

Jared Leeds

The Wall

We lived in Ferguson House, the one on the corner—Daniel, Danny, Henry, and I. Next to ours was an all-girl house, then another all-guy, then another all-girl. And that was the whole street. To keep track of things, the guys and I mapped out the sexual relationships between all four houses on a wall in our kitchen with ID pictures and red string.

One day Danny suggested we use different colors to distinguish between the nature of each encounter. So Henry, who had it in with an art girl who lived in Banks House, came home with a Trader Joe's bag full of string, and all of a sudden the Hook-Up Wall had a whole color system to it, complete with a key in the bottom right corner like a map. Yellow was for anything with clothes on, green for a handy, blue for a blowy, and red for a home run. Each new string, or a change of colors up the ranks, was cause for celebration. It was customary that the lucky lay did the honors, usually followed by a round of blue raspberry Svedka. By the end of the first month of school, strings branched from my housemates' ID pictures like multicolored spiders.

Next to theirs, my few yellow strings stuck out like a big sore thumb. Maybe the guys saw potential in me, or maybe they took pity on me. In either case, Henry started making an extra protein shake for me every morning. Danny shared his ab day workout with me. At parties, Daniel pointed out which girls were interested in me, since their passes at me usually went over my head.

Most of the strings that sprouted up around my ID picture in the following months were thanks to them. In return for their services, I acted as their confidant, an ear for the lending.

Danny once drunkenly confided in me that he didn't even like being called Danny, and that he only got bumped to nickname status because Daniel had more game than him.

Henry admitted to me once that it made him upset every time word came around that the art girl he

liked from Banks House was seeing someone else. When she hooked up with Daniel on Halloween, I found Henry sitting alone in our bathroom tub, and that was the first time I saw another man cry.

When Daniel got laid for the first time, by a girl from Barnes House named Anne, I was the first person he told.

He and I were sitting together on the dark edge of the woods behind our house, Daniel enjoying a midnight smoke. I heard an animal move swiftly between the trees. I thought I saw the nimble hind legs of a deer.

“I think she faked her orgasm for me,” Daniel said quietly.

Drained by a long evening of essay writing, all I could offer him were platitudes. “At least she cared enough to,” I said.

Daniel took a moment to respond, a moment I spent worrying I had spoken too crassly. But his face broke into a smile, then a laugh. He grabbed me by the neck and gave me a noogie. My head in his grip, I stared out into the woods. I thought I saw the deer from before staring right back at me, unmoving.

It felt good to be trusted. It felt like friendship. I never minded when the guys knocked on my door late at night to borrow a book, nor when they inevitably stuck around until the early morning to talk about girls. I especially didn't mind when it came to Daniel.

One of those times, he told me he was really freaked out about something, so much so that he didn't know if he could even say it out loud.

“Whatever it is, I'm sure it isn't that bad,” I said. “It can't be anything worse than last week's chlamydia scare.”

“It feels worse than that. Or at least, more permanent.”

“You can tell me anything, man.”

“You know Gwen?” he asked.

“I don't think so. Does she live in Barnes or Banks?”

“Neither. She's got a place off-campus. She's a junior. Performance artist.”

“Okay. What about her?”

“I was with her after the Sigma Phi party. We went back to her place.”

“Is that who was all up on you that night? I remember her now. Pretty face.”

“Body isn’t too bad either.”

“What color string are we talking?”

“Full red. But I don’t know.” He was holding my copy of *Catcher in the Rye*, fidgeting with the cover in his hands. “It wasn’t great.”

“What wasn’t?”

“All of it, kinda. When we first got to her apartment, she had me bend down in front of this big tapestry with that Hindu elephant lady on it. She made me recite this chant with her, and then she burned some stick that smelled like manure. But that was all fine, I guess. I’ve known weirder girls. It’s just that when we finally got around to getting it on, she pulled out her video camera. And I didn’t really think much of it at first, probably because I was just happy not to be singing in Sanskrit anymore, so I let her record us. *It*. Everything. The idea of it was pretty hot in the moment, actually... until we finished and I came back to my senses. Like, she’s still got the video, and *I* don’t. And she could show it to her friends, or use it in one of her performances. Art chicks are crazy like that, you know? It’s messing with my head.”

He stopped for air. He was flipping the pages of my book back and forth, back and forth. It caused his hair to flutter just the slightest bit.

I imagined at that moment that we weren’t in my room anymore. Instead, I saw us on the edge of the woods again. In my vision, the sun was shining down on us through the trees, Daniel’s body like honey in the light, a breeze brushing our skin and covering us both in goosebumps.

It was a noisy semester—the gruff, droning voices of my professors and the starchy shifting of their bodies in their elbow-padded suits, the bass in my chest at parties in cramped dorm rooms, the whispers of my housemates, frustrated, insecure, in the dead of night. Then, when the guys all went home for Thanksgiving break, everything felt abruptly quiet, like the silence between tracks on a CD.

I sat silently in my room, thumbing through books but not really reading them. I sat at our kitchen table and stared at the Wall, wondering if anyone would notice if I added another string to my picture, or took one away from Daniel’s. Sometimes I sat on the other guys’ bedroom floors, staring at the posters and medals on

their walls, the memorabilia of their lives before college. I imagined they were the exact same people here that they were in their hometowns. I wondered if I was too.

On the night of Thanksgiving, I went out to eat something other than microwaved mac and cheese and to hear something other than my own feet shuffling from room to room. When I arrived at the dining hall, it was mostly empty except for a dozen or so students. One of them, I recognized, was Gwen. She wore a turtleneck the color of pea soup, sitting alone with her dinner and a battered copy of *Steppenwolf* open in front of her.

“Can I sit with you?” I asked her.

She looked up at me. “Sure,” she said, but she had a look in her eyes that dared me to actually do it.

Before long, I was in her apartment.

We lay prostrate together under the Ganesha while I repeated Gwen’s Sanskrit chant. She burned a stick of sage and waved it around the room, over the doors and windows, and around my head. Then we had stiff, eye-contactless sex on her unmade bed.

After we finished, she pulled out her video camera. She stood above the bed and stared at me, not turning it on, just tossing it back and forth in her hands.

“You live with Daniel, right? In Ferguson?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“I thought I recognized you. Have I made it onto the Wall yet?”

I clenched my jaw. The guys always said there was nothing wrong with the Wall because, really, we were objectifying *everyone* on it, the guys and the girls equally. But the way Gwen asked about it made me tense up.

“Yeah,” I said again.

“Did Daniel tell you about the video?”

I shook my head. “No,” I lied.

Gwen narrowed her eyes. “I filmed us fucking,” she said. “Wanna see?”

“No thanks. I don’t think Daniel would like you going around showing that to people.”

“Hm,” she said. “That’s the first time I’ve gotten that answer. Henry and Danny have both watched it.”

“Really?”

She nodded.

“That’s fucked up, Gwen,” I said.

She scoffed. “Don’t first-name me like you know me. Like I’m not anything more to you than a photo and some string.” She laid back down on the bed beside me.

She turned the camera on and clicked through her most recent files until she landed on a thumbnail of Daniel, reclined in the exact spot on the bed where I lay now. He had a mixed look of eagerness and consternation on his face, his horniness tempered by his own reservation. Gwen clicked play.

I watched Daniel apprehensively take his shirt off, fumble to remove his pants. I watched Gwen take him in her mouth, watched him thrust jerkily into her from behind. When he pulled out and finished on her back, I watched the look of euphoria on his face quickly drain from him, replaced by something that looked like regret.

Gwen turned the camera off. “You’re hard again,” she said.

“Yeah. You looked good,” I said. “Hot, I mean.”

Her lips curled into a smile. “Do you wanna have sex again?”

“Sure,” I said. “Yes.”

Fucking her from behind, I stared at the tapestry of the Ganesha over the top of Gwen’s head. But in my mind’s eye, I replaced the god’s elephant face with Daniel’s. I pictured his speckled brown eyes and the dimple in his chin. I imagined the deity’s many hands moving around to touch himself—the bony hollow between his pecs, his flat, soft stomach, the trail of hair just under his navel.

I didn’t pull out when I came—I hadn’t even realized I did. Upon realization, I apologized profusely as Gwen got up to grab herself a towel. She told me it was fine, really, since she was on the pill, but if I really felt bad about it I could give her the twenty dollars it would’ve cost her to get a Plan B, as reparations.

I sat on the edge of the bed with my back to her, pulling my shirt over my head when she asked from behind me, “Were you thinking of Daniel that time?” I felt her lie back down on the mattress. “Or the first time, for that matter?”

“No,” I said, too quickly. That muffled, CD-player silence returned. “I should go. I’ll see you around.” I

got up from the bed and turned to face her before I left.

Gwen was lying there on her side like an odalisque, staring back at me with the same look in her eye from the dining hall. Her video camera was propped up against her stomach, pointed right at me with the red light blinking.

A few weeks earlier, the guys and I rode in the back of a cramped school shuttle on the way home from a party across campus. Wedged between Danny and Daniel, I kept nodding off, my chin falling to my chest until a bump in the road woke me up again. Daniel insisted I put my head on his shoulder, and when I told him I was fine, he forced my head there in the crook of his neck. “Don’t be so proud,” he said. “Get some sleep.”

I set my gaze on the dark street in front of us. In the middle distance, I saw something in the road, like a big chunk of pavement. But as we got closer, it looked more and more like a small animal, maybe a deer—curled in on itself, probably asleep.

It was quite beautiful and looked so peaceful. It should probably get out of the road, I thought, my eyelids heavy. It would be a shame if it got hit.