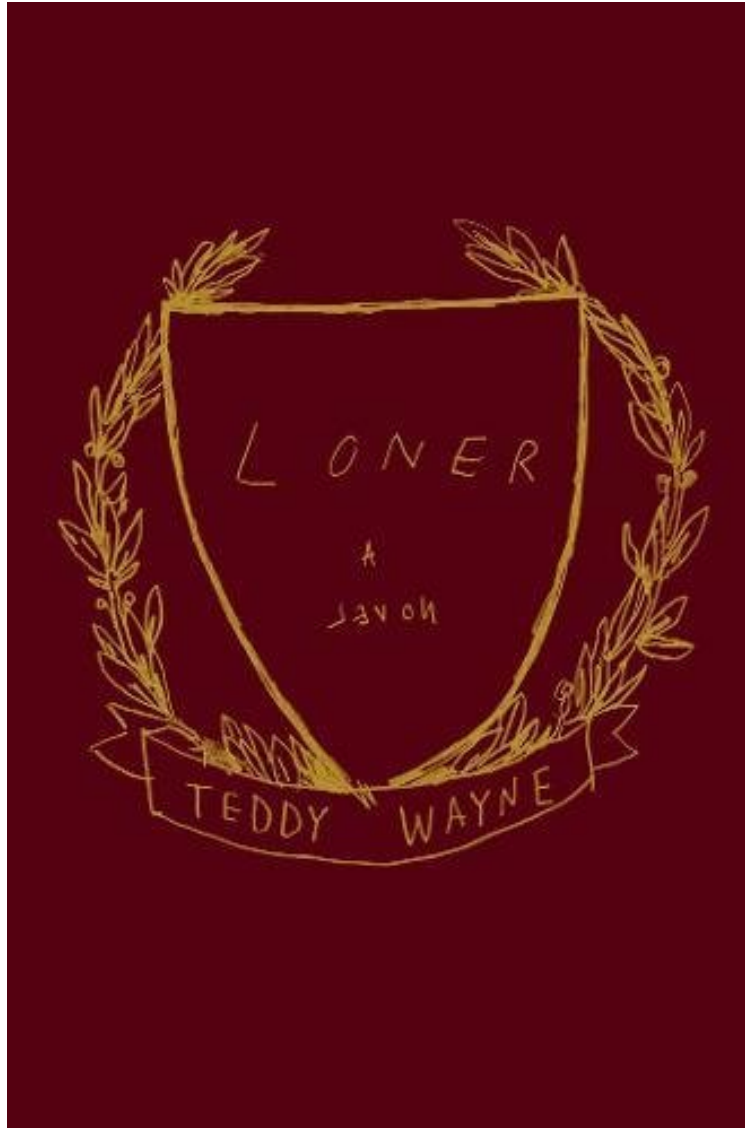


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## Loner: A Novel

*Teddy Wayne*

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**Teddy Wayne : Loner: A Novel** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Loner: A Novel:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great Writing!By aliceindandylandTeddy Wayne is an excellent writer. He has to be great, for me to like a book like this so much! It's basically the story of a brilliant, but very lonely young man, turned stalker! But it is so well-written that I was somehow always rooting for him, although also rolling my eyes throughout. After getting into Harvard, he sees and fixates on a beautiful young woman who will barely give

him the time of day, except to lure him in to write her papers for her. He thinks all along that she's going to suddenly take him into her rarified world (she's not only beautiful, she's rich), and readers are hoping all along that he will see the error of his ways, especially since there's another (very nice) young woman who likes him! There are a couple of dandy surprises at the end of the book, and not in a good way. One surprise is finding out who the beautiful girl really is, and the other is discovering what the young man is driven to do. It's kind of an ugly book, really, but immensely readable. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. *Haunting* By Loren Herring This book will stay with you days after finishing it. A haunting portrait of a college student who wants to fit in, but who is undone by his own demons. Highly recommended. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. occasionally very funny and has a great surprise at the end By Hans Castorp Pluses: Very well written, occasionally very funny and has a great surprise at the end. Minuses: the protagonist is mostly very unsympathetic.

"Powerful." —Maureen Corrigan, NPR's *Fresh Air* Named a best book of the year by NPR, Kirkus Reviews, and BookPage • One of the most anticipated novels of the fall from *New York* magazine, *Glamour*, Lit Hub, *Boston* magazine, *The Millions*, and BookPage David Federman has never felt appreciated. An academically gifted yet painfully forgettable member of his New Jersey high school class, the withdrawn, mild-mannered freshman arrives at Harvard fully expecting to be embraced by a new tribe of high-achieving peers. Initially, however, his social prospects seem unlikely to change, sentencing him to a lifetime of anonymity. Then he meets Veronica Morgan Wells. Struck by her beauty, wit, and sophisticated Manhattan upbringing, David becomes instantly infatuated. Determined to win her attention and an invite into her glamorous world, he begins compromising his moral standards for this one, great shot at happiness. But both Veronica and David, it turns out, are not exactly as they seem. *Loner* turns the traditional campus novel on its head as it explores ambition, class, and gender politics. It is a stunning and timely literary achievement from one of the rising stars of American fiction.

PRAISE FOR LONER: "Engrossing... highlights hot-button issues on today's campuses, making it seem all too real." —People, "The Best Books of the Fall" "Teddy Wayne has an uncanny ability to teleport to another location and inhabit the people who live there... Dark and compulsively readable... Wayne skillfully shows us every disturbing and obsessive moment... a tightly written, tensely memorable short novel." —Meg Wolitzer, NPR's Best Books of the Year "An impressively creepy novel of first love... At a moment when so many young writers want to join the ranks of the angels, Wayne's unfashionable wit, bitterness, and tight focus are a gift." —Lorin Stein, *The Paris Review* "Wayne has created a uniquely terrifying and compelling protagonist for such a funny book... the best second-person novel I've read since Sam Lipsyte's *Homeland*... a great, lethal little book." —The Boston Globe "Like all transgressive works of fiction, *Loner* is bound to be controversial. In some ways, the novel resembles a hyper-timely update to the psychological portrait of Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*. Similarly, *Loner* also asks the reader for a certain kind of bravery to stomach—and it rewards such risks." —GQ "Wildly inventive and disturbing" —Esquire "Harrowing... complex [and] necessary." —Salon "A chilling commentary on gender politics... Teddy Wayne holds up the Ivy White Male card as the ultimate trump. He means to slap awake a country that glorifies wealth; deifies men; objectifies women; and treats victims of sexual assault like sluts, kooks, and gold-diggers. The story barely qualifies as fiction, and it arrives on our shelves just in time." —The Millions "Engrossing, sometimes disturbing... 'Loner' is a fresh look at an old topic — longing, love and lust on campus. Read it, and appreciate what Wayne has accomplished. You won't be alone." —The St. Louis Post-Dispatch "Loner is a campus novel for our times... The novel's brilliance lies in the way Wayne toys with the reader's sympathies while allowing his narrator to pursue his dreadful end... *Loner* is one prickly piece of work, but the genius is hard to miss." —Los Angeles Times "Brilliantly terrifying... Teddy Wayne has written a masterclass on the privilege found in white male narcissism." —Electric Literature "Wayne... writes with sly grace about the seemingly unsympathetic plight of being a white American man, albeit by using ironic extremes rather than domestic realism. His bemusement is real, and often funny." —Bookforum "Loner moves ahead to its climax (and a superbly executed plot twist) with the sickening momentum of a horror movie... It stands in stark contrast to Mr. Wayne's previous novel, *The Love Song of Jonny Valentine* (2013), a funny, sympathetic portrait of a teenybopper pop star. The range shown in these two books, which move from the ridiculous to the chilling, is evidence of a rising talent." —The Wall Street Journal "With wit and style, Whiting Award-winner Teddy Wayne strips away the elite veneer of the overachieving denizens of Harvard. . . *Loner* is comic and chilling campus coming-of-age at its best." —Shelf Awareness "A frightening portrayal of privilege." —Marie Claire "Deft, involving... There is comic brio, but also an insider's precision, to Wayne's depiction... what is most frightening about Wayne's antihero protagonist (and narrator) is not how different he is from us—but how porous a border separates his monstrousness from our normalcy." —Chicago Tribune "The reader is... compelled to frantically turn the pages." —Publishers Weekly "Wayne's writing is spiky and electric... it reminded me of the early work of Jeffrey Eugenides... But if *Loner* at first appears to be a comedy of manners, it quickly veers into something far creepier... the reader may go from enjoying *Loner* to finding the experience not just uncomfortable but excruciating." —The New York Times Book Review "Magnetic... incredibly compelling." —BookPage "Wayne has crafted a magnificent story. Thrilling, engrossing, and infuriating, *Loner* harks

back—in a completely contemporary timbre—to literary classics that create compelling portraits of repellant characters, e.g., *Crime and Punishment*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Lolita*." —PopMatters "Stunning—and profoundly disconcerting...the pleasure of the book is not in its ultratimely plot but in its complicated—and unsettlingly familiar—cast. These people are nuanced even when they're disturbing, human even when they're horrendous. A spectacular stylist, Wayne is deeply empathetic toward his characters, but—brutally and brilliantly—he refuses to either defend or excuse them. A startlingly sharp study of not just collegiate culture, but of social forces at large; a novel as absorbing as it is devastating." —Kirkus (starred review) "An enthralling portrait of male narcissism and voyeuristic obsession." —Library Journal (starred review) "Like a novel of manners distorted by a twisted funhouse mirror, Teddy Wayne's *Loner* moves with wit and stealth and merciless deliberation towards increasingly brutal psychic terrain. Reading it, I found myself amused and then—with creeping force—afraid, repulsed, and ultimately unwilling to put it down." —Leslie Jamison, New York Times bestselling author of *The Empathy Exams* and *The Gin Closet* "Loner is a brave book that takes up the calling of literature to unsettle the reader into new understanding of the world. Wayne employs extraordinarily fine psychological brushwork to produce something rare in our desensitized era: a genuinely disturbing portrait, not just of a fundamentally unreliable narrator but of a culture that prizes class, achievement, and beauty over nourishing human connection. David Federman is one of the most authentically menacing characters to come around in a novel in a long time. There is no cartoon bogeyman here, only a chaser after that external proof of value that our pragmatic culture demands of eighteen-year-olds. Wayne holds a mirror up to an America in which self-esteem is paramount, parents enable inhumanity in the name of advancement, and unchecked ego combines with social failure to yield monstrous ends. It behooves us all to take a careful look in the mirror Wayne offers, because the monster depicted here is the one next door. The twists in the plot keep the reader's heart racing, even as the protagonist's blood runs cold." —Matthew Thomas, New York Times bestselling author of *We Are Not Ourselves* "Teddy Wayne perfectly conjures the mind of a keenly observant, socially ambitious, and utterly heartless college student. Yet no matter what outlandish things David does, I couldn't help but root for him—until the book's gut-punch ending." —Adelle Waldman, bestselling author of *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.* "Teddy Wayne's captivating and increasingly disturbing *Loner* features a character that you'd like to hug if you could be assured that he wouldn't try to stab you. It's a wonderfully unnerving and unreliable first-person account of a dangerous stalker who is also a shy teenager just trying to get a date with the popular girl in school. This impossible-to-reconcile character, mixed with Wayne's wry charm, makes *Loner* as thrilling as it is cautionary." —Jesse Eisenberg, author of *Bream Gives Me Hiccups*

**PRAISE FOR THE LOVE SONG OF JONNY VALENTINE:** "Sad-funny, sometimes cutting...more than a scabrous sendup of American celebrity culture; it's also a poignant portrait of one young artist's coming of age." —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times* "A funny, affecting tour of our cultural wasteland...It speaks well of both Jonny and his creator that the result is this good, a moving, entertaining novel that is both poignant and pointed — a sweet, sad skewering of the celebrity industry...his satirist's eye is impeccable...so limpidly does Wayne imitate the voice of a preteen celebrity, he risks making it look easy...to create out of that entitled adolescent voice a being of true longing and depth, and then to make him such a devastating weapon of cultural criticism — these are feats of unlikely virtuosity, like covering Jimi Hendrix on a ukulele...you'd have to be made of triple platinum not to ache for Jonny Valentine." —Jess Walter, *New York Times Book (cover review and Editors' Choice)* "Assured prose and captivating storytelling." —Oprah.com, *Book of the Week* "Buoyant, smart, searing." —*Entertainment Weekly* "Depicting the inner life of a protagonist who is not yet a full-fledged adult is no small feat, but author Teddy Wayne pulls it off masterfully." —*The Daily Beast* "Deft and delightful . . . touching (and unexpectedly suspenseful)." —*Wall Street Journal* "A showstopper...The book's greatest triumph — and there are many — is Jonny's voice...In addition to an exquisite rendering of Jonny's growing awareness, the novel provides other delights [and] plenty of genuinely affecting moments." —*Boston Globe* "A fun, highly diverting read...Wayne generates considerable sympathy for the 11-year-old kid trapped at the center of the churning entertainment machine...This is a portrait of the artist as a young brand." —*San Francisco Chronicle* "Hugely entertaining." —*The Washington Post* "Heartbreakingly convincing...Hate Bieber? Wayne's touching portrait might change your mind." —*People* "Provocative and bittersweet...A very funny novel when it isn't so sad, and vice versa." —Kirkus (starred review) "Surprisingly moving...heartbreaking...A mix of pre-adolescent angst and industry cynicism that makes him sound like Holden Caulfield Jr. adrift in Access Hollywood hell." —*Rolling Stone* "Masterfully executed. If this impressive novel, both entertaining and tragically insightful, were a song, it would have a Michael Jackson beat with Morrissey lyrics." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review) "A stunning achievement in literary zeitgeist." —Interview "The *Love Song of Jonny Valentine* takes us deep into the dark arts and even darker heart of mass-market celebrity, twenty-first-century version. In the near-pubescent hitmaker of the title, Teddy Wayne delivers a wild ride through the upper echelons of the entertainment machine as it ingests human beings at one end and spews out dollars at the other. Jonny's like all the rest of us, he wants to love and be loved, and as this brilliant novel shows, that's a dangerous way to be when you're inside the machine." —Ben Fountain, New York Times bestselling author of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* "This is a book with a runaway narrative engine, tremendous ambitions, and an even bigger heart. I do not lie when I tell you: Teddy Wayne is as good a young writer as we have." —Charles Bock, *New*

York Times bestselling author of *Beautiful Children* "A pitch-perfect anthem for our surreal American Dream, a power ballad for the twenty-first-century unhappy family, an epic ode to the fleeting glory of fame....A deeply entertaining novel with humor and heart to spare." —Amber Dermont, New York Times bestselling author of *The Starboard Sea*

**PRAISE FOR KAPITOIL:** "[Karim]'s a type—the nerdy and needy young immigrant—that we're all familiar with but that no other writer, as far as I know, has invented such a funny and compelling voice and story for...it does what novels can do better than any other art form: Show us a familiar world through unfamiliar eyes." —Jonathan Franzen in *The Daily Beast* "Teddy Wayne has written one of the best novels of my generation...Why did 9/11 happen, and why do we continue to respond so blindly? Wayne answers these questions better than Mohsin Hamid or Joseph O'Neill, the best authors of this genre until now...Wayne has completely foreseen and transcended the exhaustion of the 9/11 genre." —*The Boston Globe* "Brilliant...a major literary talent." —*The Houston Chronicle* "Flat out top-notch. Kapitoil makes you see America and the English language more clearly than ever before..." —McSweeney's "[A] wonderfully assured debut novel, at once poignant, insightful, and funny." —*Booklist* (starred review) "[A] strong and heartfelt debut novel...that beautifully captures a time that, in retrospect, seems tragically naïve." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review) "Affecting, timely, and frequently hilarious." —*Vanity Fair* "The first funny novel about oil." —*GQ* "A book ripe with beauty and potential...and a flawlessly developed first-person voice. Karim Issar is a character readers will remember, and readers had better prepare themselves to remember the name of Teddy Wayne as well. It's one they'll be hearing again and again..." —*BOMB* "Kapitoil is one of those uncommon novels that really is novel. Though the storytelling is conventional, it is satisfyingly so, and the book's estimable young narrator is a human type whom nobody until Wayne was ever inspired to write about." —Jonathan Franzen, author of *Freedom and The Corrections* "Teddy Wayne has written a brilliant book. Karim Issar is one of the freshest, funniest heroes I've come across in a long time, and thanks to his often excruciating adventures—financial, romantic, linguistic, and otherwise—we start to see America with Karim's weird and wonderful clarity. In its honesty, humor, intelligence, and hard-won wisdom, Kapitoil is 'Karim-esque' to the nth degree, and that is a very good way to be." —Ben Fountain, author of *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara* "An innovative and incisive meditation on the wages of corporate greed, the fundamental darkness of Kapitoil's vision is lit by the author's great comic intelligence and wit." —Kathryn Davis, author of *The Thin Place* "What a wonderful character Karim is—the hapless, hilarious, math-obsessed hero of Teddy Wayne's first novel. Kapitoil is a delight. Who knew oil futures could be such fun?" —Joshua Henkin, author of *Matrimony*

**About the Author** Teddy Wayne, the author of *Loner*, *The Love Song of Jonny Valentine*, and *Kapitoil*, is the winner of a Whiting Writers' Award and an NEA Fellowship as well as a finalist for the Young Lions Fiction Award, PEN/Bingham Prize, and Dayton Literary Peace Prize. He writes regularly for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *McSweeney's*, and elsewhere. He lives in New York. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

*Loner* Chapter 1 David," my mother said, "we're here." I sat up straight as we passed through the main gate of Harvard Yard in a caravan of unassuming vehicles, rooftops glaring under the noonday sun. Police officers conducted the stammering traffic along the designated route. Freshmen and parents lugged suitcases and boxes heaped with bedding, posing for photos before the redbrick dormitories with the shameless glee of tourists. A pair of lanky boys sailed a Frisbee over the late-summer grass in lazy, slanted parabolas. Amid welcome signs from the administration, student banners interjected **END ECONOMIC INEQUALITY**, **SILENCE IS VIOLENCE**, and **YALE = SAFETY SCHOOL**. A timpani concerto pounded in my chest as we made landfall upon the hallowed ground that had been locked in my sights for years. We'd arrived. I'd arrived. "For the tuition we're paying," my father said, carefully reversing into a spot, "you'd think they could give us more than twenty minutes to park." My parents climbed out of the car and circled around to the popped trunk. After tugging in vain at my door handle, I tapped on the window. "Where'd he go?" I could hear my mother ask. "In here," I shouted, knocking louder. "Sorry, thought you got out," my father said following my liberation. I checked in under a white tent teeming with my new classmates and received my room key and a bulky orientation packet. As we approached Matthews Hall, a girl emerged from the building. Seeing our hands were full, she paused to hold the door. I stepped inside and my orientation packet slid off the top of the box in my arms. "Thanks," I said when she stooped down to get it. "You would've been completely disoriented," said the girl, smiling, her nose streaked with contrails of unabsorbed sunscreen. "She seems nice," my mother said encouragingly as we shuffled upstairs to the fourth floor. The doors were marked with signs listing the occupants and their hometowns, stamped with Harvard's Veritas shield. Beneath these were rosters of previous inhabitants, surname first. My room's read like an evolutionary time line of American democracy, beginning with a procession of gilded Boston Brahmins, gradually incorporating a few Catholics, then Goldbergs and Jacksons and Yangs and Guptas, and, in the 1970s, Karens and Marys and Patricias. My mother was impressed to discover an NPR correspondent on the list (I'd never heard of her). In fifty years, I thought, I'd humbly recall this moment in career-retrospective interviews, insisting that never in my wildest dreams did I imagine my name would someday be the one people noticed. For the time being, though, I knew it didn't quite emblazon itself across the heavens like a verbal comet. David: blandly all-purpose, a three-pack of white cotton undershirts (**CREWNECK**, **MEDIUM**); Alan, an ulcerous accountant in Westchester circa 1957; then Federman, long a sound for the first vowel, an entity who is hardly here, or maybe he just left— Wait, who were we talking about, again? It was as if my parents, upon filling out

my birth certificate, couldn't be bothered. Tap is fine, they always told waiters. But now my ID card read David Alan Federman, Harvard Student. My roommate, Steven Zenger, had yet to arrive. I claimed the front room, envisioning it would lead to impromptu visitors, a -revolving door of campus characters popping in, lounging on my bed, gossiping late into the night. My parents took my student card and fetched the remaining stuff as I unpacked. After setting down the final box, my lawyer father checked his watch. "Thirteen minutes," he announced, pleased with himself. "Seven minutes to spare," my mother, also a lawyer, chimed in. Through the door the hallway hummed with the chatter of other families. "Well," said my mother, surveying the room. "This is exciting. I wish I were starting college again. All the interesting courses and people." "And I bet you'll be beating the girls off with a stick," my father added. "There are a lot of late bloomers here." My mother scowled. "Why would you say something like that?" "I'm just saying he'll find his tribe." He turned to me. "You'll have a great time here," he said with the hollow brightness of an appliance manual congratulating you on your purchase. "Just be yourself," my mother advised. "You can't go wrong being yourself." "Yep." Sensing more imperatives and prophecies, I opened the door to let them out. "Just one little thing, David," she said, raising a finger. "Sometimes when you talk, you do this thing where you swallow your words. I did it when I was younger, too. I think it comes from a place of feeling like what you say doesn't matter. But it's not true. People want to hear what you have to say. So try to enunciate." I nodded. "It helped me before I spoke to think of the word 'crisp,'" she said. "Just that word: crisp." After our own swift hug, my mother prodded my father into initiating an avuncular, back-patting clinch. They seem comfortable enough with my sisters, but for as long as I can remember, my parents have acted slightly unnatural around me, radiating the impression of Good Samaritan neighbors who dutifully assumed guardianship following the death of my biological parents in a plane crash. The door swung shut with a muted click. My bereft mattress and bookcase and motionless rocking chair stared at me like listless zoo animals. It was hard to picture people gathering here for fun, but a minute later someone knocked. It was my mother. "Your ID." She held out my student card. "It's very important—you can't open the door without it. Don't forget it again." "I didn't," I said. "You guys did." I resumed unpacking, yanking the price tags off a few items. Earlier that week my mother had dragged me to the mall, where I'd decided to adhere, for now, to my usual sartorial neutrality of innocuous colors and materials. It would serve me these first few weeks to look as benign as possible, the type of person who could be friends with everyone. I was standing inside my closet, hanging shirts, when the door flew open and my roommate bounded into the room, his equally enthusiastic parents in tow. "David!" he said. "Almost didn't see you. Steven." He walked over with his arm puppetishly bobbing for me to shake. "If I look different from my Facebook photo, it's because I got braces again last week," he said. "But just for six months. Or five and three-quarters now." All hopes I had of a roommate who would help upgrade me to a higher social stratum snagged on the gleaming barnacles of Steven's orthodontia. He would have fit right in at my cafeteria table at Garret Hobart High (named for New Jersey's only vice president), where I sat with a miscellaneous coalition of pariahs who had banded together less out of camaraderie than survival instinct. We were studious but not collectively brilliant enough to be nerds, nor sufficiently specialized to be geeks. We might have formed, in aggregate, one thin mustache and a downy archipelago of facial hair. We joked about sex with the vulgar fixation of virgins. We rarely associated outside of school and sheepishly nodded when passing in the halls, aware that each of us somehow reduced the standing of the other—that as a whole we were lesser than the sum of our parts. While Steven's mother fussed over his room's décor, his father uncorked a geysering champagne bottle of hokey puns and jokes. "Matthews" became "math-use," so now "students can finally find out how learning math will help them later in life!" When his son remarked that the Internet in the dorms was free, Mr. Zenger chortled uncontrollably. "Free!" he roared, clapping his hands. "I didn't notice that when I wrote them a check last month! What a bargain! Free Internet!" After a prolonged, maternally teary farewell—Mrs. Zenger smothered even me in her arms and assured me I was about to have the best year of my life—Steven invited me into his room. Nestled into a bean bag chair, he linked his hands behind his head, his -collared shirt's elbow-length sleeves encircling -hangman-figure arms. "There's no lock on my door," he said. "So feel free to come in whenever you feel like hanging out." "Okay," I said, lingering at the threshold. "So what are you majoring in?" he asked. "I mean concentrating in," he threw in conspiratorially, now that we were in on the secret handshake of Harvard parlance. "We don't have to declare until sophomore year, right?" "Yeah, but I already know I'm going to concentrate in physics. How about you? What's your passion? What're you into?" I was into success, just like everyone else who'd gotten in here, but admitting that was taboo. Though I'd excelled in all subjects, I didn't have the untrammelled intellectual curiosity of the true polymath. I was more like a mechanically efficient Eastern European decathlete grimly breaking the finish-line tape. Yet almost anyone could thrive in a field that consumed them. To lack ardor and still reach the zenith—that was a rare combination. Because I never mentioned my grades to anyone and seldom spoke in class unless I had silently rehearsed my comments verbatim, my academic reputation never approached the heights of Alex Hines (yearbook prediction: Fortune 500 CEO), Hannah Ganiv (poet laureate), or Noah Schwartz (President of the United States). When the college acceptance list was posted, my classmates were shocked that I was our grade's lone Harvard-bound senior. (David Federman's yearbook prediction: ??? FILL IN LATER.) But my teachers weren't. My letter of recommendation from Mrs. Rice made that much clear. (Eager to read her formal appraisal of my virtues, I overstated the number of copies I needed. When she handed me the stack of envelopes, I giddily retreated to the

boys' bathroom, tore one open, and inhaled her praise like a line of cocaine in the fetid stall.) She wrote that I was "one of the most gifted students I have encountered in my twenty-four years teaching -English at Garret Hobart High, already in possession of quite a fancy prose style (that sometimes goes over my head, I must admit!), although I can sense the immense strain human interactions put on him, whether in classroom discussions or -individual conversations. It would be wonderful if David shared his observations more in class with his peers, who would surely benefit. But I have the utmost confidence that, with the properly nurturing environment, this young man, somewhat of a loner, will come out of his shell and be as expansive and eloquent in person as he is on the page." I looked at Steven, the extroverted physicist in training, the trajectory of his impassioned career already plotted with a suite of differential equations he had memorized, his shell long since shucked. "I guess I'm still waiting to really get into something," I said. "And if that doesn't happen, there's always a life of crime." Steven waited a moment before laughing. Later that afternoon, the two of us headed downstairs for an orientation meeting. Steven swatted the casings of all the doorframes we passed through and leapt the last three steps of each flight of stairs while holding the railing. A few dozen freshmen mingled in the basement common room, key cards dangling over chests from crimson lanyards. Taxonomies hadn't been determined yet, hierarchies hadn't formed. We were loose change about to be dropped into a sorter that would roll us up by denomination. "Lot of cute girls here," Steven said to me. He plopped himself on a couch and began chatting up a girl who wore a pink pair of those rubber shoes that individuate one's toes like gloves. I took the seat on his other side. A number of "cute" girls did indeed dot the couches and folding chairs, even one or two who could compete with Hobart High's Heidi McMasters. (Our sole exchange, in eighth-grade earth science: HEIDI: "Do you have a pen?" DAVID: [immediately hands her his best pen, never sees it again]) A boy with chiseled forearms fuzzed with blond hair sat on the floor to my left. He was also not speaking to anyone, but seemed indifferent. I could tell he'd be popular. "David," I said, extending my hand. He shook it and looked around the room. "Jake." "Are you from New York?" I asked, gesturing to his Yankees hat. "Connecticut." His face lit up as he raised his hand. Another freshman swaggered up to him and slapped it. I introduced myself to the new guy. "Phil," he said. They began talking about several people to whom they referred only by last names. "You guys know each other from high school?" I asked. "Same athletic conference," Phil said. "Oh, what sport?" "Baseball," he answered without looking at me. Llabaseb, I thought—no, llabesab. I hadn't reversed a word in a month or two; I was getting rusty, far from the fluency of my younger years. At twelve, without many interlocutors to speak of (or to), I began a dialogue with language itself, mentally reversing nearly every word I encountered in speech, signs, objects I saw: tucitcennoc (Connecticut), citelhta (athletic), draynal (lanyard). Doing so came naturally—I'd visualize the word, reading it from right to left, syllable by syllable—and it surprised me when it impressed others. My verbal ability was discovered that year at summer camp, where for three days all the kids besieged me with requests to apply it to their names; Edward Park's was a crowd-pleaser. For those seventy-two hours I reveled in a social power I'd never had before, awaiting all the gnofelil spihsdneirf that would sprout from a few disordered words. Then the boy who could flip his eyelids inside out stole my thunder and, upon returning to the solitude of my parents' house, I graduated to a new lexical pastime: memorizing vocabulary lists in my older sister's SAT books. Words turned around in my mind only intermittently thereafter. When the Harvard application solicited me to write about a meaningful "background, identity, interest, or talent," though, I was reminded of that summer I felt genuinely special. "To continuously reflect the world in a linguistic mirror," I postulated in the essay, "is to question the ontological arbitrariness of everything and everyone. Why is an apple not an elppa, nor, for that matter, an orange? Why am I me and not you?" I titled it "Backwards" and typed the whole thing in a reverse font and word order (by line), preparing to mail in a hard copy so that the reader needed to hold it up in front of a mirror. My parents, however, feared the admissions committee would think it was gibberish. Bowing to prudence, I compromised by writing the body of the essay normally and changing just the title to . My "unique" essay had "rather intrigued" the Harvard admissions committee, my guidance counselor later informed me. I waited for a lull in conversation between the baseball players. "Ekaj and lihp," I said. "What?" Jake asked. "A lip?" "Your names backward." They stared at me blankly. "Jake is 'ekaj,' Phil is 'lihp.'" The two of them contemplated their reversed monikers and shared a look. "Guess we're really at Harvard," Phil said under his breath. I sank back into the couch's quicksand cushion, praying for the meeting to begin so that my silence wouldn't be conspicuous—or, failing that, for a monumentally distracting event: burst sewage pipe, freak hurricane, the president's been shot. Uoy t'nac og gnorw gnieb flesruoy, I thought. Someone tapped my shoulder and I turned around. "How was your move-in?" asked a girl standing behind the couch. "I saw you coming into the dorm with your parents," she said after I failed to react. "I'm Sara." "Oh, hi. David." "Nice to remeet you." "You, too," I said, and I was groping for something else to add when, from the entrance behind her, in the fashion of a queen granting a balcony appearance to the rabble below, you traipsed in, the nonchalant laggard. Suddenly there was no one else in the room; for the briefest of moments, as you entered my life, I paid myself no mind either, a rare, narcotic, unself-conscious bliss. "You're late," Jake hollered in your direction. "You missed the meeting." You glanced up from your phone. "Isn't it at four?" you replied. He drew out the suspense for a beat. "Just messing with you." You returned to your phone without any expression. "It's about to start, though," he said. "Sit with us." "Thanks," you said in a low, unmodulated voice. "I prefer to stand." You crossed to the other side of the room. I'd received nothing from those fifteen seconds, but it felt like I had; Jake and

Phil's loss was my gain. You had no truck with entitled athletes who chased openmouthed after fly balls like Labrador retrievers and assumed any girl would jump at the heliocentric opportunity to orbit their sun. Their assets from high school were liabilities here. Guess we're really at Harvard, I wanted to scoff in their faces. Jake, looking unscathed by rejection, whispered something to Phil, who laughed. "Well, I should probably find a place to sit," Sara said, and wandered off. You sequestered yourself against a wall, arms crossed over your chest, the only student without a lanyard. You were here because it was compulsory, not to make friends. You had no interest in present company, didn't need to manufacture an affable smile and hope some generous soul took pity on you. No, you weren't one of us at all. You were in a tribe of your own. How differently our lives would have unraveled over these years if the computer program generating the room assignments had started up a millisecond later, spat out another random number, and the two of us had never had a chance to meet.