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LIFE SUCKS: CLASSIFYING TRANSGRESSIVE FICTION

BY

JENA CHRISTIANSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts

Major in English

South Dakota State University

2018

LIFE SUCKS: CLASSIFYING TRANSGRESSIVE FICTION

JENA CHRISTIANSON

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the Master of English degree and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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ABSTRACT

LIFE SUCKS: CLASSIFYING TRANSGRESSIVE FICTION

JENA CHRISTIANSON

2018

This thesis explores the genre of transgressive fiction and locates my own creative work within this genre. *Los Angeles Times* writer Michael Silverblatt popularized the term *transgressive fiction* in 1993 and associates authors such as Dennis Cooper, Kathy Acker, Roland Barthes, Bret Easton Ellis, Michel Foucault, William Gass, Jean Genet, and William Burroughs with the genre; however, the definition of transgressive fiction remains elusive. Therefore, in my first chapter, I analyze three transgressive novels—Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, and Tony Tullamuthe’s *Private Citizens*. My second chapter consists of selections from my creative work, a transgressive novel entitled *Life Sucks*. Finally, in my third chapter I reflect on my creative writing process and describe how my creative work engages with, contributes to, and departs from the genre of transgressive fiction.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the genre of transgressive fiction and locates my own creative work—a transgressive novel entitled *Life Sucks*—within this genre. *Los Angeles Times* writer Michael Silverblatt popularized the term *transgressive fiction* in 1993 and associates authors such as Dennis Cooper, Kathy Acker, Roland Barthes, Bret Easton Ellis, Michel Foucault, William Gass, Jean Genet, and William Burroughs with the genre; however, the definition of transgressive fiction remains elusive. Silverblatt suggests that transgressive fiction subverts cultural norms, but critics have not developed a detailed description of the key elements of this narrative form. Therefore, in my first chapter, I analyze three transgressive novels—Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, and Tony Tullamuthe’s *Private Citizens*—in order to identify these elements.

In doing so, I take what can best be described as a structuralist approach to defining the genre of transgressive fiction. Roland Barthes calls structuralism “an activity” whose function “is to reconstruct an ‘object’ in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning (the ‘functions’) of this object” (214). He continues that a structuralist “takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it...not in order to copy it but to render it intelligible” (215). In other words, a structuralist approach to literary genre involves “decomposing” specific examples of the genre in order to identify their common components, then “recomposing” the genre by articulating a description of these components. This description does not capture any sort of pre-existing “essence” of the genre, but is an interpretation designed to promote an understanding of how the genre functions.

Chapter One is meant as a guide for distinguishing transgressive fiction from other genres of writing. My purpose for developing this guide is not only to render the genre of transgressive fiction more “intelligible,” but also to establish a deeper understanding of my own work and its relationship to this genre. Chapter Two is a creative section containing a piece of my own fiction, a narrative entitled *Life Sucks*, that I project will be novel length. In this piece, a twenty-six-year-old middle school teacher creates a support group for individuals who are plagued by nothing in particular, but who are unhappy nonetheless. Under her instruction, the group blames societal norms—consumerism, social media, advertising, student debt, and more—for their feelings of unhappiness and lack of fulfillment. They throw out electronics, quit their jobs, and move out into the woods. Finally, I reflect on my writing process in Chapter Three, explaining how my narrative both draws upon, contributes to, and departs from the genre of transgressive fiction.

CHAPTER ONE: DEFINING TRANSGRESSIVE FICTION

I. BACKGROUND

Transgressive fiction is a term used to describe a genre of writing in which characters intentionally attempt to subvert cultural norms they find unsatisfying. The transgressive genre has a reputation for being shocking and/or repulsive and often gets labeled as “smut” due to its tendency to glorify violence and sex; however, this is a result of the common themes of subversion rather than a requirement of the genre itself. For example, if heterosexuality is the norm of a culture, the characters might subvert this norm in aggressively homosexual descriptions. On the other hand, if a character in the modern era decides to leave civilization and live in a cabin in the woods, that would also be considered transgressive whether or not it includes anything shocking or pornographic.

Most works of transgressive fiction are set during the time in which they were written and contain characters unhappy with social expectations and conventions. These characters attempt to break out of their conventional lifestyles. Their transgressions may be social, sexual, physical, or political. The form of transgressive fiction may seem jarring for the reader. The storylines do not always follow a chronological order; the narrator(s) can seem unreliable; punctuation, sentence structure, and paragraph form often do not follow grammatical rules; and sometimes the novel itself does not follow format conventions. For example, in Kenneth Patchen’s *The Journal of Albion Moonlight*, a second and unexplained narrative suddenly fills the margin of the printed page. Readers have to read the marginal narrative for three or four pages, then turn back and start where they left off in the regular writing space. Such moves serve to keep the reader from feeling comfortable; the form of the text suggests that life does not unfold in

perfectly synchronized storylines, but rather exists as a conglomerate of memories, events, and conversations, all of which contain biases depending on who narrates. In this way, the form of the text reflect its content.

The transgressive genre is not new to fiction, although it has only recently—within the last twenty-five years—become a term commonly used to classify literature. Silverblatt introduced the genre to the reading public in an article entitled, “SHOCK APPEAL / Who Are These Writers, and Why Do They Want to Hurt Us?: The New Fiction of Transgression.” Silverblatt reflects on a writing workshop conducted by author Dennis Cooper in which “there was no talk of minimalism (the parade has past), or postmodernism (an aberration of the academy); the talk was all about the *new new thing*: transgressive writing” (par. 2). As his article title suggests, Silverblatt brands transgressive fiction as shocking, disturbing, and painful to read. While this is not always the case, most transgressive fiction addresses social issues associated with feelings of inadequacy, depression, anxiety, and loneliness by featuring characters who attempt to subvert cultural norms as a means to combat these unwanted feelings. They are often unsuccessful, which can indeed make transgressive fiction emotionally painful to read, depending on the reader. Some transgressive narratives include characters who find happiness or offer hopeful and uplifting conclusions, but most do not. As a result of the genre’s dark and salacious reputation, readers often confuse transgressive fiction with horror, gothic, and erotica. While transgressive fiction can engage conventions of these other genres—for example, William Burrough’s *Naked Lunch* and Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* both feature some inarguably pornographic scenes—works of horror, gothic, and erotica are not necessarily transgressive, and vice versa.

Throughout this thesis, I will draw examples from three primary texts while describing the aspects of the genre: *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis, *Fight Club* (1996) by Chuck Palahniuk, and *Private Citizens* (2016) by Tony Tulathimutte. Each of these novels follows characters who maneuver through vastly different plots. *American Psycho* follows one first-person narrator, Patrick Bateman, through two-hundred-and-forty pages of grueling, cataloguing prose. The twenty-six-year-old narrator, obsessed with money, material goods, and appearances, provides a look into his psychopathic mind. Living in New York, Patrick works a Wall Street job and makes a great deal of money. Most of the book follows his thought process as he goes out on the town and criticizes everyone he meets based on their clothing brands, hair styles, body shapes, restaurant selections, and overall appearances. About one-third of the way into the novel, Patrick starts murdering people he comes across on the street for seemingly no reason other than he wants to. He shows no remorse and doesn't work very hard to cover anything up. The remainder of the novel reads increasingly like a stream-of-consciousness narrative and discusses Patrick's fuzzy drug-and-alcohol-induced actions, including sexual violence, murder, and rude interactions with individuals he perceives as lower class.

Fight Club also follows a single first-person narrator: an unnamed man in his early thirties living in New York. He suffers from insomnia, has an unfulfilling desk job, and works towards having the ideal life of owning an apartment filled with the perfect furniture, wardrobe, plate sets, and other material goods. One day, he meets a stranger on the beach—Tyler Durden—who gives the narrator his phone number. A few days later, the narrator goes home to find out that his apartment building has blown up. Instead of

renting a new one and buying new material possessions, he calls Tyler. He forgets about his former belongings and moves into a dilapidated building with the stranger. They start a “fight club” in which men gather together to fistfight one-on-one. The narrator then blackmails his boss, which ends in a lawsuit that gives the narrator a substantial amount of money. He and Tyler use this money to fund their fight club until Tyler starts a different club: Project Mayhem. Project Mayhem looks less like a club and more like a cult. The members all live and work in the house. The group begins participating in acts of guerrilla terrorism, eventually leading to the narrator trying to stop the group from blowing up a credit card company building.

Tulathimutte writes *Private Citizens* in the third person, and each chapter closely follows one of four main characters: Linda, Henrik, Will, and Cory. The timeline is not entirely linear, which can prove confusing for the reader; this is Tulathimutte’s intention. Each of the characters knows one another from having gone to college at Stanford University, and each of them—all in their twenties—currently lives in the San Francisco area. Cory is an idealistic, liberal nonprofit worker who wants to make the world a cleaner, better place. Will works in computer software and molds his identity around an incredibly beautiful, disabled girlfriend whom he doesn’t think he deserves; Henrik is a socially awkward, severely depressed graduate school dropout; and Linda is a dangerously narcissistic and intelligent man-eater whose self-destruction gets the better of her. The four of them together represent different voices of the post high school millennial generation.

These three novels all include characters who subvert cultural norms and wrestle with the binds of social expectations. In addition, they engage five key elements that are

common within the genre of transgressive fiction: 1) Characters exhibit a numbness or lack of empathy. 2) The narrative associates this mental state with a variety of psychological disorders that are the result of living within a dysfunctional culture. 3) The narrative criticizes the status quo that gives rise to this dysfunction. 4) The narrative nonetheless fails to provide a clear message or solutions for change. 5) The narrative structure is unconventional and often jarring. Most pieces of transgressive fiction seem to embody these five common elements, giving readers a guide for distinguishing transgressive fiction from other genres of writing.

II. ELEMENTS OF TRANSGRESSIVE FICTION

Numbness or Lack of Empathy

One common convention of transgressive fiction is for its characters to show a numbness or lack of empathy—especially during typically intense and emotional events. According to Silverblatt, transgressive fiction writers:

Take the simple declarative sentences of the minimalists a few notches further toward blankness or numbness. No matter how startling the events in the fiction of A. M. Homes (a Barbie doll comes to sexual life, a patient finds that her psychoanalyst is in fact her missing, homicidal mother), the prose decides not to register any surprise. (2)

In essence, the shock appeal here is not the violence itself, but the lack of reaction—the disconnect from empathy—of the characters. In first-person narrative, this lack of empathy is often reflected in the narrative tone. In *American Psycho*, Patrick narrates killing innocent people in the same monotone voice as he narrates performing mundane

activities. In one chapter, Patrick describes the head of a prostitute the morning after he murders her:

Her head sits on the kitchen table and its blood-soaked face—even with both eyes scooped out and a pair of Alain Mikli sunglasses over the holes—looks like its frowning. I get very tired looking at it and though I didn't get any sleep last night and I'm utterly spent, I still have a lunch appointment at Odeon with Jem Davies and Alana Burton at one. That's very important to me and I have to debate whether I should cancel it or not. (291)

The most disturbing element to this excerpt is not the brutality itself, but the lack of fluctuation in Patrick's emotions. He has just murdered this woman in cold blood, yet he still speaks in the same tone as when he describes working out and moisturizing his face. He still feels the need to specify that the sunglasses were "Alain Mikli" and debates whether or not to cancel his lunch date because he is "very tired" and "utterly spent"—not because he just killed someone and feels guilty and/or needs to clean up the evidence.

Vartan P. Messier agrees:

What is particularly remarkable, and perhaps, even shocking or disturbing, is that Bateman displays the same matter-of-fact affective filter to describe in detail music albums, waking up and exercise routines, clothing, and restaurant scenes, as well as his barbarous acts of mutilation and murder. (74)

In essence, the lack of empathy—lack of concern for human life—is what makes this novel so chilling to read.

Similarly, characters in *Fight Club* fail to respond with empathy towards their and others' well-being. For example, the narrator states:

Tyler's upstairs, and the kitchen is filled with the smell of cloves and burnt hair. Marla's at the kitchen table, burning the inside of her arm with a clove cigarette and calling herself human buttwipe.

"I embrace my own festering diseased corruption," Marla tells the cherry on the end of her cigarette. Marla twists the cigarette into the soft white belly of her arm. "Burn, witch, burn."

Tyler's upstairs in my bedroom, looking at his teeth in my mirror, and says he's got me a job as a banquet waiter. (65)

Without skipping a beat, the narrator tells us Marla sits in the kitchen intentionally burning her flesh with a cigarette and insulting herself aloud while Tyler and the narrator sit upstairs talking about a job prospect. None of the three characters present, including Marla herself, register any concern towards Marla's mutilation of her body. She may as well have been clipping her nails or reading a book by the amount of shock or concern exhibited by the characters or the narrative tone.

While the lack of empathy in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* appears as a lack of care for others' physical and emotional well being, the lack of empathy in *Private Citizens* manifests predominantly in lack of care for others' emotional wellbeing. For example, Linda uses men for money by pretending to have feelings for them, then shows no remorse when she leaves them. Towards the beginning of the novel, she meets a man who seems to have money, and even though she feels no attraction to him, she goes home with him and pretends to be bad at sex so she can sleep at his place. Linda explains her commonly used tactic to "deliver the worst blowjob of his god-given life" then move in without permission (65). Because of her model looks, men will put up with her bad or

nonexistent sex and pay for her meals and other goods: “She told him she had feelings for him, making it seem like it was one of those jokes that were actually true, when it was really a flat-out lie. But only idiots expected sincerity...it wasn’t her fault if he believed her” (66). Even though Linda tries to justify her actions, the lack of empathy and remorse are clear. When he tells her he’s twenty-five-thousand dollars in debt from spending money on her for “clothes, plane ticket, food, drinks, drugs,” and “rent,” she replies, “Whatever, bro. It wasn’t a fucking loan. You spent money to get me to like you” (68). She then grabs her belongings and leaves, never to see or talk to him again. Largely, she pretends to fall in love with him, pretends to be bad at sex to get out of physical affection, and uses him for a free place to stay, free food, free drugs, free clothes, and other material benefits, then coldly leaves him when he tells her he is in debt.

Representations of Psychological Disorders

Another element of transgressive fiction is the tendency for characters to suffer from psychological disorders as a result of the cultural climate in which they live. Sometimes the characters openly admit to suffering from these disorders and other times critics diagnose characters with psychological disorders while analyzing their actions. The most blatant example, *American Psycho*, identifies its narrator as a “psycho” in its title, and Patrick also calls himself a psychopath several times throughout the novel. In one scene, he teases a two-year-old child at a store by waving his credit card in the baby’s face and, in a baby voice, says, “Yes, I’m a total psychopathic murderer, oh yes I am, I like to kill people, oh yes I do, honey, little sweetie pie, yes I do” (221). Berthold Schoene claims, “Patrick’s precarious selfhood is driven by both hysterical and autistic

impulses, finding itself at the mercy of irreconcilable tensions that unleash themselves in hyperbolic acts of violence, both real and imagined” (381). Likewise, Scott Wilson talks of Patrick’s suffering from “psychosis,” or “the inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality” (478). However, no one in the book points out or shows any concern about Patrick’s mental state. His narcissism, lewd behavior, drug use, and psychopathic tendencies are displayed as normal and even desirable traits.

Meanwhile, in the beginning of *Fight Club*, the narrator suffers from insomnia and what appears to be depression. After not sleeping for three weeks, he sees a doctor who tells him, “Insomnia is just the symptom of something larger. Find out what’s actually wrong” (19). This suggests the health system fails to help him when he asks for it. Instead of sending the narrator to a psychiatrist or offering a prescription to help treat the insomnia, the narrator’s doctor tells him to “chew valerian root and get more exercise [to] eventually...fall asleep” (19). He belittles the narrator’s condition by comparing it to others with more physically visible and terminal ailments: “My doctor said, if I wanted to see real pain, I should swing by First Eucharist on a Tuesday night. See the brain parasites. See the degenerative bone disease. The organic brain dysfunctions. See the cancer patients getting by” (19). Instead of helping the narrator with his mental issues, his doctor sends him to see people with more tangible health issues—people in “real pain.” Instead of getting help for his insomnia, the narrator starts attending support groups for terminal illnesses he doesn’t have. The narrative suggests that, had the narrator gotten proper treatment for his mental disorders, he would have never created Tyler and a terrorist cult that results in at least one dead member by the end of the book.

Like Patrick, *Fight Club*'s narrator also suffers from psychosis—he does not recognize Tyler as a fantasy projection of himself until the novel's last forty pages. Even then, the narrator never figures out the truth; Tyler tells him. Once given this knowledge, the narrator tries to diagnose himself: "Tyler is a projection. He's a dis-associative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination" (168). Tyler responds, "Fuck that shit...maybe you're my schizophrenic hallucination" (168). Jonas van de Poel and Eduardo Mendieta both call the narrator schizophrenic, and other sources diagnose him with dissociative identity disorder. No matter the diagnosis, the narrator suffers from a psychological disorder that motivates him to start a cult that commits acts of terrorism.

In *Private Citizens*, the characters also suffer from psychological disorders and seem to have varying experiences with treatment. In the beginning of the novel, readers discover Henrik is on a number of prescription drugs for his psychological health:

Effexor had not made things better and Celexa made things worse, so he was on washout.... Last month he'd had his Depakote upped again, bloating his face and torso, while Topamax made his arms bony, which seemed impossible, though if you could be manic and depressive, you could probably also be fat and emaciated.

(14)

As a former Yale student who transferred to Stanford after a suicide attempt, Henrik is the most blatantly psychologically plagued of the four main characters; however, not one of them is exempt from unwanted psychological hurdles. Linda is self-loathing and self-destructive. In one chapter, she talks about cigarettes as being "ideal partners" because they "made you look good" and "let you be needy for five minutes"; and while the

“romance of smoking was pure product placement...it was still the sexiest way of hating yourself” (208). At the peak of her self-destruction, Linda is offered a glass pipe of “opium” at a party from a stranger. Without hesitation, she takes four “hits” off it only to find out it is heroin (207). Her night ends with her blacking out. She wakes up in a hospital with “three cracked ribs, broken right wrist, clavicle, right fibula...palms, feet, and knees icy with abrasions,” and she is missing her two front teeth (215). She has been hit by a car while walking down the street in her inebriated state.

Cory also has issues with self-hatred. She finds herself annoyed with her roommate’s noises “at the hour of night when Cory craved the silence to hate herself” (248). Cory suffers from anxiety and depression from trying to effect positive change in the world, which pushes her body to its physical limits. After a big nonprofit event, she loses most of her hair and goes to a clinic to find out she is “malnourished, anemic, hyponatremic, and had minor but literal cases of scurvy, telogen effluvium, and iodine deficiency, which her doctor had never seen before in America” as well as “vulvovaginal lichen planus,” a vaginal infection that is “likely stress-induced, not sexually transmitted” (348-9). While many people suffer from an unhealthy amount of work-related stress, Cory’s long list of physical ailments points to psychological distress. As someone who refuses to profit from her work, she thinks of herself as something of a martyr sacrificing her body for the betterment of humankind.

Transgressive fiction represents such psychological disorders as a byproduct of the cultural climate. Engaging in capitalistic gratification causes Patrick to objectify humans and lose any sense of empathy for them, making him a psychopath. In *Fight Club*, the narrator’s psychological ailments start with depression from his unfulfilling

materialistic lifestyle and desk job, which turns into insomnia, which spirals into an erratic hallucination of an alter ego inside him who tries to change the world through vandalism and guerilla terrorism. Lastly, in *Private Citizens*, Henrik develops anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder as a result of an academic life that promises neither happiness nor fulfillment; Cory manifests symptoms of depression, anxiety, exhaustion, and self-destruction as a social activist running a nonprofit organization; and Linda suffers from anxiety as an author in a world where “TV killed the social novel” (240), as well as self-destructive tendencies stemming from sexual abuse. In the case of all three novels, the reader is led to attribute these disorders to the culture in which the characters grew up.

Critique of the Status Quo

Another element of transgressive fiction is a critique of the status quo within the current culture. In *American Psycho*, Patrick becomes a young, successful, rich Wall Street businessman who—through descriptions of clothing, food, furniture, and other material products—tells the reader exactly how wealthy he is. He considers wealth and class the most important factors in life. However, the way he shows this is by repeatedly and relentlessly cataloguing every item of clothing he sees every person wearing, which becomes monotonous and irritating to the reader. In a passage towards the beginning of the novel, Patrick describes the women at a table across from his in a restaurant:

One is wearing a chemise dress in double-faced wool by Calvin Klein, another is wearing a wool knit dress and jacket with silk faille bonding by Geoffrey Beene, another is wearing a symmetrical skirt of pleated tulle and an embroidered velvet

bustier by, I think, Christian Lacroix plus high-heeled shoes by Sidonie Larizza, and the last one is wearing a black strapless sequined gown under a wool crepe tailored jacket by Bill Blass. (4)

This cataloguing of what everyone wears, and by whom, as well as what everyone eats, is tedious to read. In fact, the entire first half of the novel is simply the narrator judging everyone he comes into contact with by their clothing choices and overall looks. Around Christmas time, Patrick catalogues items in a store:

...vases and felt fedoras with feather headbands and alligator toiletry cases with gilt-silver bottles and brushes and shoehorns that cost two hundred dollars and candlesticks and pillow covers and gloves and slippers and powder puffs and hand-knitted cotton snowflake sweaters and leather skates and Porsche-design sky goggles and antique apothecary bottles and diamond earrings and boots and vodka glasses and card cases and cameras and mahogany servers. (179)

This is only one of several lists of items in stores that Patrick describes. The point is clear: too much materialism. Messier agrees, asserting that “the subjects of the novel’s attacks are...the overwhelming importance conferred upon material goods, monetary wealth and physical appearance as a measure of success,” as well as the violence enacted on lower class citizens by those who believe themselves superior (75). Patrick reduces humans to what they wear, what they eat, what beauty products they use, what their business cards look like, and the accounts they hold at the company in which he works. The critique is that the social climate’s definition of success—money, material possessions, and physical attractiveness—causes narcissism and psychopathy. It causes

people to reduce other humans to mere objects, objects that can then be played with or destroyed without hesitation or remorse.

Likewise, *Fight Club* also critiques materialism and social class. For example, in the excerpt of Marla burning her arm, the lack of empathy may disturb readers, but this is intentional. Why does Marla think of herself as “human buttwipe”? The novel suggests that her experiences growing up in poverty have given her this idea, and instead of fighting it she embraces it. Palahniuk uses Marla’s lack of concern for her well-being to critique social class, much like Bret Easton Ellis does when showing Patrick’s lack of concern for the lives of prostitutes and the homeless—individuals he considers too low in class to deserve respect or even life. Both authors use cold and unempathetic characters to demonstrate how society thinks of lower class citizens as less than human.

Not unlike Patrick, the narrator in *Fight Club* also identifies himself by his occupation and his material belongings. However, one day he comes home from the airport after a business trip and his condo has just blown up; he catalogues his broken items scattered on the ground around him and criticizes his generation for identifying themselves this way:

Something which was a bomb, a big bomb, had blasted my clever
Njurunda coffee tables in the shape of a lime green yin and an orange yang that fit
together to make a circle. Well they were splinters now.

My Haparanda Sofe group with the orange slip covers, design by Erika
Pekkari, it was trash now.

And I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue. (43)

He goes on to list a number of other carefully selected items including: "The Alle cutlery service. Stainless Steel. Dishwasher Safe"; "The Mommala quilt-cover set. Design by Tomas Harila"; and "the easy-care textured lacquer of my Kalix occasional tables" (43-4). Much like Patrick, the narrator knows the brands of these items and their exact details. In the loss of them, the narrator realizes the triviality of their existence:

It took my whole life to buy this stuff.... You buy furniture.... Buy the sofa.... then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug.

Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you.

Until I got home from the airport. (44)

The last line suggests that in the destruction of his material goods, he is no longer trapped in the social constraints of collecting items for his "nest." He calls Tyler and moves into a large abandoned house that's "waiting for something, a zoning change or a will to come out of probate, and then it will be torn down" (57). The house is falling apart, and the narrator feels content to live there with Tyler and abandon any sentiment of going back to collecting furniture and living in a condo. In this way, the novel suggests that individuals who create their identity based off their belongings, housing, and earnings are trapped in a life in which they can never feel complete. They will always collect more items for the purpose of feeling whole and happy rather than for pragmatic reasons. Letting go of his material possessions makes the narrator feel alive.

In fact, abandoning conventional lifestyles is a common theme in transgressive fiction. In *Private Citizens*, Henrik meets a prostitute online, Roopa, who lives in a warehouse commune with several individuals. She convinces Henrik to leave his apartment, stop taking his medications, and move in with her. He goes from a depressed, ex-suicidal, Stanford student to thinking, “he could live without meds if he regulated his lifestyle, could be unemployed if he grew his own food” (191). The prose indicates that Will feels a huge sense of relief from the idea of not having to go back to school and not having to get a job:

It was like some paralyzing electromagnet on his brain had been removed, like the internal gyroscope that kept him suspended in death had finally toppled, like the meniscus of anxieties he’d had had burst, spilling his enthusiasm forth. (191)

The idea of an alternative life frees him in ways he never thought possible. In the case of Henrik, the social conformity he attempts to escape is education rather than material goods. Written in 2016, the cultural conventions in *Private Citizens* have shifted from those of the 1990s when *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* came out. The job market has put extra pressure on students to get higher degrees, social media has changed the way people interact with one another, and prescription medications for psychological help are a booming market. Henrik goes off his medications when he moves in with Roopa because she tells him, “He wasn’t disordered, she assured him; society was. Manic conservatives, depressive liberals. Mood-swinging markets and a demented climate. Rich against poor, white against unwhite. Henrik was just American” (190). While Henrik might have benefitted from the medication, the novel suggests that the reason he might

need it in the first place is because of the culture he lives in—one divided politically and difficult to navigate socially and economically.

Another character in *Private Citizens*, Cory, subverts cultural norms by boycotting the Internet. The critique of the status quo comes through her argument with Will about using social media and the Internet to promote her cause. She argues:

I hate that everyone knows technology and textiles are made by *slaves* and they *still* don't care.... the Internet is a vile, omnivorous privatization machine. A technological vector of capitalist domination...a shopping mall. A global corporate holding pen masquerading as public commons. (122-3)

Will argues back that “if she stood for progress, why not *technological* progress?” (122).

To which she answers “Because social benefit wasn't consumable—people wanted hoverboards and phone cases, not infrastructure, green energy, shit, not even food production” (122-3). Once again, consumerism has become part of the social critique, only this time it's linked with the Internet's capitalistic benefits. Cory sees the Internet as a boost to consumerism that increases the exploitation of labor across the globe. The novel suggests that consumerism in America has increased since the Internet became commonplace, and through Cory's rants it reveals the adverse social effects this has on the world.

Overall, all three of these novels critique consumer culture in America: Patrick values objects and wealth above human life, the narrator in *Fight Club* abandons his lifestyle of collecting material goods and moves into a condemned house, Henrik drops out of graduate school and moves into a commune, and Cory eschews cell phone and Internet usage.

Refusal to Provide Solutions

By the end of the three novels, none of the characters succeed in finding what they are looking for. In transgressive fiction, the novels often end bleakly with characters rarely finding fulfillment, happiness, or purpose. Often they wind up in the same state they were in the beginning of the novel, if not worse. While transgressive fiction challenges the status quo within the current culture, it seldom provides solutions to the issues presented. For example, while Patrick Bateman represents the narcissistic, materialistic, misogynistic result of over-commodification, *American Psycho* presents no alternative to his psychotic, violent lifestyle. At the end of the novel, while in a bar, Patrick hears “someone” ask, “not in relation to anything, ‘Why?’” No context surrounds this moment and Patrick responds:

“Well, though I know I should have done *that* instead of not doing it, I’m twenty-seven for Christ sakes and this is, uh, how life presents itself in a bar or in a club in New York, maybe *anywhere*, at the end of the century and how people, you know, *me*, behave, and this is what being *Patrick* means to me, I guess, so, well, yup, uh...” and this is followed by a sigh, then a slight shrug and another sigh, and above one of the doors covered by red velvet drapes in Harry’s is a sign and on the sign in letters that match the drapes’ color are the words THIS IS NOT AN EXIT. (399)

This is how the novel ends. This final excerpt suggests Patrick only acts the way he acts because that is the way people like him—young, rich, successful, attractive—act. Except for being robbed by a cab driver that recognizes Patrick from a wanted poster (and even

then Patrick's insurance pays him back), Patrick is never punished for his acts of violence, nor does he suffer unrelated punishment meted out by the author. He does not get caught, lose his job, get cancer, get into a car wreck, or get beaten up. The novel suggests he continues on the way he has in the first four hundred pages: killing people for no reason, sexually abusing prostitutes, ingesting illegal substances, cheating on girlfriends, and equating peoples' worth to the sum of their material wealth. Throughout the novel, no characters contrast this lifestyle and no solutions are suggested. In fact, the final sentence, "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT," suggests there is no way out of this cultural climate—or at least that the novel offers no way out. It suggests that the rich will continue to treat the poor as less than human and that people will continue to value one another based on wealth and perceived social status.

Like *American Psycho*, *Fight Club* offers no solutions to the cultural issues it points to. The novel critiques capitalism, class status, masculinity, and even God. Mendieta argues that *Fight Club*'s primary message is to criticize America's view of masculinity in the late 1990s (395). Throughout his essay, he focuses purely on how the novel presents a commercialized and capitalist version of American manliness: one that measures success through financial gain rather than hard work or heroism (396). On the other hand, Justin Garrison argues the novel's critique is a spiritual one: "God, not capitalism or America's consumer culture, is ultimately responsible for the characters' disappointment and frustration. This is why they describe their crisis as spiritual, not economic or political" (86).

While both Mendieta and Garrison pinpoint *Fight Club* as critical of certain elements of American culture, neither suggests that the novel gives readers a definitive

solution to the problems it illuminates within American culture. For example, Mendieta concludes that “men must free themselves from the ghosts of a masculine Olympus, whose only existence is to vitiate any feasible and realistic sense of maleness” (397). Here he refers to the ending of *Fight Club* when the narrator destroys his alter ego, Tyler Durden, and the book ends with Tyler dead and the narrator in a hospital feeling a sense of hope. However, the narrator created Tyler—a testosterone-fueled vision of masculinity—in order to find fulfillment in and break free from a society that reveres financial and material success. When Tyler’s violence and guerilla terrorism progress too far, the narrator destroys him. With Tyler dead, the narrator feels a sense of peace and hope, but this seems a temporary side effect of relief from destroying his monster. In the end, the narrator is no closer to finding fulfillment or solving his masculinity crisis. The novel ends with the narrator intermittently spotting hospital employees with black eyes, stitches, and other telltale signs of fighting who whisper: “We miss you Mr. Durden”; “Everything’s going according to the plan”; “We’re going to break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world”; and, “We look forward to getting you back” (208). Even though the narrator no longer wants a part in the cult that he created, he still has followers. Like the ending of *American Psycho*, the ending of *Fight Club* suggests the violence is not over. While Project Mayhem’s purpose was to fix the corruption of capitalism, the narrator realizes that destruction is not the answer. Moreover, he recognizes that he has only made the situation worse. The novel then ends without offering any new solutions.

Private Citizens ends when Cory’s nonprofit organization dissolves and she plans to move back home to live with her parents; Will’s girlfriend convinces him to have

plastic surgery to make his eyes less squinty, which results in an infection that causes him to lose both eyes; and Henrik and Linda seem like they might be together again even though their relationship has been nothing but toxic throughout the whole novel. In the last scene, all four of them are together in Cory's workspace on the last night before she hands it back over to the landlords. They talk about going on a supply run for more beer and drugs, and because it has been awhile since they have all gathered together, Cory speaks her mind:

I fucking hated you guys so much for having nicer lives and I spent so much time obsessing over how unfair it was, but why should it matter, you know? It's just not a real thing, because the world will not be around much longer, I'm very sorry to say. God, I actually love you guys. I love you. (371)

The group's response is silence and shared glances, at which Cory laughs and says, "It's fine, it's fine...take your time. No, don't even say anything, I know how it is. You can't say I'm wrong, though" (371). Linda then kisses Cory's cheek, "'Back in a bit,' she said. They left" (371). In this instance, Cory's mindset reflects that of all the characters in the novel: they all struggle with not living up to their own expectations of themselves. The novel ends with a message on a whiteboard, the only item left in Cory's office, that says: "FREE/ HELP/ YOURSELVES" (372). It refers to the office items being up for grabs, but the message suggests that Cory, who has poured her body and soul into her activism work, is now free of this burden and needs to learn to help herself before trying to help anyone else. Of course, the novel ends without showing Cory actually doing this. It ends with no actual solutions to any of the problems the characters have faced.

In fact, none of these three novels offer any solutions to the problems they illuminate. *American Psycho* suggests Patrick and others like him will go on inflicting violence on the wealthy; *Fight Club* suggests a guerrilla terrorist group has now made the cultural climate even worse than before; and *Private Citizens* suggests that no matter how hard people try, they will always fall short of expectations. However, the conclusions of both *Fight Club* and *Private Citizens* relay hope in addition to bleakness. In *Fight Club*, the narrator feels relief from destroying Tyler and has come to the conclusion that, “We are not special. We are not crap or trash, either. We just are. We just are and what happens just happens” (207). In other words, life is unpredictable and no one is good or evil, we just live our lives and events just happen. In *Private Citizens*, even though everyone seems worse off at the end of the novel than in the beginning, the characters appear to have learned from their experiences and the last line leaves readers feeling optimistic. Often, transgressive fiction leaves the reader wondering whether or not cultural issues can be resolved. While the authors fail to provide solutions, they often provide anti-solutions, or what-not-to-do and what-not-to-care-about while seeking happiness and fulfillment.

Unconventional Structure

Another telltale trait of transgressive fiction is the tendency to exhibit a jarring structure. Many novels feature stories within stories, change in narrators, or change in point of view. For example, *American Psycho* features a four-page chapter of narrator Patrick walking a downtown area inebriated with alcohol, cocaine, and a plethora of pharmaceuticals. Not a single paragraph break exists for the full four pages and end punctuation is scarce. It even begins and ends in the middle of a sentence: “and it’s midafternoon and I find myself standing at a phone booth” (148), and “I run out of the delicatessen and onto the street where this” (152). The next chapter begins like any other. The whole chapter reads as a confusing string of run-on thoughts.

Following this trend, in chapter three of *Fight Club*, the narrator often transitions from paragraph to paragraph by interjecting a second-person description of waking up in a different airport:

You wake up at Logan.

Tyler worked part-time as a movie projectionist. Because of his nature, Tyler could only work night jobs. If a projectionist called in sick, the union called Tyler.

Some people are night people. Some people are day people. I could only work a day job.

You wake up at Dulles.

Life insurance pays off triple if you die on a business trip. (25-6)

Palahniuk uses this interjection every now and then throughout the remainder of the novel: “You wake up at O’Hare” (25); “You wake up at JFK” (31); “You wake up at Sky

Harbor International” (156). These interjections make it difficult for the reader to identify a straightforward narrative. The novel skips travel and snaps to destinations. The reader feels as if the narrator tells the story in pieces; however, the narrator himself only remembers his life in pieces because of his split personality. When he is Tyler, he does not remember his actions.

Likewise, about two-thirds of the way through *Private Citizens*, a novel following four different characters using third-person omniscience, the novel suddenly breaks into diary entries by Linda for eight pages:

Fucking why even trip when all I'm doing is writing journal entries to myself about myself by myself for myself against myself in spite of myself? I can admit certain things now: That I can't be alone. That ambition, transgression, and righteous vengeance weren't enough after all. And finally that my writing urge has nothing to do with talent or expression. It's not that I have a way with words; it's that I have no way without them. (240)

In this piece of diary entry, the reader witnesses Linda's inner wrestling with her own motives—motives that even she cannot pinpoint. Not only does this provide a different perspective from the omniscient third-person voice, it also proves jarring to the reader. Likewise, none of the chapters provide dates (except for one flashback near the center of the novel), but from following certain details, the reader knows it does not completely follow a chronological order. For example, in one chapter Henrik runs into Linda when she's missing her two front teeth, but in the next, this has not happened yet. In another chapter, Tulathimutte presents the reader with pages of the drunken rambling of two men at a party:

—but-since-self-awareness-and-semiotic-savvy-is-prerequisite-they-can tweak-it-enough-to-conform-but-not-enough-to-be-pigeonholed-and-so-as-a-subculture-it's-unprecedentedly-sprawling-unbounded-by-geography-fashion-demographic-so-it-feels-more-like-an-all-pervading-endgame-than-any-countable-anthropological-system-and-like-I-know-like-it's-trite-to-point-it-out— (202)

Even though Linda identifies this as a “tedious pukesome conversation” (202), a perspective with which readers will likely agree, Tulathimutte still goes on with this structure for nearly three pages. The dashes alone make the pages potentially irritating for the reader, but the text is meant to irritate. The reader has to tolerate this long and arduous conversation along with Linda.

Overall, the point of Patrick's stream of consciousness, the *Fight Club* narrator's lack of straightforward story telling, and Linda's diary entries is to put the reader in the same mindset of the character. The genre suggests that real life does not move along in perfect, complete narratives, but rather assembles as a conglomerate of thoughts, ideas, and actions. Transgressive fiction attempts to mimic the instability of life through its instability of structure.

CHAPTER TWO: THE CREATIVE WORK

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE CREATIVE WORK

A major obstacle I faced during the development of this project was figuring out how to present thirty pages of fiction from a novel that I haven't finished writing. As a beginning novelist, I cannot just sit down and write the first thirty pages of a novel. In fact, many experienced novelists undergo extreme revisions from start to finish, and neither can they. First, I had thirty pages of pure character creation. Second, the direction of my novel changed. Third, I wrote the ending before I wrote the middle. None of this made choosing thirty pages from seventy pages of disorganized and questionably usable material an easy task. In the end, these thirty pages are incomplete and a bit incohesive on their own, but the novel is still in progress. Developing a working outline or summary of the novel has likewise proved elusive. To my relief, I am not the only writer who struggles with this. A former New York City detective who writes successful crime novels, Dorathy Uhnak, wrote a short article about her writing process. She describes an instance in which her publisher asked for an outline of the second half of her novel:

I told him it was impossible; the work would proceed step by step from what came before. He insisted; I wrote an outline. It was cold, bloodless, meaningless. The characters were sticks with wooden personalities. If I had followed it, my book would have sunk. My publisher returned the outline and said, "I guess you don't do outlines." (par. 9)

My experience has been similar. My outlines feel forced and unnatural and I've written summaries knowing the actual story would look completely different. Uhnak describes writing a scene without planning the outcome:

In my new novel, *Codes of Betrayal*, a very strange thing happened. My heroine, Laura Santangelo, comes into her apartment, stunned and angry to find one Richie Ventura sitting on her couch, his feet up on her coffee table. The chapter ends with Laura saying, “Richie, what the hell are you doing here?”

I didn’t know what he was doing there. I hadn’t a clue. I just felt his presence was absolutely necessary. I had to let my mind flow to find the logic for the scene. I would not invent some fraudulent reason just because I liked the slam-bang last sentence in that chapter. I skipped ahead, did a few chapters, and suddenly it came to me: Richie was in her apartment for a very specific reason, and he had a valid excuse to offer Laura. I backtracked and let them work it out.

(par. 22-3)

Like Uhnak, I often write scenes without knowing where they will go, skip ahead, then circle back around later. I also write several versions of a scene that I do not feel is working. For example, I rewrote Scarlett’s first speech to the group from multiple angles and perspectives and am still not fully satisfied with it. With that said, the following fiction piece comprises thirty pages of a novel that is not yet complete. The first nineteen are meant to fit together. These are followed by a series of excerpts that have yet to be placed within the novel’s framework. Each excerpt is divided by a break (---) to indicate that they are not yet integrated; they are floating pieces that will show up later in the novel. Finally, I conclude Chapter Two with a brief projection of where I imagine the novel’s plot will lead.

II. SELECTIONS FROM *LIFE SUCKS*

IN THE BEGINNING

SCARLETT

It's hard not to choke when you wake up with a breathing tube down your throat. The first thing I remember after it was out was that they wouldn't let me have a mirror. I could only *feel* the mess of crusty hair, cloth, and flesh that was my head. Only my left eye would open, and every time it did, the right lid tugged and ached from failure. My right arm was stuck to the bed, breathing hurt, and while morphine was good, it wasn't good enough to erase the memory of the woods. I envy survivors who forget their accidents—not that you could call mine an accident.

You see, I've always had an overwhelming feeling my life would end in murder. But I thought it would be by gangbang—you know, bunch of drunk assholes decide it's okay to use me like a blowup doll then throw my frail leftovers in a ditch on the side of the road once I'm out of air. Jogger finds it three days later, all white and blue, maggots pouring out of the mouth. The kind of corpse cops cringe away from, shed a hearty tear, and vow through cracked voices to catch the fuckers who did such a thing. But it's not like the boys were thinking much about rubbers while they crunched in my ribs and ripped open my rectum. No, the case wouldn't be a hard one to break. And the boys would rot in prison for a while, become born-again Christians, and get off on good behavior and be out in the world with more than half their lives left—my body decomposed into a rotten skeleton beneath the earth, the skull still cracked just so. I pictured my mother shaking her head at my funeral. "Oh Scar, you always were so dramatic," she'd mutter between vodkas. And peace would beset the world.

But this? This is how I die? Bludgeoned to death by a deranged ex-lover—how fucking original. I suppose I asked for this—I’ve never been particularly sensitive about other people’s feelings. I could pretend though. That’s what made me such a good cult leader.

MILES

I was picking Winny up from the bar on Third Street. It was an hour past close, but she knew the bartender. She knew every bartender. When I opened the door, the main lights were off, but the neon beer signs lit her up as she pressed him against the south wall with her hips. I opened the door and crept inside.

“Winny,” I said, “you ready?”

“Miles!” she squealed, pulling her face away from his. She gathered up her purse and fluffed her hair, yelling “Later, Cole!” as she skipped towards me.

“His name is Chris,” I said.

“Ah, whatever. Cayer me!” She tried jumping on my back but I told her not to and she muttered something cruel—pick a generic insult. She liked the British ones best. Twat, wanker, toss-uh, bloody coont. She grew up in Minnesota, but leave it to Winny for creative cruelty.

She was throwing up by the time we got to Second Street—aiming for the base of a tree planted in the sidewalk.

“I’m giving yit new-trints,” she sputtered before hurling more liquid into its grassy base.

“You didn’t eat today,” I said, gripping her fiery red hair to keep it out of the vomit. I looked around at the deserted street, illuminated in the dim streetlights of the city-town and noticed a flyer taped to the trunk of the tree she was killing.

LIFE SUCKS—LET’S TALK ABOUT IT.

SUPPORT GROUP FOR 20-SOMETHINGS SICK OF THEIR LIVES

THURSDAY NIGHTS IN THE CITY AUDITORIUM BASEMENT

NO ADMISSION FEE, FREE COFFEE

“Let go of me. Sheeeez. I cant aker mihsself.”

She had taken off down the sidewalk at a brisk, unsteady pace slurring swears at the passing trees as she always did when she was wasted. I rolled my eyes and drugged behind her.

“Left,” I said, “I parked in the West lot.”

“Stew-pit idiot-lot-perker.”

“Winny, slow down.”

But she was almost to my car already, so I clicked it unlocked and from ten feet away I could already smell the cleaning supplies from last week when she refused to leave the car to come inside. I let her pass out in the passenger’s seat where she elegantly pissed herself. Support groups are for people with problems. I knew she wouldn’t go, but maybe I could.

WEEK 1: WE NEED TO TALK

SCARLETT

The idea came to me in the shower, as good ideas often do. Student debt, shit job market, the housing bubble, selfies, body standards, rape culture, Facebook envy, Tinder—our generation was fucked from the beginning.

“Welcome.” The word echoed through the dank basement of the city auditorium. This is where they held pottery classes for the youth and the long rectangular tables were covered in canvas and clay dust. The fluorescent lights illuminated more floating particles than your average basement. The ceilings were too low and the only window sat at the very top of the back wall, framing the dead grass outside and reminding us we were underground. I stood at the front behind a chalkboard and noted the outcome: about twenty in attendance.

“My name is Scarlett.” You could hear the pipes creak.

“There are support groups for cancer patients, alcoholics, rape victims, drug addicts, divorcees, children of divorce, loss of limb victims, PTSD patients, grieving widows and widowers, parents of the disabled, self-harmers, obesity sufferers, anorexia sufferers, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

“What about those of us,” I said, “who have suffered nothing traumatizing or harrowing? Those of us who are relatively healthy, relatively functional, relatively ordinary?”

“We’re sufferers of everyday life.

“Of existence.

“Of the expectations of our parents, our friends, our bosses, our peers.

“We’re sufferers of our culture.

“Just because we’re not rapidly dying doesn’t mean we’re not suffering—it doesn’t mean we don’t need help.”

MADISON

She was a narcissistic, melodramatic siren-witch who hypnotized everyone around her into unquestioning obedience. A modern day Charlie Manson, complete with the charm and crazy eyes. Scarlett was a ripe twenty-four-year-old PR nightmare. Standing at five-foot-nine, she had thick thighs and her skin was too light and freckled for that obsidian hair color to be natural. She wore bright red lipstick, a black pencil skirt, and a sleeveless gray blouse that didn’t leave much to the imagination. She didn’t need the pumps to extenuate her figure, but she wore them anyway. Anyone who can walk that well in heels has sexual abuse written all over her past, I’ll tell you that much. Her hair was pulled into a messy bun on the top of her head with actual chopsticks piercing through it (what is that, 90’s chic?). Four years psychology, two years sociology, and a minor in political science tell me she’s a wolf in wolf’s clothing.

But...my ten-year high school reunion was coming up and the extra thirty pounds settled around my midsection and my boring human resources job at the tech firm would overshadow my Master’s degree. Everyone was married and popping out children and I was over here with too much education for the crap job where I spent half my waking hours. So when Scarlett paced the front of the room and told us we were victims of society, I had to wonder if she was right.

“I’m not a psychiatrist, a life coach, or an expert of any kind,” she said, “I’m just...” She sighed and looked up at the ceiling where tubing stretched across the

basement, then looked out across the room. “I’m just not happy with the way my life turned out. I’m not happy with my degree and my student debt. I’m not happy with my job or my tiny apartment. I’m not happy that I can make more money looking pretty and mixing drinks than teaching middle school. I’m not happy that I’m expected to spend a minimum of thirty dollars a month on overpriced dirt to smear on my face, and even more on clothing that tears and fades after only one wash. I’m not happy how many fake-happy pictures pop up on my Facebook feed everyday, representations of human beings that look nothing like the originals—the actual people. And it’s all bullshit. I did everything I was supposed to do. The recipe for happiness was: be friendly, be kind, dress well, attend class, graduate, get a job, fall in love. It’s not working for me. None of these things have made me happy. Not *happy* happy. Sure, I’ve had fleeting moments of joy, but not happiness. That’s what this group is for. I want us to come up with a new recipe for happiness.”

A middle school teacher?

“So tonight is just a meet-and-greet. It’s to figure out whether or not you’re in the right place. If you need serious psychiatric help with addiction, disease, or suicidal thoughts, please find a support group better suited to your needs. If you’re just not happy with your life, welcome to Life Sucks. Grab a coffee, meet your neighbors, and talk about why you came here. Talk about why you’re unhappy. There’s a signup book in the back, just to give me an idea of how many attended.”

MILES

“I’m Dave.” He held out his catcher’s mitt of a hand and I shook it and managed a smile. We all stood by the old drip coffee maker with Styrofoam cups sized for children, giving half smiles and head nods when our eye lines ran into each other.

“Miles.”

“Cool. Uh. Weird group, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s weird. Yeah.”

Dave was an average looking guy. A little under six feet, stocky, he had this washed-up-jock look to him like he played football in high school but stopped all physical activity once he graduated. He was aggressively balding.

“How did you find out about it?” he asked.

“I actually saw a flyer on a tree downtown.”

“No way? That’s hilarious! I subbed for Miss Pine a few weeks ago when she was out sick. She told me about it.”

“Miss Pine?”

“Scarlett—sorry, the students call her Miss Pine, obviously. She’s way too smart for her job.” He blinked hard and fast on the last word—a nervous tick, I think.

“What does she teach?”

“Eighth grade English over at Kimble Middle School.”

“Cool. Cool,” I nodded.

“Yeah, but, anyways, what’s um, why did you come?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Just, kind of depressed, I guess. I figured, what do I have to lose? You know?”

“Yeah, exactly! I don’t know, I think this thing could be good. It makes sense to me, meeting up and talking about life and stuff. It just seems smart.” He looked at the floor when he spoke, blinked fast again, then looked back up at me. He managed a smile.

“Yeah,” I said, “It’s a good idea.”

MADISON

After her speech, Scarlett walked to the back of the room and poured herself a cup of old coffee. The room nervously began to whisper and people rose and migrated toward her. There were fifteen males and seven females including Scarlett and myself. A couple overweight dudes, a couple nerdy-looking girls, one annoyingly attractive man, but mostly we were an average looking group.

MILES

Dave and I didn’t have an immediate connection, but he didn’t ask me what I did for a living, and because of that, I liked him. When people asked what I did, I would tell them and they’d feign interest until I found a way to change the subject. If my job bored me, it’d bore you too. I updated software at a company that did something. No one really knew what. The money was okay.

I decided to stay late one day to sit in my cubicle and sort through some paperwork. I wouldn’t actually get anything done, but there was something about the deserted office with the overhead lights turned off that I found simultaneously depressing and soothing at the same time. The hallway lights flooded into the main floor, giving it a dim, overcast look. I liked being able to hear the dull buzz of the lights, as if my

existence in that corporate sinkhole mirrored them. I didn't make enough noise during the day to be heard, but once everyone left I could hear my heartbeat. I think I'd become accustomed to wallowing—I inhaled it. I started doodling when I was about five years old, and I call it doodling because it can't possibly be named by anything more sophisticated. I flipped over a file that had no real significance in the world at large and began penciling in the cubicles, arranged accurately to the surrounding office. Janet's desk with her hundreds of pictures of her children in their weddings and vacations—no Janet smiling next to them. Kale's Star Wars collectibles waging a war across his desktop—a pointless and fictional war reflective of another pointless and fictional war. Kimberly's colorful sticky notes plastering her cubicle walls in a neon attempt to add some life to the grays and whites of a cubicle existence. Most of them had little inspirational quotes said by no one in particular like *Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try*. During work hours, her muffin top spilled over her pantsuit pants and though she'd been trying to slim down, her wastebasket contained wrappers from various vending machines as colorful as the sticky notes.

My pencil doodle felt more honest with its lack of color, and just as I was filling in a crinkled Mars Bar wrapper, my phone vibrated violently across my desk, and I put a hard, dark line through my light graphite representation. Mom. I sighed and watched the device reverberate closer to the edge of my desk and contemplated answering. I didn't want to.

“Hello?” I echoed into the receiver.

“Miles, dear! How are you? I hope I didn’t catch you at supper?” Her jovial tone completely shattered my wallowing session. She continued, “Is Winnifred eating enough? Lord knows that girl needs a good meal.”

“No, no,” I replied, “I’m at the office doing some paperwork.”

“Oh Miles, honey, you work too hard! Go home and cook your lovely girlfriend a substantial dinner. Did you get my recipe book in the mail? I sent along some snicker doodles—I know they’re a tad off season but I won’t tell anyone if you won’t, hmm?” She giggled much too sincerely as I added the metal bars to the wastebasket, encapsulating the crumpled Mars Bar wrapper in a silver wire jail cell.

“We got them, Mom,” I tried to smile, hoping she could hear this through the phone. “They’re delicious, as always.”

“Make sure Winnifred has her fair share, dear. Get some milk to go with them. It makes the cookie experience absolutely divine!”

“Absolutely.”

She hummed, satisfied, as I waited for the reason she called.

“Will you be coming to your sister’s this weekend? We haven’t seen you in ages!”

“Oh, uh, what’s going on again?”

“A barbeque! Dear me, Miles, you really ought to get a calendar for these sort of things. Mark made head surgeon at the hospital this year, and Carla got accepted into law school. Surely you haven’t forgotten? The whole family is coming out to celebrate!”

I wrote *Don’t kill the messenger* on one of the replicate sticky notes and waited for her to continue. Mom talks through silences.

“I’m making blueberry crumble pie and your brother-in-law is trying out his new smoker on some pulled pork. He’s been working with a friend on home brewed beer, isn’t that fun? I bet you’ll be able to take a six pack home with you.”

I scribbled *Hobbies keep you humble* on another sticky note.

“And your sister has been training for that marathon. I bet she could give you some tips on getting back into running. I really think it would be good for you, dear.”

Only you can prevent you from reaching your goals.

“I haven’t decided if I’m coming yet.” I thought about last year’s barbeque—we were celebrating Mark’s promotion and Carla’s publication in some local newspaper about some local environmental issue. Winny threw up over the fence into the neighbor’s yard and cornered Mark’s co-worker in the bathroom and offered to blow him for a bottle of Valium.

“Oh Miles, we would love to have you. You know how busy Mark and Carla are; I don’t know when you’ll get to see them again.”

I wrote *Family comes first.*

“I will let you know later in the week.”

“Okay, dear. I know they would love to have you and Winnifred come. You got the invitation, didn’t you?”

“The one with the picture of them in Italy holding up the Leaning Tower of Pisa?”

I wrote *The world is your oyster.*

“Yes! Isn’t that clever?”

“Uh huh. It’s been clever for years.”

“Oh, hush. Life is too short to be so serious. Let me know by Thursday?”

“I’ll let you know.”

“Take care, dear! Make sure Winnifred gets some cookies! I love you!”

“I love you too, Mom. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye!”

I wrote *Life is much too long* on my last sticky note and flipped the file back over:

Bank Statements July-December 2012.

I shredded it.

DAVE

I used to think this was who I had to be, but with Scarlett in charge, I felt like my life could be okay, and I hadn’t felt like that in a long time. I went back to my studio apartment that night after the group meeting and poured a bag of pizza rolls onto my Pizzazz. It’s amazing how many of those little guys could fit on there. Topanga, my tabby cat, hopped up on the counter and sniffed at the rotating food.

“Topanga, no, that’s not for you,” I scolded.

But she nibbled at one all the same and I picked her up and moved her to my bed. I was a twenty-eight-year-old fat single balding man who worked as a substitute teacher and lived with his cat. I know people don’t think I’m very self-aware, but I know I’m a loser. I know I’m socially awkward and I know I’m not clever or funny. But Scarlett was going to help me. She was going to help us all. And I met a friend today, Miles. He’s scrawny and awkward and shy, but he’s nice and I think we could get along.

WEEK 2: SHITTY COFFEE IS BETTER THAN NO COFFEE

MADISON

Scarlett was still up front giving a speech of sorts when the door to the hallway swung open and hit the wall with a bang. She was Amy Adams hot but Paris Hilton trashy. Thin as a rail, stringy orange hair down to her armpits, thick black eyeliner with a considerable amount of smudging. She was wearing a black see-through long-sleeved crop top with a black bra underneath and multicolored high-waist shorts topped off with sleek black boots that went over the knees. She still had on her mirrored aviator sunglasses even though she had to walk at least five minutes through the building to get to the basement.

“Hi,” she smiled.

A couple people smiled back—most just stared.

“So, uh,” she said. “This a religious thing or what?”

“Welcome to Life Sucks,” Scarlett said. “It’s not a religious thing. Grab some coffee if you’d like, and take a seat. We were just about to move on to mingling.”

“Coffee free?”

“It is, yes.”

“Groovy.”

She walked to the back of the room to get some coffee and Scarlett went back to where she left off.

“So, social media. I think it merits our attention. It’s step one in meeting people protocol. How many of you tried to look each other up on Facebook after last week?”

About half the room raised their hands.

“How many of you tried to look me up on Facebook?”

Even more hands.

“Right. I’m not on there. I’m not on there for a number of reasons. I’m not on there because I don’t want a digital record of all my social and business interactions. I’m not on there because I don’t want people to think they know me before they know me. I’m not on there because I don’t want phony validation that I’m attractive or accomplished or that people like me. I’m not on there because I don’t want my friend’s fifteen-year-old brother jerking off to pictures of me when he gets bored of porn.”

The redhead snickered from the back of the room, “Why not?” she bellowed. “Who’s it hurting?”

“Well it’s bad for the wrist, for one.” A light chuckle traveled across the room.

“People need a wank-bank. At least jerking off to real girls builds some sorta...uh...realistic expectation for the future.”

“Not a bad point, actually, but just the same I would rather not voluntarily subject myself to becoming a sex object for young, hormonal teenagers.”

The redhead shrugged and went back to getting her coffee.

“Moving on,” Scarlett continued, “I don’t think this Facebook fixation is healthy. Pouring your identity into some constructed version of what you want to be. You’ll never reach that dress size of two or bicep circumference of eighteen inches.

“Is it healthy for us to come across the wedding pictures of an ex on Facebook? Or to see our high school prom queen receive her doctorate and not gain a pound after her second child with her gorgeous husband?”

“Is it any better to see her fat, divorced, and unemployed and revel in her misery? Social media is a breeding ground for envy, jealousy, cruelty, and self-evaluation based on others’ allegedly happy lives.

“Facebook is self-serving and self-loathing and we don’t need it. We don’t need snap stories or Instagram or twitter. We don’t need another platform of narcissism.

“Let’s quit. Let’s throw all of it away. What do you think? I’m done talking at you. Chat with one another.”

MILES

“You came,” I said.

“Yeah why not? Free coffee.” Winny pulled her sunglasses off and tossed them down onto the table.

“It smells like dirt down here.”

“They do pottery classes in this room.”

“I’m feelin’ the dungeon look.” She blew on the tabletop and clay dust flew into the air.

“The coffee is pretty shit though,” I smiled.

“Coffee is like a blowjob. Even bad coffee is still good. It’s still coffee.”

“Says the woman with reckless teeth.”

She laughed and snapped her jaws together.

“Well, Miles m’ boy, it’s mingle time, so I’m gonna go mingle.”

She popped up, stuck her sunglasses on the top of her head and headed straight for the most attractive guy in the group. Figures.

I noticed Dave lingering alone in the back, trying to catch my eye to wave. I gave a half-wave back and headed over there. There was no use in trying to tell Winny what to do or who to talk to. She'd made it glaringly clear we were not "together" and "I don't own her." It's not that I wanted to control her; I just wished she wouldn't be so self-destructive. She leaves a trail of shattered hearts everywhere she goes and she never looks back. Except for me. She always comes back to me. I guess it's my tolerance for bullshit.

WINNIFRED

I must say this group thing is interesting enough. Get to meet new people, watch Miles struggle with other guys flirting with me. Poor, poor Miles. He has everything and nothing all at once. This tall dark one, Jonny, he caught me tipping my flask into the complimentary coffee.

"Want some?" I winked.

"What is it?"

"Chicken soup."

He hesitated then stuck out his Styrofoam cup. Not an environmental group, I take it. I caught Miles watching us and tipped a hearty ounce of whiskey into Jonny's coffee cup.

"For the soul."

Yeah, this could work out. I asked if it was a religious thing today and the lady said it wasn't. Thank Satan. Maybe I could convince these people of the complete monotony of our entire existence. Maybe Jonny boy would meet me out back after class.

Look at me, calling it class. Worthless. Class is for the rich and we eat ramen and whiskey for supper on the good days. On the bad, just the whiskey. Bottom shelf—Canadian Mist, the one with the wavy bottle that makes you think it might have some style to it. But that doesn't give it flavor. Bottom shelf liquor will always burn just enough to remind you that you're drinking bottom shelf liquor. That you'll always be drinking bottom shelf liquor.

Jonny choked slightly on his chicken soup.

And that's what Miles didn't understand: I accept my place in the world. I'm a bottom shelf human being. You can stick a different label on me all you want, but that won't make me taste any better. I am what I am—a common drunken slut whore who'd rather slum it on a new minimum wage job every month and blow my landlord when I don't scrape up enough cash than try to pretend I'm happy and my life is together by sticking to one God-awful waitressing gig where I get treated like trash anyways.

Happiness—that's what this is all about right? The problem is, so many people care more about creating the illusion—the image—of happiness than actually trying to be happy. At least I have the balls to be who I am.

MILES

It was 10:30 on a Saturday and I was just waking up. I went to bed at 11, but I'd been lacking sleep, and Winny stumbled in around 4 and messed up my sleep cycle. I found the plaid clad slippers my mom gave me last Christmas and wormed my feet into them—my big toe went all the way through. I stuck a teapot on the stove and ground some coffee beans. There were grounds on the counter that had accumulated since the

last time I got the energy up to wipe them off. They were always there. I found the pair of round sunglasses with an American flag print on the frames that Winny bought one Fourth of July, back before she hated America. I stuck them on my face and started chopping an onion. Half an onion. I started a pan on the stove with olive oil and threw the pieces in, sprinkling salt on them from a sixty-four ounce iodized salt container because I didn't know where the shaker went. Probably in Kenny's room. Then I thought about my drag of a life and how I got there. All the wrong roads I must have taken. Should have gone into nursing.

Winny walked in wearing nothing but her panties and my t-shirt. See, and it wasn't like the movies when the girl comes out all cute in just the guy's flannel with no makeup on yet her skin is perfect, and her hair is in this quasi-messy bun on the top of her head, and she leans to get something out of the top cupboard, exposing her little pink panties and a strip of creamy lower back—no. Winny looked like death. Her eye makeup was smeared all over the place and her messy bun only held half her hair—the other half like a matted dog after it rolled in something. And she didn't smell much better—cigarettes and booze sweat. The shirt she chose was big on me and swallowed her body, making her look even frailer than usual. She looked paler too—and more blemishy. Probably from dehydration. But no one really looks as good as they do in the movies and she still looked beautiful. Well, she did before she opened her mouth.

“Nice glasses, where'd you get 'em, the redneck emporium?”

“They're yours,” I muttered.

“Eggs and onions again? Woof,” she said. “When're you gonna make me pancakes?”

“Gluten allergy.” But she already knew that.

“Still the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.” She opened a cupboard and took out Kenny’s loaf of bread and untwisted the tie. “Plus, I didn’t say make *you* pancakes.” She reached into the middle of the bread to make sure she would get a soft piece and shimmied one out. She bit off one of its ears and went for a coffee mug, leaving the open bread bag on the counter, pieces fanned out. “White bread is like cake,” she chewed, “only, you can’t have cake either, can you?”

I picked up the bread bag, twisted the tie back on, and placed it back in the cupboard. Her hands shook as she poured herself some coffee and flipped open the freezer door to add vodka. This also wasn’t like the movies. Characters adding alcohol to their morning coffees and going through day-to-day activities like it’s their ADHD medication—no. She shook like Parkinson’s and slurred like it too. Winny would come home on a one-hour break from her shift around 5 o’clock and pass out for three or four hours. She’d get fired that evening—this was the third time this week, fifth job this year.

She let out a huge breath of air as she tipped her poison into the coffee and set the bottle on the counter, uncapped, and nuzzled the steam coming up from the mug. “Bitter and black, like the depths of my soul,” she smiled, slapping my ass on the way out of the kitchen.

I made her pancakes once but she threw them up. I don’t think she remembers that morning. That piece of bread was probably the only thing she ate that day. You can’t choose who you fall in love with.

[UNPLACED EXCERPTS]

WINNIFRED

Zoloft.

Because I'm depressed.

Because I drink too much.

Because happiness is something I haven't tried before.

It's been a week and a half since I started taking these little blue pills. I broke them in half for a week, then started taking whole ones after that—doctor's orders. My brain feels squished. Squished like a lump of Play-Doh, and that's all my brain is. Weed, molly, alcohol: squish, squish, squish; Zoloft. I'm not myself, but I haven't decided yet whether or not that's a good thing. The air feels different. It's lighter. I can breathe it.

Miles walks into my little apartment that's squished with furniture and squishes his lips on my forehead.

"You okay? Winny?"

"Of course."

"You're staring at a black TV."

"Black's my favorite color."

He squishes down beside me on the couch and rubs the small of my back.

"Winny, you're completely naked."

I smile. "I like being naked."

"It's freezing in here, aren't you cold?"

"Miles," I say, "I think I'm happy."

His eyebrows perform a dance. *Happiness*, I wonder. *Is this what it feels like?*
Miles wraps me in his lanky arms and squishes his lips on my shoulder blade.

“Is this what it feels like?” I ask. “To be happy?”

He puts his forehead on my shoulder and rubs my back some more, surely thinking about how to answer such a silly and outdated question. The subjectivity alone makes it too personal for us. We don’t speak of the unhappiness and we certainly have never spoken of happiness. I always thought it belonged on bumper stickers and greeting cards along with love, family, health, and wealth. It’s a fallacy that wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t for the fantasy.

I had almost forgotten the question by the time he conjured up a response: “I don’t know.”

“Have you ever been happy? Babydoll?” I call him that to diffuse the seriousness; really it is too much but I’m a bit too numb and a bit too curious. He exhales and I take his head into my arms, against my breasts. It’s not me; it’s the Zoloft.

“Yeah,” he breathes. “Remember that time in the seventh grade when Mr. Wilkins called off partners for dissecting the worm? And we were randomly put together? That’s the happiest I’ve ever been.”

“This is my first time,” I say. He removes his head from my chest and aims those brown eyes into mine, his hand moving to that spot on my jawline, that one perfect spot, and pulls me into a kiss.

“How’s it feel?” he asks.

I look around the room and pull away from him, curling my bare limbs into my body and refocusing my eyes into his.

“I don’t like it.”

What did I do to deserve this? burns into my squishy brain the way it would into anyone’s while living the life I was living. But it wasn’t my *life* I was questioning. It was this *feeling*—this feeling I had decided to call happiness that I knew *wasn’t real*. Little blue pills.

Happiness is little blue pills—I understood now.

Before Zoloft, somewhere deep down I thought maybe, just maybe, happiness could be earned. The right job, the right people, the right purpose in life. But all this time, it was a little blue pill, and I didn’t earn it, and something about that makes me unsettled. Why should I get to be happy? What have I ever done right? Nothing. And women and men and children all over the world are making moral decisions to be faithful, loving creatures and they’re sad, sad, sad. Nothing. This isn’t right. My brain feels squishy. I need to lie down.

“The worm,” I say, sliding sideways into the sofa. “Miles, you threw up on the floor that day.”

He’s across the room digging for a blanket in the closet by the bathroom.

“Spaghetti and toast. Red vomit,” I say. Then I laugh. I really, truly laugh. “My god, you’re a fucked up kid. *That* was the happiest day of your life?”

He laughs too. This is weird. “You walked me to the nurse’s office,” he smiles.

“Don’t you remember?” He throws an old afghan over me—the one my grandmother knit for my sixteenth birthday. It has all those tacky yarn colors intertwined the way those old afghans always do and you can poke your fingers through the holes. “You walked me down the hall and told me you were going to dissect the worms in my vomit when you

got back to see what was wrong with me. I said it was spaghetti—then you licked my face—*licked it*—and ran back to class. And I’m the one who’s fucked up?”

“Oh Miles, we’re both fucked up. God, the stench of it!”

“I still can’t eat spaghetti.”

“You made it last week!”

“That was for you.”

I had all my fingers in different afghan holes and was wiggling them around like worms or spaghetti noodles. I don’t know why Miles likes me so much, but today I didn’t want to make him leave. Today I was okay with him petting my hair and kissing my forehead. Today it was okay.

SCARLETT

You know what started all of this? People’s obsession with happiness. Everyone wants to be happy. Is that a life goal, or a state of mind? The fact is, you can’t be happy all the time. Some of us prefer pain. We prefer power. We prefer adoration. Happiness is ephemeral—fleeting. It’s a free beer from a cute bartender, a complimentary late checkout at a hotel, a really good lay. But is that really happiness or just excitement? Endorphins?

True happiness is narcissistic at the core. It’s personal achievement. You lost thirty pounds. You graduated college. You got the job you wanted. You won an award. You scored a grade-A lover to show off.

You, you, you, you, you.

In the end, happiness *is* power. It *is* adoration. And we are greedy people.

MADISON

“Maddy, hang back a minute,” Scarlett said, not looking at me after group one day. My heart involuntarily jumped into my throat. I go by Madison, so you can understand my immediate annoyance in her brash decision to give me a nickname. What did she want with *me*? I don’t talk during group. I watched everyone shuffle out, nervous and excited to start “the revolution,” as small scale as it was for the—what—thirty of us? She folded up her black notebook, the one she scribbled in during every session, and put that damn pen in her mouth as she always does while she satchels the notes. During group today I played connect the dots with her freckles. No way her hair is naturally jet-black. After the rest of the party shuffled out, she took a seat next to me and crossed her legs—always with those pretentious pencil skirts like she was a big deal. She tucked the pen behind her ear and smiled mouth-shut.

“Let’s hang out,” she said, raising her eyebrows—black too. Dyed.

“And do what?” What was her angle?

“I have something planned. What are you doing tomorrow?”

“I’m supposed to—”

“We’re hanging out tomorrow, just the two of us. Trust me, you won’t want to miss this.”

I hated that smile. I bet she got her teeth whitened professionally.

“Maddy, trust me. It will be fun. You need to blow off some steam.”

I looked at the cracks in the concrete floor. What did she want with me?

“Meet me here tomorrow at 8a.m. sharp,” she stood up, threw her satchel over her shoulder, adjusting it so it wouldn’t cut in between her breasts, and headed for the door. I watched her walk. I could never handle heels that way, not that I’d had any practice.

“Eight. Sharp,” she said over her shoulder.

I waited until she was gone then picked up my purse and shuffled out onto the street. What did she want with me?

I got to the auditorium at 7:55 and took my spot in the circle of chairs I normally did. They seemed glued in that circle and I wondered what kinds of addicts sat in this same spot the other five nights of the week. Heroin, crack, alcohol, sex addicts anonymous, people with extreme phobias, the terminally ill. The kinds of people I went into psychology to help before I quickly learned I hated all of them. They always had something or someone to blame—their parents, a traumatic event. The sick or cancer survivors used their diagnoses to excuse away other flaws—alcoholism, cheating, joblessness, drug use. I hated the lot of them, and now I was sitting in their shadows waiting for a redhead with black hair who thought she could own the world. 8:05—she was late. I began to wonder if this was some sort of prank, like back in high school when Theo Peterson from chemistry pretended to like me so he could copy my homework. I had told myself I would never make that mistake again.

I was reminiscing on the day Jennifer Klein approached me in the hallway and asked loudly if I thought he actually liked me when Scarlett walked in. Neon yellow tennis shoes. Black yoga pants, skin tight. White athletic tank top. Light blue cardigan tied around her waist. And a *ponytail*. Not a tight bun with chopsticks or flowy black hair—a ponytail complete with flyaways. I had never seen her without lipstick on before.

She looked like she was going to a Pilates class. I peered down at my jeans and blue-striped top that didn't flatter my figure; I never could get the clothing thing down.

"You came!" she smiled, ponytail swishing behind her. "Come on, we're not staying in this dingy place."

I followed her out into the cool air and she untied the cardigan and stuck her arms in it.

"Come on, come on," she said, flipping around to face me and jumping up and down.

"I'm coming," I said, feeling my mouth twitch into a small smile. She seemed so free without all the makeup and clothing, like the wind blew through her—energized her. I felt like I was seeing the real Scarlett for the first time since she clacked into group and told us why we were there.

"Are you excited?" she asked, still bouncing.

"Well, I don't know what we're doing."

"See that," she booped my nose with her forefinger, "is what makes it exciting." It was then that she grasped my hand in hers—the cardigan pulled up into her palm, clasped between us—and pulled me along until I had to skip-jump to keep up. We made it a few blocks, then she stopped short and I ran into her.

"We're here!" she announced, beaming.

I looked up at our destination: Another Man's Treasure. It was a thrift store.

"What're we—"

"Come on!" She dragged me inside. There were disorganized racks of clothing, lamps, dishware, old paintings. Piles upon piles of trash.

“What are we doing here?”

Still holding my hand, she snagged a basket and pulled us to a stop in front of the dishware. “Yes, this will do.”

“Dishes?” I asked.

“Dishes.” She began loading up the basket with dishware: glasses, coffee mugs, plates—all ceramic and glass. “Pick some out.”

“They’re all old and have hideously ancient designs on them,” I said.

“Oh Maddy, we’re not throwing a dinner party.”

“Well you won’t tell me what we *are* doing, so how am I supposed to know which to choose?”

“There are no *wrong* ones.”

I picked out a set of blue chinaware with little white deer prancing around the edges.

“Ooo, I like that one,” she said.

Hands still linked, she led me to the counter and as we stood in line, she swayed a little to the song playing overhead. I recognized it as something from the 90s era—that contemporary poppish style from back then. “Roll to Me.”

“I love 90’s music,” she said. “It sounds so upbeat, but if you listen to the lyrics, they’re terribly depressing.”

“And that’s why you like them?” I asked.

“We’re a generation that celebrates depression. The era of the cynics,” she smiled. “We’re all failures. Beautiful disasters trying to find our places in this messed up world.”

“Isn’t it your choice to be a cynic?”

“Fifteen fifty-four,” the cashier spat as Scarlett dug out some cash.

“Of course not. We’re byproducts of the culture we grew up in. I can’t stop being a cynic any more than you can stop being a lesbian.”

I felt the blood rush to my cheeks. She handed the cash off, grabbed our bags of chinaware, and grasped my hand again to pull me outside.

“You know,” I started, “I’m....”

“Oh calm down. I don’t care how you define your sexuality. Quite frankly, I don’t see how anyone can claim to be anything even remotely close to *straight*. We’re humans. We’re bound to be attracted to a range of different humans.”

I decided to drop it. She made you feel comfortable like that. Alone, Scarlett was the easiest person to be around. It was like she could see right through me into all of my flaws and still accepted me. Not tolerated, but accepted—embraced. I had never felt that before. It was like all of the burdens in the world had floated out of me and I could be free and myself, if just for the day.

“Here we are!” she announced.

“We’re in an alleyway.”

“Yes. Here, take a plate.”

She handed me one of the blue ones with the deer detail. The alley was heavily graffitied and deserted of any bums or cats or anyone lurking behind the dumpster.

“What now?” I asked. She smirked and dropped my hand.

“Throw.”

At that, she slammed her plate into the pavement and it shattered into hundreds of little white pieces.

MILES

I drove down to the humane society today. Dogs are supposed to help with depression.

“How can I help you?” the front desk lady asked, smiling too wide through crooked, yellow teeth and at least three chins.

“Uh, you got any puppies for sale?”

“For adoption, son. They ain’t inanimate objects.” She had on an oversized blouse and some dirty looking khakis that held half her stomach—either that or it’d hang over the belt, I supposed.

“Oh, uh, yeah. Sorry, for adoption. Ma’am.”

“Sure, follow me.”

Getting up with all that extra weight looked like a difficult chore, but she managed and began to waddle down the hallway with me in her wake.

“What kind of dog are you lookin’ for?” she huffed.

“Uh, I dunno.”

“They ain’t all the same, boy. You got anythin’ from a fifteen pound Wiener to a three hundred pound Bernese. We got young, old, decrepit.” She waddled down the aisles of caged dogs, waving her hands in a display fashion while I thought about how it was odd she knew the word *decrepit*.

“See that litter in there? Them pups gonna be monsters when they grow up. Mutts, the lot of em, but ya can tell by the paws. See?” She pointed and scooted aside so I could peek in. “Big paws equal big dogs. Little paws, little dogs. Whatchu lookin for?”

“Umm,” I peered in at them, realizing I had no idea how to take care of a dog, let alone a monster dog.

“Son, you sure you don’t wanna take a gander at the cats instead? They a hell of a lot easier to raise.”

“No. No, I want a dog.”

“Then perhaps somethin’ a bit smaller?”

“Uh, do you mind if I just look at them alone for a while?”

“Hmf. Sure. Here’s how ya unlatch a kennel, just don’t go in the ones with bite signs, lord knows I don’t need a hospital visit on my shift. They’re animals, boy. They’ll bit yer face clean off, I seent it.”

She waddled back towards the front and I peeked in at the monsters. They were all at the front of the cage, wagging their tails and yipping at me, tongues out. Brown and black and white—they definitely were mutts, but I don’t really know dog types, anyway.

III. NOVEL PROJECTION

The general plan for the rest of this novel begins with the support group turning into a full-blown cult. The members delete social media, throw out their phones, throw out conventional beauty supplies like makeup and razors, quit their jobs, and finally wind up out in the woods together trying to live off the land. I’m still working on the details and whether or not the novel will have a real location, but the general idea is this is set somewhere in the Midwestern United States. Out in the woods, the characters last only about a week before one of them snaps and beats Scarlett to near death while the group watches and does nothing to intervene. They then leave her on the side of a highway and

more or less go back to their lives prior to *Life Sucks*. The novel will end with Scarlett physically beaten and having lost all followers. The final scene is yet to be written.

CHAPTER THREE: WRITING PROCESS

I. EARLY INFLUENCES

While Chuck Palahniuk's novels mark the biggest literary influence on my writing, my own struggles with lifestyle, career, and relationship choices have been the main driving force for why I write in the first place. I grew up in a loosely religious Lutheran household where we attended church on holidays, went to Sunday school as kids, and helped out at church functions now and again. However, our religious regimen was never strict or overly pervasive in the home, and my parents focused more on general morals about treating others well, emphasizing learning and school as the highest priority. I grew up two grades below my older brother and six above my younger. As we grew up and left for college, my older brother and I chose different paths in life. He remained active religiously, met his first girlfriend after college, a Catholic woman, and converted to Catholicism to marry her a year later. In contrast, I moved away from religion and dated a handful of men without a desire to marry anyone soon. The contrast between my brother's and my relationship choices and my parents' reactions to them has been a catalyst for my fiction.

I would hardly call dating more than a few men in the last ten years and leaving behind religion a subversion of cultural norms, but the often unspoken disappointment from my parents towards my life choices and pride for my brother's sparked my interest in alternative lifestyles and the stigmas surrounding them. Throughout my education in both undergraduate and graduate school, I have gravitated towards using psychoanalytical theory and studying the concept of identity. According to Jacques Lacan, as infants we see ourselves in a mirror and perceive ourselves as coherent, whole,

and independent beings for the first time, rather than as a fragmented, jumbled assortment of limbs we cannot yet fully control (442). From this moment, we strive to maintain this feeling of wholeness, represented by the “Ideal-I,” we see reflected in the mirror (442). But, according to Lacan, this image is an illusion, and our perception of ourselves as coherent beings is a “meconnaissance,” or misrecognition (445). As we grow older, we begin to see ideal images of ourselves reflected in other “mirrors,” including social and familial expectations. We strive to fulfill these expectations. However, we can never do so completely or perfectly, and even when we come close, we are plagued by the sense that the ideal doesn’t represent what we really are—an individual who is psychologically fragmented rather than whole. For Lacan, this is simply the nature of existence. We will be healthier human beings if we recognize this; we become a bit more free to let go—perhaps even resist or subvert—cultural norms. The way I see it, we have three distinct variations of how we view ourselves: the version we want to be, the version we think others want us to be, and the version we think we truly are. All three rarely look the same and change depending on what we care about. Recognizing this may not bring fulfillment—something Lacan asserts we can never fully achieve. But it may provide us with a sense of peace in the face of our inability to do so.

Transgressive fiction often features characters that subvert cultural norms in an attempt to achieve happiness or fulfillment in life. They have found that a conventional lifestyle has not provided them with the happiness or fulfillment they assumed it would, and so they leave it behind. This action is essentially a shedding of concern for fulfilling the identity of what we think others want us to be—it is a letting go of societal pressures

to conform. My fiction explores these societal pressures, as well as the value of transgression when the fulfillment they are meant to provide remains elusive.

II. CLASSIFYING THE GENRE OF *LIFE SUCKS*

Most writers write about what they know or about what they find interesting in art and literature. I first classified my writing as realistic fiction. I created characters and relationships that could exist in the real world and I placed them in the real world. When I discovered the genre of transgressive fiction, it seemed to fit. More specifically, the authors who write in this genre seem to have intentions similar to mine.

When Bret Easton Ellis created Patrick Bateman, he created this character to depict the worst version of what someone engrossed in consumerism could become. Patrick was not created for humor or shock value, but born out of frustration towards the current culture. He created Patrick because of a “void” and “emptiness” he was feeling about the culture in which he found himself immersed. He states:

The rage I felt over what was being extolled as success, what was expected from me and all male members of Gen X—millions of dollars and six-pack abs—I poured into the fictional creation of Patrick Bateman, who in many ways was the worst fantasy of myself, the nightmare me, someone I loathed but also found in his helpless floundering sympathetic as often as not. (par. 5)

Patrick was a byproduct of the frustration and despair Ellis felt about the socioeconomic climate in which he grew up. Patrick was not a meticulously planned psycho murderer meant to be funny or to shock people for the sake of shocking people, but instead he was a cathartic release of angst and anger Ellis had for American culture at the time. Much

like Ellis's creation, my characters also come from a desire to criticize the culture in which I live.

In its earliest drafts, *Life Sucks* focused primarily on evaluating social media addiction. I planned for the birth of Scarlett's support group to originate from the "crash" of Facebook going down; the support group aimed to help users struggling with identity crises after losing their online profiles. As I wrote, the piece became less about social media in general and more about the twenty-something adults navigating the social climate of the current culture. The catalyst of the Facebook crash contradicted the emerging idea that you cannot expect something drastic to occur to change the way you feel about yourself, your life, or the people around you. A problem exists now—I did not need to create one for my story to work. The support group was then free to center on the idea that many individuals—especially around age twenty-five—feel uncertainty and unhappiness about their lives, and that while societal norms and expectations might be part of the reason, a solution might exist. The novel then turns into a quest for this group to find the solution to the lack of happiness and fulfillment in their lives.

Of course, their quest ends horribly and seems to leave them all worse off than when they started, but like most transgressive fiction characters, attempting to live against or outside culture wasn't the answer. People have to put up with the current social climate. Little steps here and there and influencing others to follow suit—spend less time on phones, spend more time outside, meet and chat in coffee shops, delete Instagram—can have a bigger impact on the social climate than moving out into the woods and trying to live off the land with a pack of like-minded individuals.

In 2016, twenty-five years after *American Psycho* was published, Ellis wrote a short, retrospective article about the novel and about Patrick. Ellis says, “*American Psycho* was about what it meant to be a person in a society you disagreed with and what happens when you attempt to accept its values and live with them even if you know they're wrong” (par. 5). Transgressive fiction can use this tactic of showing characters absorbed in the culture to evoke disgust, or it can show characters that are critical of the culture and attempt to subvert cultural norms. Both of these methods fit into the genre.

Transgressive fiction is born out of a frustration towards following societal norms and narratives for success and happiness—going to college, following the law, holding a job, paying bills—and not receiving the fulfillment and contentment those narratives promise. In an interview in 2017, more than twenty years after *Fight Club* was published, Palahniuk talks about his life before the novel:

I'd been a really good student. I kept my nose clean. I followed this blueprint society had presented to me that said that if I did all these things—get my degree, pay back my student loans and work very hard—eventually I'd achieve some sort of satisfying success.

But it just wasn't working. Around the age of 30, all of that good boy stuff starts to fall apart. You have to make a choice as to whether you're going to continue along that road, or whether you're going to veer off that road and find ways to succeed you weren't taught. That's where I was. I was really disillusioned that I'd been given the same roadmap everyone else was given, but that none of us were finding it effective. (par. 27)

Like Ellis, Palahniuk felt betrayed by societal recipes for fulfillment and happiness. That feeling of betrayal is the common denominator among transgressive fiction writers.

Reflecting on my own fiction, I realize everything I write comes back to this feeling of betrayal from following the rules and not receiving the emotional rewards I expected from doing so. Growing up, I worked hard in school, was placed in advanced classes, played sports, participated in band, helped teach Sunday school at my church, and took three Advanced Placement courses my senior year in high school—an undertaking that required a meet and signature from the principal saying I was up to the task. But for some reason, I always felt like I wasn't doing well enough in life. I always felt severely average. I suffered from undiagnosed depression for most of my teenage years and hid it (mostly) from my parents and peers because I thought of it as something that was wrong with me—a weakness. I developed anxiety throughout my years in college and started seeing a counselor, started studying depression and anxiety, and started learning how to cope with these disorders head-on. As for feeling betrayed by societal recipes for fulfillment and happiness, I don't think blaming is a productive solution. Transgressive fiction suggests that there is no easy solution to the lack of fulfillment we experience within a dysfunctional culture. Perhaps there is no solution at all. Recognizing this and finding ways to “fix” the culture rather than “fix” ourselves may be a first step, even when these fixes may seem small. But we have to make these changes from within rather than from outside the culture.

III. TRANSGRESSIVE ELEMENTS IN *LIFE SUCKS*

For the most part, *Life Sucks* includes the five elements outlined in Chapter One. The most prevalent example of the first element, lack of empathy, can be seen in Winny. Much like Linda from *Private Citizens*, Winny doesn't treat men with respect. Miles does all he can to take care of her and treat her well, and Winny repays him by engaging in sexual activity with other men, urinating in Miles's car, and never apologizing or thanking him for anything. Likewise, Scarlett forms her support group under the guise of improving life, but it becomes clear she simply craves power and enjoys manipulating others. The support group is less of an attempt to help people and more of a platform for attention and puppetry.

Life Sucks represents psychological disorders in the form of depression for Madison, Winny, Dave, and Miles. Most of the characters display self-destructive tendencies, and Scarlett and Winny exhibit symptoms of narcissism. Winny also struggles with alcoholism. Likewise, the characters in *Life Sucks* criticize the status quo through Scarlett's speeches, which blame the culture for all of their problems. She critiques social media, dating applications, advertising, consumerism, student debt, and lack of employment and affordable housing availability as the causes of unhappiness. Similar to *Fight Club*, the characters directly criticize culture and directly search for solutions. However, when the characters attempt to move out into the woods and separate themselves from society, they quickly become hostile towards one another. Their removal from society fails to solve their problems, and they wind up scrounging to get their old jobs back so they can resume their unfulfilling jobs. Therefore, *Life Sucks* fails to provide solutions to the issues it illuminates.

The element of transgressive fiction *Life Sucks* fulfills the least is that relating to unconventional structure. While the use of multiple narratives creates a sense of fragmentation, it is not particularly jarring or disorienting for the reader. The reason for this is because I have struggled with structure in the past. Often, I found myself writing pieces of fiction that I couldn't string together in a way that made sense formulaically. Therefore, I have spent time maintaining structural coherence. If I decide to make unconventional or jarring structural moves in the future, I want them to be deliberate. I want to avoid using unconventional structure as an excuse to be disorganized.

In the next section, I explain and analyze the specific elements of my fictional narrative in more detail. These elements include perspective, characterization, style, plot, setting, and imagery. My approach to this analysis is formalistic; however, my description of these elements, as well as the obstacles they have presented, provides insight into my writing process and my approach to craft.

IV. FICTIONAL ELEMENTS, PROCESS, AND CRAFT

Perspective

One obstacle I faced in the writing process has been figuring out how to write a novel. I could never seem to master the short story, and after multiple suggestions from professors and fellow writers, I decided to try novel-length fiction. Before *Life Sucks*, I had only tackled a project of this breadth one other time—in the yearlong break I took from undergraduate to graduate school. Nearly every piece of fiction I've ever written has been in first-person narration. I like the freedom it provides to create a voice with personality and sarcasm. However, I hit a snag in the first novel I attempted: I found

myself annoyed by my own narrator after about forty pages. Kat, as she called herself, was a narrator to whom I became connected, but she was a narrator who toxically manipulated the people around her. Author Anne Lamott once said, “You are going to love some of your characters, because they are you or some facet of you, and you are going to hate some of your characters for the same reason” (qtd. in Burroway 73). For me, Kat took on a facet of my personality that scared me. When her voice started coming out of my mouth, I decided to put her novel on hold.

Around this same time, I was tearing through Chuck Palahniuk novels and found myself reading *Rant*, a book written with multiple narrators in an interview format. I was drawn to the technique of unreliable narration and of having multiple narrators with different versions of the same story, a technique that is sometimes referred to as “multiperspectivity” (Hartner 181). To me, this seemed more realistic and more akin to life’s events occurring through different viewpoints. As an added perk, I wouldn’t have to focus on one voice throughout the entire novel; I could jump from character to character.

Characterization

However, this created a new obstacle: creating characters with convincingly different voices and viewpoints. I would mark this as another struggle of mine—one that I continue to work through. While creating characters, I have developed pages of narration. I had to figure out how each of these individual characters act, think, and narrate. I had to create backgrounds for them that never appear in the novel. I had to write and rewrite, cut characters that seemed forced, and create new ones to fill the void.

For me, characterization has always taken priority over nearly every other aspect of the story. I want my characters to seem real. When I create characters, I start with the names. Uhnak writes:

The first thing I had to know about these people was what they looked and sounded like. My characters have to be names absolutely on target. Megan Magee could not be Mary Reardon; Danny DeAngelo could not be Bobby Russelli. They become as real to me as people I actually know and speak to day after day. (par. 7)

Like Uhnak, I name my characters first. I scour baby name websites online and look up meanings behind names. I used to worry about naming characters unrealistic names, but I realized readers do not typically scrutinize names for realism that often. In fact, a memorable name can help make a memorable character. Catness Everdeen, Forrest Gump, Hannibal Lecter, Willy Wonka, Nicholas Nickleby, Milo Minderbinder, Boo Radley, Oliver Twist, Shug Avery, and Dr. Dolittle make up a small list of fictional character names that are anything but common. I do, however, struggle with last names. I give characters first names, but often fill in the last names much later. Scarlett Pine was originally Scarlett Black and I'm considering changing it to Scarlett James. I'm not sure yet which one I will choose in the end. I only changed the last name in the first place because Scarlett Black places two bold colors next to one another and it felt too forced, but looking back, that boldness might be the better choice for her. No matter what I choose though, Scarlett's first name cannot be changed. She has been Scarlett for years and if I changed her name, she would not be the same character. Like Uhnak, my characters take on a personality and identity that need to stay with that character. I can

take a character created for a different project and place them into a different story, but the name needs to stay the same.

Style

Once I have a name, I work on writing into that character's voice. Language is a tool that can help separate character voices from one another. The more sophisticated the character, the more likely they are to use sophisticated diction. This is something I struggle with while trying to keep my character voices different from one another, and I plan to make this more distinct in the future. My characters often use sarcasm and abrasive insults while describing other characters. I've tried to encapsulate this trait in Madison's inner thoughts and Winny's outward thoughts, but I worry the two sound similar to the reader. Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, and Ned Stuckey-French, authors of the book *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, say, "The trick to writing good dialogue is hearing voice. The question is, what would he or she say? The answer is entirely language" (77). This applies to more than just dialogue—especially when writing in the first person, and especially with writing multiple characters in the first person. I try to fluctuate language from narrator to narrator by endowing some with more descriptive language and others with less.

Likewise, I try to change the tone depending on who is narrating. For example, Madison's thoughts about others are antagonistic, while Miles's are empathetic. On the other hand, Scarlett seems focused on philosophizing societal issues and tapping into individual insecurities for the purposes of exploitation. Madison judges to convict, Miles judges to assist, and Scarlett judges to manipulate. This means Madison's tone is

sarcastic, cynical, and aggressive; Miles's tone is sympathetic and equal parts doleful and hopeful; and Scarlett's tone is assertive, self-assured, enthusiastic, and informative (with the exception of when she reflects on what happened in the woods). Overall, I do better with evoking tone than I do with varying diction, and I rely on this to differentiate my characters' voices from one another. I hope to continue sharpening the distinctions among different character voices.

Plot

Because I have placed so much emphasis on characterization in the development of *Life Sucks*, plot has tended to take a back seat, at least for the time being. Outlining has never been my strength in fiction writing, largely because planning plot has never worked for me. The story falls flat if I try to stick to an outline, so even when I have a general idea in mind of where the story is going, I allow it to grow away from any plans. In Stephen King's *On Writing*, he views novels as consisting of three parts "narration," "description," and "dialogue." He continues:

You may wonder where plot is in all this. The answer—my answer, anyway—is nowhere...I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our lives are largely plotless, even when you add in all our reasonable precautions and careful planning; and, second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible. (163)

He goes on to explain that he sees stories as entities that create themselves organically and should be allowed to grow as they go along. I'm not so sure stories create themselves, but I do agree that forcing a plan for plot never seems to work out well for

me either. Once characters have their own backgrounds, voices, and motives, plot seems to generate around the characters and not the other way around. This isn't to say plot is unimportant; its role is simply second to characterization. I had to create Scarlett before I envisioned the support group and how the story would unfold. Each time I added a new character, the plot changed around said character. The plot is more malleable than the characters within it.

Setting

While I allow plot to unfold during the writing process, I tend to allow setting—at least geographic setting—to remain non-specific. I rarely place my stories in specific towns or states, and usually just settle for “somewhere in the Midwest.” Because I’ve had peers and professors question this, I’ve come to realize how important it is to articulate this as a conscious decision on my part. I toyed with different locations for *Life Sucks*, originally picturing the Minneapolis area as one that would fit, but I didn’t like the idea of tethering my novel to a specific city. After discussing the idea with colleagues, I decided “somewhere in the Midwest” is a sufficient location. The purpose is that these characters live in states sometimes referred to as “flyover states.” In other words, states in the middle of the U.S. that people fly over *on the way* to their destinations—not states that people fly into *as* destinations. Therefore, not disclosing a specific location suggests that it doesn’t matter or that the reader wouldn’t recognize it anyway. It doesn’t matter because it’s a stereotypical city/town in the Midwest. It’s not New York City, Los Angeles, Seattle, Austin, San Francisco, Memphis, Miami, or even Minneapolis. It’s Sioux Falls, Brookings, Rapid City, Omaha, Lincoln, Mankato, Bloomington, Fargo,

Sioux City, Des Moines—it's any of the larger cities in the western side of the Corn Belt. This is the setting I'm trying to encompass; the most populated cities in the most rural landlocked states. Minneapolis is the exception because it's slightly too populated and too well-known across the country. It's not *quite* a flyover location.

Imagery

Eschewing a specific location does not mean I get to ignore setting. On the contrary, I feel a responsibility to capture the essence of these places that are less represented in literature. This is where imagery comes in. Overall, my writing approach is a minimalistic one. As a reader, even my favorite authors lose my attention with drawn out descriptions of scenery, and because of this I need to make a conscious effort to create images to set the scene. This is a weakness of mine, but it's one I'm working on. For example, I recently made the choice to switch the support group setting from a church basement to a city auditorium basement primarily used for pottery classes. The tables are covered in canvas and clay dust permanently hangs in the air. A little window is smashed at the top of the wall to remind occupants they're underground. The purpose of this switch was to mark this setting as musty, dusty, and below the surface. My aim was to create a space that was earthy but nonetheless humanly constructed. It's a dungeon where the characters are close to nature but removed from clean air and sunlight.

Miles's cubicle-filled office gives rise to other images I wanted to stand out. Here, Miles is trapped in a tiny gray space, perpetually cold, with humming fluorescent lights. He talks about how his coworkers try to add color to their own cubicles, but the effect is

futile and depressing. I wanted the cubicle to represent the cage of capitalism for people trapped in unfulfilling jobs they hate.

Imagery I have yet to develop relates to the outdoor setting the characters will move into. They move into the woods in the summer, and they will be surrounded by green grass, sunshine, and light breezes. They'll walk barefoot on the dirt and play naked in a nearby lake. However, they will also struggle with the cold of the night and the wet of the ground in the morning. These different settings are meant to contrast one another and create awareness towards environment rather than location. Instead of which city, the question becomes which biome. Are there buildings or mountains? Sidewalks or sand? I continue to work on the details, but I aim to engage imagery in order to juxtapose city and wilderness. Neither is good nor evil; both are beneficial when balanced.

IV. CONCLUSION

When I first enrolled in graduate school, I imagined receiving my degree would serve as a milestone. I never thought it would be easy, but what I didn't imagine was the role this specific project would take in obtaining my degree. The truth is, I struggled with it for over a year. I had too many ideas and too high of expectations, and I found myself with pages upon pages of material that didn't quite fit together; my scope was much too broad. I began to think of my project as a monster tethered to my ankle that followed me everywhere and dampened my mood. Then somewhere in the irony of reading about characters dropping out of school, giving up on societal pressures, and realizing that the plight of living up to their own expectations had afflicted them more than any other

obstacle, I understood that I had created the monster. It wasn't the project itself; it was my fear of failure.

I decided to start anew. Most early drafts of this project only vaguely resemble this copy. However, even though half of what I wrote for this project will float, eternally untouched, in an electronic folder, I can use all of that research and analysis—all of those insights—in my fiction. I researched and wrote about: the individualized struggles of Generations X, Y, and Z; the concept of the quarter-life crisis; the affects of choice overload and its correlation to the Internet; Freud's "the uncanny"; Lacan's "jouissance"; the ways in which depression and anxiety affect Millennials; and the social repercussions of social media. Consequently, I will benefit not only from the writing the above chapters, but also from the time and effort spent on the pieces that never made it into the final draft. Overall, this project has been my biggest, most difficult, and most advantageous milestone I have reached thus far.

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