



EARN

YOUR

SLEEP

ISSUE # 2 - TWO DOLLARS

EARN YOUR SLEEP #2

[i]

By August of 2009, it felt like everything I had become accustomed to was falling apart. I couldn't work with the people I worked with, I couldn't live with the person I lived with. Some said I just had an attitude. I was just trying to survive.

Best friends had left town and state, a couple of those close to me enlisted in the service and others stayed in one place for too long. I belonged to the latter. Circumstance is a funny thing, but it will ultimately lead you to where you need to be. Although 2009 might have been the roughest year I have ever endured, it is my firm belief that every thing happened as it should have. Allegiances were broken, new bonds were forged, plans were made as distractions from real problems and I saw a lot of people come and go that year. I wouldn't change a thing.

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Things between Oface and I hadn't been the same for a long time. They were stale, stagnant. Although on the outside I seemed happy with my position, I was a constant wreck on the inside. Days would pass like years and I had become so self-aware in my thoughts and actions that borderline panic attacks were just something I took in stride. I became numb to almost everything.

The one constant driving force to get me through was the thought of a few hours sleep at the end of twenty-hour days. It was always a chance to recharge my batteries, but I would sleep so hard that before my eyes

closed my alarm was going off. Every day I woke up hoping to be able to reset myself and shake the depression that was quickly sinking into my bones.

As the days stretched into weeks, shaking the sinking feeling was becoming harder to do. I simply got used to being unhappy and figured the hell with it. I had felt it was my destiny to be miserable. It was comfortable, familiar. I figured my suffering would make me some sort of martyr. I wanted someone to write the story about me, the patron saint of unhappiness.

I didn't spend the entire year depressed and unhappy. In hindsight, however, it sort of feels like I did. There were weeks on end where I felt content with where I was, happy in the relationship I had with Oface. All it took was waking up the wrong way to put a pessimistic slant on the rest of my day. Every other day I woke up panicked about where my life was going. I was simply too scared and numb to make the changes that needed to be made. Who was to say on a day I woke up happy, I was truly content? On the other hand, how did I know if I was truly unhappy when the day before and after I was feeling happy and settled?

It was extremely difficult for me to know what I was or wasn't feeling. Either mindset made sense while I was in it. Instead of facing the real problems I had with myself and Oface, I just sabotaged myself into staying numb so I didn't have to deal with change. I have never been good at coping with change, and this time around my self-medication was keeping myself numb.

I refused to let alcohol help with my decision-making. My thought processes when I drank became completely skewed and only confused my

overall understanding that much more. Lack of sleep and depression can do a hell of a number on you. This internal struggle was just something I got used to and carried around with me like another bad habit. And then Robin came along.

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It came that time of summer when I had to say goodbye to another best friend of mine. It seemed to be a recurring theme that made me almost dread the season. Moshboy had enlisted in the armed services and was heading out for boot camp come the end of July. He is a brilliant kid, and I knew that a decision like that would keep him on the path he wanted, and needed, to be on. I envied his determination and plan for his life. He was physically and mentally fit enough to excel in all of his military-based endeavors, and I was just a college dropout with a blue collar who smoked too many cigarettes.

To celebrate the end of summer, Moshboy's shipping off and Michull's return home for his brother's wedding, Moshboy threw a massive party out in the middle of nowhere. We got a huge group of people together that night. I had most of my friends around and Moshboy, as per usual, invited a ridiculous number of his acquaintances I wasn't all too familiar with. That didn't stop anyone from having a blast, though. Oface only stuck around for an hour and, feeling unwelcome, took off for the night to go party somewhere else.

That instance was a blatantly obvious foreshadowing of what was to come. She and Michull no longer got along. It had been that way for quite a while; which was one of the reasons she felt so out of place at the party. Another sign of what was to come was the fact that she was completely

absent from every single picture taken that night. I am not a very photogenic person because I always make an effort to be ugly in front of a camera, but at the party amidst the flashing lights of cameras, I could not have possibly looked happier. Most of the pictures in existence of me actually smiling were taken that night.

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One of Moshboy's friends, Wayne, was there at the party when I arrived. He's a good kid, and I hadn't seen him in over a year. We shot the shit for a minute and he introduced me to his friend Robin. They were both already on their way to being drunk as shit. I had some catching up to do.

He introduced the two of us, and at that moment realized that not only had I met her years before, but we had actually hung out on a few separate occasions. I was sure of it. Her name rang familiar like a memory from a past life. I brought it up to her, but she didn't believe me. I let it go because trying to convince a drunken person of their memory is always a losing battle.

The bond we had at the party was deeply rooted in our love of music. We pretentiously name dropped bands back and forth, testing each other, getting a feel for the water before we dived in. We shared the same tastes and worshipped the same front-men. We had been to shows that made the other jealous. My head was spinning with excitement. I was finally able to share the passion I had for "my" music. A few months down the road, she ended up getting the exact same band tattoo that I had already had for a few years. I didn't believe until I saw it.

After a night spent drinking and talking with her and everyone else close

to me, I passed out earlier than most. When I woke up still drunk from the night before, I figured what had transpired between Robin and I should only be taken at face value. After the party, things continued to plod along in the slow Midwest way that I had become used to. Robin and I remained in contact every so often, mostly talking about new music and shows happening locally.

Little did I know that Robin would ultimately become a catalyst, the most positive, unprecedented force in my life.

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Slowly, but steadily, the contact we had with each other became more frequent. After a month or two, talking every single day wasn't uncommon. It was strange if we went a day without. Things between us were completely plutonic. We never flirted and we weren't doing anything inappropriate. It was simply two people with a great deal of common ground getting to know each other better.

The conversations were never forced. They progressed naturally from topic to topic seamlessly. At certain times, the discussions lasted for hours. The day I knew I found something totally real in her was the day we both wound up coffee drunk together, the entire city separating us.

They day had began just like any other. I had the day free from my day job, and I didn't have to clock in for my other until later that night. I got my first pot of coffee on, and Oface headed out for work. I relished the days when I could sit and write undisturbed except for my own self-induced distractions.

I filled my mug and went into my office for a day of productivity. I got onto the computer to check up on a couple of things before I began writing. I fired up some whiskey-punk and let the ink flow. Soon thereafter, Robin made her way online and we began talking. I opened up to her completely during our conversation. I told her things that Oface or any of my other closest friends didn't even know. Spilling my guts to her like that felt so natural that I just ran with it. We delved into our life stories, made each other laugh to the point of tears and spent six hours in front of the computer. We chain-smoked and drank coffee until our eyes were nothing more than burning, red and dry marbles.

Two and a half pots of coffee on an empty stomach later, I needed to get ready for my bar job and Robin needed to go to class. I knew I had drunk entirely too much coffee in such a short amount of time, but it didn't hit me until I went to drive to work. My head felt like it was attached to my body by a string that would snap at any given chance. I felt my eyes looking everywhere at once. I was at a stop light not even a block from home and I felt like I would be safer to drive if I had drunk too many beers. I was seriously fucked up on coffee. Making it to work as best as could be expected, I clocked in and headed into the kitchen. I began pulling items out of the walk-in cooler to cook up an order. Halfway through the preparation, I realized that there hadn't even been an order rung through.

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Come to find out the next day, she had been just as jacked on coffee as I was. Safe to say it made for interesting nights for the both of us. It was a camaraderie based on discomfort. After that, we made the effort to talk

on a daily basis with no exceptions. She offered to help out however she could to distribute the first issue of my zine around, and it was after talking and connecting with me that she wanted to start her own zine. She told me that I had been the inspiration for undertaking a project of her own. I felt honored. A couple of times she came into Side Pocket with a friend to say hi. I brought what I had left of the second run of issues and handed them off to her. They were out and about within a week.

Only a few months had passed since we re-met, but whatever dynamic that had been there prior had entirely shifted. As the summer drew to a quiet close, it felt like the world that I knew was holding its breath. There was something in the air, something intangible. Something that would lead me to a place I never thought I'd see.

[vii]

November rolled around, and a chain of events was put into action the night Nothington played our hometown. They had been a favorite band of mine for years, and it was the first chance I would get to see them live and in their element. The show was on a Thursday. Most of my friends have or had the Monday through Friday nine-to-five blues, so a late night punk show in a dive bar wasn't really in the cards for them. They needed this thing called sleep. I'm not entirely sure I know what that means.

Planning on drinking heavily, I requested the next day off of work. It was, after all, Nothington playing at a bar where the Pabst flows like water. Robin was planning on showing up, as well as a couple of my other sleep-deprived friends. Oface was my designated driver for the night. I quickly found out that she was only there to keep tabs on Robin and me, not because she actually wanted to see the band or drink beers. That was

what our relationship had become. To be honest, it hurt my feelings. The entire two years we had been together, I had never given her a reason not to trust me. I sure as hell wasn't planning on it any time soon, either. Even at this point, Robin and I were simply friends who talked pretty frequently. I had only seen her a couple of times since Moshboy's party and I hadn't developed feelings for her. Yet.

Before Robin and the others arrived, and long before the show began, Oface and I were already at odds with each other. I had no reason to be anything other than content. I had one of my favorite beers on tap, one of my favorite bands playing in my hometown and I had a ride home. Some times that's all you need to make it through the night.

Oface began complaining about being tired and irritable. It had gotten old real quick. I told her I wouldn't be hurt or angry if she wanted to leave. I would figure out a ride home somewhere during the course of the night. She insisted on staying, all the while making sure I was well aware of the fact that she didn't want to be there.

When the others arrived, I welcomed it as a distraction from the awkward silences between Oface and I. It was becoming increasingly difficult to smooth things over with her on any given night, and I think it was that night at that show that I decided I wasn't going to play the role of concerned boyfriend any longer. I was there to do some heavy drinking and to see some friends and live music. That was my agenda and I was sticking to it.

Almost immediately, Oface began shooting Robin dirty looks. She was making no effort at all to be discreet, but no one seemed to notice with the exception of Robin and I. Oface was threatened by her. I can't say that

I really blame her, though. Why shouldn't she be threatened by a beautiful girl with more in common and more passion for the things I hold near and dear than she could have ever possibly had? I don't think treating someone like shit is the way to go about it, though.

I found out a few weeks later that Robin had called her out in front of every one and Oface just bullshitted some story about a bad first impression. Awesome.

The beers kept coming and we all anxiously awaited the headlining band. The openers weren't really anything worth writing home about, and Robin and I spent most of our time outside smoking and small-talking with other patrons of the bar. We were inseparable. I had forgotten Oface was even there half of the time. I wasn't doing it on purpose, avoiding her, but I just had a hunger, a madness for the night that was satiated only by Robin. I felt alive, like I was a phoenix being reborn in bar lights.

Amidst the crowded noise of the bar, a few of us went through the kitchen to the back of the bar for a cigarette. Jay, the vocalist and guitarist for Nothington was outside, hanging around and talking to anyone who approached him. I offered him a cigarette and he accepted graciously. Robin and I started up a conversation with him about anything that came to mind, careful, however, to avoid the annoying fanboy talk about his band. Although the band and music are a huge influence on me, I tried my best to keep the talk from heading that direction. Rather, I wanted to get to know him more as a person than a hero on a pedestal.

It was effortless. We swapped stories about bands we liked. I told him I felt a real camaraderie with hard-traveling bands such as Nothington. My schedule at that time didn't allow for much time off, and before I knew it I

was right back at it, sleep-deprived and steady on my feet. He told us what it was like being on the road, how he would be asleep until five minutes before the set most of the time. I really respect that kind of lifestyle, the ethos that comes with it. If I had musical talent, that's the only way I would see myself doing things.

I had chain-smoked a few cigarettes during the conversation and Robin had disappeared. In the back of my mind I was constantly searching the crowd of drunks and smokers for her. I had brought a fresh pack of cigarettes and had already begun to run low. I decided it best to head back inside where smoking wasn't allowed.

"Let me buy you a drink", I told Jay, "It's the least I can do."

"You a whiskey man?" he asked.

I scoffed, "Come on now, what'll it be?"

"Jameson?" he inquired.

That was the exact answer I was looking for. We found two empty seats at the bar. I ordered two shots of the whiskey and slid one his way. We toasted and knocked them back. After the burn of the whiskey wore off, we continued talking and sharing stories. We showed off our tattoos to each other; mine told stories of where I had been, his told where he was from.

After another beer or two, he told me he had to go and get the stage set up for the show. Lost in between the alcohol and the excited conversations was the fact that I was actually there to see his band play. With a new-found anxiousness, I left the bar area to find my friends. After

finishing my pint, I ordered more beer and took it up to the front of the stage with me. Properly drunk, Robin and I crowded the front and jumped in place. We were as excited as two kids on Christmas Day. As soon as Jay and the rest of the band got onto the stage, cheers and hollers resounded through the crowd. The band launched into their loud and fast set. Beer was spilled and smiles that stretched a mile were shared between all the dedicated fans packed shoulder to shoulder. After what seemed like their last song, they had yet to play my favorite. I was a foot in front of Jay, and I yelled over the noise of the guitar feedback for them to play my song.

"You gonna sing it?" Jay yelled back.

"Of course!" I responded, drunkenly slurring my words.

"Then get up here!"

Almost out of my head with equal parts shock and honor and smiling like a damn fool, I climbed onto the stage as the band tore into the opening chords of "Where I Stand". Robin was up front, pumping her fists in the air and screaming at the top of her lungs. I did the same, but I was on stage and singing into the microphone, with Jay and the rest of the band flanked to my right. After the set ended, I felt drunker than when it had begun. It was partially the alcohol, and partially the rush of being on stage and singing. I had never done that before.

Barely able to say goodbye to everyone, I was rushed out the door and into the car by Oface. I was too drunk to really know what was going on. The next thing I know, I was in a moving vehicle doing my best to hold down the beer that was so insistent on coming back up. Even though my tolerance for booze isn't as high as it used to be, I can hold my own quite

well; except when I get into a moving car.

I made it back home without incident, and I headed for the bathroom immediately. My body was reeling and my head was spinning. I was so worked up from everything that had transpired that night I could barely see straight. I knew the end of Oface and I was on the way, I could feel it. I knew I had feelings for Robin, but I was unsure as to how she felt about me. I was drunk and tired and running on fumes. It all hit me at once, and I kneeled down and let the rotten feeling in my gut purge itself without any effort on my part.

[viii]

Being as pessimistic as I still was at the time, I figured that that night's magic would only remain in memory, the madness and hope for the future would diminish as the days passed. Luckily, I was wrong.

Thanksgiving arrived a week later. It was the first time in a few years that wasn't spent eating away a massive hangover from the night before. Oface and I paid our time to both sets of parents' gatherings and spent the day in the shadow of an unspoken uneasiness.

After sending a message to Robin that said "The tryptophan and coffee are waging war on me!", and after her response of "Be strong, Dean! Be strong!", a single chain of events started that led me to where I am right now: a Goodwilled dining room table in Portland, Oregon.

Oface didn't like me remaining in contact with Robin. And, according to her, I shouldn't have been doing so at all. The two of us were still on the plutonic friend level. That day in particular was mere chit-chat, talking

about how a Broadway song was the best (and only) Thanksgiving song. Oface was ready to pick a fight after that, but I was too tired and didn't give two shits.

Although I had developed feelings for Robin, I didn't remain in contact with her because of it. I felt such a connection with her that I knew I needed to have her around. I hadn't told her how I felt because I was in a relationship. As hard as it was to put those feelings on the back-burner, I didn't have the luxury to tell her because I had a girlfriend, no matter how dead-end it actually was. It wasn't the right thing to do, especially since that would misconstrue for Robin what kind of person I actually was.

Later that night, Oface came out and said what we had both been thinking: "Things aren't the same anymore. I really feel like we're growing apart."

We were. It was then that I got the courage needed to do what had to be done, for the time being anyway.

"You're right," I said, "And I really don't know what to do anymore. We want two entirely different lives."

My response shocked her to the point of tears. I hated to see her cry, to be the reason for it. Up until that point, though, I had always bullshitted and sugar-coated my way out of our problems. Why I was so infamous for doing so I may never know. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, maybe it was her. Maybe I was simply too much of a coward to really live up to what I knew had to be done.

This time around, I started owning up to the problems. We did, in fact,

want two entirely different lives and futures. She wanted kids, a house, a life in Fort Wayne. I wanted to get the hell out of town and travel. I have no desire to have kids. I'm too selfish. I think the reason a lot of people want kids is to be able to name something. If I ever got the strong enough desire to want to name something and establish my livelihood because of it, I would start a band or get a pet.

Marriage was another thing, too. At our ages, she was two years my senior, it was something that needed mulling over. She was ready to settle down, especially after being with me for two years. I had no desire to settle down. I was restless, ready to see and do things. She claimed herself as a Lutheran because of her upbringing, and the fact that I am not a religious person, although I was raised Catholic, we wouldn't have been able to get married legally anyway. It is, after all, a religious sacrament. There was no way I was going to go through the bureaucratic red-tape of converting to a religion I had no interest or belief in, especially when I had so many doubts about Catholicism.

To paraphrase Kerouac, the only thing I could offer her was my own confusion. The only thing I regret about our relationship is the fact I couldn't offer her anything more than that.

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We decided to make one last-ditch effort to remedy the situation. We were both well aware of the fact that I needed to reassess what needed to be done. It was a lost cause from the beginning, mostly because I knew I wasn't going to have a change of heart. I cowardly strung her along for the week following.

A day or two after that, she told me I wasn't allowed to see or speak to Robin. My anger gave way to the courage needed to finally do what had been a long time coming.

"I'm sorry...I'm not allowed to do what?" I asked.

"I don't want you talking to her anymore," she responded.

"No, no, sweetie," I replied with vitriol in my voice, "that's not how it works. I am allowed to see and talk to whomever I please. You have no right to tell me otherwise. I am not doing anything inappropriate or under-handed."

I meant it, too. I had no desire to make Robin fall for me by giving her constant attention. I had finally found someone with whom I could carry on marathon conversations about the things that mattered most to me.

"Well, could you refrain from talking to her for a few days while we try and figure us out?" Oface asked.

Her sincerity caught me off guard and I hesitated.

"I can't do that," I told her after a long pause.

My response surprised even me. Once I realized that I was willing to put the entire relationship between Oface and I on the line to simply remain friends with Robin, I knew it was over between the two of us.

The next two days were spent avoiding each other, and the nights were spent sleeping in the same bed. I yearned for it to be Robin I was sleeping next to, not with the one who had become associated with stress and

anxiety. I awoke each morning with a crushing sense of guilt.

We were trapped in limbo because neither of us knew what to do if we were to break up. Who would go where? Neither of us was financially stable enough to afford a place of our own. And, after all, we had spent the last four years in very close proximity of each other. That is, perhaps, why it took so long to end things.

That Sunday, I was on my lunch break at work and Oface called me to "talk about things". There was nothing left to say, and I began to grow sick of rehashing everything day in and day out. I knew from the second I answered the phone it was one of those arguments we had made a daily routine of. I couldn't keep anything bottled up any longer. I was losing sleep, I was barely eating. Chest pains became commonplace.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I'm going out with Robin tonight to get a few beers."

She flipped her lid, cussed me out and hung up. Since the Nothington show, Robin and I hadn't gotten the chance to get together because of our busy schedules. It was the only thing between the two of us that needed improvement. So, on an off night from our respective responsibilities, we made plans to meet up and knock back a few. It wasn't a date and neither of us perceived it that way. I, however, went into it with a completely different set of motives than Robin had. I needed to feel out the situation as best as I could. I knew I had feelings for her, but there was a great deal of doubt still weighing heavy on me. Perhaps I was reading too far into everything. Perhaps Robin and I could only exist as friends who never saw each other. I needed to set straight with myself how I felt about her more so than finding out about how she felt about

me.

I told Oface all of this, and she said I was full of shit. Was it unfair to put her through that? Yes. But, if I had come to realize what I felt for Robin was completely unfounded, that might have given Oface and I a chance to heal. The fact that I even entertained the thought I might have feelings for someone else was a bridge burned that could have never been rebuilt. The damage had been done. There was no turning back.

Robin and I met at the Latch String that night around seven in the evening. I had only been to the bar once before and I liked it enough. Robin had yet to go. It was easier to find than the two of us had thought, and I pulled into the parking lot to find her waiting for me. I didn't know at the time, but we wouldn't be saying our goodbyes to each other for almost another ten hours.

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Being that it was a Sunday night, the place wasn't all that packed. We found two empty barstools and sat down. The bartender asked us what we'll have and we both responded with PBR. Immediately, the few drunks perched around the bar like vultures began talking.

"PBR? Man, I used to drink that shit twenty years ago!"

"Blatz Blue Ribbon?" another chimed in, "my dad used to drink that when I was a kid."

And so on and so forth. Content at the attention, we both smiled and admitted to loving what most people referred to as "old-man beer". What could we say? It's our favorite cheap beer. Every one at the bar, including

the bartender, was surprised at the fact that two people so young in comparison were drinking such old-school beer.

We pulled out our debit cards to start our respective tabs. The bartender looked at me and said "What, you're with a cute girl and you can't even buy her drinks?"

I laughed nervously, "Not tonight, bud."

The simple act of paying for her beers would have crossed the line from plutonic to inappropriate. Robin didn't seem to mind. The conversation began immediately. We discussed our favorite cities and our favorite bands. We geeked out about the first time we had ever heard The Lawrence Arms. They're our favorite band, and we shared almost identical tattoos for the 'Arms on our arms. We kept the beer coming and off and on we went out back to smoke cigarettes. The smoking ban in the city was a real pain in the ass some times, especially since I remember a time when smoking indoors, especially at bars, was allowed.

During the course of the night and on my way back from the bathroom, I caught a glimpse of Robin from behind as I came back to my seat. She was perched classily on a barstool and talking to a fellow drinker. The way her legs were crossed, the way her plaid shirt wrapped around her curves, I knew I was going to fall in love with her. Hell, who was I kidding? I already had.

The night continued timelessly. Neither of us knew or cared what time it was, how long we had been there. We were bursting with conversation. There was so much to talk about, but seemingly not enough time. When we depleted the resource of canned PBR, we arm-wrestled to see who

would get the last one. We both knew its better out of a can than out of a bottle. I was so flustered by her that she damn-near beat me.

Before the bar closed early for the night, the two of us were out back listening to music on her phone. As we both half-drunkenly sang "Substitute", I thought for sure I had no chance in hell with her. It made me feel sick to my stomach. I almost wished for the night to be over as soon as the song ended. I kept it all to myself and we shuffled back inside for last call. Much to the dismay of Robin and I, the bar was closing. She was confused as to why it was closing so early, she was still new to the bar scene. I told her on Sunday nights bars close by one a.m. We each ordered two more beers and paid our tabs. The bartender laughingly informed us that we had drunk *all of the PBR in the bar*. We found a strange sense of pride in that.

As we were walking out, half-crocked and unsure as to what was next, she asked if I wanted to go smoke in her Camaro with her. "Sure," I said, "it's too fucking cold to stand outside".

Earlier, we had gone to my car to drink and listen to a few songs she had never heard, and now she was returning the favor. Our favorite bands were in constant rotation the entire time we continued talking in her car. We talked about the first time we had ever gotten drunk. We told stories about respective scars, both physical and emotional.

It had been at least an hour since the bar closed, and we were still sitting in her car when she asked me if I thought the bar would still be open to the public.

"I doubt it. I don't think there's anyone in there".

"Shit, I really hafta piss," she said.

I shrugged. "It's worth a shot to try".

She ran up to the door of the bar and found it locked. She popped her head in the driver side window and said "You might wanna close your eyes. I really have to go, and this parking lot is gonna have to do".

I laughed and closed my eyes and turned my head. Minutes later she returned from the spot in front of her car she had decided to mark, the concrete slightly less dry than when we had arrived.

"I hope you don't think less of me," she said.

I smiled. "Hell, if anything, I think MORE of you."

As the night became early morning, the windows became too cold to steam up, even though our breath hung in the air. Without the car actually running, there wasn't any heat and we shivered and shook and chain-smoked until almost five a.m. We were too wrapped up in talk to notice the cold or how late it had become.

The time did come, however, to say goodnight. My car had been giving me a bit of trouble and I needed to have it in the shop early, the time of which was quickly approaching.

"Well, I better get heading home," I said, "I gotta run some errands early on and I've been up for almost twenty-four hours straight".

Then it happened, the longest lull in conversation the entire night. The hesitation between the two of us was so heavy you could feel it in your

chest. It was only a few seconds, but it felt infinite. I knew I wanted to kiss her, but I would not and could not in all good conscience.

"Well, give me a hug, dude", she said with a hint of melancholy in her voice.

We hugged, both bummed out to see the night finally end. After almost ten hours, it still hadn't felt long enough. We were both in desperate need of night like we had just had. We promised to do it again soon, and I stumbled my way across the parking lot to my car, not because of the alcohol, it had long since worn off, but because of the blood rushing back into my stiff and numb legs. Once I got the feeling back in them, I drove off and made my way home, although it had really stopped feeling like home at all.

[xi]

When I got back, Oface had been waiting up for me the entire time. We fought and bullshitted until six a.m. Lying in bed with her and hashing everything out threw my logic for a loop. The comfort of a warm body and a warm bed that I had become so accustomed to really screwed up my thought processes. To make matters worse, I had spent the last few hours freezing my ass off. My eyelids became so heavy that keeping them open to stare at a dark ceiling became a chore. I decided to take my car in a bit later in the day and fell fast asleep.

The end was near, but I slept straight through until noon. Taking all of my energy, I pulled myself out of bed and went straight for the coffee pot. It was the only thing that I knew would get me through the day. I decided as I put the coffee on I would no longer be sleeping in the same bed with her.

It was too damaging, and it felt completely wrong. The feeling of guilt I awoke with every morning was becoming too heavy to ignore.

I had no appetite whatsoever. After I got dressed enough to drive, Oface followed me in her car to the shop where I was taking mine. I felt ashamed asking her for a ride because of the hell I was putting her through, but it was my only option. I needed to get to work.

I got my car to the shop without a second to spare. Upon pulling into the parking lot, smoke began pouring out of my hood. We rode back to our place in silence. I attempted calling off that night's shift, but no one was available to cover me. I was so physically and mentally exhausted I could barely stand. So, I kept the coffee drinking at full force before I had to work. By the time Oface had given me a ride into work, I felt so sick from not enough food and too much coffee I thought I was going to pass out. I couldn't even smoke a cigarette I was so nauseous. As you can tell, readers, that's quite a big deal.

Safe to say, I made it through the night although I felt dead on my feet. The end of us had finally come, but we were both too scared to make it official. It was a nervous limbo we were living in, I felt dead inside except for those few nights spent with Robin.

Oface gave me a ride into work early the next day. That was to be the last time I would ever be a passenger in her car. I went through the motions at work, doing my best to put out of mind what was happening. Nothing could be resolved while I was at work.

After talking to Dayla about everything at work that day, I decided that it had to end that day. My friends can read me like a book. As trite as it

sounds, a lot of them know me better than I know myself. When Oface called me on my lunch break that day at work, I finally had found all the courage that I needed. I could tell she had been in tears as soon as I answered the phone.

"I can't do this anymore," she said, "I can't got a day longer knowing you've got feelings for someone else while you're still with me."

She was right. Even if things between Robin and I would go no further than they already had, the damage was already done. It was irreversible. The line of normalcy had been crossed. Things would never, and could never, be the same. I didn't know what to say. I understood exactly where she was coming from. I sat in the curb in silence, a cigarette hanging from my shaking hand.

"So, are we going to end this or what?" she asked, angry at this point.

After hesitating in order to brace myself for what I knew would be a messy break-up, I replied with a simple yes. And it was done. I knew it was far from over, but the hardest part had been owning up to know what I knew was the only right decision.

"Fine. I'm done with this shit," she said. "I can't do this anymore."

Again, I couldn't blame her. After a moment's pause, she said she would still take me to get my car after work.

"No, I wouldn't ask that of you. I'll walk."

I had been a burden on her for too long. I had run her through the gauntlet of my own doubts and lack of commitment. I didn't want to hurt

her anymore. She didn't deserve it, and it had simply become too exhausting for me to continuously deal with it. A good, clean break was necessary. The first step was to not take advantage of her helpful nature.

[xii]

After work, I decided to walk the couple of miles to the shop. I needed fresh air to clear my head, to shake the exhaustion off. I called Jacobo and told him everything that had transpired. He was one of the few people that seemed to be on the edge of their seats as everything had been playing out. I told him everything. After explaining my motives, my thoughts and opinions, he told me that by doing what I had done, I had actually restored a bit of faith for human nature in him.

The way I looked at it, I had done the only thing I could do. It was, without a doubt, the only right thing to do. I couldn't give Oface what she wanted or needed, I had developed feelings for someone other than her and I was unhappy. Changes had to be made. I felt like a dick for putting my happiness ahead of hers, but when you spend so much of your time focused on other peoples' happiness, you have a tendency to forget your own. I had done it for far too long, and it was time to make a decision that benefited me for once.

I arrived at the shop freezing cold and coughing up a lung. Mix in a cold December wind, a little snow, chain-smoking and power-walking and you're quite the mess when you finally get to where you need to go.

I picked up the car and headed back to my apartment. It wasn't home anymore, just a place to rest my head. I needed a shower and something to eat. I hadn't had much of an appetite earlier on, and now that it was

beginning to get late, I became ravenous. So, I showered, picked up a pizza and headed over to Jacobo's. On the way, I had a moment of clarity. As I was belting out a song off-key and in perfect time, I realized that the last year or so had trained me to get by just fine on my own. All the hours of exhaustion spent alone, beating the day before it beat me. The loneliness in my soul was filled with what was important to me: books, coffee, writing, music. I could handle myself and get by just fine on my own. Everything else came in second. It was a significant revelation. In a short while afterwards, I would come to find the other half of my being manifested in Robin. Once I realized we were in perfect harmony together, my moment of clarity became nothing more than a fleeting thought brought on by circumstance.

[xiii]

When I got to Jacobo's, we scarfed down the pizza and talked. We might have drunk beer, we might have drunk coffee. With cable television providing the backbeat to our conversation, we talked about the past and the present and the future. I was in a mental state of limbo. I wasn't sure what the future would hold. Hell, I didn't know what tomorrow would hold. Taking everything one day at a time was the only plausible way to keep on keeping on.

Robin had wanted to get together that night, but I had to cancel my plans with her. She was unaware of what was going on with Oface and me because I purposely kept her out of the loop. I didn't want to make it seem like she was my escape from the problems Oface and I were having, my escape into the arms of another girl before a relationship ended. It wasn't like that at all. Robin was my escape from the life I had become so

accustomed to living. Just the presence of her in my life put into perspective my hopes and dreams and passions and pitfalls. With her, I knew what I wanted. I knew where I was fucking up on my own thought processes. I didn't want to diminish that impact by making it seem like I was going behind my girlfriend's back to be with her.

Jacobo and I called it a night, and as I was pulling out of his apartment complex, winter hit. It was merciless. Rain had turned into the season's very first snow. Ice covered the roads in no time at all. As one storm was finally ending, another was just beginning...

[xiv]

Jon and Dayla had offered me their trailer as a safe haven for whenever I would need it. Their trailer is closer to a house than a white-trash domicile. I had yet to take them up on their offer, but that night I was in desperate need for a place to sleep everything off. I wasn't going to sleep in my car when I had a friend's floor, and I sure as hell wasn't going to sleep in the same apartment as Oface. That would be mental anguish neither of us needed.

At the time, Jon was Dayla's fiancé. They've since been married, I was one of the groomsmen. They are the first of my friends to begin the marriage, kids, house and mortgage cycle. They probably won't be the last either.

The regular twenty minute drive to their place took me almost an hour. I arrived safely, and they had a beer waiting for me. It had been an incredibly long week already and it was only Tuesday. They knew the ins and outs of everything that had happened and, to only help me farther, they didn't bring it up. It was a nice change of pace from the last few

hours spent hashing and rehashing the same fucking story. After two beers in just as many hours, I started dozing off while sitting up in the recliner. They told me I was free to use the bed in their spare bedroom. It was midnight, and it was the most comfortable bed I have ever slept on, broken box spring and all. Months down the road, Robin and I would share the same bed in an apartment of our own.

[xv]

Eight hours later, the howling wind banged the trailer's siding back and forth and back again. I was sleeping on the end of the trailer closest to the commotion and the sound was almost deafening. The sound of metal on concrete woke me from a deep sleep. I was wrapped in a couple of blankets, the hood of my sweatshirt pulled up over my head and I was cradled perfectly in the broken box spring. Strangely, I felt calm. I was safe and warm. I decided to brave the elements and go outside for a cigarette. As soon as I got outside, a dizzying sense of exhaustion made my head spin. I had just slept eight full hours through, usually two day's worth for me, and still felt physically drained. I stubbed my cigarette out after a couple drags and went back to bed, the rhythmic thumping lulling me to sleep.

That morning, and that bed, became a landmark of safety that I don't think I had ever felt before. I had walls to block the wind, a warm place to sleep, and two of my closest friends asleep in the same trailer. I had nothing and I had everything all at once.

A couple hours later, I awoke more refreshed than I had been in almost a year. I took a shower for the first time in a few days. A clean change of clothes, a couple of cigarettes and a big mug of steaming coffee, and I felt

like a new man. For the first time in quite a while, I felt free. I had no one to answer to, no one to dictate my days except for myself. The possibilities were endless.

[xvi]

The first thing I did that morning was to get a hold of Robin. I didn't have to work until that night, so my day was entirely free. Jon and Dayla had errands to run and, without a key to their trailer, I decided it best to take off. Robin and I decided to meet at IHOP for coffee. I gathered what few things I had with me, said my thanks and my goodbyes and headed out the door.

I drove through snow and ice as a winter sun beat down on the city. I was completely flustered and excited with the opportunity to spend more time with Robin; this time with no strings attached. It was nice to not have to rely on technology to do so. I don't like technology all that much, to be honest. I have a cell phone only because it seems like a necessity, but beyond that and the convenience of a computer, I could give a shit less. With technological advances come ridiculous materialistic desires. I have no room in my simple life-style for it. It bores me. The best thing about books and coffee and music is that they will never become obsolete.

I pulled into IHOP just minutes after Robin had gotten us a place to sit. There she was, patiently waiting, radiating more warmth than the two cups of coffee on the table in front of her. I sat down, grabbed the mug immediately to warm my frozen fingers and we started up right where left off that fateful Sunday night. Her eyes twinkled with caffeine and laughter. Outside, the city was a frozen grey mud-puddle. Inside, we warmed ourselves with each other.

We talked endlessly. We pointed out our own observations of the world, people around us, life and the love of simplicity. I felt even stronger in my convictions that this seemingly random girl was my other half. It was a bond I felt in my soul, like our whole lives had been spent holding our breaths and waiting to finally cross paths again. During our conversation, it was realized that our paths had been crossing during all of those years spent apart. As I was walking in one door, she was walking out the same one. Hell, we had had the same circle of friends only a few years prior and both of us spent many a night smoking and drinking and sleeping in the same trailer of a friend neither of us saw anymore.

A well-dressed, well-fed family consisting of middle-aged parents and two spoiled teenagers were seated across the aisle from us. Rudely interrupting a story I was in the middle of telling, the father, leaned over and said "Excuse me, but could you refrain from using F-bombs so much?" Shocked and awed at the same time, Robin and I said nothing at first. We were literally the only two seated tables in the entire restaurant. After a long pause, I responded with "Uh, yeah. Sure." Robin and I were so flustered in each other's company that we were off our game. Any other time we would have told the guy to fuck off. They took off five minutes after reprimanding us.

Halfway through our manic, caffeine-fueled discussions, I got a phone call from Dayla. Although I wasn't expecting a call, I knew she had planned it. She and Jon were going out to get a bite to eat at a cheap Chinese buffet. She wanted to know if Robin and I wanted to join. We were hungry, and cheap buffet food sounded good. We agreed.

Robin had already paid for our coffees, and we bundled up on the way

out.

"You can ride with me if you want," I told her. This had been the furthest I had come to ever making a move on her.

"Yeah, definitely", she enthusiastically responded.

I unlocked the passenger side door and she got in.

"You ever heard The Replacements?" I asked.

"Not a whole hell of a lot", she said.

"Listen to this song. It's one of my favorites."

We pulled into the buffet's parking lot as "Little Mascara" finished playing. The four of us had the place to ourselves. It was nice not having to worry about dropping too many F-bombs. It was the first time since Moshboy's party that we were all together, and everyone was properly introduced. Surrounded by plates of good food piled high, we talked and talked while the snow continued falling like ashes from a firestorm.

I was happy to see everyone hit it off so well. Dayla's opinion means a lot to me, and I could tell she approved of Robin. The tension and energy between Robin and I was so thick you could see it, feel it. The look in Dayla's eye reassured me that she knew Robin felt the same way. I was still uneasy, though, because I wasn't sure how to tell Robin that Oface and I had broken up. I had to use a lot of tact because even though Robin was part of the reason, it wasn't solely because of her.

After we finished eating, sleepy from too much MSG, I had an idea. As the

four of us filed to the register, I ran ahead with my credit card in hand. I handed our bill to the cashier and said "I got 'em all. Turning to Jon and Dayla, I said "It's the least I can do. You guys have really come through for me." Robin looked a bit confused, but it was all going according to my plan. After we got back into my car, I told her the reason I had paid for everyone's meal. Jon and Dayla had been instrumental in helping me through everything.

"Yeah, Oface and I broke up last night," I told her, "They gave me a place to stay, I felt like I at least owed them lunch."

"You guys broke up?" she asked.

"It's been a long time coming", I said, "for a lot of reasons. When she told me that I wasn't even allowed to have you as a friend, I knew I was through with her."

"Well, I'm sorry if I broke you guys up. Really."

I knew she meant it.

"No, no. That was only a small part of it. Things weren't the same anymore, and it couldn't go on any longer, ya know?"

"Cool. Well, alright," she said.

That's about the time I let my overactive imagination take hold of everything. I began freaking out thinking that Robin would think I was a bastard for doing what I did. I still didn't have the balls to tell her I had feelings for her. But, now that I was technically single, I knew it would be slightly easier. That would also give her the opportunity to come out and

say how she felt about me. I just had to wait it out.

We parted ways in the same IHOP parking lot we had met earlier on that afternoon. I had work, she had class. The weather had gotten progressively worse, and I can still remember the way she looked when she was unable to get into her car. Shaking and cold, a look of defeat came across her face as she wrangled with the door, trying to break the ice that had sealed it shut. She couldn't get it open. I had been idling in my car, waiting for her to be safe and warm. I put my car in park, jumped out and tore the ice from her car with my bare hands.

"Thankyouthankyouthankyou," she said. She smiled a warm smile, but it didn't bring the feeling back into my hands right away. I told her we would talk soon. We went our separate ways, both unsure of how to feel about the situation, both of us hoping for the best.

[xvii]

I was still living in the basement apartment with Oface, simply because I really had no where else to go on such short notice. I was also naïve enough to think living together wouldn't be a problem. It lasted a week.

For the next couple of days, my thoughts were consumed by Robin entirely. She was all I wanted to, or could, think about. The fact that I was getting kicked out on my ass by Oface didn't even bother me. I knew everything would pan out just fine. I had enough survival instinct to make sure of it. I'd worry about things as they came along.

Robin and I made plans for Friday night. After a physically and mentally draining week, beers were in order. We were going to meet in a bar just

outside of city limits, so we could actually smoke and drink at the same time. Its little things like that that can make an entire week worthwhile.

Erida came along with me that night. Six or seven years before, she had actually been the first to befriend Robin. That's how long our paths have been crossed. Erida hadn't seen her since, and now I was the one trying to get with Robin instead of the other way around. I knew Erida was really excited.

"She's mine," I told Erida, a shit-eating grin smeared across my face.

Erida had had feelings for Robin all those years ago, but much to her dismay, they were not reciprocated.

"I know, I know," Erida replied, unaffected by my little jabs.

When we got to the bar, there wasn't a single parking spot in the entire strip.

"Man, fuck this!" I said, cursing the trendy country bar that had stolen all of the spaces. I called Robin and told her we would have to go somewhere else. So, Erida and I followed her into Hunteertown. She lived a block away from the Willows, hole-in-the-wall type bar that was totally charming. I wanted nothing more than to spend time with Robin around cold pints of beer. I would have drove hours to be with her that night.

We stopped at Robin's house first, parked our cars and walked to the bar. The night was dry, but the wind cut to the bone. Robin didn't bring her sweatshirt, and I offered her my lumberjacket. I was freezing my ass off, but I played it off like it didn't bother me. She politely declined. The three of us shivered until we were inside the well-lit, warm bar.

[xviii]

A few hours and several pints later, the three of us stumbled back to her place to listen to music and drink whiskey. Robin threw a few ice cubes into a rocks glass, filled it halfway with Jameson twelve-year and splashed a bit of water into it. Maybe it was the way the music sounded as the whiskey burned my throat. Maybe it was the way she smiled through the smoke, but it was the best damn cocktail I have ever had.

As Erida went to the bathroom to get sick or pass out or whatever it was she was doing, Robin and I stood around nervously smoking, taking big sips of whiskey, slightly drunk and lacking courage. We both felt something, but we couldn't own up to it that night. During the course of the conversation of how we operated as people, Robin had said something along the lines of "If you've got something to say, say it. Ya know?" I agreed whole-heartedly. There was so much intensity between the two of us that even Erida had felt it. She told me so later. Funny thing was, we hadn't even been flirting. Erida finally came back from the bathroom looking visibly nauseous. I don't think she held the whiskey very well.

I need to get her home", I told Robin. We both looked at Erida. She was red and pale as a ghost. You could tell she simply loved the attention. He could barely contain a smile. That's Erida for you. Robin and I gave each other big hugs as the music continued to play. It was just as loud as when we arrived.

Once Erida had been gone for almost an hour, I did what any respectable gentleman would do and finished her whiskey for her. It made me a little steady on my feet, but I was sober enough to drive. I had to be. I

couldn't have stayed at Robin's even if I wanted to, and Erida had to get home.

While letting my car warm up, I spilled my guts to Erida about Robin. I had never been that messed up on a girl in my entire life, and Erida knew damn well it wasn't just a fleeting crush. This time I meant business.

"Go for it, man", Erida said, "She likes you. I can totally tell. Besides, I really like the way you guys sing The Lawrence Arms together. It just fits."

I knew she was right. She had been one of my closest friends for most of the past decade. She had seen me at my best and she had seen me at my worst. My nerves were still a wreck, though. Our evening came to an end around three in the morning as we pounded the pavement back to our side of town.

[xix]

The next day at work, I was hung over. I hadn't even drink that much the night before, but my head felt like it was splitting open. The day passed so slowly that the clock seemed like it was broken. My only solace during the eight-hour death-march was the fact that Robin and I would get the opportunity to get whiskeydrunk together that night. I knew we would get enough bottled courage to tell each other how we felt. You could feel it in the air. The work day ended. I waited for the hours to turn into minutes.

That night, after she finished a late shift at work, we met in a parking lot down the street from Shamoo's house. She followed my Cavalier in her Camaro. It was a pretty regular Saturday night. The alcohol was flowing like water, and we were all surrounded with friends and music. The night

drew on, and all of us there felt slightly silly from the liquor and the exhaustion from the previous work week.

After a few short hours, Robin and I had polished off an entire bottle of Jameson. We went out onto Shamoo's back porch. It was screened, and the snow was falling fast and heavy. A cold air blew, but the whiskey kept us warm. Our breath was indistinguishable from the cigarette smoke. We were sipping on our last whiskey and waters of the night. Everyone else had crashed out drunk and tired. It was just the two of us out back.

We both held our breath, waiting for the other one to speak. I hadn't felt that vulnerable in years. I was a nervous wreck for the simple fact that she might not, in fact, reciprocate the same feelings as I had for her. I felt like a kid with a crush. She gathered the courage that I couldn't muster and spilled her guts to me, much in the same way I had done to Erida the night before.

All of my doubts and fears were assuaged when she opened her mouth. Now that I was single, there were no boundaries limiting us from acting on our instincts. That kind of freedom was new to me. She very bluntly, admitted she had feelings for me, and I did the same for her. We were completely smitten with each other in the purest sense of the word. When we locked lips for the first time, we lit a fire that still rages to this day. I swear half the snow melted as we warmed our cold, red noses to each other's touch.

We fell asleep that pre-dawn morning on a couch that seemed built for us, wrapped up in each other as whiskey flowed through our veins and cartoon hearts floated above our heads.

[xx]

Later that morning, everyone seemed to have disappeared from the night before. No one was parked outside and the house was empty. Robin and I were still slightly drunk after only a few hours of sleep, so instead of seeking out anyone left in the house, we cozied up on a different couch and talked and talked for another couple hours. Marathon conversations were our thing, our element. We played with each other's hair and marked our territories by kissing and hand-holding. After what seemed like only minutes of conversation, Shamoo came down into the basement. He was surprised to see us. We were all still carrying the night before on our shoulders.

Being hung over on a Sunday morning, and with the day off work, going out to breakfast is always a priority. Robin and I greedily sucked down black coffee and Shamoo sat watching us like two kids in puppy love. You'd be hard-pressed to tell which was making him more nauseous, us or the hangover.

We were entertained by our waiter's filthy stand-up routine that he had seemed to save for the right people. We were, in fact, the right people and his dirty jokes and puns made me laugh so hard I almost choked on my coffee as it was coming out of my nose.

After breakfast, Shamoo went home to recover from the night before. I had expected Robin to do the same, figuring I would take her back to her car and leaving everything at that. Turns out, she wanted to spend the whole day with me instead. Perfect. I had no plans and nothing but time. First on our agenda was the acquisition of more coffee. We went to the local discount bookstore to get coffee and peruse books and talk. After a

while, we had drunk all of their free coffee. We stumbled through aisles of books, jittery and deep in smit. Chances are we got dirty looks as we told dirty jokes and laughed and carried on without a care in the world, but we were too involved in each other to notice or care.

Once the coffee ran out, there was no real reason to stick around any longer. We left without a destination. I pulled into the street and just started driving.

"Where should we go?" I asked Robin.

"I don't care, as long as I'm with you," she angelically replied.

My heart skipped a beat as we headed north on the highway. Right then, an idea hit me. I called up Dayla knowing she had the day off of work.

"Hey! Let's hang out. I've got Robin with me and we're looking for something to do!"

She agreed and Robin and I made our way over to Jon and Dayla's trailer.

The last few weeks had been so busy that I hadn't the time to spend with the two of them as much as I would have liked to. Besides, I knew Dayla would want more than an hour to spend with Robin. Friends that close to me always like testing the waters with the new people I choose to bring into my life. It's an odd sort of camaraderie, but it means the world to me.

[xxi]

We spent a lazy day in the trailer. Dayla and I spent hours showing Robin pictures of us and our friends, telling stories of all the crazy shit we used

to get into. By the end of it, we were all in tears from laughing so hard. I had crammed so much coffee and laughing into such a short amount of time that I thought I was going to puke.

Dayla had plans for later in the evening, and the time finally came for us to leave. It was only eight in the evening, but it felt like I had been awake for days. I was running on fumes, but the thought of Robin and the excitement of what the night would hold kept me going strong.

After we got into my car, Robin asked if I wanted to go back to her house for coffee. I couldn't turn down an offer like that. On the way back to Shamoo's to pick up her car, we passed a fast food shop that sold Chicago-style hot dogs. Neither of us had eaten since breakfast and my gut was rumbling, for once needing more than pots of coffee.

"Have you ever had a Chicago hot dog before?" I asked her.

Perplexed, she answered no.

"Happening!" I yelled as I flipped my car around with an illegal u-turn.

Chicago-style hot dogs are easily one of my favorite foods, and I wanted to share something like that with Robin. We pulled up to the drive-up service area and waited for our food. We smoked cigarettes and talked and kissed.

Once our food arrived, we scarfed it down hungrily as the restaurant turned off its lights for the night. Illuminated by my dash lights, we listened to music and shared some perfectly salted french fries. As we finished our meal and wiped the food from our smiling faces, we continued talking and the topic of music came up yet again. I mentioned

to her one of my favorite solo artists. She said she wasn't too familiar with his stuff. I switched CDs while driving with one hand and let the music speak for itself. I kept sneaking glances at her to see her reaction. It was important to me for her to like it, because it meant the world to me.

I wheeled the car back into Shamoo's driveway. It had seemed like days since we had been there last. Without a word, we continued to sit in my car and let the music play. I could tell it definitely struck a chord with her. Every few songs or so, I switched to his other albums. After an hour or more spent in Shamoo's driveway, Robin had been properly acclimated with Tim Barry's discography. We had been so distracted by our listening party that we almost forgot we had been on our way to get more coffee.

Robin's '91 Camaro had been sitting in the cold and snow for the last twenty-four hours, and I sat in my car while it idled, waiting for hers to roar to life. It took damn near half an hour for her to finally get it going. I followed her to her house and we got there safe, anxious to warm our bones. We shook the snow from our clothes and put some coffee on. We found a spot on the couch and remained there together for the next eight hours, keeping each other warm with hugs and kisses and watching cheesy horror movies. The coffee and the thought of her kept my mind racing and my heart skipping.

It came to be six a.m., and I decided it best to leave. We kissed and hugged and kissed again. It was the longest goodbye I can ever remember having. As I drove off, I couldn't find in my mind the answer to my question. What reason did I have to leave?

[xxii]

An hour later, I was still awake arguing with Oface in the basement that was no longer home. I don't remember what the argument was about, but it probably revolved around jealousy, anger and hurt feelings. I had none of that on my end. I was finally starting to see how poisonous our relationship had been and I was sick to death of it. It was over between us. The argument reached a breaking point and she stormed off to bed. I slept on the couch.

I awoke at noon and shortly thereafter found myself on a walk with her in the park across the street. Given her mental state of distress, she decided it best to get a dog. So, I went with her and the little runt on a walk for reasons unknown. The conversation was stagnant after about five minutes because there was nothing to say. It then became another argument and I tuned her out entirely. I was too distracted by thoughts of Robin to even care. The weather outside was grey and overcast, but the dreariness of it was downright beautiful. My heart felt like it was flying around on a string.

I had to work my bar job that night, so getting to see Robin was out of the question. I missed her already and it hadn't even been eight hours. I thought of nothing but her as I absent-mindedly slinged wings and cooked sandwiches.

[xxiii]

I spent the next day at work with nervous energy coursing through me. Every minute that passed was an eternity. It seemed like I was going through fucking withdrawal from Robin. I was supposed to be tougher than that.

Later that night, she called me from work and said she had a break and

wanted to see me. I had waited all day for this phone call. I swung by a gas station, bought the two biggest coffees I could and met her on the loading dock at the back of the mall. As we tried staving off the cold by chain-smoking, we talked about our days and our plans for the night.

"I can't go another night without seeing you," I told her.

She agreed and I told her I was going to pick her up from work. We were going to grab a few beers and talk after she got off at eleven. I had to work early on the next day, but that never stopped me from living. I would have closed down the bar with her if that's what she wanted. Sleep, at this point, was a last priority. Hours later, we found ourselves downtown in an Irish bar drinking Stroh's.

[xxiv]

That night, people from my past were a rotating cast of characters the whole time we were at the bar. I ran into ex-girlfriend I hadn't seen since high school, a guy I used to run around with who was still just as big a dick as he ever was and the ex of one of my other friends. It was really strange timing, I thought. None of the small-talk conversations were worthwhile and I extricated myself from each situation as quickly as I could.

Robin and I had made camp in a dark corner of the bar, completely devoid of unwanted human interaction. The neon twinkled in her eyes, the beer bottles sweated in the heat of the crowded bar and for once, instead of talking, we simply stared into each other's eyes, each other's souls. I saw fire in her eyes and it made my heart stop almost entirely. Staring back at her, I saw the past, the present and the future all at once. That had never happened to me with anyone before. It made me feel like a live wire, a

stick of dynamite. I was nervous, happy, terrified and ready all at once. I didn't want that moment, that night to end. We got one more beer each at last call. I paid the tab and we left.

She was currently couch-surfing at her two best friends' house, so I took her back there for the night. Our goodbyes lasted over an hour this time around. We made out in my car, not wanting to ever part. I didn't want to have to work in four hours. I didn't want to sleep alone on my ex-girlfriend's expensive couch. I wanted to breathe Robin in and never let her go. I felt her running through my veins. The thought of her pumped my blood. Much to our chagrin, we finally had to call it a night. I had a fifteen hour work day ahead of me and I had been awake for the last twenty-four hours.

[xxv]

A couple of days after, I moved out of the dungeon. I loaded most of my belongings into my car, and the rest I just threw away. I had collected quite a bit of sentimental items from friends over the years, and most of them wound up in the garbage. The memories were still there, but I didn't need the extra materialistic clutter. It felt good to dispose of all of the extra shit. I kept some clothes, my records, my books, my coffee pot and my box of zine stuff. It was about all I took with me when Robin and I moved to Portland six months later.

I was so happy to be out of that apartment that I felt manic. Everything I possibly needed I fit in my car, and I knew I would always have a roof over my head. Where that roof was wasn't important. I had people I knew I could depend on and that's the only thing that mattered. Robin and I were, in a sense, homeless. It was the dynamic that became an incredible

driving force for us.

We had zero responsibilities and zero obligations. We could pound the beat of a day, a week at our own pace. Time and place weren't ideas we paid any attention to. While others were sleeping, we were making a life for ourselves. We existed on an entirely different plane. We kept each other going. Exhaustion couldn't get the best of us. We would beat the hell out of the day before it could do the same to us.

We were world-weary angels, sharing bleary-eyed mornings together always, singing our hymns and driving around town as the sun still slept. Never anywhere, we were always coming and going together. Winter would not get the best of us. We found comfort amidst the frozen wasteland of our hometown.

[xxvi]

The holidays were coming up. For the first time in years, it wasn't overshadowed by the same sinking feeling of transience and unhappiness. With Christmas Eve right around the corner, Robin and I holed up in The Nest. That was the name we gave her bunk bed at her parent's house. There were at least six or seven blankets, four or five pillows and it was the most comfortable place to be in town, especially with her snoring by my side.

We spent one winter night soaking in coffee and zines and cigarettes. I was in the process of working on one of my own, and I was sharing with her Cometbus' stuff. In return, she showed off a bunch of comic books that I had to read.

We fell asleep that night with the window open. We awoke the next day, both coughing and shivering. We could see our breath in her room. We laughed at how disgustingly cute it was that we both reached for our cigarettes upon waking while coughing and hacking up our respective black lungs.

[xxvii]

I spent the eve of Christmas with her family. We drank whiskey and beer and chowed down on a killer dinner her dad had prepared for every one. We hadn't planned on getting each other gifts for the holiday, but I wanted to give her something. We did, however, make mix CDs for each other. During the festivities, we both snuck out of the house unnoticed to go to my car and listen to them. Two-thirds of the songs were the exact same. Something as simple as that spoke volumes about us.

I blew her mind by including a Beatles song on her copy. I had put "Oh, Darling" on her mix album for a few reasons. One, The Beatles is one of her top-five favorite bands. Two, it was the first Beatles song I had ever heard and actually liked. Three, one of the strangest things happened the first time I actually heard the song.

The summer before, I had been in Portland visiting Michull and J-Rod for the first time. Oface and I were still an item in loose terms of the word, and it was just a few weeks before I would re-meet Robin. The song came on, and I loved it immediately. I had no idea it was The Beatles. In the context of the song, Oface should have been the person I thought of first. But, she wasn't. The song made me think of an indistinguishable someone. It was a feeling in my gut that I would be meeting this unnamed someone soon. I shrugged it off as an afterthought and thought nothing of

it. A year later, it all made sense.

I didn't want to be cumbersome and intrude any further on Robin's family's celebrations. Had I stayed the night, I would have been a burden at the time of gift-giving. No one had obviously gotten me presents or anything of the sort, and I would have just taken up space. Robin and I planned to get back together Christmas night after spending time with our respective families.

I left around two in the morning. My brother was on leave from the military for the holidays, so I went to his apartment he shared with some friends. It was the first time I had seen him in months. We talked in the dark for a while. Around three-thirty I crashed out on his couch.

He and my parents hadn't spoken in months. There was some bad blood running pretty deep because of everything that had transpired between. He decided he was courageous enough to bury the hatchet in lieu of the holidays. My parents were unaware of the fact that I was bringing him with me to their house. All they knew is that I was bringing a guest. It ended up being a tear-soaked welcome back for everyone.

[xxviii]

Christmas night, Robin and I, along with Jacobo and Sarah Ghoulie, holed up in Sarah's apartment and drank coffee, played Yahtzee and ate fresh baked cookies. Between the four of us, the two dozen cookies got eaten. Robin, Sarah and I had one each. Jacobo ate the rest. He was so jacked up on coffee and cookies he looked physically uncomfortable. It was easily one of the funniest things I have ever seen. My stomach hurts just thinking about it.

Safe from the snow and cold, Robin and I were inseparable. Hours upon hours were spent talking, kissing and falling more in love with every passing second. I left her at her house at six a.m., drove on sheets of ice all the way across town to my parents' house, slept for an hour and went to work.

[xxix]

In between all the traversing I did about town to work, to see her and so on, the extremity of winter hadn't really registered. She was the only thing I cared about, the only thing I made an effort to dwell on. As I was loading up some clothes, my favorite blanket and some cans of soup, preparing for the next few days of living out of my car, I caught a glimpse of the nightly news on television. Apparently, it had been one of the worst winters this country had ever seen. I couldn't do anything but laugh. I was so far out of the loop that I didn't notice or care. I was falling in love with Robin and it felt fucking great. I had one thing on my mind. Let the snow bury this godforsaken town, let it drift and blow and render everything useless. But don't you dare let it keep me from seeing her.

Christmastime came to a quiet close. A week later New Year's Eve festivities were in full force. Moshboy had a huge party at the same house Robin and I met at just months before. It felt like it had been years. Whiskey flowed like water, drinking games were played with a deck of cards and arguments about which Jimmy Eat World was the best put a smile on everyone's face. We all know the answer is "Clarity".

As the clock struck midnight, I gave Robin her first New Year's kiss she had ever received, beginning a new decade with my soul mate. What follows is one hell of a story.



one hell of a story.

ever received, beginning a new decade with my soul mate.

At the clock struck midnight I gave Robin her first kiss. I had

always saw it: a slender, comely, athletic, dark-skinned woman who was as

emphatically gay as I was. She was a lesbian, a lesbian, a lesbian, a lesbian,

and a lesbian, a lesbian, a lesbian, a lesbian, a lesbian, a lesbian, a lesbian,

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