

This will surely cause a problem; the beginning of another day, which Stuart has already missed by a few hours. The thick Torontonion summer air comes through the open ground floor window bringing with it the slightly sour smell of hot garbage as the streetcar wheels grind against the tracks turning from Parliament to King. Traffic and throngs of people bustle outside making altogether too much noise for the amount of bourbon that was consumed last night.

“What the fuck?” Stuart moans to the empty room as he kicks at the sheet, sticky hot and slightly moist, impossibly entwined in his legs. Freeing himself he reaches for the chair come bedside table and fumbles for his phone; the liquor store is open, and he might as well get up.

*How the fuck do I keep doing this to myself?* he wonders as his feet hit the floor in search of his slides. Short but loose, he still wears his nylon shorts from last night, without boxers, a detailed accent to his look as the freewheeling DJ. His tank top could be anywhere between here and Queen west. As he shuffles across the one-room apartment bleary-eyed and dizzy, he laughs at the reality of his life compared to the persona he fills in public after some drinks and a bump or two. On the kitchen counter amongst the mostly eaten pizza crusts, plates with congealed condiments smeared around the edges, and empty cigarette boxes there’s a good portion of a bottle of cider left and the dregs of a bottle of vodka. With no recollection of how long the vodka has been there, the cider still slightly carbonated must be from last night “Guess I was feeling cute.” he jokes to himself as he finishes the vodka with a shutter and takes a long gulp of cider. Eyes watering and the pressure in his temples rising, Stuart grabs a shirt off his dilapidated brown couch pockets his phone, and pulls a Jays hat over his disheveled light brown hair. Five-dollar sunglasses hide his bloodshot eyes, a cigarette just barely sticks to his lips as he fumbles for a lighter.

*Don’t these people have jobs?* He asks himself stepping outside as a woman in a Hijab hustles a large group of multiethnic children passed him against the waves of people working their way north through Cabbage Town. Stuart knows this cigarette and the minor tipple this morning will only keep his anxiety and patience at bay for so long before he becomes a ruminating mess of discomfort and paranoia, but he knows better than to start the day on an empty stomach if it’s going to turn out the way he knows it’s going to. Without the energy to go against the flow he joins the masses and heads north; there’s a shawarma spot on Adelaide, or Richmond? Streetcars dinging, cabs honking, the high pitch laughter of children and people speaking Pashto, Hebrew, Cantonese, and something indistinctly eastern European all at once are enough to cause vertigo. Passing the Sri Lankan mechanic, he keeps his head down and slowly draws on his cigarette to avoid eye contact with the group of Tamils outside. They always make him uncomfortable, the shop is never closed, and feels he’s either being judged for never appearing to have a job to go to or they can somehow see through the fashionable clothes and regally aloof attitude, knowing full well that he’s an imposter. Perhaps the art party DJ vibe stops being bought along Queen St. somewhere between Young and Sherbourne. The pain swelling, expanding to the back of his head, Stuart drifts mindlessly up the pockmarked sidewalk, crumbling from salt over the harsh winters he reads them like brail until he enters New Shawarma. Greeted by Al Jazeera showing what appears to be the beginning of another coupe on the grainy Tv hanging from the ceiling and the piercing glare of a surly man behind the counter. With hairy, questionably large forearms and a thin gold chain hanging outside the collar of his stained off-white cook’s shirt he stares in silence as Stuart steps to the counter.

“Chicken shawarma sandwich please.” Drops awkwardly from Stuart’s mouth.

“You like spicy my friend?” More a threat than a question.

“Ya, sure. A bit.”

The man turns and fires a pita onto the grill, grabs a long knife, and starts slicing thin greasy pieces of chicken off the turning spit. Stuart swallows hard and steps back starting to salivate. Garlic, fresh onions, and roasted chicken fill the air as he takes in his surroundings mindlessly. A girl with impossibly smooth chestnut skin sits in a plastic lawn chair at one of the three faded green plastic tables, making sure everybody knows she is not looking at them, she has no interest in this dingy shawarma shop or the people in it.

Barley audible “pfft” escapes Stuart’s lips.

“My friend! You like green?” The man behind the counter demands as he bangs his tongs against an insert holding chopped parsley and sliced onions.

Ducking slightly and stepping back into the stand-up fridge behind him, Stuart agrees to the ingredients and reaches for his wallet.

The shawarma wrapped and paid for Stuart steps out into the blazing late morning sun, the pit in his stomach seemingly dropping deeper making the thought of food almost nauseating. He needs to top up before he can eat, so heads north again to the LCBO before he hits the subway back downtown. Walking up the stairs and straight for the tallboys, he’s on his way back to the front counter in under forty-five seconds, where the female cashier gives him a knowing, disappointed look. One Faxe 10% that he’ll slam within seconds of leaving and one Creemore, both warm, both serving a purpose.

Passing the crematorium across from St. James square on his way to the subway at Castle Frank, he realizes it must be Thursday, they only burn on Thursdays anymore and only until three. The Acrid smoke sits heavy in the sky, practically stuck within the maze of towers in one of Toronto’s few remaining housing projects. Having lived in this neighborhood for three years and not having made the slightest effort to befriend anyone in what is North America’s most densely populated area, he still feels bad for the exclusively immigrant population that has to raise their kids breathing in the ash of dead bodies. The uneasiness of deadpan stares from familiar nameless faces hustles Stuart across the street and up the road before he hops the turnstile and descends to the subway platform nestled in the Don Valley.

The streetcars are down again, Stuart leaves the cool subterranean confines of the subway and gets on the Spadina bus. The only less effective form of transport in the city than the streetcar is the Spadina bus, hopelessly trying to navigate through the congested thoroughfare, honking, moving forward in fits and starts, he’d almost be better to walk. Disembarking at Oxford St. his gait slows, shoulders drop back as he almost slides around the corner at Augusta. Gathered on the steps of the bodega which is the epicenter of all that is happening this side of Young St. is a group of eccentrics and burgeoning drug addicts.

Gnarly Nick with his long, greasy dyed black hair and bike gloves is the first to see him, “Yooo, what’s good?”

“Oh! What’s up, what’s up? Just out here grinding, trying to get that bread, you know?” He replies.

Hands slap, shoulders hunch forward into half a hug, “Oh true?” asks Nick.

“Nah, just copped a shawarma and trying to come through you know?”

“Word.” Nick, an art school dropout, knows exactly where he’s at. Pulls an open mickey from the back pocket of his tight black jeans and passes it to Stuart who takes a lengthy pull.

Having noticed his arrival, the crowd on the stoop comes to life. Eyes are pruned from phones, and complaints against the doorman last night are withheld as a fraction of the group raise to greet the

latest arrival. The change of atmosphere is felt within the store; Rita with her dyed red bob and practically see-through tank top and cut-off jean shorts bursts out the door to see how she can thrust herself into the eye of the excitement.

Left fist clenched she raises her arm and shouts “Party Arm!”, having just had “party arm” tattooed in cursive along her forearm, the letters are still puffy and red, this is the perfect opportunity to remind everyone, she is the queen of good times!

Within a smattering of forced laughter from the group, Stuart asks rhetorically “What’s up girl?” Deaf to her reply he is lost in thought. With her green eyes, crooked tooth, and bouncy tits jumping purposefully under her tank top, Stuart is glad he’s wearing his shades and questioning whether the loose nylon shorts are going to deceive him. Rita having given herself to most of the boys at the stoop remains an enigma to him. His pride hasn’t let him cross that line yet, but God damn! Would he ever like to wax that.

As an anxiety-filled morning starts to turn into a somewhat lucid afternoon, Stuart has settled in on the stoop and enjoys the revelry these impossibly hot Augusta days provide. People come and go as the afternoon progresses, someone has brought a round of booze-filled Slurpee’s, joints are passed around circles of people dissecting the Action Bronson album that just dropped. Gnarly Nick appears to have taken acid the way he falls apart laughing at incoherent jokes aimed at anyone unfortunate enough to pass by. At 6’3”, wild-eyed and boozy he does not cast the harmless shadow he thinks he does and foot traffic along their side of the street markedly drops. Naturally introspective Stuart in his Jay’s cap and five-dollar shades is silent amongst his peers. Often taken as a cool aloofness, he is rattled. Coming off four nights of cocaine his conscience is catching up with him; having slept with Nick’s ex-girlfriend two nights ago and feeling like a spectator among the current debauchery, he realizes that much like this summer he is in the dog days of addiction. The past who knows how many months blur together in an uncomfortably warm, sticky blur peppered with regret that can’t be washed off with multiple showers, the horizon holds a wash of uncertainty like heat waves in the desert.

“Saturday Night Stu!! What gives man? Too fucking cool for your friends?” Rita crashes down beside him.

“Shit, no. I’m just chillin. Taking it all in ya know? S’been a rough couple days.”

“I hear ya, I swear I haven’t slept in a week. Actually! You bumping yet? Chad just showed up, he’s holding.”

“Nah, I’m chillin. I think I got to get out of here. Got something to do.” He adds quickly.

“I feel ya, I think I need to mellow out too. Shits been too crazy. Let me come with you?”

Stuck between wanting someone to talk to and the possibility of people thinking Rita is going to add another notch to her belt Stuart pauses.

“Fuck you man! I can tell you need someone to talk to right now. You so concerned someone might think that...”

“No!” Stuart cuts in dejectedly. “It’s just that...”

“Prick, I’ll meet you at the bank.” Rita is up and gone before he realizes he should have said “thanks”.

Stuart pushes himself up creaking and sore from the hours spent on the concrete steps. No point saying goodbye to Nick as he won’t remember and will try and drag him into some existential conversation about god knows what so he throws loosely to the crowd “I’ve got to hit 516 before they open to grab my shit.” as he makes to cross the street.

“Pretty hard to be a DJ without your iPod, eh Stuey?” Calls an anonymous voice.

“Right?” He calls back over his shoulder with mock laughter, feeling the bite of the jibe. “Pfft, no more fucking guest list for you.” He curses the anonymous voice under his breath.

Across the street from Sneaky Dee’s Stuart turns off College north onto Bathurst and makes his way behind the tire shop tucked beside the bank. Having just closed, the shop provides access to the roof of the bank via a dumpster, a fire escape up to Shelly and Dave’s balcony, and a quick scamper up a teetering privacy fence. Dave, a Doberman, barks, and snaps at everyone that passes the balcony, Shelly is generally dusted sitting in her outdoor clawfoot tub smoking hash joints and drinking rose isn’t so bad but it’s the principal really. Reaching the Balcony and finding it vacant of its occupants Stuart makes for the fence. The mid-summer sun setting behind Little Italy cast long shadows across the web of streetcar tracks below; cicadas buzz loudly over the din of traffic as Stuart makes the final effort to summit the roof to find Rita, back against an exhaust fan, tallboy in hand. He walks over and sits on the parapet in front of her. Nothing is said as she lights a clove cigarette, they sit in silence for a long time as the city pulses beneath them.

Stuart breaks the silence cracking a beer “Shit man, I just don’t think I can do this anymore!”

“Ya, it’s a bit much sometimes isn’t it?” agrees Rita, “All this partying and “who gives a shit” attitude, I swear to god they all try so fucking hard.”

“I know, it’s like a badge of honor to drop out of OCAD. Like some people enroll just to drop out I swear!”

Rita howls her maniacal laughter in approval. “It’s so transparent.”

Silence again. Rita twists her spent clove cigarette into the gravel roof with her foot.

“So, what’s the plan man?” Rita inquires, “Gonna quit DJing?”

“Nah, I think I got to get out of here. Like, get out of the city man. Move out west and get some of that fresh mountain air, change my perspective a bit.”

“Whoa really? That’s heavy, I couldn’t imagine the stoop without you.”

“Bullshit. I don’t even want to tell anyone, just ghost ‘em all. I doubt anyone would even notice. Or if anyone does it’ll just be like, “what happened to that guy?” I’m over it.”

The sun has fully set as the searchlights from the club district to the south sweep the night sky. Stuart and Rita continue their Socratic discussion and sat atop the bank watching the droves of people below, unaware of the judgment raining down upon them. Stuart realizes this is the most real he’s ever been with anyone and they’ve reached a level of intimacy from which there is no return.

*Does it matter what people think? What if we actually like each other?* Stuart ruminates as he watches Rita slowly exhale smoke into the dusk.

“You want to get out of here?” asks Stuart “Grab a bottle and a bump?” he adds shyly.

“Ha! Ya, of course. Head back to yours I guess? Mines a mess.” Agrees Rita as they leave their empties and head for the fire escape.