

Welcome to the College of the Future:
A Productive Society of Soulless Shells
by Mason Shelby

Donnie looked down at his dirty hands: his fingers were shaking, trembling, presumably from the abundance of caffeine pulsing through his veins. His aching fingers were tired and slippery, with dark smears of pencil lead. Donnie realized it was probably time for a break.

He leaned back in his chair, which was cold, hard, and uncomfortable, not unlike the rest of his small dorm. Two antique chestnut desks sat at opposite corners of the room, separated in the middle by a rusty metal bunk bed, probably designed originally for prisoners. A dull hum of the roommates' computers, the centers of their educational lives, created a fitting soundtrack to the scene. Standing up to stretch, Donnie felt that if he were going to get any more work done, he would need a pick-me-up.

The hallways outside of the rooms were typically loud and full of people: most were drunks and party animals, returning triumphantly from their nightly rituals. Some went out in search of love, some just to have a good time, but all found what they needed—an escape from the pressure of their rigorous class schedules to let their collective hair down and have a fun time. Tonight, the icy silence of that same hall seemed alien and made Donnie's skin crawl.

He thought back on the previous weekend's festivities; it was their last hurrah before the Omegas. These huge tests were a big deal: if students could pass the Omegas, they were pretty much guaranteed a career in the ever-shrinking job market. Students who did particularly well were promised high-paying positions. The idea was to reward hardworking students and weed out the students who were unfit for the workforce. Donnie dreaded the thought of failing the Omegas, which seemed a greater and greater possibility, as the deadlines grew closer. Failing the Omegas meant automatic expulsion. Luckily, there were ways of bettering one's chances, methods and shortcuts that students had to take advantage of in order to keep up with one another. Donnie stepped onto the elevator to go up the twenty-seven stories to get to the vending machines. The walls of the elevator were cluttered with dozens of advertisements. Several posters suggested that he support their college's corporate sponsor, FedEx, by mailing a care package to a family member or significant other.

Orca, not unlike the other dorms on the FedEx University campus, dug deep, deep into the earth; most of the campus was subterranean. Instead of building upwards, the architects realized it was much more cost efficient to build downward, underground. Donnie didn't mind; in fact, he was happy to get away from the nasty sunburns and the yellow pollen that had caused him so much trouble on the surface. He did miss the wind, though. Although the campus had an artificial sun, artificial grass, artificial trees, and artificial birds, they did not have artificial wind. Donnie missed the howling sounds, the feeling of it running through his hair and around his body, and even the leaves blowing about in tiny whirlwinds like merry-go-rounds of fairies. Clearly, the Adderall was wearing off, while the caffeine was not. Donnie hurried.

Stepping off the elevator, finally, he looked up at the tall machine. All his favorites were there: Vicodin, THC, NyQuil, Ecstasy, Oxycontin, Zydone, Salvia, and all other sorts of wonderful pills. He didn't have time to play around though; Donnie bought some more caffeine and Adderall tablets, red and bright green, which he quickly took. His mouth was dry and he felt absolutely drained. Hopefully, the drugs would help him to quit fooling around and

get back to studying. He didn't mind most of the side effects, but the dry mouth really bothered him. Sticking his student identification card into another machine, Donnie grabbed a can of spring water and drank the whole thing before he even got back to the elevator.

The sensation hit Donnie almost instantly. But for some reason it didn't hit quite as hard as usual. He figured he was probably just building up some tolerance—that's what his sister had told him would happen eventually. She had just recently graduated from FedEx U, while Donnie was still only in his second year. He had a long way to go to secure his future with a decent career. Another tired-looking student greeted Donnie as he stepped onto the elevator. She was supposed to be studying for her Omegas, but Donnie could tell that she wasn't taking her classes quite as seriously as he was. She had a six-pack of Coors Light under her left arm and a bong in the right. She already knew she would fail, she explained, so she might as well have a good time while she still could. The girl waved goodbye and good luck as she got off on floor one hundred and sixty-seven, leaving Donnie alone again.

Donnie didn't mind being alone, though; it was nearly unavoidable on the weekdays. Everyone was either in class, studying, or in their rooms trying to get ahead of the other students. Even Donnie's roommate, Robert, was barely ever around. Donnie mainly balanced his time between studying and experimenting with different drug combinations. Most students were so rarely sober. It just wasn't practical; they could do much better in school if they felt good. And why not? They were provided with free access to the best hospitals in history, and had so few responsibilities, except to attend classes. Why not push the limits?

Donnie didn't like it when the drugs wore off. He hated that empty feeling, that feeling that there was a hole in his chest where his heart should be. It reminded Donnie of something that he had learned in history class: people used to believe in something called a soul, which was said to be the essence of a person, a ghostly vapor that seemed to dwell deep inside each and every human being. Of course, scientists had long since proved the nonexistence of souls. Finally arriving at floor one hundred and eighty-four, Donnie shook his head of such thoughts. They were a waste of time.

Sitting back in the metal chair, Donnie picked up his pencil and sharpened it. He was ready to get back to work. Although his body felt exhausted, the brain was ready to get some serious work done. Glancing over at Robert, who had passed out on his books, Donnie shook his head again. Some kids just aren't cut out for college life, Donnie whispered to no one in particular.

DONALD O'REILLY, ROBERT BROWNING, WAKE UP. DONALD O'REILLY, ROBERT BROWNING, WAKE UP. TESTING WILL COMMENCE IN PRECISELY TWO HOURS IN DORPHIN HALL. PLEASE REPORT TO DORPHIN HALL IN TWO HOURS. DONALD O'REILLY, ROBERT BROWNING, WAKE UP...

Donnie sat up very straight, very quickly. He had fallen asleep! How was that possible? He had been so careful to choose the maximum amount of caffeine that his body could handle. Why had he still fallen asleep? He jumped out of his chair, once again trembling, this time not with exhaustion, but with fear. He looked over at the spot where Robert had fallen asleep on his desk. Obviously, he had gotten up hours earlier to take advantage of the early morning to study. Glancing at his watch, Donnie whispered three o'clock...exactly two hours until test time.

Back at the vending machine, Donnie was in for another nasty surprise: a long line, stretching down the hall and through several doors, filled with people, just like Donnie, waiting to get the fix they needed to excel on the test. Realizing there wouldn't be enough time to get through the line, Donnie looked around desperately, hoping to find someone familiar to cut in front of. He recognized the girl from the elevator, near the front. His attempt to greet

and casually sneak in line failed miserably—and violently—when a big Latino guy objected by forcefully removing Donnie from the line.

Donnie hurried on down the hall, to Dorphin Hall, now with a black eye. He had slept in, missed his morning fix, and now was bleeding a little. Things were not going as well as he had hoped. He tripped on something big and soft. It was Robert's arm. Robert wasn't moving. There wasn't time, though; Donnie would have to worry about it later.

Thoughts of failure filled his mind: he had greatly compromised his future. How could he expect to ever be happy if he didn't pass the Omegas? If he failed, he could never afford the house he had planned on purchasing right after his graduation. His girlfriend would probably leave him for someone more financially sound. Not to mention the drugs—if you can't pay, you don't play. Everything was crumbling down.

Finally arriving, Donnie quickly found a desk in the back, where it would be easier to cheat. He noticed a dark-skinned girl nearby who had cleverly tattooed the answers along her arm. Another fat boy with glasses was using the tried and true method of taping the answers to the bottom of his shoe. Donnie himself preferred to just lean over and look at others' papers. It was the easiest technique to execute and the hardest to prosecute. He didn't really like cheating, but felt it was just another shortcut he had to take advantage of; if everyone else was doing it, Donnie would have to do it to, in order to keep up. Keep up or be left in the dust...poor, jobless, and unhappy.

Things were looking up, until about halfway through the third essay. Donnie's pencil, his favorite pencil, snapped in half, causing him to come to an abrupt stop. And it was at this exact point that the drugs wore off completely. He looked around at the hundreds of students around him, scratching away furiously, like termites on rotten wood. He noticed the dark-skinned girl remove a shoe to uncover the thesis tattooed on her left foot. She had painted her toenails bright red, the color of cherries or roses. Donnie recalled a childhood memory in which he gave a red rose to a young girl for Valentine's Day. Such a worthless holiday, he thought. Invented by corporations to generate more money for themselves. Still, something inside him longed for those days.

It was that same hole! The hole in his heart that he always felt whenever the drugs wore off. It made him feel empty, nostalgic, and he longed for something he could not quite put his finger on. Something to do with people and places and faces he had once known. Donnie wanted nothing more than to forget these thoughts, bottle them up and save them for later, like a fine wine. He just wanted to get back to his test. But, looking down on his essay, he saw that he had started to sketch a drawing of the girl's foot instead of writing. He had completely zoned out and ruined the essay! He had to concentrate without the Adderall, somehow. He crumpled up the drawing and tossed it aside.

The ball of abandoned art fell to the ground and rolled beneath the dark-skinned girl, who glanced at it only for a moment. She didn't have time to pick up trash off the ground either; her future was also at stake. The scribbling and testing continued.