

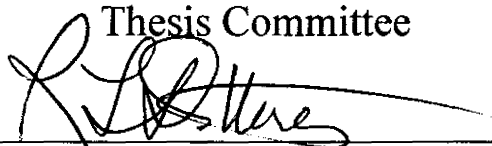
Salisbury University
Bellavance Honors Program

“At Times It Just Makes Sense”

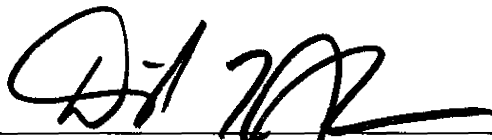
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Honors Thesis Submitted in Candidacy for Bellavance Honors

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At Times It Just Makes Sense

By Charles Liuzzo

In spite of their adamant assertions to the contrary, man is a creature that feels. That Corinthian façade you see is just that. Many a man has waited until all the lights in the house have clicked off before letting their pillows soak up what comes from the deepest vaults. A man figures out this masquerade early on.

With this knowledge, Anthony Scifarelli was awoken by the chirping of his alarm clock at 6:07 in the morning. The sun had not yet risen, yet it was time for him to. His arm rose and slammed down the snooze button.

As much as technology has done for the world, there was never a snooze button when people relied on roosters to wake them. The pleas for 5 more minutes of sleep were drowned out by nature's caaw. Progression is not linear movement.

In fact, the existence and use of the snooze button in many instances can be proof man's confidence or arrogance, depending on your level of pessimism. Anthony knew when he needed to be downstairs, showered, and teeth brushed. 5 or 10 or 15 minutes could easily be made up with superior scrubbing abilities. It's not when or how you start the day, it's just about being on that bus when it pulls away. If daily you can check off what you need to, you're gold.

15 minutes later, Anthony rolled out of bed and clicked off his sympathetic digital display rooster. He went to the toilet and did what you do at toilets early in the morning. But not before first starting the water in the shower. Time was of the essence and standing around waiting for the water to warm up was for amateurs. Better to be shitting than loitering. Maybe someone had told him that.

He stepped into the shower and into the already hot water. A little too hot. Anthony retreated to the corner, snuck a hand in to adjust the knob, and waited a moment before proceeding with the cleansing.

The water awoke Anthony and with it flowed through his mind the itinerary for the day. At age 16, it had been the same for as long as he could remember and could be summed up in relative simplicity: wake up, shit and shower, go to school, come home, eat, homework, watch TV, go to bed, and then repeat. His brother Jared was older so the mundanity seemed almost hereditary. He knew there was more out there, but if he was Frederick Douglas he hadn't yet learned to read. It was someone else's world that he guessed would eventually come. No rush. The TV guide is never wrong.

Anthony emerged smelling like whatever an Irish Spring smells like. He toweled off and then walked back into his room. His family was one so blessed that each of its three bedrooms had their own bathroom. One advantage of wealth is the elimination of the need to share. Riches can buy everyone their own little world and as cynical as that sounds, isn't that what we all work towards? Adam Smith's ideals aside, the goals of capitalism boil down to acquiring enough to be able to shit without someone banging on the door.

He applied deodorant and then pulled out an outfit from the laundry basket of clean wrinkled clothes that lay on his floor. Put away the clothes his mother washed: that could be a ripple to his bland itinerary.

Anthony descended the stairs into a kitchen that was only partially lit, as befits the atmosphere of 6:52 in the morning on a foggy Tuesday. His mother stood behind the stove clad halfway between pajamas and publicly acceptable attire. His father sat at the table, drinking coffee and eating eggs his wife had prepared. In more cliché times he would have been reading the newspaper, but he got live streaming updates on his blackberry and had already been to China and back.

“Hello dear, take a seat. Let me make some eggs for you. But hurry, the bus will be here soon.” His mother said.

“It’s okay, we’ve got 22 minutes,” Anthony replied. It was now 6:53. He had to be at the corner by 7:15. The bus service in his district was run strikingly similar to the East German subway system and did it’s best to be there on the dot.

“He’s got procrastination down to a science. Too bad you can’t go to college for that.” His father said with the sarcastic tone adopted by parents who are never satisfied with their children. Making your children feel like they’re never good enough is a decent way to get them to earn good marks in high school, but anecdotal evidence returns mixed results on how happy it actually leaves them.

Anthony ignored his father’s remark and took a seat at the table across from him. By the stove, his mother cracked an egg, mixed it up, and poured it into a pan. No cheese for the scrambled eggs in this household. As a woman who had striven to stay thin her whole life, Anthony’s mother was more than willing to also fight that battle for her children. Fat-free cheese was not an acceptable answer either, something about the saturated fat. Anthony stood up and went to pour himself a glass of low-acid Tropicana orange juice, noticed his bagged lunch on the counter, grabbed it and put it in his backpack, and then sat back down.

“Where’s your brother?” His father asked.

“No idea. I heard movement in his room and his light was on, so he’s alive.” Anthony replied.

“Thank God for that. I have something for him to do and need to talk to him about it. Hopefully he comes down soon.”

Anthony's father was a lawyer who made his living representing local businesses. Titles, legal documents, hiding under the table payments, that sort of thing. The type of lawyer work that sounded like you could do it in 15 minutes but somehow required law school training and charged hundreds of dollars per hour.

A West Coast lifer, Anthony's father was raised in a quiet upper middle class suburb of Los Angeles. He attended the University of Southern California where he met Anthony's mother, though they didn't really get together until after he had graduated from Berkeley with a law degree. She was a sorority girl and USC is the best or worst for them, depending on how much blond dye you use in your hair. Though he was good enough for a few Bud Light fueled nights of fun back in the day, the Alpha Sigma Tau recruit chair for spring semester '81 needed a piece of paper with Latin words on it to be sure she'd found love.

Upon graduation, Anthony's father moved from junior position to junior position and from girl to girl until he reconnected with her, ironically enough for these sophisticated people, in line at a local Wendy's. Two years later, they were married and a year after that he accepted a position at a bigger firm in Seattle. After 2 years of settling in to their home in a small suburb 25 minutes outside of Seattle and accruing enough money to be able to support a family, they had their first child, Jared, in the spring of 92, whereupon Anthony's mother quit her job as a receptionist and settled into the domestic life. A year and a half later they had their second child Anthony and their picture perfect life was set.

Eventually Anthony's father started his own firm and they moved to a nicer house where the children had their own bathrooms. They stayed in the same town, enjoying the feeling of quaint small town living towns with thousands of residents gave people from LA who attended colleges with student bodies numbering in the tens of thousands. The marriage had been fairly

happy, with any major arguments compromised on the shared feeling that neither could do much better, along with a healthy splattering of genuine love. Any infidelities had been minimal and well covered and they remained faithful and committed to each other in the big picture. The children grew up normal, playing rec league sports and enjoying action figures and television as they should.

In their senior and junior years respectively, Jared and Anthony had grades good enough to get them into the colleges their parents had gotten into decades earlier. Jared was a little more headstrong and while his grades were a little lower, he exhibited more creativity and independence than the dutiful Anthony.

Their father often trusted the boys to run letters and perform minor task for him, hoping to give them a sense of responsibility as well as involvement in the future of the family. Predictably, Anthony often performed the tasks in a timely manner with little incident while Jared was prone to adventures that sometimes required Anthony to repeat the task the next day.

Anthony's mother laid a plate of scrambled eggs with two slices of wheat toast in front of him. He took a gulp of the juice and then dug into his breakfast. The clock read 6:59. His mother went back to the stove and began to prepare eggs for her eldest son who would hopefully join them any second.

Almost on cue with the crack of the egg, Jared came down the stairs dragging his book bag by the handle at the top. One shoe's lace was untied.

"Here he is, right not on time. Any plans after school, Jared? I need you to do something for me today." Their father said.

“Uhh, actually I have lots of school work and was hoping to come right home to hit the books.” Jared said with a weak sense of confidence. It was far from his first time fibbing to his parents to avoid something and no one in the room mistook it for the truth.

“How studious of you.” Their father answered.

“I don’t buy it. There must be something on TV he wants to watch.” Their mother added from the kitchen.

“No belief in my innocence, mother?”

“Too much experience.”

“Either way, you’re going to do it,” Their father interjected. “I need you to bring this folder to Mr. Dusinsky at his hardware store on the corner of Kent. He should give you some other papers to bring back to me.”

His mother laid a plate identical to Anthony’s in front of Jared, who had seated himself at the table at the opposite end of Anthony and his father. He was rummaging through his bag looking for something only God, one of his teachers, and Jared knew what.

“The hardware store? The dusty smell of the lumber makes my sinuses flair up.” Jared responded, acutely aware of his father’s own lifelong battle with mustiness and sinuses.

“Always with the excuses. What is with your avoidance of anything we ask you to do? Your brother would do it without complaint.” Their father said.

“Then let him do it. I wouldn’t mind, I just have a lot of studying to do. And if it was anywhere but there I would find a way to make it happen but we’re already out of Sudafed.” Said Jared.

The clock read 7:08. They usually left at 7:10 to make the bus. Anthony had placed his plate in the sink and was milling around while his brother shoveled the last bites into his mouth.

“I don’t want Anthony to do it, I want you to. Always with the excuses. You can pick up damn Sudafed on the way home.” Their father responded not without a tinge of disgust.

“Let’s go boys, get ready to leave. Richard, just let Anthony do it. You can make this one grow up some other day when there’s more time.” Their mother implored.

“Anthony’s a better kid than me anyways.”

“Fine. Anthony you heard what I said, would you mind doing this for me? The folders on the counter, grab it on your way out. There's also ten dollars in there to grab a cab back home. ”

“Okay.”

“Thanks.”

The boys rounded up their stuff and proceeded out the door.

2.

7:12 and the boys were 2 minutes away from the bus stop. While every morning their parents feigned disbelief in their ability to make it on time, they always did. Some times things are much easier than the world and its elaborate routines make them out to be.

“Thanks for offering to take that stuff,” Jared said with his best attempt at sincerity. “Not school, but I have work to do.”

“Oh.” Anthony genuinely had no interest in whatever his brother had planned for today. He knew his mother happened to have some business on the other side of town today and wouldn’t be home until dinner tonight. He could only hope that whatever Jared had planned wouldn’t also get him in trouble.

“Yeah. I’m gonna try to get Amy to come over today. I think today is the day I show her how I swing.” Jared trailed off with a laugh.

Amy was this year's "it" girl in the school. Hardly notable during the first years of puberty, she had surely blossomed of late and was now the dream of every boy in school and the target of every boy who'd started wearing cologne and Lacoste in middle school.

"If you see a tie on the front door, ring the bell then go take a lap around the block. There's a chance we don't even make it past the living room couch."

Amy was a year younger than Jared in Anthony's grade. While Jared was new to the Amy bandwagon, Anthony and she had been close when her long legs were considered gangly. What started in the sandbox moved to the swings then to the monkey bars then to the lunch room then to the cell phone. Amy appreciated Anthony's quiet understanding and solidness. She understood that his few words didn't mean he had few thoughts. Anthony loved the spark of life she'd exhibited from the beginning, like when she got in trouble for picking the buds of her mother's flowers and stapling them to both their clothes. Though her breasts might be new to the rest of the world, her beauty was not new to Anthony.

Anthony was well aware how tragic and cliché their relationship had become but could find no way to break the mold. Anthony was a nice guy and saw himself being passed in the race by guys with flashy cars and words even slicker than their hair.

He had none of that. His few words were honest and weighed down by the anchor of truth and sincerity. Since he could only speak what he actually felt, in this situation many things between the two of them often went simply unsaid.

Since her breakthrough, Anthony had become the sounding board for her unanticipated romantic angsts and the more he heard the less he listened. They used to speak several times a week but that number had been steadily decreasing as what had once been jovial chatter about the TV show they were both watching was now blithe diatribes by her on who had asked her out

this week and if he just wanted to have sex but he was pretty cute and had let her borrow a pen in the 6th grade so he wasn't like the others and just paying attention to her now. She was well aware of her situation but smiled too much to loath the hypocrisy and general bullshit of the whole thing.

She was the one who was now cool and it was someone else's job to despise the fleetingness of the mainstream. Anthony was still just another kid and his input on her issues was predictably minimal and straightforward. Hereditarily pessimistic, he found it hard to endorse any of the applicants, especially his brother, who as of late had seemed to forget the cynical indifference he'd carried for most of his life towards his brother's little friend with tangly hair and scabby knees. Less obsessed with tits and ass than most, her thick dirty blond hair that now hung well past her shoulders was what he quite openly liked most about her. Unable to turn his back on her, Anthony could only wish.

The brothers got to the stop and less than a minute later the bus pulled up. Along with the 3 other kids at their stop, they climbed up the stairs of the bus and hung a left at the shoddily dressed old man who took breaks from smoking Marlboro Reds only when on the job. The students marched down the aisle and filled into seats that were either saved for them or happened to be open. Jared went towards the back and found a seat in the second to last row that always conspicuously happened to be left open until his stop. As one of the few seniors on the bus, respect and obedience towards him were more habitual than commanded. While most students his age, and especially the "cool" ones, were driving to school and blaring pop tunes with their windows down, Jared maintained an edginess by being that guy who didn't even have his license. Anthony was set to get his license in a couple of months and looked for an empty seat.

Anthony took a seat in the middle of the bus; too prideful to sit in the front with those even he considered dorky but not ambitious enough to go too many rows back. He plopped next to Steven Jeremy, a kid he'd been friendly enough with for years. Bookish and eccentric yet also the Junior captain of the track team, Steven often sat in the front with the other kids who were disappointed that someone else would be finishing the *Wheel of Time* series but he also sometimes moved himself back a couple of rows, as he was possessed with that resilience and inner strength that is disvalued in high school but gets you a hot girlfriend in college and a good job post-graduation. Though he could at times be too much, Anthony could tolerate him and appreciated him for being an alright guy in a sea of people whom he considered less than stellar.

"Wassup big Ant? You see last night's South Park?" Steven commenced with a usual high school conversation.

Anthony had and they shared some laughs about it, though Steven took the recitations and impressions too far and the seats around them became a little annoyed, especially the younger students who had their eyes set on eventually possessing a back row seat.

The bus pulled up at the next stop and 3 more kids got on. The first was a member of the chess club who quickly found a seat and immediately entered into a frenzied conversation about something involving lasers. The second was a hulking brute named Jason who headed for the seat in the very last row that he often loudly commanded be left open for him. Jared's friend, and another senior who also didn't drive, though not for edginess but due to his family's lack of ability to acquire a car for him, Jason gave Anthony a lunatic grin, slapped him a little too hard on the shoulder, and greeted him with a "Sup little Ant" as he passed by. Privy to some of his brother's thoughts, Anthony knew his brother tolerated Jason more than he actually liked him. Less than respect, Jared was amused by the big man's yearning to feel cool and found it in

himself to supply that, so as to have at his disposal the strength and physicality Jason brought to the table.

Third was Amy, who glided down the aisle with the exuberance of the recently assured. Anthony and her eyes almost immediately met and they both smiled deeply yet understated. She laid her hand gently on his shoulder and said “Hey Ant.” Though the seats around him were all occupied, she stopped next to him and looked around for an open one, an act that made him feel good even though he suspected it was only courtesy at this point. From the back, Jared caught her eye and pointed to the seat across the aisle from him that he had arranged to be left open. She smiled down at Anthony, let her hand linger on his shoulder, then filed to the back to the graces of his brother, who could make her feel like the princess every girl wanted to be, as opposed to the queen Anthony wanted to make her. Anthony’s ride to school was haunted by the laughter that came from behind him.

3.

The bus turned into the schools parking lot and eased its way into the nearest of the elongated spots reserved for the buses. Research by educators had found that opening the doors immediately and encouraging a bum rush (not the technical term) was counterproductive to the order and discipline schools required and the driver followed protocol and waited 30 seconds before opening the doors and allowing the students to leave.

Anthony and Steve had drifted into a comfortable silence, as their relationship was only strong enough to sustain a conversation for 7 to 8 of the approximately 13 minutes they were on the bus together. They picked up their bags and found their place in the line forming in the aisle. From the back, Anthony could hear Jason overcompensating with volume what his jokes lacked

in actual humor. Amy gave the soft chuckle of courtesy while Jared ignored him and rolled his eyes. Younger students in the back laughed with Jason, trying to buy approval from one who himself desperately sought it, a vicious cycle that is oft repeated in adolescence.

The line moved forward and as the students proceeded out, the driver wished them farewell with different variations of “Have a good day” that sounded oddly sincere from a man with such a rough and beleaguered appearance. Anthony and Steven walked towards the entrance next to each other, until Steven was hailed by someone and took off to ask them if they had seen South Park last night. Anthony walked into the school alone with his hands gripping the straps of backpack. Behind him, Jared and Amy walked together and were joined by other good looking kids. Amy noticed Anthony walking alone but made no attempt to end his solitude.

The mass of migrating 14-18 year olds bottlenecked at the doors of the school and it turned into a match of pushing and positioning that years later they would realize bore a strong similarity to the actions needed to get a drink at a crowded bar. Anthony’s larger frame served him well and he was able to wade through the crowd without the need of too much effort. Once through the doors, the press subsided and Anthony moved through halls and up a flight of stairs to his locker, where he made the necessary exchanges of textbooks and notebooks at his locker. He slammed the locker shut, slipped the lock back on, and moved onto his first period. His walk was met with a few head nods of acknowledgement but for the most part he moved amongst his peers alone.

Everyone’s first period at Sherwood High was homeroom, where the students pledged their allegiance and the announcements were read by the T.V Broadcasting Club over the

school's closed circuit channel. Minimal attention was paid and teachers tolerated talking as long as it was kept to a whisper.

Anthony's seat in this class was towards the back and he absent mindedly stared at the TV while the girl to his left whispered to her friend in the row ahead about her trouble straightening her hair that morning. The boy to his right blew his nose.

"And now for the weather with Amy Nordhoff."

The whispers in the roomed quieted down a level as some people in the room began to pay more attention to the screen. Amy's bubbly personality had always been well suited for public speaking and her new confidence had erased any reservations she had held. Anthony went into his book bag and pulled out his organizer to make sure he hadn't forgotten to do any of his homework. Though he knew it was probably too late to make up for anything he hadn't done, he felt compelled to seek the reassurance of his own checklist.

By his account, he was all good, and he put his planner back in his bag. The announcements wound down and the minute came for everyone to move to the next class. Anthony grabbed his bag and stood up, but the arrangement of the classroom forced him to wait until the girl with the hair problems gathered her stuff, finished her conversation, and stood up to make for the exit. She was oblivious to the situation and probably thought him strange for just standing there like that. Anthony had been in school with her for years and was of the opinion that she would probably never get it.

He walked out of the classroom and turned left. His second period, but first real class, was math, which traditionally had been Anthony's favorite subject. In years past, he had been known to do Jared's math homework for things like candy, DVD's, videogames, and other things Jared was done with. At some point, Anthony had realized he was being used and after turning

Jared down once, he was never asked again. Though Jared had once probably not so innocently remarked at the dinner table that he was now much better at math than he used to be, Anthony had seen his report cards and doubted that statement.

Lately however, math had fallen out of favor with Anthony. With the SATs approaching, the math classes had changed to reviews of old material in order to best prepare the students for the test that would play a large role in the direction of their futures. He couldn't disagree with the logic and appreciated the school's concern for his future, but too much looking back quells the zeal of those who are ready to move on.

The halls were a cacophony of slamming lockers and the random sounds of teenagers. Again, Anthony received head nods and a few "Heys" but no one had anything they really need to tell him. It seemed to many that Anthony had no friends but this wasn't true, due to circumstances he just had none at this school. There were two people, Alex Lozzi and Kevin Holloway, that Anthony was closest with. The three had been near inseparable in elementary and middle school and to Anthony's knowledge, those two were the only ones who had ever envied his relationship with Amy. Unfortunately for the three of them, after 8th grade, Kevin's family had fallen on hard times and they were forced to relocate to 40 minutes away to Tacoma. He and Anthony kept in touch mostly over the computer and saw each other over the summer occasionally, but their meetings were becoming increasingly awkward. One reason Anthony wanted to get his license was so that he could make trips to see his friend in an attempt to salvage one of the things he held dear.

Equally touched by fortune but in the opposite direction, Alex's father had received some kind of promotion and this past summer moved his family one town over and enrolled his son in a nice private school. Anthony and Alex saw each other fairly frequently and their families

occasionally had dinners together, but their bond also no longer kept him company when he walked alone through the halls.

Anthony walked into the classroom and found his seat in the middle right of the cluster of desks. He pulled his notebook out, laid it on his desk, reached into his pocket and pulled out his pen, clicked it twice, placed it on his notebook, and waited for the class to commence. There were 7 minutes between each class and many students got satisfaction from strolling in with only seconds to go. It was a low-risk way of challenging the authority and gave those that felt oppressed a sense of empowerment. It was another thing Anthony couldn't disagree with even if he didn't particularly endorse it.

Eventually, the desks filled up and the teacher, Ms. Bilodeau, took her place in front of the chalkboard and she asked the students to pass their homeworks to the end of the rows. Most students, Anthony included, had theirs but there were those who never had theirs and scoffed at this request they felt was so far beneath them. Ms. Bilodeau went around and collected the homeworks, placed them on her desk, and moved back to her place in the front of the room.

"Hello students. It's good to see you all. Today we're going to continue with our geometry review. Let's move ahead a little bit to the slope of lines. You should have all learned this before and hopefully you remember it, but for today let's pretend like you don't."

Anthony had no problems with slopes and was mildly insulted to be instructed on them again. He began to zone off, but kept his ears open to catch anything of importance.

"Remember, we see all slopes as moving in the same left to right direction. Whether they are going up or going down through our graph, they are all progressing towards the same unreachable goal. That is because all lines, at least as you need be concerned, are infinite and only really end when we tell them to. Whether or not a line is moving upwards or downwards is

indicated by the negative symbol in its slope. A negative meaning that is it downwards moving. We find the slope of a line by taking two random points on the line and plugging them into the formula. The points can be completely random, so long as they are on the line and on our graph. These points tell us where line has been and how it has been changing as it has grown. We can compare the points with $(y_2 - y_1) / (x_2 - x_1)$ and understand how the line is moving. Remember, just because a line is in a positive or negative quadrant does not mean it will stay there. The slope, the movement of the line, is the indicator of where the line will eventually be.”

Some in the class scribbled notes so they would remember for a quiz while Anthony listened with only his ears to what he felt he already knew. He didn’t mean to be dismissive to the words of Ms. Bilodeau, one of the nicer teachers at the school, but he had picked up on this the first time it was presented to him. Ms. Bilodeau gave examples and fielded questions from students who had trouble with the slope of line and related concepts. Seemingly soon, the class reached an end and the students filed out of the room and on to their next class.

Anthony had lunch 6th period and the next 3 classes before it seemed to fly by in a flurry of halfhearted scribbled note taking. He found history interesting, but it held no special place for Anthony. He could remember the accomplishments and failures of the past well enough and moved through it with a businesslike approach he wouldn’t have had if there was someone to distract him. The same was true of chemistry, though he doubted the importance of it to anyone and teachers have still not been able to successfully explain why it need be a mandatory class for students who already know they aren’t going to be chemists. His 5th period class was Home Ec and the smell of the cherry turnovers the previous class had baked only served to make his stomach rumble. Anthony only did what he had to and would openly admit that his knitting was

at best below-average. His ability to shut up and feign interest was enough to earn him an A in the class.

The cafeteria was a huge room arranged with 3 columns of 10 tables that managed to fit 300 plus students. Jared also had this lunch period and Anthony sat with him and his friends. He was clearly out of place and was only accepted because he was Jared's brother. Anthony kept quiet by choice, not deference, and was often only noticed as a punch line to a joke about his brother. The kids at the table treated him well enough and he didn't especially mind any of them. Truthfully, he enjoyed their tales of mischief and their failures and success with girls. As time went on, he attempted less to stifle his laughter, though he could not find it in himself to really embrace any of them.

Jared and some of his friends had already sat down by the time Anthony got there, so he plopped into the closest and easiest seat. Jared sat 3 people down to his left at the end of the table. Jared made eye contact and said "Sup" to Anthony as he sat down, before resuming his conversation. The other kids at the table acknowledged Anthony with a nod, before ignoring him.

Anthony reached into his backpack and pulled out the bag lunch his mother had made earlier. He opened it up and looked at the sandwich; turkey and Swiss on a club roll with a leaf of lettuce. Could have been a lot worse Anthony's day now had a high point.

Jason from the bus came up to the table with a lunch tray in hand and the same manic grin from earlier. He went to the end Jared was at and forced everyone to move down one spot so he could sit across from Jared. The other kids begrudgingly obliged and made looks to their friends on the other side of the table.

“Wassup boys. Anyone else get a b.j in the bathroom already today?” Jason asked boisterously.

“That’s bullshit if I’ve ever heard it.” One of Jared’s friends said.

Everyone smiled at both Jason’s obvious lie and the following putdown. Though he would never concede, Jason and everyone knew it was far from the truth, but it was a game they played almost daily. Jason could provide laughs, even if it wasn’t for the reasons he intended to.

“You’re right, it was in the girls’ locker room hahahah.” Jason replied.

Jason was roughly 6 foot 4 inches and around 240 pounds. Far from attractive, he had a sloppy crew cut and a fashion style that varied from baggy jeans with a black t-shirt to faded bright colored polos that were at least 1 size too small. Though in many areas his family would be normal, in this fairly affluent suburb they were looked down on for their rancher style house and the front yard that was littered with furniture, both lawn and living room. He had 2 older brothers whose education had fallen short of an Associates Degree and a younger sister who despised her family. His father was one of 3 foremen for a middling contractor company and his mother substitute taught every now and then. Jason’s brothers had first got him drunk at age 13 and he revered them, though they all feigned hatred for each other.

Everyday for him was a fight to be respected by people whose families had more money than his, or at least successfully upheld that appearance. He thought he kept himself in the game with wit and charm but it was almost completely through his potential brute force. As much as high school is political and dependent on Iago-like maneuvering, at the end of the day superior strength and pure physicality always win out.

“I don’t know anything about locker rooms, but Amy said she’ll come by for ‘homework help’ after school.” Jared said, punctuating his statement by making the sign for quotations with his fingers.

Anthony stared down into his sandwich and took a swig of his Dasani water bottle while the others at the table laughed and made noises of excitement, believing Jared far more than they believed Jason.

“You better hurry up with that, if she keeps looking at me like she was this morning I might have a son my freshman year of college.” Jason said with more laughter.

“If you could even get into college.” A smartass at the table named Paul said.

Jason turned and punched Paul in the shoulder.

“Jason, you’re definitely my biggest threat,” Jared turned his head to the others with a grin. “But I think I’ll put this issue to bed soon enough.”

“Well you should. I hear she’s quite the little ho.” Jason said.

Anthony picked his head up from the table and whipped it towards Jason.

“What do you mean?” He asked.

“Rumor has it that she’s been giving out hand jobs in history class!” Jason exclaimed loudly.

“That’s not true.” Anthony replied lowly.

“Oh yeah it is. Hand jobs in history and blowjobs in biology.” Jason said louder than the last time. The rest of the table was genuinely laughing with him, except for Jared who smiled, shook his head, and took a bite of his sandwich. Anthony clenched his fist below the table and gritted his teeth above it.

Anthony had never felt more alone. He was willing to take insults to himself but wouldn't stand for her to be slandered. Even if she was forgetting about him more and more daily, she was still too nice of a person for an idiot like Jason Snelling to talk about her like that. Blood crept to Anthony's cheeks and his eyes bore holes into his sandwich.

"What's the matter little Ant? Somebody got a crush? Don't worry, at this rate she'll suck you off eventually." Jason sneered over the laughter of the others.

"How about you shut the fuck up?" Anthony barked at Jason as he stared him dead in the eyes.

The whole table went silent, struck by Anthony's defiance. It would have been surprising for anyone to say this to Jason, but from the quiet kid in the corner it was shocking. No one, no matter how much clout they held, had ever stood up to the hulking Jason like that. No one knew what to say, least of all Jason. Anthony maintained his steely glare into Jason's eyes. The table was silent for what seemed like hours.

"Apologize." Jason quietly demanded.

"No." Anthony didn't hesitate.

"Apologize right now, Anthony." Jason repeated.

The others at the table looked back and forth between the two, having no idea what would come next. Jared looked at Anthony, then Jason, then Anthony again, with no idea what he should do next.

"Don't talk about her like that. You should apologize." Anthony said threateningly despite being barely louder than a whisper. He had yet to break his gaze.

Jason leaned forward in Anthony's direction. Neither would break the stare.

“You little shit head. I’m gonna fuck her and then fuck you up for that.” He violently flipped his lunch tray over, spewing its contents all over everyone else at the table. He got up and stormed from the cafeteria, slamming the door open. Other tables noticed the commotion and stared, trying to figure out what happened.

“I’m sorry.” Anthony said to those left at the table, bowing his head.

“It’s cool.” Someone said.

“Don’t worry, Anthony. He’s a dumbass.” Someone else said.

“Be careful, Ant.” Jared said.

Anthony realized he might be in danger but didn’t care. He had said what he felt for once and couldn’t take it back now. If retaliation came then it just came. His hands were shaking and his blood was pumping furiously and he secretly loved it. He felt incredibly alive and the issues he’d dealt with the whole rest of the day seemed so trivial to this new threat to his physical health. This was a problem he could really care about. Anthony unclenched his fists, inhaled deeply through his nose, exhaled, then grabbed his sandwich and put it back in his paper bag. He picked up his backpack and stood to leave.

“I gotta go. I’m sorry you guys got food on you.” He said as he was stuffing his bag in his backpack.

As the others were picking the food off themselves, Jared looked at Anthony and said, “I’ll talk to him.”

Anthony returned his steely glaze to Jared and looked deep into his eyes. Anthony turned and walked out. Right then, Jared realized Anthony would never love him.

4.

Anthony walked through the doors in a calm fury. He had 15 minutes until his next class but he didn't mind, figuring he would just wait outside the room until it was time. He'd been waiting most of his life, another couple minutes wouldn't break the camel's back.

He'd heard Jared's words and placed no stock in them. Jared had the sway to probably resolve the conflict and he might. Jared knew Amy cared for Anthony and it probably wouldn't be in his best interest if she knew one of his friends had beat up Anthony. Then again, Anthony knew Jared wanted alone time with her today.

Though he didn't relish being hurt, Anthony wouldn't mind if something happened. Jason was huge, but Anthony was inconspicuously becoming one of the bigger kids in his grade, topping 6 feet with broad shoulders that made the football coach cringe that he wasn't on the team. Anthony wanted to see if he could hold his own and if he couldn't, it was a cause worth going down for. In many ways, it would be the loudest thing he'd ever done.

Anthony milled about outside the classroom until it was dismissed. He held his head down and pretended not to notice the glances by exiting students who wasted a second worrying about his early presence. When they'd all left, he walked in and found his desk. The teacher said "Hello" and began to clean the chalkboard and prepare for the next class.

The class was literature and the teacher was Mr. Courtney, an Englishman who'd crossed the pond and fallen in love with American culture and had never left. A good teacher who showed his affection by playfully ragging on his students, he left Anthony alone for the most part, realizing he'd get minimal response back and that Anthony would still do his work even if he wasn't specially engaged.

Mr. Courtney settled behind his desk and shuffled papers. After a few minutes, the rest of the class came in and took their seats. Many greeted Mr. Courtney with barbs, which he returned in full, and the class commenced with almost everyone in a relaxed mood. He moved to the front of the room and wrote the pages they'd be reading on the board. The students opened their Norton Anthology textbook full of poems and short stories to the pages written on the board.

Anthony's mind was blank with static and he wasn't paying attention. He kept replaying the event in his head and the same mixed thoughts of indignation and apathy ran through his head. The first poem they read was by some British guy named Larkin and had something to do with parents. The class snickered when Mr. Courtney read the word "Fuck" out loud. Anthony completely missed the second poem but found himself listening to the third.

Mr. Courtney prefaced it, "The next poem we're going to read is by American writer Charles Bukowski and one of his volumes of poetry bears the same name as this poem. Bukowski lived an odd troubled life of a loner and I think this poem epitomizes him quite well.

"It begins...'When I was a starving writer I used to read the major writers in the major magazines (in the library of course) and it made me feel very bad because-being a student of the word and the way-I realized that they were faking it..."

Anthony thought this an interesting way for a poet in his textbook to start a poem.

"I could sense each false emotion, each utter pretence, it made me feel that the editors had their heads up their asses, or were being politicized into publishing in-groups of power but I just kept writing and not eating very much."

Anthony looked up from his book and decided he'd just have to keep writing and not eating very much. Later he'd figure out how exactly that translated to his life, but with his life

feeling incredibly insignificant and the fear of a real physical threat looming over his head with no one to turn to, Anthony could think of no better course of action.

He missed the rest of the poem, but folded the corner of the page and promised himself to come back to it. The rest of the class flew by and so did the rest of the school day. Anthony's mind was consumed with thoughts of Amy, Jason, and the words he remembered from the poem. Before long, he found himself at his locker, making the necessary exchanges of textbooks and notebooks.

He was in no rush to leave; he had to walk to Mr. Dusinsky's store and wouldn't be taking the bus. The store was about two miles away and he'd have to cut through the athletic fields behind the school, follow a path through some woods, and emerge in the rear of a commercial district.

As the other students left the school, Anthony hung back and went to the bathroom and used the water fountain. He walked down the stairs and moved through near empty halls towards one of the school's backdoors. Though his heart was flush with emotions, his head had never felt clearer.

The back of the school held the baseball field and track circle while the football and soccer field was way off to the left side. Anthony walked down the right side of the baseball field and stayed in foul territory while the team warmed up with games of catch. Anthony flashbaked to the one year he'd played baseball. Never having played growing up, he was very close to awful and his parents never bothered to ask him if he wanted to play a second season. However, he'd once connected with a pitch and sent it flying over the right field fence. He stopped at the right field wall and imagined he was looking at the spot where the ball would have landed had it been on this field.

Anthony continued strolling and entered the woods on a dirt path that cut through them to the other side. He walked in a couple of feet, then recognized the figure sitting on a bench alongside the path.

“I don’t care what you do to me, you shouldn’t have said those things.” Anthony said, calmly.

“Well I’m sorry I hurt your feelings, but not I have to hurt you.” Jason said as he stood from the bench and walked towards Anthony.

“I know.”

“You know?”

Anthony heard noise from behind and turned to see one of Jason’s friends walking down the path. It wasn’t one of the kids from the lunch table and Anthony didn’t recognize him. He hadn’t noticed him when he came in and wondered where he had come from.

“You’re just doing what you think you have to. We all are.”

Jason closed in to within 10 feet. Anthony clenched his hands into fists, hoping at worse to get one good punch in. He hoped Jason was all talk with a glass chin.

Suddenly, Anthony felt a push from behind and was stumbling towards Jason, who caught him and quickly placed a knee in his gut. Anthony fell to one knee, and then was met with a right hook from Jason. Anthony wouldn’t go completely down. The other kid had circled around and landed a weaker punch on Anthony that only stung. Jason moved in for another hit, but before he could, Anthony recovered himself and sprung up and tackled Jason to the ground. Now on top of the bigger man, Anthony reared back and threw the hardest punch he could right into Jason’s face, bloodying his nose instantly. The other kid recovered from his wits and landed a boot right into Anthony’s face, knocking him off Jason and sending Anthony flying onto his

back. He proceeded to send kicks into Anthony's stomach while Jason recovered enough to join the stomping.

They continued stomping him for another half a minute, sending most of their kicks at his gut. Except for one which caught him square in the face and surely broke his nose, if the first kick to the face hadn't. They were yelling and cursing at him as they circled around him like gang members in a prison riot.

"HEY, what are you doing!?" Someone yelled. Jason and the other boy snapped their head in the direction of the noise, then took off running away from the school down the path. Anthony rolled over to see the track team, led by Steven Jeremy, rushing over towards him. He smiled through the blood covering his face.

"Oh my god, Anthony! Are you okay? Someone call 911!" Steven shouted as he ran over to kneel down to Anthony.

"No, I'm okay."

"No way you're okay. You're covered in blood. What happened? We heard them shouting and came over to check it out."

"Nothing, they got a little angry, that's all. Don't call the police, just help me up."

Anthony put his hands on the ground and tried to push himself up before his arms gave out and he fell back to the ground. He tried again and this time Steven helped him and steadied him to his feet. The rest of the track team watched with awe in silence.

"I'm good. I have something to do." Anthony said, trying to catch his breath. He smiled at the track team, then raised his shirt to wipe the blood off of his face. He pulled his shirt down and the track team could see it soaked in blood.

"Dude, wait a sec. You're a mess." Steven pleaded.

Anthony shrugged Steven's hand off his shoulder and started to walk down the path in the same direction his attackers had fled. He did his best not to stumble and wiped his face with his sleeve. He never turned around to see what the track team did but figured they'd go back to their run with something to talk about.

5.

Staggering through the woods for 20 minutes, Anthony finally came onto the street and was greeted with open stares during the few blocks he walked to the hardware store. He couldn't care less what people were thinking and actually reveled in the attention for once. He strode through the automatic doors of the store and walked up to the customer service desk. He politely asked for Mr. Dusinsky and the manager on duty, after tearing herself away from staring, hurried to the back and came back with Mr. Dusinsky. Anthony pulled the papers from his backpack and slapped them down on the counter, then asked if Mr. Dusinsky had the ones for him.

"Yes, I have them." Mr. Dusinsky stammered, "Is everything okay, Anthony?" He reached under the counter, pulled out some papers, and handed them to Anthony.

"Better than it looks, sir." Anthony replied as he put the papers into the backpack that hadn't left his shoulders throughout the whole affair. "Would you mind calling a cab for me?"

"Sh-sure."

"Thanks. I'll be outside."

"Can I get you anything?"

Anthony just shook his head and turned to leave. He walked out and sat on the curb a couple of feet down from the entrance, not wanting his appearance to scare people away from

coming into the store. He kept his head down and covered himself up as much as possible; the attention was already getting old.

The cab rolled up and he got in. The cabbie asked where he was going and simply told him not to get blood on the leather. Anthony obliged to the first and did his best with the second. They rode in silence and when the cab pulled up in front of his house, Anthony paid him, tipped him well, and said “Thank you”. He walked up to his front door.

The door was locked. Anthony went around the house to a side door. He turned the knob and it opened. He strode into his own home covered in his own blood.

The kitchen was the first room through the door and Anthony went in the refrigerator and took out a bottled water. Across the room, he could see Jared and Amy sitting next to each other on the couch. They were both straightening their clothes. Amy stared at her shoes while Jared stared at Anthony and said nothing to his bloody brother. Amy never looked up to realize the condition he was in. Anthony reached into his backpack and pulled out the papers Mr. Dusinsky had given him. He placed them on the counter and climbed the stairs to go to his room. No one said anything.

Anthony opened the door and stepped into his room, went to his shower and turned the hot water on. He stripped off his bloody clothes and tossed them in the corner while the water warmed up. He showered, dried off, put fresh clothes on, lay down on his bed, and didn’t come out the rest of the night. Later, Jared told their parents Anthony was sick. That night, Anthony didn’t go to sleep until long after the last light in the house had clicked off.