



Dakota Skye

BY THE TIME I GET TO ARIZONA

PART THREE:

SECOND WIND

CHAD J. SHONK

MYNAMEISDAKOTASKYE.COM

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PART THREE:**

“SECOND WIND”

DAKOTA SKYE DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

By Chad J. Shonk

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's once-in-a-generation imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons either living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Lyrics quoted fairly and in good faith.

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**I-70 WEST, PASSING THROUGH EFFINGHAM, IL
140 MILES PAST INDIANAPOLIS**

SO *THIS* IS WHAT A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP FEELS LIKE.

No sleep the night before + a long long long day of driving + the rush and crash of adrenaline that came from being pulled over by that patrolman + the aftereffects of a physically and mentally draining panic attack + pulling into Dayton two hours after I planned + smoking half a joint behind the motel dumpster = Jonah crashing the fuck out on top of the stiff, scratchy, and cheap Motel 6 comforter, only climbing under the blanket sometime during the night when he got cold.

Shit. I went third person there for a second. Won't happen again.

I woke up this morning feeling recharged, sober, panic-free, horny, and fucking starving.

I got down to the motel's breakfast with about five minutes to spare and all that was left were a few slices of bread and two little packets of Nutella. I scarfed down three pieces of sparingly-smearred chocolate-hazelnut toast, turned in my key, cleaned out my car the best I could, tossing two armfuls of trash into the previously mentioned dumpster, and headed out.

It's been four hours since I left Dayton and I still feel great. It took me a little while to get going without a morning coffee or energy drink but I don't want to go through another attack like yesterday and caffeine is one of the reasons I went through that one. I'm going to do the rest of the trip with water and sports drinks. Might be a little tough, but I'll deal.

I feel good. For the first time in a while, I feel really fucking good.

Yesterday was a little shaky. A lot shaky. Hardware store paint can mixer shaky. But today I feel like I've found my Freeway Legs. Effortlessly maintaining my speed slightly above the limit but not enough to get pulled over, sliding from lane to lane with ease, passing with precision and confidence. Being this good on the road, this comfortable blasting my away across the vast expanse of this country, it makes me feel very... American.

For a minute I think about where I'm going and why I'm going there. It's such a beautiful day, out here in this beautiful place, wherever this is, and I'm tempted to turn off the GPS on my phone, take a turn I'm not supposed to, and venture off into the unknown. Walk the Earth like Kane in *Kung—*

Sorry. *Pulp Fiction* is my go-to movie reference. I'll try to lay off but I'm not promising anything.

I could just vanish. Stop being me. Find a new identity. Wander from town to town, get by on my wits, live off the earth, meet interesting people, and rely on the kindness of strangers. Like that kid in that movie, except without accidentally poisoning myself and dying alone and terrified in a creepy old school bus in the middle of Alaska part.

What was his—?

I don't remember his slave name but I'll never forget the name he gave himself.

Alexander Supertramp.

What would mine be?

Cameron Nightranger?

I'll work on it.

Then I think about the three or four times I've gone camping and how gross it was and that time I lost my phone and it took me a week to get a new one and the panic it caused and how I really want to see the last two *Harry Potter* movies and how close I am to collecting all the Vault-Tec bobble-heads in *Fallout* and I say "Fuck that."

I'm not ready to walk away from my life. Maybe one day, but not now. I like a lot of people in it still, even if it is fewer and fewer every year. And I'm not willing to give up mattresses, video games, showers, and Facebook (okay maybe I could do without Facebook).

I'm definitely not ready for that.

At least not yet.

At least not until I see if Harry can take out Voldemort and if Hermione and Ron finally come to and start getting it on.

No, I didn't read the books. Back off.

So no Cameron Nightranger for me.

It's still there, though. The urge. The urge to just drive... not caring where. Not caring why.

But I still have a life to live. And when I get back to New York I'm going to tackle the shit out of it. I'm going to—

I reach for my—

Whoa! Shit. Stay in your lane, Moreno. Jesus.

I grab my phone out of the cup holder, unplug it from the cassette adaptor, and look for—

Fuck! Eyes on the road, idiot.

And open the voice recorder app. After a long breath to kind of sort of organize some half-thoughts I hit record:

“So. Um. Um. List of things to do when I get back. Number One: Um. I’ve gotta find a new place to live. No way I can afford where I’m living now and dad’s going to cut shit off soon and, and I’m not going to be able to afford Alphabet City. Need to find someplace cheaper. Maybe with a roommate. I don’t know. Kumail hates his place; maybe I can talk him into— I have to find somewhere cheaper. Sunnyside. Inwood. Maybe Murray Hill or Jackson Heights. I mean, the commute into the city would suck but what do I have to commute to? Nothing. So what? Moving to Queens would make it take longer to get downtown and walk around and not be able to afford to do shit anyway? Stupid. Get a place. Cheaper. Two bedroom I can split with someone. Could check online. People still use Craigslist to find roommates or is that where serial killers go hunting now? I love my--- No, I don’t love my apartment. But I love my neighborhood. But I don’t need to be living there. Dad’s losing patience. He gave me two years and it’s coming up on that so that’s just that. So Number One is I have to find a place— God I feel good. I mean seriously. This is good. This is what I should be doing. So a cheaper place to live... that’s... that’s Number one. Okay. On to B: If I’m going to— Shit. Two. Number Two: If I’m going to stay in the city I need to get a fucking job. Not a couple nights a week bussing tables or some shit. I’m out of money from the commercial. You know, and, I’m going to have to pay rent soon. Even if I find something in the shittiest corner of Harlem, it’ll still cost me. I still have to have a job. Got to tend bar. Wait tables. Something that’ll let me have my days free so I can audition. You know, so I can, yeah, maybe some kind of night security job. Work the desk at a hotel or an apartment building. I don’t know. Am I too young for that? Too short? Do they want older, more imposing dudes for those jobs? Either way, I mean. Let’s face it. I’m a fucking actor so I’ll probably end up waiting tables. But that’s okay. As long as I make enough money to keep a leaking roof over my head and keep my stomach full of ramen and Vitamin Water I don’t see why that’s a problem. So Two: Get a job. Find a job. I don’t want a job, but I’m going to have to get a job. All there is to it. Three: I have to stop worrying about girls. About getting laid. Stop worrying about it. It’s a shitty city to date in and I don’t have the money to do it right. I’ll meet girls. Just stop focusing on it. Takes up too much of your time. Energy. Four: Distractions. I need to cut down on the distractions. If I had cable I’d cut it. I need to unplug my fucking PlayStation. I just have to. Maybe sell it. It’s not new but I could probably get a couple hundred for it. Get that thing out of my sight. Keeping me up at night trying to complete more side quests in *Fallout 3* when I could be exercising or writing or reading. Reading. Need to do more reading. First on the nightstand: *Naked Lunch*. Distractions, man. That leads me to... where am I at? Six? Number Six: Um. Work. I got to get out there. I got to— that piece of shit that said

he'd be my agent six months ago hasn't called in five so I have to find someone to rep me. Got to get out there. Pounding the pavement. Knocking on doors. Handing out headshots. I got to be doing whatever I can. Free fucking theater. If there's a Medieval Times anywhere in the Five Burroughs I need to find it and get in there and I'll fucking joust for tourists. I don't care. Got to put in my ten thousand hours. I need to act, man. Get out there. Yeah. I need to be going to plays. Meeting actors. And directors. And other— Shit. Should I move to L.A.? Did I make the wrong move? No, I— No. Fuck L.A. So. So, so, so, I've got to do that. I can't afford to take any more classes. But I'm cute and maybe talented. I really don't know if I am or not but I'm young and if I can just cut out the distractions— Oh, look, cows. That's— Fuck. I need concentrate on work. Speaking of, Number Six. Yeah, that last one was Number Five. *This* one is Number Six. Number Six: I need to write. Right? Affleck and Damon. Billy Bob Thornton. Guys who wrote parts for themselves. Sylvester Stallone! Guys who wrote roles for themselves and then *played* those roles and *that* was their big break. I need to start writing. Never written a script before but Sly Stallone does it so why can't— I've got that idea about that kid who gets cancer and comes home to live with his parents. It's a little down but man I could play the fuck out of that dying dude. I just got to right it, you know? Like a movie or I could put it up as a play. Write it as a play. Might be a little more realistic. Put up the play, it does well, then a studio buys the movie rights and BAM we're off to the races. That's how it goes, huh? Either way, I've got to write. Something for me. No one else is going to write for me; nobody knows who I am. How could they? So Number Six is 'write'. Even though I haven't written a fucking thing since high school. Still. Write. Seven: I have to start eating better and exercising more. Fruits, vegetables, stuff like that. No more caffeine. No more candy. Fruits, vegetables. Can't pay for a gym in New York City but I can jog... or walk. Walking is good. Do sit-ups and pushups. Maybe try yoga. Everyone seems to— Want to try meditating, too. I think I'd be good at that. Either way, I need to get in better shape. Get 'fit' as the birds say. I could look better. Be more toned. But no matter what I've got to take better care of— Hey lady. Does the phrase 'fast lane' mean anything to you? That's it. You can do it. Just ease on over and out of my... Thank you. Jesus. Okay. Get fit. Which leads me to... I don't know what number this is. Weed. Ugh. I don't know if smoking weed counts as taking care of myself. Makes me feel good, sometimes. Makes me feel nothing, other times, which is also good. But do I need it every day? I don't think so. I can't. I know it's not as bad for you as booze or cigarettes— God a cigarette would taste fantastic right— but it can't be good for me. Still inhaling smoke. Can't be good for my body— Damn it. Am I thinking about...? Look, there's no way I'm going to get through this visit to Phoenix without getting high. Hanging out with Kevin or Kris or, or, anybody else that I know, really. No way I can avoid it. But if I— But *when* I come back... I may have to stop. It would save me money. I go through an eighth every week. I could be using that on groceries. Fruits and vegetables and shit. I need to stop. Not just for a little

while so that it clears my system and the next time I smoke I get *really* baked but I mean for real stop. Man. That might be the hardest thing out of them all. May not help my anxiety, quitting. But if I cut out the caffeine, maybe. The meditation could help. Meditation and maybe some medication. I don't know. I think I'm going to give up— Fuck. I... You know what? Life is about making decisions. Choices. Every time I light up, every time I buy, I'm making a choice and all I have to do is choose not to. Choose not to buy it. Not to smoke it. To not be that. To not be that guy. And that's what I'm choosing. When I get back... no more weed. I'm going to focus. I'm going to stay in the damn city as long as I can with a singular purpose: attaining what I want. Getting paid to do what I like to do. Not so sure I'm any good at it, but I like to do it. All distractions gone. So, yeah. Wow. That was an important life decision I just made in the middle of Illinois. Feel good about it, though. Yeah. Alright. Got a plan. Got... a plan. All I have to do is stick to it. Okay. Um. Moreno out."

I turn off the recorder.

I can do that, right? Stick to a plan? Not sure I ever have, but this is a new me.

Or will be, when I get back.

When I'm in Phoenix I plan on being totally useless.

I press shuffle on my iPhone and The Stooges come up. "Search and Destroy".

My foot involuntarily presses down on the accelerator a little bit.

What the hell. A couple or five or ten more miles per hour won't hurt anybody.

I'm a street walking cheetah with a heart full of napalm.

I'm a runaway son of the nuclear A-bomb.

Preach it, Iggy.

I am a world's forgotten boy.

The one who searches and destroys.

Honey, gotta help me please.

Somebody gotta save my soul.

Baby, detonate for me.

I cross the state line into Missouri with enough gas to pass through St. Louis without stopping. There I say goodbye to I-70 and hello to I-44. About halfway into the state the gauge is showing well below a quarter tank so I stop at a gas station in Lebanon called Kum & Go. How hard it must be for every employee and customer of the place not to giggle every time they see the sign. Who knows? Maybe they do.

I pull up to a pump, kill the engine, and climb out. It feels good to stretch my legs. Been on the road eight hours and this is only my second stop. It'll be my last. Only three, three and a half hours until Tulsa.

I slide my much-abused Visa into the reader and begin to fill up with low grade gas. It's fairly cheap out here but it still adds up. I wish there was such a thing as super low grade. For us poor folk who don't give a shit about their engine.

My stomach growls. What time is— Let me check my— It's six o'clock here, which means it's seven back home and that means it's dinner time.

I look at the Kum & Go (still funny) and think about all the candy and beef jerky and potato chips and soft drinks and slowly-rotating disgusting hotdogs and my stomach goes from growling to churning. No food in there is going to help me feel good. Help me *keep* feeling good. I need a meal. A real meal. Four squares, whatever that means.

I don't want fast food. Healthy. I want to be healthy.

I glance around. Right across the street is a wide, three or four story brick building with a few smaller buildings attached. Parking lot. Flag waving. And a sign:

Mercy Hospital of Lebanon.

Nah. I couldn't. That's really strange. Even for me.

Ah. What the fuck, right?

When my tank is topped off I drive over and park. I enter the sliding double doors into a, well, a hospital. Everyone knows what they look like, smell like, sound like. This one is no different, even if it is a little smaller than most I've been in. And a bit quieter.

I want to make sure I know where I'm going to cut down the likelihood of anyone stopping me. I spy a sign on the wall for the restrooms and head there. After emptying my bladder of four hours' worth of Gatorade and Smart Water, I wash my hands and look for what I really came for. It's not hard to find. Four little plaques each shaped like arrows to point you in the right direction: Emergency Room, Lobby, Fitness Center, and Cafeteria.

Hospital food isn't fine dining, I know, but it sounded like a good idea at the time. Now that I'm here, looking at the selections, I'm second-guessing myself. But I know the food will be hearty and affordable, even if it is bland and limited and bland.

I grab a tray and slide it along the metal track as I weigh my options. None of them are appealing. As I scoot down the aisle, I nod at the people behind the counter to let them know I'm still looking. I almost bump into the guy in front of me who has stopped to contemplate the salads.

"How bad can you mess up a salad?" I ask him quietly.

He smiles. "I'm just wondering how long they've been sealed in that plastic. I swear I saw that same Cobb two days ago. And it looked moldy then"

He's tall, probably 30 years old. African American. Wearing a rumpled T-shirt and sweats, flip flops. A dreary look in his eyes, even in the middle of the afternoon. Probably been sleeping here at the hospital.

“You’ll have to forgive my wardrobe. I’ve been sleeping on a roll-away bed for the last three nights.”

Dude. Are you reading my mind?

“Three nights,” I say. “I hope it’s not too— I hope everything’s okay.”

“Everything’s wonderful. My wife just had a baby.”

“Oh, man. Congratulations. That’s amazing.”

“Thanks I’m a father now. Think it’s going to take a while to get used to that.”

“Can’t even imagine.”

The stranger grabs one of the less questionable-looking salads. None of the main courses look at all good to me so I settle on some mashed potatoes, mac ‘n’ cheese, and two bowls of lime Jell-O. We get in line to pay. He looks back at me.

“Don’t you want to know if it’s a boy or a girl? That’s the first question most people ask.”

Hadn’t occurred to me.

“I’m sorry. Boy or a girl?”

“Girl. Her name’s Olivia.”

“That’s very pretty. For a pretty girl, I’m sure.”

“Right now she looks like a prune with eyes, but I’m sure she’ll grow up nice.”

After paying we step out into the dining area. It’s fairly empty. A small collection of worried and exhausted diners. For many of them, I can tell the quality of the food is the last thing on their minds. I sit down at an out of the way table and my new friend sits across from me.

“You mind?” he asks. “I’d love to talk to someone about something other than babies for fifteen minutes.”

“Not at all.” I realize I haven’t talked to anyone since breakfast this morning.

“So,” he says, shoveling a forkful of greens into his mouth. “What are you doing here? Visiting someone?”

I shake my head.

“You’re a patient?”

“Want to hear something really stupid?”

“Sure, man. Stupider the better.”

“I was at the gas station across the street and decided I’d just come over here and eat lunch.”

“You did not.”

I shrug.

“You did that? Why the shit would you do that?”

I hold up a forkful of powdered mashed potatoes. “It’s a choice I regret.”

“You got a thing for hospitals?”

Who has a thing for hospitals?

“The opposite. I fucking hate them.”

“Why?”

“Seriously?” I ask. “‘Why?’ You have to ask ‘why’? This place is full of that thing. That thing that I spend most of my time pretending doesn’t exist. It’s a totally rational fear, by the way. I don’t trust people who don’t have it. Who aren’t afraid of it.”

“Of death,” he says, understanding.

“Yeah. That thing. This place is death.”

“You should come up to the maternity ward. Well, you can’t, you need one of these.” He holds up his hand to show me the blue paper ID band wrapped around his wrist. “But if you could, I’m telling you, it’s different. It looks and smells like a hospital, but the rooms are full of people taking their first breaths, not their last.”

“That’s just a sliver of this place, man,” I say. “The rest of it...”

Fuck. My sense of mortality. Go away, damn it. I’m trying to have a good day.

“Are you scared of dying or of death?” he asks, leaning in a little.

Who do you think you are, my shrink?

“Yes,” I say. “Both. All of the above.”

He smiles softly. “My great-grandmother was from Trinidad.”

Okay. That was a right turn.

“Emigrated to the U.S. when she was six. She lived through two World Wars, Civil Rights, Vietnam, Watergate, 9/11, and two Bush administrations. All that. Can you imagine seeing all that? A hundred years. That’s how old she was when she died. A hundred.”

“Holy shit.”

“Holy shit, I know. There were zero years in there where it was comfortable to be a black person in America. To us, the Sixties is a chapter in a book or a History Channel special. We think we get the gist of it in a couple hours. To her, it was *ten years* of her life. She saw things change but they must have seemed to be happening so slow to her. Ninety-four years of being a second class citizen. Funny thing is, though, is I never once heard her say a bad word about this country. She was always able to look past what people were and see what they *could* be. I think that’s how she saw America, too.”

“That’s...” I’m not sure I know what to say. “That’s amazing. How long did she— I mean, when did she die? Did she see that things got better? Well, it’s not *all* better, I know—“

“No it is not,” the stranger says, with a small smile.

“But how far did she get? When did she die?”

“2008.”

“Wow. So she passed away—“

“Just a couple years ago, yeah. February 3rd, 2008. A century in this world and you know what killed her? It wasn’t the cigarettes that she refused to quit smoking or the rum she put in her coffee every morning, claiming she was ‘honoring her Caribbean heritage.’ Which was bullshit. She just liked rum. But can you guess what actually killed her?”

“Old age?”

“Obama.”

Wait... what?

“She was living in a home. A nice place, not too far from my mom’s. The day of the inauguration, a few of us went over to watch it with her. Crammed into her little room. When we got there, she had already planted her wheelchair right in front of the TV. Made a joke about hoping her diaper would hold up because she wasn’t gonna be getting up all day. During the whole thing, especially the speech, no one was allowed to talk. She wanted it quiet. Like church quiet.

“She broke her own rule once, though. When Obama put his hand in the air and took the oath, even though that judge fucked it all up, then put it down after, and he was President, she shook her head and said ‘Now I’ve seen everything’. She was happy like the rest of us and all but I also felt like a little sad. Just something in her voice that was a little different.

“Even during the stupid walk from the Capital to the White House, she wouldn’t take her eyes off the TV. She wanted to soak in it. We were going to take her to lunch but she said ‘no’. Said she was going to watch all the news all day. Every minute of it. She wanted to hear the words over and over again. Words that in a hundred years she never thought she’d hear:

“African American President.”

He sat back in his chair. “When we left I knelt down to give her a hug. She reached up from the wheelchair and embraced me like she never had. With a strength she hadn’t had in a long time. And when she said ‘Good-bye, Brandon. I love you.’, like she always did, it had more weight to it. Like, well... like it was the last time she was going to say it.”

The guy, whose name I now know is Brandon, dabbed away some moisture from the corner of his eyes. I felt some in mine but let it stay.

“A couple of weeks later we got the call. In the middle of the night, while she was sleeping, her heart simply stopped beating. No reason given or needed. She was a hundred years old. She just died. But I knew the truth. What killed her. I heard her whisper it.”

“Now I’ve seen everything.” I say, repeating the old woman’s words.

He nods.

It’s a beautiful story and it’s taking a lot of my willpower not to start bawling, but I’m not really sure what his point is.

“My point is this,” he says.

Get out of my head, man!

“My point is: you’ll die when it’s your time. And that’s up to the Lord. He’s given you such a precious gift. Savor it. See everything you can see. Appreciate it. Kick back and enjoy the ride. When the time comes to meet your Maker, you’ll be okay. You’ll be at peace. And you’ll know. You’ll know it’s just your time.”

“What if I don’t believe in the Maker?” I ask.

“Don’t worry,” my new buddy Brandon says. “He still believes in you.”

I see the lights of Tulsa. I don’t have much I want to see here other than a motel bed. Which is good because in the dark I have no idea what the place looks like, although I do pass through some neighborhoods where that might be a blessing.

I check into a Red Roof Inn just off the freeway. Get a non-smoking single for under sixty bucks. I don’t mind smoke, tobacco or any other kind, but a smoking room has a smell and a feel and an overall air of unhealthiness that I just can’t stand. My apartment always smells like weed and it doesn’t bother me one bit, but the exhalations of a thousand cigarette smokers (and I don’t mind a nice cigarette now and again) permeated, melded, and encrusted into walls and furniture of a tiny motel room is an altogether different animal and if I have to sleep in one I without fail wake up unrefreshed and convinced I have contracted a terminal case of black lung.

The guy at the desk gives me the keycard and the Wi-Fi password and tells me to pull my car around back to where the rooms are. I’m in 227, second floor.

I toss my backpack onto the bed. The room is fine. Bed. Desk. TV. Chair. Bathroom. The shower looks a little small, but not too bad.

“Fuck yes,” I whisper to myself like an idiot. But I can’t help it. The bathroom doesn’t have a fan so instead, probably six feet from the floor, there’s a little window that leads to the outside. It is covered with mesh, but I can definitely reach it. There’s even a little ledge below it. No smoking behind the dumpster for old Jonah tonight; tonight, he’s toking in the bathroom and exhaling it out a tiny screened window. He won’t even have to put on pants.

Shit, I slipped into third person again.

And I’m aware that I just ranted about how much I had to have a non-smoking room and now I’m excited I can smoke in it.

Weed is just different, okay, because—

Because—

It just is.

I check my phone; it’s past ten. I’m hungry again. Not surprising, considering the only thing I

was able to stomach at the hospital was the Jell-O. I saw a couple places to eat on this strip when I got off the interstate.

I leave the room and walk back out to the front of the motel. It shares a parking lot with the Outback Steak House next to it and the Outback shares its parking lot with the Applebee's on the other side. Past that I see a Kia dealership and, across seven lanes of traffic from it, a Jack in the Box. I don't want to spend a lot of money but I don't want to feel sick either. I pick the lesser of three evils and walk to Applebee's.

I'm exhausted but it doesn't bother me. It feels good. It's the kind of tired that is earned. A tired that I know will make hitting the bed when I get back to the hotel a beautiful experience. A tired that will let me fall asleep without struggle, maybe without the need for intoxicants, and keep me there deep and for a long time.

Even my fatigue is in a good mood today. I wish I could save the settings on Today's Jonah so I could reload them on the days that aren't so sparkly.

I come into Applebee's and it's an Applebee's. There's the faint odor of stale beer and onion rings. There are a few people at the bar watching a college basketball game. One teenage couple sits in a booth, obviously on a first date. In the back corner is a perfect nuclear family. Both of the kids are under ten. None of them look like they're enjoying themselves.

The hostess tells me to sit anywhere. I sit at a two-person table without a view of the TV.

I don't look at the menu. I know what I want.

This place is kind of boring and kind of depressing.

My waitress, on the other hand, is neither, at least not at a glance. Tall and slender with shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair. Freckles on her cheeks and probably some in more tantalizing places. Cute button nose with a tiny stud through the right side. Older, maybe twenty-five, twenty-six. The black Applebee's polo, jeans, and apron aren't quite unflattering enough to hide her overall hotness, even if the slight slouch in her shoulders tells me she doesn't quite realize that.

When she gets to my table she gives me what I think is a second look, although I'm so punchy fuck tired that I probably imagined it.

"Good evening," she says with a well-practiced smile.

"Hey," I say. "I'll take the—"

"Where are you coming from?" she asks.

"Excuse me?"

"This place only gets locals and travelers and you aren't local."

"No, I'm not."

"Which way you headed?"

“West.”

“From?”

“New York.”

For a beat she looks like she’s seen a ghost, then says something quietly to herself:

“I knew it.”

“Knew what?” I ask.

“This is going to sound stupid. Promise you won’t think it’s stupid.”

I don’t answer. I can’t tell the future.

“Last week we went out for Chinese food, me and my girlfriend Faye, and we got fortune cookies.”

At a Chinese restaurant? The heck you say!

“Faye’s said something about work or money or something, I don’t know. But mine said ‘A stranger from an exotic land will change your life’.”

“And did it happen?”

“I think it just did.”

“Me?”

“Duh.”

“That’s really stupid.”

“You promised—“

“No I didn’t. Besides, New York isn’t exotic. It’s just loud.”

“I’ve never been out of Oklahoma except to go to Disneyland when I was ten and Spring Break one year down in Galveston. Have you looked around Tulsa?”

I shake my head. “Only been here an hour.”

“I know New York isn’t Japan or the Bahamas or something but compared to around here, it’s exotic. Might as well be Mars.”

“If that’s the case,” I lean forward a little, making sure to keep eye contact with her. “How am I going to change your life?”

“No idea. Maybe I’ll run away with you. Where you headed?”

“Phoenix.”

Her nose scrunches up. Apparently Arizona is not exotic.

“Do you plan on leaving a lottery ticket as a tip that turn out to win the Powerball?”

“No,” I say, smiling. “I don’t live in a romantic comedy.”

“Then we’ll just have to see.” She looks at the order pad in her hand and reacts like didn’t know it was there. “Shit. You probably want to order.”

“Chicken fingers and fries,” I say. It’s the most filling cheap and edible thing at any Applebee’s.

“Anything to drink?” she asks. “Beer? Cocktail?”

“I would love a beer,” I say. “But the law says I’m a bit too young for it.”

She shakes her head, ever briefly, almost unnoticeably. Winces just a little. “How too young?”

I make a little gap with my fingers. “Just a bit.”

“What else are you too young for?”

“Not much. Renting a car. Running for President. Senior citizen discounts.”

That seems to relax her. Which is good. This is good. I play this right and my really good day will get a thousand times better. “A lemonade will be fine.”

“If you were a bit older, and allowed to order a beer, what kind of beer would you want?”

“If I were a bit older, I’d probably like a Stella.”

“We don’t have that.”

“I’d probably like a Heineken.”

“Chicken fingers, fries, and *not* a Heineken.”

“Thank you...” I read her name tag. “Reagan.”

She smiles and walks off. I watch after her. She looks back over her shoulder, her strawberry hair flipping over her shoulder, and catches me. I don’t turn away. She sticks her tongue at me like a little kid and disappears into the kitchen.

My plan was to go back to the room, get high, jerk off to a selection from the porn collection on my P.O.S. netbook, and pass out. But this woman is totally flirting with me and having an actual human woman in the room would definitely be better.

My hopes for romance start to fade, though, as the night progresses. She remains friendly, but no friendlier than any other decent waitress. The beer is good. The chicken fingers edible. The fries a little cold. She fills up my water glass a few times, gives me a few smiles, and that’s it.

Did I do something wrong or totally misread that?

No way I misread that.

She brings me the check. I give her my Visa and wait for her to come back.

I need to make my move.

She comes back with the credit card receipt. I sign, leaving her a generous tip, then look up at her. “Do you have a break anytime soon?”

She smiles. “No. Why?”

“I was going to see if you wanted to sneak out back and smoke a joint. If that’s something you’re interested in. Something you do.”

“I can’t. Sorry.”

“Too bad,” I say.

“Is it good stuff?”

“Very.”

She grimaces. “I wish I could.”

Oh well. Was worth a—

“I’m out of here at midnight. Where are you staying?”

Never count a good man down.

“The Red Roof Inn.”

“The one right next door?”

“Yup. Lap of luxury.”

She kneels down, one knee on the floor, so she can look me in the eye. I stare right back.

“What room?” she whispers, switching her voice into full-on sexy mode.

“That’s a good question.”

I can feel her rolling her eyes at me while I dig into my wallet and get out my motel key.

“227,” I say. “Will I see you there?”

“Probably not,” she says, picking up my signed bill. “But you never know.”

By the time I get back to the motel I have convinced myself that I am not getting laid tonight. And that’s okay. It was a great day anyway. I felt great. Made a plan for improving my life. Met a new father in a hospital cafeteria that told me a beautiful story. Drove from Dayton to Tulsa without incident or accident. Flirted with a beautiful girl. Now I’m going to get high, masturbate, and pass out very, very hard.

A very good day.

Could have been better though...

I change into a tank top and a pair of basketball shorts to sleep in, go into the bathroom, light up a joint, take three or four good tokes, and blow the smoke out the little screened window. That should be enough to get me to sleep. I tamp the spliff out in the sink and put what’s left back into my cigarette pack.

I plop onto the bed and grab the remote control. Turn on the TV.

My netbook’s in my backpack, over there in the chair. Half the hard drive is porn. As the pot takes over my body I’m going to get horny. I know I am.

What time is it?

11:15.

So if she gets off at midnight, figure five minutes to get her stuff, less than five to walk here, she should be here by 12.10. We’ll call it 12:15.

Okay. If she’s not here by 12:15 I’ll get out the netbook and take care of business.

“She’s not going to come,” I say out loud for some reason. I think I just wanted me to hear the

words. Not get my hopes up.

I turn on the TV and find *The Dark Knight* playing on HBO. It's at the part where the Joker's about to escape. I love this chase scene coming up. With Batman's tank and the vans and the rocket launcher and shit. So good. Heath Ledger, man. What a fucking bummer, huh? All the dude wanted to do was get a good night's sleep. That's all he---

Whatthefuck!

Did I fall asleep? I think I dozed off for a minute.

Oh, shit. I missed the chase scene. Wait. We're at the end part with the boats.

What time is it?

12:30.

Well, no Reagan the waitress. Not that I expected her.

Still would have been nice.

Unless she knocked and I didn't hear. Oh, man. That would be a fucking bummer.

Worst part is I'll never know.

Damn it.

I climb out of bed, grab my netbook, and bring it back with me. I settle in under the covers while it boots up. Hmm. Which clip is going to do its job the best? What am I in the mood for? Some lesbian? Amateur? Threesome? What will get me off the fastest so I can get back to sleep?

Someone knocks at the door.

I slam the computer shut and head to the door. Through the peephole I see her.

Reagan the waitress.

I open the door and she's instantly apologetic. "Am I too late? I had this table that just *would not* leave. Plus I had to snag us these." She holds up two bottles of Heineken.

I rub my eyes clear. "You're forgiven."

She smiles. "Good. Now, you said something about weed?"

We go into the bathroom and I relight the joint from earlier as she opens the beers. I give her the first puffs. I'm already faded and don't want to get too far gone.

We do what two people who barely know each other do when they're high:

We talk.

New York. Phoenix. Tulsa. The weather. The quality of the weed. Our ages (she's 27 – takes me a minute to get that out of her). For a minute she's intrigued by the fact that I'm an actor but less so after I give her paltry resume. Did I go to school? No. Did she? Yeah. Where? Oklahoma State. For what? Business. Since she's older we grew up on different things but luckily I'm into music from all times, except for maybe turn of the 21st Century. What the fuck is a Limp Bizkit? Can you tell

me? (“I am so fucking high right now,” she says while I’m in the middle of a sentence about Linkin Park) So bands. And movies. And TV. Are you watching “Breaking Bad?” I tell her I don’t have cable. She tells me I need to get on that shit and watching “Breaking Bad.”. What it’s like to live in “nowhere” towns like Tulsa and Phoenix. That brings us back to New York and acting again for a little bit. She stops to admire the quality of the weed once again before she tells me how much she hates waiting tables and that she has a degree but that the job market right now is so tough she hasn’t found anything and that it’s all the fault of “that motherfucker Obama.”

Whoa. Okay...

“Things will be so much better after 2012 when we get him out of office. Everybody hates him. Everybody, you know? There’s no way he’s going to get reelected. I don’t know one person who’s going to vote for him, even some that did the first time. Any Republican will be able to beat him. I just hope the country survives another two years.”

She stops and gives me a sweet stoned smile. “Sorry. You live in New York so there’s a good chance you’re a big ole lib but it just boils my blood. The thought of that...” She searches her brain for the right words “...fascist socialist sitting in the same office once held by Ronald Reagan, it just pisses me off.”

“Is that where your name came from?” I ask, really wanting to change the topic. I don’t know shit about politics but I do know the President isn’t a fascist. I kind of like the guy. He was the first President I was old enough to vote for.

Note: don’t let her see your bumper stickers.

“No, it was my grandmother’s middle name.” She stands up and slides the shower door open. Peers inside. “I love hotel showers. The water pressure is always a gamble but you can never run out of hot water. At my place, I get seven minutes, eight tops, before shit starts to get cold. And when it gets cold, it gets cold fast. But at a hotel, you can shower forever. As hot and as long as you can take it. I think my record was an hour and a half. And, the best part, it doesn’t go on your water bill.”

Well, it did change the subject. Now, to alter course once again into something sexy...

“This is going to sound really stupid, but can I use your shower?” she asks.

Never mind. Course set.

“I just off a six hour shift. I feel disgusting and smell like stale beer and onion rings.”

So you smell like an Applebee’s.

“I would love to rinse off. Just five minutes. In and out. Just to feel clean.”

“Sure,” I shrug. “I don’t see why not. I haven’t used any of the towels so grab whatever one you want.”

I wait a few beats for her to invite me to join while I think she waits for me to invite myself.

Our game of sexual chicken ends in a draw and I retreat back into the room, shutting the door behind me.

Am I getting laid tonight or not? I can't tell.

The water starts to run.

She's getting naked in there right now.

Right now. Stripping down to her bra. Her underwear. Then to nothing.

Right on the other side of that door.

I could probably just strip down, go into the bathroom, join her in the shower, and get everything moving.

But I can't. I'm not built that way.

Am I getting laid tonight or not?

If not, it'll probably be my fault.

Instead of being aggressive and sexy I sit on the edge of the bed and grab the remote. Start flipping channels. CNN. Infomercial. "Seinfeld" rerun. Late night talk show. Another infomercial. "Aqua Teen".

I drain the last of my beer and stop on Turner Classic Movies. They're playing a black and white detective movie from the thirties or forties or something. Starring a wise-cracking husband and wife duo. The picture doesn't look very good, especially not on this shitty TV but pretty soon I'm caught up in the mystery and wanting to see what happens next.

"I'm a hero. I was shot twice in the Tribune."

"I read where you were shot 5 times in the tabloids."

"It's not true. He didn't come anywhere near my tabloids."

They could make jokes like that back then?

Five minutes later I barely notice that the water shuts off. I do notice, however, when Reagan comes out of the bathroom, her hair still wet, wearing only a towel.

Shit. I think I am totally getting—

"What are we watching?"

I try to act casual and shrug. "Just some old movie."

"Pretty girl."

"Yes. She's a very nice type."

"You got types?"

"Only you, darling. Lanky brunettes with wicked jaws."

She sits down next to me on the bed. She smells like motel soap, which is way better than onion rings. Her bare shoulders and neck are full of freckles, with no indication that they fade as

they go farther south.

She takes the remote from me and tosses it onto the chair in the corner.

“So,” she says. “Are you going to change my life or what?”

“I’ll give it my best shot,” I say as I lean in and kiss her. She kisses back, more forcefully. Her mouth tastes like ash but I’m sure mine does too. The tongues come out quickly. Her hand is on my knee, working its way up. I put my arm around her, holding her by the small of her back. We make out like that for a minute, maybe two, then grabs her towel and lets the top half drop.

Fuck. Freckles everywhere...

I want to count them one at a time.

With my tongue.

“I don’t like crooks. And if I did like ‘em, I wouldn’t like crooks that are stool pigeons. And if I did like crooks that are stool pigeons, I still wouldn’t like you.”

While my hand caresses her chest, she bites at my neck. Whispers in my ear:

“You have a condom?”

I nod. Brought a whole box.

I’m an optimist.

She puts her hand up my shirt and lightly claws at my chest. I put a hand on her knee and start sliding it up under the towel—

Shit.

I don’t want to—

This doesn’t feel—

Shut the fuck up, Moreno. Sex. Free, out of town, both-parties-know-this-doesn’t-mean-shit guilt-free sex! Tits and kissing and if you’re lucky a blow job.

But I’m not feeling the—

And the freckles!

When I’m with someone I want to feel this, I don’t know, energy, I guess.

Some sort of connection. It doesn’t have to be love. Doesn’t have to be from the heavens. Just needs to be real. Tangible. Even with that girl Cora, that goth girl Cora with the tats and piercings and long-faded cutting scars and the legs (*oh those legs*), even with her I had felt it. With her there was passion, fire, even though I’m not even sure we like each other that much. But there was definitely energy between us, a chemical reaction that moved our molecules to do all sorts of horribly wonderful things to each other.

Oh those fucking legs.

This isn’t passion. It’s mechanical. It’s biological. It’s two lonely people wanting to get laid on a Friday night. But when I’m with someone, even an Applebee’s waitress from Tulsa in a shitty

hotel room, I want my body to shake, to hum, to—

“I can’t do this,” I say.

“Sure you can,” she says and squeezes her legs together, trapping my hand under the towel.

“This is me give you consent.”

“I’m just not feeling it.”

She grabs my crotch through my shorts. “I think you are.”

“That’s not what I mean, I…” I pause for a second while she rubs me. I’m definitely feeling that. I want her to keep going but I take her hand off and put it on her own leg. “I want to stop.”

“You’re being stupid,” she says, not quite believing me just yet.

I really am stupid. So so stupid.

Did I mention the freckles?

“I don’t want to,” I say firmly, pushing away, putting some distance between us.

“What is wrong with you?”

So, so many things.

“Look,” I say. “This just doesn’t feel right to me. I don’t feel any connection. Here. Between us. You’re super fucking hot and I could really use some— But I just… It isn’t working for me. Do you feel anything? Tell me, honestly, do you feel any connection between us?”

“I just wanted to fuck.”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “Me too.”

We spend the next few minutes in excruciating awkwardness as she goes into the bathroom and changes back into her uniform. Only the TV is making any noise. The black and white (and long-dead) actors are still bantering:

“Now how did you ever remember me?”

“Oh, you used to fascinate me. A real live detective. You used to tell me the most wonderful stories. Were they true?”

“Probably not.”

I sit on the bed the whole time, afraid to move, my hard-on still visible through my shorts. She doesn’t say a word as she reaches for the door.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Fuck you,” she says, gives me the appropriate hand gesture, and slams the door behind her.

Started the day exhilarated and fearless. Ending it alone, exhausted, and with self-inflicted blue balls. Yeah, that sounds about right.

I feel like a tool. I feel like a moron. I feel like I should chase after her but I know it’s too late and I know it would be the same anyway. She’s a nice enough girl, but she doesn’t make my skin buzz, crackle, burn. She doesn’t make me—

My netbook is sitting on the desk. I go over and get it. Open it up. Press the power button to wake it up. "I guess it's just you and me tonight, my dear," I say.

We climb under the covers together.

TO BE CONTINUED IN PART FOUR:

THE COUSIN OF DEATH

COMING SOON(ISH)

DAKOTA SKYE: THE NOVEL

MYNAMEISDAKTOASKYE.COM

MY NAME IS DAKOTA SKYE. I'm seventeen years old, only medium-cute, and I have a superpower.

I can't fly. I can't walk through walls or turn invisible or shoot beams out of my eyes or climb walls or control metal or stop bullets with my chest or call down lightning to smite my foes.

Although being able to do any of those things would kick all sorts of ass.

I don't have X-Ray vision either. Well, not exactly.

Fact is, I am incapable of being lied to.

When someone tells a lie, any lie, to me, to anyone around me, I know the truth, what they really mean. I cut through bullshit like a Cuban through sugarcane.

There are no lies in my world. Or there are nothing but.

It's kind of hard to explain.

In a way it's like movies from other countries. Somebody says something in jibberish like "*Voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir*" and at the bottom of the screen it says...

I don't know what it says. I'm taking Spanish.

It's not really like that, though. I don't see words floating in the air. It's not visual; it's visceral. I hear what people say to me, I do, but deep down, for some reason or another, I just know the truth.

Again, hard to explain. I'm doing my best.

And, no, I'm not crazy and I don't do any drugs. Not unless you count the second-hand pot smoke that seeps out of my second-hand boyfriend's second-hand wardrobe.

I've been this way since, well, ever. I remember a fake Target-bought Christmas tree. A chipped ceramic Big Bird ornament that was my mom's growing up, hiding deep in the plastic pine needles behind more elegant bulbs and baubles. Red and green twinkling lights. Stockings, presents.

I had just turned six the past September.

A man came into the room in red with white frills. A silly elf hat, black boots, a fake cotton beard. A pillow awkwardly simulating a bowl full of jelly. I looked up at him, knowing I was supposed to be in awe, full of holiday spirit, but instead I asked:

"Who are you?"

The man turned his head quizzically, looked at my mom, and then got down on one knee.

"It's me, Santa Claus!" he said, trying to sound jolly.

"It's me, Dad." he meant, the truth exploding in my head like the worst of migraines.

"Liar!" I screamed and ran from the room. This was before I knew to hide my gift, my curse, my ailment, whatever it is. (Most days it's all three.) All I knew was that my dad was lying to me and there was probably no such thing as Santa Claus.

A white lie. An innocent lie. A lie meant to brighten the morning of a little girl, a girl who had already shown signs of melancholy, reclusiveness and anger. But a lie nonetheless. And back then I had no concept of scale.

In the fourth grade we had a history teacher who stuck to the book. The lying, whitewashing, written by the victors book. My best friend Beth would scribble furiously in her notebook, channeling the lecture like a demonic stenographer. Even then she was prepping for college. If you ever meet her mother, you would understand why. But still.

"Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492. He was a great explorer and probably the first great figure in the history of our country."

"Christopher Columbus stumbled onto America in 1492. No one knows who discovered it, but good money would be on the people who were already here."

Beth got an A. I cheated off of Beth, copying the lies she had absorbed and memorized the best I could stomach, and got a C-.

When I was twelve I sat in a cold and echoing hallway, my legs tucked up under my chin. I had been in that hospital every day for two weeks and the doctors and nurses had become as familiar to me as the teachers and custodians at school.

They lied just as much.

Mom came out of his room with a tight smile on her face. Making no eye contact with anyone else, she sat down beside me. She wanted to say something, but couldn't. My mom isn't a very talkative person and, in those days, not especially brave. I had to speak first:

"Is Daddy going to be okay?" I asked.

"He's going to be just fine," she told me.

"He's going to die very soon," she meant. Although, to be fair, if you had seen the look on her face, you would have known she was lying, too. No superpower necessary.

And, in a few days, he was gone.

It's okay. Cancer. It happens.

And, sophomore year, when rich boy Caden Kennedy told me that he loved me, well, I let him take my virginity anyway. Had to go sometime. You go and find a boy that won't lie to get laid for the first time. Go ahead. I'll wait.

To the best of my knowledge, I've never been bit by a radioactive arachnid or survived a lethal dose of wayward gamma rays or injected with some sort of top-secret super-soldier serum. The only aliens in my family are my mom's parents, but they didn't come from a distant dying planet. And as weird as Oklahoma supposedly is, I don't think my dad grew up a mutant.

Um. What else do you need to know about me? Told you about my dead dad. I'm an only child, thank God. My mom makes a lot of money and travels a lot to make a lot more. I don't mind. I love her but her quest to provide for me and her, to be both mom and dad at the same time, has taken its toll. She is not always the warmest or most pleasant person to be around. One of the most traumatizing days of my childhood, other than the dad-cancer thing, was Take Your Daughter to Work Day. Rough to hear everyone tell me how much they loved my mom when they really hated her guts. And how much they pitied me, us, for losing my father.

Oh, and I guess I should prepare you: I'm a bitch. I don't say this in any sort of empowered or proud way. I find no merit or benefit from it. But I just am. A hundred times a day my power tells me how shitty people can be. Are. What my friends think of me (that gets worse every year). Details of my mom's sex life (shudder). How little authority figures, the ones that are supposed to be teaching and molding me, actually know (zilch). And to what duplicitous lengths boys will go to for just a chance of seeing or touching a real-life boob (any).

So I'm a bitch. Most of the time, to most people, including myself. Sometimes I ascend to become a full-on c-bomb. If you can't handle that, go ahead and stop reading.

I wouldn't want to read about me either.

All of this is so hard to explain and I'm afraid I'm doing it poorly.

It comes down to this: I am involuntarily and relentlessly cursed with the truth. Something most people spend their entire lives looking for.

Lucky me.