



A New Nomad

by Zack O'Neill

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Her eyes were on the moving curtain our waitress went into, slouching, not quite at a C-shape, back upright, long golden legs straight out at an angle, looking all Hollywood with her sunglasses and picked-at salad.

We're surrounded by cracked concrete, old buildings, dry air, trees that don't bear fruit, yellow weeds, chalky dirt – all of which only underscores our conversation, I feel.

"Adjuncting there would immerse me in the two-year," I say, estimating her and then the small cactus at the center of our table, "and it's my only move right now besides adjuncting here, which is a chickenshit, feeding-at-the-trough play."

"Is it?" she says, making it sound like a statement as she scrapes at her beer bottle with her thumb. This behavior says "Please don't get into this right now," not "You've left a few things unexplained. What about-"

"I've lived down by the beaches in L.A. and Santa Barbara," I say, "and in the French Quarter, and for a summer in San Francisco, and I'm telling you, the best place I've ever been is Midtown Sacramento."

That snares her interest.

"Why?"

"There's everything you need there. Nightlife, weather, restaurants, hardware stores, groceries, the forest, the mountains, the desert, Napa Valley, San Francisco, Monterey, the Sequoias, Muir Forest, Tahoe, Reno. It's bountiful."

She looks down at her plate.

"Lots of bars and restaurants," I say. "You could do exactly what you do here. Except for more money."

"More money."

"Lots of architecture too. Restaurants and coffee shops built into Victorians, Italianates, Craftsman Bungalows, Gothic Revivals, Palladians, Queen Beths, Second Empires, High-Water Bungalows, Spanish Revivals."

"Mmm hmmm."

"Egg and dart molding, dormers, broad porches, mansards."

She laughs, shakes her head, reaches for her pack and lighter, gets a cigarette going, blows smoke, looks me over.

In her next exhale, I see the bus of her mind blowing exhaust.

"As for the teaching, my director says you either develop a publication record or you don't; at a certain point your credentials dictate your path, more or less. Early on it's easy to explain in a job interview under the guise of trying something new, diversifying my skill set, broadening my pedagogy, that I moved around and did a

Spring/Summer 2008	lot of different..."
Winter/Spring 2008	* * *
Editor's Note	I approach 2-Me on J and 49 th , stoned, and sweating from three-digit weather. The front of the building is painted cheap-chocolate brown and too-teal green. Above the door is a sign that reads "Open 7AM."
Guidelines	
Contact	<p>I feel dark air and see, when my eyes come into focus, Christmas lights and plastic pennants drooping from the ceiling, a pool table, arcade games, a shuffleboard table, and toward the back entrance Marcus and Natalie, my old grad school friends.</p> <p>"Hey guy!" Natalie says, standing up, showing off big, enthusiastic eyes. She's all wrapped up in a colored scarf and poofy gypsy-like skirt.</p> <p>I hug her, shake Marcus's hand (he's only hugged me once ever, after I picked up a huge tab at Rubicon), look around: two old guys watching tv, a younger couple further down drinking red wine.</p> <p>Marcus, dressed in dark jeans and a brown corduroy jacket, has a pint of cloudy yellow beer, atop of which floats a thick slice of orange. Natalie has a brown cocktail with a lime wedge. I get a Guinness. While I wait, I notice bags of potato chips by the register.</p> <p>"Flying solo?" Marcus says, as he looks me down, and back up, smiling the whole time.</p> <p>"Sara was too stoned to come," I say.</p> <p>Natalie laughs, wide-eyed again.</p> <p>"Really?"</p> <p>"Tired from work too."</p> <p>"How's she liking it here?" Marcus says.</p> <p>"Got a job already at Cornerstone on 24th. She likes to work."</p> <p>"Yeah?"</p> <p>"I think she's rebelling against her comfortable family."</p> <p>They are quiet.</p> <p>"You can be a waitress anywhere," I say. "One of those jobs."</p> <p>"You met her in the program out there?" Natalie says.</p> <p>I've told them this before.</p> <p>"We met in Five Points, a local hangout," I say, "she was working at a cheesy place called Yesterday's, getting nowhere, just out of a relationship with a guy who wanted to knock her up."</p> <p>"We'll have to all get together," Natalie says, after a weird pause.</p>

“Yeah.”

“So,” she says, stirring her drink, “how’s search for classes been going?”

“Nothing yet,” I say. “Some polite responses, some not so nice.”

“Who wasn’t nice?”

“ARC, Folsom Lake…”

“They’re always like that,” she says. “You need to go out there, meet them in person, say you just wanted to drop off your resume, even if doing that has nothing to do with the application process.”

“That’s what you guys did?”

Marcus nods.

“You have to harass them, man,” he says. “It’s a shit market out here.”

This isn’t what they said at Christmas.

* * *

“I have a need for self-improvement, artistic expression, and making a contribution to the world,” I say as I straighten my tie in the mirror. Occasionally I look out of the window at sycamores on N Street. Crows flutter in and out of their shining leaves, dozens of them. At daybreak you can hear them all cawing.

She’s in a chair in our tiny hallway, watching me. I’m forcing her to listen to my rap under the guise of prep for a job interview. She doesn’t get it. Or doesn’t care.

“At the end of my time in South Carolina,” I go on, “I decided I didn’t want to be some writer franchising out my credentials for maximum value, a big shot acting like a university is lucky to have me, or some one-manuscript scrub happy to have security.”

I see her attending to her phone. Reflexively I consider that she’s a dropout, that she antagonizes people who throw their success at her – each of her older sisters, for instance, has a career and family, and they all rarely speak.

“Of course, I will be perceived by some as cobbling together a rap about how much I love comp because I have no choice. Then when I publish something – boom, gone. That’s why I need to publish a manuscript. It will give this argument so much more *weight*…”

* * *

I check my tie, turn off my phone, leave it under some fast food paraphernalia, and walk across a very hot campus. The warm air and woodland ambience soothes me, but I’m sweating, my giant head is oily, and my shirt is dark in spots, coming untucked too. I feel like a pervert pushing it back in as I walk by teenagers.

After sitting in an office chair where I stare at a secretary’s impressive twisted bamboo plant that resembles copulating snakes, I’m escorted into an office. Two ladies are there, sitting behind the same desk. The first introduces herself as Heidi, who is tall and curly headed. She smiles and leans forward as she shakes my hand. She’s been my contact, and was somewhat of a crisp, curt bitch via

email.

The other is Beth, a short-gray-haired women whose eyes shine warmly when she shakes my hand. Beth, I know, is the head of the Liberal Arts division, higher up than Heidi, the English chair.

“Thank you for coming in, NEWGRAD,” she says.

“Sure! Glad to be invited. I’ve heard from my friends Marcus Paxton and Natalie Perry that this is a great place.”

“Oh good!”

“Yes,” I say, “they’ve given you ringing endorsements.”

Both laugh.

“Both of them have been great teachers for us,” Heidi says.

“I’m sure. They’ve told me a lot about working at these two-year schools. We all go way back. I’ve known them for years.”

They smile.

“So, NEWGRAD, tell us a little about yourself, and your teaching.”

“Well,” I say, “I got my MA out here at Sacramento State, and got my MFA in South Carolina. I taught in the first year English program there, teaching being part of my stipend. I did comp and rhetoric. I really took to it. I also worked in the writing center.”

As I talk, they are writing things down on pieces of paper with little square sections on them. I feel like I need to go slower, maybe not say so much.

“I came back because I love it out here, and also because I want to continue the type of teaching I was doing.”

More scribbling.

“Tell us about a sample assignment you’d use for a transfer level course,” Heidi says. They shift their pens to the next section and suspend them like surgeons with scalpels.

“Sure. There’s this one I do called the Rushdie Diagnostic. I give students an excerpt from ‘Abortion in India’ and have them look at examples of emotional and logical appeals, then they research a source that addresses the central issue and annotate that resource. This teaches them close reading, research, and formatting. I usually give it later in the semester, when they’ve been learning a lot of these things. It’s a culminating project.”

“Quick follow up,” Beth says. “How do you know when a student has been successful in that assignment?”

“Well,” I say, after a little pause, “I look for a sense of personal investment. I want to see that they’ve put a lot of themselves into it. I think people’s skill levels vary, and you want to note their progress.”

They've stopped writing.

"It's like the letter grade represents how they measure up to the academic standard," I say, "the notes you make next to the letter are more about their personal progress."

They nod.

Over the next twenty minutes they read off more questions: an assignment that didn't work, a time I participated on a group project, my technological fluency, my experience with diversity. For the latter I am careful not to mushingly speak of my love for all the people of the world; I take an opposite tack, and say diversity can mean a lot of things, like learning styles, levels of preparation, academic interests. This is successful. They look refreshed, lit up, and we all feel a sense of genuine camaraderie amidst this bland administrania.

After the last white section gets filled, Heidi says, "Well, NEWGRAD, is there anything else you'd like to say?"

There is. There has to be.

"The last thing I'd like to add is that I know this is a difficult market right now," I say. "I came all the way out here with no prospects, because I want to be here long term, and this is what I know I want to do."

They smile. I should stop here.

"The moment I knew I didn't want to get a PhD or be a university type was when one of my instructors showed our class, our teachers-in-training class I mean, the essay 'Goodbye to All That.' He gave a breakdown of Didion's usage of repetition, place, polysyndeton, epistrophe, polyptoton, parenthesis, parallelism, isocolon, anastrophe, anadiplosis, antanaclasis, litotes, and paronomasia, and in the middle of it, I asked him, 'What of this are we responsible for delivering in the classroom?' and he looked at me like I'd fired a missile at the hull of his learnedness."

They smile. Look at each other. Stand up.

"Thank you, NEWGRAD, for coming in and sharing your stories with us," Beth says.

"No problem. Thanks for having me in."

"We will let you know if any available sections pop up."

"Great."

It's a gorgeous campus. I walk among Hibiscus trees, Cottonwoods, Valley Oaks, Chinese Flames. The beautiful thing about this part of the world – it's a metropolis/forest hybrid. And it changes personalities. Now it's green and lush, but soon, yellow, crimson, magenta, nectar, then everything's bare.

I'm extremely thirsty.

I feel I've blown the interview. Know I have. Not wanting to ponder all the details, I think about another lead I wasn't planning on pursuing today and call Sacramento City College's Language and Literature department. When I ask for Barry Gurrola, the secretary says he's in a meeting. I email him on my phone and get an immediate reply: *I'm in and out all day but maybe we'll touch base.*

It takes me 45 minutes driving through the flammable hillsides, unsightly valley shrubs and desiccated riverbeds of outer Sac to get from Rocklin to Sacramento City College. When I reach the campus, I pay a very reasonable \$1.00 for an all-day pass and go forth sweating, wiping my forehead with Del Taco napkins.

Lots of minority kids here, I think. Much more urban. Concrete-based. But beautiful trees, shops, food sources.

The Language and Literature department's secretary is a nice-looking Latina about my age. She's got curly hair the way I like, and a big, warm smile, which I add bonus points for since it's the end of the day. In front of her is a plate of fruit with some cantaloupe slices, green strawberry toupees, grapes bulging from a gnarled stem.

"Can I help you?" she says.

"Hi. Uh, is Barry here?"

"Oh, no, he's out."

"Oh, okay."

Anticipating my next question, she says, "I don't know when he'll be back."

"Well, I've been emailing him, and he knows who I am. My name is NEWGRAD, and..."

* * *

We're at Centro, middle of the week, surrounded by beams and pillars painted different pastel colors, coco pele murals, downtown workers, hot chicks, hipsters, halogen lights, bums walking by outside. Culturally authentic music plays overhead. Sara was talkative the whole walk down. She loves Centro; the place is one of the locally-sourced restaurants she's been sold on by one Midtowner or another. At Cornerstone she serves basic greasy American shit and the flesh of tortured animals, and here she can get river salmon tacos and ceviche with organic cilantro. When I ask her why she doesn't work here, she gives a kind of shy smile and says she doesn't know.

She's wearing a tight-fitting silk blouse with a midnight blue and scarlet dayflower pattern. Her eye shadow is a light touch of light blue. Glossy lips. Smells like fruity bath products. It's a getup culled from many visits to boutiques in the grid. She's learning – soon she'll want a bike and big sunglasses.

Now she's scanning the Infusion menu (over-the-top girl-friendly tequila shooters).

The waitress comes.

"Hey guys, decided on some drinks, appetizers, entrees maybe?"

The waitress isn't as hot. A little pudgy, round faced. Shining, coffee-bean brown hair, though.

Sara holds up the pink sheet of paper.

"Three of these for each of us."

"Which flavors?"

“You pick.”

She looks at my girlfriend, laughs, nods, says alright she'll be back. Sara smiles, stares out of the window, sees me, smiles some more, asks me how I'm doing.

On one level, her approval is a success for me. On another, less head-up-my-ass level, she hasn't experienced Sacramento's drudgery, murky winters, financial hardship, the slick paste of wet leaves that you can slip on as you go down the sidewalk. It's the honeymoon phase right now, combined with the cult of summertime – what Midtowners suffer for. I don't know whether to amplify or temper her excitement. One thing I know, it's unsustainable.

“So I think I blew the first interview today,” I say.

“Oh no!” she says, reaching for the chips.

“The second place I went to, though, I showed up without an appointment and missed the dean, but then he called me when I was in the parking lot. I actually went back in and interviewed, and felt like I knocked it out of the park.”

“Oh my God, awesome!”

“He was a really good guy. I gave him an abbreviated version of my rap.”

She looks down. I know she doesn't want to hear this. When I get on this subject it's like a knot inside I have to untangle.

“The hardest part of the gig, really, is securing the classes. And commuting. That's what I've been told by Marcus and Natalie anyway, who are trying to mule their way into full-time jobs with paltry academic credentials. They say you have to beat on every door, visit people, bug them, be annoying. Those are things I'd never usually do.”

She over at the bar, turns back, and gives me a little dead-faced glare before reading the menu some more.

* * *

At Sac City I teach a lively morning class and an abysmally reticent afternoon class, both transfer level comp. I'm usually amused by the first class and upbeat when it ends, but after the second one I'm exhausted from performing, modeling, urging, expressing frustration. Afterwards I get a two-hour break then head to Rocklin for two more. Apparently, I didn't blow the interview there after all. In all four classes, I bond with my students, go easy on them, build rapport. The Neanderthal stares and suspicion melt away, and they talk. I learn things from them: one tells me about the Sami People who herd reindeer in Norway; another tells me about the Hmong, who traded assistance in the Vietnam war for citizenship; one tells me a Navajo origin story about people traveling through three worlds and settling in the fourth.

Sometimes I see Sara when I'm on the lunch breaks. Every so often we'll have sex but mostly she wants to smoke pot and watch tv (We have five other days and later tonight, she'll say). Today she's out getting lunch with Shelly, whoever the hell Shelly is. I eat Hot Pockets, and jerk off to lesbian porn.

On my way to Sierra I go to the liquor store on the corner and get a Red Bull, which is becoming a nasty habit (along with energy bars and pretzels), and drive to Rocklin.

The sky is almost pitch black as I enter my last class.

When I get home, we decide on Tamaya for dinner.

"I love how compacted it is here," I say on our walk from the dormant arborage of N Street to the electrified, brick-and-mortar J. "You can walk to so many different types of restaurants."

"Yeah," she says.

Something's not right.

"You alright?" I say.

"I hate our apartment."

That kind of sharp pivot, I have been noticing, the move from emotional nothingness to a state of discontent, is becoming more the norm in our interaction. Not that our tiny place, which wasn't the one we saw in the picture online, hasn't been a tumor on our daily lives. And then there's the unresolved disappointment of me getting shut down by the property manager while arguing on our behalf.

"I know," I say. "Three more months."

"Can't we just break it now?"

"Can't happen, unless we want to pay double rent."

She's silent.

I am too. I think about telling her that after spending three of the last six summers moving cross country I'm a little burnt on the idea of relocation. But I don't.

Maybe it's an obfuscation of her and my students, but when she retreats into herself now, I feel abandoned. Looked over and left. Often I get the feeling the price of an affiliation with her is rising above me.

"How was your day?" I say.

"Same bullshit. People are kind of rude here. At one point I had four tables to get to, and this one customer is making me stand there as he tells me why he's not going to tip me."

"Did you feel embarrassed? Was he saying it in front of everyone?"

"I really don't pay attention to that," she says, as I hold the door open for her.

"Why didn't he want to tip you?"

She perks up when we enter Tamaya, saying hi to the hostess instead of answering my question. When we sit down she gets excited about the menu, which is novel-thick. She orders a raspberry lemon drop. I get a big Asahi and a small warm sake.

* * *

I'm teaching a remedial class, one of only two I was able to procure in the spring.

37 students are here, more than double the NCTE's recommended maximum. The good kids, about eight of them, are up front. I can run a great class if I'm willing to overlook the two dozen playing on their laptops and phones.

In the middle of this session, as we discuss Tom Harris' "How Urban Legends Work," (specifically, contamination stories versus cautionary tales), a hideous piercing noise fills the room. We all clutch our ears.

When I get my bearings I see winking lights.

"Okay, get your stuff and go," I say, waving at the door.

We stand outside in the dry cold, and soon hear approaching sirens. No smoke is anywhere to be seen. After about fifteen minutes a fireman comes over and says they think someone burned something in a classroom, what or why they have no idea, and there isn't a threat, but there's a certain procedure they will have to follow and it will take an hour to "clear the building."

Back home, I smell pot smoke near our door. When my key goes into the lock, I hear rustling. I enter and see Sara sitting on the edge of the bed in the corner of our bed/living room. Her hair is mussed up, even after she tucks some of it behind her ear. A guy is standing next to her – young, skinny, tight jeans, oily hair, cheap brown hoodie, a deer in the headlights look.

"What's up bro."

I don't answer.

"Want some weed?" he reaches down to the floor and picks up a glass pipe.

"I have to teach in a little while."

"Okay." He turns to Sara. "So I'll see you later?"

She looks down. He nods.

He leaves. I stand aside for him.

* * *

I'm in Barry's office. We're here to discuss my evaluation, as well as my teaching demonstration, which I gave as part of a four-person-panel-interview to join the adjunct pool. On his desk is a blue bowl with a few Hershey's Kisses inside.

"You're doing a great job," he says. "We're glad to have you. The feedback from the students is overwhelmingly positive, and from the faculty evaluations, every box is either checked 'satisfactory' or 'not applicable.' Satisfactory, as you know, is the highest you can get."

"Great, great, that's all great to hear. I'm glad to be here."

"As for next fall, though. We're not sure what we'll have just yet." He adjusts his glasses, looks down at a random sheet of paper, looks away. "You're no longer an emergency hire, you're in the pool, and there's a certain protocol to hiring within the pool. We start with the people who've been here six years or more, then the next tier is people who've been here three years or more. I'm contractually obligated to offer them classes first."

“Okay.”

“I pledge to you that in that third category, you’re at the top of the list. But we’re reflexively, and necessarily, bracing for the worst as we wait for Prop 30.”

“What do you think the situation will be like if it doesn’t pass?”

He stops his evasive fidgeting and looks at me.

“We’ll all be working in construction,” he says, and laughs. I do too.

“Well, fingers crossed. I don’t want to be in one of those tent cities north of town.”

He smiles politely. I wonder if I’ve said something that has turned him against me.

* * *

Everyone’s bracing for the trigger cuts of Prop 30, and has told me there’s nothing in the fall. That makes a total of six classes this academic year, with nothing promised for the upcoming one. I’ve made about \$3000 per class after taxes.

I’m in my new apartment. All I have is a mattress, a coffee table and my clothes. And toiletries.

I read up on Prop 30 a little, then do a job search, which includes out of state contracts.

* * *

I am pacing, staring out of the window at the industrial rooftop of a neighboring bar and grill. Above the rooftop clouds move over trees that are growing more voluminous by the day. Above the clouds is a gigantic, fresh-looking sky.

The phone rings. Private.

“Hello?”

“May I please speak to NEWGRAD?”

“Yeah, *this is NEWGRAD.*”

The man identifies himself as Richard Palm from Random State University. He wants to talk to me about my application to their fellowship program. It’s a two-year contract teaching a 3/3 load of comp, rhetoric and literature. It’s designed for junior scholars to get on their feet. Good school in a plentiful city, small course load, no publication expectations.

“Do you have time right now to talk?” he says. “It’ll take about twenty minutes or so.”

Unbeknownst to my interviewer, I’ve been compiling a “career progress” notebook. In my free time I go online and cull and glean and harvest teaching wisdom; already I’ve fleshed out sections on technology, developmental reading, developmental writing, learning communities, interdisciplinary teaching, multimedia texts, service learning, curricular alignment, and team teaching.

I’m careful not to turn the pages too noisily as I talk.

* * *

"Hi," she says, like she's glad to hear from me, surprised in a pleasant way, in healthy recovery from an emotional recession. Instantly I feel ejected from my fantasy about her pining away, cursing her recklessness and shallow nature, hoping I'll call her, rescue her, forgive her.

"I've got some news," I say. "I'm not sure how it will affect you."

"Okay."

"I got a job in Randomtropolis. Two-year contract at Random State University."

"Wow! Congratulations!"

"So," I say, "I'm not sure what this changes about anything, but I thought I'd tell you."

"How did you get that? Don't you want to be out here?"

I am silent.

"I don't know what to say," she says, after a while.

* * *

Last 24 hours in Sacramento: packing, cleaning apartment, sushi with Marcus and Natalie, hugs, loading my truck all hungover, hating Sara as I connect to the 5 and look at the downtown skyline one last time on a bustling, sunny day where the farmer's market was out and some sort of concert event was taking place in City Plaza Park.

* * *

California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas. Semi truck, left lane, leapfrog, repeat, repeat, repeat.

Drive-thru. Power bars and almonds at gas stations.

* * *

The radio doesn't pick up any stations, am or fm. I have an old Grateful Dead show on from when they still had Pigpen. The song is a version of "Death Don't Have no Mercy":

In this land, Jerry keeps singing,

in this land,

in this land,

come to your house,

don't stay long

wake up children look in the bed this morning find your

brothers and sisters are gone,

I tell you

death

I'm low on gas – this is the stretch between San Antonio and El Paso where there's a whole lot of nothing except for dynamited hillsides and blown tire shrapnel.

don't have no mercy

The orange light goes on. I'm pretty sure I still have 50 miles but it's windy, and there's a full bed and ballooning tarp behind me.

A sign. At last.

From the apex of a small hill I see a road slithering through open wilderness and ending at a tiny building several hundred yards in.

When I get out the wind almost knocks my sunglasses off. A thunderous sound against my body makes me feel like an outpost.

The building has one window and it's tinted black. Outside are wind chimes, and their diluted xylophone sound.

Someone's got to be looking at me.

An ocean of sand is backdropped by mountains that seem like tidal waves, rising, gathering strength.

in this land

in this land

in this land

in this land in this land in this land in this land in this land in this land in this land in this land in this land in this land in this land,

in this land...

* * *

He's waddling up the sidewalk, socks up to his shins, the shade from a baseball cap blacking out half his face. He says hello to a mail lady before he reaches me. I've been waiting for him for 20 minutes.

"Hello" he says, a quizzical look on his face. "NEWGRAD?"

"Yes. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. I'm Floyd."

From within the recesses of his tortoise-skin face I see two tiny blue searchlights.

He starts moving to the entrance of the building.

“So you’re going to school?” he says, agile enough to turn as he waddles.

“Teaching,” I say.

“Oh, well!”

We walk up the creaky, spiraling stairs, past dead junebugs that look like beans with retracted legs and the suspended corpses of spindly harvestmen. He takes me through a filthy apartment, bequeathed to me my Chuck, a recent RSU alum who’d advertised the place on the English program’s list serve.

Chuck’s detritus tells the story of a slob entrenched in hermitage. The place has more furniture than open space. All of it looks like yard sale purchases or secondhand Ikea passoffs. I count nine tables, fifteen chairs, two couches, three bookshelves, two file cabinets, seven endtables. A mini bookshelf in the bathroom next to the toilet. Dirty stove, dirty shower, dirty walls. The unit also smells full of gas.

In the living room, there’s a note on a corrugated-wood bookcase, clipped to an envelope:

NEWGRAD —

Could you please mail me anything that comes in with my name on it? There probably won’t be anything. You can mail me the check too.

Thanks,

Chuck

Floyd looks around some more, apparently oblivious to everything I’m cataloguing. I suspect he’d say it’s all between me and Chuck if I brought any of it up. Finally, he goes to the front door and says, “You let me know what you need, alright?”

“Okay,” I say. “Let me take some inventory and get back to you.”

“I’m right around the corner. Address is on the contract.”

When he leaves, I get stoned, and unload my truck. Later in the day I call the gas company. It turns out my stove’s pilot light was out. The maintenance man also finds out my gas is hooked up to the wrong unit. I call Floyd, and he comes over, much faster this time. The maintenance man informs Floyd of the situation. “My goodness,” Floyd says. When the maintenance man is gone, Floyd leans in close and contorts his blue searchlights and tells me *come to him* if something ever goes wrong.

* * *

The campus is a concrete jungle. Hot sun bouncing off hard ground; by the time I find my building, I'm sweating. I think I'm just meeting the secretary to drop off some paperwork, but when I enter the humanities building, scale the stairs to the second floor, find the English department and open the glass door, a large, bursting-with-enthusiasm woman gets up from behind a desk decorated with ferns and business cards. "Are you NEWGRAD?" she says, hunching a little, and giving a jolly old cutesy smile. This wins me over.

"Sure am," I reply, with more charisma than usual.

She comes around from her desk (she's not wearing shoes), shakes my hand, asks me how my trip was, remarks on the weather, asks about California, tells me the head of the department is waiting for me.

"Really?" I say, "Right now?"

She smiles, nods her head, looking incredibly excited.

When she opens a door I see, sitting before a cadre of bookshelves, a white-haired man in a red leather chair, legs crossed, smiling, sagelike, calm, as if he's been waiting patiently for me the whole summer. I'm in jeans and a T-Shirt. Unshaven. Oily-headed. High.

"NEWGRAD."

"Yes sir."

"Nice to meet you, finally."

He tells me I am the last fellow to be meeting with him. It's still two weeks before school starts, I remark to myself. What a bunch of fucking goody two-shoeses. He's affable, congenial, and we get on well. We talk about California, creative writing, first year writing, Texas, and the weather. I escape without disgracing myself, and bid goodbye to the large-personaed secretary, who is every bit as ebullient as I leave.

At the new faculty luncheon I repeat my sartorial imbecility, showing up to a formal affair in a collared shirt and khakis.

* * *

I go to meet the other fellows at a bar off-campus and find them all very nice. Two guys, two girls. Two locals. One from Boston. One Kentucky. One guy has a background in law, and the two girls are graduates of the school's creative writing program. All nice, deferential, grown-up, or so I believe. They seemed a step above the prissy grad students I knew from South Carolina, and the burning-out-in-slow-motion types I'd met at the city college level.

* * *

"Any questions about the syllabus?" I say.

"How will this class help us in life?"

"There's a 16 week answer to that question." People giggle. "Anything else?"

* * *

"I can't be in class today, I have to go to the doctor."

"Okay."

"Will I be marked absent?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"What do you think absent means?"

* * *

I'm in the office I share with five other fellows. One is eating yogurt and has been scraping the cup with his spoon a long time. Another has been frantically typing for twenty minutes.

* * *

I'm in kind of a no-man's land socially: above graduate students, below full-time faculty. That leaves the other fellows to hang out with, or not, since they are all married. One invites me over for dinner but I bring wine, find he and his wife aren't drinkers, stay too long, and leave with a weird feeling I've dirtied their dishes and wasted their time. My neighbors, aside from an old guy on social security (I presume), are ten years younger than me, at least, and noisy. One is a cute redhead. I see her out front smoking cigarettes one day and she smiles at me. I find the pink tattoo on the inside of her wrist sexy. She teaches preschool, she says. That night I hear her out on the porch talking with a guy. They go inside and he never comes out. The next morning as I'm leaving for school, her door opens and she's walking out with him. She smiles at me the same way as before, with him right there.

* * *

"We have an announcement regarding Danielle Bennion," the chair says to a room of about ten people. "At MLA she interviewed with several schools, and she has been offered and taken a job at Montana State."

"Oh great!" someone says, and murmurs of pleasure burp up all over.

"She'll love Missoula."

"Isn't it Bozeman?"

"Actually," the chair says, "she'll be at Montana State – Northern. It's about 100 miles from Great Falls, 300 from Missoula, 25 miles from the Canadian border."

"Oh," everyone says, lifting the end of their emittances into something that sounds like delight.

"Any information on other grads?" someone asks.

"None right now," he says. "We will send out an announcement soon about Danielle, and of course keep you all abreast of any good news related to our other graduates. Now, we have to talk about the tuition issues regarding graduate students, specifically the threat of striking, and the retirement party for John

McConnell, then the reinstatement of faculty lunch Fridays, which most of us have found to be valuable professional opportunities to network, but the first item on this month's agenda is a report from our Lower Division Committee. Alan?"

* * *

Every day, I check the Chronicle of Higher Education, the AWP job list, the Inside Higher Ed job list, Higher Ed Jobs' job list, the MLA list every Friday starting in September; I also check the California Community College Registry, the Los Rios, Sierra, Solano, and Yuba Community College Human Resources web pages, and the UC Davis Writing Program web page, specifically the link that says "Position Announcements." It always reads, tauntingly, "No positions are available at this time." Despite Prop 30 passing, still everything's barren. Maybe I just need to give it some time, I say.

I've killed Chuck's houseplants – they're dry and yellow now.

* * *

At a high powered research institution, you will teach two classes but are expected to publish extensively in your field. At a liberal arts college, the publication requirements aren't as great but you teach about twice as much. Community Colleges make you teach five classes a semester with about 25-30 students in them, but there's no pressure to publish. All want department service on top of that. I ran into an alumnus of the fellows program one day, who said he teaches at a private high school, four classes of fifteen kids each, for about \$90K a year. I make \$40K to teach three classes, and that's roughly double the adjunct pay in Sacramento. When I tell this to my students they find it fascinating.

* * *

No one really cares how I run the classes. We have stringent curricular guidelines that are enforced ham-fistedly, but only up front. All you need is a syllabus that is "in compliance" and then you're invisible. As long as you survive the evaluations and no one's complaining, you're good. So I schedule movies, days off, conferences, and tell my students I can give them what they need economically in less time than what's allotted. They agree.

* * *

A Sunday night medley of thought: I look at the stack of papers on my coffee table, the neon HEB sign visible from three blocks away (the meat department is bigger than an entire California co-op). I'm drunk. Not stoned. I'm always in an apartment, always a refugee. I don't feel like I'm moving to the center of anything. I'm not sure what the future has in store for my students. I can't help but think they have uphill battles. They look at me like I'm an adult. One says he can't call me by my first name. I'm reminded of what my grandfather said, that even when he was eighty he felt like he was eight.

* * *

"How's it goin out there man?" Marcus says.

"Oh you know," I'm driving down Main Street, swerving around potholes.

"Meeting anyone?"

"One time I was asked to go to a party by a girl who liked me. I declined."

“Yeah?”

* * *

I get three letters of rec, two from faculty and one from the chair. Two months later I win a renewable non-tenure track job at the University of Mississippi, a 5/5 load, four in comp, one in my “specialty” of fiction. I go to the store and get some expensive fruity beer to celebrate.

* * *

The last thing I do in my apartment is look up Sara on facebook. We’re no longer friends. Good, I don’t need to be tortured with that. But I can see her pictures still.

* * *

With a full bed and cab, and breakfast from a food desert, I work my way through the web of highways circling the city. Never did go out much, I think as I drive past all the things.

Behind me, city skyline contracts.

Zack O’Neill earned his MFA from the University of South Carolina. His work has been supported by two fellowships, the James Dickey Fellowship and the Houston Writing Fellowship. His work has appeared in *The Oklahoma Review*, *Kudzu Review*, *The Homestead Review*, and elsewhere. His novel *The Blue Stoop* was a finalist in the 2010 Faulkner-Wisdom Creative Writing Competition. He currently lives in Sacramento, and works as an adjunct English professor.

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