
The first time Jade and Shilling ever met (well I mean, Shilling calls it the first time they ever *really* met) was quite by chance. Okay, so Shilling was crazy about shoes, he always was. Historically, he has always had either bright or weird or real stylish shoes, always something about them that was different. And I don't know if people noticed, but I know some did. One time, he was riding in the back seat of this kid's car. This was back before Jade, when he had a few friends, one was Greg and the other Drake. Drake was driving and Greg was in the front seat, and for whatever reason Shilling was laying down on the back seat, with his feet hanging out of the window. And somehow, as they were driving, one of his shoes flew right off his foot, out of the car. When they went back to the spot, they couldn't find it. Shilling was pretty upset. He wasn't pissed, just sad. That's how Shilling got when he lost something. And I know it was only a shoe, but Shilling got real attached to stuff. Big time. These shoes especially, because they were these bright orange shoes. And orange was his favorite color, and he just thought these things were the greatest ever. He was in love with them. For the next day or two, he was pretty mopey.

Until one day Jade rung the doorbell. Shilling knew who she was, had spoken to her like two or three times but nothing ever more. He opened the door, and she held out his shoe before him. He was so happy, he actually hugged her right there on the spot. And maybe you think a lot of people would do that, but

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Shilling, he would never do that with someone he didn't know. He was way too shy, way way too shy. I guess he was just really happy to see his shoe and he didn't even realize what he was doing.

Jade said she was walking some dog and she saw it lying there. Or maybe it was just that she was going for a walk. Either way, she found it, and she said she knew just who it belonged to because Shilling was the kid with bright orange sneakers. That was how she knew Shilling as, the kid with bright orange sneakers. And when she tried to find out who Shilling was so she could return it, she asked her friends, what's the name of the bright orange sneaker kid? And they didn't know who she was talking about. Eventually, someone figured it out and Jade drove on over to the house with the prize in hand.

They didn't exactly hit it off from there. It was more of a slow thing, they both were pretty unusual characters. Jade was aggressive in a very very strange way with people she found interesting. Shilling was always too shy to ever really actively try to form a relationship, but for people he wanted to be friends with, he definitely wouldn't resist an invitation.

All I remember is there was this girl named Jade, and for the next few days all Shilling did was talk about her.

"Okay, so." Shilling took Jades shoulders, sort of gave her a playful shake.

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"So. I'm writing this story. Trying to write it. And here's what happens." They were sitting on the grass, right outside this shopping area with a grocery store and a few little stores. They were sort of just lounging. See, here's the thing. And I know this is like off topic, but it's worth noting. The reason they were there on the grass was because of Chocolate War, that book by Roger Cormier. It was a childhood favorite of Shilling's, and there was this one part of the book that he just loved. Kind of strange, but there is this scene where I think the main character and his friend are lying on the grass, just lounging, in front of the town shop area or something. And they are there for the purpose of checking out gals. Chick watching. So Shilling had told Jade he'd always always wanted to do it, and since they were going to be off to college in like two weeks, he considered this his last chance. He somehow thought Jade was the most appropriate accomplice in this escapade, and there they were. "What happens is, there's this guy who has been going out with this gal for a long long time time. Right? And he really doesn't want to lose her. She tells him, she says she's leaving him, but he doesn't want her to. But really, in the back of his head he knew all along that she wasn't right for him. Like, the reason he had wanted to hold on was for something long term, even though he absolutely knew they weren't really meant to be. She wasn't really what he wanted, but it was this stupid idea that he *needed* companionship to be happy. And he realizes all this after the whole break up, like after a few weeks of complete misery." He dug his palms into the grass and leaned back. His shoulder blades sort of arched, high above where the shoulders meet the neck. "And, I'm

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not asking about your approval here, because I'm definitely going to write it and I think it's good and I want to write it. The reason I mention it is because I want to ask you sort of a research question. I mean, I've never really been in a relationship for real, so there wasn't really any way I could know this, although I have an idea. But, what I was wondering was, what does it leave you with? Well, not the breakup itself, but more the gap. And what happens when you get a new person to replace the old person? I'm gonna have the main character move on to someone else, thinking that's the answer, then find it's not at all. I was just wondering, what's it really like?" He looked at Jade, then looked away kind of quick. One of those 'just so you know I'm finished' looks.

Jade didn't say anything. She lowered both of her eyebrows, so they kind of hung dramatically over her eyes. Then she relaxed and was still for a while. "Well," she began after a bit, "it's definitely a gap. Like, it's so real that you feel like you could point the gap out to someone on the street or something. And then, you try to fill the gap with someone else. At least, that's what you were asking about. But really, the gap, it doesn't get filled. People say that it does, but really every person leaves his own gap. In fact, you realize that, well it's not really a gap. At least, I thought so. What I think it's more like is a butt groove. Yeah, sounds stupid or whatever, but it's true. It's more like a butt groove, like one you make in your couch from sitting there for so long. It's yours, you know? It's your butt groove, it fits you real good. Butts don't fit into grooves that aren't theirs." She stopped. Shilling waited for her to continue, to explain, but she was done.

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That was her metaphor, and she would have stuck by it if you challenged her.

Butt grooves.

After a while Shilling said, "Butt grooves. Hmm. That just might look pretty goddamn good on paper, you know? It might it might."

The other part of Chocolate War that really stuck with Shilling was that scene near the end where the kid got the crap beat out of him. The first time he read it Shilling was just... well, devastated. He couldn't believe it, didn't understand it, was really frustrated by it. And then, as the days went by, it grew on him. He liked it more and more. And more. Until one day, he came into my room. He barged in on me, I think I was actually asleep. And this was a while ago, like middle school. But he barged on in, woke me up, and said to me, "It's been driving me crazy! I hate it, I hate it, I hate it! What a horrible, foul... *evil* ending!" Then he got real still, looked around like he had just woke up, and said, "It's freaking brilliant!"

Jade turned to Shilling. "You know, there aren't really any hotties around, but I'm still having fun."

"Yeah me too." He said it real fast, like he wasn't paying attention. He was too engulfed in doing nothing, I guess.

Jade dropped her elbows to the side and put her back to the ground. She looked at the sky, then Shilling started to talk. "You know, sometimes I really feel left out. Like, sometimes I feel like I get not invited to things on purpose, because people want to leave me out. I mean, sometimes they probably just never even

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thought about inviting me, or they just assumed if I wanted to come I would ask or something." Shilling words came out in this sort of jerk. Like, I don't know, it just wasn't natural is all. It was like he was coughing. Or like he had just been broken, after days of torture he was finally giving in. Except it was probably more like, after years of him feeling this way he was finally admitting it. He didn't offer up his weaknesses and insecurities too often. When he did, it was usually in chunks, like all in one week, then months would go by before he would even acknowledge what he said. Jade had pretty much learned to let him say all he wanted, not interrupt or try to force stuff out of him if he didn't want to say more. I don't know if that was really the right approach, but I guess it was the approach that Shilling's personality caused people to take. "I don't know. I don't know what's wrong with me, but sometimes I just get so sad about it. I just feel like everybody is leaving me out. Everyone. I mean, sometimes I feel like you are too, even though we hang out all the time. It's so stupid. I get jealous or something. I guess it happened mostly before us kids were real close friends. But I have a feeling it's gonna happen tons in college. Like, since I have such a hard time bridging the gap or whatever you want to call it. I am gonna think nobody wants to be my friend, and maybe nobody *will* want to be my friend."

"Come on Shill, you know that's bull."

"No, I really don't. I want to write. But I don't want to be a writer. You know that? Isn't that weird? Like, I do want to be a writer, but I know being a writer can't fill my life. And that really makes me sad, to know that I can't do what I love. I'm

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still gonna write, nothing can stop me from writing, but I know I can't write for a living. It would kill me, Dede. It would absolutely kill me. I think I need to socialize for a living. Like, when people say 'making a living' or 'doing something for a living,' if you think about it that sort of means what you do in order to continue living, what you do so that your life doesn't end. If I relied on writing for that, I think I would die. I need people to live. I need to feel like I'm someone, like I'm important to others. Don't ask me why, I sort of feel like some people I know would call me a sell out or false or something, but I rely on others to justify my own existence, you know that? I do. I need to go out and do stuff with people, I need to hang with kids, I need to meet new people. That's what I need to make a life out of, that's what I need to do for a living. For a lot of people, that stuff is pretty secondary to them. But I think it needs to be definitely like first priority in my life. Two reasons, one because I need to put more effort into it to get out the same amount as other people, and the other because I have that whole insecurity thing where I need to be important to others. And I'm not just being self-obsessed or something, Dede. I'm not, really. Like, honestly I don't know what's gonna happen with my life."

"Maybe you'll change." She was still lying on the grass, looking at the sky.

"Maybe you won't need the same stuff as you do now, the whole *important in other peoples' lives* thing. I mean, maybe when you do start to think that nobody considers you important, or if you start to feel that way I mean, maybe then you will change. Maybe you won't crumble, you know? You think you're gonna

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crumble. Maybe you won't. Maybe you'll grow stronger. Maybe... maybe you'll find some new sort of independence." She lied there on the grass, turned on her side, away from Shilling. "I feel sick, Shill." She put her chin into her palm, turned her head to the side. "Sometimes life isn't fair and there's nothing you can do about it. Sometimes it isn't fair a lot more often for some people, and there's nothing they can do about it either. But sometimes life is really really too fair, too easy, and too good to people. Those people can do something about it, but they never do. They just sit on their luck, they take it, even though they don't have to. I guess whenever someone gets lucky, someone else gets unlucky. Maybe not always, but a lot of the time." She was crying. Real quiet, but Shilling knew something was wrong, figured she was crying or something close to it.

"Hey Dede, you know something?" He poked her in the back, put his hand on her shoulder. "You're right." He bit his lip. "You're goddamned right. You're absolutely goddamned right. Tons of people suffer. Sometimes it kills me, you know? It just kills me. But then, then I think to myself, how is letting it kill me helping anybody? You know, I can think about all the bad stuff that happens in the world all I want. And I can complain about how nobody is doing anything too. And eventually, maybe I can let it get to me so bad that it kills me. But that won't do a goddamned thing. That won't help anybody. What I can do is give up my luck, like you said. And you know, it makes me sad too, that nobody else wants to give up their luck, but getting upset over it doesn't help anything, Dede. It just doesn't. I plan on giving my luck up one of these days, you know. One of these

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days. I don't know if it's really appropriate for us to do anything though, until we're out of college. First we ought to get our education, so that way we can reach our full potential, you know? I guess that just might be complete bull, but I guess also what I'm saying is maybe it's okay to go with your luck and opportunities throughout the college years. These are gonna be the four most selfish years of our lives, you know. We're gonna be cutting ourselves off from the world, when we could be out there making a difference. But maybe it's needed, or maybe we deserve it. Or maybe it's all right for just these four years to be pretty freakin' lucky. The key is Dede, not to forget about the world in those four years of self-indulgence. As long as you manage that, nobody is ever gonna call you out for leading a selfish life, and you shouldn't call yourself out on it either."

They sat there on the lawn, in their shorts and t-shirts. Must of looked pretty strange to people walking by, a half-crying girl and a lounging guy on the lawn outside a shopping center. I don't know if I would really believe it if I saw it. Like, I would suspect something was going on, I wouldn't take it for what it was. But it was what it was.

"Hey Dede, I was thinking. You know how... like, people will tell you 'go out and live a little' or 'live life to the fullest' or something like that?" He waited for her response, and eventually she nodded her head real small like. "Well, I think they're wrong for saying that. Like, making the most out of something, you know? Who are they to say what the most out of something is? Like for instance, whenever I go out to eat with my family, we hardly say a word. We just, you

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know, don't talk when we eat too much, and don't really talk before or after. And some people would say, that isn't making the most out of life. Like, that isn't living life to the fullest. But I was thinking. What about people who just don't talk as much as other people? Like, you know, the people in groups of friends who just don't talk a whole lot, they add stuff every once in a while. There are definitely people who dominate conversations. But does that really mean they're living more than anyone else? Does that mean they are making the most of their lives? I think, I don't know. I think if someone wants to sit at home and watch television, if that's how he wants to live his life and it makes him happy for real, then why is that any worse than going out with friends? I mean, in some ways it's better. At least there's no alcohol involved. But I mean, I like to hang out with other people, but sometimes I feel constrained by this sort of social expectation or pressure or something. Like, friday nights I feel like shit for staying home even if I *want* to stay home. I hate that, you know? I hate that stuff. It shouldn't be that way. I mean, someone who is really quiet, imagine how much less he talks, how much less he says than other people in their whole combined lives. But did he miss out on anything? Did he really not live life to the fullest? Not at all. If anything, it's probably excessive talking and doing that makes you miss out on life, because living life isn't just about what a lot of people consider 'living life to the fullest.' It's not about being busy all the time, fitting all you can into one life. It's about doing what you want when you want to do it, and you know being responsible about it at the same time. I don't know, maybe I'm just being stupid or something. But

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there's definitely something right in what I'm saying, you know Dede? I mean, it's not about trying to fit all you can into life, right?"

"Shill," she said, and turned around to face him, "you're definitely on to something." She smiled, wet cheeks, hair messy, sort of just a mess all over, but still Jade, still lovely. "And I mean, I don't mean to be mean or anything, but I definitely already realized that. I think lots of people realize that. It's funny, I feel like you are trying to make this point to this whatever group of people out there, but for some reason you're telling me when I'm not really part of that group. I guess there isn't exactly any particular way you can tell them all."

"Well, I wasn't trying to like attack anyone, but I just think people are way too business-like these days. I think some people get scared or something when they don't have something written into their little schedule for every hour of every day." Shilling wrote a lot of stories and all, he had a pretty good work ethic so he was pretty much writing every night for at least an hour. He would always come out saying things he saw that he thought were wrong in society, and one time I asked him why he never put any of that stuff into his writing. He told me he couldn't possibly do that. He said he would put out what he thought to be real in his writing, and let it stand on its own, so people could decide for themselves. He told me he could only ever write anything even close to half good when it was real, like by real he didn't mean nonfiction, he meant... well, real from his heart or something like that. I don't know if he would have stayed with that philosophy for an entire career, seems pretty hard to do to me. Seems like you would be

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restricting yourself, personally I say write about whatever you want, whatever you need to write about. And if you don't want or need to write about anything, then you shouldn't be writing. That's what I say, but that's just my opinion, you know.

I don't think Jade ever suggested it to him, that he 'reach an audience' for his little societal critiques through writing. I think if Jade had, though, Shilling probably would have had a harder time explaining it all. Because I think to Jade, he makes the case sort of that that stuff *is* from his heart, that he really believes in it. But I think the truth is the way he presents it to me, that the whole societal critique stuff is really pretty much from his head, not his heart.

There was this one time when Shilling was racing in this go-cart. This was when he was in middle school, and his friend owned two go-carts and they were racing them around in the back yard. The kid had this course there, this sort of dirt circle. He said not to go out of it, otherwise you would ruin the yard and his dad would get real mad at him or something. But they were racing, and Shilling wasn't exactly the crazy driver type, but he had never really been in a go-cart that was so intense. These things had big engines that cost like thousands of dollars and all. So they were driving, and this other kid started to go pretty fast, and he was good at it. Shilling sped up to try to keep up, but he just couldn't control it. At one point, he turned way too much and went right through the big thing of yard in the center of the circle (it was a real big circle). He tore up all the grass where he drove, mud and everything (I think it had rained recently), and he sort of panicked and didn't stop, and went on all over the yard until he finally ran into a bush.

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Meanwhile this other kid was yelling at him, telling him to stop. I imagine it would have been a pretty hilarious sight, but pretty embarrassing for Shilling. But that wasn't the end. The dad came home pretty soon after and saw, and he yelled at Shilling, really yelled at him. Then the dad said Shilling had to fix it all up, grow grass back, shovel dirt back on it, make it look perfect. I think this guy even said Shilling deserved a spanking or something. It really freaked him out. He went home, real scared, not crying because he was holding it in, but pretty darned close to crying.

The next day, Shilling did something real strange. He went back to the kid's house, knocked on his door, and the mom answered. Shilling asked for the dad, and the dad came. Shilling said to this guy, I mean I don't know exactly word for word but it went something like this, "You are the scum of the earth. You have no right to yell at me like that. It was an accident, and I will die before I spend one minute fixing up your yard." Then he walked away, didn't really give them time to respond. They called up our mom, told her all about it. Mom got real mad at Shilling, he got punished. It was really the only time in his life he ever got punished by our parents. And then my parents, they made him fix up the lawn. But then apparently this kid's dad had changed his mind, and he got a landscaper to do it instead. I don't think Shilling ever really talked to that kid again, it was all real strange. He can get real real courageous when he's like that. When he's mad and filled with like a cause like that. When he thinks he's been done wrong like that.

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Jade and Shilling sat on that little piece of grass out in front of the shopping center for a while. They finally left when they got hungry, decided to go get a quick snack across the street at Phil's Pizza. Some cheese fries and two fountain drinks.