

New Fiction by Jake Bienvenue: Chasing Colonel Sandro

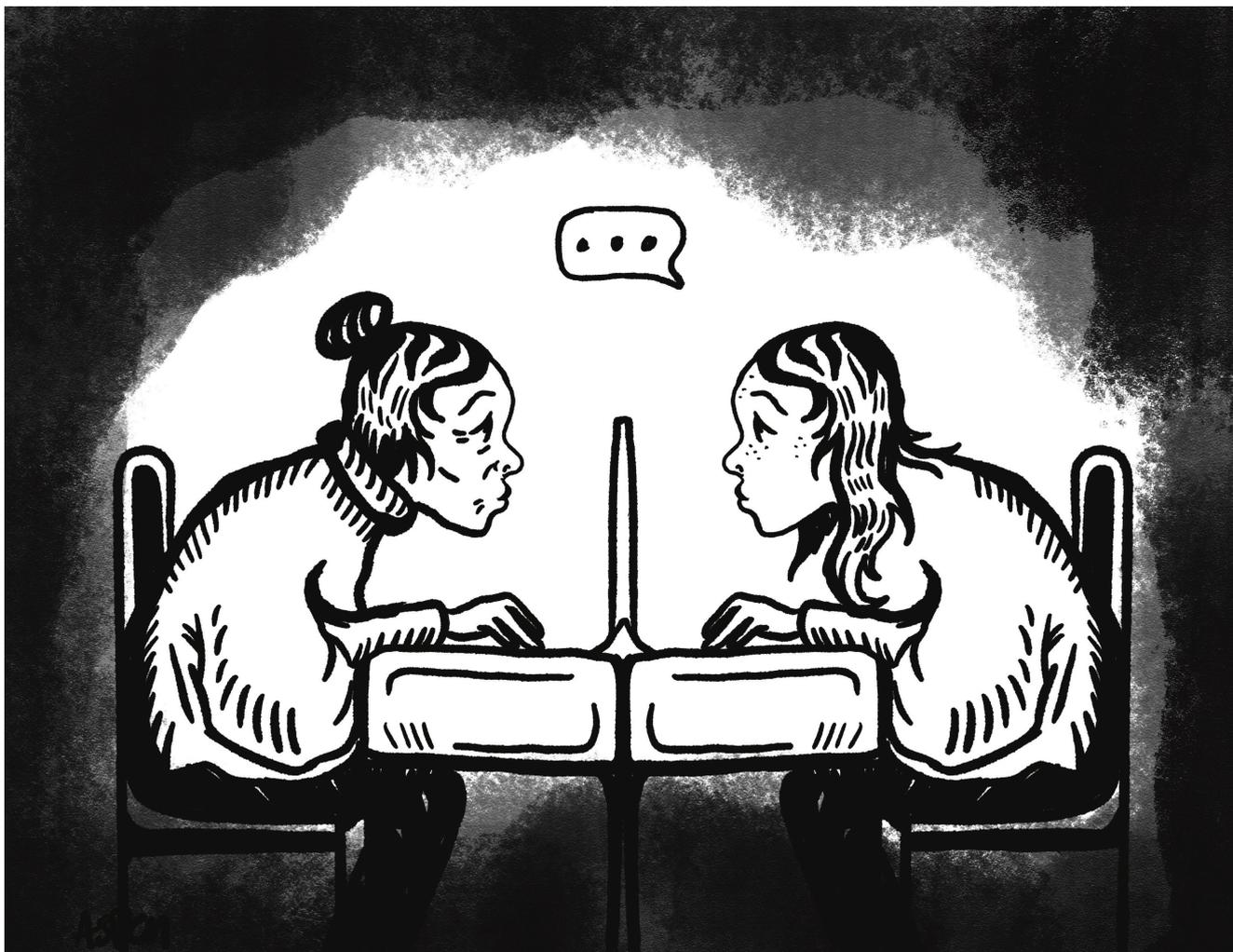


Illustration by [Aspen Kelly](#)

Dr. Maldonado fiddled with the picture of his hot wife and blonde sons, making sure I noticed. Hot professors are rare at Christian universities. They're mostly Anglican, for some reason. Such a character. I was happy for him.

"I'm thinking about grad school," I said, taking a seat and crossing one leg over the other. "I suspect this could be my calling."

Christians take this idea very seriously. Dr. Maldonado raised

his eyebrow and rotated his coffee mug on his desk. It had a picture of his wife on it also. Her hair was done up in little ringlets. She looked like she had good theology, good ovaries. "Your calling," he reflected. "Well, Lauren, your work thus far has been... general, I'd say. So I'd be inclined to ask what specifically you'd want to study."

Ouch. I thought for a moment. "I don't know."

"Well, do you have a topic for your paper? Grad apps would be due in, what, a year? This would be a good opportunity to get some research together."

"Dr. Maldonado," I said, touched. "Thank you."

A few minutes later he said he had to get ready for class. "Perfect timing," I told him. "My grandpa's funeral is about to start."

He looked at me funny, then decided I was joking. "See you in class, Lauren," he said. From his breast pocket he pulled out a small cloth and began polishing his lenses. His face was round and pale without glasses. He looked as blind as a mole. The spell was broken.

I walked across campus to my dorm. Around me the elect 2,000 bumbled along. Most of them were homeschool kids, weirdos. Unfortunate I would end up at this backwards school, but my grandparents were paying for college. Or I guess just my grandma.

Alone, I sat on my bed and FaceTimed into my grandpa's funeral, which was down in California. I guess not a funeral, per se. He'd been a marine, so some soldiers would shoot their guns in his honor. My dad answered my FaceTime and directed the camera toward the proceedings. I was in Gram's backyard. Two men in blue uniforms and crisp white hats appeared. My family stood off to the side. The marines folded the flag into a triangle with precise, robotic motions. My grandma accepted

the flag with a bow, ran her hands along the fabric, then, with gravitas, held it out in offering. For a moment I thought it was coming to me, but then I remembered I was only a phone. My brother reached into the frame and accepted the Old Glory. He hugged my grandma and saluted the marines. He was in uniform also. A few hours later he'd be back in Texas, where he was stationed.

Afterward, my dad's face appeared. "We were bummed you couldn't be here, sweetie," he said. "Mom and I are going to stay with Grandma through the weekend if you want to come down. She'd love that."

"No thanks," I said. Not a chance. It would be nice to see my dad, but not worth it, even with how boring my weekends had been. At Calvin the only thing to look forward to was the biscuits and gravy they served for the Sabbath. Everyone just hunkered down and tried not to masturbate until then. Luckily there was the prayer chapel when one inevitably failed. Nothing makes you want to jack off like a Christian university, I swear. Except your childhood home.

"Are you sure?" he said. "There's a greyhound coming down tomorrow morning. Grandma said she would pay for it."

"That's very kind of her," I said.

Shortly after we hung up, I heard the fateful footfalls. Two sets. One heavy, one light. So it was both. Brooke and I had dormed together just over a month; it was the end of September. Brooke was one of the few people I liked at Calvin. The problem was that she came with Wes, who sucked. Brooke opened the door and peeked her head in. "Oh, Lauren. I thought you were out."

Before I could respond, Wes shoved his ogreish frame into the room. "Hmm," he said, squinting at me. He had a round and pale chin, and wore a hat with an assault rifle on the front that said "OreGUNian." I don't know what he thought I was impeding.

At best they would've made out. Brooke is super Christian.

"My grandpa just died," I said flatly. Not technically true, but I was losing control.

"Oh!" Brooke said. "I'm so sorry! We can go somewhere else."

Wes blew air from his nose and dropped himself on Brooke's bed, his camo pants monstrous on the pink duvet. "We can't go to my room," he said. "Mike's in there with the chick from Dead Sea Scrolls." Brooke winced. "He said they're going to be in there all weekend, so."

"Okay," I said. "Yeah, you guys can be in here, sure. I'm actually going home this weekend. I meant to ask, Brooke, could you take me to the greyhound station tomorrow morning?"

"Killer," Wes said. "Yeah, she can take you. Mike is gonna be stoked." He rolled his eyes lustily around the room. I had a vision of him urinating in my pop-up hamper. "That your brother?" he asked, settling on a framed picture on my desk.

The picture in question showed me hugging my brother on an airstrip at dawn—him in the marine getup, me in a hoodie. "Why," I said.

"When you see him, thank him for his service," he said bravely. "My uncle is in the army."

The idea that there was some similarity between Wes's convictions and what my brother was fighting for—which I understood to be nothing—made me want to puke.

"Aw," Brooke said. "You're so sweet." She nuzzled beside him on the futon. He grunted and lay back like a fat lion. They lay side-by-side, shoulders touching like cloud-watchers in a field—so chaste it was dirty.

Brooke took me to the bus stop the next morning. "I think Wes might be a fascist," I told her.

She turned the heater up all the way. "I'm not a political person," she said.

I looked out the window. "Well," I said, "thanks for dropping me off."

I sat on a gum-crusted bench. The Chehalem Mountains sloped behind me, and in front the road ran out where the valley opens to the sky, which was thin blue at the top but yellow over the hills. Somewhere, my grandpa was looking down at me and this wide cold country, thinking about immigration and Reaganomics and law and order. Not heaven, but somewhere.

It was late evening when the bus reached the city. My dad's hatchback was in the parking lot. He was a shortish man with fair hair that gleamed in the streetlight—a black sheep among the Italian eyebrows and thick black hair of the de Lucas, my mom's side. He was a middle school teacher. I'd always had a soft spot for him, but over the years that softness had morphed into a kind of pity. He couldn't pay for college, which seemed to diminish him. Still, I was glad he'd been the one to come.

"Welcome back, Lo," he said, and hugged me and took my bag.

"Who's at Grandma's?" I asked as we pulled onto the freeway, heading into the suburbs.

"Just me and Mom. And Grandma."

"How's she doing?"

He gave me a blank, knowing face. This sort of frustration had been our secret language among the de Lucas—the solidarity of outsiders. "She's Grandma," he said. "How are you handling things?"

"Fine," I said. "Grandpa was a tough guy, so."

He shrugged.

The lawns were trim; the lanes were lined with poplars. Mansions of orange glass stared down from the hills. The gate swung open, and we drove to the top of the hill. We parked in the driveway of my grandma's formidable house and walked up to the huge double doors, which were made of smooth red wood and latticed with glass like chapel windows.

My grandma threw open the front door. She seemed taller, thinner. She palmed the air for my cheeks. I let her grab my face. The smell of instant coffee, perfume, and wine washed over me with kisses. "It's so good to see you, baby," she said, then grabbed my hand and led me to the kitchen table. She pushed me into a chair and, seeing my parents shuffle in behind us, asked them to get me something to eat, I must be starving. I felt the empty rooms and hallways. My grandma sat with her back to a pair of tall windows. I ate microwaved chicken parmesan and said yes to the Chianti she offered.

"How have you been, Grandma?" I asked once I'd settled in.

"Carrying on," she said. "It does get lonely. Though I'm on Facebook now," she said, then laughed like it was the craziest thing in the world. "So, it's been nice to connect with old friends. But how are you? How's school?" I told her it was going fine. "Sociology, huh?" she asked. "Like your father? I just hope I'm not paying for you to make lattes once you graduate," she said, then laughed.

My dad laughed softly. What infuriated me was the sense that my father's deference was a tithe, his laughter a thing owed in lieu of money he, we, would never make. Because I am not my brother, I decided not to pay. "What's your degree in?"

"Lauren!"

My grandma's face went smooth. "It wasn't an option for me," she said coldly. "The only reason you're able to go is because Grandpa spent his life 30 feet up a powerline. Public service. It's the schools now, they don't teach you kids that," she said. "Though your brother seemed to pick it up somewhere."

I looked at my dad. I waited for him to say something in my defense, but he stared into his wine glass, impotent. We shrunk back into a soured small talk. After a few minutes I said, "I think I'm gonna go to bed. Long drive."

"Oh, but we forgot to toast!" my grandma said. She raised her glass. The three of us followed without enthusiasm. "To Grandpa," she said to my mom and dad. "And to your brother," she said to me.

My grandma, generous in victory, offered me any bed in the house. I chose the couch. Everything else felt dirty. I laid in musty quilts and cried. Then I got angry, and passed the time simulating arguments in which I smoothly dismantled my grandma in various political debates. But I would've been up at that all night. So I went to the kitchen for some water. I halted before the entryway. Someone was around the corner, breathing. I peeked around the wall. My grandma sat alone at the kitchen table, scrolling her iPad. Beside her was a cup of wine, filled to its brim, black in the darkness. She raised the cup to her lips. Her face seemed doubly wrinkled in the iPad's soft blue light. I could see the tiny muscles of her face twitch to what she was reading: an elongation of lips, a flare of eyes, a crease along forehead, a plunge of brow—these gestures flashed across her face, signs meant for no one, formed in darkness. Like a malfunctioning robot. On her face was a secret despair at a country which had left her behind, and out of that, tiny celebrations of meaningless victories. Her breath was raspy like a snore. I crept backward with averted eyes, to hide the shame.

My dad dropped me at the greyhound stop early Sunday morning. The idea had been brewing all weekend. Gam was the symbol of a collapsing generation, a perfect case study of the mentally vulnerable, and the ideal intersection of my personal and sociological interest. I was eager to get on the road. As we drove, the sun rose over the long, grassy plains of Northern California, and I texted Brooke: "Can you pick me up at the bus stop tonight?"

"I don't think so, I'm gonna be at Wes's tonight. We're watching *Prince of Egypt*."

"I'm sorry I called Wes a fascist."

She took a while to reply. "It's okay. I get what you mean." I wasn't sure what she meant, but it sounded hopeful. I told her I'd buy her a coffee if she would pick me up. She said okay. With that taken care of, I set to work. The first thing would be to create a fake person with whom I could interact with my grandma. Who would she respond to? Not me, certainly. Someone like my brother. So I googled "American soldier" and scrolled through my options. I settled on a picture of a man wearing Oakley sunglasses. He stood in what looked to be a hot, dry place, surrounded by dusty green tents. He wore camouflage. Gam would love him. I used an old email address to make a Facebook profile. What should I name him? Colonel something. Colonel Sand— Colonel Sandro, I typed. I birthed him in 1964, and made him from Oklahoma, a respectable state. Then I plugged in the picture of American Soldier. I paused and admired my work. There he was, a *tabula rasa*, waiting for his breath of life. Colonel Sandro. At ease, soldier.

I set to it, giving him all sorts of strange biographical information. The Colonel, since his honorable discharge after two tours as an Army Ranger in Kuwait, had found work as an underwater electrician. He was a very serious snowmobiler, and in fact even built his own snowmobiles—sometimes underwater. I gave Colonel Sandro all the nuances of a flesh-and-blood human

being, which, for the conservative patriot I was making him to be, could be fabricated in less than half an hour. Once the Colonel was online, I reposted a bunch of conservative content on my-our?-page. Little sticky traps for my grandma. Then I searched Elena de Luca, and there she was: her profile picture was of her and my brother, hugging tenderly the moment she handed him my grandpa's flag. And there, in the background, was me: the phone in my father's hand, a dark lens. I hit "Add Friend" then slept until Oregon.

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The following afternoon my grandma became my friend. I messaged her. "Hi Elena," I typed, voicing each word as a man's in my head. "I'm sorry to hear about Bob. He was the best of us." I grimaced and hit send. A few minutes later, the ellipses popped onto the screen.

"Hello," she wrote. "Thank you for the condolences. How did you know Bob?"

"From work," I said. "We met at an electrician's conference in Tucson. He took me under his wing at a time when I didn't know why I was doing it anymore. Bob was a great man."

"I don't remember him going to a conference," she responded. "But there was a lot I did not know about him."

Alone in my room I felt insane. I read her message over-and-over. "The men of this country bear such a terrible burden," I wrote, my hands flying on the keys. "Especially of his generation. Feels like there's not a single man like Bob these days." I bit my nails and clicked send.

"I know," she said. "My grandson gives me hope. He remembers the things this country was founded on. He is in the army too." This was accompanied by an emoji of a terrifying grin.

"Well God bless," I said. "Maybe I know him. I was in Kuwait

just a couple weeks ago.” That felt stupid immediately. Kuwait? Sure, I’m there all the time.

“Probably not,” she responded. “He’s stationed in Texas. Lance Corporal Jimmy de Luca, 187th Infantry. Is there a name and rank I could pass along to him? I’m sure he would love to talk with someone who knew Bob. The passing has been hard on him.”

I panicked. “Colonel James Sandro,” I wrote, “Army Ranger in the 101st Airborne.” I hit send and began another message: “Bob did not seem like a man who kept secrets, but if he did, I’m sure he had his reasons.”

The ellipses were up for a long time. “Bob was a great husband,” was all she said.

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I waited two days; I didn’t want to seem too eager. In the meantime, I drafted more focused lines of inquiry regarding Operation Catfish My Grandma. I decided to relocate my dear grandmother from the relatively banal Facebook into more extreme right-wing internet spheres, and basically just see what happens. Was I hoping to turn her blue? Of course not. People over 40 don’t change their minds. But neither did I want to mindlessly enact a political conflict for its mere drama. Instead, I would study it. Scholarship legitimized the whole endeavor.

On the morning of the day I was to message my grandma, just after my first class, I walked into my room and discovered Wes and Brooke sitting in silence on the futon, not touching. Brooke’s eyes were red.

“You’re still up for coffee, right Brooke?” I asked, as if we had plans.

Brooke looked up and nodded, smiling sadly. Wes stood and pulled his shirt down over his gut—the libertarian snake

uncoiling—and walked out, giving her a look. The door shut. We released our breath simultaneously.

“What was that?” I asked.

“He’s not a bad guy,” she said. “I know you think that, but he’s not. He’s complicated.”

She looked so innocent. I empathized with her—both at the mercy of Republicans.

“Do you want to see something?” I asked. I sat down at my desk and opened Facebook. Brooke pulled her chair up behind me. “Hello, Elena,” I typed, thinking in the man-voice, then hit send and pulled up the Colonel’s profile.

“This is for my sociology class,” I told Brooke, scrolling up and down. “I made a fake person to talk to my grandma about her beliefs.”

“That seems—weird.”

“I’m gonna tell her, of course. Once I have the data.”

“Data on what?” she asked, but I just shrugged.

It took my grandma less than ten minutes to respond. “Hello, James,” she said. “I worried I’d never hear from you again. How have you been?”

“Check it out,” I told Brooke, then typed, “Oh, just fine, Elena, just fine. And yourself?”

When I was writing like that, I had a vision: the Colonel beside a grill, hairy toes tan in my flops, smell of charcoal and cut grass, a brew in my left hand, silver tongs in my right. *Just fine.*

“I’ve been mostly alright. A little lonely.” Then in a separate message she said, “It’s been very nice to find some old friends, but they don’t fill the house, you know.”

"This is kind of sad," Brooke said.

I squinted. "Once, for Christmas, my grandma gave my brother \$100, and me \$50."

Brooke raised her eyebrow. "You're doing this for sociology?"

"I'm doing this for a lot of reasons." I cracked my fingers then typed, "Nothing'll replace Bob, but I know some folks he would've loved to meet. Folks who aren't on Facebook." To Brooke I said, "I'm trying to see how she'd react to a site like Reddit."

"Wes is on Reddit every day," she said. She looked at the screen with more interest.

"Yes, I've liked some of them!" my grandma replied. "You know, I thought it would be harder to find level-headed people on Facebook. California is so Democrat I forget we are actually the majority."

I took a screenshot and scribbled some notes. "I'm trying to see how people like her, and Wes kinda, end up as they do. Or how they get worse."

"You mean conservatives?"

"No no," I lied. "It's both sides." Then I turned back to the screen.

"Hell, don't I know it," I typed, feeling saucy. "And Facebook is just the tip of the iceberg. We're everywhere. Can I show you a place that's even better?"

"Will you be there?" my grandma responded. This time the emoji winked.

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That's how I got my grandma on Reddit. Making a col.sandro12 profile was no problem, and then there she was:

ElenadeLucal1945. I spent some time beforehand mapping the conservative Reddit sphere. The best place to start was r/CollegeRepublicans. Most redditors there espoused old-school right-wing politics, deregulation and stuff. I explained the site to my grandma beforehand—how you went to a r/ page, how you posted comments, how the voting system worked. She picked it up in no time.

“It just blesses my heart to see the youth like this,” she wrote me following an exchange on how political correctness is modern Nazism. “On the news it seems like all kids care about are vaping, video games, and transgenderism.”

Gam was ready for the deep dive.

But I was wrong. When we moved on to the more intense r/Anglosphere, she was appalled. “This is awful, Jim,” she told me. “I don’t even know what ‘cuck’ means. My husband would flop in his grave if he knew I was on here.”

I panicked. “You can’t think of it like that,” I said, channeling the Colonel’s militancy. “No offense, Elena, but you come from a time when politics were civilized and rational. You’ve got to have grit! Just think what’s at stake.”

Grudgingly at first, then curiously, then zealously, she grew a pair of big Reddit nuts. I took meticulous notes. Over time we fell into a schedule: every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon we met on Facebook, moved to r/Anglosphere to bolster our traditional values, then made our way to r/politics to hash it out with the snowflakes. After six weeks I had compiled extensive field observations on the capabilities of my grandma to not only adopt the idiosyncrasies of incel speech, but even to generate and spread neologisms. Her language became violent as well. “If they don’t wanna work, shoot ‘em,” she wrote in one post. I encouraged this. It estranged her into the thing I hated. It felt like I was in the vanguard of sociological

research. My grandma was my prodigy, and as time went on, when I pictured the Colonel by his grill, I imagined my grandma there as well: her toes brushing the surface of the swimming pool, looking up at me expectantly, waiting for the tri-tip. We'd never been closer.

But my research was constantly interrupted by Wes and Brooke. They fought so much they were comfortable fighting while I was in the room. I was spending so much time in Wes's world, I felt like I understood him, too. As the weeks went by, more-and-more I heard Brooke crying in the dark, after Wes had gone.

I finished my paper just before Thanksgiving. At the time, I felt I'd conclusively demonstrated that the root of conservative thought was a sort of vestigial sociopathy left over from the toddlerhood worship of the father, and that only the senile, repressed, rich, or stupid—or some combination of the four—were susceptible to this kind of politics, but also that the senile, repressed, rich, and stupid constituted an alarming portion of the population, indeed even sometimes a political majority. I wanted to slap Dr. Maldonado on his juicy Anglican ass. I was an academic. I turned the paper in with a wink and a flourish. Perfect timing: back to my grandma's for Thanksgiving.

The night I was to head back to Sacramento—Wednesday—I walked into my room after class to pack my things. Brooke was lying face-down on her futon, sobbing into the duvet. I set my backpack down and dropped to a knee beside her. "What did he do," I said.

Brooke rolled onto her side to face me. Her mouth was all quivery. Spit webbed between her lips. "Are we even friends?" she moaned.

I leaned my head against her shoulder. "Of course," I said. And I was happy.

After a few stabilizing bouts of tears, Brooke stood and wiped her eyes. "He's such an asshole!" she said, pacing the room. "And don't say *anything*."

I put my hands up, hopeful at her use of the word *asshole*. "I would never," I said. "What happened?"

Brooke sat down on my bed. She wiped her eyes with both hands outward toward her ears. "I broke up with him." I waited. "And he said 'no.'"

"No?"

"No. And said if I forced his hand, he would tell our bible study we had sex."

I understood why that was a big deal, but it was still somewhat difficult to empathize.

"Jesus," I breathed. "What are you going to do?"

"We're gonna talk after I drop you off at the greyhound station."

We didn't say anything on the ride over. When I got out of the car, I told her that yeah, it would be tough if she lost her friends, but that I'd be there etc., etc. She just nodded. Then I left.

The bus rolled through the countryside. I couldn't sleep. It was only after we rolled into the city, after I got into my dad's car, that I finally slept, and hard.

I woke on my grandma's couch in the late afternoon. The autumn sun was warm on my face. The voices of the de Lucas sounded from the kitchen, along with the smells of Thanksgiving. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. When I opened them, my grandma was standing in the hallway. "Hey, baby," she said, then hugged me warmly. "So good to see you. Come say hi to everyone." My mom and dad bustled around in the kitchen. The air was thick with

the smell of food. With a wink my dad poured me a glass of wine, something bold and Californian, and because I hadn't eaten, my cheeks flushed and my blood warmed. Conversation came easy across the generations. My grandma was glowing, happier than I'd ever seen her. And it was not so much a revelation I had, more like a voice I heard—my own—that asked what the fuck am I doing catfishing my grandma? In my head I executed Colonel Sandro by firing squad and felt much better. I swilled wine and schmoozed.

The doorbell rang just before dinner. My brother stood in the doorway. He was in fatigues, a bag slung over his shoulder. "Hello?" he called. The four of us swarmed him, my mom kissing his cheeks, my dad pulling him into a bear hug, and my grandma, tears in her eyes, resting her head on his chest, saying, "I missed you."

"Hey, little sister," he said, grinning, after they had cleared.

"Hey," I said. "I didn't know you were coming."

He held me at arm's length and looked up and down my face. "So you've got a nose ring now," he teased. "It looks awful."

"Haha!" I said, because it was stupid, because it was him. Disarmed without meaning to be, I wrapped him in a big hug. There was a sort of comfort, I realized, in the acceptance of differences—a playfulness on both sides I'd ignored. No matter what, I was one of them. I looked over and saw my dad smiling at us. I smiled back, home at last.

Before dinner we placed our phones in a wicker basket under the windowsill. De Luca tradition. As we took our seats, the basket filled with iPhones and Androids and Grandma's tablet. Then we ate and had a good time.

"So, I've got some news," Grandma said afterward. Her voice was high and thin from the wine. "I've met someone," she said.

My blood went cold. I studiously rearranged green beans on my plate.

“Mom!” said my mother. “It’s only been a couple months.”

She waved away the criticism. “It’s not serious,” she said. “We’re just messaging online. And I’ve been so lonely. And Tommy,” she said. “He was in the Army, too!”

After a second, my dad said, “Good for you, Elena,” and my mom reluctantly echoed, “I’m sure Bob would understand.” But that was all. Conversation awkwardly resumed. I was quiet.

My dad filled the sink with soap and water for dishes. “Will you dry for me, Lo?” he

asked.

“Sure,” I said, and got up and grabbed a towel.

“I can help too,” Tommy said, but my grandma grabbed his arm.

“Hold on, Tommy, I want to show you something. Go fetch me my iPad, will you?” she said, putting on her reading glasses. “I want to show you a picture of Jim.”

I watched as Tommy took the iPad from the basket and brought it to the table. Grandma used her index finger to open Facebook. Her eyebrows popped over the top of her reading glasses, as though this were a thing which required great concentration. Finally, she managed to pull up the Colonel’s profile. Tommy squinted at it. “Well,” she said. “Do you recognize him?”

He laughed. “No, I don’t,” he said. “He probably served before me. What division?”

She swelled with pride. “Army Rangers,” she said. “101st Airborne.”

He laughed, again at her ignorance. "I doubt it," he said. "That's not a special forces unit."

Grandma frowned. "Well that's what Jim told me. Here," she said, scrolling up through our messages. "Look, Jim said 'Army Ranger in the 101st Airborne.'" Her voice was stubborn, assured. Out of touch. Like any grandma. I was drying off a saucepan and listening, blurry with anxiety.

"Let me see," he said, taking the iPad. He went to the Colonel's profile. "Grandma," he said severely. "How long have you been talking to this person?"

"Oh, I don't know, a couple months?"

"This profile was made a couple months ago," he said grimly. "There's only one picture. Have you given out any information to this person? Credit cards or anything?"

"Goodness no," she said, shocked. "Why would Jim ask me for that?"

"This is a fake account," Tommy said.

"What do you mean, fake? A person can't be fake. Give me that," she said, taking back the tablet. "I'll message him right now."

I dropped the pan and cut toward the basket. Too late: my phone buzzed, impossibly loud, rattling against three other phones. Tommy looked at the basket, then at me. His mouth fell open at the panic on my face. Grandma was still focused on Facebook. I snatched my phone out of the basket just as she sent a second message; it buzzed audibly in my hand. Then she looked at me, her eyes narrowed. She sent another message, then another. Dumbly I gripped my buzzing phone.

"Lauren?" she asked.

The confusion in her voice broke my heart. There was no

explaining. I slipped my phone into my back pocket and looked at my socks on the tile.

“Is this you?”

The question contained a number of dimensions, not a single one of which I was prepared to answer. “I...”

“Excuse me,” she said. She stood, an old woman, and pushed in her chair. She went upstairs.

“What did you do?” Tommy said.

I looked around. My mom and dad were watching me also. “I’ve been messaging her,” I said. “For a school project.”

My mom followed upstairs without a word. I stood in the same place, not sure where to go, what to do. I turned to my dad, but he just shook his head and gravely said, “Lo...” Tommy got up and followed my mom. I sat on the couch, looking dumbly again at my feet. My dad finished the dishes in silence.

Finally, my mom came back downstairs. I anticipated anger, but she took one look at me and broke down crying. “What?” I begged, but she walked right past, into the kitchen where she began to speak to my dad in a low voice.

I walked upstairs. The bedroom door was open. My grandma sat in the easy chair, my brother at her side, silent. She stared at me. I stared back. An odd look of triumph was on her face.

“I’m sorry,” I said. What else was there to say?

Her voice was measured. “If you’re so intent on being this, this *outcast*, then you can do it without my help.”

What did that mean? I looked at my brother, but his face was a mask. I left.

Downstairs, at the kitchen table, I sat across from my parents. My mom wiped the tears under her eyes. “So,” she said

weakly. "Grandma's not going to pay for college anymore."

I felt weightless. "What?"

"What did you do, Lo?" my dad asked. His voice was so... tired.

"Nothing," I said. "I just... it was a school thing. For a paper. She's really doing this?"

My mom nodded, very slowly.

"I'm not moving home," I said. "Dad, please."

"Please what," my dad said. He grabbed my mom's hands, then lay his head across her knuckles.

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My brother took me to the greyhound station early the following morning. "Are you alright, Lo?" he asked in the parking lot.

I wanted his anger, not his concern. "I'm fine," I said. "Thanks for the ride."

I boarded the bus and curled up in the back. The bus took off into the plains. Up ahead Mt. Shasta rose against the ice blue horizon, into which the sun had not yet risen. I wished it wouldn't. A few rows ahead, a little boy peeked around his seat. He stared at me with black eyes. For a long time I stared back, us two alone awake in the lawless dawn.

By the time we rolled into the Willamette Valley, I felt strange: hollow but intensely perceptive, my mind quick and sharp. I did not want to leave, I realized. Brooke picked me up. I asked if she wanted to get a drink, and was surprised when she said yes. It seemed we both were reluctant to share how the weekend had gone. We drove to Lumpy's on the edge of town. She asked me what she should get. I said I'd handle it, and came back with an armful of dollar gel-o shots. We took a

booth and used hairpins to scoop out the muck. At first Brooke puckered at the taste, but after three or four, she put them back easily. I waited until I felt the alcohol, then asked her what happened with Wes.

"If I tell you, can we still be friends?" she asked.

The word *friend* almost brought me to tears. "Yes."

"We're back together."

"Fuck, why?"

"It's just easier," she said. "You don't have friends like ours. They're not very... nice."

I put my head in my hands. "Fuck, fuck," I said, then groaned.

"What? What is it?"

"My grandma found out about the Colonel. She said she's not paying for school anymore. I might have to move back home."

"How did we both—? How come neither of us could—?" She looked away, embarrassed.

The bar became rowdy around us. A fly landed in one of the cups and rubbed his little hands on a nuclear green bit of gel-o.

"Do you want to play ping-pong?" I asked.

The liquor hit while we played. "You're good," I told Brooke, wobbling.

"Church camp champ," she said, then pounded a topspin off my side. It bounced into a nearby pitcher of light beer. "I'm sorry!" she said to a couple of old drunks, then caught the ball back and served it past me again.

After a couple of games, neither of us could drive. We sat in

the dirt at the edge of a vineyard. The wind rustled the vines in the light of a full November moon. I was happy.

"How are we getting home," I asked lazily.

"I can text Wes," she said. The thought made her giggle.

"Yeah, yeah. Do it. That would be fun. He doesn't drink, does he?"

Brooke recoiled and shook her head dramatically. "No way," she said. "What's he gonna do, break up with me?" She pulled out her phone and texted him.

"I have a plan to stay here," I told her. "I want to stay. With you. Not like, I don't know, but I want to stay." I felt myself blushing.

Maybe I loved her. Maybe I did. But that is beyond the scope of this paper.

She just laughed. "I want you to stay, too."

We were quiet for a while. We watched the valley. The moon was so bright we could see the hills rear up against the night, their slopes covered with vines and thatches of fir. Moonlit clouds rose up flat in the darkness behind them. It was not too cold. A pair of headlights flashed into our faces. We shielded our eyes. A car door opened. It was Wes.

"You guys smell," he said.

"Shut up," Brooke told him.

~

"Do you remember a few days ago," I told Brooke at breakfast the next day, "about that Navy veteran in Portland? Who shot and killed that protester?"

"Wes was talking about that," she said warily. "Why?"

"He's facing 25 to life," I explained. "Conservatives are riled up about it."

"So?"

"So my grandma's been watching that," I said. She waited for me to explain. "You're a computer science major, so you know how to set up websites and stuff?"

"Why?"

I told her my idea.

She frowned. "No way," she said. "That's fraud."

"It is," I said, "but all you have to do is show me how to do it."

"Won't they know it was me who helped you?"

"Who's *they*, Brooke? Come on. I need you. Don't you want me to stay? My life is *fucked* if I have to leave. I'll end up living in some crackhead apartments. I'll become a prostitute. Please!"

So Brooke taught me how to build a website. Basically, the idea was to create a fake fundraising webpage for the Navy veteran's legal team. www.right2selfdefense.law. I did some research and filled the site with a lineup of conservative legal experts, then surrounded them with American flags and right-wing adages. The donation fund linked to a stealth PayPal account that Brooke helped me set up, which I could route to my own account. Then I posted the website link on 4chan at the local library under a card I faked using a school ID I took from the lost and found. It was a professional quality job. I posted the link on all the old Reddit threads. After the post was up, I changed Colonel Sandro's name and profile picture so I could repost it on Facebook where my grandma would see it. Then we were live.

We made two grand in the first week. When I opened PayPal and saw the number, I ran across campus to our dorm. Brooke started shaking when she saw it. That night we went to Lumpy's and bought the whole bar a round of Rainiers. By three weeks we had \$11,000. A popular far-right blog had kicked it to their social media. But I had no way of knowing if I'd bagged the trophy buck. Had my grandma even seen it? I called my mom. "Can you ask Grandma something for me?" I told her my question.

"What is this about, Lauren?" she asked skeptically.

"Please, Mom. You know how difficult this time has been for me."

"No. Are you moving back home after this semester? We cleared your brother's room."

"I told you, I'm staying here."

Then it all fell apart. A few days later, the Navy vet hung himself in jail. The tithes stopped coming in. Desperate, I started a fundraiser for the funeral expenses, but it didn't get the same kind of attention. We'd already made over \$17,000 dollars. Although this felt like a great sum, it wasn't even enough to pay for one semester. My days in God's kingdom were numbered.

"Brooke," I said, "How committed are you to your education?"

"What?" She looked up from her phone. "I don't know, very?"

"Come on," I said. "Let's get an apartment in the city. Let's be cocktail waitresses at some fancy restaurant." Brooke gave me this heartbroken look. She sat beside me on my bed and squeezed one of my hands. "What?" I said. "What?"

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Stop," I said. "You sound like my brother."

"What do you mean?"

I couldn't explain it, so I told her I was gonna go talk to financial aid. Instead I went to Dr. Maldonado's office.

"Are you looking for your sociology paper?" said the old humanities secretary when I came in. She eyed me warily. "It should be in your mailbox."

I shoved into the mail room. A white-haired prof was waiting for the coffee maker to finish. After one look at my face, he left. A thin sheaf of paper rested in my cubby. I pulled it out. There was a big red D on the top. Underneath it said, "Unfocused, unorganized, unethical, un-Christlike." I wanted to scream. I held it up with two hands and bit the corner as hard as I could. I cast it, mutilated, into the recycle bin, then stormed up the stairway to Dr. Maldonado's office.

"Oh," he said when he saw me in the doorway. A student was in a chair across from him. The twerp swiveled around, startled.

"Please give us the room," I growled.

"Lauren, you can't—"

"It's fine," said the boy, clearly shaken. I moved to let him pass, but stayed on my feet.

"That was very inappropriate," said Dr. Maldonado.

"Are you happy with your wife?" I said.

"Lauren!" he said. "I'm going to politely ask that you—"

"I'm going to have to drop out," I rushed. "My family won't pay anymore. And what is *that* going to do to my *calling*?" The levee broke; tears spilled down my face.

He sighed. "Sit down," he said. I did. I tried to stifle the sobs, but that just made them sound broken and gross. Dr. Maldonado handed me a box of tissues, shut the door, then sat

and waited for me to compose myself. I arrived at a breathy calm. "What's going on," he said.

"I'm fine," I said, wiping my eyes. "I'm not one of those girls who cries in their professor's office. I'm sure you have *other* things to worry about," I said, nodding toward the picture of his family.

"I'm not sure what you mean by that." He angled the pictured frame away from me. "But I do have an obligation, financially and biblically, to be here. So. What is it?"

"My life is ruined, that's all. I'm dropping out. I'm not gonna get a degree. My family wants nothing to do with me. I only have one friend. And I guess I'm no good at sociology, even."

"Your paper did show promise at times. Certainly it was inventive. Perhaps I graded you to the standard of graduate school," he said gently. "Regarding the other stuff, I'm sure a campus therapist would be happy to meet with you during your remaining couple weeks."

"You mean the faith healers?" I sat back and crossed my arms. "I'm good."

He sighed. "If your dream is really in higher education, then you'll figure out how to make it happen. There's community college, scholarships, plenty of resources. If you feel you've actually been called, then the matter is settled: nothing can rescind it. Do you believe that?"

That was the last time I saw Dr. Maldonado. I did leave his office feeling a little better, but it faded the moment I saw Wes and Brooke in the room, the same as ever. Nothing changes. I stopped going to class. As winter break approached, I kept feeling like the FBI was gonna bust down my door and throw me in lady prison. But no one ever came. Nervously I began to transfer some of the money from PayPal into my bank account.

\$17,000—I could live for a year on that. I took a room at the Rivercrest Apartments, a shitty complex across the highway. Brooke helped me move. Sometimes she comes over and we eat Chinese food. I didn't go home for Christmas. My mom and dad called that morning, but it was awkward. It snowed that day—rare for Oregon. Of course nothing stuck. That evening I sat outside my door, on a plastic chair provided by the apartments. Me and all the other old smokers, lined up outside like gargoyles.

Me, I just sat there and thought about what Dr. Maldonado said before I left. About how you can't be uncalled. I know what that means. It means some people are never called at all.

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