

# The First American September of Tyler Walsh

(An excerpt from "I Land")

Sept. 22, 2012: He'd expected less motion, that was for sure. Tyler looked around his apartment, at the stacks of textbooks and dinner plates reinforcing the corners, at the boxes with stringy masking tape still muffling the lids, at the air mattress with two blankets draped over it like a crime scene body, and wondered again when he'd get used to falling asleep without the Pacific's *swush-slush-swush-slush* playing outside his windows in surround sound. He'd been off the island for a week now, and it had always felt like the world was in constant motion there—but in a way that also felt purposeful, and pleasant. The sun would arc brilliantly across a sky of hurried clouds, beneath which V-flocks of gulls and passenger jets soared and thrummed. Every month, a small boat with some of Dad's friends in it would come to the dock, and play some ping-pong or basketball with him before unloading the food and toiletry supplies and heading back where they came from. Here in Long Beach, though, it was like everybody, from airport security to the cabbies, was late for an appointment and trying to outrun a rodeo bull at the same time—it was a painful sort of motion. Truth was, seeing the “real world” straight though his own eyes had all the options of a desktop monitor but none of the luxury. There was no screensaver for entertainment's sake if a problem was taking too long to resolve.

He looked down at the sheet of notebook paper in his hand—quarter-folded, dotted translucent with sweat and fast food grease. He sat down in his desk chair (ostensibly a rolling one, but a single wheel had become stuck in neutral) and opened the page, exposing a brief list. Number One had already been accomplished, with considerable help from his parents:

## 1 – Get an apartment

He smirked; his penmanship was terrible. That could've easily read “Got a spumoni.”

## 2 – Go to college

That was coming right up! And it was a pretty respectable one, too: the local California State branch. His chest reflexively stung as he remembered typing out his resume and personal statement, desperately trying to spin how a decade of home-schooling, tropical fishing, and light mechanical engineering made him qualified for a major university. But as it turned out, that was almost all it took; these kinds of schools were looking for kids with something *unique* to offer. “Scholarship and service are important,” the Cal State site pronounced, “but there has to be a real *person* behind the numbers!”

Dad and his connections probably helped a lot, too, being... well, *him*. But still: a real person. Behind the numbers. Tyler didn't know if there was anyone else who got motivated by a blurb on a college admissions webpage, but maybe that was another one of those things that would set him apart.

### 3 – Get a girlfriend—a nice one

He ran a hand through his rowdy brown hair, sending a few stray strands plinking down upon the paper. Now that was going to get a little trickier.

*Sept. 24, 2012:* “Hey,” someone shouted, “That Island Kid!”

Tyler smiled, squinting, and gave a short wave—a raise of the hand, really, like one of those lucky cat figurines. Through the hard mid-morning sunlight, he couldn't make out anything other than the twin glare of the speaker's glasses. It wasn't a big deal, though; he'd be hearing it again by the time he crossed the quad. “Hang four!” the guy shouted, and experienced an apparently double-over-worthy burst of snickering.

Tyler snickered courteously in return as the pair finally passed, but it felt like he was pinching himself through the entire encounter. God, why did he ever come up with that catchphrase? Of course he knew what *caused* him to say it (not like the internet would let him forget it)—he'd mixed

up the sayings “ten-four” and “hang ten” when he was a kid, and when he relayed the story during an episode in 2010 (along with a hand gesture: a spastic flapping of one hand with the thumb tucked), it spread like a fire doused with lighter fluid. But still, *why*? It wasn't even that funny. People forgot about planking, they forgot about that old guy who beat the crap out of a bunch of gangsters on the subway, and his stuff was what had staying power. “Island Kid!” a girl called out behind him. “Wait!”

He shook his head, adjusted the messenger bag strap digging into his neck, and pulled the folded piece of paper out of his pocket again. This was a different one, though: a grid of his class schedule. Thin strips of white, like a race car's paint job, ran across the sheet from where his old printer had called in sick, but he could tell that he'd just had freshman homeroom—and he could tell that Intro to Psychology was starting in ten minutes. He flipped the sheet over; according to the dots and crude

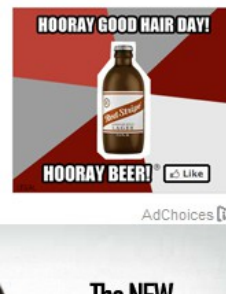
## Web celeb “That Island Kid” is moving back to California

By CNN Staff

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Tyler Walsh, during a 2011 photo shoot in his father's Japanese garden. Walsh is returning to California within a month.



Los Angeles (CNN) -- Tyler Walsh, the young star of the hit YouTube series “That Island Kid,” is scheduled to return to California—and the United States—after living for almost 18 years on a remote private island, LAX customs officials said.

Walsh, 18, is the only child of William Tantalus Walsh, the eccentric entrepreneur best known as the former host of the reality show *Awalsh with Cash*. After a private divorce with his wife in 1994, Walsh Sr. earned custody of his infant son and moved to his private chateau 50 miles off the coast of Long Beach. He would continue to work remotely, while outfitting the island with extensive food storage and state-of-the-art medical equipment.

The news has come as a great shock to fans of “That Island

rectangular lumps that apparently constituted a campus map, a big circular courtyard would connect straight into the Psych building.

In the distance, so far he swore it straddled the curvature of the earth, was one such courtyard, surrounded by eucalyptus trees. He grimaced, tightened the bag's strap, and started running. He was used to getting from pretty much anywhere on the island back to the house in five minutes. Why did everything important around here have to be so friggin' far away?

When Tyler finally arrived, breath firing in machine-gun bursts from his mouth, Room 209A was plenty full, but it was still far from what he'd pictured. He'd figured the place would be an amphitheater, with a stern, leather-elbowed man scrawling "key terms" on a monolithic chalkboard down at the base. But the place looked more like a high school classroom: level floor, a low false ceiling, and steely black chairs spaced evenly through eight rows of unsecured tables. Facing them all was a whiteboard smeared neon with half-erased marker; facing Tyler, at his own isolated table, was a lean man in a green polo shirt whose stubble dated him at no older than thirty. "Ah, and..." The man studied a chart atop his scattering of paperwork, where he then marked a check. "*Tyler.*"

Tyler looked around the class again. "Hey, uh," he said, "can I just... sit anywhere?"

"Oh," the man replied. "Yeah, go ahead."

Tyler could sense a layer of nervous-sweat building up over his almost-late-to-first-day-of-class sweat as about seventy-five percent of those in attendance eyed him on the way across the room. Which ones were doing it because they recognized him and which just thought he was weird on sight, though, he couldn't tell. But really, what was so weird about asking a simple question, or being hesitant to do it?

The nearest empty chair was in the third row, five seats deep, trapped between what he immediately recognized as a dudebro and a punk-rocker. Recalling the games of *Operation!* he'd played as a child, he clutched his bag up to armpit level and tip-toed through the slender walking-space until he reached his self-designated bubble. *At least I didn't trip*, he thought, before he scooted the chair forward, the act of which tore a flatulent screech from the linoleum and at least two snickers from the back row. Actually, tripping might have been more dignified.

Hoping to regain what little composure he had, he fixed his focus on the next rows up; turning one-eighty to gawk at him was surely too much effort. Then he leaned forward and pulled another sheet of paper from his back pocket; this one was a smallish slip, torn from a notepad. He laid it to rest with a single finger's supervision on his leg and, checking the corners of his eyes to confirm he was no longer a Person of Interest, reassessed what was there so far. He grimaced at how he'd gotten ahead of himself, starting an entry before he knew what would fill it. But in this case, it made sense...

- 1) **Girl w/ long blonde hair in library (Audrey?)**
- 2) **Girl on a bench by entrance to Arts Center**
- 3) **Student adviser in Admin Building (too old...?)**

He had started making lists when he was six years old. Dad had watched over his shoulder with a smile, Tyler's feet swinging from a too-tall oak chair as he marked out the words "MY FAVORIT THINGS" with a freshly-sharpened pencil. Back then, Number One was "apple juice," followed closely by "coconut milk" and "kites." He found he liked writing the things down almost as much as experiencing them, and as he got older he continued to scribble out lists, then typed them instead—a list of every bug he could name, a list of videogames he wanted for Christmas, a list of rock bands he wanted to watch concert footage of. And then that one day, three years ago, after Dad said it sounded like "an absolutely great, cool idea," a list of potential topics for the first installment of a little series called "That Island Kid." With a list, it was like all the thoughts careening around his mind—the maybes, the what-ifs, the wait-a-seconds—got their act together and became real and certain, all in one place. It made the complex and crazy seem simple and reasonable.

Back in the *now*, though, his feet were planted firmly on the ground, and his most recent list was hidden under the table. He didn't want to feel ashamed—after all, on the four message boards he frequented, there were guys who considered women in far crasser terms. But so too had he gotten the impression that making a list of girls he found attractive was a "creeper" thing to do. Still, it just made the process easier to understand...

Tyler was still lost in justification when a pile of papers the color of raw meat seemed to drop itself on top of his notebook. The syllabus! They'd mentioned these in homeroom. He plucked off a sheet, and the dudebro at three o'clock grabbed the stack to continue its passage. "PSYCH 101 – INTRO TO PSYCHOLOGY," said the header, and below that: "Professor – Tom Hough."

As Mr. Hough explained the highlights, Tyler heard a rustle and felt something brush against his sandal-clad foot. "Aw, crud..." mumbled someone in the succeeding row. "Could you get that?"

"What?" Tyler asked, and when he looked up, it was into a face that all but shut down the language center of his brain. It wasn't just that she was beautiful, with a pair of thick black glasses perched upon a gently upturned nose, magnifying the one wide jade eye not obscured by a brunette bob-cut. It was that his straining brain had picked that moment to remind him this was the closest he'd been to a woman who wasn't his mother in his entire life. And yet, inexplicably, she looked familiar.

"Dropped my paper," she whispered.

"Paper?" Had he seen someone on TV who looked like her? In a magazine? Dad's yearbooks?

"Sorry," she frowned. "It went under your seat."

“Umm... sure, sure!” He pointed tentatively at the ground. “The *paper*.” Putting every muscle he could into action to prevent the chair from squealing again, he ducked, red-faced, under the table and snatched up the syllabus in the ensuing gust. He surfaced, and thrust it at the girl. “Here you go!”

She took the paper between a single thumb and forefinger. “Thanks,” she smiled, and turned back around. Tyler noticed now that her arms were sheathed in the sleeves of a baggy purple hoodie, and yet she wore a delicate skirt of the same shade that nearly reached her ankles.

“Okay, so today's going to be mostly an introduction, of course,” declared Mr. Hough. “But just to see what you guys already know, there's going to another sheet going around with a short quiz. Don't worry, it's not graded! However, there is a typo on number four—it's 'cognitive development,' not...”

*Alright, this is how it's going to work. Step 1: You're going to walk up to her. Step 2: You're going to talk to her.* No, wait, was that easy? It really had to be. In just the few hours he'd been on campus that day, he'd seen dozens of guys strolling around with a girl's hand in theirs. They had to have met at some point, some place in the past! Besides, if he wasted any more time, some fangirls might get to him, and then he'd never know who wanted to have an earnest drink with him and who just wanted an autograph.

As he thought this, the class was slowly pouring out of the room, while the girl had joined a short question line for Mr. Hough. He considered standing right where he was for her to finish—but oh no, he couldn't linger. There'd be no more waiting around from Tyler Walsh; better to approach her later in an instant, rather than setting his anxiety to a slow boil. “Whoa!” somebody started behind him. “Aren't you That—” But Tyler couldn't be bothered to hear the rest.

On the ground floor, crystallized light shone through the broad front doors into a foyer decorated with staff photos and glass cases of awards—they represented people Tyler had never seen, milestones that meant nothing to him, but the fact there were so many celebrated enough to devote whole wall space to left him in a strange sort of awe. Then he heard padded footsteps on wood behind him, and turned his head to see the girl in purple retracing his path down the stairs, studying her phone. He scaled back his pace, and in reaching the doors pushed open one leaf and held it there as he took a deep breath and surveyed the courtyard. He looked back once more, and she was right on his heels.

“Ah, hey!” he said with partial surprise. He hurried outside to pull the door back until the overhead hinge crackled, arm extended like a traditional doorman.

“Oh, thank you,” she smiled as she passed the threshold.

“So,” Tyler gasped out, “how'd you think you did on that quiz... thing?”

She laughed shortly, pausing just past the door's range. “Pretty bad, I bet. I just get a little... *eek*, freaked out whenever I have to deal with memorizing all these terms and numbers!”

“I know, right?” It wasn't so much that he meant it as that it felt like the right thing to say. “But hey, it's just... like, one of those prereqs—prerequisites—or whatever, right? The class?”

“Yeah. Hey, good point.” She brushed the swath of hair from her eye. “So, what's up?”

*She* was asking *him*? Tyler remembered the first time he tried bodysurfing off the island's coast, at fourteen, and was delivered a crash-landing with a free mouthful of saltwater; his muscles were almost as constricted, his throat almost as bitter now as it was then. “Not much, not much,” he lied, and then immediately decided that he was, in all likelihood, the exception to the (unwritten) rules of light banter. “*Actually*, it's been... pretty crazy. And weird, and stressful, and...”

“You can probably let go of that now,” she chuckled.

Wow! For someone struggling with Psych 101, that was profound emotional advice. Oh, wait, he was still holding the door. “Oops.” He withdrew his hand, a cool metallic tingle coating his fingers, and the door did the same. “But yeah, what do you expect?” He gestured at himself. “You know me.”

She cocked her head. “I do?”

The door was no longer ajar, but now Tyler's mouth was. “I... wait, you don't recognize me?”

“Should I?”

“Well, I mean, I'm... you've never heard of 'hang four'? Dennis the Annoying Volleyball? 'Holiday' by Vampire Weekend as credits music?”

She furrowed a meticulous brow at him. “This *is* weird now, actually.”

“Sorry, sorry,” he uttered hastily. “It's just... you know what? Nevermind.” He cleared his throat and raised another lucky cat wave. “I'm Tyler.”

“I'm Kelsey,” she replied, and pushed her glasses up her nose. “Well, it was nice meeting you, Tyler! But I've got another class coming up here, so I've got to go.”

It could be now or never! “Hey, uh...” Tyler closed his eyes for a second, mentally cursing his tongue. How was it that much harder to type up an email or submit a Facebook message—even log in for a video chat—than talk face-to-face? “Listen, I don't know anything about you at all either, but... do you want to do... something? Sometime? You just seem really sort of cool.”

“Uh...” Kelsey seemed to study his face for a whole, agonizing moment, and as he looked straight into her eyes for the first time, a paralyzing rush of recognition came back stronger before dissipating even faster.

She bit her lip. She looked around, then shrugged. “Sure. What did you have in mind?”

“Just, like... coffee tomorrow? At that, uh, cafe across from the parking garage.”

“*Vin de Californie*?” she exclaimed. “That place is great! Here, let me give you my number...” Kelsey loosened her handbag, and Tyler wore a smile so big he would've had to check it at the airport.

Sept. 28, 2012: The green dot shone forth from Tyler's webcam, mounted atop his forty-inch desktop monitor like a parrot perched on a branch, and then his face appeared on-screen—his grainy, mirror-flipped face. He touched the lapel of his yellow-and-blue Hawaiian shirt, patted his carefully-styled yet deliberately unkempt hair, and confirmed that the poster of a tropical beach fully covered the wall behind him. Then he wondered at what point he had stopped being himself and started playing a character; sure, he'd done extensive “walkabout” video tours of the island, but that poster had been his backdrop since Episode 3, and it wasn't even *his* beach—it was some place in Costa Rica. And off-camera, he didn't care for Hawaiian shirts.

But whatever the case, the “VOLCANO-SIZED NEWS!” mini-episode, proclaiming his move to the so-called Mainland, had been his last for almost a month—and as he opened his web browser on the side, YouTube confirmed that it had already accrued over 1,000,000 independent hits. As the editing software booted up, he took a look at the top-rated comments:

**thisislandchick**

nooooooooo!! your still going to do the show right?? :(

**flamingtyre4532**

Wicked, mate! Someone should film a proper doc about you when you show up in the States.

青ちゃん

あなたのビデオたちはすごしおもしろいよ。がんばつて!

He had followers, he had Likes, he had shares and retweets... but did he have any friends? He shifted in his ergonomic desk chair and felt the lists crinkle in his pockets; *all in good time*, as the saying went. He switched to the Word window and gave his notes another quick scan:

**Sign-on - What's up, world, I'm That Island Kid! ...Except wait: I'm eighteen, and I don't actually live on an island anymore! So, without further ado, this show will now be...**

[Modified logo, “THAT AMERICAN MAN”— guitar riff plays over pics of eagles, muscular guy w/ gun] **Too soon, too soon!** [“Throw” logo off-screen—post-pro] **But yes, it *is* true—I've been in California for almost two weeks now, and I've got to say, I'm *loving* it here. It's got more strip malls, less poisonous spiders, and just as much sun to soak up! So in that spirit, today's topics will be quite the cocktail. First off: the Top Eight Things You *Don't* Want to Do at the Beach...**

It needed some work, but he could do the lead-in first and splice the rest later. Still, it sounded so good in silent text on a blank screen, but did he honestly feel that way about his new home enough to speak it? No, not really; car alarms sounded across his block with the regularity of a cuckoo clock, he'd needed to start sleeping with his sunglasses on to block out the city lights (even through blinds), and after getting lost downtown last night, he had the depressing experience of watching a homeless man paint his cardboard sign on the bus. But nobody would want to hear his complaining—certainly not

Kelsey, if she ever found out. He'd find a way to be cool, keep sounding upbeat and worldly.

He was about to hit "REC" when his Skype window maximized itself. "*Incoming call from Brenda Walsh-Eckhart*" popped up in a box. "Accept?"

He held his breath. "Yes," he clicked, and his own image was replaced with that of his mother, in all her Botoxed and spray-tanned glory. "Hi, Tyler!" she announced, the brief lag on her connection making it look like her puckered mouth was just forming words before any meaning came out.

"Hey, Mom," he said. "How's it going?"

"Oh, just excellent, thank you for asking, honey. Okay, so we *just* had that meeting I told you about, and the series *is* getting picked up for another season! And I think we can even get Cee Lo Green as a guest star for the current finale, isn't that great? I know you don't care much for... reality TV, but you really should check this one out. For me?"

"I'll look into it," he replied. "Online, or something." Regardless of his disinterest in *Extreme Everything*, the newest in a catalog of shows his mother started producing since Dad left for the island, Tyler wished he could feel more connected to her. Not so much in physical closeness (after years of her flying out every two months and on holidays to see him, her L.A. penthouse was virtually next-door), as in terms of... well, emotional. The kind a Skype call every three days couldn't transmit. He was here in the continental U.S., with a (squeaky) roof over his head and food in his fridge, because of her, and for that he was honestly grateful. But it was Dad's idea that he came in the first place.

"Oh, that's fine. Now, how are things going with that girl you had coffee with?"

"Kelsey?" They'd met at the cafe as planned, and during the course of conversation (he just told her he moved from the So-Cal coast, and then the rest of his recollections checked out) he'd worked up the mojo to ask if she'd like to see a movie with him on Saturday. And she said "sure" again! When he relayed the update to his mother, she was all the more elated.

"Gosh, that's wonderful, Tyler! She sounds like a nice girl."

"Yeah..." His heart did a rough somersault. "That's what Dad said, too."

She pursed her lips, and was temporarily silent. "Has he called recently?"

"The other night." Dad called every night, in fact. Maybe it was because he felt his son deserved to not see him reduced to text and code, after viewing the whole world for so long as nothing else, but it was the only way he'd contact Tyler anymore. Tyler had stopped informing either of his parents about the other after the first few days, though; if they were curious, they'd ask each-other.

"Alright." She swept a lock of long, watery mahogany hair away from her eyes. "Now, about that *date* of yours tomorrow. What movie are you seeing?"

"Oh, the movie..." On the toolbar, the video program's icon flashed eagerly. "It's, uh..."



Sept. 29, 2012: “*All Tickets Sold Out?*” Tyler questioned over the roaring traffic, staring up at the scrolling digital marquee guarding the Regal Cinema's entrance. “That's a weird name for a movie.”

Kelsey, who had accented her sweater and skirt with a plaid scarf and a woolen cap that clung to her head like a jellyfish, abruptly giggled. Then she sighed almost as loudly. “You didn't reserve any?”

“I...” he threw up his hands to the darkening sky. “Shoot, I just didn't think they'd run out that fast.” He told himself he'd just underestimated the number of people in Long Beach who'd want to catch a flick (he was used to accounting for a much smaller audience), but it was more that the thought of spending the evening with Kelsey—and her strangely familiar eyes—had spun around his usual “web-surf first, confirm later” directive like a kid aiming for a pinata. He'd asked her to go to the movies because he'd heard it was a thing people did on first dates, but he never confirmed what to see.

The traffic lights swayed in the night breeze like overripe fruits as Tyler and Kelsey walked, hands in their respective coat pockets, back across town. “So, what's Plan B?” she asked, looking up at the luminescent streetlamps and skyscrapers in a way that reminded him of the way he'd stared up at sunset-stained palm trees when he was little. They were of a different kind than these—not clipped and refined, confined to even patterns across a boulevard. They were still palms, but they could grow however they wanted, even if that meant it was up to rough waves and winds to guide them.

“Well,” he suggested, “you want to just take a walk? Around campus, or something?”

“Eh, why not!” Kelsey said. “If I could pick up a stiff drink before the night's over, though, I—” She stopped in the middle of the bustling sidewalk, and Tyler had to hop to the side behind her to avoid ramming into a couple with arms full of shopping bags. “That wasn't funny,” she muttered, her back to him, as she covered her eyes with a hand. “I *don't* drink.”

“What?” Tyler said. His pulse spiked. Had he already screwed up another implied social rule?

Kelsey spun around, and she had a big grin on all of a sudden, though her eyes had gained a gentle gloss. “Forget about it,” she said. “Let's go!” She grabbed his hand, and it was like a humid shock ran through Tyler's nerves as the two of them doubled back.

The silhouette of the Walter Pyramid heralded their arrival at the UC, its towering cerulean point looking like a fat arrow indicating the waning moon on high. Aside from indoor plumbing, it was the most awe-inspiring thing Tyler had seen in his short time returned to “civilization,” but when he got around to writing *that* list, he'd need to amend it with a third entry: Kelsey holding his hand right now.

“So what did you do before coming here?” he asked, as they walked a winding concrete path.

She made a noise that sounded like another chirpy laugh, and yet also maybe a quick sob. “Art stuff, photography. Pretty boring.”

*Sounds kind of cool, actually*, he wanted to say, but there was a low rush to her tone that gave him the sense she was closing the topic. As comforting as her touch was, he started to covertly scan the surroundings for a new subject, a new place to go—something to set him apart from other guys just by suggesting it! Then he saw the bicycle station, in the small field to the west. “Hey, how about we go check that out? I’ve never seen—I mean, I haven’t ridden a bike in a long time.”

She followed his outstretched hand’s indication. “Nice,” she judged, and they trod slightly uphill on crisp grass to the peeling-gold structure. A couple of bikes still leaned against their W-shaped docks, restrained by rubbery lock chains beneath a cobwebbed canopy. “Okay, so... now what?”

Tyler rubbed his chin, hoping to indicate that he was indeed thinking. He looked over his shoulders; the area was deserted. “Here,” he said, “stand back.” Steadying a foot on a reinforcing concrete block, he set the other on the rim of a nearby trash-can.

“Are you serious?” Kelsey said.

“It’s cool,” he assured. “I do this all the time.” *On the sheer rock face behind Dad’s garden.* With a clumsy kick, he thrust himself up into the air and towards the station. He grunted as the gutter caught him at chest level, then clawed at the ribbed metal tiles for a few harsh breaths before righting himself onto the slope in full. “Whew!”

“You gonna make it?” Kelsey asked.

“Hey, I said I did it all the time; I didn’t say I was good at it.” He rotated around to his stomach and lowered his arms over the edge. “Come on!”

“I don’t know,” she said, looking around as Tyler had. “But... alright.” She brought her cap down snugger, tightened her scarf, and raised her hands. Bracing his heels against the gutter, Tyler gritted his teeth and drew her up to the space beside him.

“Don’t pull something!” she said as he hissed, massaging his aching shoulder.

“S’cool,” he groaned. “I’m, y’know, pretty fit...” As the aching faded, he gazed out upon the forest of LCD-white lampposts and lumbering stone buildings before them. “Wow, some view!”

Kelsey murmured agreement. And so they sat there, legs dangling over the lonely station’s edge, fingers splayed softly atop each-other, until Tyler spoke again. “I’ve been thinking about it, Kelsey—a lot of stuff, I guess—but about... what I feel like is so great about you. It’s like, from what I can tell, you’re... not trying to make up for anything. I see all these people around here with piercings, getting drunk in the street, doing pot and steroids and whatever... like there’s something they hate about themselves they have to escape from. And I mean, geez, I haven’t even known you for a week, but you walk around like you’re happy how you are. And that’s... Kelsey?”

Kelsey’s knees were up to her chest, her arms wrapped across them as her face buried itself in

the crevice. “I can't do this anymore,” she whimpered, her voice muffled by fabric. Before Tyler could respond, she let her arms fall slack and rose numbly to her feet.

“How high up do you think we are, Tyler?” she asked, leaning over the edge. “Eight feet? I read that three is enough, if... it's just right.”

The humidity in Tyler's nerves flared up into burning panic. “Kelsey, what are you doing?”

She reached into her coat pocket and shakily extracted her phone. She tossed it blindly into Tyler's lap. “Search 'Kiara Kross,’” she ordered.

Tyler felt every single one of his hairs electrify, and a pulsing shame poured over him, like he'd just cursed loudly in public. He'd never heard anyone speak that name, though he'd certainly seen it typed, or embedded in a file, or on a watermark. And oh, had he searched it before. With Kelsey's curved purple phone, he searched it yet again.

**Search Returned 13,354 Results**

**--SuicideGirls.com – Kiara Kross**

**--Chanarchive – /s/ – Dumping the Kiara Kross sets!**

**--Sexy Pinups – KK and Friends...**

It was the sample picture, though—with Safe Search disabled—that hit him like punch to stomach: a young woman with gothy black ravenhair, a ring-skewered nose and lips, neon purple tattoos coursing like veins over her pale, naked limbs as she reclined sensuously on a blood-red bed, her curled legs obscuring the core of her lower regions. She had always been like a close stranger to him—an intangible, beautiful stranger, as with so many other women online. He went through his teenage years on an island without any girls, after all. Who could've blamed him? But now he truly recognized those cheekbones, that tender grin, those slender and flawless fingers. And in this moment, Tyler wished to the highest power imaginable that he'd never seen it—never *lingered* on it.

“I was eighteen before I came here,” Kelsey said, jarring Tyler from the small but paralyzing screen. “And I was nineteen, and twenty. I did some things I thought would... *work*. Things that would take advantage of what I was worth. People took advantage, all right.” She inched forward. “I can burn off the tattoos, rip out the piercings, cover myself up with all these baggy clothes...” She laughed, a coarse burble through her sadness. “But it doesn't go away, you know? The past, it's not a *thing*; you can't throw it away.”

The phone sat limply in Tyler's palm, and then he clutched it in a whitening fist. He eased his way up to her level and pushed the phone back at her. “Then search *me*,” he said. “Search Tyler Walsh.”

When she continued to stare at the ground, he wrenched his arm back and typed his own name in with one thumb. His YouTube Channel came up, and then below that the fan channels—the video parodies, the homages, the remixes. The CNN article, The Fox news screed, the Jon Stewart segment.

The “Ill-Advised Island Kid” meme with his face on a blue-and-yellow pinwheel background (“Wants to Stay Out of the Spotlight – Moves to California” read one caption).

“Look,” he said, trembling half in frustration and half in something like fearful love. “You think you're the only person who wants to move on? Even if you think everyone knows your face?”

As the insistent glow shone on her body, Kelsey rotated her tear-stained face to look. He could see her eyes dart across the screen, then she reached out with a single plain fingernail and flicked the page down, scanning all the entries. When she looked back into his eyes... well, Tyler didn't know quite what she felt. He didn't have much experience with other people, after all. But it looked like understanding. Love? Maybe, maybe not. But definitely friendship.

Kelsey's knees buckled, and taking Tyler's hand, she sat back down on the roof—no, laid back. She sniffled, then reached up his arm to his cheek. “Hello, Tyler Walsh,” she smiled.

He clicked the phone off. “Welcome to California,” he smiled back.

In Tyler's back pocket, a list crinkled, two final entries waiting to be officially checked:

**4) Make Friends**

**5) Influence People**

*July 31, 2012:* Tyler looked around his room, at the stacks of CDs bordering his raucous TV like Roman columns, at the moonlight reflecting from the tides through his bamboo window, at the half-empty bag of Cheetos paperweighting his sketches of the island's aerial view, and wondered again if anybody could ever top his Capture the Flag scores in *Gears of War 2*. Sinking back into his beanbag, he commanded the game console “OFF” with the press of a button and rose with a symphony of cracking joints, to head out for a pre-bedtime toilet break.

As Tyler entered the hall, he heard strange sounds in the living room—a clinking of glass, a gentle slosh. He tip-toed around the bend, and in front of a black and quiet fireplace, the starfield seeming to engulf the towering windows and rafters above, someone sat in the palatial recliner, drink in hand.

“Dad?” Tyler called.

His father turned his head, and Tyler suddenly saw the years piled upon his body—in the low light, every tanned wrinkle rising from his round jaw and into a shrinking gray hairline seemed to stare into Tyler's eyes. “You've been eighteen for a week, son,” he said softly. “Congratulations.”

Tyler crept nearer, and as he did his dad chuckled. “It's not booze. I'm getting too old for that shit, anyway.” He swished the glass. “Apple juice, direct from Washington. Always reminds me of when you were a little kid. Had to order whole extra crates of the stuff, you loved it so much.”

Sure enough, there was an auburn plastic jug on the polished wood floor. “Dad, you okay?”

Dad slouched, then straightened up even taller in his seat, and kicked down the footrest with a hard *clack*. “I've done some stupid things before, Tyler,” he said. “I don't regret them, but they were still stupid. I just... hope I can help make up for it.”

Tyler felt a glimmer of amusement, if only because he wasn't used to seeing Dad this solemn. “This isn't about one of your old shows, is it? Or money? Because—”

“I can't keep you here anymore, Tyler,” he blurted. “On this island. You're a man now. You've got to live your own life.”

Tyler stood frozen, as if he'd just witnessed a confession in a foreign language. “*What?*” A burst of something like anger flared up into his skull. “Brenda,” he muttered. “Did she—”

“It's not your mother,” Dad stated. “You know I'd tell you if it was. She wants to help, though—and I'm willing to let her—but it was my decision all the way.”

Tyler's throat clenched; he felt nauseous. “California?” he whispered.

“Most likely.” Dad set his glass beside the jug and stood up. “I know this is hard to understand,” he said, walking towards Tyler, the gentle limp he received tripping over a rock on Independence Day exaggerated in the dark. Dad didn't embrace him, but instead stood at arm's length—man-to-man.

The corners of Tyler's mouth started to twitch. Every cliché out of Dad's mouth was like a punch in the eye. “Well... what am I supposed to do?”

For a moment, Dad matched his deathly shock, but then he smiled, and even though they were the same height, Tyler somehow felt like the man was over his shoulder again, there to offer aid but knowing his son could work things out on his own. “Get an apartment,” he said. “Go to college. Get a girlfriend—a nice one.”

He laughed. “Make friends. Influence people.”

Tyler blinked. Then again, and again, each seeming to leave the scene blurrier than the last. His head felt light and vacant, like a paper-mache balloon that had just been popped, as he backed out of the room, leaving Dad standing with a half-full glass of apple juice at his feet.

With trembling hands, he flicked on the lights in his room and sat down at his desk. He snatched the nearest pen and grabbed a blank sheet of notebook paper from the half-stack by his dictionary.

He was going to compose another list, the first one in quite a while. But this one would be different; it would be okay if he got ahead of himself, because he knew where he was going. It wasn't his own ideas, but that didn't matter—it was motion, and it was meaningful, personal. He was from an island, after all. Everything he ever did, he'd done here.

So this was going to be a To-Do list.