

the fourth

Were it a movie, it might open with a shot of Richie's face, peering into the camera as though looking directly at you. Transition lens half shaded from the early afternoon sun. Slight stubble on his upper lip. The appearance of someone about to make small talk because he has no one else to talk to. "So," Richie says, "how do you know Tatum?"

You're sitting in the back yard of a small farm, not far from where the Delaware River splits a gap between Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Maybe the camera turns, the same way you'd turn your head if you looked around to see if there was anyone else that you could incorporate into this conversation, a veiled last-ditch effort to avoid a sustained and strained conversation detailing your relationship to Tatum. Your's is not a very compelling story. But there is no one nearby.

"From school. We went to school together."

Richie's head bobs a little bit. He's not yet satisfied. "And what do *you* do?"

You stand. The camera follows.

"I'm gonna get a drink."

From shade into radiant brightness, Richie left behind, the foam of a poorly tapped keg filling a glass, some poured out onto the grass, the sound of an air compressor pumping a bouncy castle full of air somewhere in the background. It's mid-afternoon on the fourth of July. You escaped the sweltering city but ended up here, amongst strangers. You're not entirely sure why you were invited to this. You haven't seen Tatum in at least five years, not since she worked on those shows that you also worked on. She moved to Berlin and married someone that she met there, who you've now just met once. He seems just fine. What you'd reflexively expect from a German millennial. This is their post-wedding celebration for stateside friends, of which apparently you are included. Tatum, tiny Tatum, has been bouncing around the still-arriving party like a fruit fly, offering edibles in brownie form to everyone who arrives. You decline. Most others don't. They sit, sweating, glazed over. There are at least four hours until the effect of the sun lessens to the extent that sustained movement might become possible.

Ten hours from now, Richie will dance on a small dance floor erected on the lawn and adorned with garden lights, alone. Eventually a few others will join him on the floor, but will dance separately, as though each is not fully aware the other is there.

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How Rob packs his bag. Two pairs of socks, both short ankle length to be worn with shorts. One pair of shorts. One pair swim trunks, as the invitation made mention of a "slip and slide." Also hopeful there might be a body of water somewhere nearby, although the Google map search doesn't present much by way of assurances in that department. Two t-shirts, black. A lighter. He's out of cigarettes, will have to buy some when they stop to buy liquor at a beer store. A Pennsylvania beer store, which is the equivalent of going to Costco to buy toothpaste. It's like an

event. Rob is looking forward to the beer store. Bathroom things like a toothbrush, sunblock in case of swimming, face moisturizer which Rob must apply daily or else risk the reddening and splotchiness on his temple and the little parts of his face between the nose and cheeks that has afflicted him since middle school. Deodorant and cologne. Rx sunglasses. A lightweight air mattress, used thus far only once. A two-person tent, purchased five years ago for the purpose of another fourth of July trip, also used only once. A plug-in air pump to inflate the mattress. A sheet, and light blanket. A pillow. This seems a bit heavy, packing-wise, for a trip that will only last twenty-four hours, but the camping gear makes up most of it. At the bottom of the bag, several foil-wrapped condoms. Because the invitation also made mention of late night “debauchery” and also because John, who is just now arriving twenty minutes early to pick Rob up in what was supposed to be his parents pickup truck but is in fact his parents SUV, doesn’t know everything about Rob’s marriage. There are things John is not allowed to know. The condoms are Rob’s secret.

Finally, the outfit for the day. Shorts, grey. The shirt, brand new, rough hewn linen, polo style which is not normally what Rob would wear but he found it on clearance at a Marshalls in the Bronx and it’s a “cool” brand and Rob couldn’t help but imagining how nice it would be to wear a linen shirt such as this one to the party so he stood in line for what was at least forty-five minutes in order to spend his twenty nine bucks, marked down from its original and absurd sticker price of one fifty. It was a size large, and Rob wears mediums, but they didn’t have any mediums. He tries it on at home. It’s on the billowy side. Maybe that’s okay? Rob’s wife has been out of town for weeks, and so Rob cannot ask anyone’s opinion on the attractiveness of this new shirt and whether he should wear it on the fourth or not. Now, day of decision, he puts it on. He’s wearing it. It’s done.

The buzzer buzzes. John is twenty minutes early. Rob lets him in. Just as this happens, Rob's wife calls to wish him a happy fourth. This is unexpected. She hasn't called the entire time she's been away. Rob has to fish the already-packed phone out of his bag in order to answer it. After thirty seconds of rushed conversation, Rob hurries down the hallway to open the door so that John can come in. "Gotta go," Rob says to his wife on the phone. "John came early." He hangs up the phone. John enters the apartment.

In the back trunk of John's parents SUV. A small blue cooler, so they can buy some tuna steaks on the way, for the invitation implies that while some food will be provided, it will be vegan, and meat eaters should fend for themselves. An air conditioner, rescued from its former location in an attic of the bed and breakfast that John's parents operate on Long Island, soon to be installed in Josh's new apartment on the lower east. That's the idea, anyway. But John has left his apartment keys at the bed and breakfast on Long Island. Now he's in Harlem with an air conditioner in the back trunk of his parents car with no idea of how to get it into his apartment. Other boxes, contents unknown, the trunk being used as something of a storage space for his parents' stuff. A tent belonging to John's father, possibly forty years old, still relatively functional. Last use unknown. A rolling suitcase, in which John has packed his various essentials. No swimsuit. But, an actual suit. John, reading the invitation several times, has been unable to parse the level of formality. There is a ceremony of some sort? Best to bring the suit.

There's no room in back for Rob's stuff, so Rob throws it in the rear seat instead. John has parked a half block from John's apartment. The morning is hot. With AC blasting, they hit the road. It's not until they've crossed the George Washington Bridge that Rob realizes that he's left his phone on the kitchen counter, having failed to re-pack it after answering his wife's call. They keep going.

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Maybe there would be a wide-angle shot of Tatum's father as he appears through the doorway of the farm house, dressed in long tan pants, a fully sleeved work shirt, and wide-brimmed olive hat, like what a park ranger or bushwhacker might wear. He's sprightly, small like his daughter, wears perfectly round gold metal glasses. It's got to be nearly one hundred degrees. You watch as he moves across the yard and pensively selects four pieces of wood from the massive wood stack on the north side of what used to be a chicken coop but is now a work space. He places them strategically, side by side, in a fire pit and places the grill on top of them. He squirts them with lighter fluid, then twists a piece of newspaper, lights it on fire, and applies the tip to the wood. There is no tree cover near the fire pit. Everyone else cowers in what shade they can find, while Tatum's father starts a fire in the middle afternoon on the hottest day, so far, that summer has to offer. Smoke rises listlessly. He goes back to the pile and selects more wood.

Inside the house, Tatum is giving a tour to a small group of new arrivals. She shows them the kitchen, complete with a mounted camera setup that allows for culinary photography. Her mother, Tatum says, is working on a cookbook. She has been working on it for quite some time. You follow as the group moves through the downstairs rooms, bathroom on the right, small sitting room, and then climbs the stairs to the second floor, where Tatum shows them the second bathroom. On the door, a sign written in colored pencil says, *Poops welcome*.

"Oh god, does it really say that?" Tatum stops and reads the sign. "Well, there you go. I didn't make that sign. I guess you should poop upstairs." You peer into Tatum's old room, with slanted ceilings. The rooms are hot. There is a closed door leading to another room. "That's mom's room."

Tatum hesitates a moment. “Should we knock? She might be asleep.” She knocks quietly on the door. “Mom? Mom, some of my friends are right here.” There is no answer. After a few seconds, Tatum turns to face her friends and smiles. “You’ll meet her later.” You follow them down the stairs.

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On the drive from Long Island, John had been listening to NPR. The news report had focused on the number of tanks to be deployed in the military parade in Washington DC. “By the time we get to the farm,” John says to Rob as they drive out of the city, over the wide bridge spanning the Hudson river, the boats tiny below, the city beyond, “the country might be overthrown! It’s good thing, Rob, that we’re going out of town. It might be overthrown already!” Rob doesn’t have his phone, so he has to use John’s phone instead. He googles, *military parade*.

“It looks like the parade doesn’t start until like three. So we’ll already be there.”

John passes someone while almost cutting off another car behind him. “Good,” John says.

The traffic is light. John and Rob become concerned over their arrival time. The invitation says that arrivals are to begin around noon, and it’s only 11:20 now but they’re going to arrive at 11:47, according to the nav system built into John’s parents SUV. They decide to detour and get lunch at Bethlehem. They can pick up the beer and tuna steaks there as well. It’s about forty-five minutes out of the way.

Bethlehem Pennsylvania appears to be a mining town, formerly. Huge factories loom on both sides of the highway. A multi-story iron wrought bridge is mounted alongside a casino, neither side of it attached to anything. John and Rob are jazzed. They like places like this, that make no

sense and appeal to the seekers of ruin. The link between nostalgia and that which has been abandoned. They imagine making great works of art in these empty factories. Of course, it's a blue collar town in Pennsylvania, so probably no one would come see the work. But still.

They eventually resort to using John's phone to locate a beer store, as driving around aimlessly proves inefficient. Following directives, they leave the downtown area with its factories and apocalypse aesthetic and find themselves in one of those suburban strips that could be anywhere in America. Next to a hospital complex, they find the beer store. It's huge and overwhelming. Thirty aisles at least, with cases of beer stacked high. In Pennsylvania, you buy beer by the case, either twelve or twenty four at a time. Rob, mind reeling, grabs an IPA almost at random. Prices aren't listed so he hopes it's not painfully expensive. The man behind them in the check out line makes some kind of a joke about wanting to go where they're going. It makes no sense, because they're both buying beer. Rob adds American Spirits to the order, they pay, and leave the beer store.

For lunch, they go across the road from the beer store to a place called Dom's Westgate Pizza, located just across from Sky Zone Trampoline park. Because Sky Zone is open, the high-school aged waitress explains, Dom's Pizza is also open, so that people can order pizza while they go to Sky Zone. John is desperate to go to Sky Zone, but as Rob joylessly predicts, 'It's probably just like for six year olds.' John is not fully deterred, but after a post-meal inspection of the "park" - dimly lit like an arcade, almost empty, several enclosed rooms encased in a mostly vacated mall, and what is described on their website as "massive wall to wall trampolines endless aerial action with friends" being more of just like a room with a trampoline for the floor - they pass on it and instead buy surprisingly affordable tuna steaks at an adjoining grocery store.

Back on the road. What is only twenty miles away takes almost an hour on the winding two-lane Pennsylvania highways. They make their way past falling down farms, tiny hamlets with miniature business districts, fields populated with sheep. They drive on gravel for awhile and then back onto pavement. There it is, on the left. “Yeah,” says Rob, “that’s gotta be it. There’s a homemade sign.” The sign is a wooden arrow, with lanterns hung from it. They park next to four or five vehicles already there. They have arrived.

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Maybe there would be some artsy editing to cut together shots of the long outdoor table with wild flowers in vases that keep blowing over in the inconsistent breeze. The flowers, placed again and again in the vases, with various attempts being made at placing them in a certain spot so that the wind can’t do its thing, then the hands vanishing from the shot and the vase falling over in slow motion, water cascading down the brown-paper-lined tables and dripping onto the grass. Eventually, a bigger heavier vase is found, and rocks are placed inside it along with the water.

Guests arrive with more frequency. An SUV pulls up, two men get out, looking a little out of place, bewildered behind sunglasses. One of them is wearing a too-big shirt. The other is dressed overly formally. “Oh my God! John! Rob!” Tatum rushes to greet them. A few minutes later, the process repeats as another car pulls off the road and into the ad hoc parking lot.

A single tent is set up on a wide lawn between the small garden and an overgrown field, long with prairie grass. As the afternoon eases into night and the temperature falls, more and more tents will pop up. You could do one of those time-lapse shots as they’re set up. Nine of them at least, all colors and shapes. Another seven or so will sleep in the former chicken coop, which at

least has a single ineffective window-unit air conditioner laboring to circulate the air. The chicken coop slash work space is also where the majority of food is housed and prepared. You overhear Tatum's dad explaining in great detail to several of the guests how he had raised the roof, the idea being that Tatum's mother needed a place to teach her cooking classes. There is no definitive word on whether those classes ever took place.

At its peak, the party's population reaches twenty five humans and two dogs. One is white and foolish, tended by its owner Charles, who has to keep calling to it when he loses track of its whereabouts. The other, fragile and dark, is held and treated like an infant by its owners, their names never outwardly declared. Their presence at the party is muted. They are present in body but not in spirit. They have eyes only for the dog.

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"What do you think that was about? The couple with the dog?" John asks on the drive home.

"I did overhear, during the nature walk," Rob recounts, "those two and the person with the short hair who also didn't hang out with anyone else, talking about their sex lives? Rather frankly, actually. And the girl, the one who was acting like the dog's mother, said something about how they hadn't for a really long time and that it was hard for them. What were their names again?"

"I don't know. They never said." John takes a left turn over a very narrow bridge. "So what do we think? Miscarriage? The dog being... you know. Did you see when she was carrying it in that front pouch sling?"

"Yeah. Yikes. Something like that."

"Something indeed."

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Elsewhere in America, the tanks are moving into procession. The president awaits his parade. Banners and flags abundant. White men in red hats raise their fists in the air, triumphantly. If you asked them what freedom means, they'd scowl at you because it's obvious isn't it? It can only mean *this*. A gesture towards the crowds, the bursts of fireworks, a facsimile of war turned entertainment. All this.

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The slip n' slide is not a branded version, rather a DIY effort. A long strip of plastic unrolled on the lawn in the direction of its slightly uneven slope. A garden hose is turned on and the plastic is sprayed with water mixed with soap which is intermittently applied onto the plastic. The afternoon's heat has peaked and some cloud cover suddenly appears, creating a sort of atmospheric haze. Rob changes into his swim trunks out in the open, shielded from the rest of Tatum's guests by a barn but exposed to the road side, should cars drive by while he is mid-change. They do not, but it's a blind corner and he suddenly becomes worried and tries to pull up his trunks too fast and almost stumbles half naked onto the ground before recovering. There is also a chance the amount of alcohol he has consumed plays some part in this stumble. Sometimes Rob counts his drinks, just to make sure things aren't getting too out of hand, but the keg pours are so erratic and foamy that they're more like a third of a beer, and Rob has no interest in fractions today. He's had a few so far. Several. Before dinner on a hot day, but he's not drunk.

The last farm-related party Rob had attended was perhaps five years prior. A train to Poughkeepsie and then a car sent to pick him up. A group of guests, much like these, mostly

unknown to Rob, with a few semi-familiar faces sprinkled in. A series of errors befell his judgement, starting with his decision to bring a large bottle of Jamison to “share” but then, because everyone had brought their own beverages, drinking it all by himself. There was no dinner to speak of at that party, as it consisted instead of a “foraged salad” from the garden, which was just a plate of lettuce and arugula. Rob remembers being able to see the liquid line in the whiskey bottle showing below the label before it even got dark out. After dinner, only fragments of memory remain. A bonfire. The sounds of revelry down by the lake while he lies on his back in the middle of a road. Stumbling through darkness. Someone throwing a blanket over him where he has collapsed on a couch in the farmhouse. He was badly hung over for two days.

So, a priority to avoid a similar outcome today.

He is the only one so far in bathing suit, but one of the female guests is hosing down the plastic, so Rob has a go. This, it occurs to him, is something he’s never done before. He has no data to fall back on. How fast should one run before sliding? Feet first or head? Would it hurt? Would he embarrass himself? “Let’s see if I make it to the end,” he says to the bearer of the hose, takes about five steps back like a field goal kicker, runs, and hurtles himself headfirst at the tarp-covered ground.

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“You should have gone!”

“I brought no trunks. I was so high. I could basically do nothing at that point.”

“It was refreshing, though. You got grass on you and soap, but after sweating all afternoon...”

“It wasn’t even that hot. It was cooling down.”

“You should have gone.” Rob lightly probes his rib cage as John turns the AC up. They’ve just left the country roads, pastoral and winding, and gotten back on the freeway and it suddenly feels hot again. “It did kind of hurt, though. I think I bruised a rib or two.”

“Yeah, you hit hard.” John cuts someone off. They honk loudly. “Oh shit! *That* was my blindspot!” He accelerates, as though to put some distance between him and the offended driver. “But Rob,” John half turns while keeping an unpracticed eye on the road, “what about the *piñata*?!”

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The piñata hung from a tree near the tables, equidistant from the farm house and the bouncy castle. After the slip n’ slide was over - eventually it was just Tatum and two of her closer friends sliding in strange ways and filming each other using the slo-mo feature on their iPhones - and after dinner, such as it were, had happened (Rob and John triumphant in their tuna steak cooking, perhaps overcooking slightly, but sustained by protein on a night where it would otherwise have been in short supply), and after some gestures towards responsible house-guesting were made like clearing the plates from the table and doing a few dishes inside the former chicken coop, and after Rob and John and others had set up their tents, and after the tree planting ceremony (which was really the reason they were all there) which was preceded by a strange cameo from a bread and puppet style puppet, one of those fifteen foot high ones with massive paper mache head, face expressionless, its actions controlled by two of Tatum’s friends holding sticks, now resting in a corner of the yard until someone figured out where to put it that would be safe for the night, and just as the sun was finally going down for real, it was time.

In the shape of an orange burro, the piñata was around three feet long and perhaps a foot or so wide. The size of a medium-to-large dog. It was lowered on the rope from which it hung, and J Mark, one of the guests who had arrived during the afternoon but would depart later that evening, volunteered to go first. He took the cudgel, a long wooden stick that appeared to have been custom made for the exact purpose of piñata bashing. Gathering feedback from the group, all of whom had gathered a safe distance away, he stood about ten full strides from the burro. He closed his eyes. He walked in the direction he thought the burro was, but was already off by about thirty degrees and ran into the tree. After a disoriented moment, he swung, missing the burro by at least ten feet. The crowd erupted, hooted. J Mark opened his eyes and grinned. He was a hedge fund manager by day, John had overheard and recounted to Rob later. For J Mark, it wasn't psychologically important that he should strike the burro. Let him be the buffoon. Let someone else triumph for once.

Each took their turn. Rob had forgotten that everyone was high except for him. It was interesting watching them make attempts at approaching the piñata. One way you could do it was to cheat, by not fully closing ones eyes. In twilight, no one could really tell. This method allowed several to get strong whacks in, but still the burro swung, its residual damage thus far invisible. It seemed awfully sturdy, perhaps too much so. John went, and was able to clip the burro just enough to send it darting furtively away. Rob missed it entirely, as he opted to not cheat but instead to stride decisively and quickly towards it just after closing his eyes. He stopped just about a foot short, or else he would have hit it pretty good. After all had gone once, the only option seemed to be for everyone to go again, which suddenly didn't seem all that fun. "All right Tatum," someone said, "it's all yours."

So Tatum took up the cudgel. She leapt in the air and swung from one side like a baseball batter, and struck the burro mid-rib cage. It danced, did not break. She swung again, like an axe splitting wood, attacking it from the top. Then the sides, the bottom. The crowd, who had oohed and ahed appreciatively with the first couple of blows, fell gradually silent. Tatum did not appear to be angry or joyful. More-so a grim determination came upon her. She kept hitting and hitting and hitting. Finally, after what felt like ten minutes, the burro burst and candy rained down. There was a short pause, and then crowd somberly applauded as one of the dogs darted hopefully towards the strewn candy.

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“That,” said John on the ride home, his voice pitched reverently as though referencing something sacred or profane or unspeakable, “was really something.”

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Elsewhere in America, at the same moment that candy spills from the burro’s belly and Tatum drops the stick, panting, sweating from effort: Fireworks explode every four seconds in Harlem, popping and whistling and filling the already too-humid air with smoke. The tanks are driven back to wherever tanks go when they’re not being used for military parades, or for killing people. Across the entire country, people take to the fields, the streets, the rooftops, to watch the simulated carnage above.

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And if it were a movie, maybe you'd take the footage of Tatum systemically destroying the burro and intercut it with a montage the fireworks displays across America. One shot of an explosion, one shot of Tatum swinging and hitting the burro, and then another explosion. Etcetera. The faces of the Americans lit by the explosion, in awe. The faces of the guests, slightly concerned. Perhaps a shot of Tatum's father, the last sunlight glinting from his round gold glasses, on the outskirts of the ring. A shot of a darkened window on the second floor of the farm house, but you can't tell if anyone's looking out or not.

And if it were a movie, maybe something would actually happen for Rob that night. Maybe he'd hook up with Emma, a 30-something American who had spent the past year in Germany on an international research fellowship. It wasn't until after dark that they started talking, as Rob figured out who was attached to someone else and who wasn't. She had rode with a group from Brooklyn, which had made it hard to tell if she was with one of them or not, but it now it appeared, not. She was affable and sleepy. Rob couldn't tell if she was high or not. People drifted in and out of conversations near the bonfire. Rob bummed one of the puppeteers several cigarettes. John got too high and went to bed. One of Tatum's friends commandeered the playlist, playing hits from the early 'aughts. Richie, on the dance floor. The couple, the one with the dog, languidly sways nearby. The musician from Bushwick who seems older than everyone else does little hitching shuffles around the others. No one is really dancing together. Rob looks around for Emma, but she's vanished. So he makes his way into the darkness and lies on his air mattress and listens to the music until it's turned off, and then he listens to the high frequency of the insects in the field until finally he falls asleep.

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They've long since crossed the Delaware River. They rejoin I-78 back towards the city. The traffic, day after a holiday, still light. They pass towns with names like Lebanon and Pottersville. Golf clubs and townships. The new as-of-yet unopened waterparks of the Meadowlands Sports Complex. Back across the bridge. There's ample street parking. John pulls up. Rob gets out.

"We should make a movie of it," John says. "A mumble core type thing."

"Maybe," Rob says. "I'll write it up. See what happens."