

People Here

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He told me to call him Jesus and so I did.

Revelation320: Not like you say it in Spanish. Not *hey* and then *soos*. Not like that.

Partee7890: Jesus like God then?

Revelation320: Exactly.

Jesus signed onto AOL around the same time each day, mid-afternoon, after he got off work at the hospital. And it was just around the same time as me. Same routine, every day: jump off the bus, say hello to my mother, and explain to her for the thousandth time that in order for me to get my homework done, I'd need to *unplug* the phone and plug *in* the computer. That the internet required this sort of dial-up connection or whatever.

"How much is this costing me?" she'd ask. I'd tell her about these free CDs that keep coming in the mail. I'd just keep showing her the same one and swing it in front of her face like a pocket watch.

"Free," I'd say, like a quivering ghost, and draw out the *eeee*.

“Can I still watch *Guiding Light* if you’re using the phone?”
 “Sure,” I’d say. “Every day.”

Jesus was a doctor in the emergency room in West Aurora, a few towns over, which is the emergency room I’d have to go to if I was in some kind of accident or needed stitches. He actually revealed this to me the first time we chatted privately in our own instant messenger window. We were talking with maybe thirty or so others in a local chat room called The Bonfire, which was for people who lived in and around the Rochester area. I’m not even sure how I ended up in The Bonfire to begin with; I think I just liked the name. It reminded me of when my neighbor Todd and I would ride our bikes down to Bellway Beach and spy on all the teenagers drinking beer and throwing the empty bottles into the lake.

After a while, I just headed straight for The Bonfire each time I signed online. Every so often, the room would be completely full and I’d have to wait, sometimes for a full hour until someone would leave so I could join. I’d pass the time looking up the week’s weather or playing Minesweeper. I’d end up just clicking all the bombs, purposely, looking to blow myself up, so the game would end quicker.

Things could get pretty heated in The Bonfire; that’s sort of where I think it got its name, and also sort of why I liked it. After listening to all the dumb boys at my school talk all day long about how they would only titty-fuck Sarah DeMarco but definitely fuck-fuck Jenna Jablonski, it was nice to go to a place where real conversations were happening, about things that mattered. I always felt like I was an old soul trapped in a fifteen-year-old’s body anyway, and that was reaffirmed with how well I got along with everyone in The Bonfire. No judgment was passed on anyone, which I felt was rare for a chat room where most of the time it’s just people getting pissed off at each other. The Bonfire was civil and could really make you think about life or whatever. The group would argue over the difference between the mortal and immortal universe, how all atoms of all things are connected for all time, or how humans are actually the fourth state of matter.

Partee7890: I thought that was plasma.

I chimed in and told the room about Mr. Rutkowski’s health class and how, if any of us sneezed, he’d jokingly ask us if we had AIDS, which I thought was pretty inappropriate.

But it wasn’t always such serious kinds of conversations. Things could get fun too. Like the group placed bets on which team would win the Super Bowl while

others exchanged recipes for the best tuna mac and cheese.

There was a large chat box where all the conversations took place. They ticked in line by line, like some sort of heartbeat. To the right of that big box, there was a smaller box labeled “People Here.” It had a count of how many people were in The Bonfire as well as listed everyone’s name. Well, our screen names.

When I initially set up my AOL, I had to pick my own screen name, which is different from your actual name. Apparently, the company prefers people don’t use their real names so when I told my mother I accidentally used mine, AnthonyRossi, she slapped me over the head with a dish towel, and automatically figured someone had already stolen my identity, like my Social Security number and stuff, which I think was something she saw on *Jenny Jones*. Later, when I looked out my window and saw birthday balloons tied to Todd’s mailbox, I decided on the screen name “Party.” AOL suggested “Partee7890,” spelled just like that and with all those numbers after it. I felt like I had to take it because they suggested it. Suddenly, instead of AnthonyRossi, I was Partee7890, which I felt funny about, like wearing a Halloween costume.

The internet was very futuristic. I had email, so I could send chain letters to my friends, and a calendar for appointments and a list of my favorite web addresses—but it was the chat rooms I loved the most. There were so many different kinds and for different occasions. HeadOverHeelz for romance, RuffHaus for sports, 4EverLife for health, BeMovie for movies (obviously). But it was in the The Bonfire where I felt like I really belonged and could use my screen name in really fun ways, like I would join the room and say, “Who’s ready to partee?!” or “Which way to the partee?” I wrote in Comic Sans font, which is the wavy, hip one that looks like a person’s actual writing. Eventually, other people began to know me and say things like “The partee has arrived!” which made me feel pretty fabulous, like a bride busting through the doors of her reception.

Eventually, the “People Here” list became more and more recognizable and I’d be happy to see familiar names: NinjaMystery4u, xxStarburstxx, and buddhabud1980 became a few of my favorites. I liked the people that said funny and philosophical things the best, like Jesus, who called himself Revelation320. He was by far the most profound of them all and even became the moderator of the chat room. When Jesus was online, The Bonfire felt alive and buzzing. And when he wasn’t, things tended to move a lot more slowly. He doled out some great advice, helped people through

things. Jesus was the only one who told me his real name, which I liked. I thought he was brave and heroic. I mean, he was a doctor, after all, and had probably been saving people his entire life.

Revelation320: I like to partee.

Partee7890: Who doesn't?!

Revelation320: A/S/L?

Partee7890: 17/male/Rochester. A/S/L?

Revelation320: 25/male/Rochester.

Partee7890: Kewl.

Revelation320: What do you look like?

I stood up from the computer chair to examine my bony frame in the mirror and flap my arms to the side. My limbs kind of just hung there, like a chalk outline. A speckled face, nose like a gherkin, a mouth full of metal. A whole body that was never my idea.

Partee7890: I have on a T-shirt and shorts. I look like a dork.

Revelation320: *bites bottom lip*

Partee7890: What's that mean?

Revelation320: It means I'm biting my bottom lip.

Partee7890: Oh, well, what about you what's your deal dood?

Revelation320: Call me Jesus.

That's when he told me about how he was a doctor and that he went to Princeton Medical School and lived in Wadsworth Park, which is where the best everything is. The best mall—the one with a train inside it that could, technically, take you from store to store—the best Olive Garden, the best Applebee's, the best Dairy Queen, the best Abercrombie, the best Tanning Bed. Everyone wanted to live in Wadsworth Park. I wanted to live in Wadsworth Park. It was a different world. And even though it was so close, maybe five minutes down the road, Jesus was the first person I ever met that lived there, and the way he described his house, it sounded like a mansion, fully equipped with an inground pool and a diving board on both sides.

Revelation320: You'll have to come over sometime for a swim.

Partee7890: DEF!

I said it in all caps like that, for emphasis. We chatted for hours that afternoon, on into the evening. I usually just eat a bowl of Golden Grahams or eggs for dinner anyway. It seemed like Jesus told me everything about his life—it sounded so grand. He said he had three dogs, all Dalmatians, named Huey, Dewey, and Louie and

that they'd won awards for being so beautiful and walking so dignified. Jesus told me that one of the rooms in his house was actually filled to the ceiling with awards from the dogs and from his own accomplishments in medical school, track trophies, swim trophies, even a blue first-place ribbon for a baking contest. He said it was the first time he had ever made a Baked Alaska. And that it's the perfect dessert to cool down with.

Revelation320: It's getting hotter and hotter.

Partee7890: I can't wait.

Finally, when sophomore year was nearly over and the summer was so close I could almost taste it, I nixed the AC and just kept the windows open wide, welcoming in the warm air. Upstairs in the computer room, the mosquitoes snuck in through the broken screens and nipped at my thighs, but to tell you the truth, I didn't mind.

Revelation320: Your blood must be sooo sweetet.

Jesus said this to me when I explained the invasion to him. I scratched at one bite so much it bled a little. I rubbed some off and tasted it. It was kind of sweet so that must be why they were so attracted to me or whatever. Keeping the windows open made it feel more like summer—freshly cut grass, pollen floating through the air—instead of an AC home of closed doors and blinds.

My neighbor, Mrs. Murphy, took pride in her lawn. After Mr. Murphy ran off with his third cousin, it was obvious their son Todd, who I'd been pretty close to as kids, had to assume the role of Man of the House. This included taking care of the yard, in the hot, hot heat. Todd had just turned eighteen, was off to Villanova in the fall, with a fully formed, masculine body.

Each time he mowed the lawn, it was the same—he'd do half the backyard with his shirt on, usually a jersey of some sort, David Beckham or Dikembe Mutombo, and then halfway through, he'd shift the mower into park, take the jersey off and throw it onto the part of the lawn that he had already cut. I'd wait for that moment. I longed for it. It was usually around the time he finished near the pool. Todd's muscles were his best feature, lean and well shaped. He had big hands, too, ones that could palm a basketball for hours, I'm sure. His boxers—if I squinted, I could make out Abercrombie & Fitch typed generously around the waistline—would always peek slightly out above his shorts, like some sort of promise.

From upstairs, I'd watch the whole thing unfold. I'd even take my fingers and pull down on the blinds just slightly so if he looked up and saw, he'd maybe see only

my eyes, but that would be it. One time I sneezed pretty loudly on account of all the pollen. I swear Todd must have heard because he looked right at my window and reached his hand into his shorts and adjusted his junk for a good ten seconds. I'm pretty sure he smiled too. Of course, I could be just making this whole thing up.

Revelation320: What's he look like?

Partee7890: Like Freddie Prinze Jr.

Jesus wanted even more specifics, so I told him. Eye color, height, build. Right down to any moles he had on his face or any other visible spots on his body. Birthmarks, scars, recognizable features. I knew them all. I've studied them since I was little.

Partee7890: I like that we can talk about stuff.

Revelation320: Yeah, it's like we're the same person.

Partee7890: Totally.

Revelation320: Picture me yawning.

Partee7890: What do you mean?

Revelation320: Are you picturing me? My head tipped back, my arms stretched out behind my neck.

I closed my eyes and saw him. In his emergency room scrubs, happy to be finally sitting and relaxing, chatting with intelligent people. He was so sleepy after a long day of fixing broken bones, fishing cotton balls out of ears, patching up wounds. I yawned wide and big, scooping a world of air into my mouth, then chest. I told Jesus I was yawning.

Revelation320: Does your mother connect with you like I do?

Partee7890: No one really does.

Revelation320: Where is your father?

Partee7890: He died of a lung thing when I was in kindergarten.

Revelation320: Do you know CPR?

Partee7890: Not really.

Revelation320: I can teach u. Haha.

Partee7890: Sure okay whatever.

Mrs. Murphy and my mother were close. They both volunteered as lunch ladies on the same days at school, they gossiped on the phone about how obvious it was Mrs. Powicki had a crush on the mailman—it was pretty obvious; I mean, one minute she didn't have lipstick on and then the next, full-blown clown face—and they even

started a mall walkers club together. They called it Body and Sole, and they met twice a week to walk laps around the mall. They say they did it for the exercise, but I know they found a spirit in each other because both of their husbands left them alone: one affair, one respiratory disease. Even so, they both kept the *Mrs.* in their name, like for catharsis or whatever. Body and Sole was like their therapy sessions, I guess. It was probably really good for them to have someone who just got it.

That's how, in elementary school, Todd and I became friends. As close as cousins, I'd say. Grade-wise, we were only two years apart, and neither of us had siblings, so I think that helped us find common ground. Todd was always the taller one, more athletic, a natural even, constantly joining some team and then quitting. It seemed like every time I'd go over to his house, he'd be in a different uniform. I noticed his good looks the most when he came home from a soccer game and his knee was bleeding. Mrs. Murphy would wipe his sandy hair from his face as he wept. The tears made his eyes gleam like some sort of galaxy.

We built forts out of couch cushions, we caught crayfish and kept them, we counted bruises on each other's legs. We even gave each other nicknames—Odd Todd and Tony Bologna—and one summer spoke in pig Latin almost exclusively. Then high school happened. Todd started hanging out with kids in his own grade and getting into older-kid kind of stuff. They called things *lame* and *gay* and *retarded*. They started drinking stolen wine coolers from 7-Eleven, talking about girls in ways that made me uncomfortable. Sometimes they even played that fainting game where one person holds the other person's neck in a way that cuts off some oxygen and causes a high or whatever. I thought it was all pretty dumb and actually pretty dangerous. They were chasing different things than me. I couldn't keep up. Todd filled out and became an actual man, and I've remained my lanky, lima bean self.

It wasn't like I didn't have anything to bring to the table. I was pretty good at guitar. My aunt on my father's side had been a bit of a folk singer when she was a teenager back in the seventies. She told me stories of traveling through all the towns on the Great Lakes and into Canada playing little coffee shops and colleges, and she had this old acoustic guitar that used mother-of-pearl inlays for fret markers. I learned to play a lot of the popular music on that guitar: Jewel, Dave Matthews Band, Ani DiFranco, Tracy Chapman. I ended up being pretty good, too; my aunt told me as much. And I mean, she would know, right? She used to be a folk singer.

Todd had a small party in his garage for his graduation—pizza, pop, chicken

wings, baked ziti—and Mrs. Murphy told me and my mother to stop by. I didn't want to come empty-handed and so I brought my guitar for fun, knowing full well I'd whip it out as soon as the moment came. Todd had a lot of his basketball buddies over and I couldn't find the right time. When all the adults went in for the night, one guy, Kev Marino, rolled a mini-keg out of his pickup and the party became something else. Everyone was getting nice and loose.

"You gonna play something or what?" Todd laughed and gestured to the guitar that I had kept in my lap for virtually the whole night. The whole party stared at me. I thought he'd never ask.

"This is for you, Daddy," I said in my best Stevie Nicks, which is actually what she says. I played Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide," the live version, instrumental solo and everything. The song is beautiful and sad and about two people growing apart. I looked into Todd's eyes the entire time just because I thought it would make for a good graduation gift. When I finished, I felt like I had done something worthy. Todd blushed, horrified. Everyone burst into laughter.

"I think he's actually gay *and* retarded," Kev snorted, drunk.

Someone flicked a cigarette butt into the sound hole of my guitar and I went to the curb to shake it out, almost violently I swung the guitar around—that was the only way to do it. It wouldn't come out no matter how hard I tried. It just kept ticking around, burning up the inside.

Revelation320: They're all assholes.

Partee7890: I thought it was a good gift too.

Revelation320: Picture me hugging you.

Partee7890: I am. It feels good.

The following morning, I was chilling in The Bonfire when a voice boomed from outside the window and swept through the computer room.

"Ony-tay Ologna-bay!" It was a language I hadn't heard in years, and one I'd rather forget. The voice belonged to Todd, of course. He sat on the flower bench beside the deck that his mother had tended to religiously. It looked like he was smoking a cigarette. I couldn't escape or pretend I wasn't there. He knew I loved that room.

"Chicks love guitar, come teach me," he yelled up.

"Now, why would I do that?"

"Look, Bologna, I'm sorry about what happened. Those guys can be real dicks

sometimes, ya know, especially Marino.”

“OK, but no cigarettes this time. Please.”

He held his cigarette up into the air and then stamped it out with one of his sandals.

“No cigarettes,” he smiled and waved his hands in the air like he was under arrest. “I need a date.”

He explained to me that when he went to visit his cousin Bobby at Binghamton, all the guys who played guitar “got the most pussy” and he said “pussy” really loudly. I wanted to say, “I told you so,” but instead just put on my best Dave Matthews Band T-shirt and booked it next door.

“Where’s your mom?” I asked as he let me in. He looked at me just below my eyeline. He had on a tie-dye tank, basketball shorts, and what appeared to be fake Birkenstocks. He stood more casual than I remember from even last night in his garage, more relaxed, breezy. I wondered if that was what college was going to be like.

“Body and Sole.”

“Oh right. Mine too.”

We left the hallway and rounded the corner up the stairs. I let my hand glide across the banister and felt the smoothness of the wood. This wasn’t the first time I’d walked up these stairs to his room. As kids we used to wrap ourselves in sleeping bags and tumble down, step by step. When we got to the bottom, we’d get up and just do it all over again. Todd’s room was the last to the right and it smelled like body odor. Socks and boxers were strewn across the floor. Some jerseys hung without thought over his headboard. There were trophies from soccer and basketball stacked on shelves near his closet, a poster with the word *Xtreme!* tacked to the wall. A Villanova pennant hung above his computer desk.

I showed him three basic chords. There was C and G and A minor, which are, honestly, pretty simple. I told him if he could play just three chords, he could write a song. I thought this was a good place to start. He didn’t have his own guitar yet, so he had to use mine, which I didn’t mind at all. He attempted the finger positions on the fret board but struggled.

“I don’t think I’m cut out for this,” he whined.

“Look, this is A minor,” I said and adjusted his fingers to press down on the right strings. He rolled his eyes and jumped.

“Ouch!” he shrieked.

“Eventually you’ll get calluses and it won’t hurt as bad,” I said.

“Let’s do something else,” he said and pulled a joint from his pocket. “A peace offering.”

“Get high on weed?” I asked and placed the guitar down softly on the bed.

“Yeah, come on, Bologna. Liver little,” he said and gave me a shove.

“I do. I mean. Remember that game where we’d hug someone really hard till they got, like, kind of high?”

“Yeah,” Todd said laughing, searching through his drawers for a lighter.

“We should try that.”

“Seriously? I don’t even think I remember how to do it.”

“I do, I think. I looked it up on the World Wide Web the other day.” I crossed my arms over my chest and instructed him to come up and hug me hard from behind.

“Like this?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, a little choked up. His grip felt strong and tight, like a real athlete. His forearms looked huge. I watched the hairs on my arms stand up.

“Feel anything?”

“A little,” I said, staring at how we looked together like this in the mirror.

Todd let go and gave me another push. He pulled the joint out again.

“Okay, now this is the real stuff.”

“Let me try it,” I said. Todd reached for his lighter. “No, I mean, the hugging thing.”

He groaned. “Sure, okay,” he said.

Todd crossed his arms over his chest, copying me exactly. I went up behind him and gave him a big squeeze, grabbing each of my elbows.

“You can do better than that,” he said, laughing, a little breathy.

I squeezed tighter. Todd was big. His neck was thick, like a pit bull’s. I had to stand on my toes to get a better grip. I could feel his pulse somewhere around in there, kind of like when you’re feeling for your own and it’s impossible to find. I slipped my middle finger around the area and landed just below his jaw bone and just above his Adam’s apple and pressed down hard. Todd began to struggle again but weakly. I felt like I had a doll in my hands. He tried to talk but I pressed my finger down harder and he dropped to the floor, slipping out of my grip and down the side of the bed. Nothing about him was moving really, just small puffs of air coming out of his mouth and nose. I panicked and paced the room, pulling at my hair and biting at my fingernails. I searched for the phone in his mess of a room, tossed dirty clothes into the air until I found it—no dial tone, no nothing. I clicked on his monitor and signed into my AOL account.

Partee7890: We were just playing a game.

Revelation320: Is he passed out?

Partee7890: Ya but barely breathing.

Revelation320: But breathing though?

Partee7890: Yaaaa.

Revelation320: What's he wearing?

Partee7890: Shorts and tank.

Revelation320: What kind of shorts?

Partee7890: Bball.

Revelation320: He might need to see a doctor.

Partee7890: HELLO I think u should come over.

Revelation320: What's your address?

From his bedroom window, I waited nervously. I watched Todd's chest rise and fall, like he was in a deep sleep. It must have been ten minutes that passed when a maroon Chevy Silverado parked across the street near the Sorrinos' mailbox. Mr. Sorrino was out, washing his own car, hosing down the windshield. The day was hot, the summer had arrived. A heavyset man climbed out of the truck with some difficulty. Mr. Sorrino stopped the hose to watch him. He had on baggy jeans and hunter boots, the big camouflage ones, even in the crazy heat. A New York Jets cap and sunglasses covered the majority of his head and face. I could just barely make out his pierced ears, two big silvery crosses dangling from each lobe. He walked up Todd's driveway and disappeared onto the front porch. I heard the doorbell ring and a calmness came over me, like a beautiful quiet or something, and I swear I never felt more in love.

