

Look Down,  
This Is Where It Must  
Have Happened

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Hal Niedzviecki

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## Special Topic: Terrorism

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The bat thudded against the window. Peter felt it — broken glass in his gut — though the window didn't break. No alarm went off. The window still sat in its frame, intact but in pieces like an assembled jigsaw. Laurie was wearing a crimson scarf that covered most of her face. Her long hair glimmered in the dark night and made Peter think of the ninja girl character in *Mortal Kombat 3*. Racist, Peter admonished himself. Or sexist. Something, anyway. Laurie poked the window with the bat. The whole thing fell apart.

Nice, Star growled. Peter had gone to high school with Star. When he walked into Advanced Social Theory 303Y (Special Topic: Terrorism) on the first day of class in his third year of university, he immediately noticed her sitting nonchalantly in the back row, bare legs protruding out of a short skirt and dangling over the seat in front of her. Surprising himself, he had climbed the steps. Hey, he said. Hey, she said back, her blue eyes already on him, a mimetic echo of his lost adolescent self, only three years removed. Star smiled, her lips full, her teeth straight

and white. Didn't you go to my high school? she asked jovially. I . . . yeah . . . I think . . . Peter said. Star had been in his tenth grade advanced algebra class, his eleventh grade geometry and English classes, and his twelfth grade honors history class. She was one of a group of smart girls who were also cheerleaders. Peter always sat behind her in the classes they had together. At night, he would think of her, the way her long blond hair cascaded over her shoulders.

Tonight Star was dressed in dirty jeans and a faded dark blue track jacket. Peter stood next to her. Despite the grungy clothes, she smelled of soap and fallen leaves. Hey Petey! Star yelled. Peter startled. They were waiting for him. He stepped forward. The shattered glass under his sneakers sounded like snow. It was October. Next month, there would be snow. Peter stopped in front of the space where the window had been and looked in. The vehicle was massive, one of those supersized trucks that seemed built to intimidate. Peter was six-foot-three but skinny like a weed. Peter glanced over at Laurie, who shrugged. Laurie Chung, lithe, quiet, fourth-year poli-sci to Peter's third-year sociology. She was also way out of his league. For sure she had a boyfriend. At the campus coffee shop Star had talked about greenhouse gasses and rich assholes who don't give a shit about the planet or anyone but themselves. Assholes, Peter thought. Laurie was short. Star was taller, but still only came up to the top of the door of the bulky truck. Even Peter had to stand on his toes to reach through to the lock. That's why they were waiting for him to do it. Plus they had agreed that everyone would play an integral part. Those were Star's words. *Integral*. So nobody could say afterward that they didn't actually do anything, that they were just there because it was an assignment.

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Who wants to start? Deirdre snapped. Today was the beginning of a series of classes that would revolve around groups reporting on their projects. Deirdre's nasal voice seemed more monotone than usual, like she wasn't just bored but bored with being bored. My name is Deirdre Mulligan, she had told them on the first day of class. Call me Deirdre. If you call me Doctor or Professor or Ms. Mulligan I'll fail you. Deirdre twitched her lips into what might have been a grin but nobody else smiled or laughed. *I'll fail you*, Peter wrote in his notebook.

Deirdre wore short salt-and-pepper hair and an icy glare floating just underneath her thick black glasses. Every time she swung her gaze Peter's way, he felt a little bit sick. All the previous summer, back at home and working as an intern at his father's marketing firm, he'd had a similar feeling. He copied reports and filled his empty belly with cold water from the cooler in the file room. His stomach gurgled, signaling the approach of lunch hour. Nobody talked to him. His university years were going by. He had drifted into sociology. He was good at math and English, but not all that great at either. Sociology, so reliant on statistics — a combination of numbers and writing about the meaning of numbers — came easy to him. Next year he would graduate. He'd never had a girlfriend. He was thinking vaguely about a career in law enforcement.

I anxiously await a volunteer, Deirdre announced petulantly. Peter looked over at Star, sitting next to him. Star's blond hair formed a curtain, obscuring her face. She was writing in her notebook. What was she writing? Samson Okalow put his hand up. Samson was from Africa. Peter didn't know his story: if he was an exchange student or what.

Okay, Deirdre said, pointing at Samson. Come up and bring the rest of your group with you. The three members of the group gathered. Deirdre relocated, moving from the lectern to a seat in the front row. Peter's belly rolled anxiously. He thought of the look that might appear on Deirdre's face when they assembled in front of her for their report — gangly Peter standing in between Star and Laurie, the two hottest girls in the class. He shook his head, trying to get the image out of his mind. His stomach flipped, queasy and empty. You didn't have breakfast, he told himself. Peter usually stopped at Starbucks for a coffee and a muffin. In class they had talked about the corporation as a tool of patriarchal cyborg capitalism. Star had nodded seriously. Peter didn't really get it. What did cyborgs have to do with terrorism? Anyway, he was avoiding Starbucks.

I will begin now, yes, thank you. Samson swallowed, his thick Adam's apple bobbing. Our cause is the plight of the people of Chad. We demand that the Western governments stop supporting this brutal puppet administration and that corporations stop doing business with this corrupt regime. We want a complete ban on all transactions with Chad until democracy and human rights can be enacted. Our aim is to pressure the governments of the West into forcing the regime to either step down or drastically alter their policies of political repression, mass execution, blatant cronyism, and ongoing destruction of the natural environment for the sake of oil development.

Peter was impressed. Samson seemed genuinely offended on behalf of the people of Chad. Samson was the only black person in the class. Laurie, sitting on the other side of Star, was Chinese. She probably had family there or something. China was full of repression and stuff. They should have done something on China. Peter had never heard of Chad before.

Samson continued: Yes, thank you, for our first action we wrote letters to —

You're a terrorist organization, Deirdre interrupted. You don't write letters. You're not some namby-pamby nonprofit working for change. You already tried that. You already sent letters. For years you sent letters, but nothing ever changed. Now you're angry, ready to take matters into your own hands.

Yes, Samson continued. The letters instruct that one individual will be killed for each week that our demands are ignored. Corporations dealing with Chad as well as government agencies will be targeted. We will send letter bombs.

Excuse me? Professor, uh, Deirdre? A plain, pudgy girl peeked out from behind Samson's shoulder. Isn't that, I mean, don't you think that's a little . . . extreme?

Terrorists are extremists, Deirdre said flatly. Remember, you became terrorists because you've been marginalized, subdued. Your concerns and needs have been not just ignored but actively suppressed. You're not just angry, you're furious.

Deirdre got up from her seat. She strode behind the group and wrote in big letters on the chalkboard: *Angry + Organized = Complacent. Furious + Organized = Terrorist*. Peter scribbled the two equations down in his notebook. He liked it when words could be added up. He glanced over at Star: still writing furiously.

So what's next? Deirdre asked the group as she reclaimed her seat in the front. Did you get any response from the letters?

Yes, thank you, Samson said uncertainly. We are awaiting response.

Your demands will go unmet.

Samson nodded soberly.

You'll have to kill someone.

That girl again: But I'm not comfortable with —

Already the cell is cleaving, said Deirdre with obvious relish. Interesting. Groups based on moral convictions and aimed at political solutions are notoriously difficult to keep together.

I just — the girl looked like she was going to cry.

If you compromise you will die. Think about how your group will be able to stay together and maintain a cohesive ideology and action plan. Now, what about the practical side of things? Your plan is very ambitious. Who's going to make the bombs?

The third member of the group stepped forward. I'm in chemical engineering, he said simply. I can make a bomb. The engineer-in-training was pudgy and nondescript, but Peter was impressed with his confidence. Again Peter looked over at Star. She had put down her pen and was inspecting her nails. We don't need him, Peter thought. We're not doing bombs.

It wasn't hard to find another vehicle to trash. They met on campus and rode the subway to Glebedale, a downtrodden area sometimes called Crackdale. Artists taking advantage of the cheap rent had paved the way and the neighborhood was now dotted with nightclubs, trendy restaurants and exclusive galleries oozing faux bohemian style and private security. At night, the desultory residential side streets surrounding the main strip were strewn with flashy vehicles driven down from the suburbs and parallel-parked in front of dilapidated row houses. Peter walked slowly, cautiously bringing up the rear. They were far from the landscaped campus of imposing stone buildings attached to modern glassed-in expansions. A breeze blew and Star's hair flared, almost touching his nose. He breathed in.

They turned onto a small one-way street heading west. There, Star half whispered. Peter tracked her gaze to a Humvee, bright yellow and brand new. It was parked in front of a crumbling brick

house adorned with a square of meticulously groomed, fenced-in green grass. The windows of the house were dark, covered by layers of graying lace curtain. The group stood on the sidewalk surveying the scene. Peter imagined two old people spending their nights peering out from behind the curtains and whispering to each other in some forgotten language. The street was empty, the driver of the Humvee nowhere to be seen. He's off partying, Peter thought. He'll probably bring some girl back and do her right here in his truck. Peter felt acid surge in his stomach. He wasn't a virgin. He'd had sex with the skinny girl three doors down from him in residence. That was back in first year. They'd both been a little drunk.

Laurie pulled a thick wrench out of her backpack. Star took out her camera. They'd agreed that from now on they should take pictures. Of course they wouldn't show their faces in the shots — just the damage they'd wrought on behalf of their still nameless group. Star said they needed documentation. Star said that people needed to *see what could happen if they refused to rethink their relationship to the planet.*

Laurie swung the wrench at the Humvee's narrow, tanklike passenger side window. The wrench bounced off. Laurie hit again, then again. The window dented and scraped, but didn't buckle. The sound of the wrench ricocheting off the glass echoed down the street. Every time Laurie's wrench made contact, Peter felt his stomach flip.

Laurie raised the wrench over her head and slammed it into the window. The wrench flew out of her hand and clattered to the sidewalk. Shit! Laurie said, grabbing her arm. That hurt!

Let Petey try, Star said. Peter shrugged, bent down and picked up the tool. The handle was still slick from Laurie's palm. He wasn't sure how hard he could hit the window without hurting

himself. There was surely some optimal velocity. He didn't want to come off all macho, so he just did an average swing and hit the window. The impact rang up his arm and all the way into his brain. Everything below his shoulder went numb. Distant laughter echoed past the ringing in his ears. Maybe we should go, Laurie said, holding her arm awkwardly. Peter looked at Star. She was smiling, showing small white teeth, the camera dangling off her neck and between her breasts. Peter hit again, harder this time. He kept hitting. He was no longer trying to find the optimal velocity. When he finally stopped, the window was buckled but not smashed. It had peeled away from the frame. Peter leaned into it with his elbow and it gave all at once, pulling him partway into the front seat.

The girls dragged him out. Peter held on to the wrench. His right arm was completely numb. He stood on the sidewalk breathing heavily while they went to work. Nice stereo, he heard Star say, followed by an evil laugh. She had brought a glue gun with her. The smell of noxious adhesive drifted through the window. Peter sucked air through his mouth, feeling suddenly nauseated. Laurie had moved to the back, was slashing the seats with a box cutter. Now Star was painting with her aerosol. Suddenly Peter heard footsteps. He turned to see the owner of the vehicle standing next to him. He was a short, burly guy with a crew cut. He exuded the heavy scent of cologne and tequila. The man made a face at the scene in front of him. What the hell? he said. He took a step forward. It's cool, Peter said loudly. Dude, it's cool. It's your lucky night. He thought he'd make it sound like a contest or something. Then they could run for it. The doors swung open and Laurie and Star slipped out, slinky and otherworldly in their jeans and black tops. Star went up to the guy, still standing there, mouth hanging open. Hi, she said. She

had the aerosol of paint in one hand and the spray gun of glue in the other. The guy looked at her, confused. Star brought both cans up and let him have it. The bright yellow on his forehead matched the Humvee's paint job. Glue oozed off his tongue. The dude fell to his knees, spitting and clawing at his eyes.

They didn't stop running until they were back on the subway. Star and Laurie sat next to each other giggling compulsively, shoulders and thighs rubbing. They were alone in the car. Peter sat across, watching them and smiling uncertainly. Every time he thought they were going to stop laughing, Star would yell something: Dude, it's cool! or It's your lucky night! and they would both start up again. The subway opened its doors at the stops and their laughter echoed through near-empty stations. He was relieved when they finally got off the train. He trailed behind as they walked the few blocks to Laurie's apartment.

Laurie's place felt like a high school girl's bedroom. Stuff was everywhere — slinky clothes, dirty juice glasses, fashion magazines. Peter didn't know what he should look at. He guiltily alternated between the girls laughing and hugging each other and a sheer white tank top draped over a chair. Both sights made him feel uneasy.

Laurie poured all of them big mugs of cheap red wine.

Cheers, Star said, brandishing her mug. Here's to our lucky night!

Our lucky night! yelled Laurie.

Everyone clinked. Peter gulped at his wine. He wasn't much of a drinker. Laurie cleared magazines and clothing off a stained couch, and the three of them sat down next to each other. It was quiet in the apartment. The wine immediately went to Peter's head. He felt thick and distant. He pictured that guy, the dude, writhing

on the dark gloomy sidewalk. When he got up what would he do? Would he call the police? An ambulance? A tow truck?

Hey, Laurie finally said, let's see the pictures! Star was in the middle. She held the camera and Peter and Laurie leaned in as she flipped through the images. Peter could feel her hip against his leg. Star's body was buoyant, luxurious. Peter knew nothing about her. He remembered from high school that her father was a doctor. That they lived in a leafy upscale neighborhood about twenty blocks from his own. In eleventh grade Peter delivered fliers in that neighborhood as an after-school job. Trudging up latticed walkways through perfectly groomed front lawns, he had liked to imagine that Star was watching him from an upstairs window.

Now he was sitting next to her. Peter gripped his mug of wine, peered at the tiny viewfinder. The pictures started with the pristine yellow Humvee. It stood out in the dark like some kind of exotic jungle bird accidentally released into the dirty city. Suddenly there was a hole in the vehicle's rectangular passenger window. Then slashed seats. Then the expensive stereo thick with gooey glue. As the pictures progressed, Star and Laurie got more and more excited. Holy shit! Look at that! That's awesome! Oh my god, how much glue did you *use*? Finally the last image: *SUV=Death* neatly, girlishly spray painted across the wide dashboard. That looks great, Laurie said. Peter could feel the heat of Star's body next to him. At some point she'd taken off her black hoody. Underneath she was wearing a thin T-shirt. He could see her bra straps. Her bare freckled arms. When he leaned in to look at the pictures he could see the top of her breasts. Star and Laurie were still talking about the owner.

What an ape!

I know!

Did you hear what Petey said to that guy?

What'd you say again, Petey?

He said, Dude, it's your lucky day!

Peter smiled a bit.

Ha! Laurie laughed.

You know what we should do, Star said through giggles. We should do a reenactment! For Deirdre! For our class presentation!

Ha! Stop making me laugh!

Dude! Star imitated. It's cool!

Laurie laughed harder then shrieked awkwardly. Oww! It hurts! She grabbed her arm.

We should take a look at that, Star said.

It's my shoulder, Laurie said. I definitely pulled something.

Is there swelling? We should see if there's swelling. You might have torn a muscle.

No, no, it's not that bad. I'm okay.

Laurie was holding her arm awkwardly. The adrenaline of the night was wearing off. Peter wondered what time it was. It's not like he wasn't used to late nights. He often stayed up till 3 or 4 AM playing Nintendo with his roommates.

C'mon, Star insisted. Let's get that jacket off. Laurie leaned back and let Star unzip her blue windbreaker. Star slipped it off and Laurie breathed a pained oww as the sleeve tugged her arm straight. Now the T-shirt, so we can check it out, Star said.

But —

It's just Petey! Star said.

Peter stared straight ahead, pretended to be trying to make out the titles of a column of books stacked on the dirty carpet.

T-shirt off, Laurie sat in her bra as Star prodded her shoulder. Does that hurt? That? Star massaged the affected area. It's

definitely swollen, said Star. Maybe we should put a heating pad on it or something.

Ice, Peter said, still peering into the gloomy disarray of the living room. You want to put ice on it if it's swelling. Heat it later, after the swelling's come down.

Abruptly he turned to look at them. Star was kneading Laurie's bare shoulder. Laurie's eyes were closed. Her small breasts pushed against the lace of a flesh-colored bra.

Okay, ice, Star said. Petey, see if there's anything in the freezer?

Peter got up, made his way to the kitchen. When he came back empty handed — there was nothing in the freezer but a package of tofu dogs and a tub of chocolate ice cream encrusted with frost — Star was straddling Laurie's lap. Laurie was leaning back on the couch, flushed. Peter stood there watching. He wanted to leave, but his legs wouldn't move. He felt like he was sinking into the carpet. He would always remember that feeling, that moment — a submerged imprinted memory; a longing gone so deep it was almost painful. Thirty years later, at the funeral of his wife, dead of breast cancer a month after Peter's fifty-second birthday, he would feel that desperate needy longing sinking into him again. He would break down sobbing.

Star kneaded Laurie's naked shoulder. How's that? she asked.

It's my lucky day, Laurie murmured.

Both girls giggled.

Peter cleared his throat.

Uh, he said . . . there was no ice.

Star hopped off Laurie's lap.

We're ignoring poor Petey. She went over to him, pulled him into her. Are you okay, Petey?

He nodded into her.

Here, she said. Have some more wine. Star pushed off him, grabbed the bottle and poured, spilling liberally as she filled up the mugs. Laurie tugged on a sweater.

I went to high school with Petey, Star said, swinging her arm around his shoulder.

Aww . . . Laurie said. That's so cute.

Deirdre never started class by asking if there were any questions. Nor did she, as was customary with Peter's other instructors, recap key points and suggest where they could go for help and more information. She just marched to the podium and started talking.

She spoke without notes in her clipped tone about the commodification of dissent, the rise of the pseudoindividual and the Borg-like nature of contemporary society. She devoted a lengthy tirade to the tired passive-aggressive postmodernism of dead faggy Frenchies hiding behind the defeatism of their own self-perpetuating methodology of helplessness. Peter followed along by studying Star's expressions and frantic note taking. Star smiled, nodded, grimaced. Every time Star changed expression he wrote down another seemingly disconnected phrase. *Frenchies. Allayed apparatuses. Borg-like (Star Trek?)*. There were moments when he thought he knew what Deirdre was trying to get at, but the impassioned, emotionless flow of words kept coming and he was soon lost. Peter was starting to dread what he was sure was the inevitable announcement of a final exam. The course ended in early December and no essay had been assigned. There would have to be a final. What questions would be asked? Despite the course description, very little of what Deirdre said seemed to do with terrorism. Deirdre had not once mentioned 9/11, al-Qaeda,

the Taliban, George Bush Jr., Iraq, Israel, or even the Middle East. She just droned on, as if the constant barrage of her words alone would destroy the SUVs, the fascist forces of Chad, the university, everything. Peter looked over at Star. She was biting her lower lip, moodily contemplating something that Peter knew she wouldn't explain even if he asked. He wouldn't ask. He looked at his watch. Forty-five minutes of class time had passed. Maybe Deirdre had forgotten about group presentations? Part of him hoped she had. But then they'd just have to go on Friday. His stomach twisted, twisted again: tighter.

Deirdre stopped talking. The class rustled, spooked out of their torpor by the sudden silence. All right, who's up? she snapped icily. Who's next?

Star slipped from her seat and before Peter could react she was down in front of the class with her laptop. Petey, she called to him, will you make this work? His stomach lurched. Star stood in front of the in-class projection unit. They hadn't talked about anything like that. Deirdre scowled at the delay. Embarrassed, Peter lumbered down the rows. He crouched behind the display console. It only took a few minutes to connect the laptop to the projector. He lowered the large in-class screen and Star logged in to the 'Net. She clicked on a bookmark that linked to a photo-sharing site. Star hovered the pointer over "start slide show" and Peter's stomach knotted. Star put her hand on his shoulder. Petey, you're in the way. She led him to the side. Laurie dimmed the lights.

The slide show started with scenes of smokestacks and clear-cut patches of forest. Quickly it moved on to various famines and swatches of desert. And then a series of cars, each one getting larger and larger and culminating in a parking lot of oversized SUVs. Finally, it ended with the glowing yellow Humvee, the

shots he'd seen in Laurie's apartment. The class was totally silent as the destruction of the vehicle was documented. Only the final shot of their spray-painted slogan — *SUV=Death* — elicited a whispered *holy shit* and a nervous giggle from a cluster off to the side. The darkness obscured the whisperers and Deirdre didn't react at all.

The slide show ended. Laurie turned on the lights. Peter blinked. Star was already moving to the center of the room, talking. Star was wearing overalls, a baseball cap and light blue eye shadow. Peter looked at her, the way her curves pushed against denim. He looked down at his shoes.

Think global, act local, she said in a voice inflected with cheerleader cheer. That's our group's motto. Our plan, as you could probably tell from the slide show, is to engage in a war of intimidation against the gas-guzzling pollution-spewing SUV. We are systematically targeting locally owned vehicles in order to discourage purchase, cause an increase in insurance costs, and destroy resale values. Ultimately we hope to destabilize the market for these vehicles, leading to the extinction of the SUV. Star ended triumphantly, her voice tinged with righteousness. Dierdre sat in the front row, scowling. Peter felt himself start to sweat. He just wanted to disappear. Star seemed unperturbed, a faint pink sheen on her freckled cheeks. Then Laurie stepped forward. She held a small sheaf of note cards. To date we've destroyed two vehicles, she reported matter-of-factly. In each action we completely vandalized the interior and spray painted our slogan on the dashboard. The attacks have been documented for use in the next phase, a propaganda campaign.

Let me stop you right there, snapped Deirdre. Your documentation may be . . . here Peter was surprised that Deirdre, staring directly at Star, seemed momentarily at a loss for words.

Uh . . . it may be . . . it's very . . . impressive. But of course, as I'm sure you're aware, in this class we don't deal with . . . uh . . . actualities. Deirdre was still staring at Star, her flat tongue darting out to lick her lips. After all, we must always remember the terrorist adage: Trust no one. Even in this classroom there could be those who are not fully . . . uh . . . committed to the causes and projects, individuals who might seek to disrupt that which is, of course, entirely and utterly hypothetical in its construction.

That said, continued Deirdre, still staring at Star but now picking up speed, returning to her usual laconic yet rapid-fire delivery, I'm sure that the documentation we saw today is entirely conjectural in nature. Again she looked at Star, this time with a trace of a smile on her thin lips. Star was half smiling too. Peter didn't get it — what was she smiling about? Deirdre was going to fail them. She hated them. The class rustled again, a herd of beasts disturbed by Deirdre's pronouncements about a potential snake in their midst. Now, Deirdre said, let's look at the issue of creating grassroots terror. You are aware, of course, that your plans hinge on copycat groups and increased public participation in your campaign. A few wrecked SUVs a week is hardly going to cripple the industry.

Star stepped forward. Our plan from here is to escalate our own attacks even as we use the Internet — taking into account security risks — to attract new, loosely affiliated cells who can act on their own. We're still trying to decide how best to do this — we've been talking about creating a website, posting videos, starting a chain e-mail and a few other possibilities.

Peter looked from Star to Deirdre and back again. They hadn't been talking to him about any of that.

The media is deliberately not reporting our efforts, announced Laurie, again reading from her cards. It's a way of suppressing

the possibility of the revolution spreading. Laurie went on with the pros and cons of their future plans. While she talked, Peter watched Deirdre. He didn't like the way her pointy tongue kept licking her lips. When had all this planning happened? Maybe after he left that night? Had they kept talking then? They could have at least told him.

What about you? What do you have to say for yourself?

Laurie nudged him with an elbow. *Pete*, she hissed.

Huh?

Wakey wakey, Deirdre said contemptuously. You are a part of this group, yes?

Uh . . . maybe we could . . . put it on YouTube? Peter saw Star nod like she thought that was a good idea. Encouraged, he continued. Because . . . then it could go viral? And . . . and like Star said, we could get more members. We could put up an e-mail address or something, some way for other people to contact us. It could maybe even spread to other cities and countries . . . and . . .

Peter trailed off. He wasn't big on talking in front of groups. But Star seemed pleased with his concept.

How do you keep from being infiltrated by law enforcement? Deirdre asked flatly. She blinked slowly. Peter felt a welling of dislike moving from his stomach to his throat. She thought she was so smart. He swallowed.

We could post from different Internet cafés, rent computer time at Kinko's. Nobody would know who we were. We could have an account with Gmail or Hotmail under a fake name. Anybody who wanted to join could join, and we could talk via e-mail, but we'd never meet anyone. Not unless they proved for sure they were for real. We wouldn't tell them too much too soon.