# The Rule of Four

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### Chapter 1

Strange thing, time. It weighs most on those who have it least. Nothing is lighter than being young with the world on your shoulders; it gives you a feeling of possibility so seductive, you know there must be something more important you could be doing than studying for exams.

I can see myself now, the night it all began. I'm lying back on the old red sofa in our dorm room, wrestling with Pavlov and his dogs in my introductory psychology book, wondering why I never fulfilled my science requirement as a freshman like everyone else. A pair of letters sits on the coffee table in front of me, each containing a vision of what I could be doing next year. The night of Good Friday has fallen, cold April in Princeton, New Jersey, and with only a month of college left I'm no different from anyone else in the class of 1999: I'm having trouble getting my mind off the future.

Charlie is sitting on the floor by the cube refrigerator, playing with the Magnetic Shakespeare someone left in our room last week. The Fitzgerald novel he's supposed to be reading for his final paper in English 151w is spread open on the floor with its spine broken, like a butterfly somebody stepped on, and he's forming and re-forming sentences from magnets with Shakespearean words on them. If you ask him why he's not reading Fitzgerald, he'll grunt and say there's no point. As far as he's concerned, literature is just an educated man's shell game, three-card monte for the college crowd: what you see is never what you get. For a science-minded guy like Charlie, that's the height of perversity. He's headed for medical school in the fall, but the rest of us are still hearing about the C-plus he found on his English midterm in March.

Gil glances over at us and smiles. He's been pretending to study for an economics exam, but Breakfast at Tiffany's is on, and Gil has a thing for old films, especially ones with Audrey Hepburn. His advice to Charlie was simple: if you don't want to read the book, then rent the movie. They'll never know. He's probably right, but Charlie sees something dishonest in that, and anyway it would prevent him from complaining about what a scam literature is, so instead of Daisy Buchanan we're watching Holly Golightly yet again.

I reach down and rearrange some of Charlie's words until the sentence at the top of the fridge says to fail or not to fail: that is the question. Charlie raises his head to give me a disapproving look. Sitting down, he's almost as tall as I am on the couch. When we stand next to each other he looks like Othello on steroids, a two-hundred-and-fifteen-pound black man who scrapes the ceilings at six-and-a-half feet. By contrast I'm five-foot-seven in shoes. Charlie likes to call us Red Giant and White Dwarf, because a red giant is a star that's unusually large and bright, while a white dwarf is



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small and dense and dull. I have to remind him that Napoleon was only fivefoot-two, even if Paul is right that when you convert French feet to English, the emperor was actually taller.

Paul is the only one of us who isn't in the room now. He disappeared earlier in the day, and hasn't been seen since. Things between him and me have been rocky for the past month, and with all the academic pressure on him lately, he's chosen to do most of his studying at Ivy, the eating club where he and Gil are members. It's his senior thesis he's working on, the paper all Princeton undergrads must write in order to graduate. Charlie, Gil, and I would be doing the same ourselves, except that our departmental deadlines have already come and gone. Charlie identified a new protein interaction in certain neuronal signaling pathways; Gil managed something on the ramifications of a flat tax. I pasted mine together at the last minute between applications and interviews, and I'm sure Frankenstein scholarship will forever be the same.

The senior thesis is an institution that almost everyone despises. Alumni talk about their theses wistfully, as if they can't remember anything more enjoyable than writing one-hundred-page research papers while taking classes and choosing their professional futures. In reality, a senior thesis is a miserable, spine-breaking thing to write. It's an introduction to adult life, a sociology professor told Charlie and me once, in that annoying way professors have of lecturing after the lecture is over: it's about shouldering something so big, you can't get out from under it. It's called responsibility, he said. Try it on for size. Never mind that the only thing he was trying on for size was a pretty thesis advisee named Kim Silverman. It was all about responsibility. I'd have to agree with what Charlie said at the time. If Kim Silverman is the sort of thing adults can't get out from under, then sign me up. Otherwise, I'll take my chances being young.

Paul is the last of us to finish his thesis, and there's no question that his will be the best of the bunch. In fact, his may be the best of our entire graduating class, in the history department or any other. The magic of Paul's intelligence is that he has more patience than anyone I've ever met, and with it he simply wears problems down. To count a hundred million stars, he told me once, at the rate of one per second, sounds like a job that no one could possibly complete in a lifetime. In reality, it would only take three years. The key is focus, a willingness not to be distracted. And that is Paul's gift: an intuition of just how much a person can do slowly.

Maybe that's why everyone has such high expectations for his thesis— they know how many stars he could count in three years, but he's been working on his thesis for almost four. While the average student comes up with a research topic in the fall of senior year and finishes it by the next spring, Paul has been struggling with his since freshman year. Just a few months into our first fall semester, he decided to focus on a rare Renaissance text entitled Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, a labyrinthine name I can pronounce only because my father spent most of his career as a Renaissance historian studying it. Three and a half years later, and barely twenty-four hours from his deadline, Paul has enough material to make even the most discriminating graduate programs salivate.

The problem is, he thinks I ought to be enjoying the fanfare too. We worked on the book together for a few months during the winter, and made good progress as a team. Only then did I understand something my mother used to say: that men in our family had a tendency to fall for certain books about as hard as they fell for certain women. The Hypnerotomachia may never have had much outward charm, but it has an ugly woman's wiles, the slow addictive tug of inner mystery. When I caught myself slipping into it the same way my father had, I managed to pull myself out and throw in the towel before it could ruin my relationship with a girlfriend who deserved better. Since then, things between Paul and me haven't been the same. A graduate student he knows, Bill Stein, has helped with his research since I begged off. Now, as his thesis deadline approaches, Paul has become strangely guarded. He's usually much more forthcoming about his work, but over the past week he's withdrawn not only from me but from Charlie and Gil too, refusing to speak a word of his research to anyone.

"So, which way are you leaning, Tom?" Gil asks.

Charlie glances up from the fridge. "Yeah," he says, "we're all on tenterhooks."

Gil and I groan. Tenterhooks is one of the words Charlie missed on his midterm. He attributed it to Moby-Dick instead of Tobias Smollett's Adventures of Roderick Random on the grounds that it sounded more like a kind of fishing lure than a word for suspense. Now he won't let it go.

"Get over it," Gil says.

"Name me one doctor who knows what a tenterhook is," Charlie says.

Before either of us can answer, a rustling sound comes from inside the bedroom I share with Paul. Suddenly, standing before us at the door, wearing only boxers and a T-shirt, is Paul himself.

"Just one?" he asks, rubbing his eyes. "Tobias Smollett. He was a surgeon."

Charlie glances back at the magnets. "Figures."

Gil chuckles, but says nothing.

"We thought you went to Ivy," Charlie says, when the pause becomes noticeable.

Paul shakes his head, backtracking into his room to pick up his notebook. His straw-colored hair is pressed flat on one side, and there are pillow creases on his face. "Not enough privacy," he says. "I've been working in my bunk again. Fell asleep."

He's hardly gotten a wink in two nights, maybe more. Paul's advisor, Dr. Vincent Taft, has pressed him to produce more and more documentation every week—and unlike most advisors, who are happy to let seniors hang by the rope of their own expectations, Taft has kept a hand at Paul's back from the start.



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"So, what about it, Tom?" Gil asks, filling the silence. "What's your decision?"

I glance up at the table. He's talking about the letters in front of me, which I've been eyeing between each sentence in my book. The first letter is from the University of Chicago, offering me admission to a doctoral program in English. Books are in my blood, the same way medical school is in Charlie's, and a Ph.D. from Chicago would suit me just fine. I did have to scrap for the acceptance letter a little more than I wanted to, partly because my grades at Princeton have been middling, but mainly because I don't know exactly what I want to do with myself, and a good graduate program can smell indecision like a dog can smell fear.

"Take the money," Gil says, never taking his eyes off Audrey Hepburn.

Gil is a banker's son from Manhattan. Princeton has never been a destination for him, just a window seat with a view, a stopover on the way to Wall Street. He is a caricature of himself in that respect, and he manages a smile whenever we give him a hard time about it. He'll be smiling all the way to the bank, we know; even Charlie, who's sure to make a small fortune as a doctor, won't hold a candle to the kind of paychecks Gil will see.

"Don't listen to him," Paul says from the other side of the room. "Follow your heart."

I look up, surprised that he's aware of anything but his thesis.

"Follow the money," Gil says, standing up to get a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

"What'd they offer?" Charlie asks, ignoring the magnets for a second.

"Forty-one," Gil guesses, and a few Elizabethan words tumble from the fridge as he closes it. "Bonus of five. Plus options."

Spring semester is job season, and 1999 is a buyer's market. Forty-one thousand dollars a year is roughly double what I expected to be earning with my lowly English degree, but compared to some of the deals I've seen classmates make, you'd think it was barely getting by.

I pick up the letter from Daedalus, an Internet firm in Austin that claims to have developed the world's most advanced software for streamlining the corporate back office. I know almost nothing about the company, let alone what a back office is, but a friend down the hall suggested I interview with them, and as rumors circulated about high starting salaries at this unknown Texas start-up, I went. Daedalus, following the general trend, didn't care that I knew nothing about them or their business. If I could just solve a few brainteasers at an interview, and seem reasonably articulate and friendly in the process, the job was mine. Thus, in good Caesarian fashion, I could, I did, and it was.

"Close," I say, reading from the letter. "Forty-three thousand a year. Signing bonus of three thousand. Fifteen hundred options."

"And a partridge in a pear tree," Paul adds from across the room. He's the only one acting like it's dirtier to talk about money than it is to touch it. "Vanity of vanities."

Charlie is shifting the magnets again. In a fulminating baritone he imitates the preacher at his church, a tiny black man from Georgia who just finished his degree at the Princeton Theological Seminary. "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity."

"Be honest with yourself, Tom," Paul says impatiently, though he never makes eye contact. "Any company that thinks you deserve a salary like that isn't going to be around for long. You don't even know what they do." He returns to his notebook, scribbling away. Like most prophets, he is fated to be ignored.

Gil keeps his focus on the television, but Charlie looks up, hearing the edge in Paul's voice. He rubs a hand along the stubble on his chin, then says, "All right, everybody stop. I think it's time to let off some steam."

For the first time, Gil turns away from the movie. He must hear what I hear: the faint emphasis on the word steam.

"Right now?" I ask.

Gil looks at his watch, taking to the idea. "We'd be clear for about half an hour," he says, and in a show of support he even turns off the television, letting Audrey fizzle into the tube.

Charlie flips his Fitzgerald shut, mischief stirring. The broken spine springs open in protest, but he tosses the book onto the couch.

"I'm working," Paul objects. "I need to finish this."

He glances at me oddly.

"What?" I ask.

But Paul remains silent.

"What's the problem, girls?" Charlie says impatiently.

"It's still snowing out there," I remind everyone.

The first snowstorm of the year came howling into town today, just when spring seemed perched on the tip of every tree branch. Now there are calls for a foot of accumulation, maybe more. The Easter weekend festivities on campus, which this year include a Good Friday lecture by Paul's thesis advisor, Vincent Taft, have been reorganized. This is hardly the weather for what Charlie has in mind.

"You don't have to meet Curry until 8:30, right?" Gil asks Paul, trying to convince him. "We'll be done by then. You can work more tonight."

Richard Curry, an eccentric former friend of my father's and Taft's, has been a mentor of Paul's since freshman year. He has put Paul in touch with some of the most prominent art historians in the world, and has funded much of Paul's research on the Hypnerotomachia.

Paul weighs his notebook in his hand. Just looking at it, the fatigue returns to his eyes.

Charlie senses that he's coming around. "We'll be done by 7:45," he says.

"What are the teams?" Gil asks.

Charlie thinks it over, then says, "Tom's with me."

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The game we're about to play is a new spin on an old favorite: a fast-paced match of paintball in a maze of steam tunnels below campus. Down there, rats are more common than lightbulbs, the temperature hits three digits in the dead of winter, and the terrain is so dangerous that even the campus police are forbidden to give chase. Charlie and Gil came up with the idea during an exam period sophomore year, inspired by an old map Gil and Paul found at their eating club, and by a game Gil's father used to play in the tunnels with his friends as seniors.

The newer version gained popularity until nearly a dozen members of Ivy and most of Charlie's friends from his EMT squad were in on it. It seemed to surprise them when Paul became one of the game's best navigators; only the four of us understood it, knowing how often Paul used the tunnels to get to and from Ivy on his own. But gradually Paul's interest in the game waned. It frustrated him that no one else saw the strategic possibilities of it, the tactical ballet. He wasn't there when an errant shot punctured a steam pipe during a big midwinter match; the explosion stripped plastic safety casings off live power lines for ten feet in either direction, and might've cooked two half-drunk juniors, had Charlie not pulled them out of the way. The proctors, Princeton's campus police, caught on, and within days the dean had rained down a spate of punishments. In the aftermath, Charlie replaced paint guns and pellets with something faster but less risky: an old set of laser-tag guns he picked up at a yard sale. Still, as graduation approaches, the administration has imposed a zero-tolerance policy on disciplinary infractions. Getting caught in the tunnels tonight could mean suspension or worse.

Charlie sidesteps into the bedroom he shares with Gil and pulls out a large hiking pack, then another, which he hands to me. Finally he pulls on his hat.

"Jesus, Charlie," Gil says. "We're only going down there for half an hour. I packed less for spring break."

"Be prepared," Charlie says, hitching the larger of the two packs over his shoulders. "That's what I say."

"You and the Boy Scouts," I mumble.

"Eagle scouts," Charlie says, because he knows I never made it past tenderfoot.

"You ladies ready?" Gil interrupts, standing by the door.

Paul breathes deeply, waking himself up, then nods. From inside his room he grabs his pager and hitches it to his belt.

At the front of Dod Hall, our dormitory, Charlie and I part ways with Gil and Paul. We will enter the tunnels at different locations, and be invisible to each other until one team finds the other underground.

"I didn't know there was such a thing as a black Boy Scout," I tell Charlie once he and I are on our own, heading down campus.

The snow is deeper and colder than I expected. I wrench my ski jacket around me, and force my hands into gloves.

"That's okay," he says. "Before I met you, I didn't know there was such a thing as a white pussy."

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The trip down campus passes in a haze. For days, with graduation so near and my own thesis out of the way, the world has seemed like a rush of unnecessary motion—underclassmen hurrying to night seminars, seniors typing their final chapters in sweating computer labs, now snowflakes everywhere in the sky, dancing in circles before they find the ground.

As we walk down campus, my leg begins to ache. For years the scar on my thigh has been predicting bad weather six hours after the bad weather arrives. It's a memento of an old accident, the scar. Not long after my sixteenth birthday I was in a car crash that laid me up in a hospital for most of my sophomore summer. The details are a blur to me now, but the one distinct memory I have of that night is my left femur snapping clean through the muscle of my thigh until one end of it was staring back at me through the skin. I had just enough time to see it before passing out from shock. Both bones in my left forearm broke as well, and three ribs on the same side. According to the paramedics, the bleeding from my artery was stopped just in time for them to save me. By the time they got me out of the wreckage, though, my father, who'd been driving the car, was dead.

The accident changed me, of course: after three surgeries and two months of rehab, and the onset of phantom pains with their six-hour weather delay, I still had metal pins in my bones, a scar up my leg, and a strange hole in my life that only seemed to get bigger the more time wore on. At first there were different clothes—different sizes of pants and shorts until I regained enough weight, then different styles to cover up a skin graft on my thigh. Later I realized that my family had changed too:

my mother, who'd retreated into herself, first and most of all, but also my two older sisters, Sarah and Kristen, who spent less and less time at home. Finally it was my friends who changed—or, I guess, finally I was the one who changed them. I'm not sure if I wanted friends who understood me better, or saw me differently, or what exactly, but the old ones, like my old clothes, just didn't fit anymore.

The thing people like to say to victims is that time is a great healer. The great healer is what they say, as if time were a doctor. But after six years of thinking on the subject, I have a different impression. Time is the guy at the amusement park who paints shirts with an airbrush. He sprays out the color in a fine mist until it's just lonely particles floating in the air, waiting to be plastered in place. And what comes of it all, the design on the shirt at the end of the day, usually isn't much to see. I suspect that whoever buys that shirt, the one great patron of the everlasting theme park, whoever he is, wakes up in the morning and wonders what he ever saw in it. We're the paint in that analogy, as I tried to explain to Charlie when I mentioned it once. Time is what disperses us.

Maybe the best way to put it is the way Paul did, not long after we met. Even then he was a Renaissance fanatic, eighteen years old and already convinced that civilization had been in a nosedive since the death of Michelangelo. He'd read all of my father's books on the period, and he introduced himself to me a few days into freshman year after recognizing my middle name in the freshman face-book. I have a peculiar middle name, which for parts of my childhood I carried like an albatross around my neck. My father tried to name me after his favorite composer, a slightly obscure seventeenth-century Italian without whom, he said, there could've been no Haydn, and therefore no Mozart. My mother, on the other hand, refused to have the birth certificate printed the way he wanted, insisting until the moment of my arrival that Arcangelo Corelli Sullivan was a horrible thing to foist on a child, like a three-headed monster of names. She was partial to Thomas, her father's name, and whatever it lacked in imagination it made up for in subtlety.

Thus, as the pangs of labor began, she held a delivery-bed filibuster, as she called it, keeping me out of this world until my father agreed to a compromise. In a moment less of inspiration than of desperation, I became Thomas Corelli Sullivan, and for better or worse, the name stuck. My mother hoped that I could hide my middle name between the other two, like sweeping dust beneath a rug. But my father, who believed there was much in a name, always said that Corelli without Arcangelo was like a Stradivarius without strings. He'd only given in to my mother, he claimed, because the stakes were much higher than she let on. Her filibuster, he used to say with a smile, was staged in the marriage bed, not on the delivery bed. He was the sort of man who thought a pact made in passion was the only good excuse for bad judgment.

I told Paul all of this, several weeks after we met.

"You're right," he said, when I told him my little airbrush metaphor. "Time is no da Vinci." He thought for a moment, then smiled in that gentle way of his. "Not even a Rembrandt. Just a cheap Jackson Pollock."

He seemed to understand me from the beginning.

All three of them did: Paul, Charlie, and Gil.



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