

I BET THAT RIGHT NOW, you're not listening to Duran Duran's "Ordinary World" in your Walkman, which means you won't understand a word I've written. You suck, but that's beside the point. Since you probably stole this notebook from me, I've already begun hunting you down, and there are two things you should know in case I attack you tiger-style from behind before you finish reading it:

I—I didn't do it to him on purpose.

B—You're never more than ten feet away from a guy who'll pay you to shuck your pants.

Test it out.

The guy standing behind you in line at the supermarket, look at what he's buying. They don't go together. See how he cruises you like a piece of fruit, and how disappointed he is when you don't give him the signal. He dumps the taco shells and ice cream in the magazine rack, and leaves empty-handed.

Customer two. The dude reading beside you on the subway,

nevermind. He's missed the whole last chapter, picturing your jeans in a funky pile at the foot of his bed. He knows he doesn't have to pay, but he wants to. He says nothing, waiting for the signal, reading your hands.

Do it. Hook your thumb in your belt loop more often, and you'll see what I mean. Even if you do it unprofessionally, they'll still swarm.



Jaeven Marshall, twenty-two.

I don't know what these guys see in me. They can easily buy a better trick just down the block.

My posture is atrocious, and my fingers are stained. I'm a mess, but they still come after me. My knees are like dowels come loose that I can't hammer back in. Sometimes they pay extra to lick the webs between my toes.

My balls are so tiny, I wonder if they've dropped yet. I have a lip ring that sometimes gets crusty, and I only shave when I find a disposable that doesn't look too iffy. I've got blue eyes, which some guys seem to trip on.

Welcome to my whatever.

A thundercloud crept toward me in the form of a car I recognized for its slow idle and hungry rumble—blue Pontiac with a stubbly leer.

A twenty attached to a hand waved out the window.

Five packs of cigarettes. Three decent meals. No matter how you sliced it, I needed that twenty.

I wasn't in the mood for a Red Taurus or a Lime Volkswagen because they usually got too kinky too fast, and not a Tiger-striped Jeep

because rabbit-fuckers like that are too impatient and juvenile, and definitely not a Black Audi because that would just be asking for “God” trouble: power trips, etc. But a Blue Pontiac I could do. They usually wear a condom when I ask them to, when HIV is real enough in my mind.

I got in the car and did a cursory inspection of his genitals to check for any visible signs of escape wounds, claw marks left by other whores gone missing. When you fight back, there are only so many things you can reach for, and the trannies who own that West Side turf are famous for being vicious.

That’s the thing. You’re probably wondering what a fabulous rent boy like me is doing walking the West Side Highway when there are so many supermarkets around. You’re wondering why I’m freezing my ass outside when there are plenty of guys who scribble down my pager number from the back of HX or Next magazines, and then beep me to take their erections away. Well, if you want to know the truth, a whore’s got to do his market research to know who he’s competing against. If the wolves can get better versions of me out on the street, my whole business model is in trouble.

So this guy, Blue Pontiac, did something unprofessional to me. It was nothing serious, like choosing a radio station without asking my preference, or making me kiss him without the presence of spearmint gum. Let’s just say that he crossed me. It was nothing unforgivable, like asking me to call him by his name, and it was nothing stupid, like making me wait in the car while he ran to an ATM.

Let’s just say that he was physically rude to me.

Now, I’m not a vengeful person, but I just couldn’t help it. I was rather unprofessional with Blue Pontiac. It was nothing embarrassing, like laughing at his weenie, or recommending a crotch-to-head hair

transplant. Let's just say that I stung him. It was nothing permanent, because I don't really know the meaning of the word.

I wonder what I'm going to do with his tax receipts. What toilet, what sewer, what shredder?



My Fiorucci duffel bag makes for a great pillow, and it's also good for absorbing kicks, you know, the occasional ones you get from city monsters. My brown and orange ski jacket, with all of its holes, can still keep me warm.

I may sound optimistic, but it's just a survival mechanism.

My shitty Walkman is the most reliable thing I have. It's chewed all but one of my tapes, but they weren't that good to begin with. On humid days, my winter itch goes away, but the Walkman goes wonky and I have to hold it upside-down to play Duran Duran properly because of a battery connection that operates on gravity.

Everything has a survival mechanism.

It's amazing how something so fragile never lets me down, even when it's raining acid from New Jersey, when the cheap batteries I stole from the discount pharmacy are almost dead, and when I'm running out of ideas how to stay alive.

I might have crabs and my lip ring might be crusting again.

Whatever.

I might have athlete's foot from squatting in wet sneakers, and the pharmacy might be closed so I can't lift a tube of Polysporin and whatever else I need to fix my shit.

Shopping problems, those I can deal with.

There might even be a tapeworm gnawing a hole through my stom-

ach out of secondary hunger, but if I hold my Walkman just right, the music plays and the world is perfect.

And when the outside world gets too oppressive, I can always go home.

There are only two things that can ruin my day.

The first is when my pen explodes during a really heavy piece of fiction. Not heavy in the sense that it makes the ink explode, but in the sense that the interruption is annoying. I get covered in ink more often than you'd believe. I use Bic medium black exclusively, though it's not because I'm a brand hound. Bics happen to be the most reliable pens on the market, and the hexagonal shape is perfect for rewinding tapes when your batteries are fizzling out.

I've used a fancy Montblanc before, and trust me, they're shit. With all the research they put into it, you'd think the ballpoint wouldn't gum up so often. There are two ways to unstick a pen—either doodle while pressing like your wrist is going to snap, or char the tip with a lighter. Both ways, there's a sixty-forty chance you're getting an ink shower.

To answer your question, I've tried Papermate pens, but their medium is so thick, it's like writing with a marker—you can't be subtle. And besides, they explode too often.

The other thing that can sour a perfect day is when someone strays into my home, my modest but well-appointed apartment, and interrupts my writing by asking me if I work there. I have to hold myself back from sticking a high heel in their neck, and then I put on my best customer service smile.

I want you to picture the kind of customer I'm talking about. She's wearing a pair of charcoal pants with bias-cut hems and razor pleats and a translucent chiffon top with batwing sleeves. The tulle

chinoiserie is just to rub your face in it. If you're wondering how I know this terminology, it's because I've served enough of these idiots to know how they describe themselves. They do it quite often. This woman, she wears perfume from concentrate, and applies lipstick thinking that her mouth spans more face than it actually does. This is a Fiorucci woman. The Fiorucci woman's biggest problem has always been finding the right shoes, the ones she needs to crush people like me beneath her.

I am here to help.

"Of course I work here."

"Do you have a size seven stiletto in sea foam green?"

"Close your eyes."

"Can't you just answer my question?"

"This is part of the Fiorucci experience," I say. "Now close your eyes and imagine waves crashing on the shore, pushing sea foam up the beach ... What color is it?"

"The water?"

"The foam."

This is usually the part when I start winning the conversation.

"Umm ... it's kind of whitish."

"So shouldn't it be sea foam white?"

"My Visa limit is probably twice your annual salary, you little shit ... I don't deserve this. Where's the manager?"

"I can call her, but you still won't be able to get those goat hooves into a size seven."

That's usually when they storm out, realizing I don't work there, and that they've accidentally discovered a stock-room stowaway. Then I hide in the only place no one will check, in a crate of fall/winter 1998—no one wants to be seen rooting through last season's rejects,

no one with Fiorucci in the blood. I camp out until things settle down and home becomes a tranquil place again, a place without customers.

Sometimes it's hard getting back home, especially after closing time. They keep changing the alarm code on me, and then I'm locked out until I spy on someone punching it in. When I spray-paint the motion sensor, they buy a new one, and when I bust the back door so the latch doesn't lock, it's so fudged up that I can't get in. On busy days, I can take a shoe order, walk right back there and never come out, kind of like how I discovered the stock room in the first place.

You're probably wondering why I can't get a real home, even with all the whole money I make. I can't understand it either. I'm staring at a crisp, hundred-dollar bill that's utterly useless.

Motel rooms, the scuzzy ones with bedbugs, start at seventy-five, but I can't afford the security deposit. They want me to pay for all the damage I might do, when the worst would be writing story notes on the bathroom wall while taking a shit.

Fold in half, right along Ben Franklin's nose.

Apartment landlords want three months up front, and family references.

Fold both sides kitty-corner into the middle.

Hostels won't let me in because they're suspicious of that new shoe smell I walk around with and can't wash off.

Bend back the wings.

And nevermind bribing doormen to sleep in building basements. Thing is, tenants tip them enough at Christmas to make sure that designer riff-raff like me can't use their zip code.

Crease little triangles at the tips.

Some places are free, like shelters, but show me one that's cleaner

than a stock room. Show me one where I can lay my head on purses of soft Italian leather. Show me one where I can walk barefoot on double-weave cotton suits with gold threading. Show me one where I can eat cereal out of a different high heel every day.

Tear a strip at the back for flight control.

Release.

One day, I might move to a city where hundred-dollar bills are more than just paper airplanes.



It's New Year's Eve, minutes away from spilling into 1999. All the screams and body-fucking. There's nothing I can do but squeeze closer to whatever's at the middle of this commotion.

Worm my way through the crowd that's distending Times Square twenty extra blocks. Blinking lights. Noise and hum stretching the top of my mind up, up, up. Starspin until I'm dizzy and deaf. This thrumming has no beginning or end, and will be here long after I'm gone.

Erase. Clear history. I could be deleted data, I could be stardust, and I could be nowhere in particular.

Some people have kids. Some people leave bullets inside other people. Some people tell jokes that get told and told. The point is that everyone leaves something, a little trace of themselves, behind.

I have writing. It's the proof I can give that there was something worth doing. You know what I mean. That not everything was for nothing. I know you're wondering what I'm so compelled to write about, but you'll eventually find out. Just to forewarn you, I write about things I find, so it's not always pretty or poetic.

The millennium's here. People are saying that it's all going to



break apart. Even atheists admit that there's some kind of reckoning coming.

So I think it would be good to get something published. As a matter of fact, I'm going to give myself until the end of 1999 to make it as a writer. And if that doesn't happen, I will very methodically kill the dream in front of your eyes, in such a graphic way that you will never believe in dreams again. Not because I'm mean, but because you shouldn't believe in things that are supposed to come true, but don't.



When I write at night, I turn into a superhero. There are superheroes all over the city, and they need darkness to hide how normal they really are.

Sometimes I abuse my powers. I steal the first newspaper delivered in the city, from the steps of City Hall at four a.m.

Mayor Giuliani can suck my wang.



Kurt Vonnegut has always tweaked it for me, so when he came to speak at the Barnes and Noble bookstore in Union Square, I didn't mind skipping out on a well-paying trick.

K.V.'s written all of my favorite novels, the ones I can handle because he wrote them in snippets.

His lectures were famous for magic tricks—bunny rabbits, hidden bouquets—yet that wasn't why I went.

I don't know what I was expecting. Maybe I thought he would grab

my notebook, read a few paragraphs to the crowd, and toast me as the next writing sensation. Maybe I thought his greatness would rub off on me, polish me around the edges.

A security guard filled the door frame just as I was about to walk in. He was wearing crappy loafers that looked like they were from Kmart, and I could see where the sole glue was coming undone.

“Sir, the bookstore is full. We cannot accommodate any more guests for Mr Vonnegut’s appearance.”

From outside, I could see all kinds of room between bookshelves and behind display tables.

“I don’t mind listening from the second floor. It doesn’t matter where I am.”

“Then you won’t mind listening from outside.”

I tried to squeeze past him but he pinned me against the molding and pushed me back outside. His radio crackled.

“It’s nothing personal, but we can’t let you in. I said we’re full.”

I sniffed the armpits of my ski jacket to see if it was street stink that had turned him off or the smell of designer leather and treated snakeskin. Nothing. Smelled like winter. He started to close the door. I jammed my foot in the crack and he kicked it out.

“It’s nothing personal.”

Of course it wasn’t. He was just doing his job, making sure I understood that my place was on the outside of the glass, fogging it up.

My nostrils misted the window until I couldn’t see anything. I had to imagine K.V.’s magic tricks, imagine them from scratch.

Not that I’d gone there for the tricks.



Why New York City is not America:

Because not everyone has a gun or thinks they need one, because the industrial smog that wafts over from New Jersey creates a sunset I want to lick off the sky, because people live in the subway, because some of the homeless live better than housed people in other cities.

Because people don't wish you "God bless," because God would feel uncomfortable among the godless skyscrapers of Manhattan, because an old woman can keep her rent-controlled apartment for twenty-six dollars a month.

Because there are four daily papers that can spin a story four different ways, dividing the city into quadrants of people who can't, for obvious reasons, chat about the news.

Because people die when the power goes out.



I don't want to talk about how I got my eye busted open, because looking back is dangerous. You have to keep moving forward to stave off death. Thank God I'm not homeless, because I'd really be fucked if I didn't have a place to crash and recuperate between wounds.

Right about the time that I was debating whether or not to let the winter wind freeze-clot the blood, or maybe tamp it with some relatively unused Ray's Pizza napkins, somebody walked into my blur.

"Hey there."

"What do you want."

Sometimes when I ask a question, it doesn't sound like one.

"Nothing. Listen, why don't you let me take care of that eye for you. It could get infected if you don't do it right."

He was a blond guy, twenty-seven or twenty-eight and kind of