



On Austerity

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Despite his \$90k/year coding gig in Silicon Valley, Nate dressed for work in the dark.

This was Classic Nate, mind you. Pre-sex-cult, depressed and reckless and bizarre. Always more than a little tense because, like most of us, he wanted to be loved, but lamented that he'd gotten laid only twice in the last five years. Once by Angela, bipolar friend of a friend who seemed to be bedding *somebody* almost every night during her episodes. And once by a visiting Israeli his parents arranged for him to meet. He drove her around aimlessly through night, punched the roof of his car when she asked for a cigarette (his pack fell from its perch above the passenger-side sun visor to land in her lap), and regaled her with stories about the United States. I like to imagine that some of those stories were about me. Then, in a parking lot alongside Half Moon Bay, he was shocked to find her climbing over the central console to unbutton his jeans and straddle him. Shafts of sunlight stabbed over the bluffs behind them.

A few hours later, Nate dropped her off at the airport. His life was back to nothing.

That's when Nate decided he was all done with the mail. "I need to start taking better care of myself," he told me, and one thing that apparently always wore him down was coming home, putting his little key into the dingy metal slot, opening his box, and

finding that yet again he'd received nothing but a flier with coupons for delivery pizza. He'd order one that evening from whichever company had courted him, eat the whole thing alone, and hate himself. He decided it was time for the cycle to stop.

Maybe it helped. He was still scowling a lot, but one single fix couldn't solve *all* his problems. His "no more mail" plan did make him feel less unmoored by time. He was an atheist and hadn't celebrated his birthday in years, so he never had anything marked on the calendar to look forward to. But the "no mail" situation meant he had numbered days piling up behind him.

"Two weeks without checking!" he told me, sounding as giddy as I'd ever heard him.

"A month!"

"Three months!"

That's when PG&E cut his electricity.

He was living in a shitty apartment in Mountain View, California. This was in November of 2005, before rents in the area skyrocketed—Google and Facebook and all would soon start binge-hiring without worrying where any of their new drones would sleep. But at the time there were still some ill-maintained apartment complexes with rent cheap enough for Nate to hate himself only a little each time he dropped off his check, muttering "It makes me feel so fucking wasteful" to be spending all that money. Rent was cheap enough for a junkie to be living downstairs, although not quite cheap enough for that tenancy to last long. As summer merged season-less-ly into autumn and then winter (the unchanging weather had exacerbated Nate's sense of being unmoored by time), that dude progressed from being "the junkie downstairs neighbor" to "the guy sleeping on the couch 'cause he was evicted from his place" to "that guy who used to stay here but I don't know, I don't *think* he's dead. I guess he might be."

Nate felt bad about the way they'd parted. Nate had come home from work and found the dude shuffling around the apartment with Nate's necktie—the one and only, bought for this coding gig's job interview—cinched tight and dangling from his forearm. Nate shouted at him. Unfairly, perhaps. Unless you knew they were there, you wouldn't even *notice* the smatters of blood. Nate's words were just more to regret. That's how depression works: you lie awake at night ruminating over a lifetime of mistakes.

The next day, Nate came home from work to find the apartment empty. The dude was gone. And Nate didn't have any way to contact him. His phone had been deactivated—nonpayment, obvies—which meant the only hope was to ask another junkie if the dude had been seen.

Anyway, the general decrepitude of Nate's apartment complex meant old-style, unmetered plumbing. Water, even hot water, was bundled into the cost of rent. Whereas electricity was separate. Somebody at PG&E flicked a switch and only Nate's was cut.

Nate had the money, but his bills came in the mail. In order to pay, he'd have to trudge down to his box and check. He'd have to admit defeat.

Instead, he figured he'd learn to do without. He bought candles. Every evening he'd draw a hot bath and smoke a jay and read *Paradise Lost* by candlelight in the tub. I assume he often lost his place—I've tried to read Milton *sober* and have never gotten anywhere.

He said he was the happiest he'd ever been.

"It's really reassuring," he told me, "to know that the cheese you find on the floor is just as safe to eat as the cheese that's in the fridge."

I was unconvinced. I was happy with my slightly-less-shitty studio apartment in Menlo Park, electric lights and all. Living the high life, part of the modern world. Well, no internet, but I had access to that at work. I was pulling \$26k/year as a grad student, but that was plenty. I didn't have many expenses other than food and rent, and food was just twenty-eight packs of ramen noodles (the blue pack, oriental flavor), seven cans of black beans, and four broccoli crowns each week. Throw in a couple bucks for soap, nail polish, and multivitamins, I was still shopping for under \$15. I didn't need to buy pencils or tape or toilet paper or sodium hydroxide or acetone—all that I could liberate from Stanford. I washed my clothes in a bucket in the shower, using my runoff in place of detergent, and hung them from push-pins on my undecorated walls to dry. I rarely ate lunch. Each meal I skipped, I'd add another \$2 to my books & music fund. Amoeba sold used CDs for 99 cents a pop, and at the Palo Alto library book sale paperbacks were a quarter, hardbacks 50 cents.

But even *I* thought Nate's austerity was too much. "You're really not going to fix your electricity?" I asked him. I couldn't imagine living without it, even though about all I used it for was plugging in my computer to watch *Invader Zim* while eating dinner. Or porn. A few times a week I might flip on my amplifier to strum an inexpert A minor on electric guitar. Then I'd use the lights to read until I fell asleep. But how was that better than *Paradise Lost* by candlelight, stoned and soaking in the tub?

The recently renovated studio apartment I was renting didn't have a tub. Just a standing shower stall lined with discount tile. Reading in the shower has never worked for me.

By the time they cut Nate's electricity, I'd been living in California for several months. The previous year I'd kept up with him during sporadic evening phone calls, and before that we'd been in college together. We lived in the same dorm my sophomore year, his junior, in singles side by side, sharing a wall. We never spoke until an afternoon in April. I was sitting at my desk typing a lab report for analytical chemistry when he charged into my room and pushed me aside. I'd been listening to music and, on shuffle, my computer had pulled up an .mp3 from Manu Chao's *Esperanza*. Nate started tapping on my keyboard, set up an ftp to send the album to himself. Once he was done, he turned, stuck out his hand, and said his name. After that, we were friends.

The song was "Mr. Bobby." It's not even the best of the album.

The rest of the year, we'd drink together on Friday nights, traipse through the dark and bullshit about politics or philosophy or suicide, walk from campus to Chicago's Navy Pier thirteen miles away, ride home on the El, bandy quotes from that same set of movies every college kid was watching those days (*Pulp Fiction*, *Amores Perros*, *Fight Club*, *Donnie Darko*), drop by the co-op to get stoned and play chess. Listed now, all packed into a single sentence, that hardly sounds like enough to build a friendship. But we were all we had. After I applied to graduate school and was choosing where to go, I picked Stanford largely because Nate was living there.

I've been told that this is a sign I was never a very serious student. But I think there's a difference between being unserious and simply giving few fucks. A school's a school, right? So why not go where I had a friend?

Nate had been living without electricity for six weeks when he and I drove to San Francisco for the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival. A fellow graduate student hooked us up, so overnight we got to sleep in a former Stanford undergrad's backyard. Much more comfortable than sleeping in the reclined seat of Nate's car, like I did on Saturdays when Nate drove us to Half Moon Bay—still his favorite place—in the middle of the night.

At the bluegrass festival, we stood with our arms folded and nodded as though knowingly, surveying the crowd. We formed romantic aspirations about all the pretty women there. As you might expect, given that it's a free music festival attended by hundreds of thousands, we never saw any of them again. Nor, given that Nate and I were both awkward, sullen dudes, did we speak to them that day.

The festival ended and we returned to our dismal day to day lives.

I'd realized that attending graduate school was a mistake. I'd liked college well enough, so when I was about to finish I thought, why not try part two? But that's not

what graduate school was. College is an intellectual exercise. You're there to *become*. But graduate school is like a trade school. You learn to do a job. And the nature of that job means spending many hours per day learning just one single thing. To succeed, you have to tamp down all other burning ecstasies for which your soul might yearn.

At least I had Nate. He was my lifeline, my reminder that there was a bigger world outside. He might buy a set of oil paints, pick me up on a Saturday morning, and drive us to the woods. Our efforts were crude, our hands untrained, but we were trying. Keeping the spark alive. I hung our creations on my formerly bare walls. Or we might sit together on a weekday night, in the dark at his place or in the light at mine, and play music, meaning we'd each strum A minor on our guitars. Sometimes he would whistle.

Eventually, I knew other people in town. I accumulated three classes' worth of former students; the strange ones would stop and chat when I saw them again. And there were a few fellow graduate students who'd talk to me. Sure, I was a monster, good at math but prone to murder jokes, liable at any moment to launch into a speculative narrative that'd end with my waking in a gutter to find a rat gnawing on my eyeball... but some people, drug people mostly, get a kick out of hearing shit like that.

I taught classes. I made desultory attempts to find a viable advisor. I aced exams to eke out middling grades after failing to turn in most of the homework. Then Nate drove over to pick me up. We went to the drug store and bought half a dozen bottles of Robitussin (without expectorant!), then conned a former student of mine into babysitting us for the evening.

About an hour in, we passed another group of students, undergraduates our babysitter knew, who were contemplating a foray into the tunnels beneath campus. We were about to join them for their adventure, but then they realized nobody had a flashlight.

Nate started yelling. "You little pinhead fucks! How are you so unprepared for... for... for life! I'm on fucking psychedelic drugs but even *I'm* more prepared than you! I have a headlamp in my car!"

I wasn't sure whether or not he remembered that his car, parked at my apartment, was some three miles away. But I have no doubt he would've run there and back, if only to show those Stanford kids what it means to be somebody who gets shit done. Sprinting past buildings that'd wobble and melt when perceived by his jouncing, dextromethorphanated mind.

The word "austerity," in contemporary political parlance, often means imposing suffering on somebody else. But Nate believed in classical austerity, austerity like in the Indian myths where heroes gain the world by enjoying none of it, austerity in the sense of subjecting his own self to pain. Despite his \$90k, his only profligate expense

was gas, and even gasoline caused him to suffer. Buying gas meant he wouldn't sleep, since his prime driving time was always the dead of night. People say that Highway 1 is very beautiful, but I've concluded that it's nothing special in the dark.

Would he run? Well, it would hurt. So, yes, obviously he would do it. He took off, leaving the gaggle of would-be spelunkers behind. I mumbled something, "He's got this, uh, medical condition," started sprinting, and tackled him. Our sitter, who must've been wishing she hadn't answered the phone when I called, stood behind and apologized on our behalf. But she stuck with us through the evening. Observing, perhaps in horror, as Nate's and my dissociation grew ever more severe. We churned through stereotypical drug person conversational bullshit ("What if there was like a turtle planet packed tight with molten sliding writhing turtles?"), but also, alarmingly, Nate leapt onto a desk and asked, sincerely, "Sometimes don't you just want to rip your own fucking face off?" and commenced, clawing at his skin with nothing but his fingernails, to try.

The disconnect between what we want and what we have can hurt. But the idea behind austerity is: can't nuthin' nor nobody hurt you like yourself.

Near dawn, as our head trips began to wane, our babysitter drove us home. Makes me wonder how Nate and I could feel unloved in the face of such misguided generosity. But there you have it. In the way of angry young men from Achilles to Ernest Hemingway, we wanted more.

I tried to set Nate up with every woman I met. I described him as a stellar computer scientist, an outdoor type, a passionate artist, a rollicking conversationalist. But women always saw through all that. They'd meet the guy and see an angry young man with no mail and no lights, a disheveled bearded dude always dressed in layers because his unheated apartment could drop to the low fifties during California winter nights, just another math-brained socially-awkward engineer in an area riddled with the same. My match-making efforts accomplished nothing. Worse, one of the women I introduced him to ended up dating, marrying, and raising a kid with *me* instead. He'd seemed to like that one. I mean, I did too, but Nate's situation was more dire. If I 'd been the one to stay single another few months, I don't think I would've joined a sex cult.

Nate did.

The problem wasn't the sex. Good for him, you know, if he was finally getting laid. If he'd joined a sex *club*, things would've been fine.

Instead it was a full-on lifestyle thing, replete with ultra-gendered philosophical mumbo jumbo, and every conversation we had after he joined wound up being some thirty

percent slower than the way we'd talked before. When he spoke you could practically see the gears grinding, Nate standing there figuring out what he was *supposed* to say before opening his mouth.

And, look, I get it, the idea that you can train yourself to act a certain way and eventually it speeds up and becomes what you do naturally. Scientology seems like a crock, but it's totally reasonable to think you could rig up a lie detector test and force yourself to say nice things, shit like "I'm a good person and am worthy of respect," and keep doing it until the detector doesn't ding you. With a statement like that, saying it and believing it really does make it true. Just like all that power pose bullshit. There *is* no line between pretending and becoming.

But I didn't want Nate to become somebody else. It was Classic Nate who took me camping the summer before he left for California. We slingshotted gumdrops against each other's bare asses while massively drunk on a cliff overlooking Devil's Lake. It was Classic Nate who carried me up a rock wall at Castle Rock State Park when, fifty meters up, I suddenly and cripplingly remembered my fear of heights. "God almost smote you there," he told me afterward, and, "It was stupid of me to help you. Good way to get us *both* killed." It was Classic Nate whose example let me not feel weird about austerity, about sleeping on a blanket on the floor for months while I saved up to buy a bed, about working to finish a useless Ph.D. despite burning to make art. *He* was sticking it out as an engineer.

Sex-cult Nate didn't need austerity. He bought a big-ass comfortable bed because now he had "activity partners" coming by to use it. He paid the fines and whatever to get his electricity back—some people like to see what they're doing. And every weekend he'd drive to San Francisco—without me—for another seminar or retreat.

He started giving me advice. "The pussy wants. The penis takes." I didn't need that kind of advice. Soon it got to be that we weren't even having conversations anymore. I'd say something, anything, and he'd respond by asking whether I was going with him to the next weekend's course. He'd say, invariably, that this was gonna be a good one. There'd be demos, or an overnight, or instructional roleplaying.

I turned him down. I stopped answering his calls. I finished my degree and moved away. I deleted his number from my phone.

Thing is, I'd be a fool to claim he isn't happier. Yeah, there's mean shit I could say. There's always mean shit people could say. Like, how would it sound if I said he'd joined the sex cult *with his sister*? How would it sound if I said he probably became one of those shaved-head bald dudes who talk yoga-slow and stand too close?

It'd sound petulant and mean, I bet.

In the old myths, austerity brings great power. Renunciants, without even wanting it, gain the world. But for us, it didn't work out that way. Nate burned, he suffered, he was unhappy. And then he squashed himself. Repatterned his soul to match the instructions of a cult that told him he could have everything he might want. I'll bet he's making a lot more money now, and spending it.

Whereas I am left with my Classic Nate memories. And jealousy. For five years now, ever since finishing the degree, I've earned no money. My wife pulls a schoolteacher's salary. We still get, unintentionally, austerity.