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a memoir about collegetowns  
and the slacker lifestyle

jason pettus

# Prologue

So I'm sitting in Chicago, minding my own business one day, when I get a call from David. "Hey, guess what, Debbie's getting married to a guy in Ditch Witch. The wedding's in Columbia this weekend. Let's blow Saturday morning."

So David's an old college friend of mine who has just moved to Chicago himself. "Debbie" refers to Debbie Rust, another college friend of the two of us, from way back when we were all freshman in the mid-80's. "Ditch Witch," is, of course, one of the midwest's older and more established guitar indie bands, one whose members and fans are now approaching their thirties, a little older and wiser and with a much more mainstream and affluent audience than when we were all hanging out, playing songs for each other in our basements.

"Columbia" is shorthand for Columbia, Missouri, the 125,000 town/city right smack dab in the middle of the Show-Me-State, the city which holds the proud alma mater of David and I and Debbie AND the Ditch Witch guys — the University of Missouri. For those who don't know, Columbia MO is one of those collegetowns that are a part of that list that might, for want of a better word, be called "Slacker Towns:"

Austin TX  
Chapel Hill NC  
Madison WS  
Evanston IL  
Lawrence KS  
Tempe AZ  
etc.

There are reasons, specific reasons, why these towns are the way they are. But that's another story for another time.

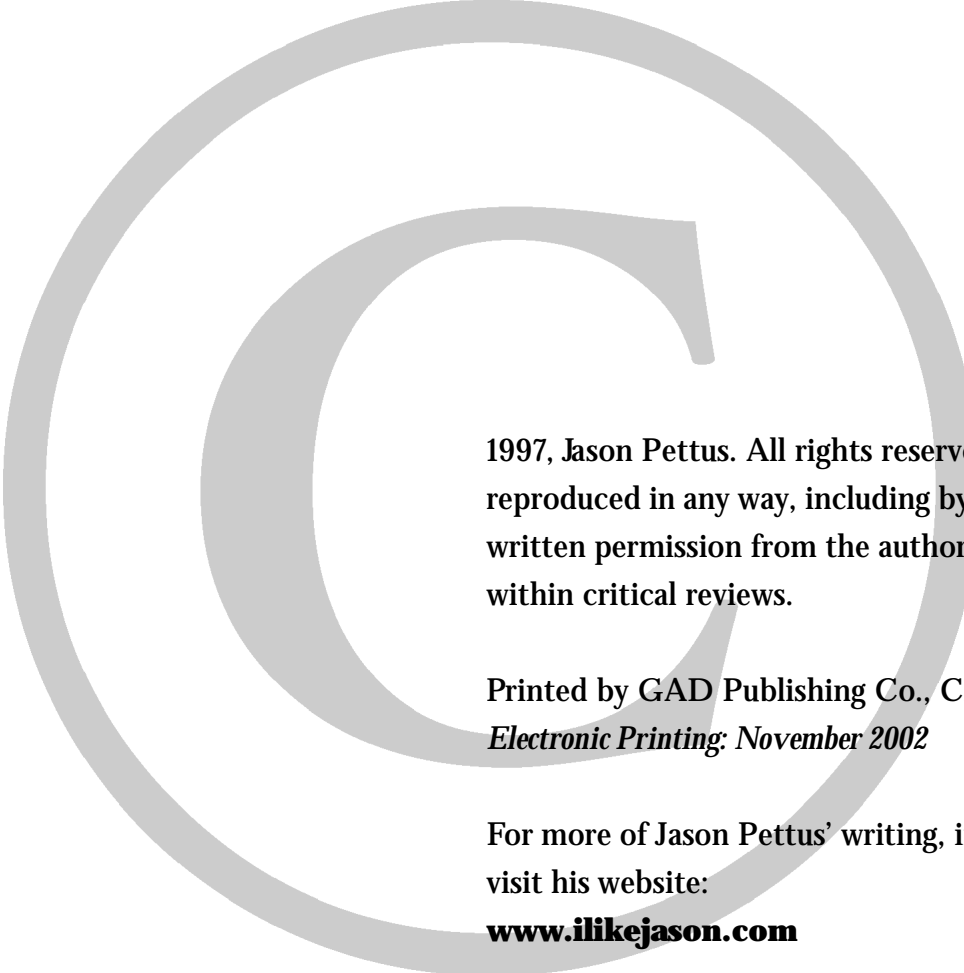
There are still a lot of people we know who live in Columbia MO. It's because it's a SlackerTown, and if you understand SlackerTowns then you realize what I'm speaking of. If not — don't worry, it also will be explained later. There are still a lot of people we know there. Some are friends. Some are not-so-friends. Some used to be friends, but then they moved away too, then failed, then went back to Columbia MO, SlackerTown, and were mad at us now for succeeding where they failed. Well. Maybe.

David and I both, at overlapping times, spent eight years apiece in Columbia MO, some as students, some as slackers ourselves. I have only been back to Columbia twice in four years. The last time was about two years ago. And maybe it was because some bad shit went down when I left. Maybe it's because there's a lot of bridges I need to rebuild that I never have. Maybe I started seeing myself turning into a Professional Slacker and I realized I needed to get the hell out while I still had a chance. That I got scared, and ended up pissing a bunch of people off because of it. Well. Again. Maybe.

And of course, "blow Saturday" in David's sentence meant "Let's get in my car and drive the seven hours to go to Columbia Missouri this Saturday morning, shall we?"

Hmm. A slacker wedding, held at a place I ran away from, filled with people who were still pissed at me for doing so.

How could I say no?



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**saturday**  
september 6 1997

**04**

**12:30 pm** We are hitting the road. We were supposed to hit the road by 10:30, but, well, you know, we got a little behind and things happened: MS#1. I've decided that, throughout my journal, I will mark a little "MS" after each sentence that describes a way that I used to live my life, a mark that will show what the lifestyle of a Missouri Slacker is all about, how the habits start slowly coming back to me as the weekend progresses.

Our traveling companion is Mendy, a woman who also lives in Chicago and who also was an MS in a previous life. We did not know each other in our pre-Big Shoulders days, but we did have the exact same set of mutual friends. These things happen when you live in a SlackerTown. It is one of the many definitions I promised earlier.

**4:00 pm** We are sitting on the concrete that constitutes the gutter of Highway 55, running the length of Chicago to St. Louis, containing the 240 other miles of vast wasteland, the most wretched plains of land ever to curse the face of this earth. The more reserved of you refer to it as "Illinois."

We are out of gas. Yes, like something out of a bad teenage slasher flick. Mendy's gas needle doesn't work, they were trying to stretch the gas out to the Dixie Truck Stop and Diner near Peoria, and we fell short about two miles from the exit. David is currently heading to the gas station, the passenger/victim of a friendly Illinois farmer. Mendy and I are sitting on top of the car, watching a man drive an antique bright yellow plane over our heads a half dozen times, dusting the crops next to us.

The yellow plane is a bit of an epiphany to Mendy and I. We had figured (we admitted to each other) that with such a rise in technology in the recent years, that some sort of more efficient way of dusting crops would have been invented. It's a shock to know that some of the incredibly old-fashioned ways are still the BEST ways. We have decided that the gas loss and the plane sighting are good omens for the trip. Of course, we're not the ones who had to hitchhike to the gas station. We wonder aloud about whether David has been kidnapped by the psycho farmer.

Mendy and I enter into further discussion. It turns out that we went to the same high school -- actually lived about ten minutes away from each other almost our entire childhoods, but never met: MS#2. We eventually spy David, walking down the road, his t-shirt in his back pocket, singing "100 Bottles of Beer On the Wall" really loudly, looking like an extra from a Bon Jovi video. We are on our way again.

**10:00 pm** I am stoned. Very very stoned. MS#3.

We pulled up to our hosts' house about 8:30 tonight. It's three of them -- Indira, Sam and Kelly. Indira and Kelly have lived together for a long time and have always gotten along, and then Kelly started dating Sam and eventually Sam moved in to save on rent. They are people who I don't know, who are too young FOR me to know, but they are the kids who have taken over the 'cool' spot of the Columbia population that David and I and Mendy once occupied ourselves.

There is a curious way that people join the culturally elite in a SlackerTown, different from

most other cities. Most SlackerTowns have a series of hotspots, retail places that become the regular hangouts of the MS's. They differ from town to town, and usually from year to year: when I was in school, the "uberstores" included Shattered, a local danceclub; The Blue Note, the local alternative live band club; Shakespeare's Pizza, which is the slacker pizza place right by campus; Streetside Records, the only record store in town that has cool albums; and then an assorted series of stores that would change every year -- coffeehouses, used clothing stores, used record shops, the latest overpriced restaurant.

These are not fabulous jobs when you work at the Uberstores -- just like any other Slacker profession, it consists mostly of making shit for customers, cleaning up the customers' shit, taking a lot of shit from customers, and then a lot of sweeping and mopping once the place closes. Likewise, there's nothing special about the pay at the uberstores either -- to get an idea of salary in a collegetown, consider the fact that in 1993, I was damn lucky to get a job at the new Kinko's, because it was one of the only places in the entire town that started you at \$5.50 an hour. Of course, my rent was \$100 bucks a month, too. But more on that later.

Somehow or other, though, these uberstores develop as THE places to work, and the challenge to get hired on becomes monumental. Once during college, Shakespeare's put a flyer in the window saying "NOW HIRING," and by twelve hours later they had a hundred applications. At a place like Streetside or Shattered, there WERE no public notices; on the rare occasions that a person would quit, they would literally hand-pick their successor, much like royalty.

Lest you believe this to be just a snotty pretentious attitude by those employees with no merit behind it, let me just tell you that these people really WERE treated like royalty in Columbia. Now, places like The Blue Note and Shattered I can understand, because becoming friends with those people could guarantee you free drinks, no cover charges, and getting to cut in line. But the employees at these places were treated (are treated) with much more of a sense of awe and reverence than those fringe benefits warranted; and for a place like Shake's or Streetside, where nothing free could be gained, I NEVER understood their entry into the Uberstore category.

SlackerTowns are notorious for this -- fame and reward for the most arbitrary, self-fabricated reasons, not for any kind of actual accomplishment or merit. This is another large reason why I was compelled to leave.

So, Indira and Sam and Kelly were part of the indie Blue Note crowd now, even though I didn't know them. "Different faces, same wardrobe," as David says. The three of them are just old enough now to be tired of the loud and crazy Student Ghetto of east campus, a six block grid of houses where the majority of the independent undergraduates live. They are all approaching twenty-five now, and like their compatriots, have moved a little past downtown to small rural roads with names like "Hinkson" and "Paris" and "West Boulevard," places with gardens in the back and lots of room for the dog, places where you can rent an entire house, front to back, basement to attic, for \$500 a month.

Walking into the Sam, Indira and Kelly (SIK) house was like walking into an ages-old checklist of what a Slacker household should be like: black and white film still poster of David Bowie from "The Hunger" propped in the corner; defunct stereo receiver in the fire-

place; hodgepodge of used and mismatched retro furniture tastefully placed around the house; library of old textbooks, seminal literature, and healthy collection of Henry Rollins and Bukowski; cheerfully cluttered kitchen, mismatched silverware, and overflowing recycling bin; and a mass of CDs that reach staggering proportions.

One of the things that I had completely forgotten was how all-important and all-pervasive music was in my life, how it provided an almost-constant soundtrack to the plotline which was my MS experience. I forgot it until the moment I spied a record player in the living room (a record player!), a stack of vinyl sitting next to it (vinyl!) and I suddenly realized how incredibly quiet it seemed in that house without some music going.

Indie rock and retro vinyl is just a way of life in a SlackerTown, something as inherent to your day-to-day existence as eating or breathing. There's really no question about it -- almost all of my friends worked at one time or another for the campus radio station, or Streetside Records, or the Blue Note, or were regional reps for major labels, or ran an indie label out of their living room, or were in a band that toured every summer and blew into South By Southwest in Austin every March and wowed the crowd. That was it, that was the shit, the one point in common for all of us -- the ability to out-hip each other's references, the ability to out-retro each other in vinyl collection, the ability to get backstage after a concert at the Blue Note, hang out with the band, and ending up letting someone like Pavement crash on your floor that night. The stereo started up about twenty minutes after we got into town (Sergio Mendes and Brasil 66) and never stopped the entire time we were there.

The SIK House is, of course, a pot house, and I had an opportunity very early on to brush up on my bong skills: MS#4. That's something else about Columbia that differs from Chicago -- people are really, really into their pot culture. They know how to roll the perfect oversized joint from two or three rolling papers stuck together; they know how to mix in the perfect blend of tobacco to make the smoke much smoother; they are conditioned to automatically grab the bong and hide it behind the couch every time there's a knock at the door. SlackerTowns are, at the heart, always HippieTowns too, and even if you are not a hippie and just want to kick a hippie's ass everytime you see a pair of Birkenstocks, you are nonetheless infused with a bit of the hippie lifestyle just by being there, such as smoking a lot of pot, enjoying the occasional guitar-based country rock show, and going camping on April weekends.

Sam and I are in the middle of a very stoned conversation. He is a sound engineer, for both live shows and recording sessions, and he is telling me how he feels that he's just about reached the upper limit of what he can do here in Columbia, how he feels that it's about time that he moves on. On the other hand, he has a good gig at the Blue Note, the money comes in, it's a nice town to be in, a pleasant town, a cheap town. He just doesn't quite know what to do. I attempt to tell him that getting out should be one of his biggest priorities right now... but I try to tell him this without being insulting or seeming that I'm bigger than him for being able to do it myself. But of course, I'm stoned out of my gourd and have no idea if I'm succeeding.

**11:15 pm**

After sitting around the SIK House for another two hours, eating rice with too many spices mixed in, listening to Indira say multiple times, "Oh God, I don't want to go downtown AGAIN tonight" and trying to convince her through the THC haze that we are in from out-of-town and that we WANT to go downtown, we finally head out.

Here's how Columbia's liquor laws work: You can sell alcohol until 1:30 a.m., Monday through Saturday. No package liquor can be sold on Sunday; restaurants can sell through midnight on Sunday, but only if a certain percentage of their income comes from food sales. As a result, the bars all close around 1 to 1:15 in the morning, in a vain attempt to get all the drunken undergraduates chased out by 1:30 (it never works).

I am doing the 9th Street Shuffle tonight, 9th Street being the cultural "main street" of Columbia, the street filled with all the alternative bars, the cool coffeehouses, the used record stores that all the MS's go to on a regular basis. The Blue Note is at the northern tip of downtown 9th St., Shattered on the southern tip, right before you hit the campus proper. It's funny, because Cherry St., the cross-street where Shattered is located, also contains Columbia's two largest fraternity bars, Harpo's and Deja Vu, each about two blocks on either side of Shattered. As you can imagine, at about 1:30 each morning, when all the fraternity people are meandering east and west looking for their friends, and all the slackers are meandering north and south doing the same thing, the intersection of 9th and Cherry is not the most pleasant thing sometimes.

Shattered and the Blue Note have oddly similar histories, which of course mirrors the history of alternative culture in the last twenty years in general, yet have many opposite specifics in their history. The two clubs are hooked together in Columbia MO lore so much that they are inseparable. Like peanut butter and jelly. Mobile homes and tornadoes. Or Maria and loud. If you were a habituate of Shattered, you would have gotten that last inside joke.

Shattered opened in the early eighties as a shitty underground biker/drug/loser club in the basement of a dilapidated downtown mall. It went through a bit of a identity crisis in its first few years -- a combination of new wave danceclub, host of live punk shows (among others, Black Flag and Circle Jerks played there in the heyday of the scene), and sole purveyor of industrial music in the late '80s, when my friends and I first started going, we of course being obsessed with the sweet, evil sounds of Ministry, Skinny Puppy, Front 242, Thrill Kill Kult, and all those other wonderful bands, like any good art major in the late '80s was.

Shattered is owned by Johnnie Hodges, although popular rumor still persists that he is a puppet owner for the Mafia in California, and that Shattered exists to launder drug money from the coast. Frankly, I've never been able to either confirm or deny this rumor, even though one of my roommates was the general manager of Shattered at one point in school. The fact of the matter is that, in fifteen years of existence, Shattered has never once replaced the dancefloor light or sound system, never does promotions, doesn't advertise (barring the occasional flyer on downtown kiosks) and in general has remained the shitty underground bar that it's always been. Now, is this because the club was created so that it wouldn't garner any attention to itself, or is it this hypercasual attitude that made it the popular club that it

is? I leave the analysis to you.

The Blue Note also started in the early eighties, but under very different auspices, and really, it can't be denied that the creation of The Blue Note is the one single catalyst that made Columbia MO elevate itself from just another colleegetown to the SlackerTown that it is. The reason is simple: Richard King, the founder and still-owner of The Blue Note, loved indie bands, and he wanted to see some place in Missouri that would book these bands. Originally situated in a shitty warehouse on the edge of town, the list of bands that played that old stinky room in the first five years could make your head spin: R.E.M., Lou Reed, Pixies, The Minutemen (and later, FIREHOSE), Love and Rockets, and it goes on and on. Columbia immediately became a seminal point in American indie rock history, one of the few cities in the entire midwest that supported these bands and let them thrive and move on to be the supergroups that they all became. The Blue Note even holds a small bit of actual music history -- it hosted the very last performance ever of Husker Du. It's true -- they broke up on the road the next day and never played a show again.

Richard was just a punk in his mid-twenties who liked bands. Because of his work and his successes, he became much more -- he became the ultimate realization of the "big fish in the small pond" that fuels SlackerTowns and is the rule of thumb. As the early-eighties became the mid-eighties and then the late-eighties, "alternative" music became more and more the norm in society. Frat boys started hanging up their polo sweaters and wearing psychedelic t-shirts. They grew their hair out into ponytails and wore little plastic peace-sign necklaces. And people started flocking to the Blue Note. In 1990, Richard had an opportunity to move, and he did -- he bought an antique theatre on 9th St. that had previously been turned into a live music club that had failed. It is antique, ornate, and holds 1,100 people. Soon after, Richard started taking some bigger chances on booking, and soon the Blue Note was hosting the likes of the Replacements, Public Enemy, Johnny Cash, while still supporting local and indie bands all during the week. It was a smash. Popular rumor has it that Richard is a millionaire two times over now (again, neither confirmed nor denied). When the Blue Note started hosting a dance party every Wednesday night, it quickly became THE event to be at, to the point that clubs like Shattered had to start closing down on Wednesdays because they couldn't make enough money to afford paying the staff of three that were there.

Shattered had its shift into the fraternity/mainstream just a little bit later, and it was spurred by two events in 1990 that were, in turn, spurred by the enormous impact that the Blue Note's dance parties had: 1) my friends and I, all students at the time, decided that we wanted to start running an art gallery. We convinced Johnnie to let us do it at Shattered the last Wednesday of each month, him having nothing to lose because the place was closed anyway; and 2) a couple of DJs at Shattered decided that they thought it would be fun to spin all records from their childhoods, the early '80s, on Wednesday nights. It was something they never heard anywhere else, and they thought "it might bring in a bit of a crowd."

Both our art gallery and the Retro Night (as it was to be known) became accidental smashes, and by April, 1991, The Blue Note was bringing in nine hundred people on Wednesday nights, Shattered six hundred, and Wednesdays were pretty much the one single night that the ENTIRE town went out. I've found out that Wednesdays are still the biggest night in

town, even though the students now don't even know WHY that is.

So. This is what I'm doing -- shuffling between the Blue Note (another dance night tonight) and Shattered (which is always dance music now), looking for people I know, dancing a little bit, drinking a little bit. I have a lot to tell people about what I've been doing recently:

--I have a novel out;

--I just won second place at the National Poetry Slam;

--I'm going on a nationwide tour this spring, which is getting sponsored by Camel cigarettes;

--I'm performing at SxSW this spring on the same stage as Henry Rollins and Lydia Lunch;

--I might be going on MTV this winter;

--I might be getting signed by Mercury Records this winter to do a spoken word album.

Needless to say, I'm feeling like a rock star when I get into town.

I'm having a really strange experience tonight, an experience like I didn't realize I was going to have. It would probably be easiest to explain it by just showing you an example:

Down at Shattered I ran into C\_\_\_, a gentleman who is just maybe a few years older than me, and who was one of the Slacker Elite when I was in school, through working at Shattered. C. is one of those people who I always felt was sort of laughing at me behind my back, who I felt like was talking about me when I wasn't around. We saw each other, he came over and sat down and asked me what I was doing these days, I went through the litany of the above list, and showed him a copy of my book.

"Wow," he said, then just looked at the book for awhile. "Wow," he said again. "I... can't believe it. That's... wow, that's fantastic, Jason."

"Oh... well... thanks."

"No, I mean it. I mean it very sincerely. I think it's just great that you're having all these successes. I think it's just... wow, I think it's just fantastic."

This has been happening all night -- the very people who used to be snide at me for having successes, who used to make me feel bad for wanting to strive for something beyond the reach of Columbia MO, are now sincerely impressed by my work and sincerely happy that I AM achieving success. I don't quite know what to make of it. I think I'm going to have to mull it over for awhile before I figure out what it means.

I had to make it back to the Blue Note by 1:15, so that I could, of course, get locked in. Like I said, all patrons have to be out of the bars by 1:30 due to city ordinance, but if you are an UberSlacker or friend thereof, you can usually get locked into the Blue Note while the staff is finishing up closing the place down, and you can hang out and drink for another twenty to thirty minutes. Again, this is one of those things that seems entirely trivial to the point of being silly now, but is taken very seriously in Columbia.

So I'm here and I'm getting hit on. Her name is M\_\_\_, and she is a journalism major. Of course. The University of Missouri has one of the top three journalism schools in the nation, and so it is impossible to get away from the big J, no matter what you do or where you go. Journalism majors in Columbia MO tend to be arrogant, overdriven, with an immense martyr complex built into their system, and from out-of-state. Oh yes, and absolutely beautiful.

Thankfully this is the weekend of Princess Diana's funeral, so no one's in much of a mood to admit that they are J students or talk about the subject of journalism at all.

M. is one of those people who would never have given me the time of day when I was living in Columbia -- and even if she had, I wouldn't have believed it. This teaches me two important lessons -- 1) you are infinitely more interesting and sexy when you come in from out-of-town; and 2) Chicago has taught me much about how easy it is to flirt and/or seduce. It is something that I never really learned in Columbia -- if you see someone you like, go up and talk to them. Get their phone number. Ask them out. When the time seems right, lean in and kiss them. It's just not much more difficult than that.

But the thing to remember is what Val says this weekend. Val is yet another friend of mine from school, one who has left, traveled across the country and into Ireland, and has come back for grad school. She used to be good at flirting/seducing people, too, but she claims she's back into that "Columbia mode" again. "Because," she says, "when you're in Columbia and you see someone cute, there's no pressure suddenly on. You know for a fact that you will run into them again in about twelve hours, and keep running into them three or four times a week, every week. There's no need to get a phone number or even talk to them the first several times you see them. It's a little gauche to do so, frankly." Ah yes.

When I mention that I'm from Chicago, M. brightens. "Oh, I'm in Chicago all the time. Do you ever go to Lounge Ax?" This is something else to know about Columbia MO -- there is a very strong Chicago connection between the two towns. It's a natural progression -- people who DO want to leave Columbia usually want to go somewhere that's large, urban, full of creativity and professional connections, yet a place that maintains as much of that midwestern charm, attitude, and feeling that it can possibly get away with. Chicago is a natural selection -- plus, really, it's only about a four hour drive away from St. Louis, or a half-hour plane ride.

There are several hundred people from Columbia MO living in Chicago at any given moment, as I imagine that there are hundreds of other people from all the other midwestern SlackerTowns here also. You never know when you're going to run into one of them -- but a live music show is always a good bet, of course. A contingent of Columbia people actually own and run one of the better and more well-known music clubs in Chicago -- The Empty Bottle. People who are current Columbia residents want to quickly establish their Chicago/indie connection to you, to let you know they're not just a tourist, that they're not just someone who says they're from Chicago but later admits that they grew up in Schaumburg and are down here in Missouri now for journalism school:

"Oh, we got really drunk at the Smart Bar last time we were up."

"Oh, what neighborhood do you live in? My friends live in Ukrainian Village."

"Oh, some friends of mine are in a band up there that just played at Fireside Bowl."

All this coming from M. is, frankly speaking, charming. We exchange phone numbers and agree to 'hook up' the next time she's in Chicago. Right about then, the staff comes by and announces that they are done closing and the club is getting locked up. I find David and Mendy and we are on our way back to the SIK House, for more pot, more alcohol, more vinyl and finally a little sleep.

**sunday**

**september 7 1997**

**12**

**11:00 am**

The people in the SIK House -- residents, guests -- don't seem to be much into the idea of clothing: MS#6. David and Sam are constantly running around without their shirts on; the women in the house don't really bother dressing when they get up in the morning, instead lounging about the living room draped in a bedsheet, groggily sipping on coffee, lighting the constant cigarettes, and throwing some Simon and Garfunkel vinyl on the stereo ("nothing too heavy before two in the afternoon," Indira says). I have been living by myself for a little over two years now in Chicago, and I have forgotten the seductive sexual rush of barely covered skin and the almost lethal casualness of Missouri Slackers, the way people take a shower and then walk around the house wrapped only in a towel, half-naked for an hour or more. It is excruciating at times -- this morning I walk by one of the bedrooms and one of the women in the house is still asleep, sprawled across the bed completely naked save a small swatch of cotton sheet over her behind. I have an immediate and shameful desire to close the door, slip into bed, and just have nasty sweaty sex right there and then: MS#7. Yes, this sharp rise in lewd thoughts deserves its own MS label, even though I still have lewd thoughts in Chicago. The difference is that they come to me in Missouri about once every ten seconds. I suddenly remember with painful clarity how little I got laid in college.

**5:00 pm**

Mendy has still not returned with the car -- she has been spending time with a former friend over at his place, and bets are being taken about whether they are just platonic this weekend, shacking up again for a couple days, or if what she said about it is the simple truth -- "I just need to go sleep in some air conditioning for a couple hours or I'm gonna fuckin' die." David and I have some serious 9th St. Shuffling to do, so we have made the 25 minute walk from the SIK House to downtown and have now split up to cover more territory.

I still need to pick up a suit to wear to the wedding, so I head out to Leo's Old Clothes, thank the silent Slacker Gods that it still exists when I reach it. I pretty much lived in old/older/vintage clothes while I was in Missouri: MS#8. I'm not sure what it is about SlackerTowns that eschew new clothing like it's a plague -- perhaps it's just the simple fact that you never have anything that you have to get dressed up to do, unlike Chicago, where my day job forces me to have five or six tasteful Gap outfits hanging in my closet, clean and pressed and ready to go at a moment's notice.

The paradox about SlackerTowns is that, even though 90% of the population shops exclusively at resale stores, there is nonetheless a plethora of cheap, quality used clothing to go around -- again, unlike Chicago, where a quest for a winter coat can take me an entire day and will lead me to sad shops with sad, completely picked-over and entirely-too-expensive tatters. As a result, I try to hit the vintage stores everytime I get into Missouri, and I am eternally grateful for them once I'm there. I pick up a complete Kennedy-era herringbone suit, three white shirts, a tie, two ankle-length winter coats, and a fedora for \$70. Yahoo!

Now we are at Flatbranch, a microbrewery and pub that was opened maybe two years before I originally moved away. Flatbranch reminds me of one of THE most wonderful things about visiting a SlackerTown once you live in Chicago -- you finally have a little fucking money, and you can actually do some of those things you always wanted to do when you lived there. Flatbranch is a good example -- it's a cool place, extremely cool, but prohibitively

expensive to a college student ("Four bucks for a pint of beer? You MUST be joking") and the only times we ever got to go was on "special occasions," which in SlackerSpeak means someone just had Mom and Dad send them unexpected money, or someone just donated plasma and has thirty bucks burning a hole in their pocket, or someone just ripped off a dorm room and has resold all the CDs that were nabbed. It's really nice to walk into a Flatbranch or a Village Wine and Cheese or a Trattoria Stratanova and blow some money and not have to worry about it, not have to worry if that will now be your last meal of the day. Don't get me wrong -- in Chicago I am dirt poor and it is a chore to scrape up the \$500 in rent I owe each month. But in Columbia MO, a couple of hundred dollars is a king's ransom, and you can literally live like royalty while you're here.

Something is bugging me at Flatbranch -- something I've forgotten, something important, right at the tip of my tongue. Oh... oh yeah.

"Hey David, when's the wedding?"

David looks at his watch. "Oh shit, in an hour. Come on, we better get back or we won't have time to do bong hits before the ceremony."

**6:00 pm** Have you ever been to a Slacker Wedding?

The party in question want to make that leap, want to make that public commitment to a full and happy life, want to do it up right, just like their parents and everyone else from their happy, midwestern upbringings. But there are a couple of problems -- like everyone involved with the wedding are all either atheists or Wiccans or pagans or so blase about their religion that the idea of knowing a minister or having access to a church is simply out of the question; like the couple in question are Slackers, which means that they are dirt poor and can't have the normal ceremony that we usually see in the normal, suburban, life-choking cities of our childhoods; like the couple in question are so infused with bitterness and cynicism about the institution of marriage, even as they are deciding to do it themselves, that they consciously and politically want to make it different from their now-divorced parents, right from the start, right from the ceremony itself.

So.

In our case, the ceremony was held in a public park, right next to the picnic pavilion, with a little temporary wooden porticullis for the minister to stand in, and a total of six chairs, for the immediate family. Music was provided by other members of Ditch Witch and other seminal midwestern indie bands (which, of course, have shown up in droves for the wedding, along with just about every other established artist in the entire midwest). There actually is a minister for the wedding, but he's a minister in the Universal Life Church ("Legal in 49 states!" David proclaims to me) and during the day he runs an internet service provider company downtown. He does things during the ceremony like say, "I will now ask the congregation if they will attest to being witnesses to the spiritual union of these two people," and then when no one answers, throwing his hands in the air and yelling, "Well, people? I can't HEAR you!" until everyone laughs and yells out "YES!" No one would be caught dead in a normal suit at this gala -- half the audience are dressed like me, their finest, least-torn vintage suit, and the other half are dressed in outfits they would normally wear on stage or to a danceclub -- leopard print suit jackets, flaming red polyester flare hotpants, bright yellow Ed-Asneresque ties.

David and I run into Debbie in the parking lot before the ceremony and go over to say hello. It's funny -- I have known Debbie since we were both maybe nineteen, and I have run the gamut of emotions with her over the years -- I have seen her facedown in the gutter on Saturday nights, so drunk that she doesn't know her name; I have entertained her at three in morning a couple of times, she zooming on drugs so illegal that I hesitate to mention them here; I have accidentally seen her naked and she has seen me in the same state (like I mentioned, she dated one of my roommates at one point). It's surreal to run into her now, me an established writer in Chicago, she so mature and grown-up and getting ready to tie the knot.

Well, maybe it's not so different. Debbie is hanging out with her mom behind a van, the two of them are sharing a beer and a cigarette, passing them back and forth like a Cheech and Chong movie, and Debbie is desperately squishing her boobs around so that they'll stop popping out of her plunging-v-neck wedding dress. We talk to her for a bit, and then she says, "Well, I better go. I'm getting married in a couple of minutes. Or at least as soon as we finish this beer, ha-ha-ha!" Maybe some things never change.

Slacker weddings walk that very fine line between country minimalism charm and the degeneration into a white-trash wedding -- really, the entire Slacker lifestyle treads that fine line at all times. The crucial difference, and the one thing that saved this wedding, is this: there is no smarmy tongue-in-cheekness about a Slacker wedding, even with the polyester suits, the new-age quasi-legal minister, and background music more at home on "120 Minutes" than in a religious ceremony. Slackers, in their hearts, in their souls, believe in these midwestern ideals, believe them with a sincerity and a passion not even found in most of the hypocritical population who deride Slackers -- a profound belief in the American plains, a belief in hard work and justifiable rewards, a belief in family and country and duty, an actual tangible belief in the idea of getting married, having children, owning a little place you can call your own, leaving this earth with one thing left behind that you can point to and say, "This was my little contribution towards making this place a little better than when I got here." So never mind the fact that the entire populace of males were staring at Debbie's breasts. It was one of the most real weddings I have ever been to.

**12:30 am** The wedding reception is at the Blue Note: MS#9. At first glance this may seem like a terrible idea, but it actually was ingenious -- the very things that wedding receptions try to set up from scratch and always and forever fail at (a decent bar, halfway decent dancefloor, a sound system that doesn't short out halfway through, a D.J. that doesn't completely suck) are all things that the Blue Note excels at, makes it the popular club that it is. It is like having our own private danceclub, all to ourselves, where all the patrons are friends of each other and everyone has to wear a suit or dress to get in. Oh, well, actually, it's not LIKE having our own private danceclub -- we literally DO have our own private danceclub. Sorry, I'm stoned. Again. MS#10.

The bride and groom head out to have their first dance, which is a Bobby Vinton song. Then the D.J. breaks into a song from the "Grease" soundtrack, for which the couple have in advance already scripted a bawdy choreograph:

YOU'RE THE ONE THAT I WANT  
OOH-OOH-OOH

"Well," Mendy says into my ear, "that really sets the tone for the whole evening, doesn't it?"

I couldn't agree more.

Even at a Slacker Wedding, the same old shit happens that happens at every single wedding reception in the history of Western Civilization -- the bride dances around in a big goofy circle with a seven-year-old girl; a couple of thirteen-year-old boys stand on the edge of the dancefloor, desperately wanting to dance but prohibited because they are thirteen and way too cool and way too scared to do so; the grandparents sit at a table near the dancefloor and sip Rob Roys and shake their heads in bemusement at all the weirdoes running around; the aunts in their forties have too many Bud Lites and end up lecherously hitting on all the boys in their mid-twenties (and, of course, all us boys in our mid-twenties let them); the D.J. plays one big band song sometime during the night, which the parents have requested so that they can finally get out on the dancefloor and not feel like idiots; and of course, all the unattached guests of the party get really, really drunk and attempt to start their own little one-night wedding themselves, presumably leading to a quick and sweaty consummation later in the evening.

I run into my friend Robyn at the reception. Robyn was a co-worker of mine at KCOU, the college radio station which was the blood and sweat of myself and most of my friends in school. Robyn was one of the people who I used to worry about a lot, who I cared for and desperately wished that happiness would come into her life -- especially considering the incredibly dysfunctional childhood that she had had that left her with such a low self-esteem as an adult that she refused to believe that anyone could ever care for her... which made you care for her even more. It happens, you know? In the course of college, you meet those people whose childhoods were so fucked up that you just want to immediately call your parents and say, "Hey, thanks. Thanks for not being my friend's parents. You made a couple of mistakes, sure, but Jesus, thanks for all the right things you did." Robyn's one of those people who make you worry that they will be the catalyst for the second reason to go back to your collegetown -- not just the weddings, but also the funerals.

Robyn is dating someone for the first time in the history that I've known her. She seems happy -- really, really happy. She has a new place all to herself, she's working steadily, she seems to finally no longer listen to her mother, and she even seems to have gotten over her anorexia. Robyn and I and David and Robyn's boyfriend slip out from the reception for a bit to go over to her place across the street, look at a bunch of old photographs, and smoke yet even more pot.

It's so enjoyable to look through the photos -- like a high school reunion, but the satisfaction of knowing that these were all friends who you picked by choice, not because you grew up with them. "Oh, and Troy's in Seattle now with the band -- Gary's in... where's Gary? Iceland, I think -- Karen's in Texas working for a paper -- Mike got a job with FOX, he's the network's youngest vice president in history, surprise, surprise -- and so-and-so is working for a major label now, and so-and-so is a rep at Matador, and so-and-so's writing for CMJ..." It's nice and oddly satisfying to see that the people who I chose to be the closest friends with in college are actually all out doing something with their lives now. It makes me feel not so much like a freak for doing so myself.

I spy the only photos ever taken of me during the colossally stupid period of my life now known as "The Great Shaved Head Mistake of 1994." I steal the photos, finish up the one-hitter, and we head back to the reception.

The reception finishes up at 11 pm -- I half-expect to see the bartenders running around the room yelling at all the middle-aged relatives, "All right, we're closed, motherfuckers! Get the fuck out! Bar's closed! Get the fuck out!" We all head off to a party thrown by yet another ex-Blue-Note-SlackerElite. They are already out of beer by the time we get there: MS#10.

The party is unremarkable except for two strange incidents: first, I accidentally meet the husband-wife duo that are members of House of Large Sizes, a band I've always been a big fan of but never seen live. I meet them because I am sitting in a chair when the woman turns to me and says, "I saw you slow-dancing on the floor tonight. Man, you actually KNOW how to dance, don't you?" and I start talking about the ragtime festival I go to every year and how I learned how to slow dance there and we get into a big discussion about the midwest and artistic careers and making your living from your creative output, blah blah. I ask for advice on this tour I'm taking next spring, and receive completely opposite opinions from the optimist wife ("You're going to meet so many cool people on the road and you're going to get this complete sense of community") and the pessimist husband ("You're going to get ripped off at least once during the tour, if not more, so get used to the idea now -- don't rely on any fucking thing the bar's supposed to supply you with -- if all you need for your show is a mic and an amp, then carry an extra mic and amp in your car the whole time"). It was the first time I've ever gotten to talk to a band that I'm a fan of and be an artistic equal, a member of the same family, instead of just some college schmuck who works at the campus radio station and has a sticker of their band on my mountain bike. It was nice.

The other strange incident is that I get trapped into a conversation with R\_\_\_\_. R., unlike C., is one of those SlackerElite who actually WAS an asshole to me in college, very publicly, and made no bones about it. I feel very uncomfortable around these people (and believe me, with the things I ended up doing in college, there's a good number of people in Columbia who were like this) and I have been trying to avoid him whenever we run into each other. However, I've gotten cornered in the living room, looking for the phone, and now I have to talk to him.

"So I hear you got a book out."

"Um, yeah, that's right."

"And you might be signing with Mercury."

"Well... it's a long shot. But maybe."

"Well, that's great. That's just fucking great, Jason." R. pauses, looks at me. "You know, there was a little betting pool going 'round when you left, on how long it'd be before you moved back."

"Um... yeah, I'd heard that." This was actually a true event. It made me incredibly pissed off at the time, made me lose a number of friends that I had had.

"You know," R. says, digging his foot into the floor, "a lot of people refused to believe in you, because they couldn't believe in themselves. But good for you for doing it. Fuck 'em, you know? I think it fuckin' rocks that you're making it."

Um, yeah. Okay. Hmm.

**monday**

september 8 1997

**2:00 pm**

David and Mendy and I are having lunch with Richard King, the owner of the Blue Note. Or, as he is known in Columbia, King Richard.

Richard is the epitome of what Missouri Slackers want to have happen in their own lives, the epitome of the hidden dream of Slacker existence. He took a very Slackeresque habit -- enjoyment of sitting around, listening to indie bands -- and parlayed it into a business that easily grosses over a million dollars a year. He has made (and broken) careers. He is personal friends with dozens of the most influential people in modern music. All while staying in a SlackerTown the entire time, and all done with the original Slacker purpose in mind -- let's sit around and listen to some cool music.

What the Slackers don't understand (or maybe they do only too well) is that to move from the position of thousands in this town -- sit around and listen to cool music -- to the position that Richard is currently in, you have to actually work. You have to work HARD, much harder than any traditional career-oriented job you might get, much less the typical SlackerJob that most in town have. You have to put up with endless amounts of hassles and headaches, endless bullshit and frustration, for those few moments of glory and happiness.

Now, I don't deny that Richard has done his share of slightly asshole things over the years. I also don't deny that it can be really fuckin' frustrating sometimes in Columbia MO when you are running an event across town and you spend all your money on a couple hundred flyers and post them around one night just to wake up in the morning to see that Richard's guys have gone around town at three o'clock that night and plastered over every one of your flyers with their never-ending supply of their own flyers. Mostly, however, the things that Richard does are just normal events that transpire with anyone running a small business, anywhere in America. The Slackers don't understand this, because Richard is the only person in the entire town who has made a big success out of an alternative small business, and thus see it as an inherent arrogance on his part. Thus, "King Richard."

This is the ultimate paradox of a SlackerTown, the one that is the most complicated and subtle, and which eventually turns into the most frustrating thing about living there and is the catalyst for moving. Slackers dream of succeeding, of really making it within the confines of the small, safe town where they live, completely on their own terms. But anytime someone attempts to actually make that happen, anytime someone simply puts in the same amount of effort and work and sweat that I have put here in Chicago (without getting any shit from my friends either, mind you), Slackers get threatened. They see all that work and it reminds them that they have not put in such effort themselves towards their own goals. Slackers watch the "overnight" successes of other Slackers around the nation -- the Richard Linklaters, the Quintan Tarrantinos -- and falsely believe that it can be done the same way that they are currently attempting to do it -- sit around for hours at a time, watching "Tinytoons" and getting high, move to a bar and sit around for hours at a time, talking endlessly about their great new project, make a flyer about three in the morning when drunk, and go to bed. When they are reminded that it takes actual dedication, sacrifice, and a solid

financial plan, they refuse to believe it and instead accuse the worker in question of being the ever-elusive, catch-all "sellout." And think up snotty nicknames, like King Richard.

Richard King has always intimidated the high holy shit out of me -- and strangely enough, I've never known why. He has always been gracious and helpful with whatever endeavor I worked at in college -- he volunteered to give us a weekly space to perform when I was in a comedy improv group; he bought ads in the zines I made; he happily agreed to let KWWC, the other radio station I worked for, co-host a whole week of live shows at the Blue Note, even though we had no money, did nothing towards booking the shows, and had "alternative music" programming for a grand total ever of six months when we approached him (it was the radio station of the city's other school, Stephens College, which up to that year had been nothing but jazz throughout its history); when he saw us doing a live remote broadcast from the sidewalk for The Breeders show that week and found out that none of us could afford to buy tickets, he let the whole station in for free and gave us free beer all night.

And just a few weeks before I moved to Chicago, Richard caught me at the Blue Note one night and started getting into a conversation with me. We got into more detail and more detail, and before we knew it, it was three in the morning and we were the only ones in the whole club. He said something to me that meant a lot, but that I didn't quite know how to respond to. I can't remember it word for word, but it went something like this:

"You know, Jason, I've been in Columbia for a while now, and I watch all the kids come and go, from year to year. And I've gotten to the point where I can tell, by the time the kids are nineteen or twenty, which ones are going to go on to be leaders in the city, which ones are going to go on and really make something of themselves. And I could always tell that about you, ever since I first met you. I've been watching you over the years, and that's why I always try to support what you do."

I don't know -- perhaps it's the fact that, from the get-go in college, I knew that I wanted to be a Richard King. I wanted to be a supreme success at whatever field I chose (which, for me, changed from year to year and in some ways still does). Perhaps it's the fact that I realized by the spring of 1990, when I had my first ever public creative display (an audience participation play that drew 200 people in one night), that I indeed had what it took to be a success, that I suddenly realized that I was going to make it while 95% of my contemporaries would not. Perhaps it's that as the years went on and I had more and more successes in this ever-changing pursuit of fame of mine (the art gallery, radio, bands, comedy improv, acting, photography, writing, cartooning, spoken word, hosting), I started receiving the same hassles, the same headaches, the same bullshit that Richard had been receiving for years. And that I totally respected him for dealing with it, thriving, moving on. And that I couldn't do that -- the criticisms and bullshit were too much for me, and I decided to move rather than deal with it anymore. In any case, it was very difficult for me to talk to Richard while I was living in Columbia, despite his efforts to make it easier.

Richard and I get along fine today, which surprises me. I'm still a little intimidated by him,

and some of things that I find coming out of my mouth during our conversation still embarrass me. But in general, I find that coming in to town as someone who has actually accomplished something, actually gotten something done outside the confines of our SlackerTown, makes me feel like I've earned the right to speak to him as an equal. It's almost like Richard is my artistic dad, and I had to make sure that I wouldn't disappoint him before we could start our relationship on these new, post-teenage terms. I feel like I've done that.

I mention to Richard that I'm going to be back in Columbia for homecoming -- MS#11 -- and that I was probably going to do a little spoken word show while there to try to sell some books.

"Well," he says, "you wanna come down and do it at the Blue Note? We'll do an early show, throw you up for an hour, promote the shit out of it."

Bless that King Richard.

**3:30 pm** We are getting ready to head back to Chicago. Actually, Mendy and I are sitting around the SIK House, waiting for David to get back with the car. David has received an urgent and harried phone call from his old employers, asking if he could come over and talk to them for a bit before leaving town. With an extremely nervous look on his face, David bids us adieu and hops in the car. That was an hour ago.

Have I explained David's dilemma, the catalyst that made HIM turn his back on Columbia after eight years himself and burn several bridges, like me, when leaving? In David's case, like me, it was his creative career, which in his case is radio.

For as long as I've known David (which is somewhere around 1987, but neither David nor I can really pinpoint the date when we originally met), being an on-air personality has always been his goal. He is one of those rare souls that get involved with student radio their first day of their freshman year and stay involved and passionate through their graduation day, working their way up from general format DJ plugging away the Mudhoney songs at four in the morning, all the way to station executive with their own speciality show on the air.

As the late eighties hit America and places like the Blue Note and Shattered started being filled with the mainstream, so too did the listenership of KCOU. And by the time fourteen-year-old girls were falling in love with Nirvana, KCOU, a 400-watt crappy student radio station, was beating all of the commercial stations in ratings at one time or another during the week, and the poor classic rock stations were still playing their Rush songs, scratching their heads, and trying to figure out where they went wrong.

At the height of KCOU's popularity, David was co-hosting, with Brent Gardner, their version of a "wacky morning drive time show," their version of course having actual real wackiness on the air, not to mention a hell of a lot better music between the witty banter of the DJs. David would do things on his show like sponsor an "Alive" film festival at the local theater, where listeners were invited to bring in their own barbecue ribs and feast away during the cannibalism movie. I mean, we were all doing weird things like that -- I once announced

an all-points-bulletin to my listeners for information concerning a woman I had fallen in love with at a danceclub that week -- but David was really GOOD at it. That year, David and Brent's show was the second-highest rated show in their time slot out of approximately twenty five stations, including ones that were spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to attract listeners. There was really never any doubt in any of our minds that David would go on to become the world's first intelligent Howard Stern, the nation's first non-patronizing Mancow, even perhaps move on to be an MTV personality, the secret goal of David's that he admitted to me one drunken night.

Of course, the inevitable happened -- a "commercial alternative" station was started in Columbia MO -- (K)BXR, directly modeled on (W)XRT in Chicago, even down to stealing their logo. David was asked to come on board there for a salary in the high teens, not a lot of money but certainly a great foot in the commercial door for a guy in his early twenties who had not yet left SlackerTown.

I moved on to Chicago with my own baggage while David became established. And while he was waiting for his own cherished on-air spot, he discovered something by accident -- he was good at writing ads. Very good. Over the course of a year, David won the in-house ad award almost every single week, and garnered several regional advertising awards.

However, the station was dragging their feet on David's career. Not only had they still not gotten him an on-air spot, they had never once discussed a raise for their goldenboy. David, getting more frustrated, eventually asked about a raise. He was told that the management would have to think it over; a week later, he was fired.

Distraught and disillusioned, David, like myself, finally decided to flip a final bird to Columbia and get the hell out. His post-Slacker life, like all of ours, has had its heady roller-coaster of ups and downs -- a stint in Denver radio, followed by getting hired to help found a new radio station in Champaign, Illinois with a radically new philosophy of programming. Which, of course, went belly-up a year later when the stuffy conservative moneymen of the station saw that the place still wasn't turning a profit, despite the industry knowledge that no radio station turns a profit in its first three years. But which, of course, still left David with good connections and a good rep in the industry, which is what has led him to Chicago, his childhood hometown, where he has possible interviews with Q101, Leo Burnett and Frankel.

David is back with the car. It turns out that the station executives have heard about David's post-BXR successes, knew that he was in town, and wanted to have a chat. They've just had the morning drive slot open up, five days a week. They'd sure love for him to come back to the station. They'd pay him in the low twenties, and while that is not much in Chicago terms, it is, as previously mentioned, a Columbia equivalent of somewhere around \$35,000. And, of course, the possibility of future raises, future advancement, and a parlay of this job into a major market is left lingering in the air.

David wanders around the apartment for about an hour, muttering "fuck" at random inter-

vals about five minutes apart. He stops every so often, turns to me, starts to say something like, "Those little fuckers have to..." or "They pull you back, Jason, they're always trying to pull you back, and..." but then he always shakes his head and lights another cigarette.

Eventually I just ask him straight out -- "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," David says, going over to the stereo and putting on some Ella Fitzgerald Live vinyl. "I don't know."

**5:15 pm** As we're loading up the car to go home, it slowly dawns on us that if we leave town now, we won't get into Chicago until... oh, probably three in the morning. Mendy and David and I just sort of look at each other, and then Indira says, "Oh shit, why don't you guys stay another night? Hey, we're gonna get stoned and watch the Chiefs game!" MS#12.

**9:00 pm** I have started writing my little essay about the weekend. Kelly is sitting in an armchair, reading through what I've written and keeping one eye on the television, where Kansas City is whipping somebody's ass on the gridiron.

I have not really mentioned Kelly much in this journal, and there's a reason why -- she seems to be the only one in the SIK House who has any kind of regular commitment to something outside of the house... or else she's the only one who can take the chaos and potential playtime of three out-of-town guests and still have the discipline to go do the things that she's supposed to be doing (unlike Sam and Indira, who have been skipping classes and work left and right so as to hang out with us: MS#13). As a result, Kelly is not at the house very much, and I haven't really gotten the time to talk to her.

Not to mention, Kelly is just another one of those people in Columbia who intimidate me. She is tough as fuck -- giant, multiple, full-color tattoos covering huge portions of her body; deep gravelly voice that, with every inflection, just spells out years of pain and experience that you will never have; this way of looking at you after you say something that just makes you feel like you have just uttered the most preposterously stupid thing that a human could ever say out loud. Kelly's one of those women in a SlackerTown who every single male instantly falls in love with, but never ever tell her, for fear of getting their ass kicked by her.

Kelly finishes reading the first few pages that I have written, hands the computer back to me and says, "Is all that real?"

"Yeah."

She raises one eyebrow, says, "Heavy," and goes back to the TV. I think she likes the story. But you never know.

**12:00 am** I have just received some information that I cannot digest -- it is literally sitting on the top of my brain, waiting for the day that it can finally sink in. But first, a little information on why I am at Shattered again:

I decided for the hell of it to call M. and see, since I'm in town another night, if she'd like to hang out. She calls me back right at the point that I'm the MOST stoned (of course) and we have this rambling phone discussion about weddings and the like. She tries to explain this weird story about how she has friends coming into town but they got their travel arrangements all screwed up and they're actually arriving in Jefferson City, the Missouri state capital which is about a thirty minute drive away, and how she has to leave and go down and pick them up and then drive back to Columbia tonight. I, of course, am surrounded by a THC haze so heavy that it blocks out the sun itself, and cannot follow her story to save my life. Finally she says, "Why don't I just meet you at Shattered at 12:30?" and something finally makes sense.

So everyone's stoned and watching the game, so I again have to make the 25 minute walk down to the central city, stoned and weaving this time, cursing the fact that our hosts don't live in the Student Ghetto. A half-hour after I arrive at Shattered, David decides that he DOES want to go, and shows up via car. That little fucker. He shows up with Lance, yet another friend of ours from our Columbia days, and one of the few people left in town who was also a fine art photography student, like me. It is now that I receive the shocking news: our photography professor, one of my mentors, has been murdered.

Ann Hoffman received her bachelor's degree in photography sometime in the '70s, then proceeded to drop out of photography, academia, and in many ways, life altogether for awhile. The five to ten years after that were always mysterious to us, her students -- she mentioned once that she spent several years as a professional horse jockey in Florida; we all knew that she had had a child out of wedlock, Brad, who she was constantly taking photographs of for her projects. We also know that she spent some time with renowned photographer Jerry Uelsmann while in Florida, and that whatever transpired invigorated her with a renewed sense of commitment to her photography. She received an invitation to study for her masters at our school almost randomly, and that is how we all ended up with her for our professor. The art school at my alma mater is small and not very good; there were only two photography professors altogether, which is why we all ended up studying with her every semester for our entire academic careers.

Ann was one of those magical teachers, one of those ones who forced you to grow by leaps and bounds without you even realizing that you were doing so. Ann made you alternately revel in awe at her abilities and curse the day she was ever born, usually both in the same day -- this was her teaching style. She never, I mean NEVER let you take the easy way out; you learned very quickly never to blurt out, "Ooh, I don't like this" at the weekly workshops unless you were ready to give a rational, detailed explanation of WHY you didn't like it, plus be prepared for her (who always played Devil's Advocate no matter what the issue) to argue with you for a half-hour, forcing you to hone your skills, your thought process, your own artistic philosophy. Likewise, you learned early on to never scrimp on your own photography, because Ann could sniff out bullshit like a police dog does heroin, and she'd call you on

it, force you to justify yourself, give you a beating if you couldn't. And like the best professors, she would bring in her new work herself, force herself to the same scrutiny, the same accusations from her students that she would give TO her students. "Come on," I can still hear her yelling. "Is it bullshit? Is it good? No one gets flunked for not agreeing with me!" Along the way, Ann ended up teaching us how to really think like an artist, how to act like an artist. She took a roomful of kids obsessed with new lenses and expensive cameras, and over the course of four years took those cameras out of our hands, replaced them with homemade pinhole cameras, experimental darkroom techniques, taught us to scratch and rip and spit on our paper to make it do what we fucking WANTED it to do. She took a roomful of children and turned us into adults.

There's a great story I have about Ann that I repeat often. In 1991 I had my first one-man show, a forty-piece themed exhibition called "disengage." I fucked around with it and almost didn't get the thing done in time, which naturally affected the quality of the work. The next week I was in class and Ann asked, "So what are you thinking of doing next?" and I said, "Oh, I was mulling over this idea for a book, actually. It'd be this little story about a weird guy who wanders into town and sort of becomes a cult figure, and a student who goes around shooting photographs of him. And then the book would be a short story explaining the plot, along with maybe fifty or a hundred photographs that correspond with the story. Oh, I don't know, I like the idea, maybe I'll work on it and have it ready in about six months."

"No, it IS a great idea," she said. "But here's what's going to happen. You have thirty days to finish the book. If you do, you get an 'A' for the semester. If not, I'm flunking you." And she walked out of the room while I was still too dumbfounded to respond.

So, I worked. And I worked. And I worked and I worked and I worked. It almost killed me, frankly -- seven to eight hours in the darkroom every single night for a month. But when I was done, I had "The Tale of Johnny X," a completed book that could probably be called some of the photography I've ever done. More than that, I had an experience under my belt that, now that I'm in Chicago and writing novels and working under deadlines all the time, I realize now taught me more about being a paid, real-world artist than any other experience in eight years at Columbia. I ran the book off at Kinko's about five o'clock that last, thirtieth morning, walked into class that day, and simply, silently, walked up to Ann and handed her the book. She took it from me, flipped through it, closed it, then wordlessly herself, reached out and hugged me, kissed me on the cheek. She picked the book back up, walked away to her office, and I walked the opposite direction back to my house to go to sleep. It is one of the most cherished memories of college I have.

So.

Brad, Ann's son, was always a peculiar child -- we all knew this from our experiences with him hanging around the darkrooms. He was hyperactive to begin with, and combining this with the ultra-liberal, ultra-independent raising that he was receiving from a mother like Ann, made him a real mess at times. I'm trying to figure out how old he was this year -- I

remember him turning seven or eight when I finished the book in 1991, which would make him around... thirteen or fourteen now?

So Lance tells me about how this year the Hoffman family started running into some problems regarding the computer. It seems that Brad had discovered the exciting and titillating world of internet chat rooms and web porn, and that he had developed quite a little obsession over it. Like a twelve-hour a day obsession. Like a phone bill for a couple of thousand dollars one month obsession. Like a really bad obsession, one of those ones they're always screaming about on "Hard Copy" and you always think is yet more alarmist bullshit.

According to Lance, Ann and others had some pretty heavy discussions with Brad over the issue, and they had finally come to an agreement that he would tone down his usage. The next month, another \$1,200 phone bill came. Having run out of options, Ann took Brad's computer away and sold it.

Two weeks after that incident (and about seven months before Lance is currently telling me the story), Ann comes home one day to see that Brad has gotten out Ann's gun and has loaded it. He shoots her six times, instantly killing her, then turns the gun on himself.

Like I said, the information has not sunk in yet -- it is still sitting there on the top of my brain, waiting for the day that I will be able to grieve over her death. For now, I can only look at it in art terms -- when I think of Ann being gone, of her horribly stereotypical murder, the thought refuses to register. But when I think of the idea of Ann's art, the photos that were so profound that I would be speechless sometimes, when I think of the fact that she will never be making a new piece again, never growing, never maturing -- that's when I cry. I cry softly to myself and I rue the loss of yet another great creator.

Ann and I got together the day that Robert Mapplethorpe died, back in the late '80s. We got really drunk and cried on each other's shoulders, toasted and toasted all the things that the man had done for our medium. Ann taught me that day that not only is it okay for an artist to mourn the loss of another artist, it is actually a needed and necessary part of BEING an artist. Any grief over an artist should not only involve the sadness of losing the human, but also the equal sadness of losing all that profound work that was being stored in the artist's brain, waiting for the day it would be released to a grateful public. Considering all of this, I believe that Ann would smile on how I'm handling her death. I believe she would say that I have been taught well.

**4:30 am** M. and I are lying in her bed in her Student Ghetto apartment, half-naked. We are trying to go to sleep but keep interrupting each other to kiss and lightly pet. MS#14.

M. finally shows up at Shattered about one in the morning, fifteen minutes before the bar closes. She has her traveling companions in tow and they have come straight from Jeff City to Shattered without even going by the apartment yet. We see each other, say hi, dance with our separate groups of friends for a bit, and then meet up again at closing. "Do you want to

go do something?" I ask.

"Sure," she says. I send David back to the apartment.

M. and the two travelers and I walk back to her car and she says quietly, "We're just going back to my apartment. Is that cool with you?" and I realize that I will be spending the night. M. lives in the exact same apartment that a number of really good friends of mine from KCOU lived in almost ten years ago: MS#15. The furniture looks as if it has literally never changed in all that time: MS#16. M.'s friends immediately go to bed, M. scrounges around the kitchen, then calls out, "Well, there's not much here. Would you like... hmm, Bacardi and... I think it's Gatorade?" MS#17.

I should mention that earlier in the evening when I announced to the SIK House that I was going out with M. later, Indira shouted from the other room, "You know, I asked around and I found out that I think she's dating someone." Indira and I have had some very light sexual tension developing this weekend (see elongated slow-dance at wedding reception referenced earlier), and I can't tell if she is attracted to me or is just naturally a physically intimate person. Then I realized that my weekend has gotten complicated enough without the addition of making a pass at one of my hosts, getting shot down, and having a really uncomfortable SIK House for the rest of the weekend. I simply told Indira that if M. really was dating, it would only confirm the track record I have always had with women in Columbia, Missouri.

M. and I drink our Bacardis-and-mystery-lemon-lime-liquid potables and read through what I have finished of the article. M. doesn't understand what I'm talking about. I start wondering for the first time what exactly her age is, and I attempt to figure it out the round-about way -- "So, I guess you're a, what? A senior now?" "No, I'm a junior." "But you started school in 1994?" "Yeah, but I have a weird story about starting college." Urgh. Usually age matters to me, but considering that it's now 3:30 in the morning and M. and I are sitting on the couch, touching each other's bodies in four different random, supposedly casual, spots, and that our faces are about three inches apart every time that we speak... well, I guess age is a pretty moot point by now.

M. seems interested and enthralled when I tell her old stories about Columbia history, like the time in 1991 that the entire staff of SPIN magazine came into town for an entire month to write and create their annual "College" issue, and what a fucking nightmare it turned into. She is the first person I've ever met who has been interested in these doddering old man stories, and it charms me. We finally get to the point where I should kiss her, and I say, "I really want to kiss you, but I heard that you were maybe dating somebody."

She looks at me in silence for a moment, then says, "Yeah, you're right. I AM dating someone. Kinda. It just started a couple of weeks ago."

I just sort of nod my head and say, "Ah." We sit in silence for about five seconds, and then she jumps on me.

Things start to get pretty heavy and we actually move our way into her bed. Then she is

overcome with a sense of guilt over her maybe boyfriend, and things lighten up. But then things start to get heavy again. And then light again. And then heavy. Then light. She says, "It's not so much that I'd feel guilty having sex with you. It's just that I feel really bad when I think about HIM doing the same thing that I'M doing right now." And so we agree to just go to sleep, barring the occasional light petting that occurs throughout the night. To borrow from my friend Shappy in Chicago, "She doesn't have issues... she has the whole goddamn subscription."

About four o'clock that morning, one of M.'s roommates gets home. She comes right into M.'s bedroom, flips on the overhead light, drunk out of her little undergraduate head, and starts yelling, "Hey, M\_\_\_! I'm SO DRUNK! Holy shit, guess what we did tonight! Oh..." She spies me. "Oh, hello."

"Hi there," I say, trying to cover myself and roll over at the same time.

M. raises a weary hand in my direction. "This is Jason, that guy I was telling you about."

"Oh, well, HELLO," the unnamed drunk roommate says, then sits down on the bed. "So let me tell you what happened to us tonight..."

"I'm..." I say, pausing, then -- fuck it -- getting out of bed half-naked. "I'm gonna go to the bathroom." I sit on the toilet until I hear the roommate trample up the stairs.

We finally start to get to sleep again, when M. rolls over and says, in that special intimate voice that one can only get when one is in bed with someone at 4:30 in the morning, "You know, I have this friend here who's an artist."

"Mm-hmm."

"And he's been spending a lot of time at home recently. He's twenty three now, and he says he's sick of the scene and all the stupid stuff about hanging out at the bars. He just sits at home most of the time now, working on his artwork." She pauses. "We used to make fun of him for being a stick-in-the-mud. But I guess I get it now. He's one of those people you wrote about in your article, right?"

There's hope for M. yet.

**tuesday**  
september 9 1997

**29**

**10:00 am**

M. has given me a ride home, after stopping off for coffee and cigarettes at the legendary Kwik Pantry, one of those SlackerTown institutions so inherent to the local lore that an entire Slacker movie, "Clerks," was made about one. We get to the SIK House, M. apologizes profusely for not having sex with me, and then asks if we can still hook up in Chicago. I say sure, we hug, and we part ways, me not entirely sure that she'll ever call me again.

I figure that at ten in the morning I'm safe from prying eyes, considering all the drugs we have taken this weekend and that everyone at the SIK House has been sleeping in every morning. But sure enough, when I walk in the door, every single person in the house is awake and sitting in the living room -- David, Mendy, Indira, Sam, Kelly, even Mendy's friend who we still haven't figured out if she's been shacking with. The entire room turns and looks at me, then erupts into laughter and finger-pointing. "Walk of Shame!" they start chanting like schoolchildren. "Jason's doing the Walk of Shame!"

I hold my hand in the air. "Guilty as charged!" I yell. Everyone applauds, a fresh pot of coffee is poured, and an old album from the '50s of Latin bands doing Chubby Checker covers is put on the stereo. It is time -- I mean, REALLY time -- to go back to Chicago.

**9:00 pm**

Almost back in Chicago now, after an excruciating day of backseats and southern Illinois diners. I have been spending the day writing and writing on this article, trying to get it all down before I forget. It has blossomed into my own private little Moby Dick, and I think I might actually submit it for publication somewhere. Between sessions on the laptop, I have also been thinking. And thinking and thinking.

I think I understand now why all the Slackers I ran into this weekend are sincerely glad for my success now, after years of ridicule and bitterness. And I think I understand why I now feel a lot better about it, and why it's been so much easier for me to take my friends' Slacker lifestyles now than when I was in my early twenties. The reason confirms two theories that I have about life, theories that are by no means new or original, but ones nonetheless that I have not had completely proven to me yet: 1) that people actually do become more mature as they get older; and 2) that time actually does heal wounds.

The last years that I was in Columbia MO -- 1993, 1994 -- I didn't quite know what I wanted to do with my life. Surprise, surprise. I knew that I felt very strongly about my creative work, that I had a really strong desire to go out and try to make a career of it. But the idea of doing that scared the hell out of me -- the chances of succeeding as an artist, no matter the medium, is slim to none, and I had virtually no examples in my life in Missouri of people doing it for a career -- I come from a suburban town on the outskirts of St. Louis, where everyone, you know, WORKS for a living, and any creative writing done in one's life is usually limited to toasts at weddings.

There was a deep part of me back then that wanted for these more traditional, but no less simple, things to happen -- love, money, children, a home. At the time, though, I realized that I could only pursue one or the other right out of the gate: in order to really succeed at my work, I realized that I would have to work like a dog for the first five or ten years of my life -- throw myself into my work for sixty or more hours every week and eschew any hopes

of those traditional things happening for awhile, if ever. And I knew that if I stayed in Columbia, those traditional things would come calling, and that they would be very seductive to me, and quite possibly ruin any chance I had of establishing a creative career. When I saw those things starting to happen to my friends, I got scared and ran away.

Three years in Chicago and three years of life have taught me something, though. Well, it's really taught me a number of things. First, I've learned that I can succeed in the professional creative world. I'm at a point in my career now that I would have literally laughed at if you had told me three years ago that I would be. That eases a lot of my fears. Second, I've learned that these traditional things don't necessarily have to be eschewed to be an artist -- love, marriage, children, a home, can all be found, and has been found by several of my Chicago friends. It just usually happens later in life and in a more roundabout way for artists than the rest of the population.

I think for my compatriots still living in Columbia, they have discovered that living a more traditional life can be just as fulfilling, just as thrilling, just as life-affirming as that supposed "crazy, passionate" artistic life that we were all, to a fault, living in our early twenties. They have gotten a little older and come to grips with the fact that not everyone is going to be a famous artist, and in the meantime have been getting married and having those children and buying that home, all on their own terms. They are discovering that this life makes them happy, really happy, and that it's not nearly the drag that their parents and the media made it seem to them originally. Our generation is a new breed -- the first generation to fully realize that the nuclear family has imploded. Our parents' generation tried to hold on to that ideal, and got fucked royally for it. We, on the other hand, see it for the modern farce that it is, and instead make up our own rules as we go along... just like every other goddamn pursuit everyone in my generation has followed. Suddenly, at the ripe age of thirty, my friends have discovered that there's nothing wrong with leading the life they lead, and suddenly they've discovered that there's nothing wrong with being happy and proud for their friends who have chosen the other path and are becoming just as happy and successful as everyone else. Much like my high school reunion from last summer, my friends and I have gotten together for a weekend and learned, to our shock, that we are adults now. And it's not nearly such a bad thing than we ever thought it was going to be.

I can see the Chicago Loop looming at us through the front window of the car, the mist-laden skyscrapers lighting up the thick clouds all around. I get an immediate sense of happiness and relaxation, an immediate sense that I'm finally back home. I can remember the very first time I ever felt this way about Chicago, how guilty I felt that my sense of being 'home' had finally transferred itself from Columbia up to here. Now, though, it's not nearly as bad. It's like the skyscrapers are talking to me.

"Hello, Jason," they say. "Welcome home. We hope you enjoyed your trip. We missed you."

They pause.

"Now let's get back to work."

Self-portrait, 1989



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# Jason Pettus

attended the University of Missouri at Columbia from 1986 to 1994. During his years there he was a member of the marching and jazz bands, founded and ran an art gallery, drew two different comic strips for the student newspaper, was a programming director at two different radio stations, published three different zines, emceed a poetry open mic, set a new attendance record at the university's art gallery, and lived in thirteen different apartments.

Mr. Pettus moved to Chicago in 1994 and has had some successes there as well. He has published three novels, performed on National Public Radio, and placed second at the 1997 National Poetry Slam. He has received a grant from the Illinois Arts Council and has lived in only four apartments, the accomplishment of which he is most proud.

# END