



New Friends in Your Downstream

Michael Gubbins

It's a four-minute drive. I'd ride my bike if I was feeling dangerous. The city of Portland created a database to register bikes in efforts to mitigate theft. The glittering teeth of scattered metal chop-shops under the 405 show how well that's working.

"You have arrived," my Irish-Siri tells me, turning off 19th.

I inch past his house, peering like a creep. The home is beautiful: driveway descending into the garage like an underground lair; moss-covered panels along expanding windows; a cracking flight of concrete steps leading to the front door, lined by a Victorian-style iron handrail; and even a little attic balcony—disrupting the red roof tile—that looks made for impending widows waiting for their husbands at sea.

The yard is covered in shrubbery. A behemoth of a tree sends roots into the sidewalk, fracturing the concrete into something steep.

I can't see inside. Not just because the sun sets before I'm off work in this season of depression—all the windows have drawn curtains. His driveway has cars in each spot, no street parking in sight.

Maybe his neighbor is having a party.

The bars on 21st packed with Friday night drinkers could also be the culprit. I whip my Honda around the corner to search for a spot, speakers spilling sad indie music.

The closest spot is next to the park. The sleek, well built playground is currently inhabited by a group of houseless individuals smoking meth from tinfoil. Rats sprint down the walkways, leaping into the tall grass garden like creepy little olympians. Hipsters sit in the grass on towels reading poetry. Pretty people fall into each other, heading to the bars with possibilities in their eyes.

I pull out my phone and send Colby the I'm here text as my screen lights up, buzzing, with my mom's face. I take a deep breath.

"Baby, what's the name of that sexy actor with the arms?"

Another deep breath.

"James? Baby?"

"Mom, it's really not a good—"

"You know the one with the good hair I like."

"That could literally be any—mom. It's not a good time."

"I tell everyone my son doesn't love—" she hiccups aggressively, punctuated by a thud.

Then crackling as she struggles to pick up the phone, "—my son doesn't love me," she finishes. A large man walks from the park with a look in his eyes like it's his first day on earth.

"I love you, mo—"

"What's so important you can't tell your mother sexy names man?"

She sounds like the liquor is beginning to win the fight against the pills. That usually happens by lunch. I'm proud of her.

"I just pulled up to a friend's house."

"Oh, is Julian finally taking time away from that girlfriend of his?"

"No, mom. His name is Colby."

"Oh! A friend? Now, James. Your father would be so proud."

The large man leaving the park shoots a pair of intense eyes my way. I can't tell if he's smiling or crying. I crack the window to listen.

"I have friends, mom."

"Don't you lie to me, James Fitzgerald."

The purple Portland sky begins spitting pitter-patter kisses against my windshield and the large man steps in my direction. Window up.

"Mom, I gotta go."

She slurps her wine, saying something about the president but I click end. The man is now standing at my door. He knocks his red tattered knuckles on the glass. I give a wave I hope communicates something other than the horror in my belly.

He knocks again. I re-crack the window. "Hey, man?"

"Would you like to buy some shoes?"

He does not appear to be in possession of any shoes.

"Thanks. I'm good."

"You know it's the funniest thing," he says, eyes like disco balls. "I've got these shoes, you know?" He trails off, disco balls locking on something just below my line of vision.

I punch the gas and clip the van in front of me, careening onto the road. I'll go back and

leave a note.

A block down I put the Honda in park and swipe a few fast-food napkins from the glove compartment, dabbing under my arms. My pipe has never not been clogged. I dig with a dirty paperclip and blow through the mouth hole, holding the carb with my thumb.

What are we even going to talk about. Why am I here.

My grinder is of course empty so I pull a few moss green nuggets with little purple punk rock hairs from my pouch and drop them in.

Grind. Pinch. Drop.

Several flicks with my skin-stripped thumb and I let the smoke billow slow. My cough sounds concerning.

Maybe I should bail. Colby seems cool and I'm so lonely I've begun questioning if I exist, but bailing sounds nice.

I pull the handle ninety-seven times after I lock the car. Just to be sure. A dude on Colby's street bent in half, still on his feet, kissing his knees—the fentanyl lean. This is pretty common in Portland, but something catches my eye: a vintage starter jacket. It's the old school Denver Nuggets pullover—royal blue with white and burgundy at the shoulder. The stomach pouch with the Nuggets logo is hidden by his lean.

And just like that I'm walking out my middle school's dented metal doors under the half window. That jacket is waiting in the parking lot. I'm dying of embarrassment, speed walking so Katie Jordan doesn't see.

The leashed Pit Bull waiting patiently at his side is beautiful. I sidestep the man and reach out a hand. Her tail wags as she licks me, staring up with eyes like moons.

I wish I had food to give.

Down the street, a sharply dressed figure stands in the doorway: tall and muscular with swooping hair. The figure waves and begins jogging in my direction. He seems too excited to see me. Maybe it's a trap.

“There he is!”

I push my lips up while the now prevalent weed kicks dust into my brain. I raise my hand in a greeting, realize how awkward this is and freeze mid-air.

“Fitz! What’s up, bro.” Colby shows his white teeth and seizes my shoulder entirely too tight.

I wince. “Hey, man.”

“It’s weird to see you without a tie,” he says, the mid-winter wind catching his own tie.

“You look—” He takes in the yellow beanie concealing dirty hair, the oversized white-tee and flannel, baggy jeans and dirty white converse. “—comfortable, bro.”

“It’s laundry day, so.”

Colby tells me a story about being handsome or something as we ascend the concrete steps. I hear the vibrancy coming from his house, the unmistakable hum of collective small talk.

“Are you having a party?”

He stops and slides his hand around shoulder like he’s about to slip me some tongue.

“Didn’t I tell you?”

I play back the tape. It’s so hard to properly remember things from the energetically demanding hours of work. But, no. I thought it was just us.

Colby pulls me close in our first hug and squeezes so tightly my tongue involuntarily punches free from my lips. “I’ve got some great people for you to meet, Fitzzy, my boy.” The little blond hairs on my arms stand erect. I’m not sure if it’s being called two pet names in one sentence, or human touch, but it’s nice.

The house is exactly what I expected. The decor is ostentatious like the kind of homes I’ve only seen in movies. The party however, is not. The curious collection of people seem to range in age from right out of high school, to right out of the nursing home.

The thing that strikes me is the prevailing attire: business casual.

Every single pair of eyes in the house looks at me in unison. Fuck. They know I’m high.

And homeless.

I blink and I'm standing behind the living room couch. The wall behind is a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf ending in a thick circular pillar. I'm staring directly into the widest smile I've seen in my twenty-seven years on this planet.

"Colby told me so much about you, Fitz," says the smile. "I'm Hannah." She reaches out a delicate hand.

I try not to react to how soft it is. "Hi."

They begin telling a story about being attractive and coming from money, while touching each other in small, intimate ways; hand squeeze, forehead kiss, shoulder bump.

"Are you excited to be here?" she asks.

"Oh, uh." Her smile is too wide, her lipstick too red. I can't concentrate. "Colby's house is really nice. My apartment is just over the 405. It's a shit box." I point.

They smile wide at each other and sip their white wine. Hannah's dress looks like it costs more than I make in a year and I think they're going to ask me to leave.

"This isn't my place, actually," Colby says. "Can I get you a drink?"

In the kitchen he pours me a wine I can't pronounce. I smell lavender. He hands me the drink but I struggle to meet his eyes—behind him is yet another high ceiling room with multiple rows of metal folding chairs, split in two by a walkway. It looks like church, or a sad wedding. In front of the sad wedding is a large white projector screen with an image of an attractive couple in uncomfortably good shape, smiling into each other. Above them it reads: HEALTH CORE.

"What's that?"

Colby smiles like a secret, leans in. "The revolution, my man." Then he hugs me. I feel the heat behind my eyes as they begin to well up. I realize I can't stop it.

"Ouch," I say, palming my eyes, muttering something about a bug.

I don't think he believes me.

“Come on, Fitz.” He grabs my shoulder, not hard like before. It feels almost paternal. “I have someone for you to meet.”

I blink furiously as we walk. We pass a girl leaning against the bookshelf. It’s too cold for the skirt she’s wearing. Her fishnet tights are thick with large holes like a net meant for large animals. Her dark hair falls softly onto her oversized faded band tee. Her boots are long, black and deadly. Several people in beige button-downs talk at her forehead as she scrolls on her phone.

“Fitz, this is Donnie.” Colby has a paw on each of us like a blind date he orchestrated.

“Hello there, Fin. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice t—”

“It’s Fitz,” Colby corrects.

“Okay. I want to make sure I’m saying this right,” Donnie shuffles from foot to foot as he speaks. “Fizz,” he elongates the z, “like a soda-pop.”

I let them hash it out while I steal another glance at the girl. She seems miserable. I want to know her name.

“So, Fitz—sorry about that by the way. Have you met him yet?”

Donnie is about a decade older than me and needs to accept he’s balding. His shirt is the beigeest beige and despite mustaches being in, his is somehow troubling.

“Uh. Have I met who?”

Donnie grins, looking back and forth between Colby and I. “Clarence, of course.”

“Clarence?”

They both freeze, staring at me, then just over my shoulder.

The police are here. They know how high I am. Or maybe it’s my hair. I knew day three was pushing it. Last night I swore I’d shower. Now I’m about to be forcibly removed from my

new best friend's party.

"Here they are," Colby points over my shoulder to a group of people walking from the kitchen wearing hostage smiles. They carry trays holding shot glasses crowned with thin red apple slices.

Colby grabs two, putting one in my hand. It smells like shampoo and bubbles like it, too.

"Is this vodka?"

Colby and Donnie exchange a laugh and I can't help but think it's at me. "It's so common to be having a great time with great friends and suddenly you're hit by fatigue, lethargy, even bouts of sadness. Am I right, Fitz?" Donnie waits for me to respond.

"Uh. I'm kinda always tired."

"That's because of toxins!" Donnie says, beaming. "Do you want to live your whole life in a toxic haze, too sleepy and depressed to get out of bed and face the horrors of existence?"

I can't tell if he's talking to me. I glance back at the bookshelf. She's twirling a ring on her finger as she scrolls.

Donnie waits for me to speak.

"No."

"I knew I liked you!" Donnie begins listing ingredients in the shot, their benefits, something about toxins. I can't stop doing weird things with my hands so I shove them in my jean pockets. What would my Dad think if he could see me right now.

The strange lesson ends and everyone begins shooting their shots like midnight on New Year's. I sneak another glance. She's eyeballing the shot with suspicion, spinning her ring. What is she doing here? What am I doing here? Her eyes dart to me and the room turns up the brightness. It feels like a flood light is pointed at my pupils. Blinded, I shoot the weird wellness bubbles. Thick liquid spills onto my stubbly chin and the apple slice disappears into my flannel.

"There you are, boys," says the widest smile in Portland. "Look who I found." Hannah's breathtakingly soft hand is on the back of a broad-shouldered man in a devastating suit. He can't be taller than five-foot six, but carries himself like a giant.

“I hear we have someone over here I have to meet,” the short-giant says, sweat spilling down his temple.

Every single person in the room beams at this man. Colby places his thick hand just below my neck and introduces me: “This is Fitz. The bank teller I was telling you about,” he turns his head my way. “One cool ass dude.”

Being introduced by my current occupation makes my skin crawl and the whole thing seemed patronizing. Yet, my eyes feel hot again. Goose flesh kisses my flannel.

“Fitz,” Colby continues. “This is Clarence.”

My hand is swallowed by an aggressive handshake before I know it. Clarence pulls his hand back, places a thumb to his nose and sniffs harshly through his nostrils.

“Welcome to my home, Fitz. I’m so glad to have you.”

“Oh, this is your house?”

Manic laughter ripples through the group. Hannah steps in and punches me hard in the stomach. “You’re a riot, mister,” she says between red lips.

The punch takes me to the ground. I try pushing myself back upright but the pain is too much and it takes several minutes to recover my footing. No one seems to notice.

“So, Fitz. My Man. Are you ready?”

I clock Hannah’s knuckles and think twice before responding. “Ready for?” I flex my tummy and brace for impact.

Clarence surveys the room—sly smile on his chapped lips. He punctuates the silence with a snotty snort. “The revolution, my man.”

Thick pellets of Portland rain ping the window pane as Clarence and Colby usher the sad wedding guests into their metal seats. Colby makes a show of reserving a chair between myself and Hannah. “I’ll be right back,” he says, with a wink.

Hannah stares at the side of my face, smiling like the Grand Canyon. I watch her hands

from the corner of my eye.

Colby assumes his position in front of the projector screen and the room erupts—claps, whistles, people yelling strange things like “there he is!” or “uh oh, here’s trouble!”

He started coming into my work a month ago. We’d talk about our lives while he deposited checks. My best friend had recently fallen in love and I’d lost him to the all consuming bubble of infatuation in its infancy, so when Colby remembered our previous conversations, treated me like a human, it felt nice.

He asked for my number last week as the line piled up behind him with angry middle-aged customers unwilling to use the ATM. I felt the butterflies of a young lover when I first saw his name on my phone.

It was as if someone as cool as him wanting to be around me validated an inner desire to be seen by the world as the person I wished I was. Maybe with him I could be someone different, someone better.

But I’m beginning to see what’s going on.

By the look on Hannah’s face, my shame must be showing.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” Hannah asks, putting one of those silky hands on my shoulder.

“Sorry. Just not feeling well.”

Hannah shoots a singular finger to the sky and an effervescent shot appears like she conjured it from thin air. “Here, sweetie. Take a wellness shot. Sounds like you’ve got toxins.”

I attempt to casually survey the room, like I’m just looking around, not for anything in particular. She left. Of course she did. Good for her.

But, no. Just as I resign to the fact, she’s led to a seat two rows up by a woman in beige. I can’t stop staring at her legs. I try to look away, but my eyes won’t cooperate. Black and gray tattoos peek through her fishnets. I picture them suffocating me. She turns around, catching me mid-fantasy.

I need to change my name now. Maybe Mexico would take me.

Her eyes linger on me. When I look into them, it's not the accusation and disgust I expect. Her eyes are soft. Full of something almost like familiarity.

Colby stands in front of his rapt audience, pulling them close with his words before they even start. I can see the speech percolating just above his broad shoulders. Hannah lets out a little anticipatory giggle next to me. It sounds like love.

"I'm so happy to be here with my family tonight," Colby begins. "Because you are my family. That's what Health Core is."

Applause explodes through the sad wedding. The projector screen behind Colby's head populates with images of various powders, pills, elixirs—all of them green, all of them branded: Health Core.

"We are so lucky to be here," Colby continues. "To be part of the Health Core Family."

He pauses, smiling like a preacher.

The beige crowd repeats it back to him: "Family!"

A man behind me begins to weep. My girlfriend turns her head, gives me that look again.

Colby continues talking about being handsome or something—I can't stop staring into the back of her head. Why is she looking at me like that?

"And now," Colby says. "The reason we're all here: our fearless leader, and someone I'm so blessed to call my friend, and mentor." Colby pauses, looking around the room. The excitement is palpable. When his eyes meet mine, he gives me another wink. "Clarence!"

Classic rock booms from speakers I can't see and the projector flips to an image of Clarence in glasses, holding a book that reads: Health Core.

Clarence walks up, shakes Colby's hand aggressively, then holds his arms out like a tyrant. "Are you ready for the revolution!" he yells.

This is too much for several people. They drop to the floor, convulsing in a cloud of business casual, speaking in tongues.

“Because that’s what it is, ladies and gentlemen: a revolution. A revolution against the toxic chemicals perpetrated by the major food and health organizations. A revolution against the nine-to-five work week.” Clarence points as he lists his enemies. “A revolution against politicians that want to keep you poor and sick. A revolution against pill and vaccine culture and a revolution against that guy at the grocery store who wants to ban you for yelling at customers, and that one time you pushed an old woman. It happened once!” He pauses for effect. “And she had it coming!” The well-dressed man punches the air.

The crowd loses it.

The girl in fishnets turns her entire body, looks at me, rolls her eyes so hard it almost knocks her off balance.

I don’t understand. What did I do?

The projector flips to a young couple feeding each other horse pills, holding glasses bubbling with freshly mixed powder.

Clarence snorts sharply through his nostrils and continues. “Health Core changed my life, folks. This is no joke.” The sad wedding attendants raise their hands and mmmhm at their preacher. “My life was nothing before I found Health Core.” Clarence begins listing his previous ailments and the specific product that fixed it. I feel a thick hand on my shoulder and look up to Colby taking the seat between me and his still smiling girlfriend.

Colby leans into my ear, “how great is he?”

It feels like we’re friends, whispering in class while the teacher lectures. Like we’re old buddies sharing an inside joke. I can’t help but smile.

“And we are blessed to have two new members of our family here tonight.”

Oh, god.

“Fitz, Allegra, stand up,” Clarence beckons with his hand and I stand like a string-controlled puppet.

I know her name and everything is better now.

Several seconds pass, Allegra doesn't stand. She continues to sit on her skirt, shaking her head. Everyone's eyes pass from her, to Clarence, then fall onto the only man standing in the sea of beige.

It dawns on me, what I must look like: dirty, ragged, obviously too stoned to be in public, juxtaposed by these people who resemble an ad for an arena church looking for donations. I am a pariah. One step above homeless.

Clarence laughs. "That's alright, little lady," he says. "Shy is okay. We still welcome you to the family." The projector turns to a schematic pattern and Colby pulls me back to my metal seat.

"What," Clarence continues, "are we doing here?" He waits for us to respond. We do not.

"We aren't just taking these life-changing supplements, powders and pills. Are we? No. Of course not. We're helping people change their lives." He enunciated each word with careful precision. "The very way they interact with the world. We are changing the way people exist—and making some dough along the way." Clarence rubs his fingers together like money, pacing back and forth. "Now how does that sound?" People slap their knees and give their neighbors sly looks.

Allegra leans into the girl she came with, muttering something I can't quite make out.

"We at Health Core are here to free you from these oppressive forces, and all those who would see you fail—die on your knees, gray and sickly. We're here to show you and your people something so scarce you wouldn't even know it if it walked up to you and invited you to dinner: I'm talking about freedom, people!"

Colby leans in and pulls me into a side embrace. I nuzzle my yellow beanie into his neck.

"The drug companies command you to take their anti-depressant pills. But you're not depressed—you're o-pressed. You just need Health Core!" Mothers toss their newborn children at the projector and a mosh pit breaks at the mouth of the sad wedding—bright blood shines in the beige like the only star in the sky.

Clarence pulls out a laser pointer and turns his shoulder. "Fitz, Allegra," he points the laser midway down the schema on the screen, "this is you. And below you, this is your family, your friends, your loved ones—acquaintances too: the guy who rings you up at the supermarket, your barista, your bartender, your bank teller." Colby bumps his shoulder into mine. "These are

all people you can help on the path, too. New friends, who will of course be in your downstream.”

Clarence begins explaining the downstream: every person you convince to sell Health Core products will give a portion of their sales to everyone above them. The person at the top making money off everyone—which explains the house.

As Clarence speaks and snorts and captivates the room, I peek at Colby. What will he and Hannah do after this? Get some food, talk about the night? And what about when the subject of me comes up. Will they have good things to say, or will it be knowing looks and hand covered giggles between greasy bites of late-night burgers?

I wonder if someone would have invited my dad to something like this.

“And remember, every person in your downstream who recruits someone to the revolution will make you money, too.”

“Like a pyramid,” Allegra says, loudly.

“The possibilities really are endless here,” Clarence continues, unperturbed.

Allegra’s muttering grows louder and I can start to hear what she’s saying: “No, it’s not. You invited me to your house for dinner.”

Clarence’s eyes move to the commotion. “Allegra, Fitz, the time is now.” He holds up each hand—palms to ceiling. “Do you pick the blue pill and return to the matrix like they want, or will you choose courage, to carry around the panacea for all the maladies that ail our sick, sad nation? Will you take the red pill, and join the revolution?”

The air grows thick with ritual.

Allegra stands up, kicking the metal folding chair. “This is weird. You’re creepy. I’m leaving.” She turns around and her brown eyes look into mine. “You should leave, too.”

She reaches out her hand and for a moment I think she wants to hold mine as we leave in tandem. My heart tests the strength of my rib cage. I reach out but she’s already in the aisle, still looking at me. I push my weight into my toes, beginning to stand, when Colby puts his arm around me. “Screw her, buddy. We don’t need her.”

I pause. He looks at me with such warmth. Like a friend. “Ya,” I say, giggling. “Screw her.”

Allegra is already gone. She doesn’t yell anything as she leaves. She doesn’t slam the door.

It’s hours later when I finally leave. Six powders, five pill bottles, and thirteen brochures in my Health Core duffle bag. I tell them I’ll think about it.

Colby and Clarence wave from the doorway like father and son as I descend the concrete steps.

The rain falls in thick droplets. I walk slowly to the park looming in the murky night. I half-expect to see Allegra. Not that it makes sense. She’s just so heavy on my mind I feel like I’ll will her into existence.

Two figures sit on the hill where the hipsters once read. A pretty Pit Bull wags its tail, a man breaking off pieces of what seems to be meat, feeding them to the beautiful creature. The man’s face looks emaciated and wind burnt—cheeks burgundy as the shoulders of his jacket. He feeds the last piece of meat, wipes his hands on the grass. The Pit Bull leans in, licking his face with a tongue matching the man’s cheeks. They continue like this, slobber falling down the man’s jacket—collecting on his stomach pouch that reads: Nuggets.

How did I ever find that jacket embarrassing.

I consider walking over and giving them some supplements, but think better of it. Just more trash on the street. And I don’t want to disturb their moment.

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