

Chit the First

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Roomwaiting

It was dark as I walked into the room. Odd, fuzzy brown. Sheila had told me to expect this. Now I believed her. The phone which I was to use was off the hook. A fly was sputtering to death in a glass of milk by the sink.

“Hello.”

I didn't answer. No one answers.

The smell reminded me of last week when Johnny was preparing for this ordeal.

“Open it and peer in,” he'd said. “If it's bright, leave. Dark, stay.”

It was dark.

I took it out, rubbed it in my hands. Rolled it. Funny. The hotdog thing never worked for me.

Times had said the world was to end. I pondered. And in good humour realized the times were bad. Afterall, it was from November. Now it's spring. As it were. As we were last year.

You see, she left me. I was no good. For what she wanted. For the kids. She'd hid them in the beginning. It was too early for me. She popped the question and I lost my pop.

Jennifer was there. On the table. With coffee. Looked older.

It began to make my hands sticky. Put it back in the canister, the headliner imprinted on it. And back into my pocket.

Sheila, she said I was hopeless. And I guess I was. I never had hoped for this. To be patient. I'm not. She thinks this will stop my charade. I have no charade.

I play charades. That's what I do. On Fridays. Sometimes Thursdays. It helps my profession. I get depressed with all the depression.

Who are these people? Completely different on Friday than the day before. From the city? Or the 'burb.

She thought I was one of these. That they're my friends.

“Talk to one of your buddies about it.”

“They're no...”

“Tom..”

Johnny was showing me how to do it.

“It's a science. Don't miss or you're fucked.”

Funny cause if I hadn't I woulda never been here in the first place.

“Maybe she can go with ya. Ya know, motivation. Preparation. They like it.”

As if he knew. He hadn't even seen one since fourth grade when he walked in on Mrs. Samson.

The phone rang. The lady answered, politely. Someone new entered. Sat. Read.

I always used to think crossing your legs was stupid. Shelia did it. Sheila's stupid.

It started out as a bet. 20 dollars. A phone number. I spent it immediately, on protection. I never used it. Finding out now, perhaps, I never had the ammo.

Ammo. Ha! Ammo.

That's the way Johnny thought of it.

"If she's a babe, use it! You got her!"

If she's not a babe, well I would never get her in the first place.

Sheila's with David now. David's been here. He prepared. He is prepared. Practices. Now, Sheila helps him. She likes that he practices. I. I'm disgusted.

Mom supports this. Having lost Dad she seems to need it. Depressed, that she may lose all her family. Says I need to be more like my brother John; his family. John's in Denver. Too far. That's why.

The lady brings papers for me to sign. Winks. I don't like her. Go back to your phone. Sit. Stay. Don't look at me. As if your guy doesn't need to be here. He belongs with Johnny; drunk.

Sheila said if the results were good she'd be back. Bad results: I was fucked. Past-tense. No longer.

"David has taught me a lot. It'll be fun. We'll try it."

I wanted to die.

The nurse called my name.

"Tom?"

Toenails

Toenails, red. Flip flops, blue. She was a typical girl. College elitist. Social, striving for popularity. Shades to unnecessarily 'protect' her eyes. Short skirt (if it had had one, I would have asked to touch its hem). Polo shirt? I don't remember.

It was Friday. Morning. One of those collision-inevitable crossings. (She was starboard). Wondering who's gonna slow up. Should I speed up? Amazing how fast these girls can work in those most-certainly uncomfortable statements of fashion.

To say the least, she raised her chin, straightened her back, more commonly known as sticking out your breast, and strode before me. Nonchalantly yet confidently claiming the right of way as hers.

Then: the wagging ass. It always reminded me of Sesame Street or the like. It was an ass trying to speak. Literally, like a hand-puppet. But this was an ass. An ass puppet. Saying 'Look at me. Notice me.' So I did.



Kathrine'd been gone for two weeks. I hadn't heard anything from her, except the usual rumors through the vine of grape. Did this, him, that, her. Gained everything. Lost everything credible. You could picture the smile on her face, and the tears on her heart.

I, personally, had truly gained everything. Pain, suffering. Given a fair trial, I betcha I would have

collected at least a grand or five. I had the apartment. 305 Mulberry Lane. Lane. I was single, and lived on a Lane.

My first wish was to sell everything. Become one of those ex-boyfriends whose furniture is their books and scholarly articles. Didn't happen. Nobody wanted my old, comfy couch and chairs. Now they weren't the old, scraggly kind you think of. But ones that only had sentimental value. The kind where the cushions would slide out from under you, forcing you to get up every now and then to fix them. Or try that worthless hop and shove manoeuvre that never worked anyway, only made things more frustrating.

We'd spent countless days on this couch. I'd say hours, but we'd literally spend almost entire days on it. Getting up only to get each other food, drink or to use the toilet. Of course, there were the sporadic flirtation episodes which would end up on the floor. These episodes which only now make me think the entire ordeal was only physical.

Personal couches are always comfortable. Even friends' couches are always comfortable. You know the desire to absent-mindedly fall asleep in one. Get lost in the cushions, pillows, and perhaps even a blanket. Yet this couch, my couch, with its blue covering and pillows with their never-forgettable scent, fought this urge. The comfort of its softness stabbed me as if it were to tell me something was missing. Someone. You still love the comfort of your couch. But something hates you. Sure, you can still fall asleep, only to wake up to a feeling of being in a minefield with no escape. Feeling pins and needles poke your entire body. I contemplated just throwing out the couch. Or using it in a bonfire. But anyone that has decent furniture morals knows this cannot be done. You will be cursed and forevermore no couch will offer you the luxury and comfort that your couch once had.

Which reminds me of the other week. Thursday, the 14th.

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“Do it and we're through!”

She had this thing about me giving her what she wanted. I would and she'd threaten to leave me. As if it was a threat at all. She couldn't live without me. It's proof, the way she is now. I was the only thing to keep her sane, if you can call what she was with me sane.

I'd called her on the phone. Been done with work, suggested I could stop home before going to my parents' for the weekend. No, she said, I'm busy. She was busy. Busy being aggravated with the work she was trying to do. Emphasis on trying. It's the try that involves having the tele on whilst complaining to herself that she can't figure out what she was doing. Long story short, she cursed and hung up.

I pulled in through the door. You'd think it'd be nice of me to stop by just for a moment, in effort to calm her. Then wish her luck and let her return to the work. Try again.

“Turn around now. Don't even talk to me!”

“Kathrine, I..”

“Leave now! I need to do work.” So, having given that I-tried-to-care-but-you-won't-let-me look, I turned to leave.

“John, if you leave now, we're through. Finished for good.”

Then the tears began.

With Kathrine, white meant black and wet meant dry. Being one that doesn't assume things, I never knew what she meant. I always took what she said to be what she meant. That's why I was always wrong.

Two hours later, I left for my parents'. What was accomplished, you ask? Sufficient Kathrine dehydration by way of tears with a side of pounding headache for yours truly.

Okay, so I lied. It wasn't that bad in the beginning.

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“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You good?”

“Yea, tired a bit.”

“Wanna come for a movie?”

“Yea, I’d like that.”

And I would like that. I did like that. It was an exhausted relationship in the beginning. Not that the relationship itself had already been spent. But in the way that we’d take care of each other when exhausted. My life had always been quite busy. Any time left over, if you can call it that, I wanted to rest. I rested with Kathrine.

“Which one?”

“Doesn’t matter, I’ll probably fall asleep anyway.”

She smiled, “Good.”

I truly had had a busy day. Classes, lab, work, fitting in food and sanity when possible. She understood, and this is one of the things that drew me to her. Everyone else didn’t seem to care that much. Stephanie only claimed that she knew how it was. Kathrine, however, just nodded a convincing ‘it’s okay’ nod, while following my relaxing slouch with her hand. A caring hand, just in case I were to hit my head on something. Funny how not too much later I’d be hitting my own head against a wall wondering how I could have been so stupid.

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“John, this is Mark. Mark, John.”

It was Friday evening. Kathrine’d planned an event for us. Dinner at Giovanni’s, a local Italian dig. Mary’d come, Kathrine’s sister. It was somewhat of a celebration. Or, as I like to think of it: an excuse for a celebration. Mary’d just been fired. She now had more time to work on her art. Using charcoal to depict depressing nudes on canvas. Nudes that we all knew reflected lonely men and women facing the realization that they will never experience true love. However, I was the only one willing to admit this.

Mark had come along to ‘help’ celebrate. He was an old friend of Kathrine’s. Someone Mary knew too.

“So, John. Have you written anything extraordinary lately?” Don’t express fabricated interest in my work, Mark. Just don’t.

“A few pieces on guitar, I’m not sure where they’re gonna go. May just leave them alone as they are.”

“Ah, well afterwards you should take us back and play some for us.” Don’t. Don’t even pull that card.

“Yea, maybe.” It was a sure-fire answer.

I’d always had this idea that you wouldn’t flirt with someone else more than you would the person who you’re dating. Apparently Kathrine didn’t feel this way. He’s an old friend, she’d say. We’ve known each other forever. Try eight years. That’s a short time in the face of forever.

You see, Mark was the ex-boyfriend kind of asshole. The one who’s just as cruel as your girlfriend claims you are. Yet, after he breaks her heart, doesn’t get any kind of shit like you did.

“I like the highlights,” Mark said as he fingered Kathrine’s forty-dollar hair. The wine had just arrived. “A toast to Mary!”

“To Mary!” Excitable unison, minus one voice: mine.

Following dinner, Mark gave each of the girls a hug with one of those maybe-kisses. Those cheek-to-cheek things that you can’t tell if it’s a kiss unless you’re either Mark or one of the girls. And even then, who knows, it might be misinterpreted as a full-fledged French kiss.

“Kathrine, I don’t think I like him.”

“Oh give me a break, John. You don’t even know him.”

“No, but you sure do. I like French kissing my lady friends also, especially when they’re involved with someone.”

“Gimme a break.”

“I sure will, and I’ll give him one too if he tries anything.”

“Want me to make it easier for you? I’m sure you’d love to bust his cap, ey, cowboy?”

“Quit it. You’re the one with the need to be all touchy-feely.”

“Well, how about I be all touchy-feely with you to get your mind off this bullshit?” I give her credit. The smile, the mysterious eyes. It almost worked. She was an attractive lady after all. Who am I? Someone to date mediocre-looking women?

“No, I’d prefer not to make out with my ever-present thoughts of Mark tonight, thank you. Maybe tomorrow, when I turn gay.”

“Suit yourself.”

“And my little cowboy too.”

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With a kiss from behind, “Good morning.” She’d stayed over.

“Morning.” I was working on my latest article.

“Juice?” It made me smile. She was a smart girl. She’d actually come to know me. Knew that I wasn’t a coffee person. I like juice.

“Yea, great.” Put on the coffee for herself and picked up the nearest paper.

“Let’s go to the couch, make it a lazy morning.”

“Good idea.”

Her cat, which oddly enough spent most of its time at my place, hell it freaking lived there, scooted off before it had a chance to be crushed. Its black hair left over was hardly visible on the blue of the couch. She turned on channel 31, Mad About You was on. One of our favorite episodes. Heck, they were all our favorite.

“Listen John, I know you don’t care too much for Mark. But he’s a decent guy. It’s obvious that he cares.”

“Kathrine, I find it hard to believe his insincere caring. He seems to be one of those extrinsic guys who only expresses care out of generosity or something. To make you believe that he cares.”

“Well, John. He does care.”

“How? By letting us buy him dinner? By kissing my girlfriend? By smiling his ‘I gotcha’ smirk? It just doesn’t come together for me.”

“John, he’s an old friend. I know he’s got his downsides, everyone does. You gotta give him a break, he’s had it hard.”

“Yea, how? In his pants? Really, how’s he had it hard?”

“You know we can’t go into that.”

We couldn’t. It was the padlocked, back room of our relationship. The room that doesn’t even have a key. She basically just walked through the door when she felt like it. Yet it was impenetrable to me. I like to think of it as the dramatic high-school secret room.

“I don’t get it. You say he’s had a hard time. That I should give him a break causa that. But no one will inform me of what hard time he’s had. I’ve had a hard time. My girlfriend is standing behind some mysterious pity-party, but when it comes to me...well..”

“I stand behind you.” It was that wishful voice, with the head pointed somewhat down and the eyes looking up at you.

“Yea, when Mark flips and you become afraid, that’s when you’ll stand behind me.”

“Well, at least I know you’re there for me.” A smile.
“Yea. Damnright I am.” As if she deserves it.
“How about breakfast?” She had me. I love breakfast.

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It was a Saturday. Our ritual was to go out for some kind of food on Saturday. Gelato, pizza, dinner, you name it. Today, I suggested the coffee house.

It’s a quaint place. Yet up to date. Reflects me in some ways I guess. Or maybe I’d just like for it to reflect me. Kathrine loved this place. Called Joe’s Beanery. Why did she love it? Yep, it was on the main street in town, alongside all the other shops.

I know, I know. I’m not a coffee person. But, I like specialty coffees, as I call them. I got a frappuccino, single espresso shot. It was a fairly warm day, so I thought it was a nice idea. Not that it needs to be a nice day for a frap or anything. Kathrine got herself a cappuccino. Rather, I paid for it.

“Good?”

“Yea,” I said.

A lot of the time our relationship wasn’t so much interest in each other. You know those couples where they won’t just shut up? Yea, they annoy me too. We were more of an enjoy each other’s company kinda couple. Enjoy. Yes, I said enjoy. I enjoyed the silence. The fact that we couldn’t find anything to talk about. A lot of people are caught up in the idea that you must always talk when with someone. Kathrine and I understood that this was bullshit. After all, discomfort in the presence of silence is a sign of depression. Or something like that.

“I wanna go to Claire’s after this.” She didn’t even ask. Just stated. I think it was expected that I’d tag along. Kinda like you’d expect your girlfriend not to flirt with Mark. Difference being, I actually went with her. It was my fault we came to this area of town. I shoulda known.

“What do you want to get?”

“Oh, I’ve been looking for a skirt.” She’s always been looking for something. Always happened to buy a few other things during the search.

“Cool. Let’s go.”

We left Joe’s, for my frap was in a plastic-porta-cup, her cappuccino in some paper doohickey, and headed down the street. Passing my favorite bookstore I eyed the shelves near the doors, looking for something to jump out at me. I didn’t mention anything, cause I knew Kathrine liked for me to be there when she picked out her trollop-garb. I mean, clothing.

“What about this one?” It was a white skirt, about two feet too short.

“And today her panty colour is..!”

“Yea, I thought so. But look, it has a few layers underneath, no one will be able to tell.”

“Except for me.” Cause I’ll have watched her put them on. And I’ll be paranoid all day wondering who else has caught a glimpse.

“And that’s because I love you.”

No, it’s because we’re dating. I have this theory about boyfriends and girlfriends. Dating is not two people who love each other dearly and would be very drastically unsatisfied if they were apart. Rather, it’s two people who spend time together and, we’ll use the British here, shag every once in a while. Not just shag, but are allowed to be comfortable with each other’s body and nudity. Also, the two care for each other, and prefer the other not to get hurt (notice prefer). I’m not really sure where along in the relationship this begins. Or why it happens with, say, Kathrine, and not Stephanie. But I see it as healthy. You don’t feel alone. No longing for someone to care. No longing just for someone to get a hug from. None of that. But a whole lotta shopping for women’s underwear.

We left the store with a purse, a brassiere, two panties, and a skirt (not the one she’d been looking for).

“Guess we’ll have to go look someplace else.”

“I guess, but let’s save that for later. Mind going to the bookstore for a bit?”

“Yea, let’s go!”

‘Yea’. It’s very subtle, but it’s there. Yes, she does mind going to the bookstore. The enthused voice and brisk walk in bookstore-direction muffles it. My guess is that she appeases me in hopes that, later, we can go get another skirt.

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We came home, this time to her place, with no skirt. In more than one way. Sure, we had that one that she’d bought. But we didn’t pick up another, and the one she’d worn in the first place was less than on her at the time. Or at least that’s where it was going.

“Come here, big boy.” I hated it when she called me big boy. It was so false. Imagine how many of her previous boyfriends she’d called big boy. She might claim none. I don’t think I’d believe her.

Things always ended up this way. Especially arguments. She thought being physical was the end all fix all for everything. Quite obvious how it didn’t fix everything, huh?

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We’d been together for a year. She thought everything was pretty serious, and it might be time to think about the seriousness of our seriousness. Seriously. And what better way to go about it, then babysitting.

Yep, babysitting. Sure, both of us had little siblings, but this wasn’t good enough. Kathrine borrowed, yes, I say borrowed, her niece for us to babysit on a Friday night. Maybe she wanted the right age? I can’t see how this could have mattered. Either way, Samantha was four. Actually, four and a half, cause, you know how little children like to include those half years too.

Personally, I don’t see how this tested our seriousness. It more tested my tolerance for Kathrine’s ridiculousness. She seemed to be studying our ability to deal with children, while I was studying Kathrine’s falsehood; her beautiful extrinsic self.

“I want you to take this seriously John.” Notice the serious motif yet? “I really want us to do well.”

I didn’t understand it. Even if we were going to stay together for a while, I wasn’t even gonna think about children for at least a few more years...say, ten. What was she thinking? We were way too young.

“Wanna play Candyland?” She’d prepared for tonight. Gone out and purchased a few things. Yes, just for this night. And Candyland? Come on, if you’re gonna spend pointless money on a board game for just one night of babysitting a little kid, at least get something decent. Shoots and Ladders, for instance.

“Yea!” It was, after all, a typical girl game.

We were playing in the family room, at the coffee table. I suggest, “Snacks?”

“Yea, TeddyGrams!” Samantha chipped in.

“Aren’t you gonna play with us?” Kathrine.

“And lemonade?” Me.

“Yea!” Samantha.

I’d stopped drinking sugary, mixed drinks since, I dunno, thirteen years before. (Yes, hyperbole. Sue me.) But, we had a mix tucked away in the pantry. Or rather, Kathrine had left some in my pantry just in case. ‘Just in case’. What is that?

Anyhow, it took me a bit to prepare it. Especially to find the wooden spoon to mix it. If I’d learned anything as a kid, it was to stir a drink mix with a wooden spoon. The TeddyGrams we had, an already open box and a backup supply of one unopened box. They were mine. I liked TeddyGrams. I

liked to hold on to my childhood this way. Reminded me of the careless old days. Ok, I lied. Again. They were Kathrine's. Her way of holding on to her inner child. I always thought this was stupid. Freaking grow up, Kathrine. But, it was decent. Cause hey, free TeddyGrams.

As I was trying to stuff the plastic, rectangular pitcher under the refrigerator ice cube dispenser, Kathrine came in.

"Babe, I told you I wanted to take this seriously." The motif, again.

Normally, what I said then would appear in this line. But I was dumbfounded. Kinda like when someone asks you if you've gotten a haircut, when it's obvious you had. For instance, a buzz cut after having had fairly long hair. Picture my lower lip extended down, about to form a 'w' word (ya know, 'what', 'why', 'whatthefuckareyou-talkingabout'), but with nothing coming.

"James, you're not even trying."

A pause.

"James?"

"Oh, John." A sorta sigh. You know what I mean. "I'm just so worked up I guess. I wanted to take this seriously. I've put so much effort into it. You just don't seem like you're into it. Can't you just be into it a little, for one night?"

"I was getting snacks!" A happy, hopeful expression. To say, 'I am into it! Check it out, fucking snacks!'

"Great John. Great." I don't even have to describe that twist motion that she did. The one girls do that almost says whatever I just said was wrong, a lie; the head looking down towards the ground. Well, I guess I just did describe it.

"TeddyGrams!"

Headshake.

"Lemonade?"

No go.

"Forget it. Let's just try to get through this night," as she turned and returned to the family room.

We did get through the night. With you-know-what, after you-know-who went to you-know-where.

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I'd never heard much about Kathrine's parents. Never met them. Never even said hello on the phone. Maybe there was something touchy about family with Kathrine. Perhaps that's why we didn't use her little sister to babysit (all the kids in Kathrine's family were girls, at least as far as I knew). But, that doesn't make sense. Cause she was putting us through this babysitting thing. Which hinted at her thoughts, or plans perhaps, for a family. But she rarely spoke of her family. I'm confused.

I wasn't one for bringing girlfriends around the family. They'd always put on a show for the family. Instill a good reputation, make them like her. Then, when I break up with them, they'd barely see my family again. I mean, come on. My family adopted you as another child. And then you ditch them like that? Not cool. So maybe family was a touchy subject for both of us.

My father knew I'd been dating someone for a while. He'd seen her, but only a few brief times. One night, he demanded that he was coming down to get to know her. And that's what he did.

Indian. Yes Indian. I, too, thought it was a weird place to take your son and his girlfriend in order to get acquainted. Weird music, spicy foods. Not exactly every girl's favorite place. A lot complained of the spice, the unfamiliar dishes. But, as we know, Kathrine was different.

"You're studying...?"

The art of girlfriend bitchiness. (Yes, I'm pessimistic.)

"English and the Classics." I liked Classics. Still do, actually.

"What about your romantic history?"

I used to be a strip dancer turned prostitute, but I've since been reborn. I can't believe he actually asked this question.

"Ya know. The usual." Ha! ..Wait. She was pretty normal. ..For a girl.

It was funny. I actually didn't know much about Kathrine's relationship past. She'd told me of Peter, whom she'd stuck it out with 'til the end of the school year. Tom, who she had gone to dinner with just a few times and no more. I knew she'd actually dated before. Been in a serious relationship. Must have. How else would she know how to annoy me so well?

"John's mother and I were high school sweethearts. Been together since." It was typical. There were so many high school sweethearts you would hear about. I had this feeling though, that parents who were high school sweethearts ruined it for their children. The idea that they were able to find someone so early on, must mean that the child's relationship luck was non-existent. You may say I had enough luck to have Kathrine. If you can call that luck. I like to think of it as skill.

The two of them went at it. Kathrine ate all my dad's stories right up. How he and Ma used to hang out, have dinner every weekend. She'd loved the fact that Dad had been into black and white photography. Kathrine said she'd always wanted to learn. I had, in fact, offered to teach her. It wasn't something I did a lot anymore. Keeping up with the dark room and chemicals had become very tedious. But I offered in the beginning of the relationship. I guess she'd forgotten the offer by now. Dad said she should come to the house and see some of his photos sometime. Meet Mom. I wasn't sure it was such a great idea. After all, the postpartum bitchiness that ensues, remember? Kathrine said she'd love to. That she'd have me make plans with him once she had some more free time. We left the restaurant, Kathrine insisting she take care of the tip.

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Moving day. One of my favorite days. Although, I'm not so sure it was with Kathrine. It was the eighth month of being together. She thought we should find a place together.

"John, what do you think of moving in together?" It was one night at dinner, almost out of the blue.

"Huh. Never thought of that." I hadn't.

She actually gave me time to think too. Didn't interrupt. It was amazing.

"I guess it'd be nice." Wouldn't it? Cheaper rent. Possibly a better place. A girl around all the time. Nice big comfy bed. There were some downsides too, of course: a girl around all the time. But it would be nice to share some body heat during the night. I always hated cold beds.

"You think you'd go for it?"

"Yea I guess so." Boy if I knew what I was getting myself into.

"Great. I found a place." What?! She found a place? Obviously, she'd been planning this without speaking to me at all. How...rude.

"What?"

"Yea. It's great. Not too expensive. Big. Has a guest room. We could set up something special in there. A dark room maybe, even."

"Really?"

"Yea. Just one thing." Pause. "We have to decide by Tuesday."

I thought about it. It annoyed me that she'd gone through all of this without consulting me. Makes me feel as if she were moving in with someone else.

"Yea, let's do it." Hey. Be nice. It's a cheap apartment. I didn't have to do any searching. I'd been wanting a change of environment lately. And hey, a girl around all the time.

"Really? Great!"

Like I said, I love moving day. But not so much when Kathrine's trying to move things she can barely lift. And she acts as supervisor/decorator. Not so much fun then.

“Put that in the family room.” It was the couch. No shit.

“305 Mulberry Lane. How’s it feel babe?”

“Good.” I was tired. “Let’s go to sleep.”

First night in a new place. Always felt nice. I got up and made breakfast that morning. H yea. As the eggs sizzled, the phone rang. Who could have had our number so soon?

“Hello?”

“John!” Oh no, it was Mark. “Hey bro, I just wanted to make sure you all were comfy in the new place. Hope the move went well, sorry I couldn’t help out.” No he wasn’t.

“Yea, things are good. How’d you get the number so soon?”

“Oh, friend of a friend. John, we should get together soon, warm the house.”

“Yea, okay.”

“Gotta run, John. Have fun!” Click.

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“What was that the other night?” I thought it was a good way to bring up the subject.

“What do you mean?”

“My dad. The ‘romantic history’ thing.”

“I dunno, John. He’s interested in your life. Why don’t you let him express that?” Because that means you getting close to the family.

“It just seemed a weird thing to talk about. Especially considering *I* don’t know much about your past.”

She was always quiet when we...when I...started talking about this.

“John.”

“I just worry that someday, you’ll forget about me too. I’ll be the ‘usual romantic history’ to everyone else in your future. I thought you were the one thinking seriously about this. Ya know, the babysitting and all. The moving in.”

“John, come on. Why would you think of our demise? Are you not telling me something?” I wasn’t.

“No.”

“Babe, I love you. You know that.” She did that girly, feminine hand on the nape/neck thing. Eyes looking up. “Don’t worry. I won’t forget you.” It was a promise that I knew wouldn’t be kept.

It was a great way to avoid the discussion. But I figured I’d force it.

“Well, what about your history? I don’t know of any of your exes.”

“Don’t you prefer it that way?” She had a point. At least there were no exes to be paranoid about. But it just seemed that it’d be so easier to know who they were and where they were. As opposed to fantasies that mysterious Mr. Ex is sleeping in my bed when I go home to visit the folks. Err... nightmares, I guess.

“You want to meet one of my exes?”

“Yes.”

“Well it’s not gonna happen.”

Damn.

“Why?”

“John, don’t pressure me.”

“I’m not pressuring you. I’m ‘interested in your life’. So why don’t you let *me* express it?”

“I gotta go to the store, you need anything?”

“Yea, a new girlfriend.”

“Smooth, John. Smooth.” She was heading for the door, grabbing her keys off the counter as she went.

“You didn’t finish your eggs!”

“You know I don’t like eggs, John. I’ll be back later.”

Eggs. Right. Shit. Eggs.

. ~ .

Later that day she came back. I was at the table working on my latest article.

“Where’s the stuff?” She’d come back with nothing. I’d thought she was going to the store.

“Oh, as I was heading into the store I ran into Mark. He suggested we grab coffee or something.”

“So you did.”

“No, we got lunch.”

“Oh.”

This was somewhat suspicious. I don’t know why. But it was.

“He mentioned he called this morning.”

“Yea, you were asleep. Said he hoped we were adjusting well. That we should have a house warming get-together.”

I liked when she stopped the conversation to say hello. “Hey baby,” as she gave a nice slow cheek kiss, then sat down.

“What about tonight?”

I didn’t know what she meant.

“We could go to dinner, then back here for drinks.”

“Where to?”

“I dunno. Mulligans?”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Of course not, I’ll be there.”

“Don’t mock me.” She’d stolen my joke. Those were my kind of lame, no effort jokes. Ya know, wherever I go equals fun and awesomeness.

She smiled and gave a slight giggle. Kissed me, “I gotta shower.”

“Have fun.”

“I will.”

. ~ .

The morning after. It always meant arguments.

“Hey baby. My name’s Mark. I’ll answer your most worthless fantasies.” I always thought making fun of the situation was a good way to deal with it.

“Oh, give me a break.”

“You bet I will. You’ll break in two when you see my six pack.”

“He doesn’t even have one.”

“That’s the point.”

“It wasn’t such a bad night. They didn’t stay long afterwards.”

“No, but that’s after a two hour dinner. Take into account alcohol, and that equals the cube of all annoyances; i.e., Mark.”

“HA!” She was mocking me.

“Yea, I guess it was better than just a night home alone with you.” I wasn’t sure if I was being facetious or not.

“I think we should do thank-yous. It was a nice gesture. Good idea.”

“Yea, let’s thank Mark for once again letting us buy him dinner, and drinks mind you.”

“Drop it.”

“...like it’s hot.”

A pause. One I thought to use to get up, do the morning routine. Maybe start breakfast. It was an excellent opportunity to end this conversation.

“Oh, I forgot. I’m going to be going to Boston next weekend. School trip. Museums or something.”

“Shopping, in other words?”

“No. Only in between the museums, silly.”

“Well that’s good. Maybe I’ll take the opportunity to see my parents.” It was a decent idea. “Or bring the ex over.” She gave me the eye after this one. I gave her the nudge. The ‘it’s only a joke’ nudge.

“Well, I hope you have fun.”

“I should. Mary’s gonna try to come. Some good sister-sister bonding time.”

“H yeaa!” It was the best enthusiastic, yet non-serious remark I could come up with.

. ~ .

Lunch break. Friday.

“Hey babe. I miss you already.” Me, miss her? Yes, this was weird. I’m not dependent.

“John, we’re not even there yet. We only left this morning.” It was a condescending voice. As if it was wrong to miss her.

“Hey, what’s wrong with missing you?”

“Oh, nothing. I love you.”

Yes, it was as weird to me as it is to you. We didn’t use the magical three words that often. I barely ever used them.

“John, we’re pulling into the city. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay. Bye.”

“Great. Back to work.” I actually said that out loud to myself. Can you believe it? Who does that?

. ~ .

“Yo, John. What’s up with the girl?” It was Kevin. A classmate-buddy type deal. Bar. Hey, I had to do something on a Friday night. What’s better than a bar with a peer? That’s right, almost anything.

“Eh, ya know. She’s supposed to call me soon.”

“Ah, bro. Turn off the phone. Let’s have a good time.”

“And what, pick up some chicks and take em back to Mulberry Lane?”

“Exactly.”

“No thanks. I have a hard enough time not throwing up at the sight of most of these bar chicks.” Yes, I’m cynical.

“Bro, they’re not bad at all. And just wait ‘til you get your beer goggles on. Oh baby.”

“Yea, ‘oh baby’.”

. ~ .

Ring.

“John!”

“Hey.....Kathrine.”

“Before..”

I interrupted, “I was gonna be mad. Heck, you said you’d call. But you’re on a school trip. Probably having lots of fun, keeping me in the back of your mind. And anyway, I love you too.”

I’d thought the night before. Left Kevin early. (He’d picked up some random blonde. Typical).

Went home for a glass of wine, some IFC, and bed. I'd been thinking 'It really isn't that bad. It's okay, things are fine. She said she loved me, right?' No comment.

"Aww, John. I miss you too. Just wait until I get home."

I kinda had to didn't I?

"I had the best night!"

There was almost enough room for me to squeeze in "Really?"

"Mary got picked as a volunteer for a street performer! You won't believe. And guess who we ran into!" Oh god. "Mark! He's in town for a few days looking into some business opportunity. So he came out with us last night."

I'd been able to sneak in "yea...", "that's..." and then "Mark?!"

"Yea, it's great. This afternoon we're gonna check out this new foam party thing, followed by dinner and then an Italian disco that Mark's friend is putting on at his club."

"That sounds..."

"Yea, I know. I'm loving it. Maybe we should move to Boston."

"Kathrine, we..."

"Sorry John, Mary calls. Girl bonding. We're getting lunch soon. Bye hun!"

I was just able to spit out an "Okay" before she clicked off. My "Bye" came after she'd hung up.

"Well," I said out loud. Again. To myself. "At least she's having fun."

. ~ .

Ring.

I hate rings. I should get a vibrate only phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey John."

"Hey."

"What's good?"

"Oh, ya know...Mom died, Papa killed himself and the dog's got cancer....who is this?" The caller ID on my phone came up as a random string of numbers that had no significance to me; other than it had two eights, one towards the beginning, one towards the end...my favorite number.

"Patricia...I thought..."

"Pat? Pat! What are you doing calling me?" I'd explain who Pat was, but I don't think it's worth the time.

"Well, I'm gonna be in your area this afternoon. I thought maybe we could have coffee."

"Eight months...and then you call me for coffee?"

Awkward silence, mumbling type thing from Patricia.

"Yea, I guess that does sound like you."

"Yea, well. What do you say?"

"To coffee?"

"To coffee."

"Okay." Freaking coffee. But hey, it was to see Patricia.

"Great, I'll pick it up and be over around one. I wanna see the new place. What's the address?"

"How'd you know we moved?"

"John, come on."

"Oh yea, you're Patricia."

"Damn right, now gimme the address."

. ~ .

“Damn, you seem to be doing really well for yourself.”

“I’m having a good time John. Isn’t that all anyone can ask?”

So I didn’t necessarily agree with everything she was doing with her life. Or maybe it was just that I didn’t feel comfortable. But she was happy. And having a good time, like she said. I was sorta jealous in that way where you wouldn’t actually work to get what that person has. But it still seems that it’d be nice to have it. She was that ‘everything I’m not, everything I want’ kinda girl.

“What are you doing hanging out with a loser like me?” That’s me, expressing my quasi-jealousy.

“What were *you* doing ever dating a loser like me?!” This was followed by laughter, and that girly thing where you fall into each other laughing. We were comfy on the couch. And yes, I did just give you a hint as to who Patricia was. But it’s still not worth the time.

“You should come by more often. This is fun.” Me trying to reclaim ownership. As if I ever had it...with anyone. But it was fun. She’d arrived at 1:30, late as usual. But it was nearly 5 now. The coffee was almost gone. Just enough for a half a cup more. For one of us. Or for both of us, drinking out of the same cup.

“John!” It was Kathrine, followed by a less enthusiastic, “I’ve got something for you.”

She’d interrupted, and obviously heard, our laughter and outright giddiness.

“Oh.”

She’d come to the door. “Kathrine, you remember Patricia.”

“Yea.”

“It’s late, I guess I should get going. You two have got some catching up to do. From what I hear, you’ve been gone all weekend Kathrine? Plus, John, she’s got something for you!”

I was sorta silent here. I’d say it was out of being stoic. But I’m a coward. And I had nothing to say.

“Um...see ya later Pat.” That’s the best I could manage at the door, as Patricia was walking away.

“I’ll see you later too, John.” This was Kathrine. Walking past me, with a backpack presumably containing just enough for a few nights at a friend’s or relative’s.

“Kathrine. What’s up?”

“You know John. You know. Your gift is in the kitchen.”

It was in the kitchen. It was a really nice gift too. A vase, with tulips and marigolds. My two favorite flowers. Kathrine had this understanding that I rarely, if ever, was given flowers. That’s why I think complaining is so useful. For if I hadn’t complained, she would have never known. It’s too bad these flowers were on the floor, scattered about the broken vase and the strewn about soil.

. ~ .

So I guess it’s worthwhile to describe the Patricia thing now.

She was a girlfriend prior to Kathrine. There was this point during which she had this idea that she could get me back. Or needed me back. Something. She’d telephone. Write letters. Leave voicemails. It was fun, trust me. It was so visible that Kathrine got involved. As in, she saw the letters. Was there when Pat called sometimes. This was the only time Kathrine’s possessiveness came out. At one point, she called when Kathrine and I were out to dinner. I answered just to tell Pat that we couldn’t talk right now. Kathrine stole the phone and said something similar to “Don’t ever call this number again” followed by a profanity or three, and the penultimate hang up. Pat called back immediately. Kathrine answered with one profanity this time, slammed the phone shut. And put it in my glass of water. I thought it was nice. I always wanted to see what my cell phone looked like underwater. What was even better is that it rang again, only to sputter to its death during the ring due to the water. I was able to get a new phone with the same number. And Kathrine bought dinner that night.

. ~ .

I only tried to call Kathrine twice that week. Once Monday, the day after. And once Thursday, the fourth day after. I knew it was best not to nag her. Yes, knew. Not “I thought it was best to”; ‘knew’. Again, just trust me.

I began collecting some of Kathrine’s things. Not really packing them up, just gathering into neat piles. Social-cleansing we could call it. Pile some of her books into piles, moving them from their flung about places of rest. It was a nice gesture.

I lied again. I thought it would be a nice gesture. Wouldn’t it? I thought about doing it. With good intentions, honestly. But I realized Kathrine would probably just get mad at me for moving her shit. So I didn’t touch anything. I just went on about my business. Yes, I had business besides Kathrine.

. ~ .

On Saturday, I decided to be lazy about making plans. Great idea. Around 1.00pm Kathrine stopped by.

“I’ll just be organizing some things. I’ll be back tomorrow to move out.”

“Move out?”

“Good to go.” She was mocking something here. I just couldn’t tell what. It was probably me.

I decided to make myself a sammich whilst Kathrine was...making a mess, for lack of better words. I like sammiches. Look, I’ll say it again. Sammich.

As I was putting the ranch dressing on my sammich, two things happened. Kathrine walked by. And my phone, which was at the table, rang. Or buzzed. That’s right. I got a phone that vibrated. H yea.

I was gonna be nice and not answer the phone. But Kathrine took the liberty to take a look at the ID. Apparently it had said ‘Patricia’, because Kathrine answered it, cordially, with a:

“I thought I told you to never call this number, Bitch!!”

Did you see that capital b? Damn right, it was intense.

“Oh, I see you and Pat traded numbers. You’re like best friends now.”

“No..I’ve had the same number since... And I have no idea what her number...”

“Peace!!”

Yea, that farewell was quite peaceful.

Looking at my phone afterward, there was a phonebook entry for Pat. She must have entered it at some point the Sunday before. Maybe she truly is a Bitch. I did break up with her, after all.

I placed the top half on my sammich, and noticed that Kathrine was at least kind enough to not hang up on Patricia. She had just slammed the phone on the table, breaking the antenna.

“Hello?”

“John.” It was actually a sweet innocent voice.

“Isn’t this a bit of an overreaction?”

“I dunno John. I’m sorry to be the cause of all this. I hope there’s some way I can make it up to you.” Sexual innuendo? I think...not? I hope?

“I think you’ve done enough Patricia. I’ll talk to you later.”

As I closed the phone to hang up, the antenna fell off.

. ~ .

I stayed home that night. I had plenty of time to be gone tomorrow as Kathrine moved out. Mark called. Yippee. He said that he just wanted to make sure I was alright.

“Course I’m alright, Mark. She’s the one that needs some help. This is some crazy over reaction.”

. ~ .

Sunday I got up early for a lonesome breakfast. It was nice. I tried to be extra friendly to the waitress, convince myself that I'm still a good guy who knows how to treat a woman. I gave Paul a call and we went mini-golfing afterward. I got three hole-in-ones.

"Been a while..what's up with you?"

I was silent.

"Wait..let me guess."

"Yep, you guessed it Paul. 'Nother lady."

"Yea well, mini-golfing will help that."

He teed off.

"What would you consider an over reaction?"

"What do you mean?"

"I just don't think this was something to break up over."

"Well. What's the point of thinking about that? This could be for the better John. Maybe you'll find someone more you. You've always told me with all the other ones that you deserved better. Maybe Kathrine was the same."

"A Mother Theresa with a body of Madonna, that's what I deserve."

. ~ .

For the next two weeks I'd tried to call Kathrine every few days. Just to see how she was doing. What was up. Was she okay. There was never an answer. I finally resorted to calling Mark.

"Mark. Hey, it's John. Listen, I haven't heard from Kathrine or anything for over two weeks. I just wanted to make sure she was okay. Wasn't planning to murder me or anything, ya know?" I'm sure he knew. Knew as in was accustomed to my ill-timed jokes, which weren't even funny.

"Yea, John. I understand. I think I better come over for this."

"I don't think that's necessary."

"Yea. I'll be over in a bit."

. ~ .

He brought coffee. Had been sipping his and handed one to me. Freaking Mark. There was little eye contact as he walked past, through the kitchen, and towards the couch.

"Go ahead John, have a seat."

I did.

"When Kathrine was younger, her family had a friend named Ryan Fougherty. Ryan was one of Marylyn's, her mom's, friends. Her father just accepted him and soon he was considered a family friend who came to dinner every now and then. One evening, when Kathrine was in Junior High, Ryan arrived early for dinner. Her parents were out at the grocery getting certain dinner necessities. Kathrine offered for him to stay, though questioned why he was so early. 'It's okay, Kath. I was in the area and didn't feel like going home and coming back.' She remembered this explicitly because no one had called her Kath before. That night, Ryan tried to take advantage of her. Kathrine resisted, Ryan persisted. Her parents arrived home just before any damage could be done. But, of course, the damage had already been done. They never saw Ryan again."

"Jesus, Mark. I never knew."

"Two years ago when Kathrine's mother died, Kathrine was dating a guy known as J Brown. They think his name was Jay; everyone called him JJ. She was very distraught over her mother's death. Stayed home for a few days, alone. Waiting for JJ to get back from a business trip. She expressed herself to him that night, telling how much Marylyn had meant to her and how much she'd missed her already. JJ

attempted to console Kathrine via sexual acts, without Kathrine's consent. We haven't seen anything of JJ since either."

I was silent. I knew of nothing to say.
He moved toward me, patted me on the back, and said,
"Enjoy the coffee,"
and Mark was gone.

Chocolate Kiss

It was late February, early March. A Wednesday, I believe. Chill night, cool enough to require a hat. Exams were approaching. Students crammed into the study spaces of Schaffer. Tables were full, lounges were bustling. Everyone attempting to prepare for the upcoming finals.

I had walked to the library in search of a quaint place to write an essay, the final paper for my class. With no table spaces readily available, I strolled the length of each floor looking for a place to work. Finally, about to give up, I find some open space towards the back of the basement floor.

The table was already occupied by a young girl, who sat facing the back wall, away from the remainder of the study tables. I placed my stuff, eyes on her briefly, prepared for a hello nod just in case she happened to look up. She didn't.

I sat diagonally across from the girl. With the help of my nice iPod, I began the essay.

All the while the dark-haired girl working diligently at her allotted space on the table. I noticed a shoebox, which she had fiddled a few times. Carried it off with her somewhere into the stacks, to return, only yet again to depart. I thought to comment 'Nice shoebox,' for it was. Isn't any shoebox in the library nice simply due to its uniqueness and rarity?

She returned, this time: shoebox-less.

I began to get the impression she was a busybody. Getting up frequently, carrying around her shoebox. Perhaps they contained her precious P-F flyers, which, when worn, only increased her busybodiness. She had claimed more than enough space on the table, perhaps a sign that I was not welcome to share it with her. She sat facing not towards the other studious students, but away.

Essay finished, I killed the battery on my Powerbook surfing the net and chatting with friends. Walking back the cold bit my ears, and I realized I had left my hat on the table. Remembering I had a lab to turn in anyhow, I returned to my room, claimed the lab, and headed back towards the center of campus to hand in the lab and retrieve my hat.

After placing the lab outside my professor's door, I steer towards the library, wondering 'Will she remember me? What will she think of my forgetfulness? I wonder if she was nice enough to hand it in to lost-and-found.'

She remained, the studious, dark-haired girl, still working diligently, my hat lying not far from her bag which rested on the table. I was relieved to see no one had taken my hat, or that the girl had bravely protected it from all perpetrators.

Feeling thankful and generous, I traded my hat for three chocolate kisses which I placed on the table forward of miss dark-haired girl. Satisfied, ears warm, I returned to my room for a good night's sleep.

Bench

One man. One woman, reading. Young, middle-aged. On a bench. In a park. Nearly autumn. Early afternoon. Man on stage left.

Man: Mary? *[Looks to woman.]*

Woman: Huh? *[Doesn't shift except slight confused eye and slight facial expression.]*

Slight pause.

Man: Nevermind.

Man observes surroundings apparently thinking.

Man: Sue, was it? *[Looking to sky; upper left.]*

Woman: No.

Man: Oh.

Man looks around. Removes watch to have a look. Searches for something in pockets. Stops.

Man: Ah, yes. Sue. In the morning she had. Yes, yes. I'm sure of it now.

Woman: *[Seemingly interruptingly.]* Sir?

Man: Maam?

Woman: No.

[Man searches in pockets. Finally removes folded paper. Views without unfolding.]

[Puts away. Ponders.]

Man: Ah, yes.

[Man removes small dark-colored book from jacket pocket. Places on bench next to woman. Exits stage right.]

[Curtain.]

I m n

./ Dennis

"No." I wanted her to stop that.

"Why not, Mr. Downing?"

"It's just...it's not what I like." Pause. "I mean, I like it. But. I dunno...why the fuck are we spending time talking about this shit? Why don't we just shut up and..." I kissed her.

"Precisely."

I lay her into the tub of warm, slightly soapy...no, bubbly water. Gently. She's still in her panties and brassiere. I remove them under the water, and join her. Calling me Mr. Downing always worked.

"Ya know, I was thinking about the peach," I say.

"Yea, what about it?"

"About it being a sexual fruit. Frankly, I don't think of supple breasts or vagina when I think of it, but yes, I'd say sexual within itself. For instance, I wouldn't want to necessarily bite into a peach right now, being all sexual with you. But, my own inter-...say...-frutal relationship with the peach is quite sexy."

"You're a peach-o-phile."

"No, no. Not in any sense. Okay, take strawberries."

"Strawberries?"

"Yea. I know you find them very sensual. You eat the whole thing for fruits sake. Green and all. Sensual no?"

"Yea..."

"So what's the difference between sensual and sexual?"

"Well...I guess sexual is much more physical. A physical getting off. But sensual is more an internal getting off."

"Accepting that, as a woman, physically getting off is internal for you as well."

"Well, of course."

"So...sensual is sexual and therefore strawberries are sexual."

"No. But I see where you're coming from."

"Oh come on. You can't tell me that if I were to give you a strawberry right now, you wouldn't be that much closer to orgasm."

"You? Bringing me towards orgasm?"

"Oh come on, don't be a bitch."

She giggles. "Okay, okay. Yes. I would be closer to wanting you to put something of yours inside me."

"Precisely."

"That's my line."

"Get over it. Now, peaches are much juicier, no? At least in the sense that you can't necessarily contain the juice. It's a much more ostentatious juiciness. Is it not true that every time you bite into a peach, you get some on you?"

"Yes, I suppose. And a strawberry you can contain; take in one bite."

"Yes, exactly. So, therefore, by its innately more profound juiciness, it is also sexual on a higher level."

"Yes, but that's only one characteristic."

"It also makes me want to kiss you more."

"Ok. I agree."

"Can I touch your peaches?"

"Freely."

I woke up the next morning to a basket of peaches and a note that said 'Goodbye', signed with a heart and finally her name, Morai.

./ Morai

I never really figured out why I left Dennis. I think I felt a need to be like all the other girls; have a few different flings, be with the 'cool' guys. Frankly, be a piece of meat. Have all the other guys look at me, see who I'm with, and wish they could be that guy. It's such a stupid notion though. I knew that then, and I know that now. Dennis was a real man. For gods sakes he looked good in pink! Maybe if I had been 30 when I was with him, rather than early twenties, we could have made something of it. No, that's wrong. *I* could of made something of it, for I was the only one who had anything wrong with the situation. But no, my overwhelming desire to be a girl was something that I just had to succumb to. Not even a girl, though. A frat girl. A sorority girl.

Do I regret it? I'm not sure. Yes, I regret ever thinking I wanted to be one of those normal girls. I knew that my desire to be one was disillusioned; had a weak foundation in society rather than in my, Morai's, being. I do not regret leaving Dennis. I would feel so much worse now, having had put him through being with me, an average sorority girl. I would have felt so much worse putting a good man such as himself through such a thing. Such a lie, I suppose we could call it. I do, however, regret leaving him as I did. It was so meaningless. I'm a bitch. Was. Remember, Morai, you're on a road to a better self. Soon after I left that wicker of peaches and awful note for Dennis, I wrote the following letter:

Denn,

I'm sorry for what I've done. I really don't know what I'm doing. If I could, I'd come home to your arms and cry out all my worries and frustrations. But I'm too stone to do any of that,

instead I'm going to go be what you've always strived not to be: an image, a reputation. I hope that you have immediately forgiven, even forgotten me. For if you don't now, I know that you never will. I also hope that you realize that you are a much stronger and more accomplished human than I am. My love for you will never approach that which you deserve. The respect and compassion I have showed you are more appropriate for a prisoner than for someone as special as you. No words can undo my poor behavior. I hope you enjoy the peaches.

I never did anything with the letter. I still have it; a reminder of my past. Just after I wrote it, I put it away. In the back of my desk drawer it stayed until just recently. Even with moves, changes of desks, it always stayed folded in the back of one desk to the back of another. Only a few months ago I unfolded it, for the first time since the creases were formed. I read it. Once. Twice. And promptly, I stuck it in my back pocket. And there it has more or less remained until today, one day further from that frightening ghost of a woman I used to be, and of which I still possess remnants. Tomorrow, one more day further away from her. And the next, another.

./ Dennis

My and Kelly's wedding is one week from today. Next Saturday I will be standing on a beach in the Caribbean with a few of our closest friends and relatives, three photographers, and Kelly, the woman I am to marry. In a matter of minutes we'll be a Mr. and Mrs.

Kelly's parents, namely her father, have always looked forward to this time in her life. They've done so in a very respectable way, however; they've never pressured her into dating, into holding steady meaningful relationships. They've let her make her own mistakes. Their daughter's love life and future family life is so important to them that they've decided to pay for a very extravagant wedding in a location of her dreams: the Caribbean. More specifically, Crooked Island. This is a very grand gesture, considering their line of work. Kelly's father, Mr. Joulen, owns a very well known used bookstore in Manchester. Although he handles many famous old, old books and exchanges large amounts of money in their purchase and selling, it is still a modest business. Mrs. Joulen is a part-time nurse and spends most of her time between her husband's bookstore and the nearby university library. Kelly says they've been saving ever since she went on her first date, when she was thirteen.

I can't complain. I've had many a fantasy of a Caribbean wedding. Although the closest I ever thought I'd get was being a guest to one, and maybe sleeping with one of the bride's maids. And here I am, a week away from having my own Caribbean wedding where I actually get to, respectably, sleep with the bride herself!

Now, of course, it's not exactly a special occasion, Kelly and I sleeping together. We can easily say that we haven't subscribed to the 'wait for marriage' notion. Let alone the 'wait 'til we get home' one either. Example:

We'd taken a day-trip to Manchester, as we often would. It wasn't such a common occurrence that these trips were rendered non-special, but we knew our way by heart, knew all the good places to go, etc. So on this particular day, a random Friday we'd both taken off, we had a few plans to do some shopping, loitering, and partaking in gluttony. (Come on, it was a Friday. Lay off.) We started the day with the drive, which was normal. Stopped at a random coffee house on the way, which was nice. I suppose I shouldn't say stopped, for when Kelly and I stop at a coffee shop it's usually at least a half-hour stop. This one was probably around an hour. I remember we'd gotten talking to a man from Florida who was in town, whatever the heck town we were in, visiting his granddaughter. She was at the small community university, and he was spending his time waiting for her to be done with classes. I remember him talking of his beautiful boat and beach house. Modest, I'm sure (it'd been in his family since he can remember)

but awesome nonetheless.

Once we'd finally arrived in Manchester, Kelly had to stop for a gelato. "Okay, so I had an espresso, I can't go without a gelat." I hated how she called them 'gelats'. Anyway, the closest we could find was Ben and Jerry's, but hey, I'm not going to complain about that. Then we did random shopping, she found a new jacket. It was a nice weight, a weight she didn't really have. So it was a useful purchase, not too expensive. Eventually we made it to her father's bookshop, as we normally would. He was busy with some connoisseur. Kelly stole whatever conversation she could, while I browsed the books. Every once in a while I'd purchase one from the store. Mr. Joulen always felt weird about taking my money, so I didn't purchase often. But he would give me books every now and then. I think it was his way of counteracting the purchases I'd made. I'd never complain about the free books. Still have most of them. Haven't necessarily read them, but they look nice. I did, however, read all the ones I purchased. I'm not illiterate, you know.

Following this we went to our favorite restaurant, *Frank's*. I always joke that Kelly has a crush on Frank, even though we've never met him. My jokes become more frequent as I drink wine, which we did a lot of at this particular dinner. The food is so good, the wine is so good, the atmosphere, Kelly...I can't help myself. Indulgences take over. At dinner Kelly was far too cute and lovey for me to be able to handle. Touching my hands on the table, playing footsy. Smiling at just the right moments, smiling just the right kind and size of smile.

We left leaving a huge tip, and holding hands. About five miles out of town, we stopped and 'parked'. Kelly's VW Jetta wagon makes for a great roadside quickie. Although this one wasn't so quick. We'd left the restaurant at 11 and arrived home at 4, which is normally a two-hour journey.

./ Morai

Since about a year ago I've been working as a journalist with *The Tribune*, a local newspaper here in Oregon. I moved out here to my aunt and uncle's town after college. My Poli-Sci / English double major didn't take me far, let's put it that way. Okay, so Oregon is far in distance from the northeast, but in reality I'm a fucking ditz journalist at this crap local newspaper. With a stick-in-the-mud editor and one photographer for the whole publication. Oh, come on, it's a joke. I'm not calling myself a ditz, I'll leave that up to you, but anyone, whether they be male or female, who had this job would be a ditz. I get the Christian pleasure of writing about little Joey wearing her grandmother's wedding dress to her senior prom. Come on! Okay, so maybe I'm being a bitch. But would you like this job?

When I first got here I lived with my aunt and uncle in their nice two-story home. They had one young kid, a toddler I'd say, and were expecting another. After about 3 months I moved out to a flat on the main strip. Okay, so the main strip has all but one bar and a bunch of shops all not worth mentioning, except Joe's Coffee Café. Yes, the name is a bit redundant, but so is Joe. Mary, my aunt, found out about her miscarriage the week I moved out. Within two months after that, her husband was filing for divorce.

But I'm a big girl now. My flat I've all decked out with my measly salary from *The Tribune*, and I've made a few friends from the 'big city', as I call it. Auburn, the larger city not twenty minutes from *The Tribune's* reading audience. Big Paul, I call him that because he's from the 'big city', came out for dinner once. We stayed in and I made pasta with asparagus. It was pleasant.

I think this small town has had enough of me though. I've put in a few applications to other publications in other areas, as far reaching as New York. The state, I'm not sure I'd want to deal with the city. I'd love to be a big time editor, but I'd settle for being a well-known journalist with the highest journalist's salary at whichever publication I write for.

./ Dennis

I hate taxis. Why the fuck we took one to the airport, I don't know. Thankfully, we happened to get one of the drivers whose name I could actually pronounce. Simon. Not that hard. But the main reason I thought it was stupid to take a taxi to the airport was our luggage. We weren't just going on a short vacation. We were getting *married*. Fuck if I know what's in Kelly's four suitcases. Fuck if I know how much extra we're going to have to pay for them. Wouldn't it just be cheaper to buy whatever is in them once we get there?

Once we got to the airport I was designated with finding our terminal. I dislike navigating. When it's on my own and I have no place to go, it's fine. But when there's a deadline and it's all that extra responsibility, well, no thank you. I started unloading the taxi trunk and placing things on a cart (for how else were we to transport all that luggage? I ain't carryin' it).

"Fran's not coming." Fran is Kelly's cousin from Chicago.

"Wha? I thought he was meeting us here. Isn't he on our flight?"

"Well, was on our flight."

"Kelly, that's...what, six hundred dollars down the tube?"

"Yes, but he has bronchitis."

"I always get bronchitis when I have a date coming up too."

Fran was notorious for being a player, as you call them. Always making, and breaking, dates. Breaking dates with friends and family to make dates with women. Women, if you can even call them that. So maybe he'd get lucky once in a while and fool a nice woman into seeing him, but most of the time they were on-the-town party girls looking for their nice drink supplier. And Fran would supply the drinks, then, if things went his way, the bed.

"Well, at least we won't have some random Caribbean lady showing up as his date to our wedding."

"Dennis, he's my cousin."

"Yes he is."

She wouldn't know it, but this last comment was a low blow. I was alluding to how things run in families. Alluding to her mischievous pasts with previous boyfriends.

"Okay, we're looking for Terminal 4."

"My favorite." Kelly always had a sense of humour when she made me navigate. I guess I sorta liked it.

We had arrived far too early for our flight, not to mention its two-hour delay. Luckily it was a one shot deal, no changeovers. So we sat for coffee.

Kelly slurped her frozen latte while I was sipping my third extra-espresso-cappuccino (I told you we'd arrived too early). I watched various couples or loved-ones say farewell before the ticket-holder passed the security checkpoint. Girlfriends kissing boyfriends goodbye, children not wanting to let go of their fathers. Until I noticed something peculiar. Well, peculiar to me anyhow. See, I support homosexuality and I enjoy seeing gay couples in public. I have a sense of gay-pride that makes me feel like a proud-father. Two women were embracing and saying goodbyes. I couldn't quite figure out if they were a couple or not. Not until the kiss, which was enough to kick-off my lesbian fantasies. And therefore, in my mind, they were gay. Whether they liked it or not. I watched as the one who was to depart bent to pick up her bags, gave one last wink and walked off towards security. The other turned towards where we were sitting at the café and began walking towards the exit. I recognized her immediately.

/ Morai

"Merri-mor! Merri-mor!"

I had no idea who that could be. Very few people knew that nickname. Only a few of whom had I seen in the past five years. It made sense that it was the person who gave the name to me.

“Dennis?”

I saw him sitting there. Waving. Smiling. Coffee in his hand as normal. It was Dennis alright.

“Morai, what are you doing here? I thought you were on the west coast?”

“Yea. Dennis, wow. Nice to see you. You look healthy.”

“Yea, well, Kelly forces me to be healthy. She wouldn’t have me with a beer-gut on our wedding day.”

“You’re getting married today?”

“Yes. Well, no. But this weekend. Morai, I want you to meet my fiancée, Kelly.”

“Hi, Kelly. How are you?”

“Fine, thanks. Nice to meet you. So aren’t you supposed to be on the west coast as Dennis says?”

This was meant to be inquisitive, a conversational jump-starter. But I could see through it. It was the kind of ‘yea, aren’t you supposed to be on the west coast i.e. not here bothering me and my soon-to-be husband?’ remark that only a bitchy girl about to be married could make.

“Well, yea. A friend of mine thought I should come out and meet her friend who works for a magazine. Turns out to have been a waste of time with a side of bar-hopping the city tossed in.”

“That was your friend over there?”

“Oh, no. That was my sister. She happened to be going through the airport today too.”

“A loving family.” He must have been alluding to the kiss he had just seen.

“Yes.”

“How’s the journalism working out for you?” I wish he hadn’t asked.

“Um, not so hot. I work for a newspaper in Oregon.” I suppose I should have been more positive about myself here. Maybe showed myself off to my ex in front of his fiancée. But, it was his fiancée. There was no hope there. I’d already lost my chance, and now he’s due to be married.

“I’m sure it’s great.” Dennis was always a positive thinker. Always the opposite of me in this respect.

“So are you off to someplace romantic to get married? What puts you in the airport?”

“Actually, yes, the Caribbean.” Okay, relax Kelly. I only just met you. “Hun, we’d better get through security.” Oh boy, she’d done it now. Dennis hated being called ‘hun’.

“Kel, we still have another hour at least. What’s the rush?”

“Well I think...”

“Wait. I have a great idea.” Dennis’ ideas were usually pretty great. And I loved this idea. “Morai, Kelly just told me that her cousin bailed. He was supposed to be on our flight. He’s not coming to the wedding. How would you like to take his place? A nice Caribbean vacation and the chance to see an old friend tie the knot?”

“Dennis...” It’s not surprising that Kelly would put in a complaint.

“What? The ticket’s gonna go to waste otherwise. Morai should take it.”

Well I can’t pass that up can I? No. After some frustrations with the airline, we had the ticket changed to my name. Did I have enough clothes or even a swimsuit? No. But I was on my way to a free vacation in the Caribbean, wasn’t I?

./ Dennis

Kelly took me to the bathroom in the airplane. Mile-high club? I wish. It was instead a stern talking-to. By this time Kelly had figured out that Morai was my ex. She started by unzipping my fly.

“Oh, ok. That’s fine. I’m sure the stewardesses won’t mind.”

Then she grabbed hold tight, but not the way you’d want someone grabbing on tight to you.

“Hey, hey!! What the fuck?!”

“Exactly, Dennis. What the fuck are you doing? Why is she here?!” She motioned back towards the cabin of the plane where Morai was seated, right behind our two now-empty seats.

“She’s here because I asked her to come.”

“Your ex, Dennis? Your ex you haven’t seen in years.”

“Yea? I haven’t seen her in years. Of course, therefore there’s no steam left over. Well, we can’t be into something, Kel. It’s not like I’ve been having an affair with her for the past few weeks.”

“That’s not the point. You don’t invite your ex to your wedding on a whim when you see her in the airport in New York.”

“Well, apparently I do.”

“Dennis!”

“Kel, you were the one to say ‘the more the merrier’ when I was concerned with the cost of this wedding. What, was that just an excuse?” I knew I had her here.

“Well...”

“Regardless, I just saved us some money. Sort of. Otherwise Fran’s ticket would have gone to waste. Now Morai will use it. And at least with her we won’t have any damages to pay for, like we might with Fran.”

“Dennis.”

At this point I started undoing Kelly’s fly.

“That’s not going to work.”

“Is it?”

“Look. I don’t see what the big deal is. I’m marrying you. Kelly Joulen. Not Morai. Are we missing something here? No, you’re the one with the ring. How about we just let Morai add to the fun and enjoy ourselves? Are you sure this isn’t going to work?” My hands were on her neck and lips near her ears.

“You can’t...”

It worked.

./ Kelly

Dennis didn’t know that I knew. Morai and he had had an abortion. They were too young. Morai apparently not yet well-versed in getting pregnant. Not literally, but she’d wanted to date other people. Many other people. Get to know what’s out there, play the field. I can’t stand this image of her. Dennis’ brother Patrick had told me about her and her situation with Dennis. Not by name, I’d never known her name. But Morai must be this girl Patrick was speaking of.

Dennis hated talking about it, Patrick said. He even secretly went to therapy because of his distress. We’d had the discussion: what if we had an accident? What if our contraception didn’t work out as planned? What would we do? Dennis was strongly for keeping the child. He even said if I were to consider abortion that our new form of contraception would be no sex. I couldn’t take that, so I just said I wouldn’t consider abortion. Would I have considered abortion? Absolutely, but what was the likelihood of that happening anyway?

The flight was a bit lackluster. I’d expect the plane to your wedding would be grandiose, full of cheer, wine, and celebration. The plane didn’t even have wine. Dennis kept turning around to speak to Morai. I’d figured I’d be the center of attention, but I guess they truly hadn’t seen each other in a long time. In retrospect, it was better than having Fran seated behind us would have been; I’m sure Dennis would say this, and I’d have to agree with him. Morai was pretty, just not as pretty as the bride-to-be.

“Well I’ve been there for about a year. It’s an okay job, but frankly, depressing. Everyone there is either a young person like me thinking they’re too good for *The Tribune* and have better things to get on

to, or are old geezers that have been there since the first atomic bomb. But really, they're sweet people even though I haven't made too many friends."

"Morai? With no friends?"

"I went on a date though!"

"Oh boy, oh boy!"

"Kelly reminds me of him, actually."

I could tell this last part was made up. Just trying to include me. Or insult me. What, do I look manly? Or was the man she dated perhaps feminine? I wasn't too jealous of Dennis flirting with his ex, but I thought I'd give him a taste of his own medicine. The blonde-haired steward looked handsome enough.

"Excuse me, Morai. I'm gonna go see if I can't find a cocktail. Don't let Dennis bore you too much."

./ Morai

I thought it was a bit weird when Kelly spent so much time with the flight attendant. It was just a few days before her wedding. I thought she'd be stressing over mundane details, complaining to Dennis. She seemed like the kind of girl that would do that. In fact, she reminded me of myself when I was with Dennis, back in my early 20s. Back then I couldn't help but complain to Dennis about a poorly made coffee if we'd happened to be out on the town.

"Dennis, I feel like I'm intruding. This is your wedding. See, I've scared Kelly off and now she's seeking the comfort of a cocktail. I bet it'd be much better with your cousin here. I bet he'd be fast asleep and leaving you two alone."

"Her cousin. Fran is Kelly's cousin, not mine. And there's no need to apologize. Trust me, he'd be a lot worse than you, not that you're bad at all. Kelly doesn't often admit it, but she's annoyed by Fran just as much as the rest of us. Besides, we want you to be here. You'll add a lot of fun to the whole celebration. Fuck it, if Kelly can bring Fran along, like she was planning, then I can bring along a nice, well-behaved friend of my own."

"Well I'm glad to be here. Thanks so much for inviting me. What is Kelly doing anyway? She looks awful friendly with Chip-the-Steward." Kelly was doing the cliché 'lean against a man with one foot curled up behind you' move. I'd used that move so often when I was younger; it always worked.

"Oh don't worry about it." Dennis seemed too swift to brush off this pre-nuptial flirting. "Tell me more about the new Morai. You seem so much different, yet so much the same, since the last time I saw you. Grown up or something."

"Nuh uh, don't think you're getting away without talking about yourself. What the fuck are you anyway, Dennis? Did you ever go to law school?"

"Yes. Well, no." This made me laugh. It was a typical Dennis answer.

"Haha. What do you mean?"

"Well, I got in. Don't ask me how. But I got in and started going. I became good friends with one of my mentors. He was big into photography. Avant-garde photojournalism. That's actually how I met Kelly. Well, somehow things went sour. I'd go to the events hoping Kelly'd be there, and she would. She was the curator, she had to be. Bill, the mentor, saw my interest was more in the girl than the art, the 'photojournalistic art', and eventually things fell apart with Bill. My broken relationship with Bill discouraged me from the whole law school thing. I eventually dropped out."

"You still haven't told me what you do."

"I'm getting there. Somehow I got a break. Not exactly the break I was looking for, but a break none-the-less. A friend introduced me to this guy who works at a publishing house. I guess I made an impression on the guy. He wanted to make me their in-house literary agent. I guess his boss wasn't too

keen on the idea, so it was sorta a solo project the guy was intent on taking on. He hired me just based on having met me once and having talked on the phone a few times. He started paying me out of his own salary, until his boss saw that I was doing the company good. Eventually they wrote my position into the company and I was official. It was kinda like a computer salesman who knows nothing about computers.”

“You’re a literary agent?”

“Yes. For Botham Books of New York, New York.”

“Get out.”

“I wish I could, I don’t really like being cooped up in planes.”

“I don’t believe it. I never could have predicted that!”

“Neither could I. But I can’t complain. It’s fun. Kelly and I are comfortable. We’re working to make it so that I can work from home. Potential authors always mail in their material anyway.”

“So you must live in New York now.”

“No, actually, I just come in three days a week. It’s a long commute, but it’s worth it. And soon I won’t have to come in hardly ever. Which will be nice if Kelly and I have a kid soon, after the wedding of course.”

“So you’re outside the city? In New York? I never could picture you living in the city anyhow.”

“Yea, not too far, but far enough.”

/ Kelly

“The steward, Colin, he’s a musician!”

“Get out,” I noticed Morai had a tendency to overuse this phrase, and I’d only known her a few hours.

“Yea, this is just his weekend gig. He plays in a band called The Mudstick Flapper Boys.”

Dennis had to chime in, “Sounds...gay.”

I gave him the ‘come-on’ look. “I always found musicians so mysterious, so...sexy.”

“Oh, give us a break Kelly. You’ll make Morai think I’m marrying some teenage sorority girl.”

‘So what?’ I thought, ‘just as long as you’re jealous.’

/ Dennis

I think Kelly’s whole stunt with the steward on the plane was to get me jealous. It worked a little. But she’d never see him again, and I was about to marry her.

Morai, Kelly and I checked into the hotel at about 11:30 that night. In the morning our parents and the bridal party would arrive to help set things up for the big day. Rehearsal was at 5, followed by dinner. Finally we’d hit the hay. The day after the guests would arrive for an afternoon wedding, and we’d all party into the night.

“Morning, Dennis. Ready for the rehearsal this afternoon?” She was sipping her morning coffee and having her typical half-muffin, half-donut breakfast. Nothing would stop my mother from having her breakfast. I’d assumed she sent Dad off to put the bags in order and get the keys to their room.

“Morning, Mom. Yea, I just have to find where it is.”

“I’d say you’d have to find your bride too. Where’s Kelly?”

“She’s introducing Morai to everyone, we just ran into them in the lobby.”

“Morai? The girl from...”

“Yes, Mom. The girl from the newspaper.”

My mother always called Morai the ‘girl from the newspaper’. She was convinced that she’d one day end up working at a newspaper, regardless of her dreams and aspirations. My mom had a knack for

being right about people turning out to be less than they expected, or less than they wanted. It always made me uncomfortable because I thought she was jinxing the futures of all these people. Turns out with Morai, she *had* jinxed her.

“So?”

“Yes, Mom. She works at a newspaper.”

“I told you. What is she doing here anyhow?”

It surprised me that Mom would even remember Morai. I hadn’t spoken of her any more than my other girlfriends. And I’d had my fair share. It must have been the prediction of Morai’s future that led my mother to remembering her.

“Well Fran canceled, don’t ask, and we ran into Morai in the airport in New York. So I asked her to take Fran’s place. Well, figuratively. Better not waste a ticket, right?”

“Right. Just like your father. You’re sure this won’t stir up any conflicts with Kelly?”

“No, I think we’re cool.”

“Well try to stay that way. It’s the Caribbean, don’t want you over-heating on your wedding day. Come, have some donut.”

My mom always tried to pawn off the donut-half and muffin-half that remained from her half-hearted breakfast. I thought someday she might try to cut the coffee mug in half too.

/ Morai

At the rehearsal dinner I was seated with Dennis’ parents. I’d never met them, but I’d heard so much. It was nice to finally meet them.

“So Morai, how’s the newspaper?”

Dennis had warned me about this. His mother was so accountable for these quirks of hers. I told her about *The Tribune* and some of the guys from Auburn. I wanted to get an in with the parents of the groom. No one was going to know me at the wedding. I needed to start a good vibe for myself where it counted. I thought Denn’s parents were a good place to start.

I thought the main bridal party got far too drunk for the night before the wedding. ‘Isn’t the heavy partying supposed to start *after* the wedding?’ I thought. Even Dennis’ parents were dancing, although there was no music to be had in the hotel’s dining room. There was a piano, but I assumed that was reserved for special weekend nights. Besides, a wedding was in the works. I was going to hold off my drunkenness until the next day. Embarrass myself in front of a whole lot of people I didn’t know, instead of just the few that were there for the rehearsal. Dennis was also comparatively sober, so I joined him on the patio outside. The ocean air was intoxicating enough.

“You look happy, Denn. You both do.”

“Thanks, Morai. I am. I am happy.”

I took a big breath of the ocean scent. I loved it.

“Ya know. I don’t have to hide anything. Ya know how there are those things in life that you’ve done or been through that you want to hide? Or those things that bother you just for having happened?”

“Like dating me?”

“No. Well, maybe, Morai. But, I don’t have to hide those things anymore. I don’t have to hide them from myself or anyone else. I’m comfortable with them. They don’t bother me anymore.”

“So...you are happy. Or...at least not unhappy.”

“Yes, Morai. I am happy. And, I am not unhappy.”

Here he hugged me. It took me a minute, but I indulged. He smelled nice, maybe even better than the ocean. I fingered the note I had written Dennis when I left him, which was now in my bra. I missed him. Once again, I was wondering why I ever left him. But I guess that didn’t matter. He was getting married. The next day, he was getting married.

./ Dennis

“I’d like to introduce you all to Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Fetcher.”

Well, on a good note, this was the only hitch throughout the whole ceremony.

“Ah...Reverend?”

“Mr.,” he cleared his throat, “and Mrs. Downing.”

It was a wonderful ceremony, I couldn’t have asked for anything better. We launched right into the celebrations. I could have asked for better celebrations.

“Dennis, I love you.”

“I know that Kelly. I just married you.”

“Yes, but...”

“Oh, no. What?”

“My mom.”

“Kelly we just...”

“Got married, I know. But you know how paranoid she is.”

Kelly’s mother was a hypochondriac with cancer. A deadly combination, as if cancer wasn’t enough.

“She just wants to make sure. See *her* doctor. All the first dance and important stuff, that’s all done. No one will know.”

Well, she was right. I have no idea how, but she snuck away with her parents for a flight back to New York that night. I dunno how they made it, or what kind of tip I ended up paying the hotel manager that booked the last-minute flight. No one noticed, but somehow Morai was on the in.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.” She winked, and handed me a drink. “Drink up, newlywed.”

I spent most of the night out on the patio near the beach, away from the dance floor in the hotel dining room hoping that people wouldn’t catch on that my bride wasn’t with me. Later, Morai came back up to me with another drink. She was good for something: alcohol.

“Where’s the dress? I can put it on, no one will know she left.”

“Funny Morai.”

“Aren’t I?”

“Yes, but it’s not your wedding. Yours wasn’t the bride that left.”

“I’m sorry Denn.”

“I know. It’s not your fault.”

“Wanna go run barefoot on the beach?”

“I thought no one’d ever ask.”

After kicking off her heels, Morai un-tucked my shirt as I pulled off my shoes and socks. She loosened my tie and whispered in my ear, “Come on, Mr. Downing.”

./ Morai

Holding Denn’s hand as we frolicked barefoot on the beach made me feel like a child again. I had always had fantasies like this. Splashing in the waves under a moonlit sky. Kissing my husband and playing with his wedding band. In the fantasies I was proud that he was my husband, and he was proud to be my husband. Perhaps our frolicking made Dennis think of Kelly. I had only my mysterious husband to think of. Someone I had yet to meet.

After picking me up, Dennis headed out into the waves.

“Dennis my dress!!”

“Yea, so? Didn’t I pay for that?”

“Well...”

“That’s right if it weren’t for me you’d be on your way back to Oregon. Any obituaries to write this week?”

At this I slapped him, playfully. “Dennis!”

He dunked me. After finding my feet I splashed him.

“I can’t believe you did that Dennis!”

I splashed him again, and he scooped me up and ran to the beach, setting me down in the cool sand.

“Warm?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Dennis ran off towards the hotel. I sat under the stars smiling. The water had been warm, and the air was hot. I thought, ‘If I were to have a wedding, this is exactly how I’d want it to be.’

After a few minutes Dennis came jogging back. He had an open bottle of champagne and two glasses.

“Cheers?”

“Cheers. To you, Dennis.”

“No. To us. Old friends.”

“Okay, to us.”

After we clanked glasses, he leaned in close. Looking deep into my eyes.

“Morai?” he asked.

“Yea?”

And he kissed me. He turned away quickly, looking out over the ocean. I closed my eyes and savored whatever remained of the kiss. Whatever remained of us. Of Dennis and I, years ago, together. How we used to laugh about miscellaneous uses of fruit. How he used to wake me every Sunday to my favorite breakfast, with a side of blueberries. How we could never share a cup of coffee without laughing hysterically at each other. I took the note from my bra and let it go with the wind.

In the morning, he rolled over to face my naked body without opening his eyes. He dug his face into my shoulder, sniffing my hair.

“Good morning, Mrs. Downing.”

“Dennis. It’s Morai.”

There was a pause.

“Oh.”

Epilogue

Everytime Sam went to the cafe he would eye Mary. He'd order his iced double and a half espresso, or sometimes a mocha-frappe, and sit where he could watch Mary work. Mary never took his

order, she was often busy cleaning, preparing coffee towards the back, or working food-prep. Sam never had food from the cafe. If anything, he'd bring his own.

Sam was an average but peculiar looking guy. His image was one of making people guess. He was of the age and stature that you weren't sure what he was all about. Was he an undergraduate college student? Maybe he'd just graduated and was taking his time to find a job. Or, perhaps he was a PhD student with the hopes of being the next nobel prize winner. Or, the wiz-kid behind a million-dollar web startup.

His clothes were a bit loose. Not so much that you'd think he was goth or emo, no. He was comfortable, swimming in his clothes. It afforded him a nice breeze which he may or may not enjoy commando. Sam's signature icon was the pair of headphones. Always around his neck if not on his ears. The big, padded kind for good quality sound. But you could never see his iPod, or CD player, heck maybe a tape player. He never pulled it out to pick the next song or adjust the volume. For all you knew, those headphones weren't attached to a music player and he wasn't even listening to anything.

Sam wore crocs. Yes, he knew they were a fashion disaster, if only he could tell everyone else that. The company CEO perhaps? But they were comfortable. He could wear them anywhere, rain, snow, sleet, hail. And he did wear them everywhere. Originally bright green, they were now worn and molded to his otherwise uninteresting feet.

So each time Sam was at the cafe, sitting either at the bar or a nearby table, he'd read. Or work. Mainly read. The local not-for-profit magazine. His latest novel interest. Occasionally he'd bring work in, but who knows what kind of work. It always involved papers and pencils, no books or pens. Absolutely no pens. Was he drawing? you might ask. No, it was clear he was not drawing. Planning his next internet startup? Perhaps, but not drawing.

When his eyes would meet Mary's, he'd try to smile. He could never be sure if she noticed him. He hoped that the awkward forced smile he put on when Mary would look didn't turn her off. He knew that his real smile looked mischievous, he could only guess what this forced smile looked like. He liked to note what she wore from day to day. A blue blouse nicely accented her just-above-shoulder-length, dark, curly hair. Blue jeans of course, he noticed that Mary never wore anything but blue jeans to work at the cafe. 'Coffee must be dirty', Sam thought.

He remembered when he first discovered the cafe. He also had a cloudy memory of Mary. Her hair was longer then, and she acted more timidly. Perhaps she was new to the job. For sure now she was much more comfortable, joking with other workers, the boss even. Sam could never really tell, but perhaps it was Mary that kept him coming back to the cafe. He wasn't too crazy about coffee, just once a day. And besides, he could make it at home. But there was something special about having someone else make it. About supporting the cafe. And about seeing Mary work.

Sam didn't go to the cafe everyday because he figured it would increase his chances of seeing Mary each time he did go. It worked out fairly well, he saw Mary often.

On one occasion Sam wanted to do work, as opposed to read. But he'd forgotten a pencil. Actually he'd forgotten all of his tools. He gathered an old newspaper to write on, and settled on asking the workers for a pencil. He got lucky. As he approached the cash register to ask a worker for a pencil, Mary was there wiping down the counter.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry." Mary looked up with a bright smile. Sam was a bit nervous, he shuffled his feet. "Yea, um, you wouldn't happen to have a pencil would you?"

"Hm, let me see." Mary looked through the cups beside the register, failing to find a pencil. "No, I'm sorry. It doesn't look like we have one here. Plenty of pens, though."

"Ah. No, a pen will not do." Sam was thinking, Great. I just missed a chance. No pencil. And what? I can't accept a pen from her? A pen?! I suppose I'll just finish my coffee and then head home to do the work.

As he turned to return to his seat, Mary spoke up, "How's your coffee today?"

What? What was she doing? "Oh, the double and a half is great." Is she flirting with me? Double

and a half, what the fuck is that? She's going to have no idea what I'm talking about.

“Oh, good. Let me know if you need anything.”

Sam gave a nod and turned and returned to his seat. After elongated milling-about in self-criticism and regret, Sam persuaded himself to get over it and began reading an arts magazine. Later, when Sam was deep into an article about street art installations, Mary came by.

“Hi. I found a pencil in my purse. I don't really like pens either.” She placed a cup in front of him. “I want you to try this. It's one of my new favorites.” Mary quickly smiled, turned, and returned to work.

Sam was floored. What had just happened? She spoke to me? Initiated a...Wait. She gave me her own pencil from her purse? Doesn't like pens? What is this drink? He took a sip.

It was heaven. It was like wearing shoes more comfortable than crocs and far more fashionable. It was like ocean waves on a beach. It was like a warm breeze at night. It was a hot drink, and Sam never liked hot drinks. He always added ice. What is this, the first hot coffee drink I've ever liked?

He didn't know what to say, or do. Thank her for the pencil and tell her that she just opened up a whole new world of drink possibilities for him? No, that was stupid. Everyone but him imbibes hot coffee drinks. He had only just found one that he could tolerate. Not tolerate, love.

Sam quickly finished this new mystery drink Mary had given him and went back to his iced double and a half espresso. He noticed Mary smile at him while he continued sipping his iced espresso. He smirked, and directed his eyes into his cup, lowering his head. He didn't know what to do. He was almost embarrassed. Sam never got embarrassed.

He stood to leave, making his best attempt to time it properly so that Mary would be near the bar. He juggled his cups, had stuck the newspaper in his front pocket and was clinging the pencil with his right hand. He fought the urge to carry the pencil in his mouth.

Mary was stocking cups under the counter.

“Thank you, the drink was delicious.”

“I'm glad you liked it,” Mary said with a sparkle.

Sam tried to smile, waved, and headed out the door. Mary stood watching him leave. When he exited, she looked around as if she'd forgotten what she'd been doing. And then began re-stocking the cups.

It wasn't until he was a block from the cafe that Sam realized that he'd never used the pencil to do any work.

The next time Sam visited the cafe there happened to be no line. He walked right in, right up to the counter. Mary greeted him with a smile.

“Hi!”

“Hi.” He was nervous, you could tell. “Could you make me one of those drinks you made last time?”

“I'm sorry?”

“The one you had me try.”

“Oh, right! Yes! That's my signature.”

“Well, it's delicious.”

“It takes a minute to brew, why don't you have a seat and I'll bring it over. I couldn't have you figuring out my secret drink ingredients, either.” Another sparkle. A wink perhaps, but Sam missed it. Sam noticed that Mary had been sparkling a lot lately.

Sam found a seat at a table this time. Mary brought over an iced double and a half espresso.

“This should hold you over until my specialty has brewed.”

Again, Sam was speechless. He could only muster up a “Thanks.”

Suddenly Sam's phone rang. You could watch his expression change as he saw the caller identification. He picked up.

“Yea? What? I'm coming.”

Sam was rarely in a hurry. Never, even. It was obvious this was urgent, whatever it was. He took a sip of his iced double espresso and slammed it down, spilling most of it. He rushed out the door.

Mary was floored just as Sam had been. But Mary was not a happy, stunned floored. Mary was a disappointed, almost depressed floored. She sulked as she poured one of her specialty drinks down the drain. She had made two, one for herself and one for Sam. She went to clean up the minor mess Sam had made and in doing so discovered he'd left behind his phone. Or, she assumed it was his.

Mary's day was nearly ruined. She felt she had scared Sam off. She considered looking through his phone, but thought it'd only make her feel worse. Eventually, before the end of her shift, she scrolled through the contacts on the phone. She noticed an entry that was labelled 'my other phone – work'. It was speed dial number one. From the phone, she sent a text message to 'my other phone – work'. It read, “you left your phone at the cafe”. Quickly, a reply arrived.

“Mary?”

He wasn't supposed to know her name. Workers at the cafe didn't wear name tags.

Mary sent back another text.

“Mr. Iced double and a half espresso?”

“Yes. Can I have my phone back?”

“Yes.”

Mary couldn't think of anything better to say. He'd come back to the cafe to get the phone, right? Another text message arrived.

“I'm hungry. Can we do it over dinner?”

At this, Mary knew exactly what to do. She sent a reply.

“Marty's 645 Main 9:15”

At 9:30 Mary was waiting on the steps of Marty's Bistro. Sam was late. Sam hated being late. He couldn't stand the idea of being late, let alone to his first pseudo-date with Mary from the cafe.

Sam jogged up to the steps of Marty's at 9:43, just as it began to rain. He was a fit guy, and for the first time, as per Mary's knowledge, he was wearing a suit. His dress shoes clinked on the ground as he approached the restaurant. The first words were Sam's.

“I'm sorry I'm...”

Mary interrupted him with a kiss. As the rain picked up, they eased away from their embrace, smiled, and entered Marty's Bistro.