

*The Phantom of the Urethra*  
*and Other Stories*

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## Death Comes to Kingsley

I have read that most rifles, and even some handguns, including Dirty Harry's trusted .44 Magnum Smith and Wesson Model 29, fire supersonic bullets. Since the bullet travels faster than the speed of sound, you could be dead before hearing the report of the gun that killed you, at least in theory. Such was certainly not the case with my .175 Daisy air rifle, which fired copper BBs and lead pellets at a maximum velocity of 750 feet per second (the speed of sound is approximately 1125 fps) and did not even pretend to have real killing power; the packaging advertised the gun for target shooting and "pest control," rather than the "small game hunting" capability boasted by higher-end models. Their boxes sported silhouettes of squirrels, starlings, and rather underfed woodchucks, leading me to believe that the largest game I could hope to bag would be creatures you would be dismayed, though not entirely surprised, to find scurrying through your house.

I imagined my mother calling from the kitchen: "Oh damn, there goes another one. Dylan! You'd better get your mouse-shooter. Plink him before he makes it under the hole in the weather-stripping." Or my father, from the basement woodshop, upon the discovery of one of my trophies, letting out a low whistle and remarking, "Poor roach never stood a chance. Kid shot him clean through the carapace. Stopped him dead in his six-legged tracks."

My cat took care of any mice that had the misfortune of entering the Orr household, and dutifully dropped them on the foyer mat as a display of his worth. As for cockroaches, I was privileged enough that for a number of years I remained under the impression that they were exotic vermin that existed only outside of the immaculate sphere of cleanliness that is the United States. The first roach I encountered was a sad specimen floating in a sink of the boy's bathroom of Franklin Elementary School. I assured all my friends that it could not possibly be such a low,

vile insect, not in our bathroom, and that it was most assuredly some other, less insidious species of rust-brown beetle. Even if they had been a clear and present danger to my home, cockroaches can survive nuclear fallout and decapitation-- a lone vigilante with an air rifle would hardly have dented their morale.

It was just as well that my air rifle was intended for paper targets, because when it was gifted to me for my tenth birthday, my parents outlined strict rules for its use. Both Mom and Dad all but forbade me from taking the gun outside, although on different grounds. My mother was concerned that the neighbors might see me trapesing through the yard with my trusty air rifle in hand, mistake it for a real gun, and call the police. The police would presumably arrive, weapons drawn, and since I would be preoccupied drawing a bead on the nearest pest, I would naturally mishear the officers when they asked me to drop the weapon. I would instead whirl around to ask if they could repeat themselves, at which point the trigger-happy cops would unleash a hail of gunfire, and I would go down in the style of Bonnie, Clyde, Dilinger, Baby Face Nelson, and the rest. It was not until a few years later that such context would be immediately associated with Trayvon Martin instead of Depression-era gangsters.

Our tiny street, Kingsley Road, was sandwiched between apartment complexes and car dealerships that had steadily encroached on historic Owings Mills over the past century. This isolation meant that I knew almost everyone on the street, and vice versa. As a result, my mother's worst-case scenario would have carried no weight at all with me, except that the neighbor who lived directly across from us was on the Baltimore County Police force, even if only as a school resource officer. I rarely saw him leave the house, and *certainly* never in uniform, but I didn't much feel like finding out whether brandishing my BB gun in the front yard would compel him to exercise his civic duty. Baltimore County prohibits the use of rifles outside

of gun ranges (hunters have to take on the hordes of deer with bows or shotgun slugs), and I rather doubted he would be in the mood to hear me try to excuse my use of the air rifle.

This ruled out the front yard, sure, but I argued that surely no one would take issue with me taking it out to the back yard. This was where my father's reasoning came into play. In his nihilistic vision of the Kingsley Road universe, I would be staked out in the back yard, my senses primed, my BB loaded, and my gun pressurized with the maximum ten pumps so as to enable me to utilize the full 750 feet per second promised by the packaging. After hours of carefully concealing my presence through camouflage and minimizing my movements, an unsuspecting pest would appear in my crosshairs. I would gently cradle the trigger with my index finger, relax my breathing, steady the stock with my shoulder, exhale, and let the BB fly. At the last possible second, the pest would shift positions, or my sweaty palms would make the gun slip, or in some other way the shot would completely miss my quarry. It would, however, speed past the lucky animal, past the huge beech tree that was always last to dump its leaves, past the dying dogwood trees, past the black raspberry patch that we gorged ourselves on each June, past even the replanted Christmas trees at the foot of the property and through the eye of some unfortunate child playing in the Shetland Circle apartments, finally coming to rest in his or her brain. The child would be dead before he or she hit the ground, and those same cops that gunned me down in my mother's vision would pick me up later that day on second-degree murder charges, after the ballistics unit had traced the .175 copper BB back to the Daisy air rifle belonging to one Dylan Orr of 28 Kingsley Road.

Their imaginations put *The Christmas Story* to shame, but when Dad proposed more likely possibilities, such as putting a hole in somebody's window or dog, I conceded and resigned my gun to the confines of our crowded basement, where my father repurposed an old

spray-painting booth and some foam insulation to make a BB trap. I quickly tired of static paper targets and switched to empty aluminum cans, which at least tipped over when you plinked them in the right spots. When I got bored with shooting holes through the soft drink logos on their sides, I tipped the cans on their side and practiced shooting the pull-tabs off them.

To add some variety, Dad brought home a metal three-sided trap from a thrift store or deceased relative's house that had small, metal animal figurines that could be set up and shot over, similar to the games you sometimes see in county fairs in movies. On the back wall of said trap were stenciled yellow letters which read “.22 CALIBER ONLY.” We figured that it was intended as a warning against using larger calibers which might puncture the back wall of the trap, so I would be fine using a .175 air rifle.

Shortly after I began gunning down the little metal figurines, one of my shots missed the miniature duck I had been aiming for. As I drew back the bolt to reload, I felt something sting my arm. I thought nothing of it until it happened a second time, and this time I realized that they were BBs zinging me when I missed. Unlike traditional bullets or lead pellets (which I had run out of), the BBs did not flatten out when they hit their target, making them especially prone to ricochet back and give me a welt when they connected with the back wall of the trap. My interest waned considerably after that, and my birthday present collected dust for several years.

One misty summer evening in my teenage years, I had the sudden urge to kill something. I am not entirely sure why such violence possessed me- I wasn't even in a bad mood at the time. All the same, I slipped away from my parents, who were watching a documentary about the evolution of the American railroad in the living room, grabbed the Daisy from its rack in the basement, and slipped out the back door. I decided that 750 feet per second definitely wouldn't do for a squirrel, not at any sort of distance, but just maybe it could take down a bird. I decided

that I would try for a catbird, since they were an invasive species after all. I would be doing the native birds a favor, really.

I didn't have to wait long before a pair of grey catbirds caught my attention down near the dying dogwoods. I pumped up the gun to full power, relaxed my breathing, cradled the trigger with my index finger, and fired at one of the pair resting on a nearby post. Contrary to my father's fears, I did not miss. The BB struck the catbird's breast, and it fluttered its wings reflexively as it was knocked off balance. One foot clung tenaciously to the fencepost.

My hypothesis was only partially true. The BB was powerful enough to immobilize the bird, but it was still very much alive. I reloaded, pumped up the gun, lightly rested the barrel against the wounded bird's head, and fired again.

I cradled the dead catbird in one hand and studied its plumage. Catbirds look completely grey from afar, but up close you can see blues, whites, and even hues of indigo in their feathers. The body was still hot. With the other hand I Googled the grey catbird, and my heart sank as I read the words "...native to the East Coast of North America" in its Wikipedia entry. My mother had been worried I might die like a gangster, but here I was echoing the lives of Cortez, Pizarro, and Custer instead.

I laid the body in the nearest clump of woods and tried to console myself with thoughts of the Circle of Life. If nothing else, a fox would have its next meal on me. As I walked back to the house, I realized that at 750fps, the catbird most certainly would have heard the distinctive *Bwak* of the air rifle, even if I had killed it with a single shot. What a stupid sound to be the last you hear.

## **A First Rate First Mate**

The Boy Scouts of America is not an organization renowned for promoting fun. The recruitment posters and popcorn boxes boast boys who sport toothy smiles and haircuts that look adorable rather than gawky, pictured in the middle of an activity that promotes the outdoors, inclusion, service, or any combination of the above. The cover of my Boy Scout Handbook compiled several such scenes in a tableau that was an unsettling combination of real boys superimposed over a computer-generated campground. Here, a multiracial cadre of boys sets off on a hike into the pixelated distance. Above them, a Scoutmaster and another adult—two registered adults over the age of twenty-one are required to oversee all BSA activities, a rule with a name that always conjures up the exact opposite of its purpose in my mind: “Two-Deep Leadership”—instructs another group in setting up a tent composed of physics-defying graphics. Somewhere between them on the page, a wheelchair-bound scout and his friend fish for digital bluegills in a too-blue pond. All of them are smiling as if their lives depend on it.

That last image of the scout in the wheelchair always struck me as a bit cruel. Sure, he was happy enough to fish with his buddy, but then again, did he really have a choice? The hike was straight out, and at least half of pitching a tent is scrambling around on your hands and knees trying to secure fiberglass poles determined to spring up into your eye. I suppose he could have joined the canoeing contingent on the back cover, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that without the physical component, scouting is really just extra school. It takes a brave boy to sit through a discussion of the pros and cons of goose-down versus synthetic sleeping bags, followed by a lecture on the perils of cotton clothing, when he knows that he will be resigned once again to guarding the jail during the ensuing game of Capture the Flag.

Capture the Flag became the default game after our troop meetings because it involved about as much touching as BSA would tolerate: a light tap above the waist. I had not minded so much when the no-contact-sports rule broke up “Smear the Deer,” the improvised politically correct name for a game that had long been a weekly staple, but all too recently expunged of its more common and homophobic title, “Smear the Queer.”

## Of Trust and Tractors

“Sure, here are the keys,” Simon said, offhandedly dropping them into my palm.

“Thanks, man!” I called back over my shoulder as I walked toward his cheery little green John Deere 210 with a morose maroon trailer hitched to its rear. I hopped onto the lemon-yellow seat while Ben hauled himself over the side of the trailer. I turned the ignition and the tractor shuddered to life. Its mechanical squeaking and groaning blended harmoniously with the cacophony of the Arcadia Steam Show.

For many years it was a tradition of Boy Scout Troop 143 to spearhead the parking of several thousand visitors who come each September to marvel and gawk at the myriad tractors, antique cars, and assorted junk that comprise this annual agricultural festival. Despite the heat and rowdy attendees, it was one of the year's most eagerly anticipated camping trips because when we completed our shifts, the wonders of the Steam Show were ours to explore. The modus operandi for sightseeing was, naturally, the tractor. They may have been called “lawn mowers” just the week before, as they performed the final cuts of the season, but at the Steam Show one rode a “tractor,” regardless of its size or intended function.

And so we went contentedly cruising down the main drag of the flea market, both of us sunburnt, dusty, and proud. After dutifully standing for hours clad in oversized fluorescent vests, waving neon orange flags at drivers who probably could have managed on their own, we were free at last. I negotiated a busy four-way intersection, pulled over, and turned to my passenger.

“You wanna drive?” I asked, suppressing a smug grin.

“Yeah!”

Ben had repeatedly asked for a chance to drive, but Simon denied him every time, citing Ben's absence of experience and the fact that, strictly speaking, it wasn't *Simon's* tractor, it was *Simon's uncle's* tractor. I was permitted to drive it only because I used the same model to cut my lawn, though my 210 looked nothing like this specimen. For a thirty-some-year-old piece of lawn equipment, Simon's uncle's 210 was immaculate. The paint was fresh and uniform, the seat was intact, and not a spot of rust could be found. Even the miniature headlights looked polished. Side-by-side with my Deere, the two tractors looked like a redneck rendition of Beauty and the Beast. Now I was smuggling him forbidden fruit.

As Ben drove us shakily onward, I slouched in the corner of the trailer, eager to play the role of the cool, easygoing buddy rather than the strict martinet. For as long as I could remember, I had always been the party-pooper, the spoilsport, the stick-in-the-mud that seemed determined not to have fun. I was the kid who colored in the lines. I was the friend who *didn't* double-dog dare you to drink whatever gross concoction had been whipped up at lunch that day. If I caught you breaking the rules, I wouldn't snitch on you; I'd tell you to knock it off myself. It was tiresome being the enforcer, and I was trying my best to erase that tiresome reputation.

I let my eyes lazily drift over the mess of old and new junk populating the tables to our left as the tractor trundled toward the tents, but my daydreaming was dashed by a violent jolt that nearly threw me from the trailer. The John Deere was immaculate no longer. Neither was the black pickup truck it had T-boned. Several maxims can be gleaned from this story. "Teach before you test", "Do not loan what you do not own", and "Look out for parked F-150s" all strike me as worthy morals, but the three words which first came to my mind when I staggered out of the

trailer that sunny September afternoon were “don’t do stupid,” our scoutmaster’s credo. If only it was that simple.

## The Phantom of the Urethra

When the burning in my penis began, I blamed it on the movie. It was around eleven o'clock on a Thursday night during the spring semester of my freshman year of college, and my roommate had requested to spend some time alone with his girlfriend in our dorm room. I had scuttled off to the floor lounge (this was in the days when the University of Maryland still had such things, before the housing crisis, during which the administration papered over their glass facades and furnished them with two beds, two wardrobes on wheels, and two luckless freshman), and settled in on a couch that smelled vaguely of stale cookies. Having no classes on Fridays, I cracked open my laptop to see if Amazon Prime had any movies that merited anything over 50% on Rotten Tomatoes.

I settled on *Silence* because I had seen Adam Driver and Liam Neeson in the trailer and it was directed by Martin Scorsese. Having now seen the entire film, I believe I am doing a service rather than a spoiler to those who have not when I say that you see about as much of both Driver and Neeson in the trailer as in the movie's interminable two hours and forty-one minutes. Watching *Silence* for Liam Neeson's character especially is analogous to watching *Saving Private Ryan* for Private Ryan. What you will get are minutes of internal monologue from an emaciated and disheveled Portuguese missionary (Andrew Garfield), interrupted by stretches of—you guessed it—silence. Or by the cries of seventeenth-century Japanese Christian villagers being graphically tortured or killed by inquisitors, as was the case when my genitals launched their rebellion.

Onscreen, an unfortunate family of Christians had just been wrapped up like burritos in bamboo mats and set ablaze after refusing to renounce their religion. Simultaneously, I felt like a

fire had been ignited in my urethra. Seeing human beings burned to death can have that kind of visceral effect, I told myself, just as some people gag empathically when another person loses her lunch. Yet my inner flame only intensified after the hapless hamlet-folk had been barbecued beyond recognition. As Garfield returned to his crisis of faith and asked God what these Japanese had done to deserve such an odious end, I asked myself what I had done to deserve such a conversation-arresting symptom.

If you tell someone, “I have a stuffy nose,” a thoughtful person might offer you Mucinex and a tissue or make polite inquiries about seasonal allergies. “My penis feels like the nozzle on a propane torch,” is not something a friend should offer to help you with. Worse still are the questions it conjures in the mind of the listener: Did he miss sex ed the day they discussed chlamydia? Has he been wiping with that dreadful single-ply toilet paper native to public restrooms? Has he been going commando in jeans? Did I ever shake this person’s hand after he used the bathroom?

I decided the only person I trusted with this information was my on-duty NSA agent, so I turned to the Internet for answers. Various resources suggested that I could be suffering from renal failure, kidney stones, or ill-fitting condoms, but the only malady that seemed truly plausible was the urinary tract infection (UTI), an umbrella term for any nasty bacterium that has crawled up into your urethra, ureters, bladder, or kidney to set up shop. I began sipping water in hopes of flushing the intruder from my person. As soon as I felt I could pass urine, I stalked across the hall to the nearest bathroom and muttered my best imitation of an exorcism as battery acid that had somehow made its way into my bladder escaped into the urinal. Was my urine cloudy? Confirmation bias be damned, it was definitely cloudy.

It was going on midnight. The university health center was closed, but I could still make it to the dining hall if I hurried. I stuffed my laptop into my backpack and walked from the warmth of Anne Arundel Hall for the breezy November night air. I had initially gone to the lounge equipped only for a couple hours relaxing while watching a movie, so I lacked any form of outerwear as I shivered my way toward the only surefire antidote I knew: cranberry juice. Passersby would have beheld the curious sight of a skinny nineteen-year-old hunched against the wind in a horribly insufficient sweater, clenching his legs together, muttering curses at roommates and penises and juice between his chattering teeth. By the time I arrived at the dining hall, every part of me was thoroughly chilled except for my urethra. I made a beeline for the drink machine, filled a cup with cranberry juice, gulped it down, filled it again, drank about half of that, took a break as my cheeks puckered at the sugar and tartness, and threw back the rest. For good measure, I emptied my water bottle and topped that off with Ocean Spray, too. Stomach sloshing, I dragged myself back to the dorm.

I decided to take my roommate into my confidence after he spotted the jug full of cranberry juice. When I explained that it was not for mixers but rather to quench the flames raging in my crotch, his reaction was to laugh because, as I was to discover, people tend to read the Mayo Clinic entry which says, “urinary tract infections occur mostly in women” as “urinary tract infections occur only in women.” I told him my genitals thought otherwise but I didn’t belabor the point. It was ridiculous, I thought, how quickly a person’s body could betray itself in such a peculiarly humiliating way. I set my alarm for 7:30 AM so I could wake up the next morning and stand angrily clenching my legs together when the health center opened at 8:00 the following morning.

When the alarm sounded, I found to my amazement that the pain had all but abated. More amazing still, I found that equally discomforting. Where before I was a noticeably pained person poised to prostrate myself before professionals, I now found myself in a state of awkward uncertainty, working with a bleary receptionist to determine whether or not I had insurance to cover the treatment of an illness I may or may not have had. The waiting room was blessedly empty when I made the phone call to my mother to settle the insurance issue. Revealing the symptoms of a suspected UTI to one's mother is hard enough without an audience.

Friday mornings must be understaffed in the health center, because I had the better part of half an hour to settle back into the vacant waiting area after I sorted out the insurance details with the front desk. I was relieved to see that the nurse who collected me was a man. He did not come across as thrilled to be there, but I was more than willing to bear his solemn mien for his familiarity with male equipment (I hoped, anyway). When he verbally checked the reason for my visit, he too added a question mark to the end of "urinary tract infection" that elicited a protracted "yeaaaahhh" from me in response. He half-shrugged and shook his head as if to remark, "College students, what can I say?" before taking my blood pressure. Then came the questionnaire:

"How would you rate your current pain on a scale from one to ten?"

"Uhh, well right now I'd say maybe a two—ten is most painful, right—"

"--Uh huh—"

"—but last night it was a solid eight point five."

"I see. So you're currently not displaying any symptoms?"

"Well...not really, I mean my penis still kinda hurts, I guess."

"Gotcha. Are you sexually active?"

“I wish.”

“Have you ever smoked?”

“Never tobacco.”

After several more negative replies, the nurse looked especially bewildered. His finger traced down to the bottom of his sheet.

“Do you have a family history of prostate cancer?”

The answer to that was straightforward enough.

“Yes.”

His expression was inscrutable, but I didn't care for the way he decisively checked the “Yes” box, abruptly put down his pen, and told me that somebody *else* would be with me shortly. My unease grew steadily as I waited. I hadn't elaborated to the nurse just how common prostate cancer was in my family. A maternal great-uncle of mine had recently taken it upon himself to preemptively read a book about coping with prostate cancer cover-to-cover, just so he could be prepared. It was only a matter of time, he said. The nurse left me thus, cancer on the brain, dangling my legs from the exam table.

One of the downsides to not keeping social media accounts or games on my phone is that I have absolutely nothing to do in such situations. I'm not cool enough to keep running text conversations either, so that possibility was ruled out too—unless I wanted to send Mom a fun message updating her on my potential diagnosis: “Remember how you said guys don't get UTIs? Looks like mothers know best after all...it might be cancer!” Normally I would mull over all the assignments due the coming week but finishing the final eight chapters of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for ENGL222 seemed decidedly less important now that my own eyes should seek similar supplication. Instead of turning to the heavens, however, they flitted across the exam

room. It was then that I really noticed the cats. I had seen the “Bad Cats” calendar over the nurse’s shoulder during the questionnaire, and that had seemed innocuous enough, but I now realized that felines ornamented all four walls, the desk, and even the Snellen Eye Chart taped to the door. The wall clock had ears, eyes, and a tail-shaped pendulum insouciantly whisking back and forth. A variation of the “Hang in There!” motivational poster dangled a kitten from a tree branch just over my head. A profusion of oversized pawprint decals was slapped on the cabinets and drawers, as if someone had set a Maine Coon in a tray of black paint and then spun circles across the room with a laser pointer. Beside pictures of real cats on the Pas desk sat a couple of those gauche pillows found in ambiguously themed gift shops which broadcast memorable maxims including, “No outfit is complete without cat hair!”

I have nothing against cats. On the contrary, I think they have personalities eerily similar to humans, and that is why some people despise cats. You can take a dog to a kennel for a couple week while you’re on vacation, and when you pick that animal up, it will come running, tail propelling it forward like a torpedo, to cover you with loving licks. Pull that shit with a cat, and you’ll be lucky if it hasn’t destroyed a choice piece of property. It will ultimately forgive you, but likely not after at least soundly biting the hand that feeds it. Well-treated dogs are unconditional, but well-treated cats, like well-treated humans, still reserve their right to be pissed off at you from time to time.

However, my experience with domestic cats has taught me that they generally prefer limited company, so when I see more than two or three adult cats gathered together in the same room, it feels unnatural and eerie. In my elementary and middle school days I took full advantage of my grandparents’ cable television subscription to watch anything besides PBS when I went to their house. Animal Planet consistently received rave reviews at the lunch table, making it one of

my go-to channels once I hit the couch. In my own house I loved watching *Nature*, Marty Stouffer's *Wild America*, and VHS specials about animals—I kept *Eyewitness: Reptile* and *Animals of the Alaska Zoo* on repeat. They had acclimated me to well-edited documentaries with soothing voice-overs; nothing had prepared me for Animal Planet. There were shows about people attacking animals, shows about animals attacking people, shows about people that happened to have animals in them, and shows about people looking for animals that do not exist. Even the programs which ostensibly featured only animals did everything possible to dramatize them into distinctly humanistic soap-operas. Animal Planet is a nature channel in much the same respect that Fox News is a news channel; they deliver partly what they purport to, but infused with enough fearmongering, unnecessary commentary, questionable take-aways, and straight bullshit (sometimes literal, in Animal Planet's case) to easily overshadow real information. I recognized this, but as many white male septuagenarians can attest, this is a highly addictive combination. I spent too many hours riveted to the screen by programs such as *Miami Animal Police*, *Animal Cops: Houston*, and *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*, watching emaciated animals chained in suburban backyards or cramped in squalid houses filled with festering piles of garbage, knowing full well they would supply me with nightmares for weeks to come.

Having stewed in the exam room now for over half an hour, the feline décor, coupled with anxiety about my potential diagnosis, was beginning to conjure memories of houses filled with starving cats, swarming over their dead comrades and litterboxes overflowing with literal gallons of feces to eat what little rancid kibble their obsessive owners provided. Such was my state of mind when the PA entered and greeted me:

“Hello, my sweet! My name is Julie.”

She was a short, white, middle-aged woman with glasses, but thankfully her resemblance to my stereotype of a cat-lady ended there. She seemed competent, good-humored, and clean-cut, and I was willing to bear her strangely antiquated pet names so long as she steered clear of euphemisms when discussing my genitals. Julie pored over the sheets on her clipboard and ran through some of what I had told the nurse.

“So, you’re not sexually active?”

This time I only shook my head.

“Ok, well an STD would normally be the most likely explanation for the sort of trouble you’re having. It’s really not common that we see young men with a UTI.” She scribbled a note on the clipboard before looking up with a determined smile. “But God bless America, we’ll figure this thing out! Let’s go ahead and take a look. Are you allergic to latex?”

I had expected somebody to inspect my genitals that day, but I had not expected it to be a woman. I reluctantly dropped my pants and hiked up my shirt as Julie snappily donned disposable gloves. I spend most days trying to ward off anxiety, but that morning I thanked it for stifling what would normally happen if someone fondled my balls at that hour. Julie worked silently, too, which was a welcome departure from my pediatrician’s tendency to ask about my vacation plans during such procedures. It was well-intentioned, but his inquiries only drew more attention to the sight-seeing *he* was doing.

Having found no tumors, discolored discharge, inflammation, or other pleasantries around the seldom-seen world of my groin, Julie stripped off the gloves and I went to put my underwear back on. Before my hand had even retrieved my Hanes from the floor, Julie made a rather sudden announcement:

“Oh, no, you can leave those off my sweet.”

Whatever temporary sensation of relief I had allowed myself disappeared when I saw that she was eyeing the bottom of the clipboard once more, this time with a visibly uncomfortable expression.

“Oh, I am sorry, my sweet. Have you ever had a prostate exam before? It might feel a little weird—where are those packets? —but God bless America, we’ll get it over with and have you on your way!”

Never had the full weight of the idiom “caught with his pants down” hit me until that moment. In my earlier prolonged ruminations on prostate cancer, I had anguished over thoughts about how deadly it is, how it killed Frank Zappa, and how disappointing it is to never know how many people attend your funeral, among others. Yet I had forgotten that in this age of face transplants and surgery on grapes, the primary screening test for prostate cancer is still having your health care professional stick a finger up your ass and wiggle it around. I kicked my pants off from around my feet and stoically resigned myself to the task at hand. I stood before the exam table trying to unclench my ass as Julie fumbled through every single drawer of her rolling plastic pawprint-covered supply cabinet. She was becoming noticeably flustered, as would I if some strange man’s bare ass was positioned right at my eye-level, but on the second rustle through the drawers her hand emerged holding what looked like a condom for chimpanzees. Nothing says capitalism quite like a miniature sleeve designed specifically for putting exactly one finger into someone’s anus. A glove would have worked just as well, I reckon, but I had little time to question the relative merits of latex products because Julie had already rolled the chimp condom onto her index finger and was liberally smearing it with lubricant.

A few weeks after my exam, I watched John Mulaney’s 2016 special *New in Town* with a group of friends. I was too inebriated to remember many of his bits, but during a segment titled

“The Xanax Story,” I erupted into laughter as Mulaney described his doctor knocking him down from a semi-erect posture to leaning on his elbows. Julie lowered me from my similar initial stance, but unlike Mulaney, who imagined himself gazing over the side of a cruise ship, the angle I settled in looked like I had paused midway through a push-up, making the experience all the more physically uncomfortable. With my elbows awkwardly flared to each side, I momentarily smiled to think I must look like one of those anoles or whatever variety of lizards I had watched as a youth in *Eyewitness: Reptile* performing their courtship displays, but then Julie began counting down from three. “And *relaaax*,” she said after “one,” punctuating the last prolonged syllable by sliding her finger into my anus.

“Does this hurt?” she asked, titillating my prostate, an organ of which I had heretofore completely lacked physical awareness. I responded that I wouldn’t say it *hurt*, but then again, I didn’t exactly have any previous experience to know what something shoved up my ass would feel like with a healthy prostate. Whether or not Julie recognized my hesitating inflection, she was satisfied with my answer and promptly removed the finger. She slingshotted the sleeve into the trash can and washed her hands, but she neglected to offer me a tissue, a paper towel, a wet wipe, or any suitable material to remove the excess lube which now completely coated my ass crack. There was no good way to ask, so I gingerly pulled on my briefs and khakis and eagerly snatched up the cup Julie told me I had to go fill with urine for testing, a welcome excuse to shuffle off to the bathroom. Single-ply toilet paper had never been a more welcome sight. I didn’t think twice about the logistics of peeing in the cup after the ordeal I’d just been through. On another occasion perhaps I would have been bladder-shy, but that morning I pissed with the precision of a hungry bachelor who knows his older microwave will spoil his Velveeta shells if

he undershoots or overshoots the fill-line. I thought the foam might overflow the container, but it quickly dissipated like the head on a cheap wheat beer. Like my urine, I was golden.

I dropped the cup off at the lab, picked up a prescription for some Bactrim, updated my mom, and left. My urethra felt surprisingly better, my butt felt violated, and my pride felt deflated. That afternoon I received a text from my dad, who had evidently been cued into the situation by my mom —HIPAA laws evidently do not apply to mothers. It read simply, “Heard you had a big day—virgin no more!” I could not help but laugh. Never had I imagined I would be penetrated before penetrating someone else. By the time the weekend was up my urethra had ceased troubling me, which I attributed to religiously popping my sulfa pills and abstaining from alcohol, but several days later, Julie called from the campus health center with a different conclusion:

“Your urinalysis came back completely negative. No bacteria, no ketones, nothing at all out of the usual. I don’t know what caused your symptoms, but you’re right as rain, my sweet!”

## **Douse My Fire**

One of the best parts of not using social media is that I don't feel obligated to treat every trip outside my door as a photoshoot. By default, this means that in groups I usually serve as cameraman, though certainly for convenience rather than quality's sake. I've seen people hop into friends' photographs plenty of times and know it's socially acceptable, yet still I wait for someone else to give the friendly command, "Get in there!" before I step into the frame.

Photography and I have a troubled history. At one point in my childhood, I went through a phase of not smiling

### Outline:

- Personal dislike of photos, pros and cons
- Social media requires photos, but I have none, so how should I present myself on an app like Tinder?
- Explanation of motives behind joining a dating platform
- Experience of collecting/culling photos with roommate
  - Roommate creates fake profile for testing purposes
  - Tinder-specific photoshoots
- Creating profile, difficulties of writing a bio when you're a boring person
  - Choosing order of photos
  - Settings like age and geographic range
  - Writing and revising is hard with character limits
- Initial hope at immediate likes
- First week of swiping yields no matches, mortified when I ran out of profiles within five miles without getting anything

- Commiserating with roommate
- Changing photos, revising bio
- Hope springs eternal over spring break, matches begin
- Conversations over Tinder really suck
  - Making first move, related etiquette
  - Interview-like format
  - Frustrated again
- Break from app
- Return to increased likes, begin swiping again
- The nature of Tinder profiles
- Success? Time will tell