

DAVEY
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My grandma paid me to get older. I was old enough to hold a job important enough to get her evicted, and forced into a multi-layered dwelling of unbearable, insane people. I was old enough to almost realistically own said dwelling, but still she sent money every time my birthday came. The check this time was for two hundred dollars; I got more than my brother, even though I make far more money than him, because my grandma more approved of my lifestyle, and the way I presented myself. My brother's checks ranged from twenty to thirty dollars. I'd smile with grandma every time I saw her, and affirm the job was hard, but worth it, and that I was always looking, was always on the prowl, for a girl to replace Katie. Every time the check came it was the only acknowledgement of my birthday but for my parents and brother calling. I threw the card onto the kitchen table. I flipped my laptop open. I hadn't notified anyone of my birthday since the last one I'd had with Katie; Katie'd burned me one of those rare CDs, full of music I both liked and hadn't heard before; it was maybe that she was able to burn me a CD like this that had me still feeling like I do, about her, all these years later, because I still haven't met a girl since her that could do anything like that at all. There's been only one girl since then who's burned me any kind of CD and that one was full of songs I'd mostly heard and mostly didn't like. This girl was a girl I work with who by most people's standards—by standards somehow numerically linear—was better looking than Katie, but she wasn't to me, never to me. Never to me because on that same last birthday I'd recognized socially, Katie somehow

transcended for me the feelings I'd had, always, on my birthday, that made it impossible to enjoy my birthday. The feelings of being handled with birthday gloves, or wanting to be handled with birthday gloves; of all expectations of every imaginable interpersonal interaction being colored in strange and uncomfortable ways, on my birthday. For instance the feeling I'd have on my birthday that it was a holiday, and thus feeling — when hugging friends and family and acquaintances — a hole, a hole into which only a verbal holiday greeting could fit, and then filling said hole by saying Happy Birthday, even though the person I'd say this to was never experiencing their birthday; I was. I was experiencing it in nervy ways like this except when on that one last birthday I'd recognize socially, Katie gave me that CD and we made out, listening to the CD; made out, innocently, like we were still in high school, and making out was still a fresh thing to do, and we hadn't done all sorts of things sexually complex since then to try to recreate the feeling we got, miraculously, making out to this CD. And then she threw me a surprise birthday party. And made sure I was able to indulge all the fetal impulses I felt that birthday and, in fact, I'd argue, myself and everyone feels every birthday. She made sure I was able to just sit down and be surrounded by smilers and not bothered and given alcohol so good it didn't taste like alcohol, rubbing my back and shoulders, most of this time. Fully indulging those fetal birthday impulses, that's the only way to deal with them, it seems; she made it so I didn't even have to make decisions, decisions those destroyers of the abyss-like infinitude of possibility we carry with us, in some part of us, every moment; she made it so that on that birthday, I never had to be that destroyer. That wouldn't be happening this birthday, though, because this birthday I'd just be working. I thought maybe the girl at work who made the mediocre CD could indulge my fetal birthday impulses, impulses made no less present by my ignoring my birthday, it turned out, and I felt a bit warm and

like there was still maybe something good in life, but then I realized I didn't want her to indulge them; I only wanted Katie to indulge them. I only wanted Katie as I looked to the laptop screen at the listings for more open rooms; I had to leave this apartment where mine and Katie's love was practically smeared on the walls; I had to leave even though I still only wanted Katie. I thought maybe the girl at work could come to my new place like Katie did to this one; that we could conceptually smear things on the walls there. Even if it was just sexual. I knew it was terrible to just have intercourse with someone, though; this was terrible. If the sex isn't meaningful, it's completely terrible for me—I knew this because of what had happened, the previous week, with the girl I met on the internet. After she put her hand on my shoulder, as I sat on the kitchen floor, the girl from the internet, my date, leaned in and started kissing me. Started making out with me, and since it was when I was last with Katie that I'd kissed anyone, I'd worried deeply that when a moment like this came I'd perform incompetently in it, but these worries were pointless. These worries were pointless because nothing is more natural than pressing lips together. It was natural when my date did this; natural, not good. She was overzealous and downright slobbery, she moved too quickly to tongues, and then to the neck and such. I had no heart to stop her and I also thought, in part of me—the part of me full of the voices of my friends; my friends with their numerically linear approaches to females and loving them—thought in part of me. This is good for me, I need this. I stood from the floor, and my date practically pinned me to the wall the way she was kissing me. The way she was slobbering on me. I gradually nudged her as she slobbered, nudged her to get her to my bedroom, which I thought—I thought wrong—would be good because there I could let her exhaust herself of the slobbering and there, I thought, we could both fall asleep. But in the bed she didn't want to sleep, she wanted to remove all her clothes, remove all my clothes. We removed clothes

poorly and slowly as she slobbered; I slobbered, too, but only to make her feel like her slobbering was okay and normal; I didn't enjoy this. I wanted to go to sleep. I wanted to say: Don't you ever get tired of this? I heard a siren wail by, on the street outside, and said: They're coming to get us! But my date didn't register this joke, didn't acknowledge it. Katie would've loved this joke. Instead my date moved her head down toward my waist, took off my underwear—I'd been nudging her slightly, pushing her shoulder, in fact, to do this, because I figured there had to be some endpoint to all this, but I didn't want it to be intercourse. I didn't want her to perform orally on me, either, but there'd need to be an endpoint, and this seemed like a drastically less intimate endpoint; I didn't want her to be intimate with me, not at all. I was barely erect as she put her mouth around my member and then got even less erect. Even less erect, I thought, because of the tattoo on her back. It was a tattoo of some type of dragon, it seemed; it was the kind of tattoo you'd see far too many times at those unbearable drove-ridden beaches, mere unfortunate miles from my apartment. Human skin, the most perfect and desirous thing there could ever possibly ever be to other humans; why would anyone maim the perfection of having flesh—mar it with tasteless, abominable permanent ink? There was this de-erecting my member, and her shoes, her platform shoes she didn't even wear now but I still had to think about; even in her bare feet I had to think about this asinine footwear. That's how asinine it was. I raised her head back up to reasonable making out level, pretending to be decent, or chivalrous, or something along these lines, about my flaccidity. Pretending maybe it was my own sexual problems instead of her dragon tattoo and asinine footwear that led to my de-erection. She continued to slobber. She even bit me some as she moved back down to my neck. Stop biting me, I said, I thought gently, but now I realize I probably didn't say it gently; I can't stand when people bite me. I can't stand when people own each other naked so readily.

With Katie owning each other naked was a struggle: there was a battle of multiple months against her will and against mine to be able to do something like this. We were protecting ourselves from a thing like this for months, because there need be challenge in things. My date didn't seem to think so. She was destroying my sense of infinitude so very maliciously every time she bit me or slobbered on me like I was a popsicle; she was destroying that sense of infinitude Katie and I'd whittled over years into something fucking perfect. This episode with the internet girl was so ugly and imperfect that it made me want to leave this apartment more than ever, on my birthday in the morning at my kitchen table. But the open room listings were bad, all so bad. I knew I needed to live with people and no longer alone, but not with girls, because with girls I felt too worried I'd carry all the weight of my fetal impulses, and the weight of my expectation of any inter-dwelling girls to indulge those impulses in the way that Katie did. And they'd most likely wear asinine footwear, which I couldn't fathom being able to handle. So I'd have to live with boys—men, really, given my age and the age of those I'd consider living with. But it was hard to call anyone a man when they mentioned their fondness for video games in a posting aimed toward contractual agreement of inter-dwelling habitation. Or who mentioned his fondness for alcohol, or mainstream films—almost wholly unacceptable films—or his propensity away from utter cleanliness. These things all seemed like things borne of boys, things borne not of men. Things that shouldn't ever but often did coincide with salary levels high enough to pay rent in excessively comfortable dwellings in comfortable, relevant sections of relevant American cities. Things concurrent with dragon tattoos. My grandma called and I told her the things I always told her when I called. My brother called and I told him the same things, really, but in a different tone. In a tone that pointlessly belied the facts and themes it relayed; a tone of effective low-level humor that often gets me through

conversations. A tone which suggests there could ever be anything ironic about going to work to get paid to pay rent and live and eat normally and potentially provide for a girl who could fill the hole left by Katie, the hole into which my fetal impulses sank unrequited, this sinking far worse and far more significant than my gut's fallout from the incident the previous week with the internet girl—this is all I wanted in life: to fill this hole. But more specifically I wanted Katie, and there is no irony to this. Not to me, not anymore: I'd changed a lot since the things I thought and said that made it all end with Katie, mostly from the still-hurt of absent Katie. That still-hurt shaped and changed me every day. Made my mind and self conclude and float and wallow so much differently. I'd even changed much from the still-sink of my gut from the episode with the internet girl; it's impossible to avoid being that destroyer of infinitude, impossible not to make decisions, in any way, that narrow your existence amorphously, every day, I realized. I found an open room listing I thought I could stand, one mentioning quietude and tolerance and acceptable noise levels. I play music quite loud, but still, I figured this was the best I'd do, given the general unacceptability of the listings in existence. I e-mailed my interest-an infinitude-of-possibilities-destroying thing to do, to be sure-describing myself as authentically the best match for the listing, no matter what others said. I could feel, through the prose of the listing, that the lister's mind was sharp and engaged enough to appreciate a lengthy reply, so I sent him an eight page reply. I flipped my laptop closed and went to work. ♦