

## **The Road to Wakefield**

Interstate 87 rolls away beneath me as the tires of Poppy's Delta '88 glide heavily over the pavement. We're doing about 75 even though the speed limit's still 65 and Pops really can't afford another speeding ticket.

The red brown and yellow leaves are falling off the autumn trees, bright colors livening up the New England countryside. It's the only countryside I've ever known, since before I can remember, since before I was born. Since before I was myself, or Georgie was himself.

My alter ego, Georgie Gust, is in the back seat, looking out the window.

His parents, Pops and Rose, are up front. (And me?)

An enormous trunk and an old, fat-tired bike are tied to the car's roof.

Wakefield's a small, blue-collar town near the New England coast that consists primarily of turn-of-the-century colonial homes, sidewalks, large grass lawns, a train station, your everyday necessity shops, a children's playground and park, a pizza place, a bike shop, a couple of restaurants, and a vintage luncheonette.

Bicyclists, joggers, pedestrians, and moped riders (Vespas mostly) line Main Street, in the center of town.

Yellow wooden arrows point toward the school grounds. They read:

WELCOME WAKEFIELD STUDENTS!

Just around the corner from the remarkable school arches and the vast school grounds is The Pen, an old, shady, rundown bar near the street corner. Homeless guys and drunks hang around outside, drinking out of brown paper bags.

Pops's car stops at a red light.

Pops fidgets in his second-hand suit and tie. He's holding the wheel tight; his head tics slightly. Pops turns to Rose, who has turned to stare at Georgie.

"They're going to love you here, honey," says Rose.

Georgie starts pulling at his clothes. He says, "Fucking cunt, fucking nigger! It's hot in here."

*(Parenthetical Pet Peeve)* Overheated cars, work places and other public facilities.

Then Rose says to Pops, "Aren't they, Martin?"

Pops glances at Rose. "Hmm?" he says.

"Dude," Georgie continues. "Shite, man, it's really hot."

He looks at his mother.

"Sorry," he says, and touches her nose with the tip of his finger.

She ignores him. "What I'm saying, honey, is that these kids are different. They have money. They have manners. Not like the others."

Georgie sighs. "Mo-om," he groans.

She turns to Pops. "Right, Martin?" she says.

Georgie stares out the window. He watches the lowlifes and derelicts flicking ash outside the bar.

Pops peeks in the rearview mirror. "The important thing is the Winterbourne, Georgie. Win that, my boy, and you're in."

"The most important thing is your classmates," Rose persists. "You're going make friends here. Not like that other place."

Georgie looks at her, rolling his eyes. "Going to study Nietzsche, Camus, Unamuno, Sartre," he says. "Big time. Jean-Paul Sartre even turned down his Nobel Peace Prize. Fuck, that's cool, huh?"

Pops jumps in, a little more sternly. "Hey, boy. Worry about the Winterbourne. Okay? Win the Winterbourne and you're in. In like flint."

Rose glances disapprovingly at Pops. "All I'm trying to say is . . ."

"Well, don't," Pops cuts in. "Just don't even say it."

The traffic light turns green as the Wakefield track team turns the corner and jogs past the car down Main Street. The runners wear sporty yellow jerseys; their swinging legs are

perfectly in sync. They sweep past the big blue-and-gold signpost:

WAKEFIELD ACADEMY

VETUS TAMEN IUVENESCO

FOUNDED 1892

The Delta '88 stops at the administration building, pulling in next to one of the several luxury cars already parked in the parking lot. Parents, students, and faculty crowd around the building's lawn, getting to know one another.

*(Parenthetical Pet Peeve)* Schools assuming that people live in a 50s sitcom and parents are always available to pop right down to the school with no notice for conferences, etc.

Georgie picks out the parents from the faculty, which is easy because the teachers don't have any kids hanging around near them. He tries to figure out which one is the dean, and then he sees her—an older woman, a teacher. Unlike the rest of the faculty, she is dressed-down, seemingly casual. Even so, she's hot enough to make any priest want to kick a hole through the stained glass windows of his chapel. (Anyway, that's what would happen, if I happened to be a priest, and I was hanging out there. If I were Georgie; if Georgie were me.)

Then a girl his own age catches his eye. Surrounded by two rough-looking jock types, she is 18 in all her glory—attractive and conservative, but slightly troubled, too. (Sometime later, she would step into the Penthouse centerfold of Georgie's life—and mine. Her breasts aren't sagging or fat, now, but puffy-nippled, pert, and pale, covered with silky cilia. They're soft, smooth, those plump belly-breasts and their dime-sized aureoles.)

Georgie jumps out of the car. He's wearing jeans, a baseball cap, t-shirt, and sport coat. Georgie takes off the dark glasses, his deep-set eyes slightly sad.

"Georgie?" Rose calls, jiggling the inside handle of the

passenger side door. “Georgie, I’m stuck . . . .”

Georgie seems not to hear; he’s too busy scoping out the campus. He grimaces, bobbing his head at strangers.

Rose struggles with the door. “Georgie?” she calls, sounding scared.

Finally, Rose slips her arm through the window and pulls the exterior door handle. She gasps as she straggles out of the car.

Georgie stretches one arm over his head, scratching his ear.

Rose puts her arm around him and kisses his cheek. “They’re going to love you here, baby. Really,” she says.

From a slight distance, the two rough-looking jocks see the exchange and start laughing. One of the girls standing nearby—he hadn’t noticed her the first time—laughs along with them. The one he noticed—the troubled teen—glances at her friends, and then stares intently at Georgie. The casually dressed teacher also stares.

Dear Diary:

It is so difficult to not allow other people’s behaviors to affect me in a negative way.

## Settling in

Later, Wakefield students crowd the dorm, calling to each other across the hall as they check out their rooms and roommates. Georgie, lugging his trunk and bicycle, half hops, half skips down the crowded hallway, looking for his room.

Near the end of the hall, Georgie spots two geeks holding their laptops and stylus pens. Georgie sets down his trunk to rest, and the two geeks notice his over-packed steamer.

"Shite's heavy, dude. Huh?" Georgie says.

"You should have left the bike outside, dude," one advises solemnly.

The other kid adds, "It'd be lighter to carry."

Georgie blushes, gulps, and continues to drag his luggage down the crowded hallway, yelping in frustration.

Several doors down, Georgie finds his room. It's a single. He awkwardly unpacks, puts away his clothes, sets up his computer and other electronics, and finally pulls out several rolled-up posters from the overstuffed trunk: Dostoevsky, Henry Miller, Socrates, and Nietzsche, along with Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. He listens to electronica and disco while he unpacks, dancing and quivering.

Georgie tacks *The Scream* to the back of the door and begins stacking his books on the small bookshelf provided. He brought philosophy books, mostly: Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, along with several how-to books on writing. Soon enough, he stops dancing and pulls out an old thumb-worn French copy of Sartre's *Nausea*. I don't remember packing this, he thinks. He opens the book.

"Original. Sweet. Oh my God, it's in French," he says aloud.

A few photographs fall from between the pages.

Georgie picks up the pictures and brings them to his desk. They're family pictures from when Georgie was a small child. He's posing with his family, sitting on his father's shoulders.

Georgie is scratching his father's face off the photographs with his room key when a big grey pigeon lands on the open window above his cluttered desk. He looks at the pigeon and

coos at it softly, and then feeds it potato chips from a bag in his pocket. As he leans out the window, he watches as one of the rough jock-types bursts out of the back door. The jock shouts at his cell phone as he jogs down the sidewalk, clutching a lacrosse stick and ball in his other hand.

*(Parenthetical Pet Peeve)* Parents who expect sports figures to be role models for their children.

“Dad. Dad. Dad. Dad! When have you ever been a father to me?” he yells. “You’re always too busy helping out everyone else’s kids, Dad.” He stops jogging, quieting his voice. “Yeah, I know . . . okay, I’m sorry, see? Look, I got to warm up for practice . . . I’ll do my best . . . I’ve been doing my best, Dad. Bye.”

The jock hangs up, and then sees his buddy up ahead, waving a lacrosse stick. The jock with the cell phone wings the ball his way. “Yo! Heads up, Wyman!” he calls, and then sprints after his throw.

Georgie pulls his eyes back into his own, single room and flops into his bed to stare at the ceiling. Ten minutes later, he’s asleep.

(And me, too. I get tired, more and more, over the years, whenever I try to make sense of everything. “Who am I? Where am I?” I ask myself. Where’s Georgie Porgie? Who’s Georgie and who am I? I’ve got to admit, I don’t know, Dr C . . . Better go ask Georgie. He knows better.)

Dear Diary:

I’d wish it were easier to not allow other people’s pasts to create my own present.

## The birth of adult love

Students sleepwalk to their classes (but, of course, nobody's truly lucid. Not even me, or Dr C. I dream of Georgie, and Georgie's me. And Dr C knows I'm dreaming—she dreams of me. She dreams of Georgie.). Georgie wears a hat and sunglasses, riding past zombie students on his old fat-tire bike.

I see Georgie pass by me. I look up. I wake. Those students, too, glance at Georgie as he rides on. I'm nowhere while he's moving, and that's where I prefer to stay. My alarm goes off. The clock tower chimes.

Flocks of birds fly over the large campus lawn.

A bird looks Georgie in the eye. The bird sees me, sees Georgie. I'm a speck in its eye. In Georgie's eye. The bird flies away, with me a speck in it.

Back in the dorm, Georgie unpacks his ticky-tack room decorations and other bric-a-brac. He hangs his clothes neatly in the open closet.

He takes a flask from the trunk. (He remembers me—Ben—but I'm slowly drifting away into the future. It must have been me, it must have been me, made him drink. But I didn't. I really didn't. I promise, it wasn't.)

Georgie throws the flask up into the air and catches it, practicing catching it perfectly, like that, then jams the flask underneath his mattress. Like that.

He sits on the rumpled bed, pulls out his laptop, and starts writing about the idea of a woman. A perfect woman, a young woman, at her peak. She is the perfect, un-perplexed idea, his finest, first image of a beautiful woman—an alter ego. A living, colorful beauty. Georgie's One and Only. She was The One, wasn't she? (Who was she? Wasn't she—someone whispers the name again—Claudia. Claudia Nesbitt.)

Georgie describes her room, her dorm, and her school. She's there, isn't she? She's there in his version of reality, his perfect, pure, beautiful idea. He thinks that every little detail about Claudia corresponds with something so beautiful and pure and is overwhelmed to tears. Georgie falls in love instantly with the

perfect idea of her.

(Where's she? Where's he? She's lost in his perfect, beautiful fantasy.) Light jazz creeps from the small pink radio on her desk (. . . she's lost, now, isn't she? And me, too . . . she flies away, like me, lost in this confused, perfect fantasy). Claudia's room is plastered with photos and letters and other scraps of memory—medals, awards, and decorations. There's even a blue, New York police officer's uniform, dry-cleaned and perfectly preserved in its entirety. It once belonged to a young man of 30—her father. (But her mother? Her family? Who knows? Does Claudia even have a mother? Or a family? It's all up to me, now, isn't it? Wasn't it?) Claudia's alone in her room, her shrine. She sits down to write out a letter. It opens with: "Dear Daddy, I miss you."

Dear Diary:

I wish people—including myself—wouldn't judge other people's books by their covers, yet be mindful by looking at others, without judging them.



## Heidi

Where are we now? We are in Heidi's room, aren't we? Where Claudia becomes Heidi who becomes me. (But who is Georgie, if not Claudia, Heidi, or me?) A small Oriental shrine rests beneath her television set, "in memory of Tina" engraved on its base. As Heidi lights a candle above their photo together (in the photo, her sister leans on crutches), she talks on the telephone.

"Excuse me?" she says, sounding ruffled.

Heidi's place is quaint and cluttered. It's a good place, for now, she thinks. But just for now, because she loves to travel. She's currently trapped here within the boundaries of this school, this Wakefield Academy, but just for now. She teaches philosophy, but she has a medical degree. She thought she'd give teaching a shot, because her sister always wanted to be a teacher. (But her story, her life, went sour.) Heidi's a fantastic teacher (isn't she?). She's liberal, hip, radical, the Wakefield Academy ideal. But still, she tends to feel close to the students, sometimes, some of them. ("Only the special ones," she said, the special students, like Georgie, like me. But I can see the future already. I can see Heidi's future, and it's not Wakefield—it's not me.)

Her campus apartment, as it was, as it is, is filled with tangible memories of her deceased sister. A poster-sized photo of the two of them together, items that once belonged to Tina, etc. But she's distracted from her communion with her sister by another, different conversation.

"No, sir," Heidi says into the telephone. "I don't believe there should be any hesitation on your part or any unsatisfied parents this year."

Dean Winterbourne clears his throat. The sound echoes down the line.

"There was some question about a student," he points out. "A student in one of your philosophy classes."

Heidi lights another candle.

"But that boy graduated two years ago, sir."

Dear Diary:

Every mother on earth gave birth to a child, except my mother. My mother gave birth to a legend. High five for Mommy!

## School blues

Georgie gets off his bike and walks, step-step-step-hop, towards the white-pillared red brick Wakefield Humanities Building. Students scurry pass him, rushing to class. Some notice his step-hop. Many decide to ignore it.

Georgie walks into Miss Heidi Berillo's classroom with his sunglasses on, his books loosely held in his arms. He picks a seat in the back, sits down, and sets his books on his desk. He checks out the other students from behind the anonymity of his dark-tinted sunglasses, pulling a baseball cap down to cover his forehead.

On the board is written:

"We agree that what is holy is loved by the gods because it is holy, and not holy because it is loved by the gods.—Socrates."

The girl he noticed yesterday, the attractive, conservative, troubled girl, rushes in, breathing heavily. She sits two rows over and a couple of seats in front of Georgie, and is quickly joined by one of the jocks—the one not named Wyman. The jock glances back over his shoulder at Georgie. He nudges the girl and snickers, but the girl ignores them both.

When Miss Heidi Berillo begins the class, Georgie drops his eyes and stares at his books, his blank notepad.

"The class requirements are all on the syllabus, as are my rules, which are very simple: No late assignments, no tardiness, and no talking out of turn. Oh, and, by the way, no sleeping. And especially no snoring."

The students whisper among themselves.

"No hats and no shades."

Georgie removes his baseball hat and dark-tinted sunglasses, as do the other boys in the room (and a few of the girls). Heidi pretends not to notice.

Finally, Miss Heidi Berillo hands out the course syllabus. After briefly describing the class format and course objectives, she gets down to important matters.

"Class, a big heads-up," she says. "Come January, Wakefield Prep will sponsor our annual open competition for the

prestigious memorial prize in memory of Dean Winterbourne's late father and founding father of this, our school, the Winterbourne Memorial Scholarship for the most outstanding senior essay. There are no guidelines or limits on subject. Any topic—philosophy, literature, science—will be accepted."