom tip-tap-scritch-scratch and jumped up on my leg.

"Here's how it is," said the pigeon. "I am special police, I watch you. As personal favor I take big risk to help you. You just need to listen to me and your life will get better."

"You can be good," the pigeon said. "It will be extremely hard for you, at this time, but it's still possible."

I winced, not so much because of what the pigeon was saying, but because I was struggling to stay conscious.

"Oh, drug bug," the pigeon said, jumping up on my shoulder.

"I think you will be okay, huh? It is very hard for everyone, hard for me too, hard

for pigeon in New York City,” the pigeon said, sticking his head under my chin and cooing.

The soft whirr of the idling dehumidifier was sounding more and more like angels. I could see the pigeon’s wing twitching from the blurry corner of my eye. “Don’t worry, pigeons on the internet now, great historical events coming, comprehensive changes soon...”

That was the last thing I remember the pigeon saying before the universe began folding in on itself, rapidly over and over until it was a single point that flickered away with the sound of wind chimes in flowing grass.

When everything came back I wiped the drool from my cheek and tried to figure out where I was.

The light from the air shaft told me that the afternoon was over. The pigeon was gone, the bathroom window was still open.

Anxiety hit me hard, like sundown syndrome or something.

I immediately stood up and started pacing around the kitchen, at least enjoying the luxury of having enough room to pace in circles.

I needed a drink. I remembered Patrick.

“Free soon,” I messaged him. “Can you pick a bar?”

I could do the cleaning in an hour. I lit candles and aligned all the coffee table books, and started to process the experience I’d just had.

At the bar with Patrick, everything felt kind of tired and broken. At times I was totally unable to speak. A little temporary brain damage. I'd be fine. Patrick and I barely looked at each other, eyes wandering around the bar.

I ordered myself a double and drank it, but it didn't do anything for me. So I played with the ice in my drained glass while mentally replaying the mysterious feeling of being reborn in someone else's bathroom.

I felt comforted that I had just experienced something big, close to a mystery of life. Rare maybe, even for druggy losers. Maybe I could stop doing drugs now.

Patrick and I talked about music and some gay sci-fi shit but it felt hollow and forced. The date or whatever felt pointless.

Annicka texted me asking if I could take a job in Williamsburg, the normal cleaner wasn't responding. It was a super cool job and she'd pay extra because it was so late in the evening. I would have said yes even without the extra money because I'm a loser.

"I have to go," I said to Patrick. "Nice to meet you."

"Bye," he said, making a cunt face.

I railed some normal K off the bathroom sink on my way out. Annicka told me to make sure to read the job notes, which were really long, explaining that the store's owner was super environmental, that I should use their supplies, be careful about streaks, etc.

I walked south. At first it was quiet. Passing under store awnings I heard pigeons

getting ready for bed and I wished I lived in Greenpoint. Then I entered the area around McCarren Park. There was a painful amount of young people standing outside sandlots, dives and brasseries wearing lots of chunky oversized outerwear. Maybe if I was younger, better raised, this would end with me going to rehab. I'd turn it all into an "experience", invent a transition to the next thing. But moving back to Rockford wasn't an option for me, neither was going to a substance abuse place. I needed to pee.

I found somewhere quiet (only cars passing by) and pissed on some green construction site hoarding.

When I arrived at the shop around 8:20, the big window display was all lit up. I got freaked out for a sec when a girl waved out at me from behind the glass. She climbed down out of the display case, some weird towels under her chin. I read the sign on the rack she was arranging: Reusable Family Cloth Toilet Paper, a great complement to the TUSHY bidet toilet.

As she unlocked the doors of the shop, another, mousier girl appeared behind her.

Inside, Four Tet was playing. Wooden shelving rose up two stories, concealing dozens of Sonos speakers. The taller girl introduced herself as Willa in a quiet monotone and started to "show me around". Nothing special, a little office and bathroom to clean, I could do the front windows when they were done with the display.

"The shelving looks really nice," I said. "Very geometrical." This was the ketamine

speaking. Willa said “thanks” kind of ironically. Her clothes were expensive in a way that I recognized but didn’t understand in terms of brand.

I put my headphones in to listen to the same gabber mix I’d been listening to all day. The office was basically free of hair and slime so I dusted and aligned. When I was done I walked through the dark store to where the girls were working on the display. It looked the same.

“Where do I put the trash? I couldn’t find a can.” I asked.

“Oh, we’re a zero waste shop,” said the non-Willa girl.

“Oh, okay,” I said, embarrassed and kind of annoyed. “What should I do with this then?” I said, lifting up the bodega bag I’d filled with a few seltzer bottles, tampon wrappers, and dust bunnies.

Willa interrupted whatever the other girl was going to say.

“Oh yeah, I’ll take care of that,” she said, extending her hand.

I laughed. Willa was expressionless. She squatted to stuff the trash into a MOMA PS1 tote bag.

“How do you like working here?” I asked.

“Hah, well, my mom actually founded the brand,” she said. “It’s alright.”

Willa stood up and for a moment we looked directly at each other. I imagined her mom, her Instagram stories, an older, less beautiful version of Willa talking confidently, the type of woman that makes me want to kill myself. I asked Willa

what her job was called, pointing at the pyramid of stuff that they were arranging. "Director of Product". Willa talked for a bit about how she picked out zero waste products, something about animal testing in China and how it was "not ideal from a global justice perspective."

Willa showed me the Miele vacuum. It was quiet but powerful.

At some level I was pissed at this stupid scammy store, but I'd already gone down this track of thinking. Many times. On jobs I'd get into moods and my thoughts would run faster and faster, banging back and forth like a car on a track, but after so much sameness and nothingness I was starting to know which tracks to avoid going down.

When I was done vacuuming I went outside to clean the front window. It was probably the first cold night of the year. This made me feel hopeful, like my first fall in New York. On the other side of the glass, Willa was instructing the other girl, but I couldn't hear what they were saying.

About fifteen minutes before 10pm the non-Willa girl walked out the door with her bag, barely saying good night to me.

I walked back and forth under the orange streetlights, looking for streaking on the glass. I didn't want Annicka to have to "relay feedback from the client".

Right when I was about to go back inside Willa came out, hugging herself and shivering.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"It seems like there's something stuck on the glass there, can't get it off."

"Yeah," said Willa. "Don't worry about it. I'm going to get the key so we can leave."

I grabbed my microfibers and tried to go inside but it was locked.

"Fuck!" yelled Willa. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. Willa sounded like she was about to cry, the word fuck sounded weird in her mouth.

"What? What's up?"

"Rachel forgot to put the key in the lockbox."

"Oh shit," I said. "My stuff's inside."

"Fuck fuck fuck," said Willa, and then stopped pacing, made herself calm down.

I felt really uncomfortable. I looked at the lock.

"I'll tell Rachel to get a car back here, hopefully she has service on the train."

I thought of all the times I paid like \$30 for a Lyft to a job where I only made \$70, and felt bad for Rachel even though she was clearly retarded.

"Wait," I said. "I can get us in probably."

"What?"

I took out my keys. I learned a lot nerdy stuff from my brother, like about bitcoin back in 2010. That Christmas he also gave me a little folding lockpick and taught me how to pick locks. I used it a lot when I was into tagging, and still had it attached to my keychain. The front door wasn't dead-bolted so I'd be able to pick it, probably. As I gently torqued the lock Willa didn't say anything. I realized it

was dumb to do this in front of a client, but I guess I wanted to show off. And I missed my brother and it was cold.

When the door swung open I felt a shudder of pleasure, more satisfying than an orgasm.

“Wow,” said Willa. “Thank you. That’s a cool skill.”

I stood aside, held the door open for Willa.

“Do you have any cool skills?” I asked.

Willa looked me up and down.

“Can I do something to your upper back?” Willa asked when we were inside, warming up. She made squeeze gestures with her hand: massage.

“Yeah,” I said, surprised. “It’s constantly, like, inflamed.”

“I can see that.”

Willa moved to stand behind me and I tensed up. I always felt extremely aware of my body in a bad way, except, of course, on dissociatives. At this point I was pretty sober, and felt Willa’s fingers running over my shoulder blades. Her knuckles suddenly stabbed into my back at a set of symmetric points. My shoulders snapped back and it felt like very cold or hot water was running down my back, collecting at the base of my spine. I instantly felt lighter.

“What – was that some sort of kung fu thing?” I said. Willa gave me a sidelong smile. “I’m going to grab the spare keys from the office,” she said.

I packed up my stuff and waited by the door. Outside, she thanked me for my help and handed me a book.

"Here, I – you might find this interesting. Someone gave it to me and it helped me understand myself better."

I turned the book over in my hands. "Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age".

I stared at the cover art, which reminded me of "Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul". Did she think I had autism? Because I had this shit job, or maybe I was acting weird because the drugs?

"I'm heading to the train," said Willa.

"I'm heading that way," I said without looking up, pointing the opposite direction, towards the East River.

"Good night, take care," said Willa.

"Good night."

I flipped through the book as I walked past the low-rise luxury apartment buildings to the park by the river, next to the newer, taller buildings.

I considered sitting there and reading the whole book in the freezing cold. I always do shit like that. But another part of me was very sad, self-pitiful. I felt like the butt of a big joke.

Fuck. Like maybe I was playing all the wrong games in life, messing around with

stuff that just wasn't for me. Like when I used to play chess against my dad and slowly lost each game for reasons I didn't understand, then when I started winning he wouldn't play me anymore.

Maybe the best case scenario for me was to end up like Willa. Or get my shit together so my kid could be like her mom.

I stared into the dark water, thinking about my day, the comforting pigeon, the rest of my life, the Christmas when my brother gave me the lockpick. I realized I could barely remember anything else about him, how we were as kids. I yelped like a kicked dog.

It was like finding an empty space in my mouth where I expected a tooth. There was just years and years of bullshit instead.

I paced back and forth for a few minutes, conflicted, and then turned towards the train.

Hurrying past some nice dive bars, I tried to remember stuff from my childhood. Maybe if I had some of my mom's tapes, videos of us doing normal stuff, I could remember more.

When I got to the Bedford Avenue stop, I decided to try calling my brother. If he picked up, I'd ask if he had any of the tapes. And I'd ask what he'd been up to for the past decade.