

BERT KREISCHER


LIFE *of the* PARTY
STORIES of a PERPETUAL MAN-CHILD

"The Machine"

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STORIES OF A
PERPETUAL MAN-CHILD

BERT KREISCHER

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS  NEW YORK

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In fear of forgetting to thank someone important for the help in making this book possible, I would like to simply thank my family.

Dad, you footed the bill for a lot of these stories, so you may not want to read past this page. In a seriousness, you have always told me to write a book, and here it is. Thank you for making me the man I am today. You'll never know how important that one phone call on my twenty-sixth birthday was.

Mom, you have been my champion since I was a little boy. You have had my back since that first fly ball I caught, spiked, and started dancing in the infield. As the coaches screamed, the bases cleared, and Denny Sullivan yelled, "Put some mustard on that hot dog," you cheered in the stands for me. I can't imagine who I'd be without your love and support.

To my sisters, Annie and Kottie, you didn't really do much to help me write this book, shape me, or support me. This book would be just as good had you done nothing, which you kind of did. Really, you two have just been there, like two gas stations you pass by every day on your way to work. Maybe I'll stop and get a coffee, maybe a donut, some gas, whatever ... just kidding. I love you like sisters.
BIG TEAM!

To my daughters, Georgia and Ila, I love you SO much more than my sisters. You guys gave me purpose, direction, and a reason to slow down. Ironically, you are also the reasons I work so hard. Considering you guys are only seven and nine right now, I'll keep it simple. Realize, if and when you read this book, that your dad is ALSO the guy who taught you to ride your bikes, played monkey in the middle with you, and kissed you four times every night I tucked you into bed. Nailed it! Oh it is so hard. My only hope is that this book is out of print by the time you go to college.

LeeAnn, you are simply the greatest person to ever come into my life. You are not only the reason this book is complete, you are the reason that I am complete. I wake up every day the happiest man in the world, thanking God I have you in my life. Thank you for your absolute selflessness day in and day out. I only hope that one day the roles can be reversed and I can be as selfless for you as you have been for me. I love you, baby doll!

Introduction

Bong hits are like strippers: they're best when shared with a group of friends. That's what I was doing—taking a bong hit among friends—when I got the phone call that would change my life. There have been a handful of times when I knew without a doubt that my life was now changing. All of them are in this book, and none of them would have happened if it weren't for this one phone call.

"It's *Rolling Stone* magazine," my roommate Blair said, passing me the phone. "They asked for you." Had I known what was coming, I might have paid more attention, but I was a sixth-year senior with no plans beyond that toke and my next game of Frisbee golf. So instead, I held in the smoke and bubbled out a hello. As best I can recall, the man on the other end explained that he was a journalist and was interested in writing an article on my college, Florida State University, being "The Number One Party School in the Country." He needed a tour guide, he said, who knew the school inside and out. Since my name had been brought up by nearly everyone he had spoken with, he wondered if there was a good week in November for him to fly down and "observe." I agreed to show him around as the bong made its way back in front of me.

I heard him laugh. "Are you doing a bong hit?"

"Yup," I said, trying not to lose any smoke.

He laughed again, "Perfect!" and hung up.

I was, in fact, the perfect host for a journalist—I had been at the school longer than most of the teachers and knew everyone there was to know. Also, silence makes me uncomfortable, so I talk to fill dead air. Little did I know, I was about to become the subject of a six-and-a-half-page article in *Rolling Stone*.

Soon everyone would learn that I skipped class, smoked weed, drank excessively, threw outrageous parties, didn't wear condoms, and was willing to shit in public if it meant winning an election—details I poured onto the writer. At the time I was just hoping one of these stories would make it into the article, maybe followed by a flattering picture that I could frame on my wall to remind me of my college experience. I never could have expected what was to follow. My dad was the first one to call me, at 8 A.M. on April 1, 1997.

"What the fuck did you do? I have news people camped out in front of our house, and the phone

ringing off the hook.”

As if straight out of a movie (and soon it would become one: National Lampoon’s *Van Wilder* even though it didn’t end up resembling my life much at all), the doorbell rang. With the phone still in my hand, and my dad still shouting on the other end of the line, I opened the door to a UPS man holding the most important parcel I’d ever receive: my issue of *Rolling Stone*. I hung up with my dad, plopped down on the couch, and flipped to the article titled, “The Undergraduate.”

The first paragraph literally brought tears to my eyes. Of all the emotions that ran through my head that day, the one that held anchor was pride—pride that I had honestly portrayed what life at FSU had been like.

And FSU had been a dream to me. I had wanted to attend since I visited as a junior in high school and was blown away by how beautiful the campus was. University of Florida was flat, spread out, and too clean, like a ninth-grade girl with daddy issues. University of Central Florida was too new and barely had alumni. University of Miami was in god-awful Miami. But FSU was lush, rich, colorful, and full of hills. At UF, UCF, or USF, you needed a car to get from class to class, an idea I wasn’t into. At FSU, where the female undergrads outnumbered the men three to one, all you needed to get by was basic conversation skills.

My first day on campus, I fell in love nine times, made five new friends, got drunk, got high, and managed to go to orientation. That first semester, I passed all my classes with only minimum attendance and effort. And that became my credo: Take the classes that people told you were easy, show up when need be, and party. I won’t say all the kids who attended FSU were only there to party, but all the kids *I* knew were there for the exact same reason: to have a good time and get a college degree.

I learned to drink ... a lot. I also learned that when drinking, I could make people laugh, and often found myself at the head of a table. I enjoyed being the center of attention, the life of the party. By the time *Rolling Stone* found me, I had developed a reputation as the guy you *had* to party with.

After the article came out, things got weird. It’s hard to picture now, with reality TV making the outrageous seem so mundane, but in 1997 with no precedent like Snooki or Honey Boo Boo, a college kid talking candidly about living a carefree life of excess got the media’s attention. TV shows came to Tallahassee to meet me, radio stations called every fifteen minutes from as far away as Australia. ESPN sent a pre-*Jackass* Johnny Knoxville to party with me on a tour bus, and for one semester, I was truly famous in the town I cherished. As I sat next to recently drafted running back Warrick Dunn during graduation, talking about our big future plans for our now famous selves, I thought to myself *must be the luckiest man in the world*.

What I didn’t know then was that one of my writing teachers had overheard someone making the (false) claim that I had a book deal with Random House, and that he had therefore decided to fail me out of spite. Having spent six and a half years working the system, I knew it was almost unheard of to fail a graduating senior. So the next week, I went to the instructor’s office and made the plea that

administration office had informed me was necessary.

He stopped me mid-sentence. “I don’t give a shit, you can go fuck yourself. I’m not gonna help you. You have skipped through life without a care in the world and succeeded. Now you have a movie deal, a book deal, a stand-up comedy career ... you’re famous, why do you need a college degree? Go out to Hollywood and make your millions.”

“But I’m only three credits short and yours is a creative writing class, it’s a subjective grade ... objective. I always get those mixed up.”

He didn’t laugh. He leaned forward in his chair and seethed, “I’ve been writing my whole adult life and I take it very seriously. And here you come—blacking out, smoking pot, shitting, skipping classes—and you get a book deal? And, to make things even worse, you and your party lifestyle have sullied the very university I am trying to get my degree from. I will never pass you. I’m not going to help you and there’s nothing you can do to change my mind. Please leave my office.”

Dumbstruck, I walked out of his office and left Florida State for good. As it turned out, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I moved to New York to start a career in stand-up comedy that has taken me around the world and onto stages in places I could have never imagined.

First, however, at the insistence of my father, I had to enroll (via correspondence) in what turned out to be the two hardest classes I had ever taken. These were pre-Internet classes, just a box of books and a test sent to me through the State of Florida, the same classes given to inmates at correctional facilities. In the end, I managed to get the credits I needed to get my degree, and today I sit here, forty-year-old college graduate (barely), sincerely wondering: What if I had studied harder? What if I had partied less, taken life more seriously, not fucked around at every opportunity, and focused more on academics like every teacher I ever had told me I should?

I’m not sure what the answer is, but I can say with 100 percent certainty that had I been more serious and more focused, I wouldn’t be doing what I do now: making people laugh for a living, wouldn’t be selling out comedy clubs, I wouldn’t be appearing regularly on radio and television, and definitely wouldn’t be hosting my own TV shows. I would have never robbed a train with the Russian mafia, swam with great white sharks, fought a bear, played arena football, been mauled by a bull, jumped out of an airplane with Rachael Ray, partied with David Lee Roth, or thrown Johnny Knoxville down a flight of stairs.

I would have absolutely nothing to write about, and maybe I’d be just as bitter as the teacher who told me to go fuck myself fifteen years ago.

I don’t remember that teacher’s name, but I hope he is still sitting in his tiny closet of an office reading this paragraph. He definitely remembers me, and if by chance you are reading this: Teacher, I hope this book makes you angry beyond belief, and frustrated that you never got out of Tallahassee and lived a life worth writing about. And even more angry knowing full well that I just misspelled Tallahassee.

1.

Worthy Keeper of the Annals

I've never suffered from stage fright. As a matter of fact I suffer from the exact opposite of stage fright. I suffer from the fear of not getting on stage, of not grabbing the spotlight, of letting a potentially magical moment slip by. I'm not sure what drives it, nor am I sure how to control it, all I know is that I will give a three count of noble "no's" before I risk making a complete ass out of myself.

"Bert, you should get up there and say something!"

"No." *One.*

"Seriously, the mic is open."

"I think it's a bad idea." *Two.*

"It would be hilarious..."

"Really?" *Three.*

"Yeah..."

And I'm off. There have been some beauties and some beasts (more often than not beasts). And it's those ugly ones that are generally remembered the longest.

But there have been a handful of beauties, too....

* * *

One of my earliest recollections is entering first grade. I had a very hard time with separation anxiety my first week. I'd previously gone to a school where my mom taught and my sister attended, so I don't think I had a firm grasp of what entering first grade entailed—the inherent gravity of it. It dawned on me when I got in my dad's van that morning, and we left for school—alone. As we merged onto the interstate and into traffic, I felt my stomach swirl. I was in the system. My dad, like everyone else on the road, was thinking about the traffic. But for me, the fact that I was alone with my dad felt odd. We hadn't spent a lot of time alone up until then. I was still too young, and he was working a lot.

He must have noticed my unease, because halfway to school he asked me what was going on.

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Do you think it would be okay for you not to go to work today and maybe hang out with me at my new school?"

“I’ll hang out for a while, but I’m going to have to go to work at some point.”

“Maybe you could just skip work and hang out, like, outside the classroom.”

“I think they have rules against that, buddy.”

We went back and forth like this all the way to my new school, up the stairs, and into my classroom, where I began to melt down. This is the parenting job my dad pulled on me:

“Here’s the deal: I won’t go anywhere. I will sit in the parking lot all day in my van until you’re done with school. If you need me, just come out to the parking lot and get me.”

And I believed him—for the first ten minutes of first grade. It was then that I politely informed my teacher, Mrs. Thompson, that I would be taking a little break from the introductory portion of today’s lesson and heading out to the parking lot. I explained that I had just about had my fill of being without my family and needed to find my dad, who had promised to wait in his van in case such a situation were to arise. She explained in her soft Southern accent that my dad had gone to work. He was not in the parking lot. I was going nowhere.

To say I took this news poorly is like saying DMX has some bumps on his driving record.

Tears turned into sobs, which turned into panic, which turned into sheer panic, which turned into mayhem. I made my way from desk to desk, from kid to kid, explaining that we might never see our parents again. Mrs. Thompson had lost control, and her only hope was to get me on her side to help calm the kids down. So we made a pact: I would do first grade peacefully, as long as I got to sit at the front of the class, my desk next to her, holding her hand.

What can I tell you, I’m a straight-up gangster.

That year I discovered the band KISS, and with that discovery, found my life’s direction. Whenever I could, I dressed in as much drag as I could pull together from my mom’s closet, threw on as much makeup as I could sneak, and performed solo renditions, earphones on, in our living room. “Shout It Out Loud” was my preferred jam, although “Rock And Roll All Nite” inspired some stellar solo performances.

A couple of my uncles were living with us at the time, trying to start a band, and they would go wild with laughter at my one-man show, which I couldn’t hear (due to the headphones). They would suggest dance moves, wardrobe choices, and mock guitar licks, for my benefit and their amusement. I jumped at the coaching, following their direction to a T. Come Christmas, I was a goddamned air-guitaring Jimi Hendrix.

So you can imagine the excitement that overwhelmed me when I first caught wind of our elementary-school talent show. Finally, all my training could be put to use. I almost felt bad for the kids who had to muster together some kind of performance in a matter of weeks, while I had been in rehearsals since August. I kept a lid on my project, though, and practiced even more dutifully than before. I listened more closely to my uncles’ guidance, as they sipped their Heinekens. I kept my eyes on the prize.

Come talent-show morning I was ready. I told my mom the night before that I had entered and

would need to borrow some of her clothes. My mom, hands down the most supportive woman I know, didn't offer the least resistance. She dressed me to the nines. I would handle my own hair and makeup. My mom walked me through what to put on and how to apply it. (I had to pretend that I hadn't been putting on her makeup in secret for months.)

I met my dad at the front door for school that morning shirtless, in my mom's panty hose, with chains draped across my chest, cowboy boots, a cape, and a tote bag full of product.

My dad blinked. "What the fuck is this?"

"I have a talent show today and this is my costume."

"Does your mother know about this?"

"She dressed me!"

"Of course she did."

After he conferred with my mom for a minute, we drove silently for twenty-five minutes downtown Tampa. In hindsight, I imagine my dad acted with me the same way he would if he had to, say, give a transvestite a ride home. But at the time I thought nothing of it. I was already envisioning my future glory. As I got out of the car, my dad handed me a bag.

"I had your mom pack an extra set of clothes and your uniform just in case you ... got cold." I took the bag, thanked him, and was on my way. I could hardly wait for the reception I would get from my first-grade class.

The school day went just fine, as I remember it. I distinctly remember not being nervous but excited. Funny, too, because now, as a professional performer, I always get nervous. But that day I was stone-cold confident: I was going to murder.

Then, suddenly, it was time for the talent show. Mrs. Thompson allowed my classmate Brian Callahan and me to go to the bathroom to take care of my hair and makeup. Ten minutes later we were back, and I was Gene Simmons. The class circled me admiringly. I couldn't wait to see the looks on their faces after my performance. I'd be a god.

We left as a class for the auditorium, and I split off with Brian, who had now assumed the role of tour manager. We learned that I'd be performing in the latter half of the show. So I settled in, waiting for my cue as Brian made his way back to sit with the class.

The show consisted of a predictable assortment of gymnastics, piano, comedy, and juggling. It wasn't until about halfway through that I saw him. A fourth grader with a violin—dressed as KISS lead guitarist Ace Frehley. My heart sank—this kid had stolen my act. He walked up to me and nodded.

"Which one are you supposed to be?"

"Gene Simmons."

"Nice. What are you going to do?"

"'Rock And Roll All Nite.'"

"No, what instrument are you going to play?"

I looked at him like he had started speaking in Swahili. “Nothing,” I told him.

“Nothing? What, are you ... just going to dance?”

“Kind of.”

He started laughing and walked away. It wasn't until I saw my act in this light that I realized how ill prepared I was for this *talent* show. I didn't really have a talent, per se. All these people were dazzling the masses with actual skills they possessed, had been working on, crafting. My only real talent, as I saw it, was that I liked KISS.

Panic set in as I watched Ace Frehley take the stage. Just seeing his makeup was enough to set off the crowd. Great, my one sure bet and he just stole it. Ace then banged out a semirecognizable version of “Shout It Out Loud.” He closed with a mock guitar strum on his violin. The place went nuts.

He passed me without a word as he left the stage, then went over to the other fourth graders and slapped them five (high fives weren't around yet). A couple of kids went on in between us and as they did, I felt the pressure mounting and my confidence wilting. I had no act, my costume looked ridiculous, my makeup was suspect. And I realized that I had somehow completely overlooked the “hair” portion of my hair-and-makeup routine.

But there was no time to do anything about it. It was showtime. I had them start the music before my entrance, just as I would do with my uncles. But with no instrument to show for myself, the crowd was more confused than anything. I can only imagine they were trying to figure out what this misbegotten drag queen had in store.

It's moments like these that define a man—when he must choose between risking major, public humiliation or admit that he's been outclassed. I took that moment to sprint and then slide onto my knees up to the very edge of the stage.

I then proceeded to air-guitar the fuck out my song for the K-through-Five set.

The build started at the back, the fifth graders who I'm sure had been rolling their eyes at the kid with the violin. After all the pianos, violins, and jugglers, to then have a first grader crank a song that all knew and loved and get *weird as fuck* on their asses—it must have been a treat. I jammed for the whole song. Students sang along with me as I belted out the lyrics as loud as I could.

I don't remember too much of what followed. There was the looks on their faces. The sounds of their cheers. But mainly I remember the elation of having been on stage. When my parents picked me up at school, I wasn't the same kid who had been dropped off that morning. I didn't enter the talent show the next year, the year after that, or any other years at elementary school, but one thing was for sure: the bug of performing had bitten me.

* * *

They haven't all been beauties. For every beauty, there are a dozen beasts. Fast-forward to 1992 at Florida State University.

By this time in my life I had begun to make a name for myself as a Funny Guy. I would write

comic songs on my guitar about our friends, I was quick with a joke or a comeback, and was the go-to dude when our fraternity needed to put together a sketch or a skit. People would introduce me as one of the funniest guys they knew, and every once in a while, someone would pull me aside and tell me, with all seriousness that I should try my hand at being a comedian.

It sounded beyond unattainable, so I stayed in my small circle, continuing to make my friends laugh. My fraternity was the one place I knew I could always draw an audience. There were a few times a year when all 180 of us would gather, and one of those was elections. Guys would prepare a speech, put on a coat and tie, draw up bullet points on poster paper, and go around the room trying to sway votes in their direction.

The more ambitious among us saw this as an opportunity to grow, network, pad a resume. I found it an ideal time to mock those guys. You got ten minutes to win votes. These were my ten minutes to entertain, my first brushes with stand-up. The first year I sang a song, got huge laughs—and lost. The second year, I gave a very sincere ten-minute speech, completely naked. At first I got laughs, then very uncomfortable eye contact as I strutted around the stage pretending not to be naked. My platform was, “I have nothing to hide,” and despite my command performance, I lost again.

The third year I hadn’t prepared anything when I saw that Josh Young was running uncontested for the position of Worthy Keeper of the Annals. I had been taking myself really seriously at the time. I was in a band, plotting a path away from Writer-Comedian and toward Brooding Artist. But old habits die hard. My bandmate, John Dacre, leaned over to me and whispered, “Are you going to run against him?”

“No.” *One.*

“Are you going to run at all?”

“I don’t think so.” *Two.*

“Well, you can’t let him run uncontested, you gotta go up there naked again.”

“To be honest my stomach is kind of bothering me; if I did go up there, I would probably just shiver all over the place.” *Three.*

Having heard only the last half of the conversation, our bassist and John’s best friend, Brent Brackin, chimed in. “That would be hilarious! You have to do that!”

I looked to Dacre, waiting for somebody to back down, but his eyes had widened.

“Yeah, you’re doing that!”

And just like that it was decided.

The two stood up and, in unison, said, “We nominate Bert Kreisler for the Worthy Keeper of the Annals.”

“Bert,” our president said, “do you accept?”

I reluctantly nodded. The three of us headed back to the bathroom to prepare for my speech.

Worthy Keeper of the Annals, the unfortunately titled office I was running for, was fairly low on the ballot, which meant it came early—and that we had very little time to plan anything. Lucky for us

the speech as we conceived it required very little preparation. I stripped nude, Brackin found a tie for me, and Dacre, in a moment of genius, pulled an empty pizza box out of the garbage. The president came back to the bathroom to see if we were ready. We were.

We walked in toward the end of Josh's speech, for which he was wielding a laser pointer (brand new technology for the early 1990s). He was in a suit and tie, and closed with something to the effect of, "And that is why I think you should vote for me."

Josh took a seat as Brackin walked into the room and began to speak on my behalf, the kind of endorsement every candidate was required to have.

He started solemnly, "Guys, as you know Bert can be something of a jokester, a prankster if you will. But ever since we started our band, I've seen a very different side of him. And I think tonight, you look past the Bert you have come to know, you, too, will see a different side of him. With that said, for the position of Worthy Keeper of the Annals, our brother, Bert Kreischer."

Dacre discreetly slid the pizza box into place. I revealed myself to the crowd, wearing only a tie. Like last year, they went nuts. A little lightheartedness was welcome, in what had come to be very serious and sometimes unhealthy campaigning. I walked up to the pizza box, butt cheeks clenched and waited for the crowd to calm down.

"I would like to show you all a very different side of me," I said, turning my back to the crowd, facing the previous year's council. The audience laughed at what they thought was a simple joke: my ass. But as I let go, I heard a gasp.

It was the sound of the last breaths of fresh air in the room behind inhaled.

The council, sitting at their designated table, seemed confused at first. I started peeing at their feet. (As we all learned that day, you can't go number two without a little number one.)

The smell was absolutely atrocious. The room cleared out in a matter of seconds. People literally jumped out of the windows, piled out of every door, began violently dry-heaving. The council lost their minds and demanded that I go back in the room and clean up my mess, which I did (and directly after, threw up). I'll spare you too much description except to say that my aim for the pizza box was balls-on accurate.

We gave the room a solid ten minutes of aerosol air freshener, assumed our places, and waited for everyone to vote. Ballots were collected as Josh and I stood at the front of the room, listening as people chuckled over what they had just seen. As the votes were tallied, I heard a rumbling of dissent from the members.

"You guys have got to be fucking kidding right now."

We answered with curious faces.

"There is only one vote for Josh. Bert won in a landslide."

The place went fucking bananas. Josh walked over to the ballots and confirmed what the council had told us, that everyone had voted for me ... except for his own vote, for himself. (I had opted to abstain, as I found both candidates incompetent. I instead wrote, "Mills Sucks Pole" on my ballot.)

The council congratulated me as Josh began to shout. “You’re not really gonna let this happen at you? The guy shit on a pizza box! I have a plan and a laser pointer. I wore a fucking suit.”

“He won fair and square,” said the president.

Josh looked at his brethren and shouted, “This is fucking bullshit!”

An unknown brother piped back, “No, it’s bertshit.”

* * *

If these two stories, the beauty and the beast, form my legacy as an entertainer, then so be it. I hope to keep growing artistically, and I think these stories suggest I have. But if, at my funeral, the only people to speak are my makeup artist Brian Callahan and my bandmates John Dacre and Brent Brackin, and they share these two stories with the friends and family in attendance, please know that I will be smiling from up above. Naked. In KISS makeup. Rocking the fuck out.

2.

Alcoholism, Vandalism, Drug Use, and Other Ways to Have a Good Time

Fraternities take a lot of flak, and rightly so. Mine was something of a breeding ground for racism, sexism, alcoholism, vandalism, homophobia, and drug use. I know that anyone with a liberal blog is about to lose their mind and get those angry butterflies that inhabit enraged chests, but my goal here is not to anger, but to show you how much fun racism, alcoholism, vandalism, homophobia, and drug use can be for a young man. Maybe shine a light on a secret part of society, the way a disco ball sparkles in a dorm room at 3 A.M. when you're blowing up on X. No one ever meant too much harm. We were a bunch of simple-minded boys who were desperately trying to find out who we were before entering the big wide world. There's a part of me that wishes I had been strong enough as a young man to carve my own path, rather than following in the footsteps of so many. But it was a whole lot of fucking fun if you were a guy with six years to kill. One thing I can say for certain, I would do it again completely.

I pledged along with my roommate and best friend at the time, Jeff Hartley, in the fall of 1991, the first semester of my freshman year, the year grunge meandered its flannels onto the music scene. We rushed a couple fraternities but gravitated toward the one that was populated mostly by guys who had gone to our high school in Tampa. Pledging a fraternity is a mindfuck of an activity. They wine and dine you to get you to join, then allow you a two- to three-week grace period, just enough for you to get comfortable. It's the kind of grace period an abusive husband or a sociopath might give you. You're comfortable, you're confident, then when you least expect it, you are hiding in the closet because you've overcooked dinner. The first time it happened to me was also the first time I heard the N-word used unapologetically. I was so appalled I almost stood up and left. But no one else was leaving, and considering that the group of older boys yelling at us was looking for someone to sing out—and standing up and protesting, “*Language, gentlemen,*” would do exactly that—I held in my liberal rage until we were alone.

After the meeting my pledge class sat around in a circle drinking beers, collecting our thoughts. I waited for the right moment to voice my concern.

“Can you believe that guy said the N-word?”

“Grow the fuck up,” said one of my older pledge brothers, who had gotten hazed beyond belief and would later de-pledge because of it. “He didn't mean it as racist. He wasn't calling a *black person*”

nigger. He was calling *us* niggers; it's not racist if you call a white person a nigger." Although cringed every time he said the word, you couldn't argue with his logic.

Another pledge brother chimed in. "Yeah, it had nothing to do with race ... you dumb nigger."

Everyone laughed, and I left my longhaired liberal outrage behind. And that is how complicity racism happens.

It made sense in a way. They were constantly trying to shock us. In that climate, you kind of fell into line quickly and you were never comfortable. Anytime you felt relaxed, it was because they let you feel relaxed so you could slip up just enough that they could haze you. They were giving you the rope to hang yourself. They'd let you show your ass and then call you on it. So when they did haze you, it was for those things that you'd done—like admit which brother you thought didn't belong in the fraternity, or who had the hottest chick you'd like to fuck, or better yet who you thought might be gay. The proper reprimand would always involve ratting you out and lots of screaming.

To say that our house was a place of hazing is like saying that Guantánamo Bay is a residence for independent-thinking Middle Easterners. There were one or two guys that got hazed worse than the others because people had personal beefs with them. I got hazed because I was gullible, likeable, and something of a moron. I'd be walking into the house in the early morning to clean the up head and pass Pete Whalen, a guy I'm still friends with. He'd see me walk in, tired and hungover, and grab hold of me.

"Hey, at 6 A.M. I need you to wake up Brother Siminson."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, he asked me to do it, but I have to leave."

"What do you want me to do?"

"He's a heavy sleeper, so he said to grab a hammer and bang on his door until he gets up."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain. And don't make me say it again, pledge. You got a dip?"

Dip was the binding powder that brought us all closer to each other. Ground-up tobacco that you pinched and placed between your bottom lip and teeth. Your safety as a pledge was dependent on two things: if you dipped, and what brand you dipped. The only two acceptable brands were Skoal mint and Copenhagen. Copenhagen was for the guys who owned trucks, had been hit by their fathers, drank whiskey, and said the N-word. Skoal mint was for the softer boys, who usually came from country clubs, private schools, and veered away from racial slurs. Pete and I were Skoal men, as was Siminson. I pulled out a fresh can, handed it to Pete, and he took a big morning-sized dip, as did I.

"So, I'm safe leaving my responsibility in your hands?"

"Safe!"

"I don't want to get fucked on this one!"

"You won't, I promise." We both spat and walked in separate directions, me to clean the up head and Pete to economics class.

Come 6 A.M., there I was with a framing hammer outside Siminson's door. I started soft, but after a short while found no result. My soft taps then turned into harder bumps, grouped in machine-gun spurts. Still nothing. Slowly I could hear other brothers in other rooms waking up, shouting for the guy with the jackhammer to stop, but still I heard nothing from my intended target. Finally, I decided to pull the stops and began taking Paul Bunyan-sized swings at my target. The dip juice seeped between my teeth as I swung at the door with all my might. I remembered thinking at one point I should probably pull back a bit or I might just knock the numbers off, when I finally heard movement in his room. Excited, like a fisherman who feels a tug on his line and wants to set his hook, I banged out a few murderous booms for good measure, and with that Siminson was at the door, in a rage.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"You have to wake up."

Siminson looked still asleep but shocked, like someone had just lit him on fire in the middle of his slumber. He grabbed the hammer out of my hand and slammed the door in my face. "Motherfucker," I heard him yell from the other side of the door.

Part of me wanted to make sure he was up, and the other part of me realized Pete had most likely been fucking with me. The question of which part of me was right was answered when I ran into Siminson at lunch in the mess hall.

"I'm gonna make your life a living fucking hell this semester."

"But Brother Siminson, Brother Whalen—"

"Shut the fuck up before I go to my room, get that hammer, and shove it up your ass. You got a dip?"

I handed him my can of Skoal, he put it in his pocket and walked away. That was the way it worked. Brothers fucked with the pledges, and if they could ricochet it so that fucking with us meant fucking with a brother at the same time, even better.

* * *

One night, I was setting up the mess hall for dinner when I got called into the kitchen by one of the older brothers called Cuz. Cuz was from the Panhandle, and he had the kind of happy-go-lucky attitude that made everyone like him. A couple years later he would go on to work for Nabisco and show up at my house with rejected boxes of cookies, and we would get stoned and feast on broken Nutter Butters. But back then he was just a brother working in the kitchen to help pay his dues. And that was his pledge.

Cuz was hollowing out pumpkins for a pumpkin-carving social we had with a sorority later that night, and when I walked into the kitchen he had his hands full of pumpkin innards.

"Yo, Bert. You take a look out there and tell me if there is anyone wearing a suit."

I looked out and noticed that, in fact, there were quite a few brothers wearing suits. I told him so, and he smiled.

“Do me a favor and reset the tables for an outside dinner.”

“Okay!” I said. The word *no* has never been a strong part of my vocabulary.

I got all the tables on the basketball courts and set out all the plates. When I came back in he had an even bigger smile on his face.

“Bert, you wanna play a hilarious prank on the brothers? I mean this is a legendary, next-level kind of prank that will be talked about for years, just like the donut prank.”

The donut prank had occurred a few years earlier and was the stuff of folklore. The pledges at the time, after spending a night getting hazed beyond belief by irate and drunk brothers, woke up early the next morning and left the brothers a couple dozen donuts in the lounge as a peace offering.

The brothers woke up, hungover, and feasted on them. Later that day the pledges posted a blow-up picture of themselves in the same lounge, with the same donuts, only with them skewered on the brothers' dicks. The brothers got pissed, but the prank was so legendary it was worth it. And that was the ultimate job of the pledge class: to grow enough balls to prank the brothers.

“Will they get pissed?”

“No, come here.” He led me into the storage closet. “Take all this flour up to the roof and hide it. When they start saying grace, I want you to run to the edge of the roof and throw all the flour on the brothers. Then I’ll come out and spray them with the hose and yell, ‘Looks like ya’ll got the ol’ papier-mâché treatment!’”

Cuz started laughing so hard at the idea of his prank that the laughter became contagious, and soon we are both smiling ear to ear. I was already figuring out the dance I’d do up on the roof afterward—kind of a mix of the Ed Lover Dance and the Icky Shuffle. He told me to grab Accardi, the only other guy to get hazed as much as me—if not worse—and to get on the roof through the only access we had: Brother Bongwater’s window. After we dumped the flour, we’d go back into his room and hide until the brothers all blew over. He said if there was any fallout, he would take it for us. But when time passed and everyone realized just how funny the ol’ papier-mâché incident was, we would get full credit, and we would become legend.

Accardi and I grabbed four sacks of flour, went to Brother Bongwater’s room, locked the door behind us, climbed onto the roof, and waited like snipers. Many a thought passed through our heads while we waited, including, “Is this a good idea?” and “Is this really how you make papier-mâché?” and “Will everyone know that this was how you make papier-mâché?” and “What does *mâché* mean?” and “Why exactly is this so funny to Cuz?” But when we heard Cuz start off dinner by announcing, “Brothers, please. A moment of prayer,” we leapt into action like soldiers. I covered the near side and Accardi dumped the brothers on the far side. We thrilled at coating the brothers who’d hazed us the most, waiting for Cuz to come out with the hose.

What happened wasn’t what was planned. Instead of Cuz, one of our pledge brothers showed up with a hose, and he proceeded to shower our suited brothers.

Cuz stood by his side feigning astonishment.

“What have they done? The balls on these guys to hit you with the ol’ papier-mâché treatment.” F turned his gaze toward us. “Look, on the roof, it’s Kreisler and Accardi! They’re going to Bongwater’s room! I’ll get the keys!”

We crawled back into our only escape, eyeing each other in panic like we had been running a train on a hooker in Haiti and both our condoms simultaneously broke.

“They’re gonna beat our asses.”

“They’re not allowed to hit us,” I said hopefully.

“They hit me all the time,” Accardi said.

At that we heard the keys to the door jingling outside, like a Drunk Santa coming in to discipline his unruly reindeer.

“Bert, whatever you do, don’t hit them back.”

The door opened and to my relief, I saw that the first to enter was the most religious brother of our fraternity. He stood, covered in flour, but I knew that without a doubt, despite being enraged, he wouldn’t resort to violence.

That’s when I got punched.

It turns out he had been on his way to meet his girlfriend’s parents—in a suit and tie—when Cuz had asked him if he could do him a favor and hang out long enough to say the prayer, which he happily had agreed to do.

He hit me pretty squarely in the jaw, but since he was a devout Christian, it didn’t really hurt. Behind him was Siminon, wearing a huge smile. Accardi immediately took a swing at him and missed. As many people as could fit in Bongwater’s room jumped on us and dragged us downstairs. So began the longest hazing session of my life. Pumpkin innards were placed in just about any spot they could find. Brothers took turns in sort of a lazy-Susan manner hazing me, including Cuz, who I could see smiling as he did it. Then he would retreat to the back of the line and egg on the brothers covered in flour.

“You look absolutely ridiculous, he ruined your suit with the ol’ papier-mâché trick ... *no respect!*”

We stood our ground and didn’t say a word for fear that it would only make things worse and because no one would believe us.

I wasn’t really sure why Cuz did it to us—just fucking with someone for fuck’s own sake, I guess. But I did notice the next time I saw him, it was as though we shared a secret. He never hazed me again, even treated me like something of a friend, if not exactly an equal.

And that was how we were taught to bond: by treating each other horribly and sharing a laugh about it later. It’s like the Friars Club motto, “We only Roast the ones we love.” The more you like someone, the further you could take it.

When it was my turn, it was a great feeling to set up a pledge you liked and watch the result. Like lightly covering the mouth of a bong in shoe polish and offering a pledge a bong hit during Hell Week.

Hell Week was the week at the end of the semester, just before the pledges were about to be made by the brothers, when all the hazing was crammed into 120 sleepless, drunken hours. We'd get one of the pledges high with the ol' shoe-polish trick and watch as he walked around the house with a brown ring around his lips. Or we'd discreetly ask a pledge for a glass of water during an important meeting, then wait till he was gone to yell to the masses, "Can you believe this guy? He said he wanted a water and just walked out like it was nothing at all. If that dude comes back with a water, we better give it to him."

Fucking with each other was an art and we got so good at it, you would assume we hated each other. Bottle rockets under a door. Yelling from a balcony to the pool at spring break, "Kaiser, you forgot to put on your butt-rash medicine," or passing a guy on campus who was standing with a hot chick and greeting him with, "Damn, you have a new chick every time I see you!"

* * *

By the time I was a sophomore I was out of the dorms and a full-fledged brother of my fraternity. This was the first true year of my independence. The summer before, I had started growing out my hair and listening to Widespread Panic. I bought a dog, an iguana, and a mountain bike. Needless to say, I was also smoking a great deal of weed. This was going to be the new version of Bert I presented to the masses. The high-school athlete/meathead/finger-fucking-in-the-back-of-a-Jetta guy was dead. Now I was a sensitive guy with social insights and longer hair.

I moved in with two friends, Hartley and a guy we all called Cheese. The three of us had all gone to high school together, and we'd known each other since before that. Hartley was—and still is—an alpha male. But he was an alpha male with a twist. He had been a twin, and his brother died when he was ten. What that does to an average boy, I can't tell you, but I can tell you what it did to Hartley. He was a massively compassionate friend when it was just the two of you, but in groups, he was an unyielding bully. He was tall, strong, and aggressively handsome, something he was well aware of. With a blazer on he looked like a Baldwin; with a whiskey in his hand he acted like a Kennedy. He loved to fight and always won. When he saw the changes that I was making in my lifestyle, he openly mocked me. But then, privately, he asked me to help him buy a dog, an iguana, and a mountain bike.

Cheese, on the other hand, was a beta. He had known Hartley and his brother since before his brother died. Cheese would always say Hartley's brother was the true alpha of the two. He and Cheese had been close mostly because they were the biggest kids of their age. Cheese had developed before most of his peers—he was already shaving in eighth grade. But by the time we got to college, the rest of us had caught up with or even passed him in size. This either humbled him or put things in a different perspective, because he was a much quieter, sensitive guy by the time we were sophomores in college living together.

Hartley and I joined a fraternity, but Cheese waited to make sure his grades were up to snuff first ("like a faggot," Hartley said). So he joined the next semester, and by the time we all moved in, Hartley and I were brothers and Cheese was finishing up his pledgship. Cheese and I hung out very

easily, as I find I do with most people. Hartley and Cheese meanwhile were closer with each other than I was with either of them, but Hartley was relentlessly rough on him. I wonder if Cheese saw Hartley the little brother he really was, and that bothered Hartley. But still, Cheese was quick to get pissed, and Hartley loved it. Cheese forgave even faster—I knew that was the reason deep down Hartley felt so comfortable fucking with him. If Hartley was a bully, Cheese was passive-aggressive to the core. Hearing one day that Hartley had a fear of snakes, Cheese promptly drove to a pet store and bought a large python. That was Cheese's way of fighting back.

On our first day in our new apartment, Hartley walked upstairs and decided who would live in which rooms.

“With the amount of pussy I get and my new dog, I'll need the room with the private bath and balcony. You two faggots can share a bathroom. Bert, you get the room on the corner 'cause you have a girlfriend, and Cheese, you get the room that looks like a closet.”

Hartley agreed to pay one hundred dollars more for his better room. I took the medium one, and Cheese took all his worldly possessions—which included a big-screen TV, a desk, wall-sized cabinet and stereo with surround sound—and turned his closet into a personal oasis. (The only thing he left downstairs was his snake, of course.)

“The guy's got electronics worth ten grand in his room,” Hartley said, “and we've got a twenty-inch TV and a goddamned alarm clock for entertainment downstairs.”

“He said if we pay fifty dollars more a month, he'll leave it downstairs,” I offered.

“I'm not renting his fucking entertainment system. I'll just watch TV in his room when he's not here.”

Which Hartley did, often. In retaliation, Cheese would leave Hartley's dog in Hartley's room with food and water, and then shut the door behind it.

One day, Hartley walked into my room with a smile and closed my door.

“My dog shit in my room again, so ... I greased up Cheese's brakes on his mountain bike; let's see if we can get him to do the Widowmaker with us.” The Widowmaker was a steep hill near our townhouse, as grueling an uphill ride as it was a lightning-fast downhill one.

“We'll get him with the good-cop-bad-cop routine.”

“Good-cop-bad-cop?”

“Yeah, the good cop is going up the hill ... the bad cop is the ride down.”

Not sure if that was the correct way to use that analogy, I said nothing and smiled. We walked into Cheese's room and Hartley plopped down on his bed.

“Hey, buddy, you wanna go mountain biking with us?” Hartley said.

“No, I'm gonna take a nap.”

“Come on, it'll be fun.”

“I said I'm gonna take a nap.”

“What are you, nine months old? You want me to put socks on your hands so you don't scratch

your face? Come on, man, let's go hang!"

"No!"

"Don't say no. Hang out with us. We'll go mountain biking, head over to the house, get a few cold beers, ride through campus, check out the talent, come home, shower up, and we'll go out tonight."

"You guys go. I'm gonna take a nap, and I'll go out with you later."

"Come on, dude."

"Fuck off, Hartley. I said no."

"Fine then, be a little faggot."

Defeated, Hartley and I got on our bikes, went for a ride, and retreated to our fraternity house to explain how close we got to pulling off a legendary prank. We went out that night and forgot about it.

A week later Cheese asked us to go biking. We agreed and later we all met at the peak of the Widowmaker. In typical Hartley fashion, he decided the order.

"You guys are both faggots, so I'll take the lead."

"I'll go second," I said.

"Well, I don't want you two assholes trying to ride your bikes up my ass to prove to me what a faggot you think I am. So I'm fine with the anchor," Cheese said.

"Anchor is a great way to say you're riding bitch."

"I'm riding anchor."

"Alright then, I'll see you faggots at the bottom," Hartley said, then led off fast and furious. I followed, with Cheese staying well behind to give himself an ample cushion.

I was completely on my own, flying over bumps in the trail and whistling around corners—when I heard the shrill squeal of compromised brakes, as they struggled to stop two hundred pounds of Cheese. I slowed down to look over my shoulder and that is when the gap closed. Within seconds, he was flown past me, *Top Gun* flyby style, glancing alternately at me, his bike, and the trail. I heard him swear as he blew past, "What the fuck, man, something's wrong with my bike! My fucking bike is broken!"

His pace was breakneck. I sped up thinking I could do something to help, but I couldn't catch him. Cheese was howling down the Widowmaker like he was being poured over nachos, and by the time he caught up to Hartley I was still well behind. All I heard was the smashing of tree branches and the shrieks of terror as Cheese flew off the designated path, shredded.

A minute later, I caught up to Hartley about twenty yards away from the path Cheese had just created in the flora.

"What the fuck is he doing?" Hartley said.

"We greased his brakes."

"What?"

"We greased his brakes last week and forgot about it."

Hartley's face turned from confusion to terror, then to absolute joy.

"Ohhh fuck me! I fucking forgot about that. How fucking great is this moment? It's even better than

way than if we'd gotten him to go with us then."

"We would have stopped him," I said.

"You would have. I wouldn't have. But you didn't get a chance to, and that's why this is so perfect."

"He might be dead!"

"He's not. I can hear him crying in there."

Cheese emerged from the shrubbery with his bike in his hand, in pain, and enraged.

"This thing is a goddamned piece of shit!"

"What happened?" Hartley said, feigning concern. "You can't throw caution to the wind like that and ride recklessly; we care too much about you, Cheese!"

"It wouldn't stop. I was pulling the brakes as hard as I could and it wouldn't fucking stop. I could have fucking died."

"Are you hurt?" I asked timidly.

"No, I don't think so."

Cheese dropped his bike next to us on the ground and started examining it. "I just can't figure it out; it seriously wouldn't stop."

"I'd check the brakes," Hartley offered. I shot him a look, but he only smirked.

"No shit I'm gonna check the brakes." There was a pause. "What the fuck?"

Hartley started to laugh. I took a deep breath.

"There's something on my brakes."

"That can't be good," Hartley said, helpfully.

He wiped the frame of his tire and the brake pads and found substantial amounts of WD-40.

"There's fucking grease on here. Can you fucking believe that?"

"No way," Hartley said.

"How the fuck did WD-40 get on my tires and brakes?"

"Did you ride through some on your way here?"

"No."

"Do you normally grease your brakes up before a ride?"

"No."

"Did you recently grease your chain, and maybe get some on your tires?"

"No, I don't think so."

We were stumped.

"Well then, I guess the only other thing I can come up with," Hartley said, "was that last week Ben and I greased your brakes and tried to get you to come out on a ride with us but you were being a bitch."

Cheese looked at us in confusion while what Hartley said sank in.

"And had you not taken a nap, we would have stopped the prank before you flew off the trail."

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