

THE FLAVOR OF LIFE

INTRO

It's been a hell of a week for you. The dance company you lead showcased its very first public performance on Sunday night and the reviews came in Monday afternoon. Suffice it to say you won't be needing your dance company anymore. Months of hard work, all for naught. Everyone's a critic may be just a saying, but in this case even your mom couldn't look you in the eyes and tell you she liked the performance. On Wednesday, your girlfriend of six months broke up with you; turns out she was banking pretty hard on that dance thing becoming successful. You feel the burn from that one, but at least you weren't together quite long enough to make this development too devastating. Things finally began to settle by the end of the week, until yesterday you found out your rent is going to see a twenty percent increase next month due to higher demand for housing in your neighborhood.

You've got some things to figure out, and some soul searching to do. Fortunately, it's Saturday. "Ah, Saturday," you think. "Jesus should have made this his Father's Day instead." With the whole week behind you and another day of weekend ahead of you, you can finally carve out some you time. That's right, today is all about you. Your life's vector has gone askew and it's time to put it straight again. Today is your day to figure it all out. Today you look deep into the wells of your very soul and with the net of honest introspection you pull out answers, answers to the problems that are currently making a maelstrom of your life. It's nine a.m. and anything is possible.

But wait, can you hear that? The ice cream man is coming down your street. No man ever dragged his demons, kicking and screaming out of his being and expelled them with extreme prejudice while simultaneously getting his crave on for a double scoop. Your problems can wait for a few minutes, you've earned a treat.

You rush outside and get in line behind several neighborhood kids. Ah, but you have a new dilemma on your hands. The way you see it, there are two options. A cool, creamy pile of vanilla soft serve in a sugar cone, or the holy grail of every middle school cafeteria, the elusive Choco Taco.

[Pick Vanilla Soft Serve – pg. 2](#)

[Pick the Choco Taco – pg. 3](#)

You opt for vanilla soft serve in a sugar cone. It's a simple choice, but hey, it's the simple things in life that get you through, right? Perhaps it's the quiet consistency of the vanilla soft serve cone that has you enticed this morning, the promise to deliver unto you something cold, sweet, and satisfyingly creamy every time. Maybe this rock solid-steady ice cream selection serves as a crutch to you in these turbulent times, or maybe you just find it incredibly satisfying to watch the ice cream man spin the cascading cream into a neat little twist. Whatever your reason, you're having a rough time and anyone with a heart would give you a mulligan on this morning's ice cream choice.

As you savor your first lick of the perfectly molded ice cream spiral, a voice speaks over your left shoulder, "Wow, you like plain vanilla too?"

You turn and see a shorter man standing with a cone just like yours. *"No, I got this because I hate plain vanilla and I'm a fucking glutton for punishment. Yes, I like plain vanilla, you stupid fuck."* Wow, your inner voice sounds way angrier than you feel this morning, probably on account of all the misery you've been through this week. You decide this might not be the kindest thing to say to an apparently well-meaning stranger. You settle on a simple, "Yes."

The man smiles and goes on, "Wow, no one else ever seems to like plain vanilla. I always feel like I'm the only one." He chuckles, "Hey, maybe you and I should start a fan club for plain vanilla eh? It'll be the most exclusive club in town!"

"That sounds absolutely miserable, what a dumb fucking idea. Who the hell would ever admit to being a co-founder of a fan club dedicating itself to vanilla fucking ice cream. Hey, maybe you and I should go out in the desert, find a rock, and start a fan club for it. Then we'll be the most exclusive club to ever have its members' decomposing remains found around a lone desert rock." Geez, your inner dialogue really needs to chill out if you have a prayer of making some self-progress today. You try to remember that this guy is only attempting to make pleasant conversation.

You force a smile and laugh, "Yeah maybe we should."

You can't put your finger on it, but something about this guy makes you uneasy. He seems like the kind of guy whose life is an endless playback of the same ten remarks, interspersed with some socially unaware comments and an uncomfortable question or two. That might be why you keep roasting him in your head every time he speaks. Anyway, right about now would be a great time to tactfully walk away with a passing "have a good one" and get out of here. On the other hand, he's been nothing but nice to you. Do you want to stay and talk to him more or move on with your day?

[Stay and Talk to Him – pg. 4](#)

[Stop Talking to AI – pg. 5](#)

You opt for the Choco Taco, and what a call to make. As you unwrap the thin foil package, you feel a rush of nostalgia for the days of your youth. You remember excitedly waiting in line with the milk money you'd saved up over the past week. Your mom might have intended for you to grow some stronger bones and fortify your body with vitamin D, but you're pretty sure she would have been happier, in retrospect, knowing that her son had managed to secure himself the Lamborghini of the middle school dessert line, elevating him to young godhood in the complex prepubescent social order.

You gaze upon your prize as the minute ice crystals dotting the chocolate coating shimmer in the morning sun. You can already taste the rich, liquid fudge within. It's the crown jewel of ice cream. The world is yours. But someone else wants it.

Your attention is brought crashing down from the clouds of ice cream divinity and back to earth. The man who was in line behind you is making a scene. It seems he wanted a Choco Taco as well, but you snagged the last one. You feel for the man. After all, who wouldn't want a slice of this feeling you've got. At the same time, this is your day. You needed this, and you deserve to have this treat to yourself. The man seems pretty upset though. What are you going to do?

[Keep the Choco Taco – pg.14](#)

[Give the Choco Taco away – pg.15](#)

Maybe you just don't want to go anywhere until your ice cream is finished, or maybe you think that a bit of friendly conversation would get you going on the right foot today. Either way, here you are, conversing with your fellow fan of vanilla soft serve. He continues to put you off with his decidedly vanilla demeanor, but you keep your friendly face hitched on tight and pretend to be interested in his oddly-timed anecdote about his freeze-dried bug collection. You can't help but think there's a fifty-fifty chance this guy could be a serial killer. On the other hand, he probably has some trouble with social awkwardness and is doing the best he can.

"I'm Al by the way," he says, extending his ice cream-free hand. "What's your name?"

[Carl – pg.6](#)

[Magnus – pg.7](#)

You decide to bring an end to this conversation with Al and move on with your day. He seemed nice, but so do Tide pods until you really bite into them. You decide to follow your instinct and get away from this guy. Besides, you've got bigger fish to fry today. You finish your ice cream and look around. A pair of pretty girls are walking away from the ice cream truck. You remember your ex-girlfriend telling you that you're not assertive enough. Well, maybe a chat with these two lovely ladies is just what you need to get your confidence back. You decide to approach them.

"Beautiful day for a cone huh?" you say with a smile.

"Yeah, it is," says the blonde. Her friend, a brunette, looks a bit wary of you. "Where's yours?" asks the blonde.

"Funny thing, I mistook it for oxygen and inhaled it," you say with a chuckle. "*God, you smooth talking son of a gun, how are you single.*" Your lines haven't gotten any better, but at least your inner dialogue seems to have brightened up a bit. Probably because of that egotistical streak of yours; nothing like thinking about you to lighten your mood.

The blonde seems to think you're pretty funny at least. She laughs with you and asks what you got. As you tell her in vivid detail about the unimaginative cone you ordered, you notice her friend edging away. You think she might be slightly prettier than her blonde friend, and since you're just shallow enough for this to matter, you decide to try to bring her into the conversation.

"So, ah, what are your names?" you ask, making sure to look the brunette in the eyes as you do so.

"I'm Mallory," says the blonde.

"I'm Kristen," the brunette says, a shy smile creeping across her face.

The conversation becomes smoother now. You exchange pleasantries about yourselves, caring more about extending the interaction without looking too socially inept than focusing on what everyone is actually saying. Smiles and nods are tossed around. Soon, Kristen appears ready to leave again.

"I'm on my way to Jackson theatre," says Kristen. "My friend has a dance recital there and I promised her I'd go. You can come with me if you like."

"Awh, I was going to head to the park for a pick-up game of soccer, you guys should both come with me!" says Mallory.

Kristen insists she must go to the dance recital and walks off, leaving you both with an invitation to stop by the theatre before one p.m. if you'd like to see the recital with her. She gets in a yellow Volkswagen Buggy and drives off. Mallory looks at you expectantly. You've got a choice to make.

[Go with Mallory – pg.9](#)

[Go meet Kristen – pg.10](#)

“I’m Carl,” you say, “Nice to meet you.”

Something changes in Al’s face as he hears this. A shadow passes briefly over his expression, and an unpleasant glint flashes in his eyes. Maybe you just imagined it. Al quickly returns to his normal, cheerful expression. As the two of you finish your ice cream, Al asks you if you wouldn’t mind helping him roll back the top on his convertible.

You’re both surprised to find out Al has a convertible and confused as to why he needs your help, since you, in your limited knowledge of convertibles, assumed all of their tops rolled back on their own. Nevertheless, you shrug and agree, thinking you might get some good karma going for you. Al flashes his biggest smile yet and thanks you.

He leads you off the street and around the back of a housing complex across the street from your home. You look around and see a red sports coupe tucked away in the corner of the sheltered parking lot. Al motions you over to it. He points you to the rear of the vehicle and asks you to look for the small “disengage” lever. You bend down and squint, seeing nothing but the immaculate red metal of the body. You hear a shifting to your right. A blinding pain suddenly streaks up your torso.

You keel over, blood streaming from the fresh wound in your side. Shaking, you shift your gaze upward and see Al standing over you, holding a long, thin knife.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” he asks. “I didn’t recognize you for a while, thought maybe you were just a nice fellow who enjoyed a good vanilla twist. But no, no you’re the man who crushed my dreams five years ago.”

Holy shit, it’s Alexander the Hapless (or so you and your cast referred to him when he auditioned to be in your show).

“As soon as I heard your name, I knew it was you, Carl. I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.”

He bends down over you. You scream as loudly as you can, but your cry is cut off as cold steel penetrates your throat. You choke for several seconds, then your vision goes blurry, and fades away to blackness.

It looks like your instincts were pretty accurate about Al.

"I'm Magnus," you say. "Nice to meet you."

"Wow," says Al. "That's a badass name, man. What is that, German?"

You recall that you have no idea from which country your name originated, probably due to your strained relationship with your parents. Not wanting to appear as though you're bullshitting, you nod. "Yep, my mom's side of the family is super German."

Al is inordinately excited about your name being Magnus. He goes on for several minutes about the various medieval heroes he can recall that had a similar name, telling you that you might have been one in a previous life.

"Listen, I was going to go hang out with some of my buddies after this. Want to come with me?" Al asks you.

[Go with Al – pg. 8](#)

[Don't go with Al – pg.5](#)

You decide that this quirky little man just might have something to offer your plans today. After all, he has been very friendly, and no one was friendly towards you this past week. He takes you to an apartment further downtown. Inside, you find two other men, both of whom remind you strikingly of Al, both in demeanor and social skills. It becomes clear that the men are about to play League of Legends, a popular online video game that has somehow become mistaken as a professional sport in the last few years. You've never played, and you feel bashful as you watch the men prepare their runes and spells before the oncoming battle, but you've come this far, and you figure you might as well see what this is all about. Al sets you up with a spare computer and the game begins.

It feels like you've only blinked, but somehow eight hours have gone by. You feel dismay wash over you as your bloodshot eyes stare at the clock. This was supposed to be your day to put things right. Yet here you are, in a dimly lit apartment with three men you've never met before, playing this game that seems to do nothing but aggravate you while effortlessly swallowing up countless hours of your life. The jolt of realizing how much time you've wasted today leaves you completely disinterested in League of Legends for the first time in eight hours. Shaking your head, you pardon yourself from the room. Al and his friends are starting a new game and don't seem to notice.

You stumble out of the apartment and down the street. You feel heavy. Tears are welling in your eyes. The full weight of this last week crushes down upon your psyche. In your mind, you see your cast leaving the theatre, heads hung. The scathing reviews flash before you, and the burning sensation left by the love that never was with your ex-girlfriend bubbles up within you. You feel lost, hopeless. You've completely wasted this day and you are no closer to fixing things. As you cross over the bridge by your house, an unmistakable sense of doom creeps over you. Wild thoughts chase each other through your mind. You want to do something insane, you want to hurt yourself, anything that will help you forget about the agony that is this emotional cancer eating away at your very soul. You see the water below you.

You lean over the edge of the bridge. An easy climb over the rail and it would be as simple as taking a step to rid yourself of all of that pain. You feel an inexorable force pulling you over the rail. You close your eyes and give in. An image of your first dance recital passes before your mind's eye. Your mother sits in the front row, smiling. You'd forgotten she was there for that. Her and your father's divorce tore her apart so completely, you almost forgot about all of the love she showed you before her emotions came apart and rendered her a shell of the person she was. Her latent love floods your heart and you collapse on the bridge, sobbing.

You arrive home and fall into bed. Tonight, you cry yourself to sleep. Life may turn around for you yet, for you've recognized the love that you still possess in your heart, however that turn will not be taken today.

You decide to go to the park with Mallory. She might not fit every conventional standard of female beauty that your shallow ass usually demands, but she seemed to really vibe with you, and according to your Tinder bio, that's what matters most. The only trouble is that outside of the dance world, you've got zero athletic ability. On your best day, you're about as coordinated as one of those drunk pandas from the YouTube videos. You've found yourself committed to this plan, however, and anyway this should be fun. People play sports for fun, right? Your dad always said sports were man's way of making sure his testicles grew in properly, and even if you believed it at the time, you're pretty confident you can now reject this hypothesis on the grounds that it doesn't make much sense at a biological level. You went to a liberal arts college for two years, so you know that much.

At the park, Mallory passes you the ball for a quick warm up. You confess that you haven't played much soccer and she laughs, telling you today will be all about learning. That sounds pretty good to you. You try to kick the ball back, sending it about twenty feet to Mallory's left. At this point, you fully expect things to go south. It's obvious you suck at this, and from the look of it, Mallory is pretty good. Anxiety grips you. You feel the urge to leave and go to the theatre to find Kristen where you actually have a clue what's going on. Mallory is returning with the ball, it's time to decide.

[Stay with Mallory - pg.11](#)

[Go meet Kristen – pg.10](#)

You arrive at the doors to the main performance hall to find Kristen waiting for you. "I was beginning to think you weren't coming," she says with a grin.

You return the smile and make a quip that you supposed you didn't really have anything better to do with your day, even though the opportunity to go see this recital with a beautiful girl is absolutely the highlight of your week and you would definitely sacrifice almost any other plans for it. It's a good thing you're smooth.

You enter the performance hall and grab a seat next to Kristen. The two of you chat about the world of dance while you wait for the recital to start. To your great surprise, you learn that Kristen's friend is actually a member of the Greater Falls Dance Company, one of the most prestigious groups in the country. What's more, she's in a developmental program, meaning the company is currently training her to become a regular member of their cast. Excitement boils over inside of you as you wonder if this might be an opportunity you can take advantage of. As the show begins, you fall under a spell of awe, transfixed by the delicate grace of the dancers. You feel something roaring inside of you. A calling, this is your calling. Yes, you feel certain of it. You will not turn your back on the world of dance, you will return to it and embrace it no matter how hard it fights back at you.

Kristen clearly notices your reaction to the recital because she leans over and whispers to you that she can introduce you to her friend after the performance. You catch the flowery aroma of her hair as she leans in and it sends a shiver of excitement through your body. You could not feel more alive right now.

After the show, you are introduced to Kristen's friend, Lee. Your passion for the art is so evident that Lee feels compelled to take you to the company's regional coach. He looks you up and down and asks you if you have any pieces you've already performed that you'd like to demonstrate. Well?

[Nope, no pieces – pg.12](#)

[Actually, yeah, I had this dance company – pg.13](#)

Against what feels like your better judgement, you stay at the park. To your great surprise, Mallory doesn't tire of your sucky play. To the contrary, she seems downright entertained. She even defends you when her soccer friends start yelling at you for kicking the ball into the pond for the third time. You start to feel like maybe there could be something happening here between you and Mallory. Now that you see her in her element, you take notice of the way the sunlight strikes her blonde locks and lights them up, making it look almost as if a halo encircles her head. You see the way her freckles scrunch together so adorably when she laughs. Most importantly, she makes you feel valued for who you are. She may not know who that person is yet entirely, but she certainly hasn't gotten a chance to see much of your upside out on the soccer field, so that has to be a good sign for when she sees you do something you're semi-competent at.

After the game, the two of you go out for a late lunch. You feel a squirming sensation in your stomach as you come to the end of the meal. It's been a wonderful day with Mallory. She's made you forget about all of the pain you've been feeling. Now it's time to convey this feeling to her somehow.

"Listen, uh, Mallory. You've been really amazing to hang out with today. The amount of kindness you've shown me has totally made me look past the way your eyes are a little too close together. And the way you carry yourself with such confidence and poise...it's truly inspiring and has definitely caused me to care significantly less about your weight, which appears to be marginally greater than mine for reasons of greater muscle mass." Shit, you better tell that jackass in your head to shut up or you'll blow it. You give him a mental kick in the shins and refocus your thoughts.

No, you can't mess this up. You haven't jived with a girl like you have with Mallory in a very long time. She's making you feel like a nervous schoolboy. Your palms sweat and you're suddenly very conscious of your own breathing. The room is getting very loud, but that's definitely just you, freaking out about having feelings again. The waiter drops the check at your table and she reaches for it. It's now or never, what little courage you have is about to fail you.

You're about to ask her if she'd like to see each other again when she gets a phone call.

"Hang on," she says. "My boyfriend is calling me."

Fuck. You didn't see that one coming. She walks outside to take the call as you sit, stewing in the bitterness that has now consumed you. "This is what you get for assuming," you think. There might be a flip side to this, however. Mallory isn't really your type, but she sure does make you feel good about yourself. Maybe you can just keep this friendship thing going.

Mallory returns and apologizes, telling you she needs to get going, but that you two should "totally hang out again in public some time". Ah, there it is. Somehow, you've been missing subtle hints like that one throughout the course of your time with Mallory. Your friend Ben always called that "listening with your dick", and maybe there's something to it after all. Now that you know Mallory is spoken for, you can clearly see she's interested in you on a purely platonic level.

You decide to head home and check the classifieds. Perhaps today hasn't been a complete loss. After all, a good friend is worth their weight in gold, and Mallory weighs more than you. It was worth it to spend that time with her today, if not just to purge yourself of all that negative energy. Tomorrow is a new day, and your outlook is fresh.

You wisely explain to the regional coach that you've been dancing for years, but that you would rather demonstrate your grasp of solid dancing fundamentals and techniques under his instruction. He stares at you for an unnaturally long time. You feel a bead of sweat forming, thinking you may have blown it. Then, he breaks into a laugh.

"I like your attitude," he says. "You're a bold one. Sure, come on by on Monday and we'll try you out. If you suck, it's no loss to me. So best bring your A-game kid."

You can't believe it. Yesterday you were mired in the deepest bogs of depression, ready to give up hope, and today you stand ready to take an opportunity with one of the most renowned dance companies in the country. This is going to be devastating to your already over-inflated ego, but hey, at least now you might actually have something to back it up. You leave the theatre with Kristen, riding one of the greatest natural highs of your entire life. Tomorrow, you best get practicing.

Uh oh. You told the regional coach of the dance company about that dance company you led. You know, the one that just performed that piece last week. That piece that was just hailed by the Atlantic Post as “a regression along the evolutionary chain”. Yeah, that one. That was a mistake. You may be prideful, but one would think that after your own mother couldn’t hide her disgrace at the scale of your failure, you might have learned to keep that section of your life’s history as quiet as possible from here on out.

Naturally, the regional coach asked you to perform some of the routine from the show. He probably shouldn’t have called 911, but even still, it’s difficult to place too much of the blame on him after the display you put on. No, you didn’t actually require emergency medical support, but with all the writhing on the floor you decided to write into that routine of yours, it’s totally understandable why he might have thought you did. It also may have been a bit of overkill to request an officer to escort you from the premise and rough you up slightly on the way out, but to be fair you did make numerous threatening gestures during your performance, and it would be enough to turn anyone sour on you.

You end up back home with a bloody lip, a black eye, and a broken ego. The day hasn’t exactly been uplifting, or even overly helpful in your quest to restore balance to your life. However, you have now been shamed so completely for your ineptitude at composing dance routines that your egotistical ways have been brought to an end. A physical victory is far from reach, yet a victory over one of the demons holding you back in life and poisoning your perceptions of life is not to be overlooked. With your ego in check, you may find yourself bringing change to your life much easier than before.

Screw that guy, this is your Choco Taco, your brief respite from the crushing realities of your sad existence. That guy can scream at toddlers until his face turns blue, he's going to have to settle for second place today. You walk away from the scene, feeling rather like a movie star walking away from an explosion. You look back, of course, because you're not nearly cool enough to pull off a move like that. Although to be fair you did just hear the man start to threaten bystanders with the "business end" of a waffle cone, and that's worth taking a look at any day.

As you savor the delectable Chaco Taco, feeling temporarily invincible to life's slings and arrows, you begin to consider your next move. Immaculate though your ice cream experience might be, you're only several heavenly bites from its delicious crucifixion, and you don't have time to wait around for the second coming.

You think for a moment. Part of you thinks that it might be inspiring to go to Jackson Theatre and look around, maybe see a performance, and overall just soak in the vibrations of the place that has made so many people successful who aren't you. Then again, that could be sad for you. Maybe you should just go for a walk in the park and enjoy the fine weather. Life might just spit out a solution to your troubles for you.

[Go for a walk in the park – pg.16](#)

[Go to the theatre – pg.17](#)

You sigh deeply. A look of deepest longing passes between you and the Choco Taco. You want it so badly, and yet...no. The universe gives back to those who give freely, you think. You turn around and tap the man on the shoulder.

"Excuse me," you say. "You can have this Choco Taco if you want."

His demeanor changes immediately. A wide grin splits his face, revealing a full set of white teeth and a man more handsome than anyone watching his protest over the Choco Taco ever could have guessed. He expresses his deepest gratitude to you and accepts your offering.

"You're a great guy, you know that?" he says, biting into your Chaco Taco with intense vigor. "Who taught you to be so cool?"

"My mom, I guess," you say. "She wasn't that great of a mom, but she taught me to 'kill em' with kindness' when the other kids made fun of me for being a dancer."

"You're a dancer you say? That's great! Hey, listen, I've got to get going, I'm meeting a buddy of mine at Jackson Theatre. I've got a proposition for you, though. Meet me at the theatre in an hour, here's my card in case you need to call me."

He hands you a crisp business card. You read the title: Chris Dowinger, Team Promotions, New England Patriots. Intriguing, to say the least, you think, as he walks away. You're unsure what this could lead to but you decide it could be worth checking out, just in case. First, you need to remember who the New England Patriots are. You call your mom, knowing that her many miserable years of marriage to your sports-loving, childhood-destroying dad instilled her with an acute knowledge of professional sports, particularly in the northeast where you both live.

She picks up on the second ring. You quickly convey your question and get your answer just as fast. Ah, right, football. Duh. You're about to hang up when your mom surprises you by asking how you're doing. You pause, then tell her a bit about your week. Out of nowhere, you unleash a flood of emotion as the struggles you've been through overwhelm you. You tell her everything, right up to the business card you just received.

"Well Hun, if you want you can come out to the country and visit me for the day. It sounds like you need a break," she says.

You definitely do, you think. Still, it would be interesting to see what the New England Patriots could possibly have planned for you.

[Meet Chris at the theatre – pg.18](#)

[Go visit your mom – pg.19](#)

You're feeling very Zen today, and a peaceful stroll down the sun-drenched pathways that wind through the park sounds like chicken soup for the soul. You walk along at an exceptionally leisurely pace, thinking that maybe you got the idea all wrong about this past week. It wasn't the destruction of your world, but rather, the rebirth of a new phase of life for you. The rays of sunlight filtering through the canopy of leaves above you creates a beautiful greenish-gold glow everywhere you look. You feel drawn to walk deeper and deeper into the park, engrossing yourself as completely as possible in the alcove of nature that exists here. Suddenly, you hear a commotion up ahead. You creep carefully around a bend and see two people struggling with each other. You quickly realize that a woman is being mugged, and her attacker has nearly wrested her purse from her.

Your pulse quickens. You feel a wild impulse to run away from the scene as fast as you can. Yet, you seem to be the only other person within range of this situation. You're probably this woman's only hope. You see the man rip something small out of the woman's hand and put it against her throat. He's got a knife! You swallow hard. This may be a bit out of your hands. You're in good cardio shape from dance and your calf muscles are truly a sight to behold, but neither of those physical features is going to change the fact that you have no experience whatsoever in hand-to-hand combat. If you step in right now, you'll probably die, or at least suffer a serious injury. You feel the moral obligation to help, but you also know that this could easily be where your story ends. There's no time to call the cops, you need to make a decision. What are you going to do?

[Help her – pg.20](#)

[Don't help her – pg. 21](#)

You decide to go to the Jackson theatre, perhaps following that lingering hope that you might still rekindle that dance career of yours. There's also the chance that the lasting emotional damage your dysfunctional parents stamped you with has made you a bit of a glutton for punishment, since it causes you considerable pain to stand in the building where your dance debacle occurred.

You wander through the main hall, gazing around at the various posters from shows past. It hurts you to be in a place where so many others have succeeded at something you failed at, but still, you love the energy of the place, and you're also getting a weird pleasure out of the self-torture of being there. As you wander, you spy a pretty girl reading a program by the entrance to the main performance hall. On a whim, you decide to approach her.

"What's being shown in there?" you ask.

The girl looks up, startled. Then she smiles, "Oh, sorry. My friend has a recital and I promised her I'd come."

You tell the girl that you're a dancer yourself and she seems to warm to you. She tells you her name is Kristen, and invites you to come in and watch with her. You have nothing else in mind for the day and Kristen is quite good-looking, so you agree. She tells you she needs to go see her friend first, but that she'll meet you by the doors in ten minutes. You decide to finish your walk around the theatre in the meantime.

You arrive at the doors to the main performance hall to find Kristen waiting for you.

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You return the smile and make a quip that you supposed you didn't really have anything better to do with your day, even though the opportunity to go see this recital with a beautiful girl is absolutely the highlight of your week and you would definitely sacrifice almost any other plans for it. It's a good thing you're smooth.

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After the show, you are introduced to Kristen's friend, Lee. Your passion for the art is so evident that Lee feels compelled to take you to the company's regional coach. He looks you up and down and asks you if you have any pieces you've already performed that you'd like to demonstrate. Well?

[Nope, no pieces – pg.12](#)

[Actually, yeah, I had this dance company – pg.13](#)

Hoping for some change for the better, you decide to go to the theatre to meet Chris. You find him saying goodbye to a man in a crisp, gray suit. He notices you and waves you over.

“My friend! So glad you could make it! I was just speaking with that gentleman about arranging a dance routine for a halftime show performance a few weeks from now. I’ll get straight to the point. I don’t need a dance company right now, what I really need is a single dancer. Have you been staying involved in the dance world lately?”

[Yes, I danced in my own show – pg.22](#)

[No, but I’ve stayed current with my training – pg.23](#)

Maybe the best thing for you would be a return to your roots. You pack an overnight bag and hop in your old Subaru Outback. Your mom lives out in the country, about two hours outside of the city. It's a peaceful place, and life moves at a much more manageable pace out there. As you pass the city limits, you can't help but feel a little better. You were raised with grass under your feet and trees over your head, and you've always found that life makes a little more sense when you can return to this state. You pull into your mom's gravel driveway and kill the engine. She comes out to greet you.

"Geez, kid, you're still driving this piece of shit?" She says. "Good thing you're a dancer, a think my fat ass just might break that rusty go-kart you're trying to pass off as a car.

"Nice to see you, mom," you say with a wry smile. God, she really is a bitch. Maybe this was a mistake. Nevertheless, you follow her inside with your bag.

Her house has that distinctive smell that the homes of elderly people tend to carry, like a stale, musty closet. She shows you to your room and you toss your bag down on the bed. Home, again. You didn't come here to lie around, though. Part of you thinks it might be nice to take your mom out for lunch in the village a few miles to the west. On the other hand, you're itching to go out and be in nature for a while. You hear your mom come back inside from pillaging your car for loose change. What's it going to be?

[Go for a walk in the woods pg.29](#)

[Go out to lunch with your mom pg.30](#)

You grab a nearby stick. It seems sturdy enough to do the job. Steeling yourself, you break off running towards the pair as fast as you can. The sound of your footsteps attracts the attacker's attention. He turns to face the new arrival, however those beautiful dancer's legs of yours have you right on top of him already. As he turns, his face meets a solid piece of wood, which tears at his skin, then snaps clean in two. Looks like you needed a better stick. Still, he appears to be momentarily stunned. You look around wildly for another stick, but the woman has already pulled a can of mace on the attacker. He screams in agony as the fiery liquid douses strikes his face. Not knowing what else to do, you aim a hard kick at him and catch him directly in the groin. He doubles over, gasping and whimpering. Feeling like you're on the right path with this kicking thing, you aim another at his head. He stops whimpering and lies still.

"Holy shit, did you kill him?" asks the woman breathlessly.

Your heart skips a beat and you bend over him, putting your hand on his chest. Fortunately, his heart is still beating. You didn't just commit a murder and on top of that, you rescued this stranger from a potentially deadly fate! You turn to speak to her and then freeze. She's staring at you in shock. You quickly see why as your face also melts into one of surprise. You're standing face-to-face with your ex-girlfriend.

The ensuing silence seems to last for days. She's the first to break it.

"Thanks for that...I don't think I'd still be here if not for you."

A weird gargling noise escapes your mouth as you crack a pained smile and jerk your head to, hopefully, convey that it was nothing.

"Well, listen," she says, slowly. "I was thinking about texting you later today. I've got something I want to talk to you about. I wasn't sure if it would be the right thing to do to talk to you about it, but after everything that just happened...I definitely think we need to talk. This is big, and I mean really big. But before I tell you what's up, I just want to know that you'd be capable of forgiving me for the way I treated you."

You take several moments to digest what was just said. You feel a confusing mixture of emotions swirling around inside of you, some pushing you to hear her out, others suggesting you aim one more kick and then get out of here.

[Hear her out – pg.27](#)

[Bitch her out – pg.28](#)

Your cowardice gets the better of you. You turn and run as you hear the sound of the woman screaming. You jerk your head around out of some grim curiosity and see the attacker plucking a purse from a lifeless form on the ground. He turns and sees you. For a fraction of a second the two of you stand frozen in time, neither daring to move. Then, clearly deciding that you'd be better off silenced as well, the attacker rushes towards you. You're only fifty feet apart and the adrenaline floods your veins so violently, your vision momentarily blurs. You turn and run as fast as you can.

You hear the labored breathing of assailant chasing you. He's a larger man, and you've begun to outstrip him. You burst out of the trees and into an adjacent street, looking around wildly for someone, anyone who could help you. Instead of help, you hear a car horn blare right at your back. Something massive strikes you around your middle and your world goes dark.

Karma's a bitch, but she's also a fair one. Maybe you should have done less looking out for yourself today.

You tell Chris about the show you put on with your dance company, leaving out the part about how ill-fated it turned out to be. He's intrigued, and asks if you could demonstrate some of the performance. Experience might have told you not to indulge him in this request, however your ego sings at the opportunity to display the show you worked so hard to create. Perhaps Chris will be the one who finally appreciates you for the genius you truly are.

You lead Chris into a vacant theatre and then demonstrate the first half of the second act, your favorite part of the whole show. Thirty seconds into your performance, you hear a retching noise, followed by a loud door slam. You look around and find that Chris has gone. A small puddle of vomit pools where he had been standing to watch you.

Maybe he ate something funny, or maybe he just happened to think of something particularly disgusting right when you started to dance. Maybe the reviews about your show were right. You hang your head and leave stage.

[Go to pg.24](#)

Ah, the white lie. The hall pass to moral fortitude. You decide that Chris doesn't need to hear about the disastrous show you put on only just last week. You explain to him that you haven't been directly involved in any shows recently, but that you have been training very hard, just in case any opportunities were to arise. Chris seems to like what you're saying. He nods enthusiastically and tells you that your wait is over.

He explains that the New England Patriots are currently in the market for a new dancer to fill the role of mascot at home games and promotional events.

"It's great," he says. "You just put on the Patriot costume and dance around like the town drunk, people will love you."

"Isn't that a bit simplistic to be entertaining?" you ask, privately wondering if you could compromise your art to take this position.

"Absolutely it is, but keep in mind, these are Patriots fans. As long as the team wins and they get plenty of beer and dancing Patriot, they're on cloud nine. So, what do you say? It pays full time."

[Be the Patriots mascot – pg.25](#)

[No deal – pg.26](#)

You wander through the main hall, gazing around at the various posters from shows past. It hurts you to see be in a place where so many others have succeeded at something you failed at, but still you love the energy of the place. As you wander, you spy a pretty girl reading a program by the entrance to the main performance hall. On a whim, you decide to approach her.

“What’s being shown in there?” you ask.

The girl looks up, startled. Then she smiles, “Oh, sorry. My friend has a recital and I promised her I’d come.”

You tell the girl that you’re a dancer yourself and she seems to warm to you. She tells you her name is Kristen, and invites you to come in and watch with her. You have nothing else in mind for the day and Kristen is quite good-looking, so you agree. She tells you she needs to go see her friend first, but that she’ll meet you by the doors in ten minutes. You decide to finish your walk around the theatre in the meantime.

[Go to pg.10](#)

“Done.”

You shake his hand and set up an appointment to do orientation at the stadium. As you walk home, you can't help but think that maybe you gave up on yourself a bit by accepting this job. It's a bit of an insult to your art form, but then again, so was the entirety of your dance company's performance, so don't go throwing stones in that glass house of yours. At the end of the day, it's a job, and a new beginning. You have no idea what the future could hold, but you're pretty sure it's better than what you're leaving behind.

Congratulations, you're the new mascot of the New England Patriots.

Ultimately, you decide that you can't compromise your pride just to get a new job. You feel that if you just stay true to yourself, another opportunity more fitting of your dreams will certainly come along. That could very likely be some idealistic bullshit though, and you may have just passed up the best opportunity you could have possibly obtained in the wake of that train wreck of a dance performance. As Chris walks away, looking disappointed, you almost call out to him, thinking that maybe you'll go back on your decision and sacrifice your pride for the sake of rent money. Before you muster the courage, he's gone.

[Go to pg.24](#)

Maybe it's the life or death scenario that you just underwent, or maybe you just haven't mastered your heart rate enough to speak coherently yet, but regardless you're still standing here in front of your ex-girlfriend. She seems to be taking this as a good sign, as she smiles that pretty smile of hers reaches up to brush some stray stick shrapnel off of your face. Her touch is even softer than you remember and she's looking at you with those gorgeous brown eyes that could melt the heart of even the coldest man- oh fuck it let's hear her out, you think. You nod and she smiles wider than ever.

"Thank you," she says, hugging you tightly. "I know I don't deserve it."

"No, you don't deserve it, you cold-hearted, gold-digging bitch. You would have robbed me blind if I only had the money. You would have gone looking for that reality TV show contract so that the rest of the world can sit and laugh at our fragmenting relationship and then watch us stitch it back together with the money from my fabulously successful dance career. We'd call it 'A Dance with Desire' and get Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson to narrate it, occasionally stepping in to serve as some bizarre pseudo-relationship counselor straight out of the twisted book of love written by the famous and depraved." Whoa, clearly there's a lot of anger buzzing around in your head still, and apparently a burgeoning mid-shelf late night TV series to boot. Look, you decided to stay, so you better quiet that inner dialogue down, make a mental note to write down your show idea and a reminder to find out how to contact the Rock, and then give this girl your full attention.

She explains to you that her grandfather passed away this past Thursday, and that he left her and her older brother a considerable amount of money, them being his only grandchildren and the offspring of his only son. She tells you that she is about to come into possession of roughly 500,000 dollars, after taxes are deducted. She continues, explaining how she only treated you so badly because she was so afraid of what would become of her, having always been rather poor as a child. She tells you she was desperate to find a way out and that she clung to you to be her escape pod. Now that she has all of this money to start life anew, she wants you to come with her. The money can buy the two of you a new apartment and finance the revitalization of your career. You can live off of it while you get things back on track, but first the two of you will head to the Virgin Islands for a week-long couple's retreat to renew your relationship and get you started off on the right foot again.

You don't know what to say, but life seems to have made this decision for you. Even if there is the possibility of more heartbreak further down this road, what better option do you have for the immediate future? Your hopes and dreams may have just been realized at last. This could be your "happily ever after".

You feel a sudden surge of anger as you recall what little regard your ex showed you and your feelings when she threw you away like a copy of yesterday's paper. You know, that paper with the awful review of your performance? The thought fills you with still more rage. Unbridled fury courses through your veins, until you feel that you surely must have gone Super Saiyan. Regardless, you're about to drill her with a Kamehameha right in the feelings. Without holding back, you rip into her for the pain she caused you. You bemoan the nights when she gave you no comfort as you stressed profusely over whether or not you would be able to complete your show in time for the first performance. You tear her apart for refusing to acknowledge you publicly as her boyfriend and eviscerate her for the times she made you feel inadequate. You expose her for the absolute witch she surely is.

In your rage, your rant bleeds over to the composition of your performance. You begin to realize something. All of this negativity you feel inside was captured in your performance. Could it be? Could it be that your performance suffered so greatly because of this horrible person cowering before you? Perhaps, you think. It certainly feels good to blame your failure on a woman, so you run with it. An epiphany strikes as you enumerate the references to you and your ex's dysfunctional sex life that can be found in act three of your performance; this truly is all her fault. Without her, your potential is boundless!

You finish her off with one last flurry of well-chosen four-letter words and then storm off, victorious. You know what you need to do. It's time to get the company back together. It's time to plan your return to the stage. You feel good, and it may not be for any of the right reasons, but it's better than how you started the day feeling, and now at least you've found the courage to reignite your career and start again.

You decide that spending more than a few minutes at a time with your mother would be a tall order for you, especially given what you've been through lately. You opt for a walk in the woods instead. It's a stunningly beautiful day, and the forest is displaying its finest greenery in the afternoon sun. You grab a walking stick from beside the front door and head out.

There's something special about being alone in the woods. Out here, the problems of your civilized life seem quite insignificant. You slowly pick your way through the brush, taking note of the life and death struggles occurring all around you. A fly fights to free itself from a spider's web, while the spider closes in to secure its meal. Above you, squirrels chase each other around the trunks of trees, competing against one another for the many nuts hanging from the surrounding branches. There's a simplicity to life here that makes much more sense than anything you've had to deal with in the city. Here, it's eat and live, or starve and die. In the city, you're not even sure what it is you're supposed to be doing.

You chuckle to yourself as you imagine becoming a hermit out here in the woods. You'd have to get a bit further away from your mom first, you think. The idea comes and goes, you push it from your mind like any other ridiculous plot people's minds spit out when they crave an escape. Suddenly, you come out on to an exposed rocky cliff. You can see an entire valley beneath you. You breathe in the clean air and relish this moment. You realize the sun is setting in the distance. You've gone and lost track of time out here. Still, you savor this beautiful moment. You think that you might have just found the mental clarity out here to turn things around when you get home. You take in one last breath, smile at the horizon, and start heading back to your mom's house.

She's still your mom, right? You figure that since you're out here, you might as well take your mom out for a late lunch and try to spend some time with her, maybe find out what it is she's been getting up to out here. The two of you get in your car and drive into town. You stop outside a tavern and go inside. Mom immediately goes to take a seat at the bar. You pause, looking over at an open booth by the door, but she seems to be pretty set on this decision. By the time you sit down, she's already ordered you both a round of whiskey and finished her first. You feel a sense of foreboding, but you're here to spend some quality time with your mom, so you tip your head back and swallow the amber liquid. It burns, but you find yourself feeling pleasantly light-headed.

You suddenly remember that you haven't drank in a few years, but you can't figure out why, this feels great. You join your mom in toasting the second round to a brighter future.

A cock crows somewhere close off to your right. Your eyes snap open. Dazed, you pick up your aching head and look around. You're lying on the floor of what appears to be a hen house. Your mom is stirring five feet to your left. Oh, that's right. You don't drink because you're a raging alcoholic. So is your mom. It runs in the family. She's already clambered to her feet and is tugging at you.

"Come on junior, Farmer Louis is gonna be awful sore about the additions we made to his chickens."

You look around and see that you and your mom have clearly taken a marker and drawn clothes on all of the chickens. You follow her lead and book it out of there as quickly as your foggy head will allow.

Well, that was something. You realize it's Sunday, and you've got to get back to the city. You haven't really made any progress on yourself and you're pretty sure you've just awoken an alcoholism problem that has been lying harmlessly dormant for several years. You've banished none of your demons and summoned a new one. Life is hard, and you've just gone and made your own a bit harder. There's nothing wrong with trying to reach out to estranged family members, but maybe some people are better left out of your life, for your sake.