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### Dichotomies: Lessons from a College Life on Tour

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## Praise for *Dichotomies*

“A remarkable first-person odyssey of a young touring musician who artfully combines his comedy rock music performances with completing demanding, long distance, higher education studies. Dontre offers a living, often humorous, and sometimes bawdy, chronicle of memorable characters he meets on the road. He adds to the mix practical insights gleaned from his school work, as well as vivid descriptions of the highly-charged, emotional ups and downs of high energy concert work.”

**-Ray Forbes, Ph.D.**, Professor of Business Psychology,  
Franklin University

“I feel stuck between a rock and a hard place and cannot decide if this book is funny or insightful. As inferred from its title, that's probably because it is both.”

**-Mats E. Eriksson, Ph.D.**, author of *Another Primordial Day*,  
Professor of Paleontology, Lund University

“This is a must-read for any potential college student who thinks that they can't do it, whatever the reason. ‘I'm not the college type...I'm too (fill in the blank...)’ Alex shows that with some tenacity and grit, anyone really can earn a degree—even on the road and next to a dumpster! I am truly in awe of what he accomplished and how he stayed committed to this amazing journey. It is the rare student that can expose a professor to a new iteration of a genre of music while also contributing to the field of business psychology in a meaningful way. After 20 years of teaching, Alex has motivated me to work harder to be a source of motivation to my future students.”

**-Kristan Jones, Ph.D.**, Professor of Business Psychology,  
Franklin University, Director of HR Talent Development at  
Raymond James

“On tour, while the rest of us were crapping, napping, fapping or gormandizing, Alex was studying and working on speeches for his degree. It doesn’t end there, then he would play a flawless set every night on the drums...he’s a bad-ass dude with a heart of gold.”

**-Todd Smith**, Dog Fashion Disco, Polkadot Cadaver,  
& Knives Out

“I can't really say whether human psychology and touring go hand in hand, or if they are arch enemies...but I will never forget walking off a soundcheck to find Alex's face lit by his laptop while working on a psychology paper. Usually the few times I have seen people whip out laptops on tour is to pay their bills, Skype with the family, or to check in with their probation officers, and not to write academic articles on "Psychology of Organizational Coaching". To pull things like that off in a touring environment is as impressive as the drumming of Alex Dontre.”

**-Niklas Karvonen, Ph.D.**, Machinae Supremacy,  
CTO of Substorn

“Every touring musician understands the difficulty of maintaining a life on the road and a life back at home. Alex decided to do both at the same time, and I'm not sure if that makes him brilliant or deranged.”

**-Daniel Drinnen, M.A.**, URIZEN

"Sex, drugs, and rock and roll is a tired cliché. Alex is a perfect example of a man with concrete goals, willing to utilize technology and time management to plan for his future. Witnessing his dedication and work ethic every day on tour definitely made me wonder if I should be doing something more with my life."

**-Neil Patterson**, Downtown Brown

# DISCOGRAPHY

## **Psychostick**

*DO (2018)*

*Revenge of the Vengeance (2014)*

*Space Vampires vs. Zombie Dinosaurs in 3D (2011)*

*The Digital Appetizer (2010)*

*Sandwich (2009)*

*The Flesh Eating Rollerskate Holiday Joyride (2007)*

*We Couldn't Think of a Title (2003)*

*Die...a LOT! – Demo (2001)*

*Don't Bitch, it's Free – Demo (2000)*

## **Debtors**

*Debtors (2018)*

## **Evacuate Chicago**

*Veracity (2010)*

## **The Stuttering C-Cowboys**

*Various songs recorded from 2004-2006*

DICHOTOMIES  
Lessons from a College Life  
on Tour

Alex Dontre

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Feel free to join me on Goodreads:  
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## DEDICATION

*To my loving partner, Lora, whose support of this project  
remains unwavering despite meeting me a month  
after the story concludes.*



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**Finally, to everyone who attended the 505 Psychostick shows from September 2011 to May 2017.**

## PREFACE



I am not a rock star; I'm a musician. In my view, rock stars are those people you only read about in books or observe with astonishment in documentaries. To be fair, I've met a few. They are often insufferable humans with few redeemable qualities save their musical skills.

Thus, this is not a tale of a “rock star” life of drugs and sex and partying all night. This is a book about my struggles and triumphs as a college student while touring with my band, Psychostick. Specifically, I am the drummer of said band, and we've been going strong since 2000 when I met Josh and Rob for the first time at age 15, and Matty a decade and many adventures later in 2010.

In case you're new to the Psychostick camp, allow me to introduce everyone. Rob Kersey is our vocalist and web designer. Josh Key is our guitarist and audio engineer. Matty J “Moose” is our bass player and merch extraordinaire. Our

other Matt, who goes by Matt “Kooks” Kuchta, is our hotshot video star and also the “anything you can imagine” technician. Need a blood cannon? Ask Kooks. Finally, Patrick “Murph” Murphy is our video director and secret weapon. He helps write a lot of the lyrics, especially on the more recent albums. Your cordial author is the drummer and tour manager.

My intention in writing this book is not to pore over my reasons for enrolling in college post break up. Granted, 2011 was quite an emotionally challenging year as I pieced my life back together following a relationship with a wonderful woman who is now married to an equally wonderful guy. Fortunately, I have salvaged my friendship with both, and we still convene from time to time when I visit Columbus.

That said, the primary reason for enrolling in my first classes in late 2011 was a desire for an autonomous bit of achievement. Until then, all my triumphs had been part of a team, whether it was as a member of a band or a member in a relationship. I had also recognized a huge deficit in my knowledge and skills with financial matters. Accordingly, I enrolled in my first finance class with no intention to continue further. Carry on to learn more about my bizarre life.

## INTRODUCTION TO TOUR LIFE



The floor was alive with ants thriving on Honey Nut Cheerios. It was not an ideal place to rest, despite our severe exhaustion of being four weeks into a tour and not even at the half-way point. All I wanted to do was sleep, especially after the night we had. Psychostick was the opening act for the 2010 Nashville Pussy and Green Jelly tour, and before our set, we learned that no one was going to be paid by the promoter. As an extended (and likely heated) argument ensued outside, we opted to go ahead and perform anyway. We didn't get into this business to drive 700 kilometers<sup>1</sup> from Des Moines to leave our fans in the lurch.

Accordingly, Tulsa received our performance as the only touring band to play that night, and we were subsequently chewed out by the tour manager (known as a "TM") for "giving up our power" to get paid. In the end, we opted to set

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<sup>1</sup> Of nearly 200 countries in the world, only three refuse to use the metric system.

up our merch in the parking lot outside and were able to earn some gas money to make it to the following night's show in San Antonio.

Back in the aptly named "living room" of the house with the writhing ants, I dismally realized I would be spending yet another night in the sweltering van. The couple who offered to house us for the evening were friendly enough, but hygiene did not seem to be their familial priority. As the wife proceeded to ignite the stove to prepare a late-night snack, I sheepishly asked to use the shower. If nothing else, I could at least clean myself, if not their infested carpet.

With my clothes in hand, I once again entered the homely anthill. I had been given directions to the master bedroom's shower because it was in "better condition." That sounded fine to me, so I made my way to the hallway as instructed. I had to pause for a moment to comprehend that I would need to surmount a pile of clothing up to my waist to gain access to the intended bedroom. With a quick hop, I was in the room and immediately froze in alarm. There was a second, full-grown woman asleep in the bed. While I'm not one to judge others' life choices, I was perturbed with the idea of this woman waking to see a strange, exhausted man sneaking past her.

Fortunately, she remained deep in slumber and I continued on unabated. As I triumphantly entered the bathroom, I gazed upon something unimaginable. A baby's used diaper was stuck to the tile, poop down, adjacent to the toilet. I steadied myself after a moment of shock and proceeded to glance around. There it was, even more unconscionable than the diaper—an empty Snickers wrapper. What kind of monster eats a candy bar in a room with a dirty diaper stuck to the floor?

Determined to overcome this horror of a night, I quickly

found a relatively clean spot on the sink to rest my clothing as I showered. If I could not wash myself of the memory, I would at least wash my body. I anxiously tip-toed to the shower, careful to avoid any other land mines, no doubt with a grimace on my face. Finally, I was able to pull the knob to invite the water to wash away my agitation from the preceding several minutes.

Rather than flow out into the tub below, the leaky shower head blasted me directly in my right eye with Arctic water. Involuntarily, my body leaped backward, and the frigid torrent soaked my once dry clothes. I only later realized that the shower head was the singular reason there was even a clean spot at all.

## CHAPTER 2011



“What the *fuck* are you doing?” This was the first time someone had asked about my new collegiate touring routine. It was day two of the Slaughterhouse Roadshow, a five-week U.S. run in Autumn. My band Psychostick was direct support for the group Mushroomhead, and we were booked to play all over the East Coast and Midwest. I had begun my first semester<sup>1</sup> at Columbus State Community College (CSCC) just the week before, and I had no intention to neglect my homework just because I was on tour again.

As it turns out, rock venues are not an ideal locale for studying. However, there weren't many options from which to choose. I had perched up in a semi-secluded corner of the

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<sup>1</sup> CSCC switched from quarters to semesters in 2012, but for simplicity let's just call them all semesters.

venue we were playing that night, a place called Streeters in Traverse City, Michigan. Just the week before, I had begun my college career with two classes, Pre-Algebra and Personal Finance for my first semester, and I was struggling to focus somewhat while Mushroomhead was sound checking. I had purchased a set of Sony noise-canceling headphones along with my textbooks, but they blocked out about as much sound as can be expected from foam cushions barely a centimeter thick.

During sound check, the headliner for the evening typically bangs on each instrument while the sound guy (or sound technician if the person is feeling fancy) dials in the tones and volumes desired. As the band clamored on, a member of the tour party I hadn't yet met stumbled over my laptop's power cable and unplugged my computer. Not at all ideal.

After sound check, I was finally building some momentum with the assignment when I received the profane inquiry from a then-unidentified<sup>2</sup> member of the headlining band regarding my current task. I mumbled something about online classes hoping to discourage the inquisitor from forcing further conversation. Mercifully, the exchange ended abruptly and permitted me to venture on.

Touring is not unlike a semester of university courses, but a tour is perhaps a bit less civilized and more erratic. It is all-encompassing for several weeks, then you move on to the next project. While classes are typically aligned with the seasons and last for the duration of a semester, a given tour might last a couple of weeks or could drag on for several months. By the end of each, all you want is to complete the final exam (or the final show) without bombing and collapse into hibernation.

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<sup>2</sup> It can be a challenge to learn all the names of a tour party. This is especially true when the band wears masks on stage, like Mushroomhead.

This tour, however, was just getting started. We had about one day scheduled off per week, so planning ahead was paramount. My exams were of particular concern. Fortunately, the due dates for exams 1 and 2 of my Personal Finance course aligned quite well with the scheduled tour routing. As we had several shows booked in and around Ohio (Mushroomhead's home state), I was able to coordinate visits to the CSCC Testing Center before multiple-hour drives to Lexington and Cleveland, respectively.

The coming weeks would bring a new ritual to the tour routine. Whenever an exam was scheduled, several of my new tour mates would inquire about the material being covered and the testing logistics. Their encouragement prior to the examinations and congratulations after began to cultivate a sense of great appreciation in me. While it was an exclusive new responsibility I had accepted, it became a shared adventure.

## Pestering Mushroomhead

Some four weeks into the tour brought us to Dallas at an interesting venue appropriately known as Trees. Rather than humdrum steel support beams to shoulder the roof, the venue features—you guessed it—various tree trunks throughout the building. In fact, one is even located on stage right<sup>3</sup>. It offers a unique indoor experience, although I am suspicious that the trees are in fact fabricated and not living botanic beams immune from the need for electromagnetic radiation and liquid water. The Dallas County Fire Marshal would likely find the whole framework problematic.

It was also the completion of my 27<sup>th</sup> orbit around Sol, (or

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<sup>3</sup> Stage-right and left are from the band's perspective facing the audience.

simply my birthday if you prefer). Following a notably energetic show, several of my tour mates were eagerly supplying me with Jäger<sup>4</sup> bombs in an apparent attempt to encourage me to say something inappropriate. Frowning at probably the third plastic cup thrust into my hand, I recall eloquently elucidating the fact that I am not a fan of guzzling drinks in a single enormous gulp like an aquatic bird with a massive gullet.

Evidently, my peers remember this conversation somewhat differently. Probably closer to the truth is the story that I abruptly shouted, “I’m not a goddamn pelican!” Following my nonsensical outburst about water birds, the group began to roar with laughter. None of us may remember the setlist from the concert that evening, but no one will soon forget my heartfelt howl lamenting my commitment to consume another Jäger bomb.

Later that evening, I found myself in a scenario that could have easily gotten my band ousted from the remainder of the tour. To be clear, under no circumstances is it appropriate to bang on the door of the headliner’s tour bus. A bus is typically a rental, and a large one featuring 12-15 bunks may cost anywhere between \$1,000-1,500 *each day*, regardless if you have a show booked to make money or not. The price tag covers the vehicle, the trailer, the insurance, the driver fees, and whatever else may come with it. Accordingly, the Mushroomhead bus likely cost the band between \$40- to \$60,000 for the tour. You don’t “bang” on a 60-thousand-dollar door.

Regardless, that is exactly what I did. Rick Thomas, a member of the band (and also the TM), promptly swung open

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<sup>4</sup> A “Jäger bomb” is a syrupy mixture of Jägermeister and an energy drink. Incidentally, the first song I ever wrote for Psychostick was Jägermeister Love Song.

the door to see me scowling at him. “You!” Immediately professional, Rick enquired, “What’s the problem?” as he stepped out onto the sidewalk. Without hesitating, I seized the tour laminate hanging from my key ring and held it up to his face. “*This* is the problem. These laminates are WRONG!”

I genuinely wish I could have witnessed the horrified faces of my tour mates as I harassed Rick on the sidewalk in downtown Dallas. Fortunately, he had the sober acumen to recognize that I was being entirely ridiculous with my critical affront regarding erroneous tour dates. If I were a gambler, I would wager that every tour ever booked in history bears at least one inaccurate tour date listed. It is an inescapable fact that as soon as you print the laminates, tour shirts, and promo posters, at least one of the dates will be changed or canceled. In our case it was a show in Hillsdale, Michigan the following week that had been dropped subsequent to the printing process. With an almost imperceptible smirk, Rick brushed off my grievance and returned to his infinitely more amicable bus.

Evidently, my laminate faux pas was not enough to provoke Rick to decide that he hated us. Instead, he invited Psychostick to join him on tour with his other band, Ventana (also performing on the current tour) the following January for another five-week run. How do you brand a tour with such a lineup? In probably the shortest tour name discussion in history, someone unexpectedly blurted out, “How about...the ‘Punch Your Cock In’ tour?” Rick’s response? “Done.”

## Proctor Exams

Like it or not, exams are a part of college life. It does not matter whether or not you have other obligations. As a student, I had committed to fulfilling the requirements of my two classes. As the Mushroomhead tour came to an end in Missouri and we

said goodbye to our new friends, I had one more challenge to overcome.



The clearly erroneous tour laminate.

When taking an exam on one's own college or university campus, the requirements are very simple. All you need to do is arrive at the testing center during open hours and complete the assignment prior to the due date. Off-campus proctor exams<sup>5</sup>, on the other hand, are a different beast entirely.

My first proctor exam was scheduled the day after our final show on tour. We had stayed with our friends Nick and Jen roughly 20 minutes east of Kansas City in a small suburb known as Grain Valley, Missouri. That morning I borrowed the van while everyone else was still asleep and drove to a local

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<sup>5</sup> This is sometimes called remote testing.

community college to try my luck.

There is a specific protocol to follow if a student wishes to proctor an exam away from one's home college campus. To explain, proctoring an exam off-site requires the approval of several entities. These include the professor of the course, the student's college or university testing center, and the desired location's testing center (usually another college). Additionally, a touring band member who is also a student must coordinate with fellow bandmates to successfully carry out the mission.

The first exam to be proctored was the second test for my Pre-Algebra class. Months before, I had scoured the area for a suitable location and discovered the Metropolitan Community College - Blue River (MCC-Blue River) campus about 15 minutes from the house. It seemed like a prime testing site, partly because it was a community college rather than an intimidating four-year university.

This is where it gets a bit complex. To uphold the academic standards as an accredited institution, CSCC requires that a student who wishes to have an exam proctored needs to fill out the official Remote Testing Request Form for each exam to be taken off-campus. The application also requires written consent from the professor teaching the class, as well as written consent from the desired proctor site. After requesting permission from my professor (which was granted), then requesting permission from the CSCC Testing Center (granted upon approval from the proctor site), I contacted the MCC-Blue River testing staff.

Once it was all approved, CSCC physically mailed my Pre-Algebra exam directly to the proctor site to await my arrival at MCC-Blue River in November. While it all seemed unnecessarily bureaucratic at first, I soon came to recognize that the numerous careful procedures were indeed an

important element of maintaining academic integrity. So be it. I paid my \$20 test fee (a written check was required) upon arrival and got to it.

Upon returning to Nick and Jen's home came excited questions about how everything went and how I did. I was pleased to report a successful first proctor experience, with more likely to come in the near future. I still had four exams to go for the term, but I was able to return to Columbus to stay with my ever-gracious friends, Paul and Jessica. I could then take the remainder of my exams on the CSCC campus with fewer hurdles to overcome.

I completed the semester intact. In fact, the two A's I was awarded for my efforts were very encouraging (and much better than my mediocre high school performance). If I could juggle two classes with an extensive tour schedule, what else could I do? Although it was not originally my intention to continue taking classes, I opted for three the following January. My initial finance course had offered a compelling glimpse into the complex realm of investing. I was gradually beginning to realize that you can spend your entire life working for money, or you can make your money work for you.

## Personal Finance 101

As the saying goes, "the poor stay poor while the rich get richer." Obviously, this is wildly oversimplified. However, there is some truth to the statement, regardless if the world is not binary, as it is inferred. Then why do the poor stay poor? How do the rich get richer? It's all a matter of simple math. Well, it can be simple, or it can get as complex as you want it to be. For our purposes, let's just keep it easy and pretend that the world is a binary place.

Most people like to buy *stuff*. When I say stuff, I mean that

people buy new furniture, TVs, cars, appliances, daily lattes<sup>6</sup> and all kinds of things that lose value over time. Obviously, wealthy people buy stuff too, but they have a different priority. Their priority is to pay *themselves* rather than pay other people by buying stuff. By “pay themselves,” I mean they prioritize paying their future selves by putting a significant portion of their income into *owning* companies instead of buying things *from* companies.

Many people think that purchasing a house is an optimal investment because they believe it will continually grow in value. In itself, this is a huge fallacy. Buying a house and expecting it to grow into a retirement plan is a massive risk. All your accumulated wealth is locked up in one singular investment. What happens if your investment floods, or there is a fire, or a tornado, or an earthquake? Insurance is useful, of course, but what might that do to your imagined long-term retirement if your house is no longer worth what you hoped it would be? Or what if the housing market begins to tank like it did in 2007? It puts all your eggs into one basket rather than spreading them out with diversification.

Instead, the simplest way to be a partial owner of a company is to open an account with a financial firm known as a brokerage account. It’s kind of like any regular checking or savings account, except you can purchase shares of stock. Shares of stock = literal fractions of ownership. So, owning 100 shares of a company that has 10,000 shares available on the market means that the person would literally own 1% of the company. In reality, most large companies have many millions of shares available, but we’re keeping it simple.

It is critical to comprehend the difference in numbers here.

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<sup>6</sup> Coffee was the big one for me, and I had no idea. I was purchasing \$5 coffees every day. That’s about \$150/month. It’s also \$1,825/year. Yikes.

If the average growth of the U.S.<sup>7</sup> economy as a whole is, let's say, 7% per year, that means the money that investors put into buying shares of stock is growing at an average of 7% year after year. Meanwhile, people who only buy *stuff* are losing value because their accumulated wealth is in the form of stuff that depreciates over time. You can think of stuff as a non-productive asset. Sure, it's cool to have a brand-new TV that dwarfs your friend's TV, but it loses value over time as electronics manufacturers release increasingly fancier products. Instead, you could own something that tends to grow in value.

Naturally, there are a couple of caveats here. The first is an economic feature called inflation. This just means that the value of money itself typically shrinks over time. In recent years, average inflation has been around 2%. This is another reason why many people remain poor. A great many people are thrilled when they receive a 2% raise from their jobs each year. However, that 2% raise is in nominal numbers; we want *real* value. So, a 2% raise minus 2% in value loss due to inflation means you are in exactly the same spot as you were the previous year. This is called the money illusion. It also means that the 7% annual growth of the stock market should really be thought of as only 5% because the value of currency declines each year.

The other caveat is taxes. As long as we prefer not to live in a prison cell, we have to pay taxes. So that brokerage account is subject to taxes, just like income earned at a job. However, there is a way to accumulate and grow wealth in a way that isn't reduced by taxes nearly as much. Rather than open a brokerage

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<sup>7</sup> I enrolled in finance courses in the U.S., thus my use of U.S. companies, economics, and laws. Many other countries have similar financial products, just with different names.

account to buy stock, you can contribute to a retirement plan<sup>8</sup>, which is tax-sheltered. In the U.S., this is called an Individual Retirement Account (IRA). You still have to pay taxes on income, however; that is unavoidable.

Now, IRAs come in two basic forms: Traditional IRAs (pay taxes on growth later) and Roth IRAs (pay taxes now). Which is better? There are lots of competing ideas about this, but this is how I see it. Which one offers you a better deal in the long run? What I mean is, when will tax rates likely be lower? Considering the many trillions of dollars of national debt the government has accumulated over the years, I'm banking on taxes going up over time. Thus, I have a Roth IRA to get my taxes out of the way.

If you are unsure of which stocks to purchase, there is a wonderfully simple way to invest responsibly that takes the guessing out of it. There is a financial product called a mutual fund, which is pretty much what it sounds like. It's an investment fund that a whole bunch of individuals mutually put their money into and allow it to grow. Again, we want diversity, not single companies (or houses). Single stocks fluctuate in price much more than a collection of many hundreds of stocks inside a mutual fund. Plus, it catches a much wider net and exposes you to companies of different sizes, different industries, different countries, and so on. When one company tanks, another might skyrocket, and your mutual fund investment is far more protected than just a single company's stock.

Sometimes I hear about how risky it is to invest in the stock market. Do you panic whenever your favorite department

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<sup>8</sup> Contributing to a 401(k) is an even better option because of employer matching. If you have one, you can max it out first to get the free money and *then* contribute to an IRA.

store puts appliances on sale? Do you rush over to your neighbor's house to try to sell them your current refrigerator, just in case its perceived value that day gets too low for you to be able to sell it tomorrow? Of course not. That would be silly. But that is exactly what far too many people do when the stock market dips down a bit on a "bad" day. Who cares what the stock market does today? The only thing that matters is what the value of your investment ends up looking like decades from now.

I did not fully comprehend all of this by the end of my first semester in college. It was an entirely new assortment of concepts for me. Consider that fact. Why is it that as a society we neglect to teach children the one thing that could mitigate paycheck-to-paycheck thinking and diminish their ongoing financial struggles? Regardless of your desired occupation or calling in life, everyone needs to be comfortable with basic financial concepts. We should teach this in high school, not just in college. It should be a required course when seniors are approaching graduation.

Imagine two students in identical situations. Both are 18 and getting ready to finish high school. Both are working for minimum wage at some terrible fast food joint. However, one of these students enrolls in a finance class and learns not to simply spend every dollar earned on buying *stuff* and instead purchases shares of company ownership in a mutual fund. It accumulates and grows for 30 or 40 or 50 years. That single class could completely transform the life of that student. That's exactly how I felt as I completed my first semester—transformed.

Thank you for reading the first chapter of my debut book. I hope you enjoyed the beginning of the strange tale that is my life. If you would like to press on, simply click on one of the purchase links below. Thanks again!

**-Alex Dontre**

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