

# PRAISE FOR TWISTING IN HEADSTANDS AND HEAVY DRINKING

“Some say it isn’t total shit.”

Milwaukee World Report

“Full disclosure: I didn’t actually read the book, but it’s a masterful display of the struggle between adolescence and adulthood, exploring inner sanctums of insecurity in a shifting social position that lacks ritual or rite.”

Cleveland International Edition

“Twisting in what? Never heard of it.”

Podcast for the Mainstream

“All the premarital sex stuff is immoral. Parents, if you find this in your son or daughter’s bedroom, they’ve likely joined a Satanic cult and may be pregnant.”

First Catholic Church of Tulsa

“I agree with the Catholics. Just give me the Bible and Joel Olsten. I don’t need this gobbledygook.”

Tenth Evangelical Church of Wichita

“It’s his debut novel? Well, I hope his next one’s better.”

The Kearney Review

# **Twisting in Headstands and Heavy Drinking**

Justin Zyla

Justin Zyla Writing Co. (USA)  
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This is a novel, a work of fiction.  
All characters, places, and events  
are fabrications: inventions from the  
imagination of the author. Resemblances  
to actual persons – living or dead – are  
entirely coincidental. And none of these  
events really happened.

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For Ms. Erin Marie Mackey,  
a young woman whose spirit radiates like the sun,  
burning vast amounts of hydrogen in a wicked display of  
warmth and light.

“It’s form just coming out of energy – what I believe all of us are: conscious awareness dancing for itself, for no other reason than to stay amused.” – Jim Carrey

“Everything that’s great has come outta rebellion...out of a, ‘Fuck you.’” – Vinnie Paz



## PREFACE

These stories – cut chaotic and stitched together – involved my life as an undergrad, living in a fraternity house. My three years in that place. A time spent surrounded by brotherhood, tradition, the party scene. Where we drank: heavy and often. Loading ourselves full of thick suds and shots of strong drink. With the evening, the night, the next morning – a haze of strange and fleeting memories.

But the house: it was a rented space that brought a rented freedom. A building to defile, as we searched for something held silent in the pauses of the midnight sky. Students who, just hours after sitting in cramped desks, shoved themselves arm-to-arm in narrow basements and got fucked up. Time spent in the shadows. As we turned out the lights. Letting strobes pound flashes into our eyes.

There was a culture to it. Rules and regulations to ensure virtue in the obscene.

“Maintain the buzz.”

“Never be stingy with beer or cigarettes.”

“Protect thy ass.”

These rules scripted civility over our feverish disorder. As we shook wood beams and tile. With something reverent and disturbed swirling within us.

Whatever it was, the dance made me feel less alone. Less impotent and less afraid. Like we had slipped into the main vein of a life fully lived. Self-actualized by morning reminders: “Dude, do you remember what you did last night?” A collage of shame, laughter, pain, triumph. A patchwork of images and sounds, and an endless display of youth. As we pressed back against, “Adulthood,” and everything that fucking meant. But the slurring conversations; the offbeat grinding; that, “Whatever,” we chased – it was sand slipping through my fingers. Leaving rough pebbles across my skin.

But while we were – and still may be – entirely and hopelessly fucked, for some sick and twisted reason, I hope the feeling never fades. That itch. Those, “Frat boy eyes.” As I grit my teeth and push forward: into one more night of savage self-abuse in the sweet serenade of booze and cigarettes. Into the arms of part-time degenerates looking for one more shot at affection. Into a desperate search for what we’ve lost in this world.



**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 4TH -  
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 5TH**

(PART ONE)

1

## KEEPING HOLY ON THE SABBATH

We fucked again in the morning. Entirely unaware of our toxic morning breath: an ungodly mixture of booze, cigarettes, and sleep that swirled between us. And she moved quick, uncontrolled. With hips shifting hard before she came. Recently divorced. At least, I thought – she had talked about him cheating and a separation. Damn. The last night’s haze cut chaotic in my memory. Was it – ? But she fucked with great vengeance and furious anger, leaving me to wonder whether my dick was just a middle finger to the man. An altogether simple gesture, so he knew where things stood. Whatever it was, the history helped trample any feelings of guilt or remorse. Well, the booze helped that, too.

“Have you?” She smiled, breathing heavy with her open mouth.

“No – I mean, I wanted to make sure you got off first.” My skin felt sticky, muscles tensed and crouching above her. With jeans pulled down to the knee. And my shirt unbuttoned. We had slept in them – our clothes – and created permanent wrinkles. Sometime, early on, I had reasoned that taking them off wasted an amount of time I felt vitally important to my well-being. “You want me to keep going?” I ran my hand through my hair, and the salt of my forehead acted like a natural gel substance, pasting it back.

But it was seven a.m. Scant time before a morning filled with satin robes, wooden pews, her kid and her parents. They were in town to watch her son for the weekend, and she – “But trust me. I’ve never came so much. It’s been – like – way more than enough.”

“Really?” My eyebrow shot up. Forehead wrinkled.

“Yeah. Like, I’ve never with a guy before. Only by myself.”

Wait. Did she just – ?

She grabbed me, with hands clutching ears and tufts of hair. And she kissed me – or – she tried. Because it quickly devolved into teeth gnawing at random bits of flesh around my lips and cheek. Did she – ? She fucking drew blood. But it was junior year: I had just turned twenty-one, and my mind strongly advised me to ignore the awkward teeth-play and enjoy the minor moments we spent together.

But I couldn’t shake what she said. About being her first, or was it some strange ruse?

I imagined years of men flopping around on top of her. The male body like a guppy in dry air, moving back-and-forth on a warm piece of cement as it slapped against the ground. Fish gills gasping for water to breathe. And her like that piece of cement: solid and stoic.

Or was it just what some girls say? A corrupted form of, “I’m still a virgin.” Meant less as a statement of historical fact, but as something else entirely. To create a perception that the sea-wearied traveler had reached land, on a bit of small pebble and rock, entirely new to his fellow countrymen. How many times, and to how many people, had she said that very same thing?

When she first said it, I guess I felt good. With something like pride growing, expanding. This brief and flashing glow that blinked and –

But then her history just stuck there in my head. And it kept flopping around – moving against itself – on the stiff concrete of her body and that faraway look. I reached out to take her hand, and the steel of her ring rubbed against my palm, against my forefinger. The diamond edges scraping against my skin. And the way she kept wearing it, after everything, and how fucked the whole thing felt.

At some point, I finished, pretending to enjoy it: I screwed up my face and clutched my teeth, grinding them horizontally. My eyes closed, lids pressed firmly together. What looked like tension, pleasure, or neither. A fully dedicated act with the occasional god praising or,

“Sophie,” to sell the whole damn thing. But I couldn’t escape the reverberations. My head held cycling those thoughts and inklings – distracted. At who Sophie was and how we ever got here.

“I’ve gotta get – ”

“Yeah, I can walk you out.”

We fixed our clothes in a rush of buttons and zippers. And I laid down next to her, curling my arm around her shoulders. “Ten minutes?”

“Ten minutes.” And she kissed me on the cheek, quick and dry.

I watched the white-painted ceiling, tracing its rough texture. Those thick, little globs running across the drywall. Thousands of them, maybe millions. Like the whole thing started melting, started dripping, until it paused in time.

She looked out the window and into the street. As she spun the ring in circles around her finger. Watching the sun give its first rays. Particles of light creeping over the horizon. With the grey hues growing vivid, exploding color into life.

Us staring out from our little, screwed-up pocket of the world.

“Was that really your first, or were you just – ”

“No – it was. I mean, I haven’t been with too many guys, but – ” She kept going for a few more seconds.

Seven-thirty hit, and I decided not to ask again. Leaving those decrepit parts of my psyche locked deep inside. Putting on a part-flirty, mostly shit-eating grin.

“Well, beautiful, let me walk you to your car.” With the ruse sending strange, existential pangs of guilt or shame down my spine. Like needle pricks from an allergy test: a rolling pin pressed across my back, searching for the red and puffy reaction to my sense of chivalry.

I opened the side door to the busted wooden steps, and the morning stung my eyes. It stood tall over the earth and treetops, causing me to squint hard. That burning star felt unruly. Like it sent a few beams down just for me.

“Fuck you too, Sun,” I murmured.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I raised my hand up to my forehead for a sliver of shade. “Parked out back?”

“Yeah.”

We walked toward the alley, and she scuffled with her purse for a pair of cheap, plastic sunglasses. The ones with oversized lenses like bug eyes.

“This you?” A blue, four-door sedan with a bumper sticker that read, *Abortion is Murder*. What a strong fucking jolt that’d bring the random driver pulling up behind her. Him just sipping coffee, singing along to Taylor Swift or Ted Nugent, all smiles and rainbows – struck by a religion and death. The coffee cup in a dead drop before it spilled hot, thick liquid all over his lap, and a wincing – an altogether effective conditioning tool for whoever managed to find himself behind her.

“Have fun at church, darling.” We kissed again but not like we did the night before.

And I started to walk away but, “Hey, Sophie.”

“Yeah?”

“You, uhh – how about dinner sometime? My treat.”

She let out a deep sigh. “Let’s – like – can we not make this complicated?”

“Sure. We can. Forget I asked.”

“Thanks. I’ll totally text you though,” and she beamed a quick smile.

“Can’t wait.” I forced a half-grin, hoping to ease the weight of my question and her answer. Wildly searching my pockets for a cigarette and lighter. Catching the fire with deep breaths, deep breaths of carcinogens filling my dried lungs.

She walked over, kissing me on the cheek. Stretching her body taller on her toes to reach me. And she said, “Thanks for everything,” with what looked like a tear rolling down her cheek and which I felt, at the time, was somewhat backward.

The alley: city property. The end of fraternal jurisdiction. That line drawn deep in the earth, where we stood solemn against the wider social order in all our fucked-up wisdom. And she drove off spitting up dust and rocks, her tire bouncing in a deep, dirt trough on her way out. “Sophie.” And I mouthed, “Thank you,” for whatever that night meant. Maybe, late in life and with the scorecards tallied, it’d be worth something. Maybe – but I felt the hangover like a strong jab to the mid-section. So I just mouthed the words and turned back toward those busted wooden steps.

2

**COMMUNITY SERVICE (OR)  
SWEATING OUT THE  
DISCONTENT**

The ringing house alarm sprang from the top of the staircase, and I walked up to see Dean perched over an empty keg. Wearing just his boxers and a sly look of rebellion. He pounded away at the metal with a rubber mallet. Hardly a chance for an echo before the next ungodly clang. “Gotta get up.”

I called out over the noise: “Good morning to you, too.” With a quick salute of my middle finger and a whispering, “Fucking shit, man.” I dove into my room, tossing on fresh clothes: a ripped-up, paint-stained pair of jeans; shoes with soles so worn the rubber was punctuated with minor holes, supplying just enough space for pebbles to hide; and a shrunken shirt with our three Greek letters, originally well-fitting but long ago deformed in the scalding heat of our dryer.



Coffee: the maker sat in our upstairs bathroom, and I started brewing a pot. Random mugs littered the counter. They looked mostly clean, but I rinsed them anyway. My fingers scrubbing at the soap and random stains. The sponge on the counter: it looked fresh. New, even. But was it lying to me?

I waved down the hall as Dean kept beating the house alarm. “Coffee, man?”

He jumped down, walking toward me. “Time to get out there and build us a house.”

“So no coffee?”

“Damn, now. Hold on a minute. I’m fixing to get me some, here.” He shot into his room. “Just let me throw some clothes on.”

Henry, Matt, Neel – doors began opening with a slew of profanities in hushed tones.

Henry headed straight for Dean’s room, blood sizzling. With murder in his eyes.

“Fuck, dude.” Matt shook his head and stumbled into the bathroom. He turned on the faucet, throwing handfuls of water on his face.

I started rinsing out my hair in the sink next to him. “Feeling alright, man?” Tossing some shampoo into the mix – a desperate attempt to starve whatever bacteria clung to the roots.

“So hungover.” He shook his head and snagged the coffee mug. “I’m never drinking again.”

“You’re just gonna drink my – alright.”

“But hey. Somebody had a friend stay over last

night.” He giggled. “What did you two kids get up to? Playing hide the pickle?”

“What’s the thing about gentlemen and the – ”

“I think you have to actually be a gentleman.”

“Thanks, dick.” I grabbed a towel to wipe off the counter. “She’s good, though. Seems decent.”

“What happened to – who was it – ‘Jenna?’ ‘Jasmine?’”

“She started dating some guy. He seems nice. But not exactly enthusiastic about us staying friends.”

Neel popped his head in. “Hey, Matt – know what time we’ve gotta be there?”

“Eight o’clock.” Dean, and he yelled it from his room. “Get your skank ass ready.”

It was a ten-hour house build. For a family who lost theirs in a fire. A relatively straightforward event to reach our community service goal for the semester. On paper, I guess it showed young men learning their civic duty. Trying to repair the altogether fucked-up parts of our more civilized order. But it just felt like something to fill the hours of a Sunday.

And they had left the drywall. For the twenty of us to measure out, cut up, screw into the walls and ceiling. I felt the weight of the power tool grow heavy in the hours spent drilling into beams overhead. Short bursts of ache in my triceps. A pile of spent water bottles mounded in the corner of the soon-to-be living room. Crushed plastic growing with the passing time.

I ran my sweating hand through my sweaty hair, that moisture covering my whole body in beads. “Matthew – help me hold this up? I need to get it set.”

“You need a little help?” The pitch of his voice got higher, softer. A cruel exercise in baby talk. “Can’t do it yourself, huh? Well, I’ll just have to come help you, then. Won’t I?”

We pressed the drywall over our heads and against the beams. A thin, chalky powder falling on us. Mixing with the moisture of our skin and turning into paste.

“You ever text that girl, man?” I grabbed the first screw, spinning the drill. Punctuating the pauses with electric tremors.

“No. She’s kind of a skank.”

“Didn’t you want to sleep with her the first time you all met?”

“It’s, ‘Y’all.”

“Nope. Not doing that shit.” I finished my side and moved to where Matt was standing.

“She’s seeing her ex again, apparently.” Matt let go while I drilled in the last few. “Guy’s a tool.”

“Check those?”

He ran his finger over the drywall, feeling for the bump of a screw head. “This one sucks, but the rest are fine.”

“I’ll fix it.”

“But no – she’s really going back to him.” Matt threw his hands out wide. “And he’s always such a dick to her – what the fuck?”

I spun it out and tried again. Nope. Another fuck up. One more time – yep. There it went.

“Next piece?”

I took three or four screws and stuck them between my teeth, letting them jut out from my mouth and ready to stab any threat. They had me mumbling directions to Matt: “Little to the left – right there. Hold it, and let me just –”

“That good?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All I know is: I’m getting shwasted tonight.”

“Fuck it – me too. It’s a holiday tomorrow, right?”

“Oh, fuck yeah.”

I felt stress slip away at the thought of the coveted three-day weekend. Where I could pull myself from that Liberal Arts world of Critical Thinking – the long weeks of deadlines and due dates – and, for a moment, I could breathe. The air seemed to fill my lungs with a warm, thick embrace, and it was a vast improvement over the toxic cigarette smoke it replaced.

“Check those.” I set the drill down and shook my arm. An old rock climber’s trick to help the muscle – to push out the lactic acid. Not that I had ever climbed, in any serious way. Just that I heard it on a show once and had considered it reasonable enough.

“What about the girl who’s always coming over?”

“Addy?”

“Or are there a bunch of them?”

“Just friends, man.”

“She’s been around a lot.” He started chugging from his water bottle. Eight ounces – maybe twelve. All drank without pause.

“Not that much.”

“More than a lot.”

“Maybe.” We had talked about it. Me: quick on the trigger and shortly after we met. I had invited her to cuddle up to a movie. But for Adalina, there was that other guy. And there was some other girl for me then, too. So we dropped the subject completely, leaving the pinballing of college romance to settle the terms of our relationship.

“She’s cool. Doesn’t seem all that crazy.” He tossed the bottle across the room and into the crop of empties.

“She’s good shit. Smoke break?”

“Oh, fuck yeah.”

We went outside to where the sun stood high and bright. It was chocked full of piss and vinegar. With a mean glare that scared off most clouds. Leaving a solid hue of blue that invaded the horizon, and it was cooler out there. Less humid. Less thick. A breeze that crept up, hour-by-hour, into the evening chill.

I looked at the house next door, and it was still charred black from the fire that had taken them both. Boarded up windows. With a sign out front that said something about trespassing.

The whole neighborhood seemed like that: swallowed up by our divine callousness. Old houses and owners without the funds to renovate. Insurance companies that

refused to pay claims. Lawns filled with a collage of weeds and dying grass – all covered in crisp, brown hues. A car hoisted on cinder blocks in a yard just a few houses down, and its hood was up – with empty space where I expected to see parts. Some referred to it, with a certain amount of scorn or relief, as, “The Other Side of the Tracks.” And the cliché fit. With those rusted steel beams separating two sides of the city. One of social investment. The other of structural injury. One of, “Hard-workers.” The other: “Lazy.” “Just living off welfare.” And with people who needed to, “Get a job.” Though most seemed to have one and were looking for better.

“Well, shit. We got a lot done. How long ‘til we finish up for the day?”

Matt looked down at his watch. “Two more hours. They wanted us here for ten, right?”

“Yeah, that’s what we signed up for.”

Those two hours moved across our eyes, and I worked quick at the pile of drywall. One piece. The next. With Matt following my lead, as we pushed through our aching bones. It started to look like something. Something in the effort of grimy hair and moist clothes. Only breaking for the occasional frustration:

“Dude, you cut it too fucking short.”

“Get off me, man. I’m trying to get shit done.”

“Watch out with that knife – fuck.”

The wind slowed, and whatever breeze came to a

dead fucking stop. I leaned in the windowsill, looking out at the street. Cracks in the concrete. Potholes filled with gravel. Even the public park was covered in that same stiff, dying grass. Fuck – it used to be green, but it had dried up and passed. Replaced by coils of thick weeds. I looked around at the half-made house. “Fuck, man. Do you think any of this shit matters?”

“Hang on.” Matt stopped. He cut the drill and jumped off the pile of drywall boards. Landing with his feet spread and crouching. His drill pointed out in front of him. “What’d you say?”

“I said – ”

He hit the trigger and let it buzz. Giggling.

“I said, ‘Do you – ”

He hit it, again.

“Do you think they’ll be a lot of people over, tonight?”

“Oh, fuck yeah.” He tossed the drill on the stack of drywall sheets. “It’s not like our house is ever empty.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, turn that up.” Matt yelled across the room at Henry, who stood by the radio, and who spun around bewildered. “Do you see that knob there on the stereo, Huck?”

Henry mumbled something under his breath, turning the volume higher to let the country music surge. It had played for most of the day. A unanimous vote, minus me, to let the room fill with strumming guitar and heavy, rural lyrics.

But dust covered the floor. Small bits of wood, plaster, and it jumped. Bouncing in the air whenever we walked. I snatched a broom and started sweeping. Hitting the floor in short, hard strokes. Diving around tools, materials, around the other guys: some stacked drywall boards. Others collected tools, sorting them into tubs. And a few stood around just bullshitting.

I created massive piles of dust, filling up a trash can. But no matter how much I swept, there always seemed to be more still waiting. Calm. Like the wood bled sawdust against our feet. Like an active rebellion against the thought of ending up discarded.

“Let’s get going.”

We walked out into the waning daylight. And the guys started piling into the vehicles for our venture home. But – “Hang on, guys. Forgot my keys.”

The representatives, from whatever nonprofit handled the work, had already collected their clipboards and paperwork while we cleaned. They were sitting in their pickup trucks, with air conditioning at full blast and humming some folk tune. “Hurry up,” one of them said, looking at his watch.

“Yes, sir.” I jogged to the porch and into the house. But I slowed after I was away from the windows. I found the keys on a stack of drywall. Snatched them quick and dropped them in my pocket, letting my eyes move around the room: the wood beams, the insulation that seemed more like cotton spilling out from a ripped couch cushion. We got a lot done, but it still looked a few



months from finished. From that ribbon cutting and the family.

A paper, half-crumpled on the floor. I bent over to pick it up and throw it away, but – but I flattened it out instead and found the names: *Mr. and Mrs. Franklin*. A notice, or some other sort of official-looking document, to track the progress. And they were sixty – maybe older. One of the nonprofit reps. had mentioned, “The elderly,” now retired or too worn from time to work.

“Damn – ” I shook my head and folded the sheet, stuffing it into my pocket.

I jogged again when I made it to the open squares of future windows. Out the door. Off the porch. Across the grass. I met Matt in his pickup, and the chill from the air conditioning felt good on my drying skin. “Well man, that was an honest day’s work, if I ever fucking had one.”

“Oh, fuck yeah. I’m ready to grab a beer and a shower.”

“Nothing like a shower beer.”

“Gotta stay hydrated in this heat.”

And we drove away, while I felt this thing – this – like a small pearl in my chest. Shaped and sparkling from the pressure and friction of the day. It started out – dust? Or coal? But transforming into something else entirely.

A pearl: sure, they looked nice against an earlobe. Or strung together. But what did it really –

The pickup's engine roared, shaking the rust off its frame.

“Yeah, nothing like a shower and a beer after a day like today.” He swung out the driveway in a quick burst of acceleration. Then, he shoved the transmission into drive and cut a straight, fast line toward the railroad. “The Other Other Side of the Tracks.” And the way you could sum up the entire city in that perpendicular street that ran across. One side with its long cement cracks. With potholes that the local government hadn't decided to fill. And how they only grew deeper in the passage of time. Then, the tracks. A minor bump just a few feet before an asphalt road they repaved that previous summer. Slick, smooth, and glistening against the sun.

We dove hard across the tracks, heading straight for the frat house. We headed –

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