

## Things Go Sour

Nothing stared up at me from the dark except the blue-white light from my cracked screen. I swiped my thumb sideways to push the scum to the side, and noticed my cuticle was bleeding again. Sighing, I looked up from my feed to the stage, watching another going-nowhere junkie sing about love, making some sort of metaphor about cocaine and a first kiss: original. I pushed my hair to the side and looked around for Jo. She said she was going to meet me at 9; I went for another hit of blue-white light that told me 9:03. So where was she?

I felt like an astronaut on his inaugural flight. *"Explore,"* they told me. *"Go out and discover yourself in the winding dust and strumming beat of the stars."* When I unfurled in that vastness of night, they forgot to tell me I could never get back on the ship.

The first night I met Jo was pretty much like every other Thursday night in college. Frat kids drinking, using their fake IDs to get into bars, and the pusher foreign kids studying frantically in the library to make their tiger moms proud. I'm not sure who used more adderall, but more than 30mg makes my eyes twitch and my hands clammy. Continued use makes my hair fall out in tendrils, circling the drain like swans in my cold morning shower.

That night I went out with the usual group. I would tell you about them, about how pretty Sam's hair was no matter what she did to it. Or that Mickey's dad used to beat him up, but he was still one of the nicest guys around. Sometimes he liked to punch holes in walls of empty rooms at parties, but only when he thought no one was watching. Introductions don't really seem important though, because ten years down the road, Jo was the only one that ever really mattered.

There were three tables set up, with kids milling around the concrete-bricked room, acting drunker than they were and scuffing their new shoes as they flirted back and forth. The mortar had seen abuse over the years, but the gathering had at least the festive warmth of youth and plentiful beer. Gurgling with pride, glowing boys puffed up their chest before punching each other, speculating on the grandiose adventures to come, and taking the newer, hotter girl upstairs. The green paint on the table was peeling back despite some shoddy repairs, and the years of spilled beer had caused a few spots of soft mold to develop on the underside. I stuck my thumb through and twisted until I was satisfied with the dent I'd leave, when a girl stepped back into me, losing her balance and mine.

"Hey" she smiled.

"Wanna float?"

Do I have a story worth telling? My ship glided across the starry ocean, sleek and silent in the peaceful expanse. I cracked open the shiny tin of rations with a flick of my palm, and hunkered down for botanical review and fuel calculations. Even in this black, I dream. I dream of my mother, with the long auburn locks of her early twenties, coming to me in the night to whisper in my ear "Things Go Sour." I awake in a sweat to check the clock, my only friend in a night that's always night, and turn back for sleep. Do I have a story worth telling?

Do you?

The next time I saw Jo we were on a roof. Music pounded up from the sweaty club below, and she handed me a rolled cigarette. The smoke lulled in delicate derivations upward, lazily offering our thoughts to the night sky.

“Them? They pursue a figment – something I know not to exist. Endlessly devoted to the great big nothing of tomorrow. Us? I could write a book. How To: Feel Real Again.”

“Sure,” I sighed as I rested my head on the cooled post beside me, “But to feel real, you’ve gotta exist in the first place.”

And so the apathy began. I have one picture from the night. Our knees and bare feet dangle through the bars of a balcony, heels abandoned in a tangle a few feet to our side. We could feel the expanse of the drop below, the quaking energy of free and absent air. We glowed white, thin, and blurry with the flash of her phone camera; I looked to the moon and imagined a life not my own.

Thus came the fall from grace: the eruptive nights and deadened mornings, the feeling of needing to will your pulse alive. I don’t know much of myself I lost along the way. Amid the hours spent, staring dull at the same water stain on my ceiling, the numbness gave over to fury and I fought back, the human response. Before Jo, I would read and read until my eyes gave out and could no longer take the fine-yellowed print of my cracked book. After her, books were irrelevant, no- irreverent . Thieves of the time I should spend going out and living, capitalizing upon another day I had to break free. Instead, I remember lying on my cheap mattress, readjusting to the creak of old springs, desperately willing myself to be better, be more. In the silence of the room: “lub-dub, lub-dub,” the beat of my waning heart.

Blink. How many days has it been since you thought back, really thought back, to your earliest memory? I know mine – a wave of white light passes over me, soaked in tones of lemon and vanilla. I open my baby eyes and look up, my head reclined into the thick piles of carpet in my parent’s bedroom. Soft golden light glazes from an open window, and I

watch dust particles dance with each other into the honeyed floor. The slanted rays pass over my body as I feel the reassuring weight of my arms, my body that is mine, sprawled onto the floor. A lazy cloud drifts by, the object of my afternoon. Blink: dust can't settle without gravity.

By the time Jo and I were considered best friends, I'd told her little to nothing about myself. Sure, she knew the facts. She knew my high school, my hometown; everyone I'd ever had sex with. I knew hers. Things she didn't know: the way I painted, my thoughts in the grey light before dawn, how I felt about the crooked tree that crowns the hill. So even as I felt her tearing me away from my self-definitions, as she glossed my hair and slipped me a pill with a wink, I continued to lie through my teeth in the mirror – "Real. Real. Real." As the days slipped into weeks and years, my mirror became accustomed to the lizard voice of a girl without a dream.

Radio loss, negative contact. The ship glides on, an undisturbed miracle of life in the unknown. I click away the calendar as my muscles atrophy from lack of use in the silent, holy night. "Space Oddity" jingles from my speaker, and I let the comfort from another person's voice wash over me. Binary signals: flashing on, off, on, and off, they construct a symphony from absence and light. They keep me company as I look forward into the stars, my celebration song as I reached the edge of my galaxy. From this point forward: I am the first.

Here's the part that's for you to decide. Looking back, scrolling through Instagram, Facebook, the texts I sent my family about vacations home: She isn't in a single picture. Even from that first night I only see two, knobby, no-good knees. It's 9:17 now. None of my other friends remember her. Sam laughed nervously when I brought it up at the

bachelorette party last week, followed by a nervous glance over her shoulder. So when I think about the years I spent with her, her flashing smile behind mine when I tried on another stolen top, or how her face was the first thing to float up when I came up from a pile of white - do I sit at this bar waiting to see if she even exists, the girl that melted me new? The stool squeaks as I bounce my crossed heels against the corrugated tin of the bar, and I wonder again who gets to decide whether or not someone is truly alone. The door creaks, I turn my head, I smile, ...Jo.

I want to describe the landing to you, the excitement of never-worn white rubber pressing indentations into the fine powdered dirt of another world. I want to say the deep breath of new possibility filled my lungs more deeply than I could've hoped, replenishing my purpose and justifying the time I spent alone. I want to tell you these things, but still my ship sails on, on, on. The compass gleams bright and the engine quiet; I glance to the window and dream that someday I could find the world.