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COLLEGE SLASHER NOVEL

by

Jeff Hill

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Timothy Schaffert

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2022

COLLEGE SLASHER NOVEL

Jeff Hill, MA

University of Nebraska, 2022

Advisor: Timothy Schaffert

This project was completed in hopes of creating a new novel that combines the research and craft worlds of composition and creative writing while merging the social worlds of teaching and campus Greek life, as well as making relevant contemporary commentary on the genres of satire and horror. In preparation, beyond necessary course work completion and time to outline, write, workshop, and revise, I read numerous novels and articles and watched dozens of films and television episodes as well as conducted research regarding current campus demographic to compose the best novel I could write in my time within the program. The first half of the degree was completed while teaching high school full-time, whereas the second was spent as a full-time student and research assistant.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this master's thesis to my late friend and fraternity brother, Dustin Niemeyer. I found much of him on every page I wrote and believe he would have loved this crazy story. Miss you every day, brother. In coelo quies est.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work presented here would not be possible without the continued encouragement from the following people. From the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, my thesis committee members, Timothy Schaffert, Stacey Waite, and Chigozie Obioma; my colleagues at the Walt Whitman Archive, Ken Price, Brett Barney, and Kevin McMullen; and my professors, Robert Brooke, Shari Stenberg, and Debbie Minter. I would also like to thank my former colleagues at Lincoln Public Schools, Pam Davis, Kristen Friesen, Kurt Glathar, Matt Gerber, Kim Davis, and Pat Hunter-Pirtle. I am grateful for the guidance of my mentors David Hollander, Scott Wolven, and Shanna McNair. I am thankful for the words of wisdom from my parents, Bill and Diane, and my grandparents, Larry and Carol. And of course, to the brothers of the Nebraska Alpha Chapter of Phi Delta Theta fraternity, Yours in the Bond. Thank you all.

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ESSAY

I have been in classrooms my entire life. First as a student, then as an instructor, and now, after many years, as both. When I returned full-time to finish my master's degree, I decided that I wanted to graduate with a new book. I have written two others, the first with no help at all and the second with the assistance of several folks met along the way through my time as a teacher who would attend writing conferences as a student every summer break. Because I have always felt passionate about writers writing what they know best, it became quite obvious very early on that I would write about my two biggest passions: school and scary movies. And that is how the college slasher novel project became my culminating project.

In preparation to write the college slasher novel, I read ten books. The books I read were *The Rules of Attraction* by Bret Easton Ellis, *Stoner* by John Williams, *You* by Caroline Kepnes, *Dirty Rush* by Taylor Bell, *Indignation* by Philip Roth, *The Ruins* by Scott Smith, *Total Frat Move* by W. R. Bolen, *Dude, Bro: The How-To Guide to College Your Parents Don't Want You to Have* by Bread Foster, *Urban Legends: 666 Absolutely True Stories that Happened to a Friend... of a Friend... of a Friend* by Thomas J. Craughwell, and *Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities* by Alexandra Robbins. This helped me gain a sense of familiarity with the field of other college books and understand the range of genres and styles in which to tackle my particular story.

I also watched dozens of movies. The comedies were *21 & Over*, *Admission*, *Van Wilder*, *The House Bunny*, *Pitch Perfect*, *Road Trip*, *Animal House*, and *22 Jump Street*. The dramas were *Liberal Arts*, *Whiplash*, *Spring Breakers*, *The Social Network*, *Runner Runner*, *The Skulls*, *Lions for Lambs*, *Solitary Man*, *Good Will Hunting*, *Wonder Boys*, and *The Rules of*

Attraction. And the horror films were *Black Christmas* (the original and the two subsequent remakes), *Scream 2*, *Sorority Row*, *Brotherhood*, *Hell Fest*, *Happy Death Day* and *Happy Death Day 2 U*, *Friend Request*, *Master*, *It Follows*, *The Ruins*, *Rope*, *Smiley Face Killers*, *M. F. A.*, *Promising Young Woman*, and *Urban Legend*. This assisted me in my formation of the setting, giving me the visual inspiration to make the world in which my characters lived both familiar and relatable yet otherworldly and scary.

In addition to the movies, I watched several episodes of many popular television shows that took place on or during (or simply had seasons or storylines featuring) “the college years” as part of their seasons or series. These shows included: *Greek*, *Scream Queens*, *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, *Workaholics*, *You*, *A Teacher*, *Gossip Girl*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Chair*, and *Community*. This simply improved my dialogue and gave me the strength to throw in those pop culture references that I initially fought against and those off-color jokes that were toeing the line between funny and too far.

Along the way, I wrote an article called “The Evolution of the Survivor” (which was published in *Watershed*) and an article called “Greeks in the Writing Center” (which I am currently shopping around in various composition and writing center journals, hoping to land in the pages of something along the lines of *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*). For the former, I did this to do a sort of follow-up report to the findings while watching various horror movies in preparation for writing the college slasher novel. For the latter, I did this because I was learning more about Qualtrics surveys, utilizing my composition teaching background, seeking IRB approval and CITI certification, and connections with both the English department and the campus Greek system. These both added a slightly more scholarly approach to the work that would become the novel portion of my thesis.

I merged three abandoned novels: *Dark Tendencies and Dirty Secrets* was a story about a journalism student trying to convince herself that every silly partial lead was connected to a major plot to destroy a building in a major metropolitan city. This character became Tessa. *Backwards Compatible* was a story about a group of friends traveling across the country in an old RV as they tried their best to console their best friend as he navigates his first post-grad breakup. This character became Todd. And *Those Who Can't* was a story about a college professor who left his tenured high school classroom after a series of tragedies led him down a dark path. This character became Jay. Adam was a character from a few of my previously published short stories and he served as a connective tissue for the other characters. Add all these characters from abandoned works that weren't quite large enough to exist on their own merit and you get my thesis, a brand-new novel. All I had to do was add a serial killer, throw them all into the same college town during a snowstorm, and *Dead Week* was born.

As far as the format of the novel is concerned, I decided to borrow inspiration from Bret Easton Ellis and tackle the storytelling approach using a rotating cast of first-person narrators. I also used the idea of Cormac McCarthy's unnamed sparse stylistic storytelling in his critically acclaimed novel, *The Road*. I thought it would be fun to paint a larger picture of this fictional college town's setting by giving us snapshots into the campus through characters who did not necessarily impact the overall plot of the novel, excluding the two bookend scenes that open and close the book. Deleting dialogue tags, leaving a lot up to the imagination and interpretation of the reader, and passing no judgment from an omniscient narrator was an interesting experiment in restraint, juxtaposed purposely jarringly against the hyper-opinionated narrators. Creating these "interchapters," to borrow a term frequently used in the academic books I have become quite familiar with while teaching and learning about the teaching of the field of composition

studies, I found the necessary transition from chapter to chapter. I also wanted to try something new in terms of the actual numbering of the story. Since the action takes place within a school week, I thought it would be useful to label not only the characters before they began speaking their versions of the truth, but also to separate their tales by the days. I also feel this builds a sense of suspense and dread as the reader nears the climax.

To further understand my process on a larger level, I should probably elaborate on my writerly identity. There have been six key moments in my own development as a writer. One in grade school, one in high school, one in college, and three after graduation. I plan to discuss each of the six in greater detail, but I would be remiss to neglect at least briefly mentioning that each writer's own process undergoes significantly more events as it shapes and evolves. These are just the six most crucial ones for me so far.

The first was in grade school, when a teacher assigned a science vocabulary assignment, which was to become the first short story I would ever write. The directions of the homework assignment were simple enough: make sure you use all ten of the week's vocabulary words correctly within an original short story. Most students in the class wrote a two or three paragraph tale about fishermen or magical talking fish and received full credit. I wrote a twelve-page story about an obsessed sea captain on the run from a serial killer aboard a luxury yacht. She had me read the entire thing in front of my classmates, received several angry parent phone calls, and took me aside saying that she could take the heat and that I should never be afraid of exploring where a good idea could take me on the page. This was the first time I had ever felt my stories were good enough to write down.

The second was in high school, when a teacher named me editor-in-chief of the school's literary magazine, *From the Depths*. I needed an English class and wanted to write more stories

in high school, only writing for myself and my friends all through middle school. This class would serve two purposes: it would look good on my resume and it would give me the inside scoop on how to get as many of my classmates to read my words as possible without bribery or printing and handing out hundreds of copies that would just end up in the trash. I learned to love editing, reading, critiquing, encouraging, and following daily writing prompts, something that my pre-internet generation only got if we were fortunate enough to enter a creative writing class. I would take the awards won at the district, city, state, and national level and put them to use when I created my own literary magazine after becoming a teacher myself, titled *The Bathroom Wall*, several years later. This was the first time I had ever felt my stories were good enough to share.

The third was in college, when a teacher told me that my writing reminded him of a famous writer he adored. I was told in an introduction to fiction writing class that there was only one rule: Don't write a "kill your classmates" story. But that teacher, who is no longer a teacher, got a thrill out of telling freshmen and sophomore beginning writers that their stories were awful and weren't going to cut it, all the while never actually getting a single one of his pieces published. So I went for it. I wrote the one thing that could get me in trouble, which got me a B in the class, rather than an A, but also got me into an advanced fiction writing course. I turned in that same story the first week of his class and he said that it sounded like Patricia Highsmith and that I should write crime stories. This was the first time I had ever felt my stories were good enough to publish.

The fourth was when I became a teacher. I graduated with a B. S. in education at the beginning of a district hiring freeze, so my student teaching became substitute teaching and two gigs long-term subbing at the highest-achieving high school in the state and an alternative arts

and humanities focus program, eventually arriving with my own classroom at a Title I school in desperate need of a creative writing program. My teaching experience got me in the door, but it was my publications and my content area knowledge that got me the job. This was the first time I realized that the best teachers of writing were in fact writers themselves.

The fifth was after college, when a writer at the Writer's Hotel writing conference in New York, New York and a writer at the Sarah Lawrence College Summer Seminar for Writers in Bronxville, New York entered my life first as teachers, then again as friends. Summers off as a teacher building a creative writing program for a district that knew exactly what they were getting in return afforded me the opportunity to live in the Midwest during my contracted work times, but on the east coast, in the heart of the publishing world, for every single paid day off, professional leave or writing or teaching conference, and extended breaks. Through networking, one became my editor and the other became my mentor. This was the first time I was confronted with the inevitable choice ahead of me: commit to my writing or commit to my teaching.

The sixth was when I became a writer. After almost ten years, thousands of students, hundreds of friends, and countless stories, I packed up my classroom for a final time. At the end of the day, all any teacher can do is his best. And that is what I did every single day. I knew this might have seemed like the end of the story to some, but it was just the beginning of a fun, daring, scary, exciting new chapter for me. Every writing class I ever taught would begin with me saying two things: "Yes, I'm a writer, but I also happen to be your teacher. And you're a writer, too... You might just not know it yet." Some kids bought in after a day, others a semester, and some maybe years. But by the time they left my class, they knew that they had a story to tell, they had a voice with which to tell it, and they knew how to put it down on the page. This was a career where my expertise was not only vital, but encouraged and praised. And there

was nothing more rewarding than helping a struggling student become a confident writer or a gifted student become a talented writer.

I would also like to add a few more names to the list of thanks in terms of forming me and my writerly identity. My past teachers, my former colleagues, and every student I ever had in Lincoln Public Schools. I think of them often and remember them fondly. These people made my teaching career an always memorable one. And the connections made during that tenure made it important. After all, every single story lived is a story worth writing down. A large portion of my work is fiction, but that doesn't mean that the academic work I reference isn't going to be useful as anecdotal evidence or valid field research and that the creative work I am inspired by isn't going to be more human because of my knack for realistic age- and gender- and region-accurate dialogue after having spent so long around its source or more believable because of my travels and my glimpses into lives that were so different from my own experiences.

I was fortunate growing up, being supported by friends and family and teachers who believed that I had a knack for stringing words together. I always had access to paper, pens, pencils, word processors, computer desktops, and laptops. But I also had access to books, movies, television, video games, comic books, and activities. I was never told that what I was reading, viewing, or creating wasn't appropriate for my age. I always had a willing audience for my stories, whether from my mouth or on the page. And those privileges made me a confident writer. But they didn't make me a good one. My process and my dedication to the craft did that.

My writing process is shockingly not all that complicated. Or difficult to understand. But that doesn't mean that it isn't wildly difficult to explain. The only thing harder than writing a novel is explaining how I did it. I don't think I've ever read a craft book or an argumentative academic textbook that successfully and succinctly put into words what I've been avoiding

answering my entire life: How do writers do it? Or, in this case more specifically, how do I do it?

I need deadlines in all my writing, that much is clear. They can be teacher-assigned or editor-mandated or publisher-directed, and recently, self-set. But the moment it becomes a task and not just an idea, the writing process begins for me. With my expository and academic writing, especially an argument-based course-assigned writing exercise or a personal essay of sorts, I set a goal of outlining, then journaling, then, usually the day before or even the day of the final due date, I simply sit down and write the whole thing out. This might seem like a one-and-done drafting approach to some, but as a former educator and writing teacher/tutor myself, I know that there is much more to it than that. It may be a second or sometimes even a first draft when it is submitted, but that's because I do a lot of spot-check editing along the way and have been thinking about the concepts and ideas and formatting approaches for days or even weeks.

My creative writing approaches differ somewhat, but not as much as one would think. Sure, I might get a fun first draft down and it will just live on my computer or in a notebook for the rest of time, almost immediately forgotten and never seeing a second draft or another set of eyes. But when it comes to my serious writing, such as a short story I want to send out to a literary magazine or a novel that I wish to eventually publish and sell, I need those deadlines. And I know that I won't do a majority of the writing on the actual page until crunch time.

I will also point out that there is a different approach to my writing (both academically and creatively) than how I approach grading, planning, and researching for those two audiences. I need noise for my own writing. I need silence for the writing of others. I can't write without something going on in the background, but I can't research or plan or grade or even read without complete and total silence. I think this is worth noting because all of those things are very much

part of the writing process for me and it would be far too simplistic to just dismiss them from the approach to getting to a final product.

I returned to classroom to sit on the other end of the desk after teaching for a decade. Being a graduate research assistant for the Walt Whitman Archive and serving as a chapter advisor for the Nebraska Alpha Chapter of Phi Delta Theta fraternity (for which I received the David S. and Julia N. Jenkins Graduate Fellowship), I also honor my commitments as a faculty member of the Writer's Hotel writing conference in New York City and a freelance writing tutor. I have over thirty short stories and a handful of poems and essays published at the professional level, but now that I am a full-time writer, I plan on widening my reach and sending as much work out as possible. I would also like to fine-tune and find a home for three novels. Some of my previous jobs that have shaped my stories and the way in which I write them down (other than teaching, of course, which I haven't been gone from long enough to miss yet, but I'm sure it's right around the corner) include: working in a bar, working in a comic shop, and working in a garden center. I'm a firm believer that all jobs make stories more real. One of the best pieces of literary advice I was ever given was when I met a New York Times best-selling writer (as he put me in a chokehold and I thought I was going to die, but, luckily, didn't) and when he said the key to making fiction seem real was to give everyone a job. "Everyone has a job. Give your character a job and they instantly become real to the reader." This is true for all fiction and creative nonfiction, but it is also true regarding honing and capturing an academic voice, something I fully believe cannot be taught, but must be encouraged and explored.

I miss writing in loud public bars, during the daytime and I miss workshopping with people who are all striving for a healthy but competitive goal of getting work published and snagging an agent. My two biggest goals right now are to generate as much work as possible

and to garner the attention of someone who wants to represent that work and encourage me to fix it up, flesh it out, and make it as great as possible for as many readers as possible. A lofty goal, but I've found in my decade of doing this seriously that we're all a little off when it comes to reality. And who's going to root for us if we don't do it for ourselves, right? This pandemic has done a lot of good and a lot of not-so-good for all of us as writers, but from personal experience, I'll say that joining a program that offers set deadlines and innovative approaches to writing would be one of the better decisions I've made recently. I honestly think getting together with other likeminded creatives is an under-appreciated and quite vital step in advancing as a writer. I'm looking forward to continuing to connect and take words of advice and wisdom to the table or the laptop when it comes time to write.

As for what works for me, I prefer to write and edit creatively in public or with background noise (TV show, music, street traffic, etc.) and I prefer to write and edit (and plan and grade) academically in private with no distractions at all whatsoever. As for genre, I would love to say "I do it all" or "I try to write literary stuff" but I'll be honest and say that I gravitate toward commercial fiction, with the occasional trip down crime alley or into another world via speculative fiction. I like ghosts and murder, but not so much in real life. I like romance and humor, but not so much in my fictional worlds.

And that is what this final master's thesis has come to. I have completed the course work, made some connections, and wrote a ton of new material, publishing six new pieces in this final semester alone. But perhaps the thing that I am most proud of is the novel itself. A master's degree in English with a specialization in creative writing dictates that the substantial piece of creative work be around 75 pages in length. But I wanted to graduate with another novel under my belt. And I feel like I have accomplished this goal.

EXCERPT FROM CREATIVE WORK

The Old and the New

Hey, Kitchen Hawk.

The dude working the front desk of the athletic office says as the backup school mascot makes his way past him. It's not even mocking anymore. It's just his name.

He nods and looks down, his usual M. O. when passing by anyone who isn't overweight. Which, on this campus, seems to be just about everyone who isn't him or a member of the janitorial crew or maintenance staff. Or under the age of forty.

The name started when he rushed a frat. And failed. They give pledges nicknames that stay with them for the semester until they become active members. But when you get a nickname and you don't make it, it's your name for the rest of your life. The athletes party with the frats because they date the girls in the sororities. So he's not one of them, even though he'll be the main school mascot next fall. And he's not supposed to talk to them, even though he puts in just as many hours as they do. Maybe more.

You know you're not supposed to take food with you.

He looks up, sees someone beautiful, then looks back down. He drops his Gatorade.

You don't look like an athlete, either.

He's wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt with the school colors. He's sweating like he's in the middle of a workout, even though he's just trying to exist.

Fitness initiative.

What was that?

Shit, he thinks to himself. He spoke.

Nothin'.

Kitchen Hawk keeps walking, picking up the pace from his speed to that of a normal person's speed.

You got a name?

Kitchen Hawk thinks to himself. He actually has to think.

Yeah.

That is what he answers. Not a name. He's got two, he thinks. The one he wants people to call him and the one that people do call him. If he had a little more confidence, he'd share the former.

Kitchen Hawk!

A football player, slapping him in the crotch as he enters the food court reserved for athletes only.

Why do they call you that?

The stranger forces him to look into his eyes. He has eyes that beg to be looked into. He has a face you can trust.

He doesn't dare tell him the story. He doesn't dare tell this stranger about his misguided attempt to become one of them. He simply tells him it's because he's fat.

That's pretty fucking mean.

Uh-huh.

They open the doors to leave the athletic office and head toward the rec center. He runs, really runs, for about three hundred feet, out of breath by the time he gets to the next door.

Going to work out?

Nuh-uh.

He opens the door for the stranger, who seems to be following him but is probably just going to work out. He has to drop off paperwork and pick up the new mascot uniform that came in the mail for him. Just in case the first string mascot gets sick and he needs to step up.

What's the fitness initiative?

The stranger is still following Kitchen Hawk down the narrow corridor and into the equipment office.

I run from place to place.

He isn't simple. He's just not complicated. The stranger seems to like that. As the mascot picks up his uniform, he takes it out of the bag and inspects the mask. Last time it didn't fit properly.

The school mascot's a clown?

The stranger pushes Kitchen Hawk against the lockers. Hard.

They are alone. It is dark. No one will know he is in trouble. No one will look for him. No one will miss him for weeks.

Cool.

The stranger shoves a scalpel into the backup mascot's abdomen, slowly moving it upward.

He doesn't have kind eyes anymore. He doesn't have a face that can be trusted. And as Kitchen Hawk's life fades away into a further obscurity than it already was, he sees that the stranger is now wearing a mask of his own. Also that of a clown.

I like clowns. They're super fucking creepy.

MONDAY

Tessa

Former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt once said that “Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people.” But I think interesting people talk about all three. I’ve always prided myself on living the life of a celebrity, even though I haven’t achieved celebrity status. Yet.

I’m with a boy on a date, after I slept with him last night. We’re at Starbucks. We proceed to have a “talk” as adults tend to do when he comes to two sudden realizations. First and foremost, this is not only “my thing,” banging available and gullible strange men and then doing the whole date thing after. But also that I’ve brought him here for a specific reason. I do not know his name.

“Danny,” the barista calls out.

“Look, Danny,” I begin, and he actually starts to cry. Seriously fuck. This. Guy. “Okay, well, first of all, stop *that*.” I gesticulate both wildly and frantically, somewhat desperately.

He pulls his shit together.

And then I begin the conversation I have pretty much every single time I get one of these shits to sleep with me. It never makes me feel bad. To be fair, it never actually makes me feel good, but still.

My legacy at this school will not be my degree. Nor will it be the connections that will land my first big girl job. No, my legacy will be Garbage Humans, the school gossip tabloid. You see, I have a journalism degree waiting for me as early as May if I choose. But as the

December air chills us all to our bones in this unusually dark month, we're all filling out the graduation paperwork for spring. We're finalizing our schedules. And I'm getting all the dirt.

I can work for the *Times*. I can get a Pulitzer. I could even write a book or two... but what's the point? I'm good at it, sure, but you know what else I'm good at? Talking shit. And getting down and dirty to win a fight. I was raised in a house of three boys, one of which was my father. I'm the youngest, with both my brothers being a year older than the previous. They're protective, sure, but only because they feel they have to be. Only because Dad makes them look mature by comparison. He's not an alcoholic. He's not absent. He doesn't beat us or anything. He's just... Dad.

Mom left him when I was born. Yeah. That's right. My mom left the family. She simply said she didn't love him anymore and left him while I was in his hands crying and my brothers were running and screaming and crawling all over the place. He never really recovered.

Or maybe he did recover. A little too well. He jumped in the sack with all of the young college co-eds (Dad had opted out of college since he was 16 when Sam was born and high school was about as far as he could justify). So imagine being a little over 20, you can't even legally drink yet, and you've just been left with a baby, a toddler, and a four-year-old who can't seem to stop yelling the word penis.

You'd crack, right? Well, he did... in his own way. He just started banging everyone who would look at him. Which was everyone. And I mean everyone.

Girls. Women. Widows. Business execs. Professors. Ex-girlfriends. And even, if you got him feeling bad enough for himself, the occasional DL frat bro. My dad isn't gay. He isn't even bisexual. He's just a straight-up sex addict. We've competed before. But that's another story for another time. A fucked-up story for a time when I'm fucked-up.

So back to me. And Garbage Humans. The tabloid that I run. And write. And edit. And, well, it's my legacy, as I already told you.

It all started when I got kicked out of the J-School for something that I'm not fully comfortable talking about just yet. Let's just say that I got into some trouble, broke a few morality clauses, and almost got kicked out of the university entirely. But someone went to bat for me. To be fair, he had to. It was sort of his fault. And he didn't go unpunished, either. But still. Kind of bullshit.

So my journalism career was over before it even started. But I liked reporting. Not necessarily factually. Not necessarily even writing it out or sharing it with the masses. I just liked the search. The investigation.

I started blackmailing my classmates. I started a Twitter page and an Instagram and even a few Tinder and Bumble accounts and lured the best of the best to their political and social deaths. And out of this, Garbage Humans, my baby, was born. Here's the fun part... not necessarily just the articles are good. Not even the photos. It's the mystery of who's on my staff. Who I am. And above all else, how we get our information.

And how it's delivered.

We print off-campus and only make one copy per building. Every frat house, sorority, apartment complex, and dorm gets exactly one copy, taped to their front door. After delivery, one person usually (and by usually, I mean always) makes copies. Dozens. Hundreds. Depends on their friends and how much they find it amusing. But I know what you're thinking right now. How have you never been caught? Well, it's simple. I don't deliver them. In fact, no one on my staff does. I drop them off in a stack at a different location each and every week. I then send a text on a burner phone (or, if I'm feeling extra sketchy, use my voice alt app and block the

number I'm calling) to someone who needs some extra cash. Usually a person who is either on drugs or in too deep with the wrong people. That person then distributes one copy (and only one, because rules are rules and tradition matters) to each location on a list. Then I wait.

It usually only takes about an hour for the shitstorm to reach its peak. Interest in Garbage Humans is very high. There have been numerous times I've almost been caught, but never again. When I was a freshman, I was almost kicked out of the journalism school for writing an expose on Greek life. There are lots of opinions on why I did it. But the only real answer that I ever gave was that it was too easy pass on. Too juicy. And when I got the attention, I never looked back.

And yes, I realize that I just said "first" time I almost got kicked out. But I've had a rough day. And a few shots. And a beer or seven. So I guess I'll tell you the real doozy. The one that drove me to go part-time at the school newspaper and half-heartedly complete my degree because money is hard to come by in my family.

I slept with a professor.

There. I said it. I'm a cliché. But you know what? He was good. And fuck you. You already figured it out. Because just like the rest of the assholes on campus, you already knew. Because the number one way that I have avoided suspicion all these months with Garbage Humans reaching critical mass is that the very first issue of my tabloid featured a picture of both of us doing the deed in his classroom. Why would I out myself? And what type of journalist wouldn't want to take credit?

Well, stick around. You'll see just what type of journalist I am. And you'll learn something. Because before the end of this schoolyear, I'm going to make a name for myself.

I'm going to get back onto the newspaper. I'm going to graduate with distinction. And I'm going to blow the lid off this Godforsaken college town.

Jay

They say that those who can't do, teach. But what happens when those who can't teach try to teach anyway?

My students are testing my patience. My department chair is passive-aggressively checking in on my publications, my teaching practices, and my interpersonal communication with my colleagues. Who are, simply put, the absolute worst. It's tenure season. And it's the holidays. And even though we just got back from Thanksgiving break two weeks ago, I swear, if I don't get to the end of the semester without another scandal, it will be a miracle.

That being said, I went to church for the first time in years last week. I was walking home late from my office and was thinking about stopping into the local dive bar for a nightcap when I heard what sounded like total 1980s *Castlevania* music coming from a nearby church.

As I got closer, I saw a homeless man stumble out, vomit, and then collapse at the foot of the steps. I looked up at the priest as he was slowly trying to shut the door. The winter air aggressively slapped me in the face. We locked eyes, the man of God and the man in search of God. He smiled a tired smile he was tired of smiling and I walked up the steps toward my would-be salvation.

"Confession?" he asked.

I nodded. We walked to the back of the church and went through the motions.

"I saw my old boss last weekend when she came to my office."

“Oh?” the priest asked, prodding for more.

“Yeah. She’s mad because someone blackballed her kid on Greek row a few years back and now it’s come to her attention that it was me.”

“So this is your confession?”

“Yeah. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. There’s a lot more to it than that. There’s a lot more history. And I think that history is finally catching up to me.”

We both sit in silence for a few seconds.

“I did something, Father.”

“And what would that be, my son?”

Another silence.

“How long you got?”

Needless to say, it was a long night.

“Jay,” the voicemail begins. “It’s me. It’s Chelsea. This is way too hard. I just can’t do it anymore. I’ve lost everything and you, you’re just too... *You*. I love you, Jay. You know that, right? I just... I’m sorry. I gotta go.”

And she hung up. I’ve listened to the voicemail a few times a day for the last week or so. Not sure why. Not sure if it’s helping or hurting or if it really even serves a purpose at this point. But that’s me. It’s how I roll. I keep voicemails and letters. It’s my thing, I guess you could say.

I once saw a guy named Frank Warren. He came to speak at the university back when I was in undergrad. He formed a website, wrote some books, gave a couple of Ted Talks, and now Post Secret is one of the largest user-submitted entities on the internet. People essentially just

send in their postcards to anyone who would read their secrets. Sometimes, it just kind of feels good to matter. Or to say what you feel. Or to feel alive.

And that's why I keep them. Voicemails, that is. I'm always afraid that people are going to die before I can see them again. And I'm even more scared that I won't remember what they sound like. When my mom died, it was a shock, obviously. I was young. She was young. More importantly, she died violently. Some would say that she was taken from us. How accurate. But at this point in my life, my adult life, it doesn't really matter. All that matters are my memories of my time with her. My memories of my mother.

I remember what she looked like. I remember what she smelled like. But for the life of me, I can't remember what her voice sounded like. At all. This kills me. And that's why I keep letters, photos, and, most importantly, voicemails.

Even from my exes. Because you never know. Sometimes they stay in your past. Sometimes they're just taking a break. And sometimes, just sometimes, they come back. So I'll keep it. And I'll listen to it. And maybe she'll come back to me. Some day.

A knock on my door. And it's her. Kelly Schroeder, my teaching assistant. Some day is today, apparently. To be fair, it's a version of her. Not the real one, though. The facsimile. The one that went from right to right now to maybe right or at least right enough.

Life is confusing. Love is infuriating. But we keep on keepin' on, don't we? Not like we have much choice in the matter. Ever try to stop breathing? Not possible. Ever try to stop loving? Love is my oxygen.

I let her in.

The undergrads in the journalism school are insufferable sometimes. But every once in a while, they're, well, not. I always have been "young at heart," so to speak, so when I hear of a

drama that is life-ending or a relationship that is no more, I can't help but sympathize with them. After all, here I am, just shy of thirty-five and still not guaranteed a tenure position until the hearings and final paperwork slides across the dean's desk in May. I'm on "best-ish" behavior, so to speak. Meaning that I can't party with students, I can't go too far into the realm of controversy in my curriculum area, and I can't, well, do what I'm about to do.

She slips off her top as I draw the blinds to a close in my office. There's something about her that makes me feel young again, and it's not just her youth itself. It's something about the way she looks at me. Really looks at me. Not in class. Not even when we're at play in the office, or her sorority kitchen after hours, or in my car that is entirely too expensive on my salary. It's when we get coffee in a small shop across town. It's when she Facetimes me on the weekends she drives home to see her parents. It's when she treats me like her lover, not just her fast-track secret to the top.

I think I love her. To be fair, I always think I love them. Each and every time. Countless girls have broken my heart. Countless women have disappointed me. But it's always the undergrads that make me weak. Their naivety is something I never had. Their spirit is something I always wanted. But the way they look at me, after a few times together, they always look so ashamed of themselves. And disgusted with me. But not her. Never her. She always comes back. For once, she loves me back.

Adjusting her glasses and dressing in front of me, Kelly rearranges the clown magnets and figurines. She knows clowns creep me out, so every so often, she finds one at a thrift shop or at the campus bookstore and can't help herself. My office is full of them. She's always moving them around, sneaking in and placing them in my classroom, sometimes even my apartment downtown. She thinks she's so funny. She kind of is.

She knows I'm stressed and makes me talk about it. Always. My high school reunion is nearing. It's going to be during dead week this year, because everyone usually comes back to town for the holidays anyway and the previous years' attendance has been abysmal. I'm a "townie," as the rest of the former student council always reminds me, so I get to plan it. I'm almost embarrassed to still be living here, but the only thing that makes it okay in my mind is that I'm a pretty big deal at the collegiate level. I've "made it," so to speak. The class reunion is set to take place at a bar just on the outskirts of campus.

She calls me when she leaves my office. I send her to voicemail. She doesn't leave one. She texts me... her preferred method of communication anyway.

"You know that's creepy, right? Anyway. Love you."

I don't text her back. I never say it, especially in writing. Rule one of being a good journalist: Never leave any proof.