

New Fiction from Eddie Freeman: "Gideon's Thesis"

Gideon, a senior majoring in journalism at the University of California, Santa Cruz, fidgeted nervously. He wanted to write a senior thesis that could be turned into a podcast or miniseries. He had researched the criminal conviction of Moses West. West was imprisoned for murder. It wasn't hard to connect his arresting officer to a far-right group. Gideon had written West, and West had written back. Dr. Sandel spent four minutes reading Gideon's outline, before placing it aside.

"I don't think you have the resources to research an investigation that took place in Los Angeles. I strongly encourage you to focus on a local issue," Dr. Sandel said.

*

A few weeks later, Gideon attended a party. He tried and failed to keep the attention of a woman by making up a rap about a feather in her hair. Gideon found a seat on an outside couch which featured unique stains. A man, who introduced himself as Rainbow, inhaled a blunt and passed it to Gideon.

"Have you heard about Tyler Rosenthal?" Rainbow asked.

Gideon shook his head.

"Tyler's dad is hella fucked up corporate leader. Tyler was going to expose his corruption, and his father had him committed," Rainbow said.

The two men locked eyes. Rainbow knew that Gideon had been placed on earth to uncover such a story. Rainbow wore a sleeveless black t-shirt, marked with bleach and a pair of green army pants. He smelled as though he had not bathed in weeks. His disregard for surface concerns allowed him to see a

person's true destiny.

*

Relative to other campuses, UCSC was not huge. It was easy for Gideon to find Tyler on Instagram. Gideon was unsurprised when he recognized a woman named Drea in a number of Tyler's pictures. Drea and Gideon had worked on a group project together during Gideon's freshmen year. Gideon still had her number. She answered the third time he called her.

"Have you heard about Tyler Rosenthal?" Gideon asked.

"I know he took a leave of absence last year, for mental health reasons."

"I want to bring his story to wide audience. Who should I talk to?" Gideon asked.

"Tyler didn't go out much, but he lived with a guy named Riccardo."

*

Riccardo agreed to meet in the apartment he once shared with Tyler. He was a tall, skinny, Latino man, with neatly combed wavy hair that stopped at his shoulders. He wore all white.

"At first Tyler was a little socially awkward. Like, he helped a woman on the bus with her bag without saying anything. He thought he was being helpful, but I could tell she was freaked out. He slowly turned into the worst roommate ever. One time he made a steak, and left it untouched in his room for days. Bugs feasted. He would stay up all night talking to himself, saying crazy things, like admonishing Owen Wilson for immoral behavior. I started seeing this woman Sarah. The first night she came over, she said Tyler was too high, and we had to take care of him. I told her it was fine, it was normal for Tyler. Sara stayed awake with him all night. In the morning, she used his phone to call his mom. His mom flew in from the East

Coast. I heard he's getting treatment and doing better," Ricardo said.

"What do you know about the role corporations, specifically the Divinity Hospital Group, played in poisoning Tyler?" Gideon asked.

"Nothing. I know literally nothing about that," Ricardo said.

Gideon had been using his phone to record their conversation. He turned it off.

"You can speak to me. I assure you, I know how to keep my sources safe," Gideon said.

"I agreed to talk to you, because I wanted to encourage people to speak out. I wished I helped him sooner," Ricardo said.

*

Gideon presented Dr. Sandel with a transcript of his conversation with Riccardo, and a summary of the research he had conducted into The Divinity Hospital Group. Gideon had listed dozens of times the group had engaged in questionable corporate practices.

"If you give me enough time, I know I can prove Tyler was poisoned by his father," Tyler said.

"You can write about Tyler Rosenthal for your thesis project. But don't mention The Divinity Hospital Group. If you have to write about D.H.G, keep it to one paragraph, maximum," Dr. Sandel said.

*

Gideon spent months working on his project. Gideon's older brother, Joseph, had trained as an electrician shortly after graduating high school. Joseph had been working for the state since he was twenty-one. He bought a house when he was twenty-

four. Gideon had always thought he was smarter than his brother. Their mother thought Gideon was smarter than Joseph as well. Gideon would use his thesis to prove that he could change the world, even if he never achieved financial stability.

Gideon presented Dr. Sandel with forty-five pages. His work detailed the role The Divinity Hospital Group played in the opioid crisis. He described instances in which doctors working for the D.H.G. had used medical implants which had never completed the proper trails. He told the story of a public hospital owned by the D.H.G. that closed under sketchy circumstances. Bernie Sanders had made a comment. Gideon was proud of the way he argued the C.F.O. of the D.H.G. was not above poisoning his own son. Gideon felt he had done the best he could. Dr. Sandel needed a week to read it. He summoned Gideon to his office.

"I am recommending that you take the senior exam instead of working on a thesis. I am no longer willing to work as your thesis advisor," Dr. Sandel said.

*

Gideon took the senior exam. He graduated. He found a job as a cook and continued to live in Santa Cruz. He was listening. He firmly believed the town had one great story to give him before he moved away.

He attended a party where he drank beer out of plastic cups and hung out in the backyard to avoid the noise projects playing inside. He started talking to a woman, Sophia Turpin, who he vaguely knew from school. She was a journalism student, a senior. She was working on her senior thesis.

"I am focusing on the lives of undocumented college students. These people don't have financial aid and their parents

typically aren't in positions to help. They have to try and make it the best they can."

Sophia took out her phone and played some oral testimonies.

"You're brilliant and your project is brilliant. I know Dr. Sandel, if you need help talking to him," Gideon said.

"Sandel has approved of my project. Most of the work is done," Sophia said.

"I want to help you in any way I can. Can I have your phone number and address?" Gideon asked.

Sophia shared her contact information, likely because she was drunk.

*

Gideon visited her apartment the next day. He was eager to express his sober enthusiasm in person. Sophia's roommate answered the door.

"Sophia isn't here," her roommate said.

"I know she is working on her senior thesis, but that is something I need to help her with. I am Gideon."

"She isn't here."

The door closed. It is possible Gideon heard the word weirdo.

Gideon texted Sophia around ten times that week. He rode his bike past her place sometimes, but refrained from knocking on her door. Eventually, Gideon decided that he could share his thoughts on undocumented students without Sophia's help. He spent two weeks writing twenty-five pages. He listed Sophia Turpin as the first author. Underneath Sophia's name, he wrote, with special thanks, Gideon White. He printed the work out, visited his old campus, and placed the work in Dr. Sandel's mailbox.

Two weeks later, Gideon received an email in his student account from Dr. Sandel. Sandel wanted to meet.

Dr. Sandel sat behind his desk. The thesis which Gideon had written, and attributed to Sophia, rested in front of him.

“Your actions constitute plagiarism. If you were working as a journalist you would be fired. If you were still a student, you would be expelled,” Dr. Sandel said.

Sandel talked and talked. He was a bald man in his forties. He wore a dress shirt. He appeared older than he was, maybe from the strain needed to keep a university job combined with his lack of interest in fashion. Gideon realized Dr. Sandel did not know how to change the world either.

For a couple of months, Gideon worked at the restaurant, and spent his free time binging TV shows. He gave some money to a group helping immigrants from Afghanistan. He received an email from his mother about a Santa Cruz woman who helped people volunteer with the elderly. I know you want to change the world, his mother wrote.

The woman's name was Janis Brown. She had broad shoulders and long gray hair. The first time Gideon and Janis met, he found her to be a mix between a high school principal and an ex-biker. The Harley lady who wanted to live straight. She arranged for Gideon to visit a woman named Ethel. Ethel no longer recognized the face of her children. They lived far away.

Gideon met Ethel inside of her senior care facility. Everyone in her unit had memory issues. He had to pass through a locked door to enter.

She sat in a room with twenty other seniors. A Lifetime movie played on TV.

“Where are we going?” Ethel asked.

"We're just hanging out," Gideon said.

"It would be nice to go somewhere."

They sat for ten minutes.

"Where are we going?" Ethel asked again.

Gideon texted Janis. He asked if he could give Ethel a ride in his car.

Insurance companies aren't going to dictate how we care for one another, Janis wrote back.

Gideon slowly helped Ethel out of the building. None of the employees stopped him. He had to give her step by step instructions on how to get in the front seat. First her butt went down, then her feet went inside, next the seat belt.



He drove to the down town strip. Families were eating dinner outside. People of all ages were walking around. Ethel stared at the scene and her face lit up. Gideon knew he had changed the world for one person.

Stuck

Ozzy

stuck pennies in Huey's door, wedging it shut, and we all stood in the hallway and laughed as he tried to get out. Serinson and Crater built a wall of beer cans and set it outside Gregg's door so he crashed into it on his way to the shower the next morning. Butthead and No-neck tied a rope to the handle of two doors across the hallway from each other so no one in either room could get out, and I have to say I found the shouts amusing, quizzical and comical at first, growing increasingly angry, until the entire dorm was filled with the word fuck.



On Sundays Simpson wandered the perimeter of the tennis courts collecting lost balls; late Sunday night, from his third floor window, he and I aimed them at the cars below us in the lot, setting off the alarms, shattering the one night of stillness on campus. Devins threw Skoal packets in the washers and dryers in the community laundry, and Jenkins filled the soap dispensers with mayonnaise. Every night someone flooded the sinks, and every morning some new witticism like "Here I sit broken-hearted" had been scrawled on the toilet stalls.

When Pace passed out we drew a penis on his face. When Stevenson slept we shaved him, then short-sheeted his bed. Davids we ducted-taped his wrists and ankles together, and the only thing that kept us from taping shut his mouth was we were afraid he might choke on his own vomit, drunk as we all were.

What

we didn't do was go to class. I'll say it was because we were too tired from

constantly watching our backs, or maybe it's that we only have so much creativity inside us, and when we use it coming up with ways to attack others, we forget to expand ourselves. It's also possible we had given up. Or were so busy trying to lock someone else in that we shut ourselves out, too busy attacking to protect.

That first semester we had all been friends. It was only in the winter, when the First Gulf War began, that we tried to hurt each other. This was after watching the news every night: the bombs over Baghdad, the Tomahawk missiles flying in from the Red Sea. We didn't know then how war would loom over our adult lives, how we'd move from one war to another without even realizing we'd moved. No wonder we were too tired to go to class, or care. No wonder we built so many walls, shut so many doors. It would be years before I quit sabotaging others, and still more before I realized there's no end to the creativity we can control, it's only that there's a limit to how much emotion we can handle. I'll prove it to you now. Tell me, when's the last time you remembered we were still at war?

Paul Crenshaw is a writer and essayist. His essay collection "This One Will Hurt You" was published by The Ohio State University Press in spring 2019. Other work has appeared in Best American Essays, Best American Nonrequired Reading, The Pushcart Prize, anthologies by Houghton Mifflin and W.W. Norton, Oxford American, Tin House, Brevity, North American Review, and Glimmer Train, among others.

The Importance of Identity