Proof I Exist

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The Minneapolis Issue
On a brisk morning in March, I helped my roommate Dan pack his life into the new Honda Civic he had bought only a few weeks previous. His parents had also driven in from Detroit to help with the efforts, bringing a truck big enough to pull a trailer big enough to take away Dan's couch and other larger items of furniture. After 44 minutes of loading and securing, the two vehicle family convoy was ready to head back to Eastern Standard Time, leaving the Chicago way of life in the rear view mirror where it didn't seem so cold and cruel. I couldn't blame Dan for leaving. In his short time here he'd had more bad luck than Ryan and I put together, and we'd been here much longer than Dan had. He finally decided this just wasn't the town for him, and I can respect that. But as I helped him move out of our apartment, I felt like I was moving him out of my life as well, and it left a bitter taste in my mouth. It wasn't so much the fact that he would no longer be living with us, as it was the notion that he was abandoning us. Maybe that's how parents feel when their kids finally spread their wings. Or maybe I just knew it wouldn't be the same without him. Separations are almost always more difficult for the one that gets left behind, a fact that had eluded me all my life until this moment. See, usually I was the one moving away. Usually it was me waving out the window, glancing in the mirror for those first few blocks until turning my full attention to the road ahead. This was the second roommate I'd lost in a 3 month time period, and I was starting to take it personally. And it was then that I wondered if this is how all my former roommates had felt when I moved out.
The first roommate I ever had was a kid named Tyler, one of my best friends all through high school. We had both decided to move to Minneapolis to enroll in Brown Institute, where we would be taking classes in “Visual Communication”. I'd discovered the program during my phase of staying up too late on school nights so as to numb my mind with television, a phase that began when I got a TV for my 13th birthday and continued through my Senior year of high school. Late one night, there it was: a 30-minute infomercial on Brown Institute. “Hmmm...” I thought, “18 months, straight through, and I'll get a 2 year degree. That sounds kind of cool.” And it was kind of cool. But let's not kid ourselves, I enrolled because I thought it would be cool to live in Minneapolis, a place widely agreed upon as being a city, yet not a city so big and scary as to intimidate a country boy such as myself. Yes, the Twin Cities was just where I wanted to be, and when I told Tyler about it, he said that was just where he wanted to be too.

So two months after graduation, we moved up there. We signed up for this program that helped you find an apartment, sort of a student-housing program. In other words, we wouldn't be living in dorms, but we would end up with other students from our school. We decided on a pretty decent sized 3-bedroom place, which would be inhabited by 6 students. It took us a few months to realize how badly we were being fucked over in this system. Although the place was nice, and I got along great with all my roommates, what we paid had nothing to do with how much space we had. I think the rent was around $300 a month, but that was per person, so even though 300 doesn't sound too bad, for the whole place we were paying close to $1800 a month, a ridiculous price.

Anyway, the big move in day was kind of fun, but sort of bizarre and creepy as well. The main source of said creepiness was the interaction of all of our parents. While we were trying to move things in, they were talking, and laughing, and discussing who had what for furniture, and how they thought we should handle the food situation. It was very surreal. But soon they were gone, and what do ya know, we were all on our own.
Ok, so let’s do a little break down of my five Minneapolis roommates

Tyler—Tyler was my buddy from high school, and the only roommate I knew, or had even met, before committing to live with. We had the basic high school history, filled with stories and good times. He’s a great guy, though for being a bit whiney at times. But you gotta love him, you really do. Kind of straight forward, but kind of punk rock too. He had his inline-skater style labret piercing, and his spiky hair. I shared a room with him, but oddly it never really felt like it. Pretty much we both slept in the same room, but neither of us were ever in there that much, and neither of us slept that much either.

Jared—Jared was the good boy of all of us. His father was a minister, and who knows, Jared might be as well by now. He was great, and never failed to make me smile. I don’t recall ever seeing him in a bad mood. He was from Missouri, and had that great small town, farm-boy attitude, where you knew if you were stranded on the side of the road, he’d be the one guy who would pull over to help. Towards the end of my stay with him, he had started working at a Papa John’s Pizza place, and was helping with some hookups there. Sweet....

Derek—One of the first questions I remember asking. Derek was whether or not he was gay. He was kind of surprised I asked, and asked me how I knew. “You keep saying ‘significant other’ whereas most people would say either boyfriend or girlfriend. Also, when describing our new apartment you used the word Fabulous.” As dumb as it kind of seems to me now, Derek was the first gay guy I really got to know. I grew up in Bum Fuck, Iowa, and if I knew any gay people then, I didn’t know they were gay. I learned a lot from Derek, and had a lot of fun. He talked fast, and seemed emotional and passionate about life. And he seemed to know all the cool girls.

Marcus—As dumb as it seems that Derek was the first gay guy I ever hung out with, it seems even dumber somehow that Marcus was really the first black guy I ever hung out with. Again, the whole Bum Fuck, Iowa thing. Marcus was cool too, and I learned some from him. He seemed wiser than the rest of us, hailing from Sweet Home Chicago. Unfortunately I never got to hang with him much. He was always out, finding a new life to live. Oddly, I seemed to see him at other people’s parties more often than I ever saw him at our own apartment. Tyler said the same.

Jason—Jason. What the fuck can I saw about Jason? He was 28. He had been in the military. He watched Alley McBeal, and would always tell me about it. He loved his anime and RPG’s. Yes, he was one of those types. He was the oddball of our place, and really didn’t fit in with any of us. I think the other guys were either annoyed, or indifferent towards him. I actually kind of liked the guy. I got to spend more time with him than anyone else. We got the same job at UPS, and worked the same shift, so had a lot of quality car time. Oh, did I mention that he was the only one of us without a car? Yeah. He...he was interesting.
Can't Sleep? Then Let's Gamble

Minneapolis was great. I absolutely loved it up there. I only lived there for 6 months, but they were probably the best consecutive 6 months I've ever had. Don't get me wrong, I had plenty of down times, and plenty of troubles. But that's life. Those times never seemed to bother me when I lived there though. Everything was new to me, and I took it all in through the eyes of someone who was just rediscovering life.

All through high school I had been slowly decreasing my average amount of sleep, and this pattern seemed to reach its peak (or valley) when I was living in Minnesota. What felt like a short, yet fulfilling, night of 6 hours sleep in high school now seemed a bit excessive to me. I was soon down to an average of about 4 hours a night. Some nights I'd sleep a lot, but other nights I wouldn't sleep at all. Often times my mom would see me online at 7 or so in the morning. She was always impressed that I was up so early, when the truth was I had yet to go to bed at all. For whatever reasons, I was perpetually high on life. Thinking back on it, I don't even know that I accomplished all that much. I wasn't really writing at that time, and had become burned out on zines, so wasn't doing ANYTHING along those lines. But one way or another, my time was always filled. I always found things to do. I'd decorate our room or apartment, I'd hang out with friends, I'd video stupid shit. It was great.

Alright, alright, once again getting back to the Bum F**k, Iowa thing. Now, I'd obviously been in a few cities during my school days. From time to time, I would hang out in places like Kansas City, and Omaha, and Des Moines. By the time I moved to MN I had even visited the Big Apple. But I'd never LIVED in a city. Anyone who has lived in both the country and the city can quickly attest to how drastically different they are. Tyler and I reveled in the marvel of it all. The grocery store is a mere 2 miles away? And it's 24 hours? We can go shopping at 3AM in the FUCKING MORNING!? We can do that now?

Shit yeah we could do that, and so we did do that. Within our first 2 weeks of living there, we probably hit every 24-hour place within an hour's distance. Cub Foods, Wal-Mart, Denny's, Mystic Lake...

"What a minute," says you, the reader, "what is Mystic Lake?"

Mystic Lake was the casino located about 20 minutes from our cozy little apartment. I never had to find it in the daytime, but it was easy to find at night, cuz they had this giant beam of light that extended all the way to the Heavens. Even the first-timers found the place alright. The trick, as with all casinos, was finding your way out.

Now, what made this sweet was that in Minnesota the legal gambling age is 18. This goes along with all the other ways the Land of a Thousand Lakes kicks major ass, including good schools, clean cities, and of course Jesse Ventura. So here we were, a couple of young pups, out on our own, and what can we do when we're bored? Go gamble. Of course, an imperative part of the gambling equation is the initial money, of which we usually had little. But that never slowed us down. They had machines that ran off nickels and quarters, not to mention all the free soda you could need. Yeah, it was a pretty sweet deal.

One time a few of us went down there. I'd imagine I had some friends in town, but I can't remember the details. All I know is that Marcus went with us, and rumor has it that he did pretty well on the Black Jack table for awhile, even getting up a couple hundred dollars. But, he kept on playing, and that was his mistake. I think he left with less in his pocket than when he walked into the place, and we all felt a bit defeated for him.
There were several great things about living in that little apartment complex, but top of the list would have to be all the friends I made there. Yes, yes, good ol’ Mill Pond. It was four buildings spaced out in a circle around a nasty-ass pond which served as a home for a small flock of geese. I lived in building B, but had friends in each of the buildings. The weird thing about it was that approximately half of the tenants were students at Brown Institute, but the rest were just your average people, your average families. So at times, it felt like we were living in dorms, but at other times, not so much. For example, there were all these little kids that lived in my building whom I got to know pretty well. We’d play on the provided playground equipment. They always tried to talk me into dying their hair, but I told them I’d only do it if their parents told me it was ok, and that never really happened.

So, as I was attempting to say before, I made a whole slew of great friends, and they were scattered about the 4 buildings. Anna and Sara in my building, Jorji and Sonya in that other building, Starr and Becca in that one building, and so on and so forth. So when the weekends rolled around, it was time to party hop. Somehow, there always seemed to be 4 or 5 parties a weekend, usually one in each building. You’d hang with one group of friends at one party, then wander over to another party, and the weekends were pretty much spent like that. It was great fun.
Let's Pretend We're Artsy Fartsy

One time I got the brilliant idea that we should throw an Art Show. I really don't know where the idea came from, but it was one of those ideas that I didn't really need to think about. As soon as it was in my head, everything fell into place, and I knew it was simply something I was meant to do.

First and foremost, we needed a place to hold it. Now, Derek stepped up right away and suggested we have the show in this general use party room that was on the main floor of our apartment building. I let him deal with getting it all arranged, which wasn't an easy task. The management didn't seem too keen on opening up their space to a bunch of crazy artist kids, but I gave them the $250 deposit for it, and they didn't really have any choice but to hand us the keys.

So we had a location. Next on the list was art. Again, no problem. We went to an art school, so it was just a matter of talking about it with all my friends. Everyone was into something, and we wanted a taste of it all. My roommate Tyler loaned us a bunch of the sweet ink drawings he had done, and Derek wanted to read some poetry. I talked to these two kids, Chris and Justin, and got a bunch of paintings and drawings from them. Those two had fairly simple agendas in life: they'd get really fucked up, usually acid, but on most anything, and then they would draw and paint some of the most amazing things I've ever seen. Crazy shit. We got lots of other stuff from lots of other people too, from photos to sculptures to everything else.

We picked out a date, and I made some flyers. A few of us went in early to set everything up. I did this one piece where I took all these baby doll faces, and wrote different emotions on them, (like "Angry", "Depressed", "Humored"), and then hung them from the ceiling. (This is one of my favorite 'artsy' things I've done for some reason. What I liked was that even though the faces were identical, when I'd read the word, it would make that face seem like it was expressing that particular emotion. I thought it was brilliant, and probably told everyone so.) We also took a giant sheet and hung it on the wall, scattering some markers and pens about on the floor in front of it. Throughout the night people were writing and drawing all sorts of things on it, and after the show we hung it up in our apartment.

There were refreshments, there was art, there were readings, and there were A LOT of people there. Alyssa, Steph, Jamie... people I didn't even know. It was joyous. I had so much fun. I had spiked up my whatever-colored hair, and was wearing my thrift store suit jacket. The big moment of the night for me was when I screened a 30-minute video I had made called "The Color P".

So the night ended, and was a huge success. Such fun. Such glamorous fun. We all acted like adults, and were impressed that we had done such a thing. The next morning we had to clean everything up, and scrubbed on the fucking wall where the sheet had been for like an hour because the markers had all bled through. But we got our money back, and all was well.
The Color P, continued and explained

Often times when you graduate from high school various friends and relatives give you money as a token of congratulations. I was no different. Of the money received, I spent about $300 on an RCA video camcorder.

I hadn't owned it for very long before I suddenly wondered why I hadn't had one all through high school. I was obsessed with videoing things. It started with my post-graduation trip to New York, but the habit followed me on up to Minneapolis when I took residence there. I carried the camera around in a little black bag that was permanently attached to my hip. Somewhere I came across the term "cinema verite", a French term for a style of film that tries to capture reality with a camera. Yes, this is what I wanted.

I took my camera everywhere, and captured some of the dumbest, most boring, yet most incredibly fascinating things you could imagine. Often times I'd just turn it on and let it run while having your every day normal conversation with my friends. But going back now, a couple years later, it's amazingly interesting to watch. They're memories. "Oh, I remember that day, that person, that place, that whatever...."

Of course, going to school for visual communication really meant I wanted to make movies, so some of that occurred as well.

I made several music videos, all pretty low quality, yet incredibly fun nonetheless. Whether it was me and Tyler ninja fighting, or me and Jess crawling out of dryers, I was always taping fun little scenes to be later dubbed over with some sort of pop punk or techno music. Rockin.

A few of us even tried to make an actual movie once. Didn't really happen though. The story idea came from Ross, a fellow aspiring movie-guy. (we both work at video stores now, how cliche) I was never sure exactly what the story was, and we really only shot one scene. In that scene a girl is coming home from work when she is approached by a vampire. She doesn't know he's a vampire, but the viewing audience of course does from the close-up of his teeth while he tells her "I'm not really fond of the day time". Superb I tell you. The part of the girl was played by a friend of Ross, probably someone he was trying to get with at the time. Playing the part of the vampire was Dan, or Vampire Dan, as we all called him, not because of the movie, but because he was always telling us he actually was a vampire. More on him later though.

But my biggest project during this time was "The Color P". I'm not sure how it started exactly, I suppose with a dream/vision/stroke of idiotcy, but basically it was a series of interviews I conducted with people while they were peeing. For a few months it was my big icebreaker, and a great way to get to know people. "Oh, you're going to the restroom? Mind if come with you?"

There were too many highlights to mention, but I covered the bases, and had good variety. I asked people I knew, I asked random people I didn't know, I had them pee in their homes, in cafes, in grocery stores, and even outside in the public. In the end I think 34 people were featured, and I was sort of proud.

The end scene, the real topper, was when I got my friend Mike to pee on my friend Rachel while she stood in the shower. She was topless, but in her underwear. With her eyes closed (so as not to see our friend Mike's cock) she danced back and forth while he pissed on her legs and feet. Mid-stream she yelled out "Why did I take my shirt off for this?" Which was hilarious, and something none of us had given much thought to until that moment. Ahh, good times. I've always wanted to do a sequel, but have yet to do so. I'm sure it could be topped, but I'm not sure if it should be. Maybe some day though.
Vampire Dan offers me the colored pills

Straight black hair, sunglasses, boots, fangs. Staples of my friend Dan's attire. Dan quickly became known as Vampire Dan, and this was fine with him. He played the role of vampire, and he actually played it with a bit too much enthusiasm for my liking. He wanted people to think he was eccentric, scary, and, well, interesting. Sort of like all the rest of us. But mostly all I saw was a kid from the suburbs who used to play D&D and probably got beat up a lot in middle school. But he was nice, I liked him. Hell, all my friends played D&D and got beat up in middle school.

I hung out with Vampire Dan a fairly good amount. He was in most all of my classes, so I talked to him there. There was this super cool goth girl with dreads that he would talk to, and I'd always get jealous because I had a secret crush on her. I'd also see Dan at parties. He was always in the corner, or to the side, talking with someone. Never the center of attention, but most always getting attention. He'd drink wine, or vodka, and do so with more class than everyone who was surrounding him. He drank in a manner that expressed patience, not like more college boozers who always seem to race towards intoxication. He just sat, and drank, and smiled at everyone. Sort of quiet, yet very social.

One such party brought forth a conversation that still brings slight chills to my spine from time to time. I don't think it was a Halloween party, but it was around that time. I had been party-hopping all night, and came across one where Dan was sitting at a kitchen table, back in the corner. It was late, and a lot of people had already passed out or gone home. I could tell Dan had been drinking all night, but he still seemed pretty coherent.

He saw me, and called me over to sit with him. The conversation that followed was one of the most bizarre I've ever had. You see, Vampire Dan began to share his very soul with me, telling me the things he explained he didn't normally like to talk about. He told me that he wasn't human, but in fact immortal. He said he had once sat in the kingdom of God, but for reasons he would not explain he had been cast down to Earth, sentenced to live eternally in human form. He said he had lived many lives before this one, and after every death he was reincarnated back into another human body.
Now, I know how insane this sounds now. I do. But there was something about Vampire Dan. You couldn't ignore his words, you had to listen. You had to understand, and believe him even. Even when he explains how he met Joan of Arc, even when he tells you he used to be friends with Lucifer before he was cast out of Heaven. You had to. So I did. I listened.

Dan told me he could see my soul. He was envious of me, because one day I would be with God, but he never could. He told me to appreciate the purity of my soul, but to be careful, for it was of great importance to the sides of both good and evil. He told me a lot of things.

Then he looked deep into my eyes. And he asked me that question that only comes along in the movies: "Do you want to know everything? Do you want me to answer all your questions, and explain it all to you? Because I can. But once I do, everything will change."

What the fuck do you say to that? I didn't know then, I don't know now. I hesitated, and he read this as a sign that I wasn't ready. He retracted his offer before I could officially tell him he was scaring the shit out of me.

I went home and wrote about it in my journal, saying I had either been talking with a crazy drunken idiot, or someone whom I couldn't explain or understand. Dan and I never talked about it after that, and didn't seem to talk much at all afterwards. It was all very surreal, and to this day I'm not sure what to make of it.

**Confessions of a Human Sock Monster**

During my time in Minneapolis

I also went through a few weird phases, which in retrospect may have had something to do with the whole lack of sleep thing. One of those phases was my Great Sock Thievery Phase.

Being as we lived in an apartment complex, there were laundry rooms on every floor of every building. Now, I'm not sure how it started, and I can't remember the very first time I did it, but somehow I took a liking to the idea of stealing other people's socks. Yes, yes, it is twisted and wrong, but I couldn't control myself. Maybe it was this weird desire to fulfill the ancient myth of the elusive Sock Monster. You know, the mysterious creature who always takes your socks, but for some irritating reason he only takes one of any given pair, thus leaving you with several single socks, eventually forcing you to simply buy and wear only packs of identical looking socks so that it doesn't really matter if one is lost. Yes, I know you know what I mean.

Well, I was equally irritating as that "mythical" phenomenon, taking only single socks, never a full pair. I was unstoppable, and was never caught. This is my first public admittance of such questionable activities, because only now, nearly 3 years later, do I feel it is safe. But I was obsessed. I really did have a problem. When I came home, I would not only stop by in the laundry room on my floor, but the laundry rooms on ALL THREE floors, just see if there was any action. I'd take from the dryer, or even wet ones from the washer; I was just that nuts about it. I did have my own set of
codes though. I would never take more than one sock from any given source. Also, I tried not to take socks that were too nice. For the most part I stuck to simple socks, avoiding special ‘theme’ socks, ya know with pictures on them or what have you.

So what exactly did I do with all these socks? Well, that quickly became an important question. I entertained the idea of bringing the single socks into my own personal collection. This would be a blatant statement about my activities, even if I would be the only one to know about it. Sort of like drinking the blood of your enemy, or driving proudly driving a stolen car. But this seemed a bit much, and could possibly have been enough to bring bad Karma, which I felt I was just shy of actually deserving. No, I didn’t want to seem creepy or anything, I was aiming for more of a hint of confused eccentricity. So what were my other options? Well, I needed some place to store them, and the method had to be random, and therefore “the last place anyone would look”. I glanced around my room, and my eyes fell upon a nearly empty box of Whoppers, a delicious chocolate candy I was also obsessed with while living there, another phase. I ate the last few malted milk balls, and stuffed in the 8 or 10 socks I had.

But, like John Wayne Gacy trying to find more crawl space, I was soon looking for more storage area. It wasn’t long before the first box was full, and a new one was quickly needed. In this manner two of my obsessions worked well to fuel each other: I needed to eat more Whoppers so as to have a place to contain the socks, and equally I had to keep taking socks so as to top off the latest Whoppers box and start on the next one.

I kept the boxes neatly in my closet. If I remember correctly, each box would hold around 20 or 30 socks, and by the end I had around 5 or 7 boxes. So we can safely guesstimate that my number of precious footwear treasures was over 100, possibly 150 or 200. So think, a potential group of at least 100 people experienced bad days, frantic searches, confused thought processes, or general annoyance, all due to my actions. I find this amusing. Maybe I shouldn’t, but I do. It’s not that I hated any of my subjects (look how I avoided the word victims) but more like... well... Ok, so I still don’t really know why I did this. But it was fun.

That fun, however, did come with a small price. (wow, I sounded like VH1’s “Behind the Music” right there.) Once I started taking other people’s clothing, and completely getting away with it, I realized just how easy it was. Therefore, I could never EVER leave my clothes alone when doing laundry. I would always take a book or my handie sack down there, something to keep busy. But I wouldn’t leave my clothes alone for a second. This same complex has stayed with me, long since my sock-addiction ceased. I’m working through it, but now that I have to do my laundry in a public place, it’s even more important, because any Joe Shmoe could walk in off the street and jack my favorite boxers (see Maria of Fight Club for example).

So whatever became of the socks? Well, eventually I had to move out, and I decided that I would leave behind this particular habit. I kept a couple boxes, ya know, for memories, but the rest were strategically hidden about the apartment the week before I moved out. Behind the couch, on top of the counters, back in the closet... Tyler said they were finding them for months, and were horribly confused until he finally asked me about them, and I gave him the laughter-filled confession.

Oh, it was good times...
For Sale: One Soul, in good condition.
Would like $7.25/hour.

My first job up there was working at Wal-Mart. Yes, yours truly actually worked for one of the biggest corporations on the planet. But hey, $7.25 an hour for an easy ass job, and I wouldn’t even have to cut my hair or take out my eyebrow ring. Yes, Wal-Mart is in it for the little guy.

Step one of being hired was to watch several videos and take various online quizzes. In other words PROPAGANDA. Yes, pro-Wal-Mart, pro-capitalist, pro-consumerism, pro-patriotism, pro-lots of other things propaganda. It was ridiculous. The videos were along these lines:

Old man wearing red Wal-Mart vest stands outside a Wal-Mart on a beautiful sunny day.
“T’ve been with Wal-Mart for 27 years, and have gone from being a clerk all the way to district manager. I don’t know where I’d be without this loving company.”

The computer surveys provided equal laughable quotes, which I’ve forgotten by now. But ya know, things like:

If you see a co-worker stealing, you should:

A) Tell your manager on duty.
B) Keep it a secret, because he is your friend
C) Ask him why he does it, and try to get him to stop
D) Find out how easy it is, and possibly try it yourself

But eventually those sweet-ass training hours were over, and I was suddenly expected to actually do my job. I was a clerk. They told me that the area of the store they were looking for help in was the Garden Center, so that’s where they put me. So I was working in the back of the store, where they have things like fertilizer, garden tools, plants, and other such things. It was also sort of the Seasonal area, so there were various items to go along with whatever holiday was 3 or 4 months away.

Now, I spent a good portion of my youth working for my dad’s lawn care business. In other words, I mowed lawns every summer of my 7th-12th grade years. So I knew a little something about gardening, and plants and whatnot. But that something really was little. If we sold things like mowers, or trimmers, I might have been ok, but we only sold stuff I really didn’t know about, and even worse didn’t care about in the slightest. I would get calls transferred to me with people asking about “what sort of bug spray” this, and “do you have any so and so” that. Well, I didn’t know, and didn’t care, and
My Friend Sonya. She was from Alabama, and gave great hugs.

would therefore avoid answering their inquiries, telling them we were temporarily out of what they were looking for, and they should call back Tuesday (or whatever day I wasn’t scheduled for.) Unfortunately, I had real life customers in the store to deal with as well, something much more difficult to avoid. They usually didn’t like asking a messy looking kid about seed, but whom else could they ask? So there I was, and for the most part it was ok.

Although I was never asked to cut my hair or take out piercings, there was a dress code. Nice pants, and a nice shirt were required. I’m pretty sure tee-shirts were ok, as long as they weren’t offensive in any way. But pants, yes, I would need pants. Jeans were discouraged, so I went to the thrift store and bought a nice pair of black slacks for like $2.00. I wore those goddamn pants every day I worked at that store, and I never washed them ONCE. I was always proud of that, and when I quit I donated the pants back to the same store I bought them from.

The job was pretty easy. It was a 24-hour store, and I’d usually work one of the later shifts, either til 10 pm, midnight, or til 2am. I’d ring people up, sweep the floors occasionally, and do my best to keep the shelves looking nice. The only really shitty thing was when I had to work on Sundays, which was always a bitch. That’s when they’d usually put me on a main register up front, and I’d literally spend hours at a time checking people out, non-stop.

My time working there came at one of the broker points in my life, which is why I was rather grateful to have a source of income. My eating patterns were pretty sparse during those times, and I remember eating entire bags of free Sam’s Club popcorn during my 15 minute breaks, and downing it with 25 cent Sam’s Club soda. I would take home any past-expiration-date food they would leave in the break room. I also developed a liking for the taste of water softener salt. For those who don’t know, you can buy these big bags of salt to put in your home’s water supply to soften it, and make it nicer to bathe in. I think it also helps to keep your pipes from freezing in the winter, a serious concern in Minnesota. Well, we sold such bags of salt back there in the Garden Center, and I most usually had a piece in my mouth while working. Helped kill off hunger, and I liked the taste. I remember my dad once telling me that while working on his farm growing up, he would chip off bits of the horses’ salt lick for himself. Guess it runs in the family.

The people I worked with were ok. A couple of them were pricks, but most were just kids like me. This one dude was really cool, but I never got to work with him much. He had dreadlocks, and a big septum ring, and various tribal tattoos. Also, this weird red headed kid, Vinnie was cool. And there was this guy whose name I forgot, but he was from Africa, and taught me a lot, and had the biggest smile I think I’ve ever seen. Oh, and there was Hank. Hank was one of the security guards that worked in the Garden Center. I think he had some sort of dislike for me, but I took that with grain of water softener salt, because he had a dislike for everyone. He was in his 60’s, and had sailor tattoos on his forearms. He would step outside the automatic glass doors to smoke fairly often, and told really good stories. Sometimes when it was slow, it would just be me and him back there, and I felt like we were cellmates. His wife died a few years back, and he’d lived alone since then. I could tell he hated working here, but I could also tell it was about the only thing he ever really had to do, so why quit? He was cool to talk to, and I understood his jaded bitterness towards life, but sometimes it was a bit much and would just end up depressing me.
"If you're down with E, well then you're down with me"

The only thing I really had to remind me of good ol' Wal-Mart was my pet eel. Every day when I worked at Wal-Mart I'd go by the fish section and talk to the eels. I love eels. Snake-like, yet their own thing.

My first eel was long and slender and smooth. After only a small amount of thought, I decided to name him E, after the lead singer of the band The Eels, one of my favorite bands. I loved E, he was great. He loved it when I'd roll up my sleeve and reach down in the tank and pet him. I fed him every day, and loved to watch him swim around. Some times I'd set up my video camera by the tank, feeding it through to the TV so I could watch E on the big screen.

As much as I loved E, I could tell when he wasn't happy. Who could blame him? Forced to live in a 10-gallon tank, cut off from the rest of the eel population, and with basically nothing to do. I felt bad for him, I really did. But what could I do about it? I just fed him and petted him, and hoped he was ok.

But on one fateful day in October, his demise finally came about. I suppose I should have almost expected it, but I didn't at all.

I had been in Wisconsin with some friends for the weekend, having a grand time. We got home in the middle of the night, and when we came in I saw what I knew was a horrible thing, even through the near pitch black. I turned the lights on and rushed over to my nightmare: E was lying on the floor, outside his tank.
He had jumped out some time while we were gone, an obvious suicide attempt. This seems like something that I could easily make witty, overactive jokes about, but let me assure you, I took this with the utmost seriousness. I loved E, I really did. Upon kneeling down to him, I could see that he was still alive, but just barely. I gingerly lifted him from his non-watery grave, and placed him back into the tank. I held him in the water, pushing him back and forth, trying to revive him. His bones were stiff, and he was stuck in an “S” position. His skin wasn’t doing too well either. But I kept trying.

In the next day or two, he started to get slightly better, and I thought maybe he would recover. But ultimately his heart wasn’t in it, and after about 3 days, he finally died. It was a horribly sad day for me, and again, I took it seriously.

I took a shoebox, and placed E inside it. I went outside late at night, and walked down to the murky, and rather disgusting pond for which our apartment complex of “Mill Pond” got its name. Wearing my black trench coat, and feeling as though I were straight out of a scene in a movie, I kneeled at the water’s edge, box in hand, looking at the reflection of the moon in the water. I opened up the box, and put in a few flower petals from the plants that grew near the pond. I then sealed the box and began to dig a grave just up from the water. I thought it fitting that he be returned to water.

After the grave was sufficiently deep, I laid the box inside and covered it with the damp earth. A nearby rock served wonderfully for a makeshift tombstone. At this point I pulled out a black candle that I had been saving for some sort of appropriate situation, and this seemed perfect. I lit the candle, and stared at the flame.

(Ok, I know this all sounds really cheesy and overdrastic, but I honestly did all these things, and if you continue reading you’ll see that it gets worse.)

So then I began to sing various Eels songs. I can’t think of any other way I could have ended my ceremony. I just sang whatever song came to mind, and was generally sad during it all. But then one song in particular triggered a bizarre chain of possibly unreasonable thoughts. The song was “Elizabeth is on the Bathroom Floor”, and it’s a song about a girl committing suicide. I sang this song, and upon getting to the line “My name’s Elizabeth”, my mouth just sort of fell open, and my mind raced. I ran to my car, and started to drive.

Now, let me explain a few things. I got in my car so I could drive to Wal-Mart, so I could buy a phone card, so I could then try to call my friend Kristen. You see, Kristen is my friend from New York, and has been a good friend since high school. One of the major things that always kept our bond of friendship strong was our general dislike for humanity, as well as our open discussion of suicide. We had both been through our depressive ups and downs (yes, some times the ups are still depressing) and I knew that she was at a particularly severe down right now. Now, the reason the song immediately reminded me of Kristen was because as her online/email name, I knew her as “Elizabeth Bathory” (a sadistic killer of the 1500’s). In my mind it all made sense: E’s suicide was somehow symbolic of Kristen’s. I was now deathly afraid that one of my best friends had taken her own life, and I wouldn’t be able to rest til I found out she was ok.
So got my phone card, and dialed her number from memory on the pay phone outside Wal-Mart. To my complete relief, she answered. I didn’t know what to say. I don’t even know what I talked to her about, or whether or not we even talked about my reason for calling, but I felt better. I hung up, and went home.

Once the healing process had worked through a bit, I did eventually get a new eel. I named him Zed, in part after the character in Pulp Fiction, and partially after the Biblical character Zedanak, though I can’t remember which passage it was from, nor the exact reason it was such a fitting name. But it was. I ended up giving that eel to my mother, and she took it to her 6th grade classroom. She found out it’s not actually an eel, but a “goby fish” or something. She emailed me the other day to tell me he’s starting to look so well.... I guess that’s the cycle of life for ya.

So, my roommate Derek was quick to learn about all the cool spots in the city to hang out. I pretty much only hung out at the pool hall that was across the street from our place. Don’t get me wrong, it was a sweet place, and stayed open til 4 in the morning. But Derek, he knew all the places to go where there would be drinking, dancing, chaos, fun, and even occasional nudity. I finally decided I wanted in on the action, so told him that next time he was going out I wanted to come with. The following Sunday night was my first time at the Gay 90’s.

Although most all clubs and bars in Minneapolis were 21+, nearly all of them had at least one, if not a couple, nights when the age limit was lowered to 18+. The Gay 90’s was one such place. Sundays and Thursdays were “college nights” when all us young’uns were allowed inside to be harped upon by the older and more experienced crowd. But ‘twas all in good fun.

Derek drove, and along for the ride were Jorji, Uppy, Anna, and myself. Anna favored the females, and I think she’d been there before. I think Jorji may have been there before as well, or at least to a place similar. But for me and my bud Uppy, this was a big step: first gay bar. I had a rough idea what to expect, but was still a bit nervous. Not so much in a homophobic way or anything, but more like a basic “experiencing something for the first time” way. I wasn’t worried about being hit on by guys, and I’ve always been really open-minded about stuff like that (which is sometimes a bit unusual when you come from a small town), but I simply didn’t
know how to act or react in such a situation. I was also a bit worried about the potential resentment that might come from straight guys coming to a gay bar, especially since the Gay 90’s was often jokingly referred to as the Straight 90’s due to the high number of straight people that seem to frequent it. I had this sudden fear that everyone would take one look at me and know I was straight. But right away everyone was really nice, and it seemed like everyone was there to just dance and have fun.

So, every Sunday is reserved for drag shows. Not usually being much of a dancin’ type, I was really looking forward to this. I’d seen plenty of drag queens, but never a drag show, so I was excited. The show started up, and we all got sat down and just enjoyed it. It was soon demonstrated to Uppy and I how you go about showing your appreciation for the performers. That’s right, with some crisp greenbacks placed carefully on the dancer’s body or outfit. In return for your generous donation, you got a nice kiss, some being a bit nicer than others.

What grand fun. I was loving it. Eventually Uppy and I took our turns tipping our favorite drag queens, bursting our never-been-kissed-by-a-guy cherries on the same night. How magical. I think it was probably around this time that I realized how attracted I’d been to all the dancers, and immediately following that realization was one along the lines of “Yeah, but they’re all guys.” Hmmm. Interesting.

My mind wrestled with this over the next few weeks, and several more trips down to the Gay 90’s. I’m attracted to girls. But I’m attracted to drag queens, who LOOK like girls, but are not. But I like their dollar kisses. What if they wanted to kiss more? What would I do then?

These were big questions for me, and ones I’d never thought about before. What if they took off their make-up, and dresses, and tore away the duct tape that hides their cocks between their legs? Would I still want their kisses then? I wasn’t sure. But for some of them, like the one guy with the belly button piercing and palm tree tattoo, or the black dancer that wore all the bondage stuff, it was tough to imagine myself NOT being attracted to them. So I guess there’s your answer for ya.

Nothing ever happened while I lived up there. No boyfriends, no dating guys, and no kissing, other than the ones I had to pay for. But I learned that there’s no need to set up rules of who you can or can’t be attracted to, and I also learned that sometimes it’s fun to flirt with guys too. I dunno. You only go around once, so you might as well loosen up a little bit and just do what you want. Never know, it might be fun.
Hair Dye Parties, and Brand New Piercings

All through high school I wanted colored hair, and I wanted an eyebrow ring. But I never got either. My parents and I sort of had this agreement where I wouldn't get pierced or tattooed until I moved out. As for hair, we met in a strange middle ground where I was allowed to cut it however I wanted, but could only dye it "natural" colors. In other words, blonde or black. But overall my parents were always really cool, so I never really felt the need to rebel against the few rules they had. I just cut my hair in every possible design I could think of all through school, and dyed it back and forth between blonde and brown/black. But then I went to college...

First weekend in college I pierced my eyebrow. I came back to Des Moines to get it done, a place called Reflections. Along for the adventure were Jessi, Mike, Tyler, and Jamie. (I think that's right...) Anyway, we were all getting pierced. Or most of us. Ok, so I can't really remember who all was there, and who got pierced. I got my eyebrow pierced, and I think Jamie got her ear pierced. And I KNOW Jessi got her ear pierced, because the intense pain caused her to lean on me all the way home. I think Mike probably pierced something too. Oh well. It doesn't matter. What DOES matter is that after we got pierced they gave us promotional Frisbees. Now THAT is damn cool.

Hair was also in constant change. I was not alone in this cause either. Tyler was the main fellow in helping me out here. Between the two of us, as well as other friends, we had all the colors of the rainbow, and we shared generously. We would have hair dye parties, and 3 or 4 of us would dye our hair on the same night, and we'd put on loud music and dance around while waiting for the colors to settle in. Great fun, I tell you.

One particular night I was hanging out with Derek and Jorji, and somehow we all decided that this particular night was a night for change. Step one, Derek would get his ear pierced. We went to the local Burnsville shopping mall, and found ourselves a nice little trendy place, the kind with jewelry and stationary and is frequented by annoying girls with thin-strapped purses. But for a cheap ear piercing, this place was ideal. As mentioned, I was going through a phase of being in love with my video camera, so of course it was with me. They said I couldn't video the piercing, which translated to "This girl doesn't know what she's doing, and if she sticks your friend in the neck with the needle, we don't need video evidence against us." So I pretended to turn it off, and Derek done got hisself an earring. Rock.

Steps two and three of the night were as follows: Jorji would shave off her shoulder-length hair, leaving only the bangs, and I would shave off my bi-hawk, also leaving only the bangs. I can't remember who went first, but I think it was her. She enjoyed the ordeal, and loved the new 'do. Cutting off several inches of hair is always a liberating experience, and she was pretty enthusiastic the whole time, making her classic Jorji faces (which consists of sticking her tongue part way out, squinting her eyes, and pouting.)
Of course, then it was my turn. I’ll be honest, I didn’t want to cut my hair. I love change, but I also loved my bi-hawk. But it was like, ya know, peer pressure, so I let them cut away. It wasn’t so bad, and hey, we like bonded and stuff.

Tyler got home a little while later. Jorji put on a do-rag, but he guessed what we’d done that night right away regardless. We all laughed and probably went out to eat at Denny’s or something. It had been a good night, but was even better is that it wasn’t unique. That sort of stuff was actually quite common for us, and we all loved it.

Of course, all good things must come to an end...

I don’t want to mince words, or try to layout my reasons for why I left the place I’ve been bragging about through these pages. Sometimes you just know when your time is up. Things started to go bad for me, and I could tell the storm was about to hit, so I left town. My job was getting harder, my school was leaving me unsatisfied, and my relations with the females were starting to turn sour. I made a few mistakes, and decided I wanted out of the whole situation.

At first this seemed like a fairly easy task, but about a week before my departure I suddenly realized how fucking much I loved it there. All my friends made me realize I’d miss them, and I felt the urge to stay. But I’d set the gears in motion, and my internal compass was already pointed towards the east coast. Yes, time to move on. So that’s just what I did, leaving behind all the good times, good friends, and good experiences, taking with me only the memories and satisfaction of everything that went on. It was great, and I’ll never forget any of it.
Loop Distro is a Chicago-based zine that offers some of the best publications. It's a great place to meet new people and get involved in the local DIY scene.

Take care everyone.

Leah Sullivan

I hate thank you letters.

But I love all of my old and new friends.

My old friends in Chicago are great.

Take care everyone.

Leah Sullivan

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Wes, check it out. I have this stuff cut out, get in touch + support the DIY scene in your area.

Charlie